UNPACKING THE FRAME: ADDRESSING IMAGE-BASED SEXUAL ABUSE IN INDIA

CONTEXT

Around the world, personal images are increasingly being used to commit gendered violence and abuse. The impact on individuals' lives, relationships, mental health, expression and participation can be severe and longstanding. While there is increasing evidence about this, most of the studies and knowledge come from the Global North. These studies often focus on the sexual or intimate nature of images, with harms primarily defined from the perspective of privacy violation. However, in the context of India, where honour and shame are tied to women, queer and trans persons' bodies, anecdotal evidence indicates that violence can be committed through images that are neither nude nor sexual. For example, modelling photos or images of ordinary interactions between men and women can cause harm if leaked under certain circumstances. Furthermore, survivors share how image-based abuse is not just a violation of privacy but also of their dignity, sense of bodily integrity and self, and ability to express themselves. Most research also focuses on the experience of 'women' in a generic or homogenous sense, excluding the experiences of people and communities facing intersecting layers of discrimination.

OBJECTIVE

THIS RESEARCH HAS TWO KEY OBJECTIVES:

a. To arrive at a much richer understanding of what image-based abuse (IBA) may consist of in the digital space by examining the lived experiences and perspectives of four key constituencies (sex workers, trans persons, women and LBT+ persons with disabilities and young women from low-income communities).

b. To build stronger cross-sectoral responses to prevent image-based abuse by formulating concrete recommendations for policy, law enforcement, judiciary, digital platforms, research, media, helplines, civil society, donors and bystanders, that can start to address this form of abuse more effectively.

METHODS

THIS STUDY USED MIXED METHODS AND CONDUCTED THE RESEARCH IN THREE PHASES

PHASE 1

- Secondary Research:
  - Review of academic and public scholarship
  - Media analysis of articles from 2018 to 2024 in twelve news publications, using seven keywords related to IBA
  - Analysis of calls related to IBA from TechSakhi between August 2023 and July 2024
- Workshop with partner organisations to gather early feedback on the methods and conceptual framework for this study

PHASE 2:

- 2-3 in person FGDs with 6-8 people from each constituency conducted in Kolkata, Mumbai, Delhi, Lucknow, and Sangli (purposive sampling)
- 9 online semi-structured interviews with survivors of image-based abuse to understand specifically their experience with seeking help in response to image-based abuse (purposive and snowball sampling)
- 16 online semi-structured key informant interviews (KIIs) with stakeholders who have expertise in/ are responding to image-based abuse (purposive and snowball sampling)

PHASE 3:

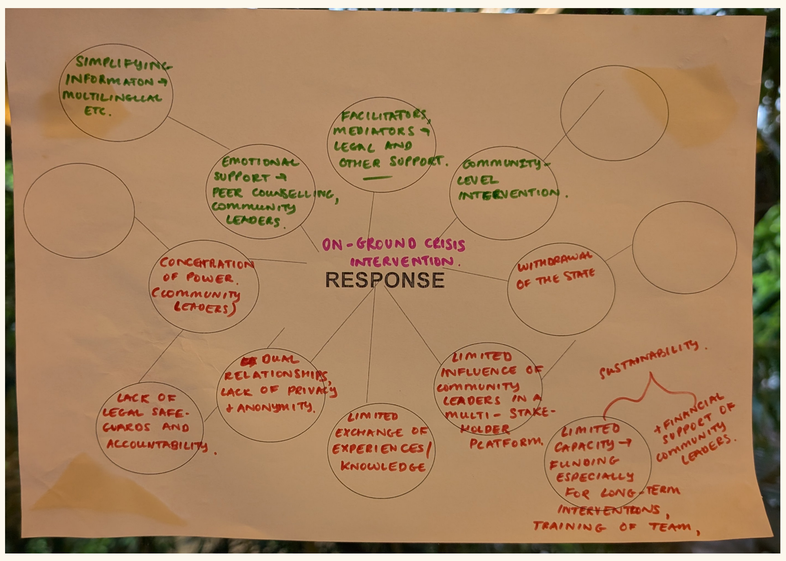
Based on the insights provided by the fieldwork, a consultation was held with key stakeholders to brainstorm alternatives and imagine new responses to this growing phenomenon.

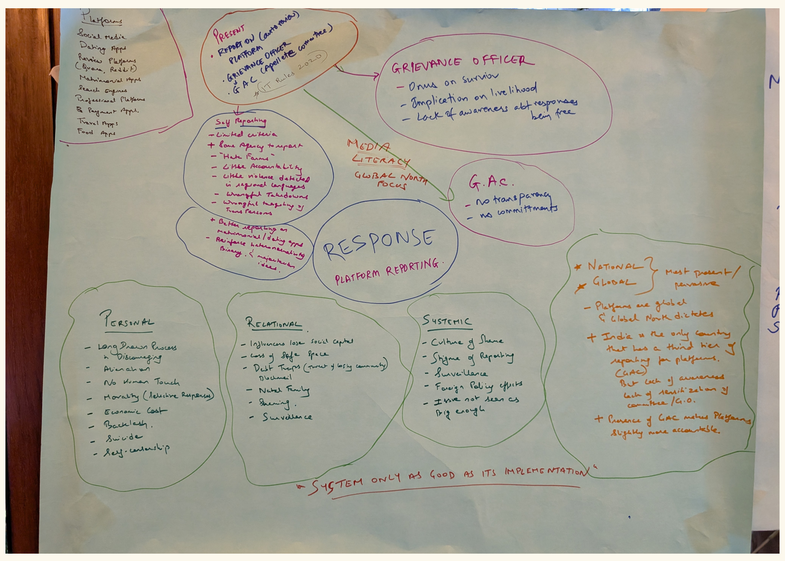
RESULTS:

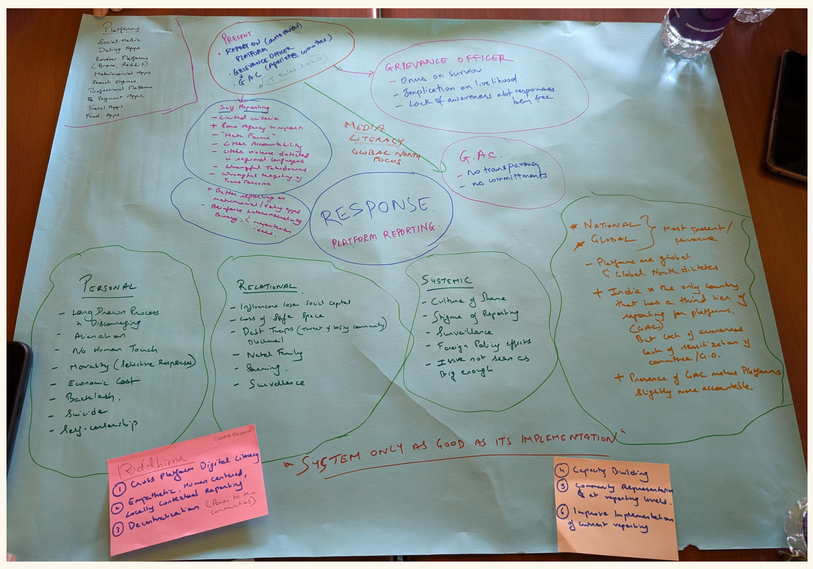
- Image-based abuse is pervasive and the kinds of images used to perpetrate violence are wide-ranging - from memes and fake profiles, use of inappropriate audio with simple images, harassing comments targeting gender/sexual identities to morphed photos and nonconsensual capturing and sharing of images online or with family/friends.
- People we spoke to are creative in negotiating their online presence and images, using a variety of tech and other strategies to stay safe while enjoying their online experiences.
- Communities or chosen family and friends are often the first people that survivors of image-based abuse rely on for support.
- Existing response mechanisms such as police, cyber cell, or platform reporting are woefully inadequate and need to be sensitized.

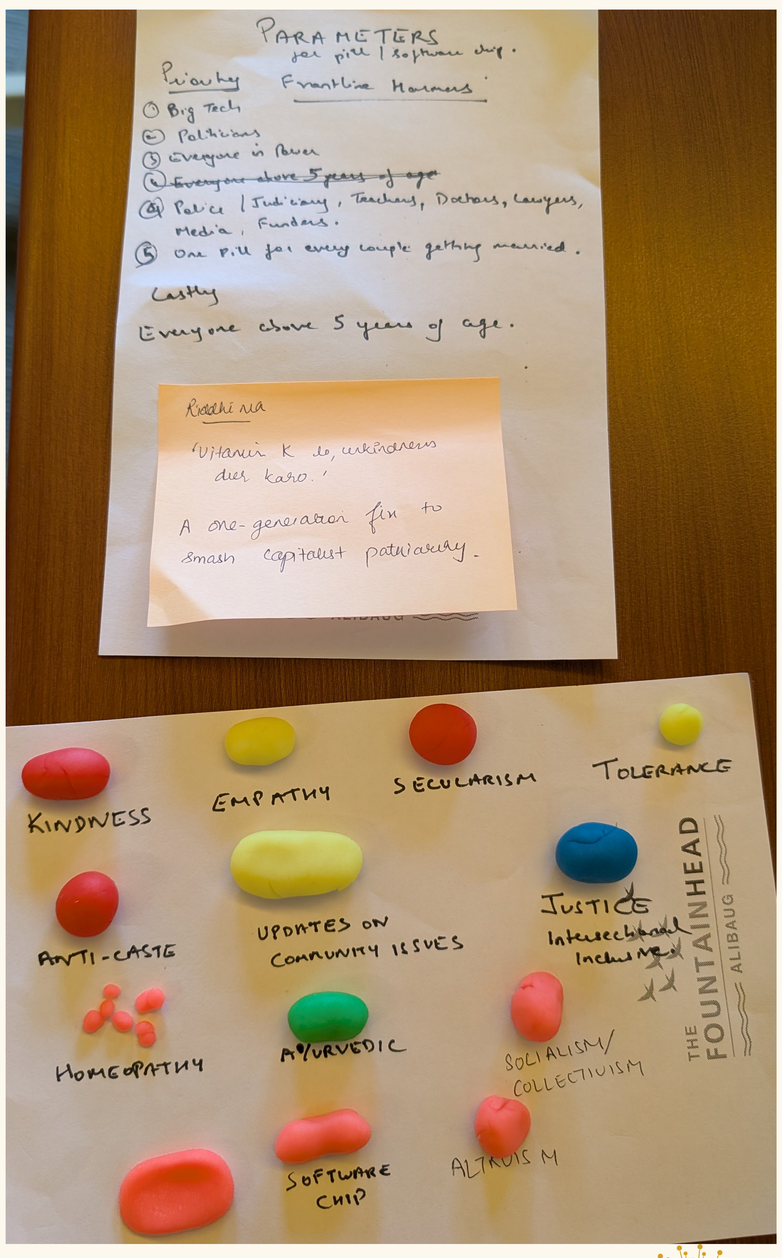
IMPACT OF THE STUDY

Point of View brought together key stakeholders working on technology-facilitated gender-based violence from the legal, civil society, helpline, platform, and technology perspectives at our response workshop to rethink and reimagine response to image-based abuse that is grounded in the actual need of survivors and lack of systemic support using a futures literacy design method. By the end of the workshop, stakeholders commented on the shifts in their approach to image-based abuse and response.









point of view

SVRI sexual violence research initiative