

VIRTUAL REALITIES

AN OVERVIEW OF
CYBERSEXUAL AND GENDER BASED
VIOLENCE FROM 2021 TO 2023



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for Search for Common Ground
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INTRODUCTION

Gendered Online Hate Speech (GOHS) is content posted and shared through ICT means which is hateful towards women and/or girls based on gender, or a combination of gender and other factors (e.g. race, age, disability, sexuality, ethnicity, nationality, religion or profession), can include spreading, inciting, promoting or justifying gender-based hatred and can also involve posting and sharing, through ICT means, violent content that consists of portraying women and girls as sexual objects or targets of violence. It can be sent privately or publicly and is often targeted at women in public-facing roles (European Institute for Gender Equality).

Cyber Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (CSGBV), or Cyber Violence Against Women and Girls (CVAWG) includes a range of different forms of violence perpetrated by ICT means on the grounds of gender or a combination of gender and other factors (e.g. race, age, disability, sexuality, profession or personal beliefs).



All acts of CSGBV can start online and continue offline such as in the workplace, at school or at home; start offline and continue online across different platforms such as social media, emails or instant messaging apps; be perpetrated by a person or group of people who are anonymous and/or unknown to the victim; be perpetrated by a person or group of people who are known to the victim such as an (ex) intimate partner, a school mate or co-worker (European Institute for Gender Equality).



The current laws in Sri Lanka do not fully address GOHS or CSGBV. The recently passed Online Safety Act No. 9 of 2024 does address the issue to some extent by identifying certain offences and the action which will be taken if these offences are committed. However, the Act only speaks about false statements, which do not capture some of the most pervasive forms of hate speech such as misogynistic comments.

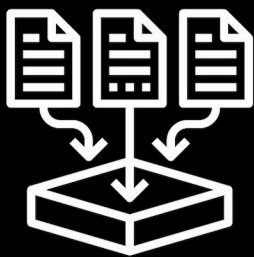
This report has been created to provide a snapshot of CSGBV and GOHS based on the data collected under the project 'Caught in the Web' from mid-2021 to December 2023 with a view to developing concise policy recommendations for stakeholders based on the data. Through this report, stakeholders can identify strategies for addressing and mitigating CSGBV to identify points of support and intervention. By identifying the dynamics of GOHS and CSGBV in Sri Lanka, more informed and targeted strategies can be used to reduce its occurrence and to mitigate its impact both offline and in terms of offline violence triggered by online content.



METHODOLOGY

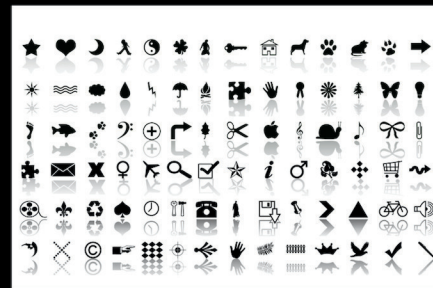
Hate speech monitoring is the process of collecting and analysing data on hate speech to identify trends, target groups and other factors which can document the trajectory of hate speech and examine the factors which influence it.

Hashtag Generation (HG), a consortium partner for the “Caught in the Web” project, collected statistics on GOHS and CSGBV over two and a half years (between June 2021 and December 2023) for the project. HG collected harmful speech content from social media platforms using an internal methodology that has been honed over the years of social monitoring they have conducted. Most of the content reviewed is based on content that is published publicly by a team of reviewers who have expertise on the platforms. They also undergo intensive training on how to review content and follow a consultative process where they have regular meetings to discuss their findings.



The platforms monitored were Facebook, TikTok and YouTube. Facebook is the most popular social media site in Sri Lanka. YouTube has been growing in popularity because it is less responsive to hate speech, resulting in some people migrating from Facebook to YouTube to post hateful content due to Facebook being more responsive in removing harmful content. TikTok is the largest growing platform so it was included as well.

As part of identifying content, HG uses a lexicon in both local languages, including Singlish (a combination of Sinhala and English) and Tanglish (a combination of Tamil and English), to identify harmful content more effectively. The team is made aware of the changes in the words/phrases used on social media over time and with different incidents, they keep using updated terms when looking for harmful GOHS.



More recently, HG noticed social media users including symbols in words to prevent their content from being taken down. The lexicon has adapted to that and has also started including such words to observe and record harmful content. Through CiTW, Hashtag Generation created an open Google form that was shared amongst the consortium to be reshared with the wider network, requesting CSOs and individuals active in this specific field to include any new words or terminology they may have observed online so that the HG team could add it to their lexicon.

There are three main limitations of the current methodology. The first is needing access to privately published content to collect more comprehensive data and the second is needing more tools to capture local content more effectively. The third is that video-based content is harder to monitor than Facebook posts.

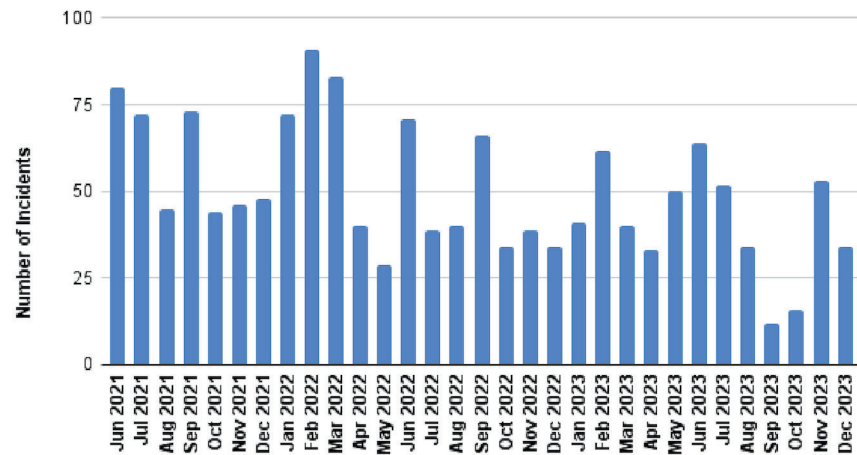
This report utilizes the data produced under the project to analyze trends to provide an overview of GOHS. The monthly statistics and key incidents from the monthly reports produced under the project were used to perform an analysis of the findings to map out the dynamics of GOHS. It must be noted however, that since it is near impossible to monitor all GOHS produced in Sri Lanka, this report can only provide a snapshot of the trends in GOHS rather than an analysis based on each incident that took place during this time period.

SGBV TRENDS BETWEEN JUNE 2021 - DECEMBER 2023

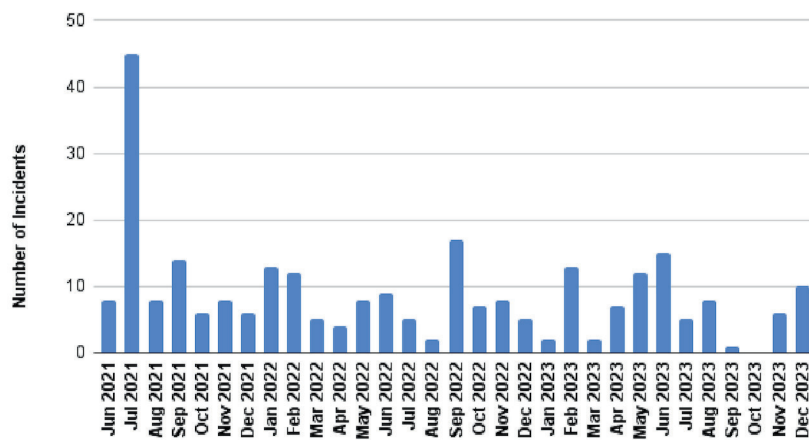
THE PERPETRATORS

When analysing the number of male vs female perpetrators, it becomes evident that the number of male perpetrators is significantly higher during the entire time period. In fact, there was never a month where the number of male perpetrators was less than the number of female perpetrators.

Number of Male Perpetrators

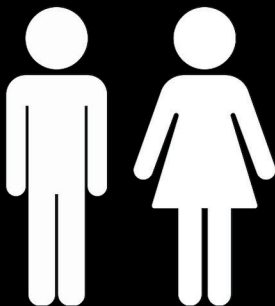


Number of Female Perpetrators



Upon closer analysis of the numbers, it is clear that while the number of female perpetrators accounted for 50 incidents or less in a month (and often did not even reach 10 occurrences), the number of male perpetrators amounted for over 50 incidents in around half of the time period measured, sometimes even surpassing 75 incidents.

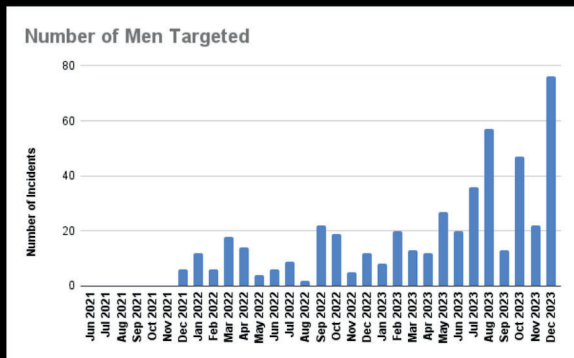
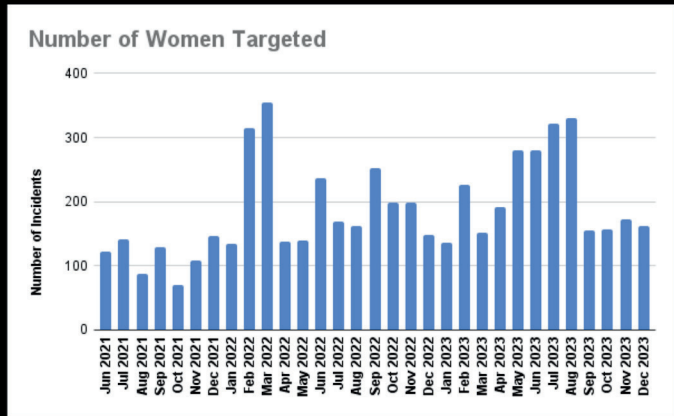
It should be noted, however, that this data is collected from publicly available information and does not include private accounts. Further, there are many instances where the gender of the perpetrator is unclear either because the data is not available or because the hate speech originated from a fake account.



SGBV TRENDS BETWEEN JUNE 2021 - DECEMBER 2023

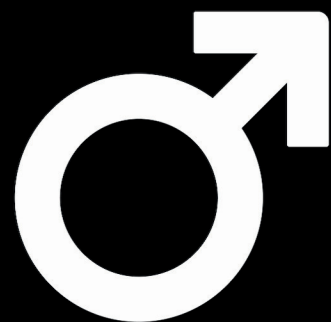
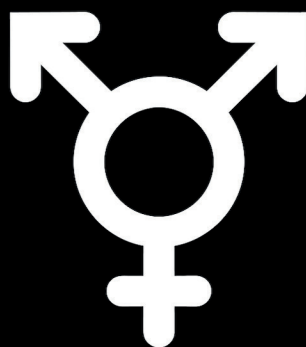
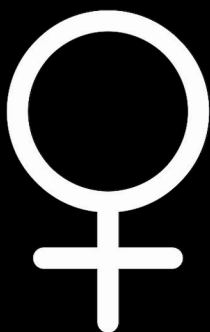
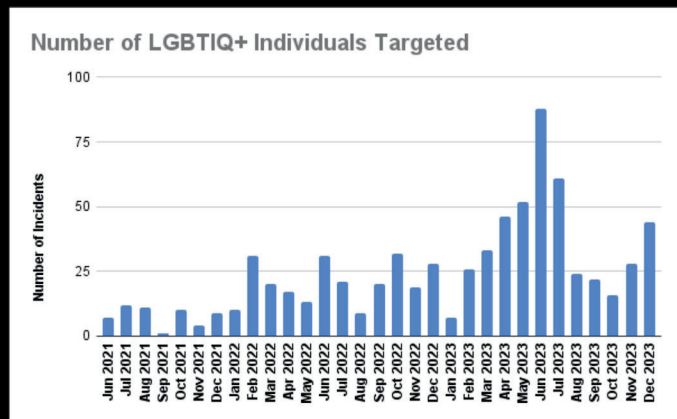
THE VICTIMS

Across the years, it is abundantly clear that the number of victims is predominantly female. The second highest target group was members of the LGBTIQ+ community, while men were the group that was targeted the least. Interestingly, the number of incidents targeting men seems to have increased over the years,



The number of incidents targeting the LGBTIQ+ community peaked in June 2023, coinciding with the time period during which talk of decriminalising homosexuality became a large part of public discourse and because it was during Pride Month.

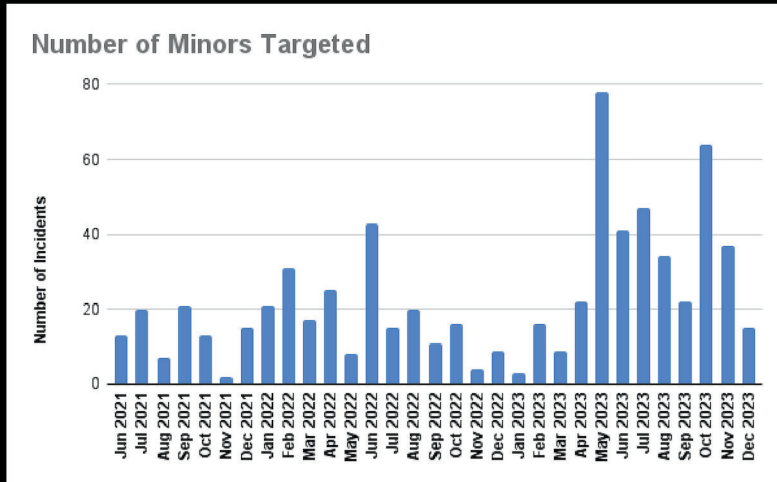
Overall, the number of incidents targeting men did not go beyond 80 instances a month, often falling well below 20 occurrences. In stark contrast, the number of incidents targeting women was well over 100 instances and often was closer to 200 incidents. The number of incidents against the LGBTIQ+ community was usually around the range of 25-50 incidents.



ONLINE ABUSE AGAINST MINORS

The number of incidents against minors averaged between 20-40 incidents a month, with particularly high numbers in May and October 2023.

In May, A 16-year-old schoolgirl was found dead in Kalutara. Several suspects were arrested. Discussions about child abuse and kidnappings gained wide traction. Misogynistic attacks against the victim were observed.



New stories were created using the edited pictures in such a way that harasses the victim. A significant number of content targeting minors were observed on Facebook and TikTok, including several non-consensual intimate images with captions promoting and glorifying child abuse and rape.

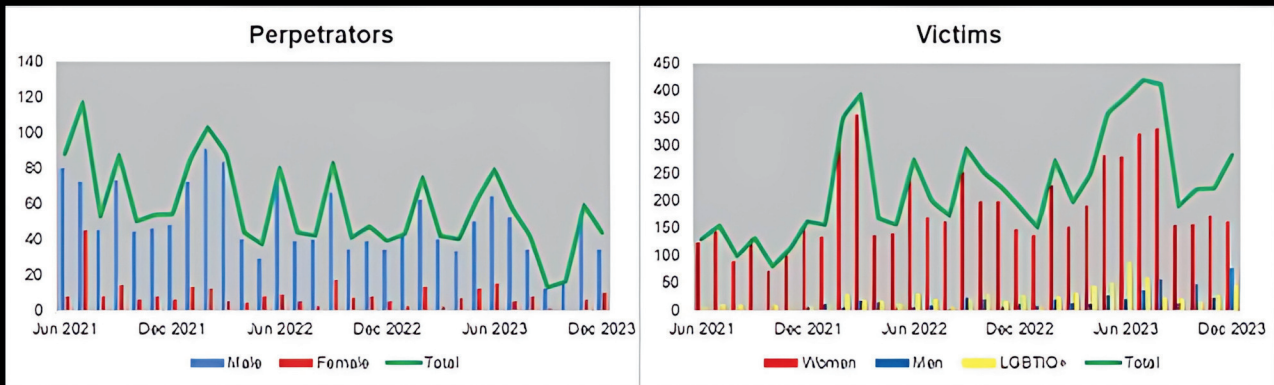
In October, several cases of child abuse were shared on social media, promoting discussions advocating for the implementation of the death penalty for child rapists. Many individuals emphasised the importance of the media upholding media ethics and the Government's responsibility to implement penalties in the event of violation of these ethics. Fake accounts and groups specifically created to share non-consensual images of school girls were observed.



These accounts and groups encouraged users to share and sexualize non-consensual images of minors in school uniform, and share half-nude images of girls created using AI technology.

Sexualized images of school girls in uniforms or sports kits and girls wearing “revealing” clothing are often found in pages and groups specially made for the distribution of such content.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VICTIMS AND PERPETRATORS

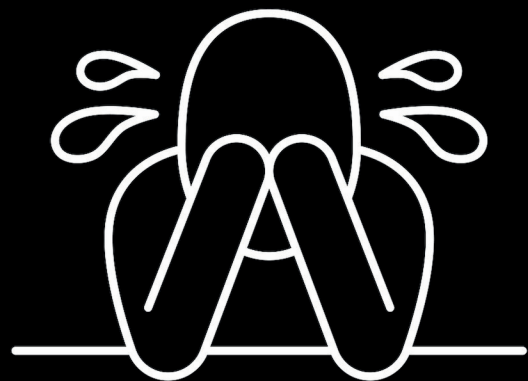


The trend lines and the number of incidents clearly flip when the subject changes from male to female and they appear to have an inverse relationship.

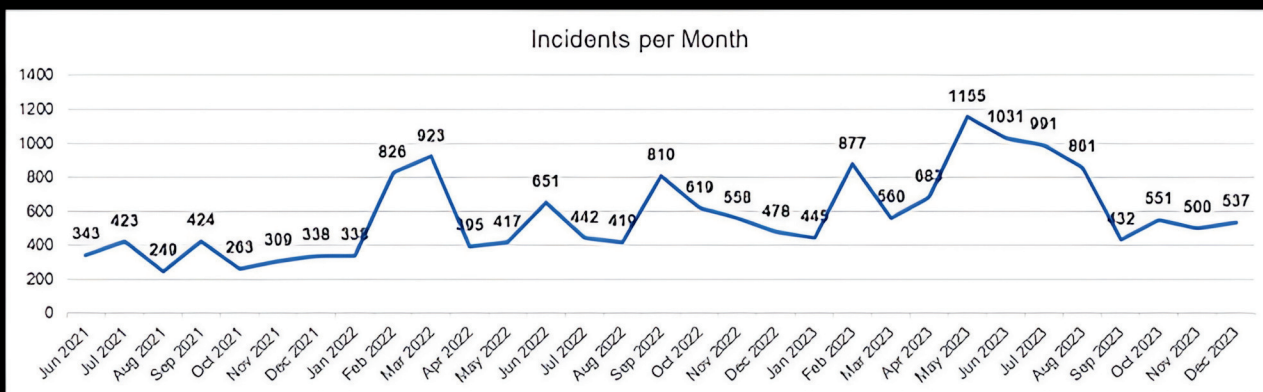


The social norms dictate that traditional roles are followed and the country has retained a patriarchal model over its history. This model unfortunately also translates into a higher societal tolerance towards the mistreatment of women and the LGBTQI+ community. These societal norms have also translated into online platforms and communities in the form of GOHS and CSGBV.

Another interesting point to note is that there are more total victims than there are perpetrators. One possible reason why the number of perpetrators is quite low is that the false sense of anonymity combined with the ease of access to social media often emboldens perpetrators. Also, when fake accounts and private accounts are used, the gender of the perpetrator cannot be ascertained.

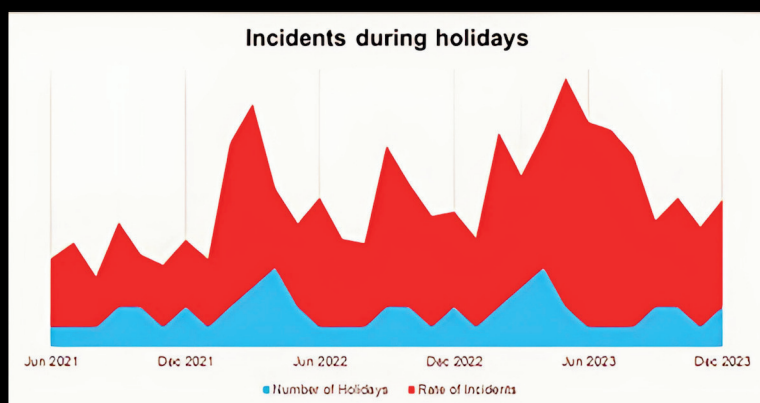


TRENDS OVER TIME



Late 2021 had the least number of events of violence in a year. One reason for this could be the fact that conversations during this period were dominated by the pandemic.

This was rectified during the Aragalaya (the 2022 mass protests in Sri Lanka to oust the government due to the unprecedented economic crisis in the country,) where people finally had a positive outlook on reforming the country and a manner in which to vent their frustrations. This resulted in a couple of months that had the lowest number of incidents for the remaining time period up to the end of the data collection period

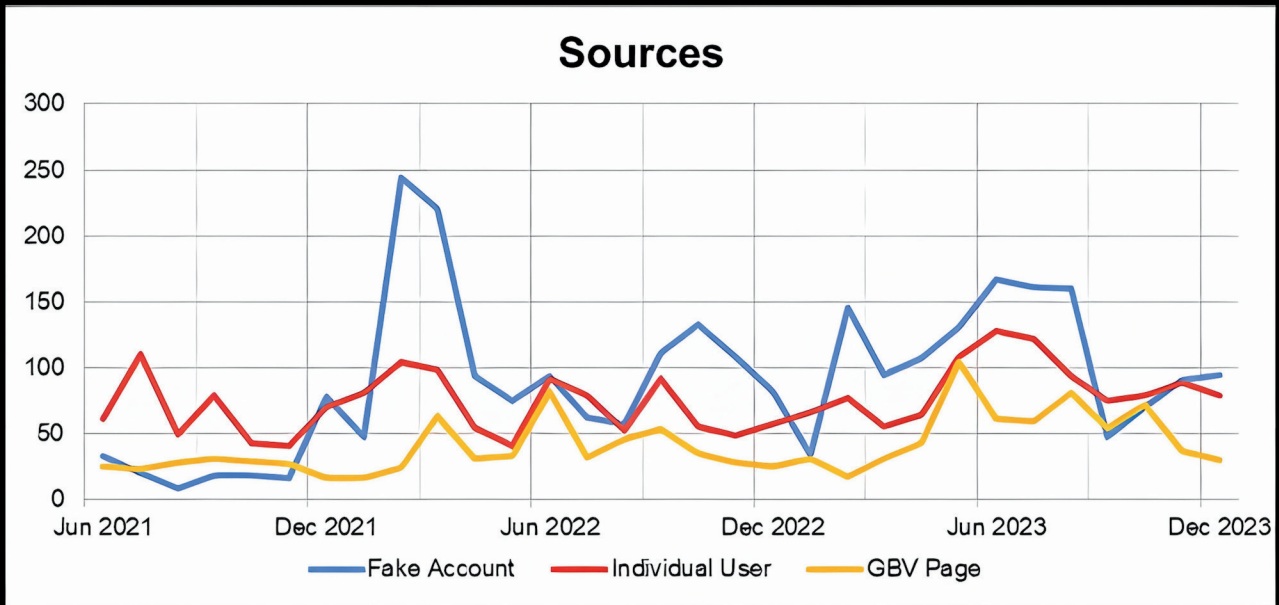


Occasional spikes in June 2022, September 2022 and Feb 2022 in an otherwise quiet period. During the Aragalaya period, there were instances where a sudden spike occurred, with the most amount of incidents over the 2 and a half years taking place from May 2023 to August 2023, possibly due to the higher number of holidays that can be seen during this period.

The number of incidents in a given month appears to mirror the number of holidays available to the public, bank and mercantile sectors in the month. There could be several potential reasons for this. One such reason is that as people have more free time, any viral trends that promote hateful behaviour have better chances of reaching wider audiences. Furthermore, among younger users, holidays mean less supervision and they are free to absorb and spread harmful ideologies. This is especially prevalent in Sri Lanka where parental control tools are less common.



ORIGINS

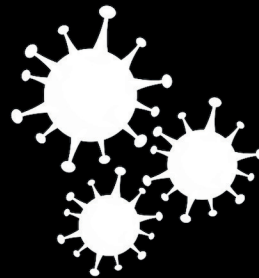


The graph for sources of harmful content shows that it is constantly being generated at a steady pace by individual users. While GBV pages (pages whose goals are to share nonconsensual images, sexualise women etc). are also a constant offender, they generate the lowest number of incidents compared to the other two sources.



It is interesting that fake accounts on the whole have stayed low, with the exception of a few peak moments where they surpass individual users. One suggestion is that people open up fake accounts to perpetuate their harmful views because they may want to protect their identity from real-world repercussions.

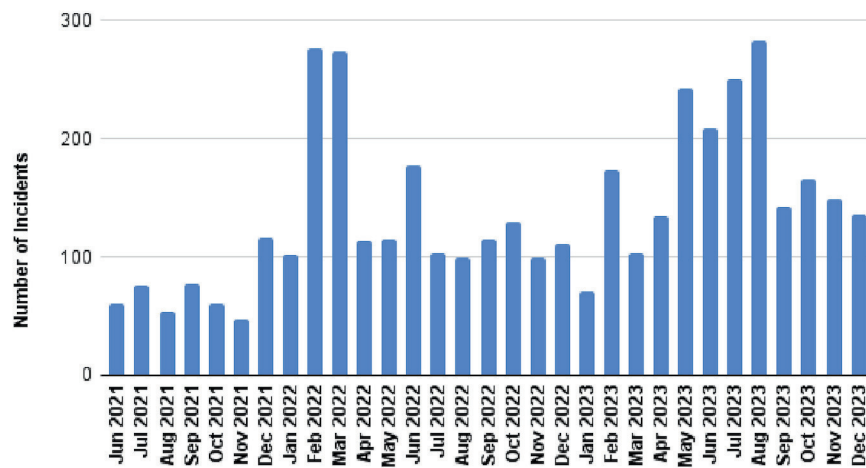
While this is certainly a factor, another explanation can be identified by looking at the peaks. For instance, in late 2021 to early 2022 when COVID was rampant, there were cases of government interference to distract from the issues surrounding the mismanagement of Covid.



Furthermore, there also appears to be a spike around the time of the Aragalaya, further suggesting that there may be some artificial inflation in these instances. This could be looked into in future studies to determine the level of artificial stories being generated to divert public attention.

TRENDS BY CATEGORY

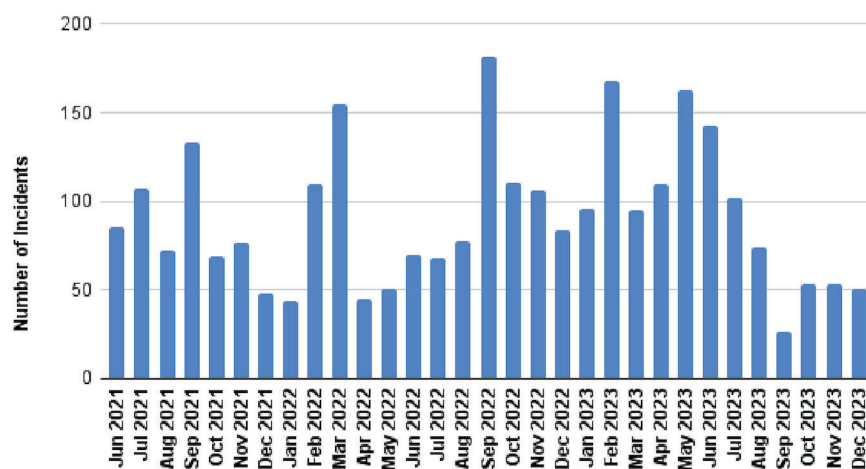
Non-Consensual Image/ Video Sharing



The highest number of incidents were categorized under non-consensual image/video sharing at almost 24%. This category of CSGBV alone was responsible for a quarter of all the CSGBV and GOHS incidents. The lowest category, on the other hand,

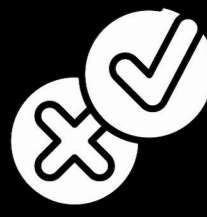
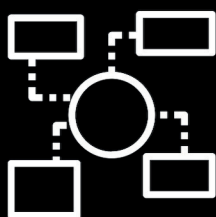
was Sextortion which amounted to around 5 incidents per month. It should be noted though, that sextortion is often underreported due to the fear of victims and is rarely something which can be seen posted publicly by perpetrators (since threats are issued privately). It is interesting, however, to note that the highest category relates to following through on the threatened action of sextortion, ie the sharing of images without the consent of the victim.

Misogynistic Discriminatory Expressions



The three categories that made up over half the incidents amongst GOHS and CSGBV were non-consensual image/video sharing (The gathering, collection and distribution of private and/or sexually-explicit images [or videos] of individuals.

without their consent for private or commercial purposes. This includes the obtaining of non-consensual private images), misogynistic incidents as well as cyber abuse/cyber sexual violence (online sexual exploitation and abuse is when one person manipulates another person to get them to do something sexual. This encompasses a wide range of sexual misconduct on digital platforms). There is an obvious overlap between misogyny which gives rise and results in cyber sexual abuse/violence becoming more acceptable.



NON-CONSENSUAL IMAGE SHARING; A SUMMARY

Since non-consensual image sharing was the highest category overall, the following analysis of the trends of the peaks of non-consensual image sharing was done to provide a brief summary of the triggers and connections between the different forms of GOHS

The highest number of non-consensual image and video sharing occurred in early 2022 and mid-2023. Given below are the most prominent incidents of nonconsensual image-sharing during the months when there was a rise in this category.

Some of the most prominent incidents observed in February 2022 included the sharing of a video of alleged sexual abuse, as well as clips and still images from the video to gain traction online. In March 2022, there was a rise in incidents of nonconsensual images and video sharing, mostly of women and girls, harassing them.

In May 2023, there was a rise in FB groups created specifically to share non-consensual and morphed images of female celebrities (mainly actresses and singers). Groups and individual users were both observed sharing non-consensual videos and images. There were also nonconsensual videos and images of members of the Tamil diaspora which were shared with sexist slurs during May. TikTok accounts were created to share nonconsensual images of workers from the Middle East during this time.

These groups also shared nonconsensual images and videos of female masseuses and sex workers and promoted the idea that men should have access to their confidential information.

July 2023 saw the video of a Buddhist monk engaging in sex with two women and the women subsequently being sexually and physically assaulted being shared. Morphed images of an actress who was given accommodation by a prominent businessman/ member of the cricket board during a cricket tour in Australia were also shared widely.

In August 2023, nonconsensual videos and images of a Sri Lankan cricket umpire were shared and the abuse of the abovementioned actress continued. Facebook groups created specifically for sharing nonconsensual images and videos and AI-generated explicit images of women were also observed in August, along with fake accounts sharing nonconsensual images of female celebrities and TikTok accounts created for sharing images of female massuuses.

- The above clearly indicates that there is a trend of online attacks against women, particularly women who are well known, if they say or do something that gains attention, even if their actions are positive and beneficial to society/have no negative impact on society*
- The above phenomenon means that women and gender minorities often self-censor their speech, especially on social media and in public, for fear of being attacked and criticised*
- It is also clear that when an incident of non-consensual image sharing takes place, it is often accompanied by other forms of GOHS such as misogynistic comments and doxxing etc.*

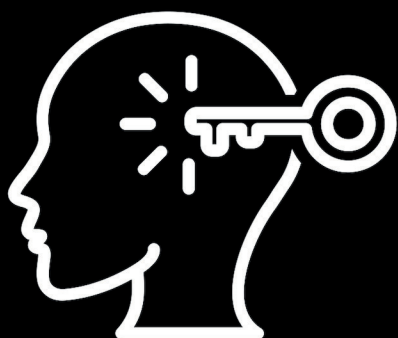
RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on these findings, the following actions can be taken to combat GOHS

State

Improving Digital Literacy

Prioritize initiatives to enhance digital literacy and awareness, especially among the youth and women on CSGBV. Develop targeted educational programs tailored to the specific needs of key target groups as identified by the data. Conduct similar awareness for law enforcement (such as the police and the relevant government officials).



Awareness Campaigns

Comprehensive awareness campaigns for law enforcement should be conducted with key affected groups in mind to address the societal stigma associated with reporting CSGBV and the importance of overcoming these barriers to create a safer online environment and empower affected individuals/ demographics to report and combat CSGBV through accessible and user-friendly reporting mechanisms.

Tailored Support

Support services and interventions by law enforcement should be tailored to the unique experiences and challenges faced by key affected groups. This can be done by meaningfully using the Online Safety Act to prosecute perpetrators and support survivors. This also includes providing psychosocial support, youth-led support groups, and apps for reporting and support.



Tech Companies

Early Warning Indicators

Trends in Gendered Hate speech can be used to project online trajectories and protect vulnerable groups both online and offline.

Employ More Reviewers Who Understand Local Languages

Have more reviewers who understand Sri Lanka's local languages (Sinhala and Tamil) because there aren't enough reviewers in Sinhala and Tamil, which means GOHS is taken down less often when posted in languages other than English.



Take Cultural Context Into Account

Cultural differences that make GOHS more damaging in Sri Lanka. For example, pictures of women wearing less traditional clothing might not cause any issues in Western countries, but it could cause domestic violence for the woman in question based on her cultural background.

RECOMMENDATIONS

CSOs

Consultations With The Government

Using this data and the studies, data and statistics from other CSOs who have worked on GOHS, consultations with the government and other policymakers can help improve state policies



Collaborative Partnerships

CSOs and women's rights organisations should establish partnerships with the legal community to identify the most affected victims based on the data produced by CiTW to assist victims. This would ensure that survivors receive the necessary legal, technical and psychosocial support and other initiatives to the address issues faced by victims. Collaborative efforts can include joint training sessions, resource-sharing and the establishment of legal support networks.



Use Of These Statistics For Further Research/ Academia

Academic institutions should conduct further research to explore the evolving nature of CSGBV and its legal aspects. Research should include assessing the effectiveness of legal responses and identifying emerging challenges and trends. Collaborations between academia and CSOs can help collect and analyse data comprehensively.

