



Gender-Based and Sexual Violence & Increasing Access to Digital Communication Technologies: Challenges and Opportunities for Policing in Timor-Leste

Report by

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Acronyms

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| ALFeLa | Assisténsia Legal ba Feto no Labarik (Legal Assistance for Women and Children) |
| CSO | Civil society organization |
| FM | Fundasaun Mahein |
| FOKUPERS | Forum Komunikasi Perempuan Timor-Lorosa'e (Timorese Women's Communication Forum) |
| GBV | Gender-based Violence |
| GBSV | Gender-based and Sexual Violence |
| JSMP | Judicial System Monitoring Program |
| MSSI | Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion |
| NGO | Non-governmental organization |
| PCIC | Scientific and Criminal Investigation Police |
| PNTL | National Police of Timor-Leste |
| SEI | Secretary of State for Equality |
| VPU | Vulnerable Persons Unit |

Executive Summary

This report presents the findings of a research study examining the impact of increasing internet access and digital technology on gender-based and sexual violence (GBSV) against women and children in Timor-Leste. Conducted by Fundasaun Mahein (FM), the study aims to provide actionable recommendations for the National Police of Timor-Leste (PNTL) to enhance their response to these emerging challenges using a community policing approach.

The study engaged in primary data collection through semi-structured interviews with two key stakeholder groups: PNTL officials from the Vulnerable Persons Unit (VPU) and three civil society organizations (CSOs) supporting people who have experienced GBSV: ALFeLa, FOKUPERS and JSMP.

The study's findings highlight the increasing complexity of GBSV in Timor-Leste in the digital age, particularly the challenges posed by online harassment, exploitation and abuse in a context where digital literacy is lacking and patterns of GBSV reflect deeply entrenched power dynamics and socio-cultural norms. The research found that while PNTL's VPU has shown significant dedication to combating these issues, limited financial, human and technological resources, inadequate digital training and external structural barriers significantly hinder their efforts. Furthermore, civil society organizations working in the GBSV prevention and support space emphasize the need for better coordination between law enforcement and community support services to address the growing digital dimensions of GBSV.

The report concludes by offering recommendations aimed at tackling the challenge of digital GBSV in Timor-Leste, including investing in building PNTL's institutional and operational capacity, expanding partnerships between civil society, law enforcement and government and incorporating digital literacy initiatives into community policing strategies.

Introduction

The issue of GBSV remains a pressing concern in Timor-Leste, particularly for women and children.¹ Traditionally, GBSV has been addressed through a lens focused on physical and psychological abuse. However, the rapid rise in internet access and the increasing use of smartphones, tablets and social media platforms have introduced new forms of digitally mediated abuse, exploitation and violence. Meanwhile, Timor-Leste's population faces significant digital literacy limitations, including limited knowledge of the dangers and consequences of online abuse and harassment.² As a result of these factors, online harassment, cyberstalking and digital exploitation have

¹ Estimates of the proportion of women and children who have experienced GBSV in Timor-Leste range from 1/3 to over half. See, for example, The Asia Foundation's 2016 Nabilan report or the 2021 Spotlight Initiative report on GBV in Timor-Leste.

² See UNCDF's report on digital and financial literacy in Timor-Leste (2023).

become more prevalent,³ posing unique challenges for law enforcement agencies and civil society organizations working to support GBSV victims and survivors.

This study seeks to respond to this emerging challenge by assessing the current landscape of online or digital GBSV in Timor-Leste, from the perspective of PNTL, particularly the VPU, as well as civil society organizations working in the area of GBSV prevention and support. In addition to shedding light of the current situation regarding digital GBSV in Timor-Leste, the research aims to identify current gaps in knowledge, resources and coordination among key stakeholders, with the goal of providing concrete recommendations for enhancing civil society and law enforcement responses.

Methodology

Primary data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews with two key stakeholder groups: PNTL officials based in Dili, particularly those in VPU, and civil society organizations that work closely with victims of GBSV. Additional secondary data were collected through desk review of relevant documents, including international agency reports, news articles and NGO websites. Data analysis and synthesis were conducted by Fundasaun Mahein's research team.

The semi-structured interviews allowed for flexibility in exploring each stakeholder's unique experiences and perspectives while maintaining consistency in the core topics addressed. These interviews provided qualitative data on the institutional and operational challenges faced by PNTL and other relevant stakeholders, especially in addressing GBSV through the lens of digital technology.

Due to time and funding constraints, this research did not seek to document the perspectives of individuals who have experienced digital GBSV, their family members or wider communities. The research findings therefore reflect the viewpoints of individuals and organizations working in the GBSV space, and not those of survivors or victims of GBSV.

The study refers to “online GSBV” and “digital GBSV” interchangeably.⁴ These terms describe both online-only activities such as cyberstalking, cyberbullying or sharing of sexual images without consent, as well as physical acts which are *mediated* or *facilitated* by digital communication technologies, such as the use of social media to facilitate a physical encounter which culminates in sexual abuse.

³ See The Asia Foundation's report Digital Youth in Timor-Leste (2022).

⁴ UN Women and other UN agencies have adopted the phrase “Technology-Facilitated Gender-based Violence” (TFGBV) to describe this phenomenon; however, FM has chosen not to use this term during this research as it is not yet widely used or understood in Timor-Leste.

The Nexus of Digital Technology and GBSV in Timor-Leste

The rapid rise of accessible digital communication technologies – particularly cheap smartphones and mobile internet packages – has transformed social relations in Timor-Leste, both in urban areas like Dili where internet penetration is higher, but also in rural areas which are increasingly connected to the 4G mobile internet network. While internet access has brought new opportunities for communication and access to information, it has also facilitated online abuse. Women and children, especially young women, are the primary victims of online harassment, cyberstalking and non-consensual sharing of intimate images. In addition, there is evidence – documented in this report – that online communication is being used to facilitate offline sexual activities, including abusive and violent sexual behaviours. These forms of violence are particularly insidious because they extend beyond the physical realm, severely impacting victims' psychological well-being and sense of safety.

Although Timor-Leste is still in the early stages of digital transformation, the trend toward increasing internet speeds and wider access means that GBSV in the digital space will likely continue to grow. This presents new challenges for law enforcement, especially in understanding and responding to these new forms of abuse and avenues for exploitation and harassment. Traditional policing methods, which are often reactive and focused on incidents of physical violence, may not be adequate in addressing the complexities of digital GBSV.

Fundasaun Mahein therefore believes that PNTL, particularly VPU, urgently needs to develop new strategies to effectively combat online abuse and digitally mediated forms of sexual exploitation. This includes developing greater in-house capabilities to detect and prevent these practices, including digital investigation techniques, community awareness programs and greater coordination between PNTL's specialised GBSV units – VPU and the Gender Division – and community and municipal policing structures. At the same time, it involves increased collaboration with civil society organizations and government entities like the Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion (MSSI) and Secretary of State for Equality (SEI) to respond to the challenge of digital GBSV as well as the broader social factors that perpetuate violence against women and children.

Findings

Significant Gaps in PNTL's Capacity to Address Online GBSV

The following findings are based on interviews conducted with two PNTL officers: the current head of VPU and a former member of VPU. The interviews revealed significant concerns about the relationship between digital technology and GBSV and specific actions taken by VPU to respond to this growing challenge. The officers noted that the

rise of digital platforms has brought new challenges, but that PNTL in general – and VPU in particular – faces numerous obstacles to respond effectively, including limited technical capacity, insufficient human resources and the socio-cultural stigma surrounding reporting sexual violence, particularly in cases involving a power differential between perpetrator and victim.

Current head of VPU

From the perspective of the current head of VPU, the increasing use of digital technologies, particularly the internet, has significant implications for the safety of youth in Timor-Leste. With faster internet speeds and cheaper mobile data packages, the use of smartphones and online platforms has become more widespread and appealing. However, many people, especially young users, do not fully understand the risks associated with these technologies. The VPU has observed that an increasing number of cases registered with their unit are related to online activities, with many individuals using smartphones in uncontrolled ways, putting themselves at risk.

One of the major concerns raised by the VPU chief is the widespread access to pornography, especially among children. Parents often provide smartphones to their children with the intention of facilitating their education, such as learning English. However, many parents fail to monitor their children's usage, allowing them not only to access inappropriate content, including pornography, but also to engage in “sexting” and sharing of explicit images with their peers. These issues are not limited to adults exploiting minors – VPU stated that they have also seen cases where minors have abused other minors in this way.

In response to these growing concerns, VPU has engaged young people, particularly in schools, about the safe use of social media. Its “socialisation” program focuses on raising awareness about cyberbullying, online sexual harassment and exploitation. VPU acknowledges the many positive aspects of internet access, such as expanding knowledge on various topics, but also stresses the need for caution and awareness regarding the potential dangers. The program begins with secondary school students, where discussions on gender-based violence, sexual exploitation and the risks of sharing personal information and images online are held.

A critical issue highlighted by the VPU chief is the lack of legal recognition in the current penal code regarding the sharing of images without consent. Young girls, in particular, are vulnerable to inadvertently sharing personal images on social media platforms, which they then cannot control, leading to potential exploitation. The absence of specific legal provisions on this issue complicates the ability of the PNTL to take appropriate action in such cases.

The VPU chief emphasized the need for greater collaboration and information-sharing among all relevant entities to address these issues, and VPU advocates for a more comprehensive societal approach to protecting young women and girls. This includes involving various sectors of society in efforts to prevent victimization through digital

technologies, including families, communities, local and national government agencies, civil society and community-based organizations, educational institutions and policing institutions.

Finally, the VPU chief underscored the importance of education and awareness in addressing these challenges. While the technologies themselves are not to blame, there is a need to educate individuals on how to use them responsibly and recognize the associated risks. He recognized that civil society organizations have a crucial role to play in raising awareness within communities and providing information to help individuals and families navigate the digital landscape safely.

Former VPU officer

According to the former VPU officer interviewed during this research, the current situation regarding digital sexual violence and gender-based violence is extremely troubling. Reportedly, there has been an increased number of incidents involving victims who are targeted through social media and other digital platforms. However, victims often feel too embarrassed or ashamed (*moe*) to report these incidents. The stigma surrounding sexual violence, especially in cases where perpetrators are influential figures (*ema boot*), prevents many victims from coming forward. As the officer explained, “There are quite a lot [of cases], but many are embarrassed, [and thus] do not want to come to make a complaint.” This silence hampers the ability of PNTL to fully address the scope of the problem. Even when complaints are made, cases often stall because investigators lack the resources and expertise to build strong cases. Some cases are referred by PNTL to the Public Prosecutor, only to be dismissed due to insufficient evidence or procedural gaps. The officer noted that, in many instances, “because we have no law [specific to this issue], the case cannot be continued [by the prosecutor].”

Regarding community knowledge, the officer reported that while there is some general awareness of the risks posed by digital platforms, many parents and community members do not take proactive measures to educate their children. As the officer noted, “Many know about this problem, but do not want to tell their children and then when they become victims, they are surprised.” This lack of preventive education leaves young people vulnerable, particularly in rural or remote areas where digital literacy is lower. In such areas, victims may be unaware of concepts like deception and exploitation through online platforms.

PNTL's response to digital crimes is further constrained by both technical and human resource limitations. When a complaint is made, officers attempt to track down the perpetrator, but this task is often difficult. However, the officer did not fully explain why this would be difficult in cases where the perpetrator was known, such as when a perpetrator used a social media profile under their own name to commit sexual harassment or abuse.

PNTL has made efforts to raise awareness about online GBSV and the risks of digital technologies. VPU has conducted door-to-door campaigns and school outreach programs, while also disseminating information through social media, television and radio. However, these activities have been limited in scope due to a shortage of personnel. As the officer remarked, VPU has “shared information on social media like FB and via television and radio. Other methods we have not done yet as the VPU has insufficient people.” The limited reach of these campaigns means that many communities, particularly in rural areas, remain unaware of the risks associated with digital technology.

In terms of resources, the most pressing need identified by PNTL is for enhanced IT capacity and digital tools to detect and respond to sophisticated cybercrimes. The officer said that PNTL’s “lack of IT capacity to use advanced digital [means] to detect sophisticated cybercrimes” is a major obstacle to effective policing in this area. Without the necessary technological infrastructure, PNTL is ill-equipped to tackle the growing threat of cyber-enabled GBSV. The officer warned that the “government must take responsibility for fixing these issues, otherwise when [Timor-Leste’s newly constructed] fibre optic cable becomes operational, there will be many victims and PNTL-VPU will not be able to do anything.”

Perspectives from Civil Society Organizations

CSOs in Timor-Leste play a vital role in supporting victims and survivors of GBSV, including providing psychosocial support services and legal assistance, and advocating for legislation aimed at punishing perpetrators of GBSV and protecting victims. Interviews with three CSOs which specialize in providing psychosocial support and access to justice for victims of GBSV revealed that they are increasingly encountering cases of online or digitally mediated abuse among the communities they serve. CSOs highlighted the growing need for digital literacy programs to educate both victims and law enforcement on the dangers of digital GBSV and how to respond effectively.

ALFeLa

ALFeLa (Asisténsia Legál ba Feto no Labarik – Legal Assistance for Women and Children)⁵ supports women and children who have experienced GBSV to access the formal justice system through legal aid, education and advocacy.

In recent years, ALFeLa has observed a growing number of cases of sexual abuse initiated through social media, particularly Facebook. For example, many perpetrators have threatened to expose victims' private images when relationships end, understood by ALFeLa as a tactic often used by men to exert control over their female victims. This form of abuse has become increasingly common, with ALFeLa seeing several

⁵ <https://iwda.org.au/asistensia-legal-ba-feto-no-labarik/>

cases each month. The organization also reports a disturbing trend of young girls being lured online into dangerous situations that result in serious violations.

The increased use of social media to initiate romantic relationships, sidestepping traditional processes of getting to know each other through mutual acquaintances, seems to have contributed to increased levels of abuse. ALFeLa observes that young people often fall for each other quickly when communicating via social media, not fully understanding the risks posed by engaging with strangers online. This is especially true for young girls, who are more vulnerable to manipulation and exploitation, particularly after they have been encouraged to share intimate images of themselves. A lack of awareness about the dangers of online interactions, combined with insufficient digital literacy, has further complicated the situation.

ALFeLa noted that their Referral Network, which includes VPU and several other civil society organizations, works tirelessly to address cases and assist victims. ALFeLa also plays an active role by collecting evidence from digital devices, which they provide to the VPU for investigations. However, the organizations involved have limited capacity to respond to all cases effectively, and ALFeLa noted that many cases never reach their organization as victims do not know about their services or are too embarrassed to bring their case.

To better address the issue, ALFeLa recommends that greater efforts be made to raise awareness in schools and communities about the risks of social media, particularly regarding meeting new people or engaging in romantic or sexual relationships online. They also suggest expanding the government's current social media training for journalists to cover topics such as social media safety, sexual abuse and harassment, which could help prevent future cases of digital GBSV.

FOKUPERS

FOKUPERS (Forum Komunikasi Perempuan Timor-Lorosa'e – Timorese Women's Communication Forum)⁶ is a women's rights NGO which advocates for gender equality and provides support services for women who have experienced GBSV.

During the interview with FM, FOKUPERS highlighted the negative impact of social media misuse, particularly on vulnerable women and girls who often do not fully understand the risks of sharing personal information online. Cyberbullying and online sexual harassment are becoming more prevalent, with many victims being further abused and stereotyped once their private information is shared. These victims often face additional harassment in the form of verbal abuse, both online and in person. The organization notes that many victims are reluctant to report the abuse, fearing blame or further mistreatment.

According to FOKUPERS, the deeply rooted patriarchal culture in Timor-Leste is a major contributing factor to the rise in online abuse. FOKUPERS points out that

⁶ <https://www.fokupers.org/>

harmful behaviour, such as bullying or harassment by men, is often excused as "normal" or "men's nature," placing the burden on women to avoid becoming victims. From a young age, girls are taught to be cautious and stay at home, which fosters an environment where women are expected to bear responsibility for men's actions. Additionally, economic hardship and widespread poverty have led many people to accept abuse as a normal part of life, contributing to a sense of apathy toward addressing the problem.

Although some progress has been made by state authorities in tackling gender-based violence, including criminalizing domestic violence, significant gaps remain, particularly in addressing online forms of abuse. FOKUPERS emphasizes that civil society organizations, such as theirs, play a key role in educating communities about the risks of social media while also supporting victims. However, they stress that it is ultimately the responsibility of the state to provide adequate support and protection to victims.

FOKUPERS calls on the government to take a stronger stance against gender-based violence, including online harassment, by providing the necessary resources to monitor and prosecute violators. They also recommend more active state support for civil society organizations working on these issues, as well as better integration of digital safety and sexual harassment topics into community education efforts.

Judicial System Monitoring Program

The legal advocacy NGO JSMP (Judicial System Monitoring Program)⁷ monitors and advocates on judicial processes and legal reforms in Timor-Leste, with a strong focus on gender equality and GBSV. JSMP also works together with other CSOs to provide support to women who have experienced GBSV.

With regards to digital GBSV, JSMP reports widespread misuse of social media, particularly by men who use these platforms to intimidate or control their partners. This misuse often manifests as emotional manipulation, threats and harassment, which can severely restrict the freedom of the victim, leaving them afraid to leave their homes. These behaviours are particularly common among younger couples who, due to family pressures, use online communication as a primary means of contact, which can lead to jealousy and escalate into physical violence when perceived infidelities arise.

Key factors driving digital abuse include economic dependency and lack of awareness. JSMP highlights that many perpetrators are unaware that their online behaviour could lead to legal consequences. Moreover, women in abusive relationships, particularly those who rely on their partners financially, are often discouraged from coming forward due to fear of retaliation and the inadequacy of the legal response.

JSMP notes that the legal system in Timor-Leste does not deal with cases of sexual abuse or domestic violence harshly enough. Sentences are often suspended, even in

⁷ <https://jsmp.tl/>

cases where the victim expected imprisonment for the perpetrator. The lack of protection for victims during court processes further undermines the justice system, discouraging others from bringing their cases forward. JSMP also highlights the absence of mechanisms to directly contact social media companies to prevent harmful content from being shared, a service that exists in other countries.

JSMP recommends legal reforms to address gaps in the penal code, particularly the inclusion of incest as a specific crime. They also call for more specialized training for police and prosecutors in investigating cases of digital GBSV. Additionally, they stress that the Timor-Leste Government, particularly MSSI and SEI, needs to play a more active role in educating communities and providing long-term support to victims. Finally, they urge donors to move beyond short-term awareness programs and invest in long-term initiatives that can meaningfully address the misuse of digital technologies in perpetuating abuse.

Analysis: Challenges and Opportunities for PNTL

Gaps in Training, Resources and Legislative Frameworks

The findings from interviews with PNTL officials and civil society organizations point to significant gaps in training and resources within PNTL's VPU, as well as broader challenges related to limited knowledge among communities of the risks of digital technologies. While these units are tasked with addressing GBSV, they lack the technical expertise and tools needed to investigate and respond to online abuse effectively. Without specialized training in digital forensics and cybercrime, PNTL is ill-equipped to address the growing threat of online GBSV, leaving victims vulnerable and perpetrators unaccountable.

A significant challenge identified during interviews with both civil society organizations and PNTL officials is the current legal gap in Timor-Leste's criminal justice system regarding online harassment and abuse. While there are laws addressing physical forms of GBSV, there is no clear legal framework that specifically defines online GBSV or provides guidelines for investigating and prosecuting such crimes. The lack of specific laws or protocols also means that the police often lack the necessary tools and knowledge to properly respond to incidents involving online harassment or abuse, which can involve complex issues such as digital evidence collection and cooperation with social media companies. This legislative gap severely hampers the ability of law enforcement to effectively address digital forms of abuse, leaving perpetrators with little fear of legal consequences.

Opportunities for Collaboration

Despite these challenges, there are opportunities for PNTL to enhance its response to online GBSV through stronger collaboration with civil society organizations and government entities like SEI. By working together, these stakeholders can develop

comprehensive prevention strategies that address both the physical and digital dimensions of GBSV. This could include joint training programs for police officers and community leaders, joint public information campaigns on digital literacy and online safety aimed at educating the public, and the development of clear protocols for reporting and investigating online abuse.

One of the most pressing needs identified in interviews with civil society and PNTL officers is the lack of training and capacity to handle digital GBSV cases. A collaborative program that focuses on building the capacity of PNTL officers, public prosecutors and other judicial authorities is critical. This could involve workshops and training sessions led by civil society organizations with expertise in digital safety, legal frameworks and gender-based violence. These sessions would aim to familiarize law enforcement with emerging trends in digital GBSV and equip them with skills to gather and manage digital evidence.

In addition, working with regional or international partners with advanced expertise in digital forensics could help build PNTL's capacity for investigating and prosecuting digital GBSV.

In light of the observed rise in cases of online abuse and GBSV mediated by digital technologies, both civil society and PNTL emphasized the importance of raising awareness about digital safety, particularly among vulnerable groups such as women and children. A joint public awareness campaign could be conducted to educate the public about the risks of social media, how to protect personal information and how to recognize and report instances of online harassment or abuse. This campaign could be rolled out through community outreach, radio, TV programs and social media, using a mix of traditional and digital platforms to reach different demographics.

Collaboration between the government, civil society and PNTL would be essential to ensure the wide distribution of this critical information. School-based awareness programs could be particularly effective, with educational materials developed and distributed in collaboration with ministries of education and social solidarity, as well as gender-focused NGOs. Special workshops could also be held for parents and caregivers to equip them with the knowledge to better understand and support their children when it comes to navigating digital spaces safely.

Given the legal gaps identified by both PNTL officers and civil society organizations, one of the most important collaborative efforts would be the development of a comprehensive legal framework addressing digital gender-based violence. A task force could be established, involving key stakeholders such as the Ministry of Justice, PNTL, civil society organizations working in gender-based violence and technical experts in digital law. This group would work together to draft a digital GBSV law that reflects the realities of the online environment in Timor-Leste, addresses the needs of victims and strengthens the capacity of law enforcement to act decisively. Such a framework would provide clear legal definitions of online harassment and abuse,

establish processes for collecting and preserving digital evidence and outline protocols for the police and judiciary to follow in investigating and prosecuting such cases.

The Government in collaboration with international partners could develop a safe reporting platform to allow victims to confidentially report online harassment or abuse. This platform could be monitored by a dedicated team within PNTL trained to handle digital GBSV cases, ensuring a prompt response to any incidents reported. The platform could facilitate access to legal support for navigating the criminal justice system, psychological counselling and assistance in safely removing or securing personal data from online platforms, services which can be provided collaboratively through the existing GBV referral network.

Another critical area where collaboration could make a significant impact is in the research and data collection related to digital GBSV. Civil society organizations, in partnership with academic institutions and government bodies, could conduct studies to better understand the prevalence, patterns and impact of digital abuse in Timor-Leste. Data collected could inform policy decisions, help identify emerging trends and provide a clearer picture of the digital GBSV landscape. Research could focus on both the perpetrators and victims of digital GBSV, shedding light on the root causes and contributing factors. Research can also be conducted to determine the effectiveness of existing campaigns aimed at raising awareness about these issues, such as VPU's "socialisation" efforts in schools and communities regarding online safety. The results of this research could contribute to improved program design and innovative methods for raising awareness about the risks of online communication among youth.

Furthermore, a collaborative effort to monitor and analyse online platforms such as Facebook for potential threats of harassment or exploitation could be established. This could involve setting up a task force with representatives from PNTL, civil society and technology experts to track and respond to problematic online behaviours.

Digital GBSV – a Question of Power and Impunity

Finally, FM believes that the issue of digital GBSV in Timor-Leste cannot be fully understood by focusing solely on technical deficiencies such as digital literacy, education levels, legal gaps or the technological capacity of law enforcement. While these factors are undeniably important, they are only part of the problem. From FM's perspective, the main drivers of digital GBSV in Timor-Leste are deeply unequal power dynamics and patriarchal social norms which systematically disempower women while normalising or excusing sexually inappropriate behaviour by men, particularly men of higher social status.⁸

⁸ Indeed, international research on gender equality and sexual violence has demonstrated the correlation between unequal gendered power relations and patterns of sexual abuse and exploitation (Kearns et al. 2020; Kreft 2023), with contexts in which rigid and hierarchical male-female sex roles predominate consistently demonstrating high rates of sexual violence (Kalra and Bhugra 2023).

This was alluded to in the comments made by VPU, where an officer remarked that cases involving “ema boot” (powerful individuals) often fail to proceed due to “lack of evidence.” The officer’s statement hints at a deeper truth: the reluctance to prosecute these cases is not primarily due to the absence of evidence, but rather a lack of political will to challenge or hold powerful figures accountable. Both the PNTL and the Public Prosecutor’s Office seem reluctant to pursue charges against influential individuals, knowing that these efforts could result in political backlash or institutional obstruction. This reflects a broader theme of elite impunity, where political and economic power shields individuals from facing the consequences of criminal behaviour, particularly in cases involving sexual abuse or violence.

Similarly, patriarchal cultural norms were highlighted by both FOKUPERS and JSMP as a critical underlying factor that enables and perpetuates gender-based violence, both online and offline. FOKUPERS points out that these norms create a culture of victim-blaming, where women are held responsible for the abusive behaviour of men, reinforcing power imbalances and contributing to the normalization of abuse. JSMP adds that the economic dependency of many women on their male partners further limits their ability to report abuse or seek justice, as they fear both social and financial consequences.

Digital GBSV, in this context, is an extension of existing norms and unequal power structures – both between “elite” and “ordinary” people, but also between men and women more broadly – that allow men to avoid being held accountable. The digital dimension only magnifies the issue, as it provides new tools for perpetrators to exploit victims anonymously or from a distance. The ability to use digital platforms to harass, blackmail, or manipulate individuals without immediate consequence further tilts the scales of justice in favour of perpetrators, especially those with connections and influence.

Furthermore, these dynamics are deeply entwined with prevailing social attitudes towards gender-based violence and sexual harassment. In many cases, sexual and domestic violence are treated as relatively minor issues, and are expected to be dealt with informally within families.⁹ There is a pervasive cultural reluctance to bring such issues into the public or legal domain.¹⁰ As noted by the VPU officer, many parents are aware of their children’s victimization but choose to “taka” (cover up) the issue rather than report it to authorities. This tendency to silence victims and handle matters privately reflects long-standing cultural norms that tend to prioritize family reputation and social harmony over justice for victims. These attitudes are not confined to the general population but are also present within state institutions, contributing to a lack of robust institutional responses to GBSV, whether digital or otherwise.

⁹ See, for example, Cummins (2018) and FOKUPERS’ report on the implementation of Timor-Leste’s domestic violence law, which noted that a large majority of Timorese society continues to believe that husbands’ beatings of their wives can be justified (2022).

¹⁰ Kovar (2012).

Given this complex landscape, it is imperative that any efforts to address digital GBSV move beyond a purely technical approach. While building the capacity of PNTL and raising digital literacy in communities are important, such measures will be insufficient if they fail to grapple with the underlying power structures that allow elite impunity and the cultural norms that silence victims. In other words, stakeholders need to invest in a deeper understanding of the political economy surrounding digital GBSV when designing any interventions.

Therefore, it is strongly recommended that Timor-Leste's international partners allocate more resources to conducting thorough research into the power dynamics which drive digital GBSV and shape the state and civil society's responses to it. This research should involve independent civil society organizations, particularly those with expertise in gender issues and governance, as they possess the knowledge and sensitivity required to navigate these complex topics. A thorough power analysis led by civil society organizations will help to identify the real drivers of digital GBSV and suggest entry points for effective action. Without this level of scrutiny, any intervention risks addressing symptoms rather than causes and ultimately failing to protect the most vulnerable. Therefore, a strategic and well-researched approach, informed by both technical expertise and a deep understanding of power dynamics, is essential for tackling the growing problem of digital GBSV in Timor-Leste.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, this report recommends several key actions:

1. **Joint Training Programs:** Implement collaborative training for PNTL officers, judicial authorities and community leaders to build capacity in handling digital GBSV cases. These programs should focus on gathering and managing digital evidence, case report writing, legal frameworks and emerging trends in digital GBSV.
2. **Joint Public Awareness Campaigns:** SEI, PNTL and civil society organizations should implement public awareness initiatives focused on digital literacy and online safety with a specific focus on digital GBSV. These campaigns should be delivered via community outreach, radio, TV, social media and school-based programs to educate the public about online risks and safe digital practices.
3. **Develop a Digital GBSV Legal Framework:** The Government should form a task force comprising the Ministry of Justice, PNTL, civil society organizations and digital law experts to draft legislation addressing digital GBSV. The legal framework should clearly define online and digitally mediated abuse, identifying the various forms of sexual exploitation and violence which occur both online and offline. The framework should also establish digital evidence protocols and outline investigation and prosecution procedures, including tightly controlling PNTL's and PCIC's handling of victims' data during investigations. The law

should also require all public and private institutions to adopt policies for child protection and digital GBSV to ensure that all public and private employees are aware of these practices.

4. **Update the Penal Code:** Timor-Leste's Penal Code should be revised to include online sexual abuse, violence and exploitation and sexual abuse facilitated by digital communication technologies as public crimes.
5. **Create a Safe Reporting Platform:** Develop a confidential digital reporting platform, in collaboration with international partners, to enable victims of online harassment to report cases safely. The platform should offer access to legal support, psychological counselling and assistance in removing harmful content from online platforms.
6. **Collaboration on Digital Forensics:** Strengthen PNTL's and PCIC's digital forensic capabilities by partnering with regional or international experts. These collaborations could provide technical assistance and capacity-building in investigating and prosecuting digital GBSV cases.
7. **In-depth Research on the Drivers of and Responses to Digital GBSV:** Allocate resources to conduct comprehensive research into the power dynamics and cultural norms that shape digital GBSV – and responses to it – in Timor-Leste. This research should be led by independent civil society organizations with expertise in gender and governance, focusing on institutional capacity, underlying gender relations, elite impunity, victim-blaming and the societal reluctance to report abuse. Understanding these deeper systemic issues will inform more effective interventions and ensure greater protection for vulnerable populations.
8. **Monitoring and Response Task Force:** Establish a task force comprising PNTL, civil society and digital technology experts to monitor online platforms for signs of harassment or exploitation. This team would track and respond to problematic online behaviours to prevent further abuse.

Conclusion

This research explored the growing issue of digital GBSV in Timor-Leste, focusing on the impact of internet technologies, the capacity of law enforcement, and the role of social and legal structures in addressing these challenges. Through interviews with PNTL's VPU and civil society organizations, the research identified the significant rise in cases of online harassment and abuse, particularly affecting women and children. It also highlighted the current legislative gaps and the limited capacity of law enforcement to respond effectively to these crimes.

Analysis of the findings highlighted the deep-rooted societal norms and power dynamics that compound this problem, shaping both occurrences of digital GBSV and also societal and institutional responses to it. Entrenched socio-cultural practices and

attitudes, including unequal gender relations, victim-blaming and the reluctance to report abuse, contribute to a lack of accountability for perpetrators, especially those with social or political influence. The research emphasized that digital GBSV is an extension of these existing inequalities, further amplified by technological developments.

In response, the report recommends a strategic, coordinated approach involving stronger collaboration between PNTL, civil society organizations, legal and technology experts and the Timor-Leste Government. Capacity building for law enforcement, legal reform to address digital GBSV and public awareness campaigns focused on digital literacy and online safety are crucial. Tackling underlying power structures and cultural norms is also essential to ensure that any interventions address the root causes of abuse, not just its symptoms. A comprehensive and informed response is necessary to protect vulnerable groups and promote justice in both the digital and physical spaces.

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