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CONFRONTING ONLINE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE IN THAILAND: STRUCTURAL VULNERABILITIES AND INSTITUTIONAL POLICY RESPONSES

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Abstract

This article critically examines the proliferation of online gender-based violence (OGBV) in Thailand, conceptualizing digital abuse as a manifestation of entrenched structural inequalities. Utilizing a qualitative methodology comprising focus groups and in-depth interviews, the study captures the lived experiences of survivors—including women, youth, and LGBTQ+ individuals—alongside critical insights from legal and social practitioners. The empirical findings reveal that technological affordances, such as user anonymity and rapid viral dissemination, severely amplify traditional patriarchal harassment. Consequently, victims frequently endure profound psychological trauma and intense social stigmatization, which are further exacerbated by fragmented institutional responses and the absence of a dedicated regulatory framework. To break this self-reinforcing cycle of digital marginalization, the research strongly advocates comprehensive structural reforms. Key policy recommendations explicitly include enacting specific OGBV legislation, establishing a centralized national agency focused on digital victim support, enhancing societal digital literacy, and fostering collaborative governance directly with technology platforms. Ultimately, securing the modern digital ecosystem requires seamlessly integrating robust legal protections with transformative cultural shifts to ensure fundamental human dignity actively.

Keywords: Online Gender-Based Violence, Technology-Facilitated Abuse, Digital Human Rights, Victim Protection Mechanisms, Cybercrime Governance

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Introduction

Online gender-based violence (OGBV) has rapidly emerged as one of the most pervasive human rights challenges in the digital era, representing a severe extension of long-standing structural gender inequalities into virtual spaces. Historically situated within physical settings, violence against women and girls now manifests with unprecedented intensity across digital platforms (Fascendini & Fialova, 2011). In Thailand, the exponential expansion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has fundamentally transformed how individuals interact, access information, and express themselves. However, this digital transformation has simultaneously created unprecedented opportunities for harassment, exploitation, and discrimination, particularly against women, youth, and LGBTQ+ individuals—demographics that have historically occupied more vulnerable positions in society. Recent national data illustrate a dramatic shift in Thailand's digital landscape; according to the Electronic Transactions Development Agency (2022), average internet consumption surged from approximately four hours daily in 2013 to over eleven hours during the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, children and adolescents, particularly Generation Z youth aged roughly 10 to 21 years, represent the most frequent users, spending extended hours on social media and entertainment platforms. This significant increase in daily screen time has greatly heightened exposure to severe digital risks, including cyber-harassment, the non-consensual sharing of intimate images, sexual exploitation, and technologically mediated intimidation. The profound dependence on online communication—intensified by pandemic-related lockdowns—has expanded the reach and impact of OGBV, making such abuse both more common and exponentially harder to detect, prevent, or control.

Compounding this heightened exposure is the pervasive normalization of harmful digital behaviors in everyday life. As online interactions become deeply embedded in society, acts of harassment are too often dismissed as humor, entertainment, or mere interpersonal conflict, causing many to underestimate the seriousness of OGBV. For many users, especially young women, the boundary between public and private life is significantly blurred in online environments, and perpetrators ruthlessly exploit this ambiguity to spread harmful content with alarming speed. Features of social media such as anonymity, encrypted private messaging, rapid sharing, and viral circulation facilitate repeated violations of privacy and consent. These technological affordances enable perpetrators to escalate abuse with minimal accountability, thereby reinforcing the same structural gender inequalities that exist offline. Moreover, OGBV is not merely a technological issue but a deeply social and cultural one. The persistence of patriarchal norms in Thailand—such as rigid expectations that women be modest, obedient, and compliant—continues to influence perceptions of blame and responsibility. Women who report online harassment are frequently met with intense moral judgment or skepticism, while LGBTQ+ individuals encounter compounded discrimination rooted in gender non-conformity. These overarching cultural attitudes actively discourage victims from reporting incidents or seeking help, reinforcing a systemic silence that leaves survivors without support and perpetuates a cycle in which victims internalize guilt and fear social stigma, further limiting their access to justice.

At the same time, Thailand faces acute institutional unpreparedness to address these nuanced harms. The country currently lacks a central agency dedicated to preventing, monitoring, and responding to digital gender-based violence. Without a coordinated national framework, authorities respond in fragmented and inconsistent ways, leaving victims completely uncertain about where to report cases, which legal protections apply, or how to preserve and submit digital evidence properly. While existing statutes like the Computer Crime Act and the Personal Data Protection Act offer partial protection, they were not purposefully designed with the nuanced forms of gendered digital harm in mind. Consequently, many OGBV cases fall into legal grey areas, contributing to severe delays in enforcement and failures to prosecute

offenders effectively. Comparative insights underscore these specific policy gaps; for example, the United States and the European Union have developed far more structured approaches to data collection, prevention, and victim support, with institutions like the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (FRA) systematically gathering statistics on cyber-violence. These international models highlight how Thailand's lack of centralized data and monitoring undermines evidence-based policy formulation, leaving policymakers struggling to design effective strategies or allocate resources appropriately. Against this backdrop, this study treats OGBV as a structural phenomenon that intersects gender, culture, institutional capacity, and technological change. By analyzing the lived experiences of women, youth, LGBTQ+ individuals, and practitioners, this research provides the grounded, evidence-based knowledge required to guide legal reform, strengthen institutional responses, increase public awareness, and support the development of a comprehensive national toolkit for victims in Thailand.

Literature Review

The literature on online gender-based violence (OGBV) consistently shows that digital aggression is inextricable from the broader structures of oppression that shape contemporary gender relations. GenderIT (2022) discusses technology-facilitated violence as encompassing practices such as digital harassment, cyberstalking, non-consensual dissemination of intimate images, identity theft, and technology-enabled threats, framing these harms as part of a broader continuum of gender-based violence rooted in patriarchal norms. This understanding aligns with theoretical perspectives that conceptualize OGBV as a manifestation of structural violence, wherein harm is embedded in social institutions, cultural values, and gender hierarchies rather than arising solely from individual conflicts. International scholarship likewise highlights that digital spaces tend to mirror—and in many cases amplify—existing gender inequalities. The European Institute for Gender Equality (2017) emphasizes that cyber-violence is grounded in misogyny and systemic discrimination, demonstrating that women and girls are disproportionately targeted because their presence in public and online spaces remains socially contested. These findings parallel the conclusions of the United Nations Human Rights Council (2018), which frames online violence as a pressing human rights issue and stresses that abuses experienced in digital environments have direct implications for victims' equality, dignity, and freedom of expression.

The rapid expansion of digital communication technologies has introduced new forms of vulnerability that intersect with traditional patterns of gender discrimination. United Nations Children's Fund (2016) highlights the particular risks faced by children and youth—especially girls—who encounter grooming, exploitation, and harassment in online settings. The organization's research suggests that low levels of digital literacy correlate with higher exposure to harmful content, indicating that structural gaps in education and awareness contribute to increased vulnerability. Studies by the International Center for Research on Women (2022) and the International Center for Not-for-Profit Law (2023) further illustrate how digital harassment affects women's participation in civic and political spheres, undermining democratic engagement and silencing women human rights defenders. These works suggest that OGBV not only harms individual victims but also has a chilling effect on the public voice and agency of women and marginalized groups.

A recurring theme in the literature is the dynamic interplay between gendered social power and technological power. Digital tools amplify harmful behaviors by providing anonymity, speed, and broad visibility, enabling perpetrators to replicate patterns of sexual control and intimidation with greater ease (Henry & Powell, 2018). This understanding is echoed in analyses by the European Parliament (van der Wilk, 2018), which detail how certain platform design features—such as algorithm-driven visibility, permissive content moderation practices, and the potential for viral dissemination—facilitate coordinated online harassment, especially

targeting women in public-facing roles. These studies underscore that OGBV cannot be separated from the design and governance of digital platforms; the architectures of social media and other online forums play a crucial role in either enabling abuse or mitigating it through protective features and moderation policies.

Regulatory and policy literature, particularly from the European Union, demonstrates that existing laws often lag behind technological developments. Discussions surrounding the EU's Digital Services Act and related frameworks (Buri & van Hoboken, 2021) highlight the need for updated regulations that recognize emerging forms of digital harm. Various European Commission documents (2002; 2017; 2020) similarly call for modernized legal approaches, while the Council of Europe's Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (2021) report argues that states must integrate gender-sensitive standards into tech regulation and platform accountability measures to ensure adequate protection for victims. These assessments reinforce the view that technology governance must be grounded in human rights principles to address the evolving nature of digital violence effectively.

Another significant body of work focuses on digital literacy as a prerequisite for protection and empowerment in the online sphere. Findings by the DQ Institute (2020) suggest that many children and young adults lack the competencies necessary to navigate online risks, particularly in areas like privacy management, informed consent, and digital citizenship. United Nations Children's Fund (2017) likewise links inadequate digital literacy to increased exposure to harmful online content and negative mental health outcomes, indicating that educational systems and public policy play an essential role in prevention. This strand of literature positions digital literacy not just as an individual skill set but as a collective social responsibility, calling for institutional investments in education and awareness-raising as part of any comprehensive OGBV prevention strategy.

Thai academic scholarship on OGBV reflects many of these global patterns while adding culturally specific insights that illuminate localized dynamics. For example, a study by Augsornpipit (2018) on sexual cyberbullying among youth in Bangkok shows that victims often hesitate to report incidents due to shame, fear of social repercussions, and concerns about being blamed for the abuse. These findings resonate with the sociocultural analysis of Songsamphan (2008), who demonstrated that public discourse on sexuality in Thailand is framed by conservative moral values that contribute to the stigmatization of victims and policy inaction on gender-based violence. Such scholarship helps explain why online harassment in Thailand frequently intersects with cultural norms around modesty, reputation, and gender expectations, leading to underreporting and limited institutional response.

Feminist theoretical perspectives further deepen this understanding of OGBV. Jackson (2006) argues that gendered power relations shape women's experiences across both public and private spheres. This framework is adopted in international contexts such as the Council of Europe's Explanatory Report (2011) to the Istanbul Convention, which conceptualizes violence against women as a manifestation of historically entrenched gender inequality. The United Nations General Assembly (2020) has extended this analysis to global crises, noting that events like the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbate gender-based violence-including its digital forms-by intensifying economic and social stressors and increasing reliance on online communication.

The U.S. Department of State (2022a) emphasizes that governments must work collaboratively with digital platforms and civil society to address transnational forms of online harassment. In a separate policy document (U.S. Department of State, 2022b), the Department further situates technology-facilitated violence within a broader strategic framework that prioritizes prevention, survivor-centered responses, and gender-sensitive digital governance. Together,

these initiatives illustrate a growing global movement toward treating digital safety as an integral component of gender equality and human rights efforts.

In summary, the existing literature establishes that OGBV is not an incidental byproduct of technology, but rather a deeply embedded structural issue reflecting long-standing gender inequalities. Technological changes have expanded the arenas in which gender-based control and harassment occur, even as legal and institutional frameworks worldwide struggle to keep pace. This body of scholarship provides essential theoretical grounding for interpreting the empirical findings of the present study. It also highlights the need for multifaceted, gender-responsive strategies-encompassing legal reform, education, platform governance, and cultural change-to effectively address OGBV.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the socially embedded and context-dependent nature of online gender-based violence (OGBV) in Thailand. Because OGBV is shaped by gendered power relations, cultural norms, and institutional responses that quantitative indicators cannot adequately capture, the research followed interpretivist and feminist methodological orientations. These approaches emphasize lived experiences, meaning-making, and the structural contexts in which violence occurs, making them particularly suitable for studying harm that is simultaneously personal, cultural, and institutional. Purposive sampling was used to recruit survivors-including women, youth, and LGBTQ+ individuals-and practitioners such as police officers, social workers, psychologists, legal professionals, and policymakers whose experiences were directly relevant to OGBV. Recruitment through trusted networks ensured confidentiality and safety in discussing sensitive experiences, while also enabling the research team to reach participants who may otherwise be hesitant to speak about stigmatized or traumatic events.

The team collected data between January and March 2024 through focus group discussions with survivors and semi-structured in-depth interviews with practitioners and experts. Focus groups enabled participants to articulate shared experiences, identify common patterns of harm, and validate one another's narratives in a supportive environment. Individual interviews provided space for more detailed reflections on institutional constraints and policy challenges. Specialists in gender studies, child protection, law, and communications reviewed the instruments to ensure clarity, cultural sensitivity, and trauma-informed design. Ethical protocols included informed consent, anonymity, secure data storage, and referral pathways for participants experiencing distress, aligning with best practices for research involving vulnerable populations.

Thematic analysis, following Braun & Clarke (2006), guided data interpretation. Coding combined inductive identification of emergent patterns with deductive attention to structural gender inequality, digital rights, and institutional accountability. Multiple rounds of coding, cross-checking, and refinement ensured accurate representation of participants' voices. Triangulation across participant groups strengthened reliability by comparing survivor narratives with practitioner and expert accounts. Member checking with selected participants helped verify that interpretations aligned with their intended meanings, while peer debriefing with external experts enhanced analytical rigor and reduced researcher bias. While the sample may underrepresent individuals without access to support networks, the methodology provides a robust qualitative foundation for understanding OGBV in Thailand and informing the development of a national survivor-centered toolkit.

Accordingly, this study draws on feminist and interpretivist perspectives as analytical lenses, using existing scholarship to contextualize how gendered power relations, institutional practices, and digital infrastructures intersect in shaping experiences of online gender-based violence in Thailand, rather than applying a single predictive criminological model.

Research Results

The qualitative findings unequivocally indicate that online gender-based violence in Thailand is increasing in both frequency and severity, propelled largely by expanded digital engagement among youth and the ubiquitous adoption of social media platforms. Corroborating the national data, which highlighted average internet usage exceeding eleven hours daily during the pandemic, the study found that this prolonged exposure creates vast opportunities for harassment, non-consensual dissemination of personal information, sexually intrusive contact, and other forms of technology-facilitated abuse. Survivor accounts explicitly confirm that perpetrators commonly weaponize specific technological affordances—most notably absolute anonymity, rapid content circulation, and private messaging functions—to initiate and escalate abuse with near-total impunity. Survivors vividly described the ease with which abusers could create new fraudulent accounts, impersonate others, or share harmful content within seconds, illustrating exactly how digital tools magnify the speed and emotional intensity of gendered harassment. Consequently, victims reported substantial psychological and behavioral trauma; the study extensively documents how targets frequently experience profound anxiety, fear, hypervigilance, and complete withdrawal from social interaction, with many exhibiting symptoms highly consistent with clinical depression or trauma. Several survivors detailed chronic sleep disturbances, persistent feelings of intense shame, and the active avoidance of daily digital activities due to the paralyzing fear of renewed targeting. These severe behavioral modifications—which include deleting social media accounts, reducing online visibility, and disengaging entirely from academic or professional online platforms—demonstrate how OGBV tangibly restricts victims' ability to participate fully in modern digital life. In a contemporary context where online participation is essential for education, employment, and social inclusion, such forced withdrawal creates severe socioeconomic disadvantages that compound the initial emotional harm.

These traumatic experiences are consistently exacerbated by profound institutional challenges and overarching societal failures, which emerged as a central, recurring theme in the research. The glaring absence of a dedicated agency for OGBV monitoring, coordination, and support leaves victims confused about where to report incidents, which legal protections apply, and how to preserve digital evidence effectively. Practitioners explicitly noted that limited gender sensitivity and low digital literacy among law enforcement and judicial officials severely hinder effective case management. Survivors heartbreakingly recounted negative experiences where they were dismissed, blamed, or asked highly inappropriate questions by authorities, a process that deepened their mistrust and actively discouraged further help-seeking. Furthermore, existing legal ambiguities significantly weaken enforcement; many specific forms of image-based abuse, coercive control, or technologically mediated humiliation fall entirely outside clear statutory definitions or overlap problematically with multiple laws, creating extensive procedural delays and uneven application. This institutional paralysis is sustained by low public awareness, where participants described how online harassment is frequently trivialized as mere entertainment, interpersonal conflict, or harmless "drama," thereby reinforcing stigma. Cultural attitudes that inherently blame victims for their online visibility or behavior—such as posting photos, expressing opinions, or engaging in public discussions—continue to normalize digital abuse and dictate poor institutional responses. This normalization is further reinforced by peer pressure and community silence, leaving victims completely isolated and hesitant to disclose their experiences even to immediate family members. Despite these formidable systemic barriers, the findings highlight the absolutely critical role of civil society organizations. These grassroots networks often provide far more gender-sensitive and technologically competent support than formal state institutions by actively helping victims document evidence, navigate complex reporting systems, obtain vital legal advice, and access trauma counseling. Furthermore, they play a key role in raising public

awareness, providing digital literacy training, and fiercely advocating for legal and policy reform, demonstrating the indispensable importance of community-based support networks in addressing the vast gaps left by inadequate state mechanisms.

Conclusion and Discussion

The empirical evidence of this study conclusively establishes that online gender-based violence in Thailand is not merely a series of isolated incidents perpetrated by malicious individuals, but rather a profound reflection of deeply embedded structural inequalities that have seamlessly migrated and adapted to digital environments. While digital platforms are often celebrated for democratizing communication and expanding opportunities, they have also served as powerful mechanisms for reproducing long-standing patriarchal norms and power imbalances. The qualitative data clearly illustrate that online harassment closely mirrors offline gender hierarchies; women and LGBTQ+ individuals continue to be heavily policed, judged, and targeted, predominantly for transgressing rigid social expectations related to sexuality, appearance, or behavior. The persistence of these patterns emphatically shows that technological innovation alone cannot transform social relations as long as fundamental cultural assumptions about gender remain profoundly unequal. The Internet is demonstrably not a neutral space free from societal biases; instead, it frequently amplifies those precise biases under the potent cover of anonymity and virality. The discussion underscores how OGBV has evolved into a multi-dimensional crisis shaped by intersecting cultural, institutional, and technological factors that combine to create a self-reinforcing system. At the cultural level, widely held beliefs about female modesty and moral character dictate how the public and authorities respond to abuse, fostering intense victim-blaming where women are scrutinized for posting photos or expressing strong opinions, rather than focusing on the perpetrator's actions. These cultural narratives inevitably spill over into institutional responses; for example, if a police officer shares the societal belief that women should not be outspoken online, that inherent bias heavily influences how seriously a report is treated, thereby reinforcing systemic barriers to justice.

At the institutional level, the total absence of a comprehensive, coordinated central agency to collect data, monitor patterns, coordinate across sectors, or provide specialized support leaves victims profoundly frustrated. Reporting OGBV currently involves navigating an unclear maze of local police, cybercrime units, and social agencies, leading to wildly inconsistent responses ranging from diligent support to outright indifference. Practitioners revealed that even when legal provisions exist on paper, limited gender-sensitive training and low digital literacy among officials hamper uniform implementation, showing that legal reform must be paired with deep institutional restructuring. Simultaneously, on the technological front, the architecture of digital platforms—characterized by user anonymity, rapid content dissemination, encrypted messaging, and jurisdictional complexities—allows abusers to inflict immense psychological harm with minimal risk. Survivors detailed the unique anguish and powerlessness of watching doctored images or defamatory posts spread beyond their control, knowing such content could remain online indefinitely. This loss of control is compounded by inadequate, slow, or unresponsive in-app reporting and takedown mechanisms provided by tech companies, highlighting a major private-sector accountability issue. Together, cultural victim-blaming discourages reporting, leading to institutional under-resourcing, which allows perpetrators to exploit tech features with impunity, further normalizing the abuse in an endless cycle. Despite these sobering realities, civil society organizations, feminist groups, and digital rights advocates are driving powerful forms of resistance and empowerment. By raising grassroots awareness, directly assisting victims with evidence preservation and legal advice, and pressuring both tech companies and the government, they have built a vital parallel support system. A comprehensive national strategy must formally involve and leverage this existing

ecosystem of expertise and activism to ensure interventions are genuinely survivor-centered and contextually appropriate.

To decisively dismantle this structural crisis, Thailand must immediately implement comprehensive, multi-sectoral policy responses grounded in human rights and gender equality. First, the legislature must develop and enact a dedicated OGBV law that clearly defines and criminalizes specific behaviors such as cyberstalking, doxing, the non-consensual distribution of intimate images, gender-based hate speech, and technology-facilitated coercion. This legislation must include rapid protective measures, including urgent content takedown orders, digital evidence preservation, and electronic restraining orders, grounded in gender-sensitive principles that recognize structural power imbalances. Second, the government must urgently establish a centralized national agency functioning as a one-stop center with specialized expertise in digital forensics, cyber-investigation, victim support, and legal assistance, ensuring streamlined reporting, inter-agency coordination, and the maintenance of a national database for evidence-based policymaking. Third, Thailand must invest heavily to strengthen institutional capacity; law enforcement, prosecutors, judges, educators, and social workers need comprehensive, mandatory training in both gender sensitivity and digital literacy to handle evidence correctly and interact with survivors in a trauma-informed manner. Fourth, Thailand must invest aggressively in long-term public awareness by incorporating digital citizenship, online consent, privacy protection, and gender equality into educational curricula, alongside broad social campaigns that challenge cultural norms that trivialize abuse. Finally, true multi-sector collaboration is essential; social media platforms and internet service providers must be compelled to adopt human-rights-based content moderation standards and transparent user-reporting systems, and to cooperate actively with authorities and civil society organizations. Only through this sustained, integrated effort can Thailand build a safe, equitable digital environment where all individuals can exercise their rights freely and without fear of intimidation.

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