Hidden Behind the Screen: The Silent Digital Struggle of Women and Girls with Disabilities in Nepal

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Introduction: A New Challenge in a Digital Nepal

As we mark the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence in 2025, the world is focusing on a new and dangerous battlefield: the internet. For most people, the internet is a place to learn, chat, and work. But for women and girls with disabilities in Nepal, this digital world is becoming a place of fear.

In Nepal, technology is growing fast. More people have smartphones and internet access than ever before. For a woman with a disability, whether she cannot see, cannot hear, or has trouble moving, technology can be a lifeline. It helps her talk to friends, send money, or learn new skills without leaving her home. But this same technology has a dark side. It exposes her to digital violence, a form of abuse that happens online but hurts just as much as physical violence.

This article, in the broadest sense, explores deeply how accessible and adaptive technology, which is supposed to help, can actually make women and girls with disabilities in Nepal more vulnerable to cyber-abuse. It looks at the real situation, the laws we have, and the preventive measures (major steps) we must take to keep them safe.

The Double-Edged Sword: Accessible Technology and Vulnerability

"Accessible technology" means tools that help persons with disabilities use computers and phones. Examples include screen readers (which speak out what is on the screen for blind users) or voice-to-text (which writes down what you say). Even though these tools are amazing, they create unique risks for women with diverse disabilities in Nepal. While the digital revolution in Nepal has opened doors for communication and education, it has also unlocked a dark basement of cyber-abuse. For women and girls with disabilities, this space is doubly dangerous. They face a "double burden"discrimination because of their gender and discrimination because of their disability.

1. The Risk of "Eavesdropping" and Loss of Privacy

Imagine a young woman in Kathmandu who is visually impaired/blind. She uses a screen reader on her phone. When she receives a private message or a bank notification, her phone reads it out loud. If she is in a public bus or a crowded room, everyone around her can hear her private information.

The Danger: Abusers or scammers nearby can hear her passwords, bank details, or personal messages. They can use this information to steal from her or stalk her.

The Reality: Unlike others who can glance at a screen silently, she is forced to announce her private life to the world unless she wears headphones everywhere, which might not always be safe or possible.

2. Reliance on Others (The "Caregiver Trap")

Many women with severe physical disabilities in Nepal rely on caregivers, family members, or even neighbors to help them set up their phones or type passwords.

The Danger: If the person helping her is not trustworthy, they have full access to her social media and bank accounts.

Factual Insight: Research often shows that girls and women with disabilities face the highest risk of abuse from people they know. Giving a potential abuser access to one's digital life is like giving them the keys to one's diary and wallet.

3. Scams Targeting "Easy Targets"

Cyber-criminals often target people they think are "vulnerable." They might pretend to offer disability allowances, free medical equipment, or foreign visas.

The Danger: A woman with a cognitive disability might find it harder to tell the difference between a real government message and a fake one. Scammers use this to trick them into sending money or photos.

The Reality: Data That Demands Attention

To understand the problem, we must look at the cold, hard truth. Violence against women in Nepal is already alarming, with reports indicating that nearly 80% of women with disabilities face some form of violence in their lifetime. But as our lives move online, the violence follows.

Recent data from the Nepal Police Cyber Bureau shows a massive spike in cybercrime, with nearly 9,000 women reporting digital violence in a single year. However, these numbers likely miss the silent majority: women with disabilities who cannot access the reporting mechanisms. If a reporting portal is not compatible with a screen reader for a woman with visual disability or if a helpline does not support video calls for a deaf woman using Nepali Sign Language, her digital abuse remains unrecorded.

How "Accessible" Tech Can Expose Vulnerability

We often praise technology for being "adaptive," but predators are adapting too. Women and girls with disabilities in Nepal are exposed to unique forms of digital harassment that girls and women without disabilities might never consider:

- The Screen Reader Trap: For visually impaired women using tools like NVDA or TalkBack, phishing scams are harder to spot. A sighted person might see a slightly misspelled URL (like "faceb00k.com"), but a screen reader might read it out as legitimate, leading them into traps where their private photos or data are stolen.
- Image-Based Abuse (The "Deepfake" Threat): With the rise of AI, predators can easily create fake, compromising images ("deepfakes") of women. For a woman with a physical disability or facial difference, her image is often already stigmatized. Bullies use these altered images to mock her disability, spreading them on platforms like TikTok or Telegram to humiliate her.
- Stalking via "Safety" Features: Many families in Nepal, out of "protection," install tracking apps on the phones of girls with intellectual disabilities. However, when these girls enter relationships, abusive partners can abuse these same "accessibility" features (like Find My Device) to stalk their every move, turning a safety tool into a digital leash.
- Online Harassment and Bullying: People on social media can be very cruel. They might mock a woman's disability, her appearance, or her speech. This emotional abuse can sometimes lead to severe mental disorders, such as depression and anxiety.
- Financial Exploitation: Scammers specifically target women receiving the government's disability allowance. They pose as "social workers" on Facebook, promising to help increase their allowance if they share their bank OTPs (One Time Passwords).

Financial Fraud: Stealing disability benefits or savings through online banking scams.

Why Is It Worse for Them? (Disproportionate Impact)

Women and girls with disabilities in Nepal face a "double burden." They are discriminated against because they are women, and again because they have disabilities.

1. Isolation: Many women with disabilities are already isolated at home. If they are bullied online, they feel there is nowhere safe left for them.
2. Lack of Support: If a woman without a disability is harassed, she might run to a police station. But for a woman in a wheelchair, is the police station accessible? Can a deaf woman communicate with a police officer who does not know sign language? The answer in Nepal is often "No."
3. Victim Blaming: Society often blames the woman. If a woman with a disability complains about online abuse, people might say, "Why were you on the internet anyway? You should just stay offline." This attitude silences them.

The Legal Landscape: A Gap in Protection

Nepal has strong laws on paper, but they often struggle to bite in the digital world.

- The Electronic Transactions Act (2063): This is the main law used for cybercrime. While it punishes "illegal conduct" online, it does not specifically define "denial of digital accessibility" as a crime. It treats all victims the same, ignoring the extra vulnerability of a woman with disability.
- National Criminal Code, 2017: This code criminalizes harassment and violation of privacy, but, fails in the effective implementation.
- The Act Relating to Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2074): This act guarantees the right to live without violence. However, it focuses heavily on physical access (ramps, lifts) and less on digital access.
- International Framework (UNCRPD): Nepal is a signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Article 16 calls for protection from violence, but we are failing to apply this to the internet.
- CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women): This guarantees women's rights to safety and equality.

A Story of Courage: The "Faceless" Victim

Let's look at a realistic scenario based on common cases in Nepal. "Sita" (name changed), a deaf woman from Pokhara, uses video calls to communicate in sign language. A man she met online recorded their private video chats without her consent. When she refused his demands for money, he threatened to release the videos to her conservative family.

Sita wanted to report him. She went to the police station, but there was no sign language interpreter. She tried to use the online police portal, but the "CAPTCHA" code (the puzzle to prove you are human) was not accessible to her understanding. Frustrated and scared, she gave up. Sita's story is not just about harassment; it is about a system that failed to let her speak.

Preventive Majors: Building a Digital Shield

To truly solve this problem, we need practical, simple, and strong actions. We cannot just talk about the problem; we must fix it. Here are practical, realistic, and factual preventive measures (Preventive Majors) that can be implemented immediately in Nepal.

1. For the Individual: Adaptive Digital Safety
   - "Trust but Verify" with Allies: Women with visual impairments should establish a "trusted ally" system, a close friend or family member who can visually verify a suspicious link or image before they click on it.

- Trust No One Online: Be very careful about accepting friend requests from strangers.
- Accessible Two-Factor Authentication (2FA): Instead of relying on SMS codes which can be intercepted, use authentication apps (like Google Authenticator) that are compatible with screen readers. This adds a lock that hackers cannot easily pick.
- Cyber Hygiene: Use headphones when listening to private messages. Cover your screen in public.
- Webcam Covers: For women with limited mobility who may leave their laptops or tablets open for long periods, a simple physical webcam cover is a cheap and effective way to prevent "cam-fecting" (hackers spying through the camera).
- Keep Evidence: If someone harasses you, take screenshots. Do not delete the messages; they are proof.

2. For Technology Companies & Developers
- Universal Design is Non-Negotiable: Nepali apps (like eSewa or Hamro Patro) must ensure their platforms meet WCAG (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines). If an app updates, it must not break the accessibility features that women with disabilities rely on.
- "Safety by Design": Apps should be built with safety in mind. For example, banking apps should have a "privacy mode" that dims the screen or speaks less sensitive info when in public.
- Easy Block/Report Buttons: The buttons to block a harasser must be easy to find and use, even for someone with limited hand movement.
- AI for Good: Tech companies should develop AI tools that automatically detect and blur abusive images sent to users who have flagged themselves as vulnerable.

3. For Government and Law Enforcement (Nepal Police)
- Accessible Reporting Portals: The Cyber Bureau must upgrade its reporting portal. It needs a "Video Relay Service" where a deaf woman can report a crime via video call using sign language. It also needs high-contrast modes for the visually impaired.
- Strict Law Enforcement: Police officers need training to understand the specific needs of women with disabilities. They must take online threats seriously and not dismiss them.
- Disability-Sensitized Training: Police officers need training on how to handle devices used by persons with disabilities. Taking away a blind woman's phone for "evidence" is like taking away her eyes. Data extraction must be done quickly so her assistive device is returned immediately.

4. For Civil Society & NGOs
- Digital Literacy Camps: Organizations in Nepal, like the Blind Youth Association Nepal (BYAN), Access Planet, and Prayatna Nepal are already doing great work. We need to fund specific "Digital Self-Defense" boot camps that teach women with disabilities how to block, report, and secure their privacy settings using their specific assistive tech.
- Awareness Campaigns: Use the 16 Days of Activism to tell the public that harassing a woman with a disability is a crime. We need to change the mindset of society.

5. For Caregivers and Families
- Respect Privacy: Families must understand that a woman with a disability has a right to digital privacy. Do not demand to read her messages.
- Support, Don't Control: Help her set up security (like two-factor authentication), but let her control her own device as much as possible.

Conclusion: No Excuse for Digital Abuse

As we move through 2025, the distinction between "online" violence and "real life" violence has vanished. For a woman with a disability in Nepal, a threat received on WhatsApp is just as terrifying as a threat on the street, perhaps more so, because it enters her safest space: her home.

In other words, digital violence against women and girls with disabilities in Nepal is a silent crisis. It hides behind the screens of smartphones and laptops. But it is real, and it hurts. We cannot just tell women to "get off the internet." We must make the internet safe for them.

The 16 Days of Activism is not just about wearing orange; it is about shining a light on these dark corners of our digital society. Preventing digital violence against women with disabilities is not just about writing new laws; it is about empathy. It is about understanding that when a woman with visual disability cannot see the screen, she needs to trust the system. Similarly, when a woman with hearing disability cannot hear the video, she needs to trust the platform. Let us ensure that technology remains a tool for liberation, not a new instrument of oppression.

As we move through 2025, our goal must be clear: Internet access must not come at the cost of safety. We must build a digital Nepal that is inclusive, where a woman with a disability can use technology to empower herself without fear of abuse. By combining strong laws, accessible technology, and genuine human empathy, we can stop the violence before it starts.

The theme for 2025 is UNiTE. Unity does not mean leaving the most vulnerable behind. A digital space that is unsafe for a woman with a disability is a digital space that is broken.

We do not need pity; we need policy. We do not need charity; we need change. As we observe these 16 days, let us pledge to make the internet a place where a woman's disability does not define her safety. Let us ensure that technology remains a tool for freedom, not a weapon for fear. If we can build ramps for wheelchairs in hospitals, we can build firewalls for safety in the digital world.

Let's click "Delete" on digital violence and "Enter" on equality. There is no excuse for abuse, either offline or online.

How You Can Help Today

If you or someone you know is facing cyber-violence in Nepal:

- Report to the Cyber Bureau: Visit the office at Bhotahity, Kathmandu, or email cyberbureau@nepalpolice.gov.np.
- Call for Help: Use the National Women Commission Helpline: 1145 or Nepal Police: 100.
- Support: Reach out to organizations like the Nepal Disabled Women Association (NDWA) for legal and psychological support.