

Making *Delete Nothing*: Making a Feminist Internet

Zainab Ibrahim and Sachini Perera



D *Delete Nothing* is a trilingual platform that aims to document technology-related gender-based violence (GBV) in Sri Lanka, particularly—but not limited to—the experiences of girls, women, and queer and trans people. It also attempts to break down what technology-related violence looks like; ways of dealing with such violence including and beyond the law; and connect survivors to non-profit and psychosocial services that can provide support and solidarity. Jayanthi Kuru-Utumpala, Sachini Perera, and Zainab Ibrahim conceptualised *Delete Nothing* in late 2017, building on conversations with groups like The Grassrooted

Trust and the Suriya Women’s Development Centre, insights and needs of activists with first-hand experience supporting survivors of technology-related violence, police officers who have had to address technology-related violence, lawyers handling such cases, and so on.

These conversations, as well as the study of some of the cases that our interlocutors had dealt with, showed two dominant narratives: a belief among State and some civil society actors that technology-related violence was not widespread; and a lived reality among survivors that there is nothing that could be done about technology-related violence, and that there was no one to turn to

about it. Activists we spoke to noted that systematic documentation and analysis of incidents of technology related violence—including survivors' experiences in reporting these incidents to the police, social media and internet platforms, teachers, employers, etc.—would be a constructive way to challenge some of these dominant narratives, and to create an alternative discourse about GBV. In this article we document the making of *Delete Nothing*, drawing from feminist scholarship on how the internet has become a site of violence against women the world over, innovative ways feminists are finding to support survivors of such violence, and studies on GBV in Sri Lanka.

Technology-Related GBV

The internet has opened spaces for new forms of individual self-expression and new forms of social interaction, especially for people who are non-normative: for collective engagement, to find community, for work, for the sharing and consuming of knowledge, and for social justice activism. However, it comes as no surprise for many women and LGBTQ+ people, that despite all the freedoms that the internet and digital platforms afford, the sexism and violence they often face in their everyday, offline, on-ground lives is never far behind. Indeed, the boundaries between people's online and offline lives are blurred. People's online and offline lives are a continuum, as opposed to a binary, as has been clearly demonstrated by feminist scholarship. This means that people's experiences of violence also bleed between these spaces.

Technology-related GBV has been defined as “acts of gender-based violence that are committed, abetted or aggravated, in part or fully, by the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), such as phones, the internet, social media platforms, and email” (APC 2015). It takes various forms including online harassment, cyber stalking, attacks on people's sexuality, doxxing or the exposure of personal/private information, threats based on morality or religion, manipulation of images, and non-consensual distribution of intimate images and/or private videos of people having sex that are used for blackmailing. When images and videos are reposted online, it can also cause repeated trauma for survivors.

Existing studies show that technology-related violence can cause emotional and psychological harm, can lead to sexual and other forms of physical violence, reinforce prejudices, damage reputations, and pose barriers to participation in economic and public life. This form of violence often leads to silencing and self-censorship of women and LGBTQ+ people because they feel unsafe

and vulnerable and want to limit backlash, stifling their self-expression and participation in these spaces. A 2014 mapping by Take Back the Tech also shows that in 40% of 1126 cases, the perpetrator was known to the survivor.

Technology-related violence also complicates notions of consent and agency, and of public and private lives. In offline lives, the non-consensual sharing of private /intimate images and videos possibly has a clear first perpetrator in the context of what was an intimate relationship. But once these images and videos are shared and re-shared online, they spread so rapidly with no regard to consent, which introduces multiple and third-party perpetrators (Gurumurthy *et al.* 2018). The internet, therefore, offers new tools and ways of being that not only encourage but exacerbate violence and harassment on the basis of gender, sexuality, caste, class, etc.

For example, social media platforms make profit based on user engagement, data extraction, and advertising. This is a business model that views any engagement as profitable. However, platform affordances that ensure such engagement including the gamification of how we behave online (elements of game playing being incorporated to motivate people to engage online) and the sharing, retweeting, etc. of content that is violent ‘going viral’ (virality), spread it more swiftly.

Technology-related violence has a performative element, because users are engaging with a constant and readily available audience, often beyond geographical boundaries. This, combined with the anonymity and invisibility of readers, leads to an increased lack of restraint, which promotes violence (Gurumurthy *et al.* 2018). It leads to people saying things they may not otherwise say in their offline lives, which has been described as “toxic disinhibition” (Suler 2004). This kind of violence has been described among other things, as “an exaggerated form of patriarchy” (Shokooh-Valle 2021), causing harm most often towards women, non-binary, and LGBTQ+ people.

Digital spaces, therefore, both mimic and muddle the traditional frames through which we view GBV including intimate partner violence; and challenge our understandings of its forms, and its impacts, making it critical that the contours of justice addressing GBV adapt in order to be effective. It is within this context and with an intention to expand ideas of justice for GBV, that *Delete Nothing* was envisioned and created.

The harms caused by technology-related GBV and the ways women and LGBTQ+ individuals have experienced them have been documented in global

(APC 2015), regional (Raghavan 2021), and local studies (as cited here). Feminist engagement with technology in Sri Lanka spans decades, starting from the radio, the typewriter, the cyclostyle machine, and print technologies to ongoing engagements with the internet and social media. Feminist researchers have been studying the gendered implications of the internet at least since 2012 and have continued to do so, especially in relation to how GBV against women, girls, and LGBTQ+ people manifests on the internet and impacts them (Kottegoda *et al.* 2012; Wijewardena and Samuel 2015; Women and Media Collective 2016; Deshapriya *et al.* 2017; Perera *et al.* 2019; Perera and Ibrahim 2021). This body of evidence confirms that the online and offline exist in a continuum, in which both the freedoms and the oppressive systems and structures we experience in public and private spaces offline, also manifest online. They also deepen our understanding of how gendered experiences on the internet intersect with ethnicity, religion, class, age, etc. and are affected by patriarchy, neoliberal economic policies, authoritarianism, nationalism, etc.

Complicating Technology-Related GBV in Sri Lanka

In Sri Lanka, there is a normalisation of sexist commentary on social media pages that objectifies women and members of the LGBTQ+ community, and an established trend of non-consensual dissemination of intimate photos and videos (Perera *et al.* 2019). A study from Sri Lanka shows that 62% of respondents were at the receiving end of abusive comments online, and 56% received unwanted images that were sexually explicit or demeaned women (Perera and Ibrahim 2021). School girls in Sri Lanka being blackmailed by their boyfriends for sharing naked pictures and videos—consensually shared and meant to be private—is far too common (Billimoria 2017). So too the misogynistic shaming and victim blaming of the girls themselves by law enforcement personnel and others when attempting to seek justice and redress (Groundviews 2018). It is no surprise then that less than 10% of people who participated in a study that looked at gender, sexualities, and sexual behaviour on the internet in Sri Lanka sought accountability from the legal system (Perera and Ibrahim 2021).

However, the increasing number of incidents reported on mainstream and social media makes it much harder for anyone to deny that technology-related violence is an issue. In 2012, Chulani Kodikara discussed competing discourses about domestic violence in Sri Lanka: “a dominant discourse that is attempting to trivialise and condone domestic violence, and an alternative or reverse

discourse of women’s organisations as well as women victim-survivors that highlight the pain and trauma of domestic violence as well as the many ways in which the latter try to make their lives free of such violence” (Kodikara 2012). The discourse on technology-related violence—including the (mis)use of technology in domestic violence and intimate partner violence—follows a similar and only a slightly more complex polarisation, but the ebb and flow of attention on social media and the rapidly changing mainstream news cycles present these incidents as isolated rather than as part of a systemic issue.

There remains a tendency to condone technology-related GBV against women and LGBTQ+ people, especially those who are public figures, as well as a tendency to trivialise it as a ‘lesser’ form of violence that happens in a digital vacuum. The alternative or “reverse discourse” mentioned by Kodikara also still exists in the form of increased activism, advocacy, and research about the seriousness and pervasiveness of technology-related GBV, with the intersections and complexities of sexuality, class, ethnicity, religion, etc. being highlighted when feminists grapple with the issue (Women and Media Collective 2016). It could be argued that the earlier feminist struggles to reframe domestic violence as a rights violation rather than “a mere domestic criminal justice concern”, while breaking the silence around such violence in the public domain (Coomaraswamy 1996) has laid a foundation on which a similar reverse—and feminist—discourse can be built about technology-related and online violence. We hope to contribute to this effort through *Delete Nothing*.

Feminist Responses to Technology-Related Violence in Sri Lanka

Many recommendations have emerged from feminist research in Sri Lanka about responding to technology-related GBV, with research and evidence-building being a strategy and response in itself. These recommendations illustrate patterns and tensions of feminist thinking about technology-related violence in Sri Lanka. The law remains a point of focus, with some demanding the full implementation of existing laws and for new laws to criminalise certain behaviours online (Deshapriya *et al.* 2017). There are also recommendations to strengthen the capacity of law enforcement and other State institutions to recognise and address technology-related violence (Women and Media Collective 2016; Deshapriya *et al.* 2017; Perera and Ibrahim 2021).

However, there are also calls to look beyond the law. Our own research from 2021 recommended comprehensive and survivor-centric responses to

technology-related GBV, which included the full implementation of existing laws, access to non-judgmental and free mental health and psychosocial support, access to information on how to report incidents of technology-related violence, how to reach civil society organisations, and how to access legal support. We see the tension between law-and-order type approaches and more complex demands for justice from victim-survivors. This is a point also raised by Satkunanathan (2021) who contrasts the law-and-order carceral approach to violence against women adopted in past struggles, with the increasingly abolitionist position of present activists against criminalisation and incarceration as responses to rights violations. This is a feminist fault-line we have to negotiate by continuing to call for comprehensive approaches to rights violations that decentre criminalisation, while supporting those who may seek police and legal remedies and face further violence in the process (Kamalendran 2021).

There is consensus among feminists that GBV cannot be addressed with only criminal justice and law enforcement. There are concurrent recommendations to document the online experiences of women and LGBTQ+ people; create counter-narratives with women and LGBTQ+ people telling their stories in their own languages and ways (and for the State and all other actors to promote these counter-narratives); integrate online experiences and behaviour to relationship education in and out of school; and for accountability and resource allocation by social media platform companies to ensure their users can be online freely and have accessible ways to report technology-related GBV (Women and Media Collective 2016; Deshapriya *et al.* 2017; Groundviews *et al.* 2019; Perera and Ibrahim 2020). *Delete Nothing* is positioned at the intersections of these recommendations.

***Delete Nothing's* Documentation and Support Tool**

Delete Nothing's documentation tool invites people to share their story, while offering support via a section that presents paths that survivors and their loved ones can carve out as they navigate experiences of technology-related violence. As feminists and feminist researchers, we created *Delete Nothing* using feminist methodologies and their “ongoing sensemaking” (Tracy 2012). We started off by studying 30-40 cases documented by activist groups in Tamil, Sinhala, and English, and identifying patterns of violence—including in seeking redress—that were experienced by survivors. We noted some of the gaps in such documentation, such as the emotional impact of technology-related violence which is often less visible and tangible than the impact to

education, livelihood, and reputation. We created the first version of the survey/documentation tool based on this granular understanding of various forms of technology-related violence that were occurring in different parts of Sri Lanka, on different platforms, in different languages, and with varying degrees of impact on those who experienced them and those who perpetrated them. We compared the forms of violence we identified with the work of other Global South feminists (Luchadoras 2017) and found resonance. We presented the Tamil, Sinhala, and English versions of the survey to various groups including activists, lawyers, school and university students, and teachers, whose feedback helped us be reflexive, and we continued to rework the survey for many months until we arrived at the current version.

Parallel to developing the documentation tool, we also paid attention to the other dominant narrative we had come across, which was that survivors of technology-related violence felt alone and without help. We were clear from the very beginning that *Delete Nothing* would not be an extractivist exercise, and would be informed by feminist ethics of care. Therefore, the platform comes with a trilingual support section that looks at various aspects of technology-related violence in Sri Lanka (definitions, rights, laws, next steps, existing support mechanisms, and resources on digital wellbeing). *Delete Nothing* recognises that most resources on staying safe online are not freely available as they are often primarily produced in English, and therefore not always accessible. Therefore, it attempts to address this gap by sourcing locally produced resources where possible, and sharing support services that function in Tamil and Sinhala. It also recognises that not everyone wants punitive justice. Sharing of experiences and stories is both cathartic and a form of resistance, as the recent experiences of the #metoo #lka moment in Sri Lanka show (Satkunanathan 2021). This was echoed by a survivor when filling the *Delete Nothing* survey: “I forgot halfway I’m filling a survey. It kind of felt good to be heard tbh” (to be honest). Sharing our experiences and stories can be a form of justice—including when punitive justice and patriarchal institutions and solidarities fail survivors. There is symbiosis between the documentation and support sections of *Delete Nothing*, with the survey providing survivors with the option to download a copy of their responses should they need it in taking further action.

Making ‘Delete Nothing’: Making a Feminist Internet

The Feminist Principles of the Internet on ‘Usage’ recognise that “women and queer persons have the right to code, design, adapt and critically and sustainably use ICTs and reclaim technology as a platform for creativity and expression, as well as to challenge the cultures of sexism and discrimination in all spaces”.

We see *Delete Nothing* as an exercise of this principle, and all the excitement and challenges that come with it. Co-creating the platform within a feminist politics of design (Costanza-Chock 2020) came with a number of priorities that needed to be balanced: an interface that is easy to use but is not owned by third parties; an articulation of the nuances of technology-related violence while making it accessible and relatable; and documentation through data collection while ensuring privacy, anonymity, and consent-as-ongoing. Some of the ways we addressed these priorities were by collaborating with developers to create a customised survey that is not owned by and does not share information with third parties; working with queer artist Isuri to create a comic that provides an entry point into the issue; creating a responsible data policy for the website and the survey; and assembling information on support services that are non-heteronormative, do not victim-blame, and centre bodily autonomy and pleasure in how to be safe online. It has taken us a few years to navigate these challenges and responses, and we launched *Delete Nothing* a few months ago. We are now introducing the components of the platform to a wider community of activists, organisations, lawyers, and others grappling with technology-related violence in various ways.

Conclusion

Making *Delete Nothing* is an exercise in acknowledging the possibilities and limitations of a web-based platform. Even as internet access continues to grow in Sri Lanka—albeit with a significant digital divide including a digital gender divide (Galpaya, Zainudeen, and Amarasinghe 2019)—we recognise access as an ongoing process that is affected by various economic, social, and cultural factors such as patriarchal control of women and girls’ use of the internet, cost and sharing of devices, and the lack of bandwidth and capacities (both technological and physical/mental/emotional) to use a platform to report and document your experiences of violence.

Delete Nothing is not a stand-alone ‘solution’ to technology-related violence and was never imagined to be so. It is not a tool for direct redress but one that aims

to share more choices for redress and make the journey a little easier. It is an attempt to do long-term advocacy around the various aspects of technology-related violence by building a body of evidence. It is an attempt to support and uplift the work that a number of activists and groups across Sri Lanka are doing. It is an attempt to put a face to the myriad forms of violations that are specific to the Sri Lankan context, and gain a textured understanding of technology-related violence—where it happens, to whom it happens, the forms it takes, and the extent or lack of accountability in taking action, while keeping the focus on the kind of justice that people want.

You can document your story or support someone else to document theirs by visiting <https://deletenothing.org/share-your-story/>

Zainab Ibrahim is a feminist activist and researcher from Sri Lanka. The main focus of her work on issues of gender equality and women’s rights has been to document people’s lived experiences and under-represented histories and practices, such that it forms the basis of efforts for social justice and advocacy.

Sachini Perera is a queer feminist from Sri Lanka. She’s interested in the intersections between the internet, popular culture, sexual and reproductive justice, and pleasure, and explores these through research, advocacy, co-creating tech, and facilitating discussions in various communities of belonging.

Image credit: Comic by Isuri (www.deletenothing.org)

Notes

1 By LGBTQ+ we refer to people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, as well as people of other gender identities and expression, sexualities, and sexual behaviour beyond heteronormative frameworks.

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