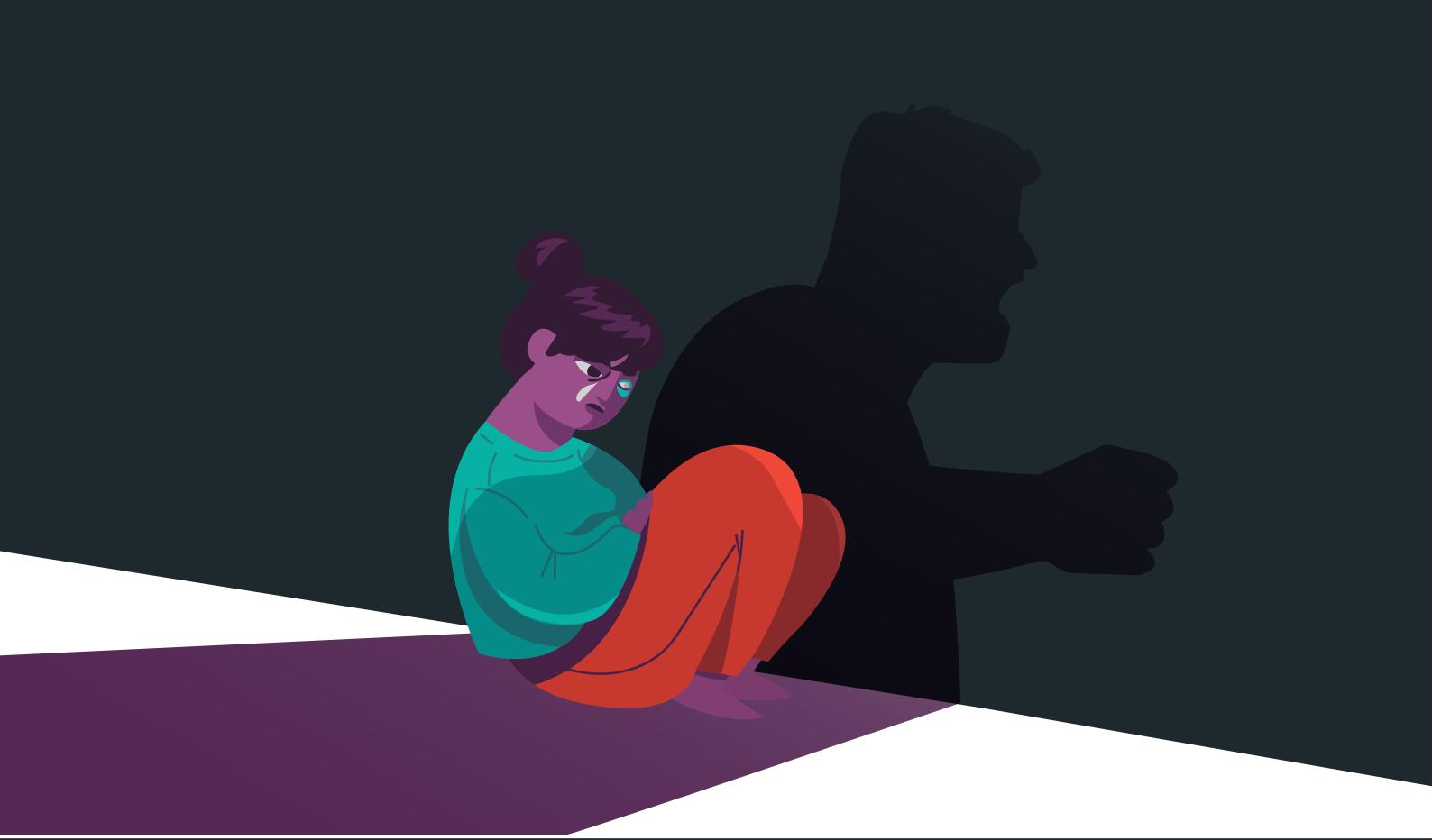


DIGITAL ECHOES:

A compilation of real
life experiences of
Harassment Online





About this publication

Accountability Lab Nepal conducted an online campaign to collect the stories of people who have been victims of cyber crime, particularly in social media. As part of this campaign, we created a safe space for individuals to share their experiences as victims of cybercrimes. This e-book/pdf is the compilation of the real-life experiences shared during the campaign.

To protect the privacy of the individuals, all names in these stories have been changed or modified. Although these narratives are based on life experience of an individual, they are representative and may resonate with many others who have faced similar challenges.

The primary aim of sharing these stories is to inform, raise awareness, and alert readers about the darker aspects of the digital space, while encouraging everyone to adopt safer practices and mediums online.

This publication contains descriptions of cyberbullying, harassment, and emotional distress.

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MY IDENTITY BECAME THE REASON FOR MY BULLY



In an ever-digitizing world, I found love behind the bright screens of social media. I was saddened because I knew my relationship had to be hidden from my family because they would never understand or accept my i) LGBTIQ++ identity and ii) my partner. However, I couldn't let go of the love and comfort I had found. Infatuated by my lover and the feeling of being in love, I carefully guarded my relationship from prying eyes. I even blocked my family from my social media handles and built a shield. Unfortunately, in a twist of fate, my hidden world came crumbling down when my older sister discovered my relationship, from no other but my trusted friend. Burdened by my secret, she exposed my relationship to my family and in doing so unleashed a cascade of consequences that reshaped my life forever. As the news of my hidden relationship spread within the confines of my Muslim community, I faced fierce resistance and punishment from both the outside world and my family.

I was locked up in my room for 21 days. My parents, deeply rooted in their beliefs and culture, struggled to accept my truth and identity. *This was made worse by the outside world who tormented me and my family and turned the social media haven I had carefully crafted into a battlefield.* Friends became adversaries, launching derogatory comments and demeaning posts all targeting my identity and orientation. With no idea of legal support to halt the onslaught of cyberbullying, I was forced to delete my social media handles and exit from the world where I had discovered love and once felt safe. Isolated from the world which now only existed to torment me, I had been flung into a dark abyss of depression and self-harm. My nightmare extended beyond my life and entangled all those who still chose to associate with me. *My mother too became a victim of the atrocious virtual hate that sought to shame her for having a gay son.* In my case, the hate and demeaning continued, even long after I had moved on from that phase. I was targeted for my identity. This incident has scarred me and completely changed the path of my life. My relationship with my family and friends were tarnished and that was not something I had imagined. My story has now become a standing testament of age-old themes related to resistance and intolerance describing the perils of being true to oneself in the digital age and highlighting the lack of agency and justice for those who face damaging and destructive hate through social media.

THE POWER IN ANONYMITY

Around a year ago, a Facebook page under the name B Rural Municipality Group, and a fake account with the username R_____L began to abuse my close friend Ganesh. Ganesh is a health worker from my village. The abuse began after he publicly voiced his opinion against the leader of one of the popular political parties. Following this incident, he became the target of public humiliation on social media.

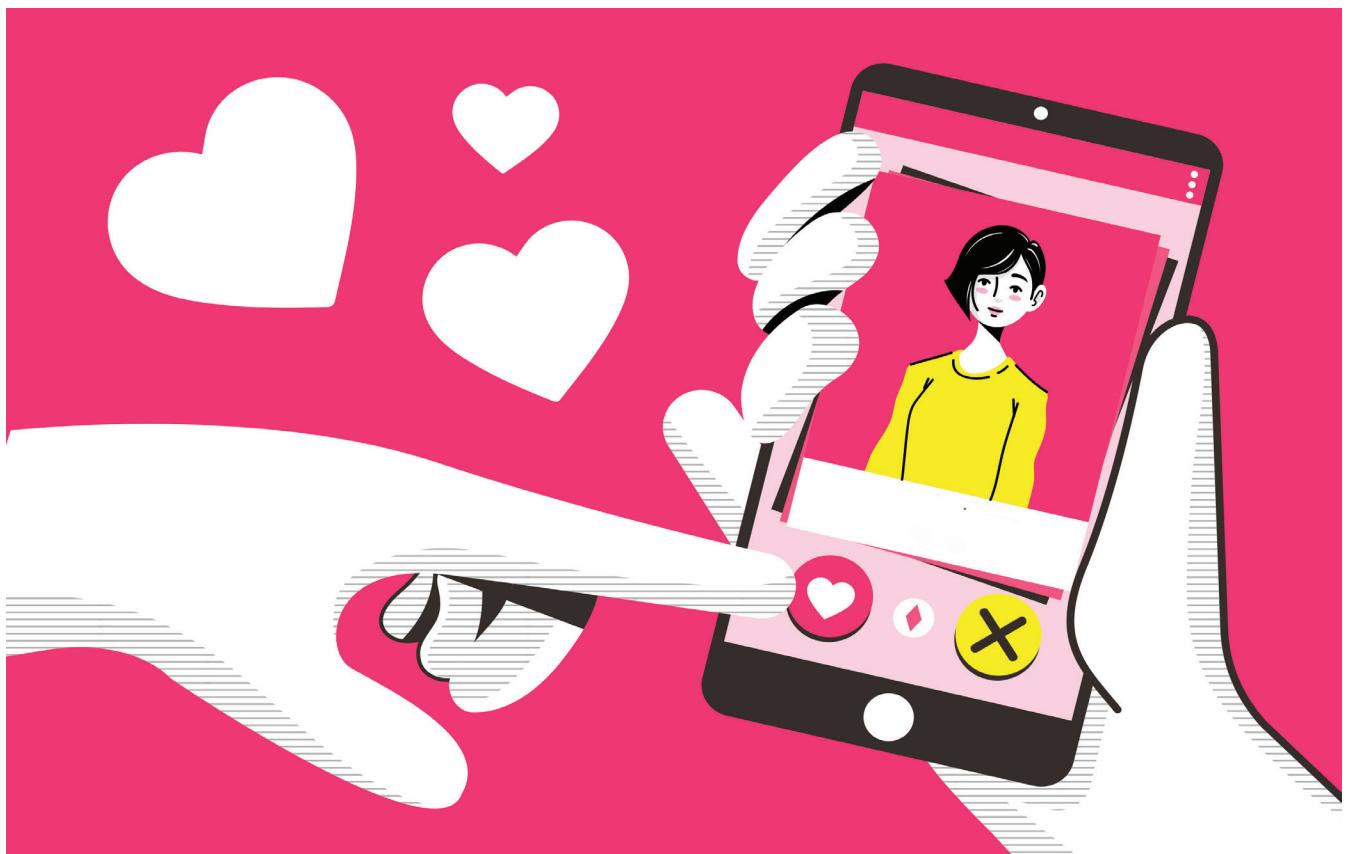


He started getting lots of abusive comments on his Facebook status. Further, the fake account posted photos of my friend with alterations that caused public humiliation. These posts shared by an anonymous account, caused public embarrassment that began to seriously affect the mental well-being of my dear friend. *The abuses did not stop at him and were directed towards his family too. It then escalated to threats. Feeling overwhelmed and scared, he reached out to me for help, and I advised him to file a complaint at the Cyber Bureau.* Amidst his insurmountable pain, the investigation revealed that the account was targeting other members of my village too and this led us to conclude that this anonymous user could be a member of our village. Taking it upon myself to help Ganesh, I personally messaged this account and urged to stop this abusive activity and bullying. While there was no response to my message, the harassment had stopped for about five months. In the meantime, the Cyber Bureau's investigation revealed that the user had been operating outside of Nepal and was out of their jurisdiction. Within a month of receiving this news from the Bureau, the fake user became active and to horror started targeting me.

Similar to how they tormented my friend, they used my altered photo and started sending threats towards me. I requested the user through messages to end this torment and this time I got the response. The user explained that they knew I was the one who helped my friend to report the abuse and even accused me of writing a news article against their action of cyberbullying. I tried to explain that I had never written any article about them, and requested the user to have a more civil conversation to reach a mutual understanding but I only received threats. Fearing my safety, I warned the user that I would report them to the Bureau as I had done before, but they simply explained that the public body could do nothing to the user. This account continued to harass me and blackmailed that they had all my professional and personal information which can easily be manipulated to jeopardize my life. From the conversation that I had with the user I quickly realized that this account had been following me for a while and that I must have met the user before. However, I was not able to identify the true identity of my tormenter. No matter my action this bully seemed unfazed by my pleas or my complaints to the cyber bureau. Feeling overwhelmed and out of options, I blocked the user. I have no idea of what the user did with my information. Sometimes, I worry if they contact me through another account or if it would act on the threat of using my information against me. I am frustrated and scared for me and others because I doubt if the public bodies established to protect citizens from cyber crime are effective in doing so.



DATING APPS FOR LOVE?



Intrigued by the allure of dating apps which had already captivated my friends and peers, I decided to try it for myself and discover what connections the digital world had in store for me. Afterall, why not? However, I was taken aback by what existed behind the facade of romance, a darker reality encompassing harassment and hate. I found that my reluctance to promptly accept an immediate date could trigger and invite an alarming amount of threats and hate from the other side of my screen. When I tried to ignore these messages hoping to be left alone, the silence only fueled more aggression from other users. Instead of courteous understanding,

I was met with a barrage of slurs and menacing threats. I initially dismissed it as mere coincidence or even as bad luck with a few individuals. But soon I realized that this disturbing pattern was faced by many of the users. *Who would have thought one will have to face so much hate and disgust on an app designed to help people find love?* The relentless pattern of harassment and threats became a horrific routine that occurred multiple times a day from different users. This disheartening experience marred by a toxic environment of sexual objectification and vulgar threats pushed me to delete these dating apps which I had recently begun to use.

PHOTOGRAPH

Just a few weeks before my tenth-grade SLCs, my school hosted a farewell party for my grade. Like every other 10th grader I was surrounded by the joy of music, laughter, and friends. I had taken photos with all my classmates, determined to capture the essence of our shared journey before we all embarked on separate paths forward. Little did I know that one seemingly mundane picture would become an unexpected thorn in my life. That particular photo had captured me standing with two of my classmates, one male and one female. The boy in the photo, whom I shall call as 'A' henceforth, had been in class with me for years but till that day we had never become more than acquaintances. However, after we took that photo we began to talk and I realized we had a lot in common, and I didn't realize how he would become a larger part of my story. With the SLCs rapidly approaching, our friendship blossomed as we partnered up for exams preparations. Learning of our closeness, many of our classmates began teasing us in childish ways about our newfound friendship, but that did not bother me much. Weeks had passed after we had taken our SLC exams and I was happy in my new relationship. This was until I was tagged in a Facebook post depicting the photo I had taken with 'A' and my other friend, except it had been cropped to only show a picture of me and 'A' together and had a long romantic caption. Unfortunately, I stumbled upon this post after many people had already seen it, and everything took a turn. It not only caught my eye but the attention of my unsuspecting family as well.



In a frantic attempt to salvage the situation, I reached out to 'A' only to find him unreachable, leaving me stranded in a storm of confusion. Faced with my father's disapproval over the unwanted public attention, I was forced to delete my Facebook account. My older brothers schooled on securing my digital privacy, revealing the profound impact and consequences of online platforms. The truth later surfaced after many years that one of our classmates had hacked into 'A's account, turning a harmless photo into a disastrous prank. *Although it was just a prank from his side, only I know the fear and humiliation that I had to go through at such a young age.* This prank and its far-reaching consequences taught me more than just how to adjust my privacy settings, it underscored the serious repercussions of digital platforms in spreading misinformation, even when the intent was far from malicious. It was an eye-opening lesson to me about navigating the very public online lives we all lead and the importance of safeguarding my narrative in the age of social media.

REJECTION TO REVENGE



This story is based on my friend's experience. While she was studying at higher secondary level (+2) she had mentioned about a boy who used to follow her online. While she was worried about this boy—him stalking and felt uncomfortable by his imposition, she did not deem it serious enough to report about him to anyone including her family. This all changed when the stalker advanced his intentions by confessing his love for her. My friend respectfully denied his request and explained that the feelings were not mutual. After this interaction, the stalker began harassing her with continuous messages (often with abuses) on Facebook Messenger, which my friend again decided to ignore as she was certain that it would stop once he got over the initial rejection which must have infringed his ego. This continued for a few weeks and she realized that his harassment was not going to stop. Later, she discovered an account created under her name with vulgar posts intended to damage her public reputation.

While there was no concrete proof that the stalker was behind the creation of her fake account, she was certain that it was his doing. *More fearful than ever before, she confided in her family and told them about the boy who had been stalking her and harassing her for the past couple of weeks.* Her concerned family immediately reported the stalker to the police, but the boy continued to deny any of the action that he had done. However, after being pushed by both the police and my friend's family, his mask began to crack and he confessed to all the crimes that he had done. The boy immediately began to beg for mercy, confessing how sorry he was and vowed to never do anything of this nature again. He then deleted the fake account that he had created. My friend and her family decided to forgive him with the stern warning that if he ever contacted my friend or did anything of a similar nature again, with anyone the family would follow through with serious legal proceedings and hold him accountable for all his wrongdoings. Since then he seems to have learned his lesson, as he has stayed away from my friend and refrained from contacting her.



IMPERSONATING IDENTITY

A close friend of mine models as a hobby, often supporting small businesses. As a result of this work, her social media accounts are public. As a result of this, it becomes easier for anyone to access her profile and even mimic it. An individual created the profile under her name and impersonated her identity. My friend, only 22 at the time, showed me this 'fake account' and it had used the same profile picture as her actual account, and even copied her bio word for word. In an effort to make the account seem real, the impersonator even used some of her actual posts and weaved it in with defamatory, vulgar and explicit posts. This hampered her reputation and also her profession. My friend, in a desperate attempt to contain the situation, asked her followers and friends to immediately report and block the account impersonating her hoping to have it taken down before her family and the larger public saw it and assumed it was her actual account. The fear of this thing blowing up and the consequential public embarrassment made her worried and deeply concerned.

Her mental health began to suffer too. In response, I volunteered to go to the Cyber Bureau to report a complaint hoping to help her, instead, the legal department ignored my requests and firmly established that the victim had to be present. My friend at the time was in Biratnagar* and was unable to travel all the way to the capital to report such a heinous crime. To add to her problems, it was discovered that this account was created on Indian soil, the legal department couldn't be of much help and explained that it was out of their jurisdiction. I was disillusioned and frustrated by the lack of support to people who were in desperate need of assistance. I realized that as much as the law or the policies are necessary it is also necessary to orient and update the staff engaged in the process to be more empathetic and understanding and to provide clear recommendations on how to proceed. While the page was eventually taken down due to mass reporting, it makes me think *as we enter an increasingly digital world where crime transcends the national boundary the ways to combat it should be on a similar scale too.*

At present you can report a cybercrime at any district police office in Nepal, or directly with the Nepal Police Cyber Bureau



Cybercrime prevention and reporting

Cybercrime prevention and reporting

While it is impossible to be entirely immune to cyber harassment, there are ways to significantly increase the safety and security of oneself and loved ones in online spaces.

Preventive measures:

• **Secure your accounts**

- ★ Use strong and unique passwords for each account
- ★ Regularly change your password
- ★ Enable multifactor authentication on all platforms
- Limit who can reach or contact your profile
- Avoid sharing personal or sensitive information online
- Be cautious about interacting with unverified/unknown accounts and suspicious links
- Monitor your digital footprint:
 - ★ Search about yourself on a regular basis; remove unnecessary or outdated content that might be used against you.
- Utilize platform security features, such as block, report, etc.

• **Reporting a CyberCrime**

There are many reporting spaces for victims of cyber crimes.

- Report offenses directly on the platform where it has occurred, as most platforms have dedicated mechanisms to address cyber abuse.
- The Cyber Bureau of Nepal is the authorized body to report against cyber crimes. You can also reach them via email cyberbureau@nepalpolice.gov.np
- Seek help from nearby police stations.
- The Nepal Police App has an e-report feature that allows you to report crimes directly from the App or you can also report and complain through their website.
- Malicious phone calls and texts can be reported to the network carrier, such as Nepal Telecom or Ncell.
- The National Women Commission can be contacted for cybercrimes against women; similarly, specific communities (Madhesi, dalit or indigenous groups, etc) can report to their respective commission to seek justice.

Scan the QR for the report and complaint form:



Useful Hotlines

Name	Hotline Number
National Emergency	100
Child Helpline Nepal	1098
National Women Commission	1145

FOR MORE DETAILS

