

The background features large, overlapping, wavy shapes in shades of green, blue, red, and brown. Scattered throughout are small, pixelated figures of people in various poses and colors, some appearing to be using mobile devices.

# EROTICS Regional Survey

# 2020

Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka:  
A different/contextual exploration  
on sexuality, rights and the internet

This research is part of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) project “Expanding EROTICS Networks in South Asia”, funded by AmplifyChange, and is based on a strong alliance with the partners and focal points in four countries: Sachini Perera and Zainab Ibrahim (focal points for Sri Lanka) Women and Media Collective (partner organization in Sri Lanka), Parsa Sanjana Sajid (focal point for Bangladesh), Point of View (partner organisation in India), Loom and Body and Data (partner organisations in Nepal).

Between August 2018 and October 2020, APC’s partners carried out this regional survey and follow-up qualitative studies exploring the information and communications legal, policy and socio-cultural landscape related to sexuality on the internet in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. This publication is based on the country regional surveys conducted in local languages by EROTICS partners and focal points and represents a continuation of the Global Monitoring Survey established by the EROTICS network since its inception in 2008. To read the previous reports and more on this subject, please visit [erotics.apc.org](http://erotics.apc.org) or [www.genderIT.org](http://www.genderIT.org)

EROTICS (Exploratory Research on Sexuality and ICTs) is a global network of activists, academics and organisations working on sexuality issues including LGBTIQ rights, sex work, sex education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender-based violence, in addition to internet freedom advocates, policy experts and techies. The objective of the network is to act as a bridge for inter-movement collaboration on sexual rights and internet rights, highlight technology-related violations against sexual rights activists, and build their capacity in the design, usage and governance of the internet.



## **EROTICS Regional Survey 2021**

Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka: A different/contextual exploration on sexuality, rights and the internet



### **AMPLIFYCHANGE**

APC would like to thank AmplifyChange for their support of this 4th edition of the EROTICS Survey

**Regional survey report author:** Srinidhi Raghavan

**Country survey reports authors:**

Shubha Kayastha and Mamata Pokharel (Body & Data) – *Beyond access: Women and queer persons with disabilities expressing self and exploring sexuality online* and *Identities experiencing the internet: Nepal Survey Report* (Nepal)

Sachini Perera and Zainab Ibrahim – *Somewhere Only We Know: Gender, sexualities, and sexual behaviour on the internet in Sri Lanka* (Sri Lanka)

Parsa Sanjana Sajid – *EROTICS South Asia Regional Monitoring Survey: Bangladesh country report* (Bangladesh)

#### **Editors**

Tigist Shewarega Hussien and hvale vale (APC)

#### **Copy editing and proofreading**

Lori Nordstrom (APC)

#### **Publication production**

hvale vale (APC)

#### **Layout and cover design**

Cathy Chen (APC)

ISBN 978-92-95113-42-8

APC-202106-WRP-R-EN-DIGITAL-332

The 4th edition of the EROTICS Survey, this time conducted for the first time in the Bangla, Sinhala, Tamil and Nepali languages, is part of the APC project “Expanding the EROTICS Network in South Asia”, funded by AmplifyChange. To read the report and more on this subject, please visit [erotics.apc.org](http://erotics.apc.org) or [www.genderIT.org](http://www.genderIT.org)

EROTICS (Exploratory Research on Sexuality and ICTs) is a global network of activists, academics and organisations working on sexuality issues including LGBTIQ rights, sex work, sex education, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and gender-based violence, in addition to internet freedom advocates, policy experts and techies. The objective of the network is to act as a bridge for inter-movement collaboration on sexual rights and internet rights, highlight technology-related violations against sexual rights activists, and build their capacity in the design, usage and governance of the internet.

# Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka: A different/contextual exploration on sexuality, rights and the internet

## Introduction

Methodology

5

7

## The politics of access to the internet

The legal terrain of access to the internet

14

17

## Does the internet build more connections?

The internet as a space to learn how to communicate  
and build empathy

Who creates LGBTIQ content?

Understanding discourse and systems behind online violence

“I didn’t respond to the message”

Expression in sexuality

20

22

24

25

27

31

## Conclusion

34

## INTRODUCTION

**2009**

Research undertaken in Brazil, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, South Africa and the United States

**2013**

Global survey in English

**2014**

Global survey in English

**2017**

Global survey in English followed by in-depth interviews

**2019**

South Asia-focused survey in English, Bangla, Nepali, Tamil and Sinhala alongside individual country-led qualitative surveys.



At different times over the past seven years, the Association of Progressive Communications Women's Rights Programme (APC WRP) project EROTICS: Exploratory Research on Sexuality and the Internet has conducted surveys among its worldwide network of gender and sexuality activists, advocates, professionals and academics. APC launched the EROTICS network in 2009 to begin research in Brazil, India, Indonesia, Lebanon, South Africa and the United States. The research focused on the challenges facing LGBTIQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer) and other sexual rights communities. It was done to understand the role of the internet and information and communications technologies (ICTs) in the world of sexual rights activists globally. This project sought to answer the question: "How may emerging debates and the growing practice of regulation of online content either impede or facilitate different ways women, queer and trans people use the internet and the impact on their sexual expression, sexualities and sexual health practices, and assertion of their sexual rights?"<sup>1</sup>

Following this, global monitoring surveys were conducted to learn about the experiences of online usage and explore the potential as well as challenges of the internet in exercising gender and sexuality rights. The first global survey was sent out in 2013, and a revised version of the same questionnaire was again sent out in 2014. In 2017, the questionnaire was released again with

the addition of in-depth interviews with individuals who volunteered to expand on their responses.<sup>2</sup> The surveys attempted to answer the questions: "How savvy are sexual rights activists in handling the legal and technical issues that come along when they use the internet? How do they negotiate online threats and restrictions?"<sup>3</sup> These surveys provided a perspective of how activists used the internet, but it was difficult to glean deeper insight into local understandings of the internet and gender and sexuality – because the surveys were in English, and often responses were predominantly from a few countries.

Thus, in 2019, as a continuation of the previous work and to deepen the network regionally, APC WRP began the "Expanding the EROTICS network in South Asia" project, which aimed to expand the network of sexual rights and digital rights activists from India, Sri Lanka, Nepal and Bangladesh. In this new iteration, more countries in South Asia were added to explore internet-related challenges and the experiences of women, LGBTIQ and sexual rights advocates. As a learning from the previous research cycles, APC and its partners wished to deepen the scope of the research undertaken, especially in South Asia where people are more familiar with local languages.

In 2019, a regional monitoring survey that focused on experiences in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka<sup>4</sup> was

1 Kee, J., et al. (2010). *EROTICS: Exploratory research on sexuality and the internet*. APC. [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Erotics\\_Exec\\_Summary\\_2.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Erotics_Exec_Summary_2.pdf)

2 APC. (2017). *EROTICS Global Survey 2017: Sexuality, rights and internet regulations*. [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Erotics\\_2\\_FIND-2.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Erotics_2_FIND-2.pdf)

3 APC. (2013). *Survey on sexual activism, morality, and the internet*. <https://www.genderit.org/articles/survey-sexual-activism-morality-and-internet>

4 India was not included in this primary research, but some secondary research conducted in India has been included in this report.



launched. Through a mixed-method research approach, the survey was hashed out in a collaborative process among the three countries. This regional monitoring survey was the first time the partners chose to open the survey up to users who didn't necessarily identify as sexual rights activists. Thus, the findings illuminate several important connections between identity and usage, online expression, and how the internet is used as a tool to expand the understanding of gender and sexuality. It also provides us an insight on how users see the overlap or binary of online and offline in their lives.

One of the key findings from this survey has come through the process of building, disseminating and analysing the findings itself. We embarked on the journey of conducting a survey that was for the first time translated into local languages and used to explore the regional undertones of the internet and the experience of it in our respective countries. In an attempt to localise the process of research fieldwork, the survey was first written in English and all the regional partners were involved in providing feedback. This process continued until the partners felt ready to translate it into the local languages. During this process of translation and uploading of the regional surveys, all attempts were made to infuse the survey with local language and local culture idiom. This was done in collaboration with the APC technology team and the regional coordinator. It must be noted that since both these persons were not familiar with the local languages, several iterations took place to ensure

the regional language surveys had no errors. However, some errors did occur in this uploading and translation process. Our learnings from the survey are explored through the chapters with some inter-country comparison and some localised information.

## Methodology

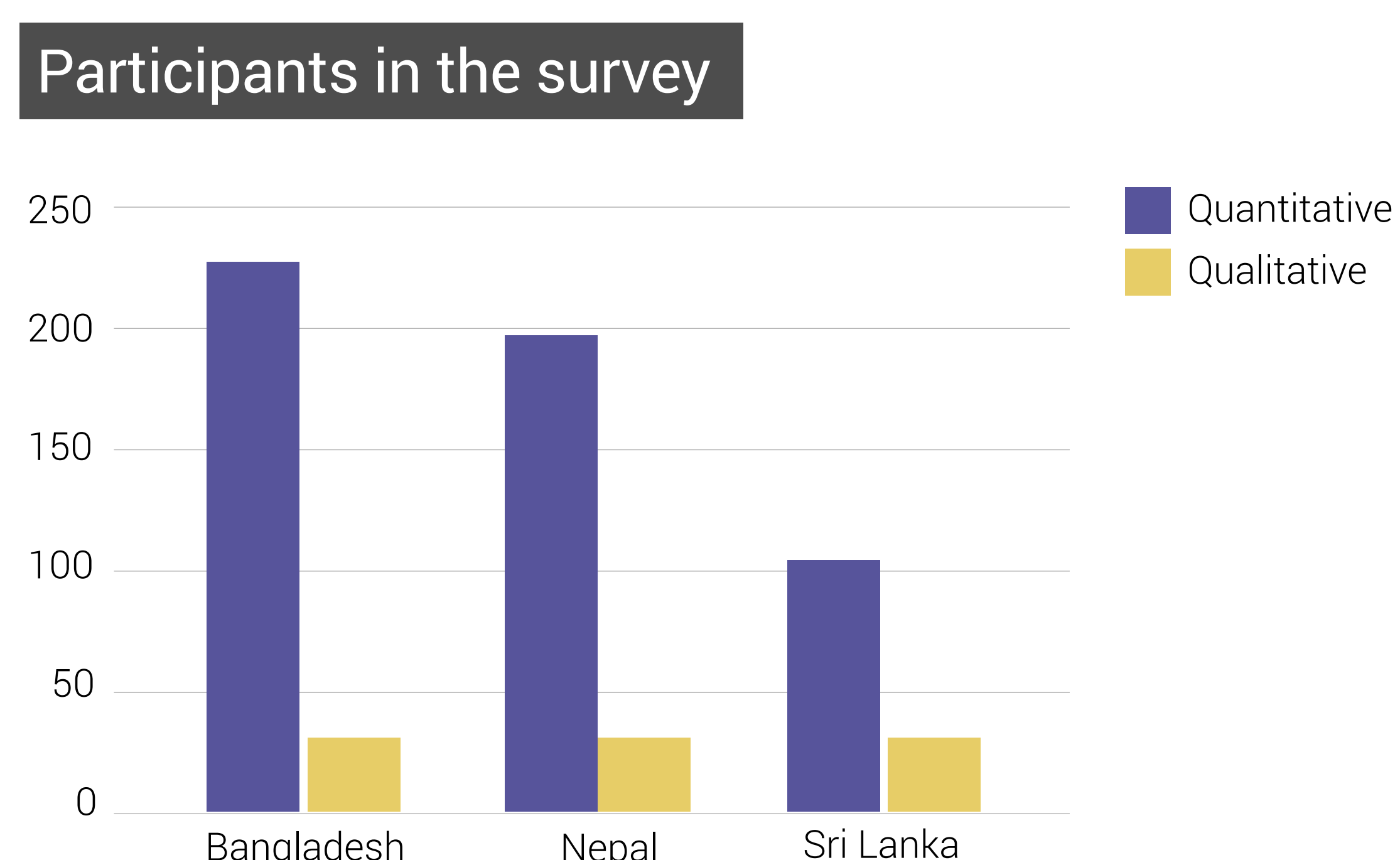
The survey was conducted in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka between August 2019 and February 2020 by researchers based out of the three countries. The Regional Monitoring Survey was launched in different countries during different periods of time and stayed online and available during that period. The survey tool was developed in English and then translated into Nepali, Sinhala, Tamil and Bangla. These were then added to the online survey. Each country adopted a different strategy of dissemination and attempted to reach many cross-sections of the population. The local researchers used their understanding of the scenario to adapt methodologies best suited to the context. Each of the researchers from the region engaged with the survey questions to contextualise them to the locations, gender and sexuality diversity and ethnic specifications of the country in question. There were a total of 30 questions in the survey. We collected demographic information including gender and sexual orientation as well as details of any intersecting identities. The survey aimed to understand how people use the internet (on any device) in their work, personal life, activism, etc.



The process of developing the survey tool and the execution was participatory. The questions were designed keeping in mind the regional diversity. It also has to be noted that only the quantitative questions were designed and reflected on together as a region. The qualitative aspects of the research were country-researcher specific. The design of the questions and the execution of the qualitative research were also country-researcher specific. The target group for the qualitative questions was chosen depending on the objectives of the researchers in the country. This process was intentional and aimed at the practice of a bottom-up research process between an international organisation coordinating this research and local partners and researchers implementing the research. This negotiation is important to highlight that the local partners are indeed the experts on their region and its nuances.

Though COVID-19 did not affect the data collection of this research, it is important to highlight that it played a huge role during the process of analysing and writing the research. Another important negotiation for the researchers of the region was to navigate the inherent power dynamics in a region where India is seen to be the most vocal voice. Building narratives around countries and their deep politics was important for the team working on this research. However, it has also been a process of building regional analysis through this project while ensuring that country specifics are not hampered and researchers are credited during this process. This document is a compilation of the efforts and insights from each of

the individual research processes conducted and thus should be read as so.



Some differences between the previous monitoring surveys conducted by APC and this regional monitoring survey conducted in three countries were:

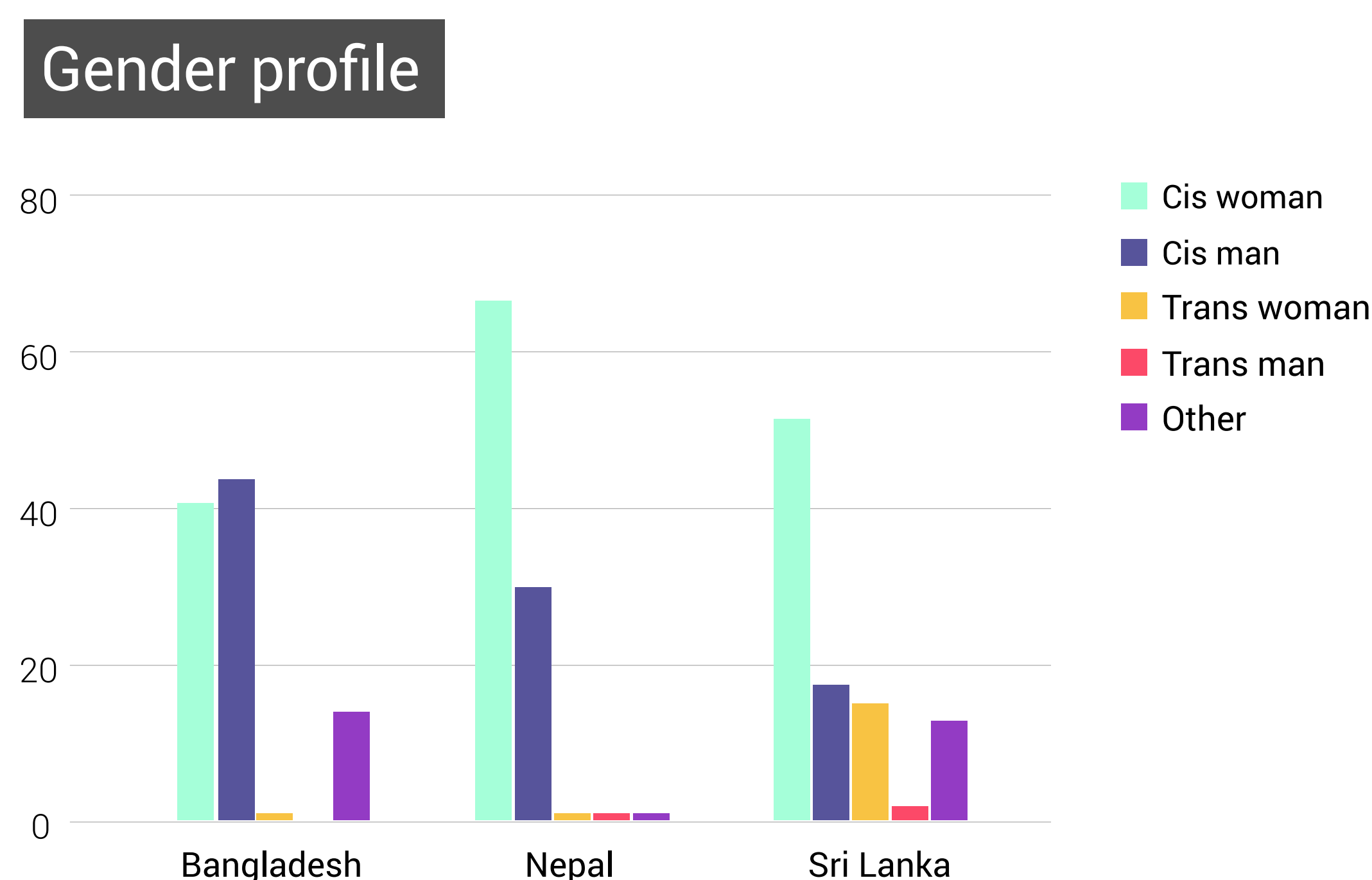
- The survey was open to those who didn't identify as gender and sexual rights activists.
- Active support was provided to any participant who needed it.
- A couple of questions that were asked in this survey but did not feature in the surveys conducted previously are listed below:
  - How often do you use the internet as a consumer of content on the internet?\* Please choose only one of the following:
    - Daily
    - Weekly
    - At least once a month
    - Rarely
    - Never
  - - How often do you use the internet as a creator of content (blogs, vlogs, memes, code, Instagram posts, uploading photos, etc.) on the internet?\* Please choose only one of the following:



- Daily
  - Weekly
  - At least once a month
  - Rarely
  - Never
- o Questions regarding internet regulation and implementation in the country were included in previous iterations but were not asked in this one.

## Quantitative research

- **Bangladesh: November 2019 to February 2020: 228 responses**
- **Nepal: July 2019 to December 2019: 200 responses**
- **Sri Lanka: July 2019 to January 2020: 103 responses**



In Bangladesh, the survey was launched in November 2019 and closed in February 2020. The survey was available online but also fielded in-person. We received 228 responses. A few of the questions were modified for Bangladesh’s specific context. For example, the Bangladesh survey included the locally specific term “hijra” as a category under gender and added “marginalised on the basis of religion” to reflect local contexts. The

survey targeted students, professionals, sex workers and queer community members. Although it is not always easy, the survey attempted to ensure gender and sexual orientation, economic and educational background and religious and ethnic diversities. We got responses mainly through a combination of two methods: online sharing of the survey and outreach to groups to arrange in-person surveys. For the first method, the survey was widely shared by the researcher through personal and professional contacts, Facebook and WhatsApp groups for universities, media and queer organising, and other professional and advocacy networks. For the second, the researcher trained field organisers and made outreach efforts including but not limited to harder-to-reach groups who nonetheless rely on the internet, such as hijra community groups and sex worker support networks. To reach the target goal of at least 200 responses, we estimated that approximately one-fourth of the responses (approximately 80) would have to be in-person, and trained field organisers and implemented an outreach strategy accordingly, assigning approximately 16 in-person surveys to each organiser. In Bangladesh, 41% of the respondents were cis women whereas 44.74% were cis men.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, 79% of the respondents were heterosexual or straight. In terms of gender and sexual orientation, among those who participated in the qualitative research, 13 self-identified as cis women, two as non-binary and two as trans; four self-identified as bisexual and

<sup>5</sup> However, 7% of those who answered the survey (marked here as other) unidentified as hijra, a localised term for transwoman. This term was not used in the other surveys. It is possible that many of the transwomen interviewed in the other two countries might be comfortable with this term as well.

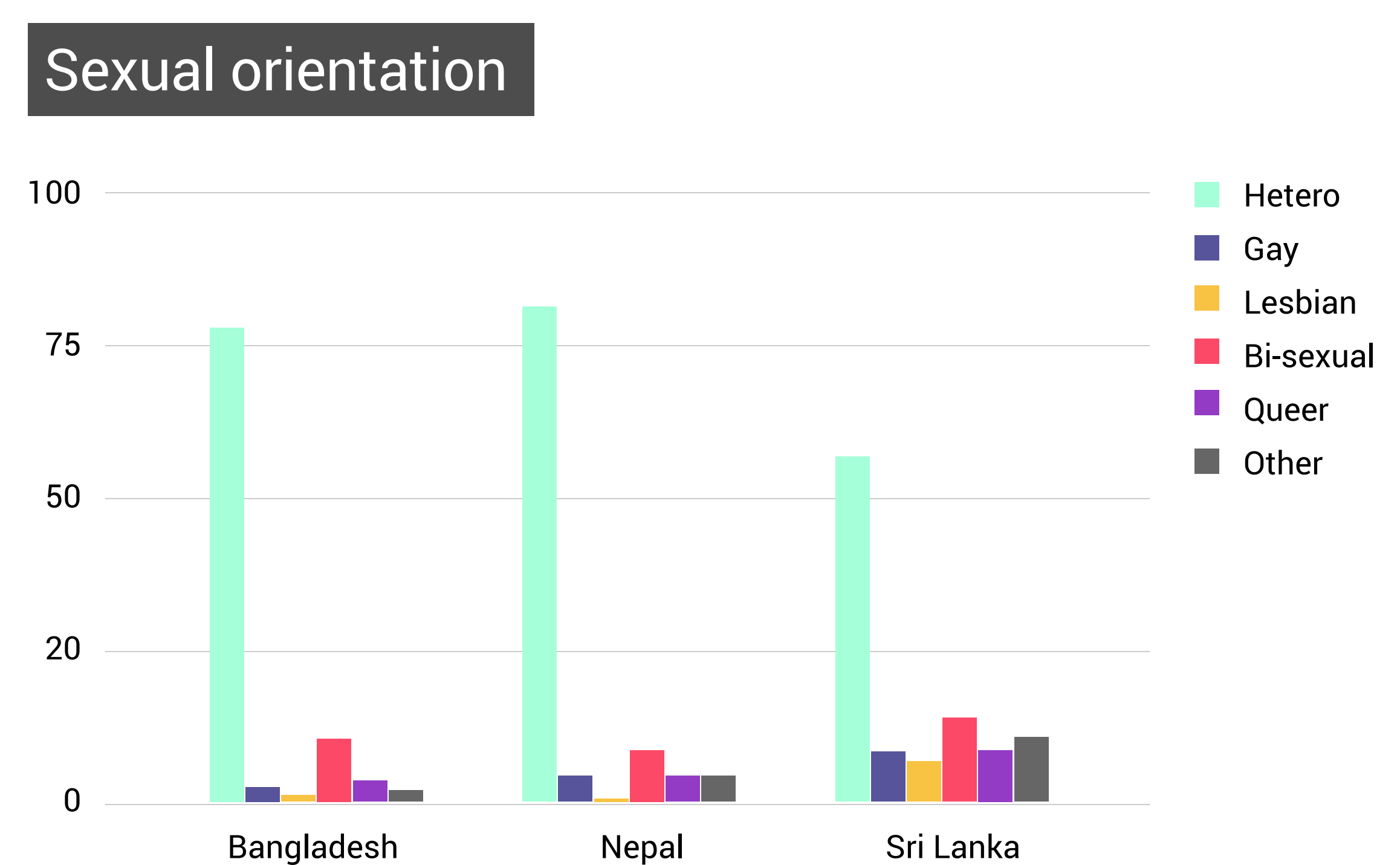


two listed “other” as sexual orientation. Three individuals who participated in focus groups self-identified as gay. Two of the participants self-identified as having disabilities and two “preferred not to say.”

In Nepal, the survey was filled out by 240 persons from Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, from July 2019 onwards. Through the outreach we reached 240 people, but in the end 40 surveys were not used because of inconsistencies in the responses; for example, some of the compulsory questions were not answered in these forms.<sup>6</sup> The research used a combination of online distribution and offline-supported filling; this was done with the support of eight organisations. It is important for us to flag that the offline-supported filling by respondents could be biased towards conservative responses, as speaking openly about sexuality in Nepal, like much of South Asia, is taboo. During the in-person meetings conducted to fill in the survey, an interactive discussion was conducted on use of the internet, negative and positive aspects of the internet, as well as how useful and/or necessary it is in the lives of the respondents. The targeted group was people aged 17 to 40, comprising a range of identities such as ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, gender, caste, class, or people with disabilities. A majority of the respondents, 67%, self-identified as having a marginalised identity. Almost half of the respondents were students (49%), with

the second largest group being employees of non-governmental organisations (17.5%), private sector workers (11%) and freelance/independent workers (5.5%). The sample also had 4% artists and 2.5% human rights activists, with a very small set (1.5%) of government sector workers.

Among the 200 respondents to the survey in Nepal, 67% were women while 81% of them were heterosexual or straight. Only four of them chose to not say. In keeping with Nepal and Kathmandu’s diverse population, 71 of the respondents were Indigenous, which was the largest among the marginalised identities, with 18 self-identifying as ethnic minorities, 12 as people with disabilities, 11 from a marginalised caste, and five from a marginalised race. We also had a majority 67% (135) of the respondents who self-identified as having a marginalised identity. Of them, 12 have a disability, 19 are from ethnic minorities, 73 belong to Indigenous groups, 14 identify as migrants, and six identify themselves as marginalised on the basis of race.



<sup>6</sup> While filling the form online, the participants/respondents could not submit the form until all the compulsory questions were filled in. However, in the offline filling of the form, many questions were raised about specific questions. Therefore, those questions with too many doubts or in need of clarifications were left unfilled. This resulted in many forms not being included in the survey. However, it is important here to reflect on whether those who filled in the survey online did indeed receive clarifications for some of the questions and if they responded accurately or to the best of their understanding.



In Sri Lanka, the survey was initially intended to be an online survey only. However, LGBTIQ people who are not within activist spaces and sex workers whose experiences and behaviour fall outside heteronormativity would be left out of the process. Additionally, technological limitations of accessing and completing an online survey, and issues with regard to the terminology used in the survey and what is used in the local languages, were other concerns. Therefore, through in-person meetings in community-led spaces, hard copies of the survey were disseminated. Five such meetings were organised in total. As part of the process, respondents filled in the survey as well as providing feedback on the structure and content of the survey. The responses from the in-person meetings were then fed into the online survey format for final analysis. In one such instance, the responses were filled in as part of a meeting that was a social gathering. The convenings were important for intergenerational connections to be made between LBQ women, as there has been a gap in LBQ women organising ever since the dissolution of the Women's Support Group (WSG) in 2010. This was a conscious decision to ensure that the convening also became an opportunity to meet, connect and share stories and experiences.

In total, the survey had 103 respondents who completed the survey in full, while nine surveys had compulsory questions left incomplete and therefore could not be included in the final analysis. While the survey did not ask respondents to specify their location within the country, the Sri Lankan survey was almost

entirely conducted through community gatherings that were held in the Western and Eastern provinces and were attended by participants from the Western, Northern and Eastern provinces of the country. Given internal migration within the country, especially to the Western province, it is possible that some of the respondents were originally from other provinces. The choosing of these provinces was deliberate. The capital city is in the Western province, which is connected to urban lifestyles and everyday use of the internet. However, the ethnic, cultural, political and linguistic specificities of the Northern and Eastern provinces as well as heightened militarisation and surveillance inform internet access and use in these provinces. The queer organising in these regions thus would be affected by these local situations. This made it important to ensure that these groups were covered.

In Sri Lanka's case, some people felt that the option to choose between cis and trans was too limiting, including but not limited to those who were post-operative, since they identified simply as man or woman (52%). Therefore, some respondents opted for cis regardless of the gender assigned at birth. There are two considerations that should be taken into account. First, many of the terms that were given in the survey as fixed options, whether around sexuality or gender, are actually not so fixed. The rationale behind a majority of those identifying as heterosexual (51%) must then be understood within this context of applying and projecting one's agency and personal

lived experience into the survey categories, therefore hacking and reinterpreting the possibility of them not being cisgender within the commonly accepted definition of the term. This very same argument and positioning is pushed further by sex worker respondents, whose sexual behaviour cannot be understood from their responses to sexual orientation. Once again, the commonly accepted definitions of terms perceived as fixed or specific is interpreted in line with the personal experience and understanding of one's self, which makes us question whether the final tally with regard to these terms should be seen more as a general impression or image.

## Qualitative research

The target group chosen for the qualitative research differed from location to location. For instance, Bangladesh conducted the qualitative study and desk research first – before the quantitative survey was undertaken. In Bangladesh, a total of 29 individuals participated in the qualitative discussion process. Though the interviews were conducted in Dhaka, most of the respondents shared that they lived outside the city. Five focus group discussions and eight in-depth interviews were conducted. The participants were primarily youth, students, LGBTIQ community members and sex workers. Two of the in-depth interview participants were from the Indigenous communities in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, who did not also participate in a focus group. The inclusion of the two in-depth interviews in

many ways was to reinforce their specific experience, which got left out in the focus group discussions.<sup>7</sup>

Nepal, on the other hand, chose a very different target group. In the quantitative survey they found that only 6% of their respondents were people with disabilities. They felt the need to reach more people with disabilities, and so their qualitative survey focused entirely on women with disabilities. The qualitative study was conducted through 16 interviews and two focus group discussions with disability rights activists based in Kathmandu. All the participants were women with disabilities.<sup>8</sup> Two of them identified as LGBTIQ/queer. The participants for these interviews and focus group discussions were chosen through snowball sampling and visiting individuals and organisations. The disability rights activists who comprised the respondents for this study all had their own mobile phone, live in the capital city of Kathmandu, and are connected to the disability rights movement directly. A telephone survey conducted by SINTEF found that “many persons with disabilities are still out of reach of modern technology.”<sup>9</sup> Thus, this study is a subset of people with disabilities who do have access to technology within an otherwise disempowered and silenced group; the concerns of access, discrimination and silencing faced by people with disabilities, especially women, can be assumed to be much greater for those with disabilities without the same privileges.<sup>10</sup>

7 Sajid, P. (2020). *Safety, agency and surveillance: An exploration of sexual expression and digital spaces in Bangladesh*. APC. <https://erotics.apc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/BD-Survey-Report-FINAL.pdf>

8 Blind/vision impaired/low vision: 4; Deaf/hearing impaired: 3; Locomotor disability: 9. The blind and vision-impaired participants were provided with assistance to fill in the form and the deaf participants had local sign language interpreters who aided the process.

9 National Federation of the Disabled, Nepal. (2016). *Living Condition Survey for People with Disabilities 2016*. <https://archive.org/details/lcs-2016/mode/2up>

10 Khayastha, S., & Pokharel, M. (2020). *Beyond access: Women and queer persons with disabilities expressing self and exploring sexuality online*. APC. <https://files.bodyanddata.org/nextcloud/in->



For Sri Lanka, on the other hand, the qualitative interviews were considered as an opportunity to delve deeper into the quantitative survey, as well as to close the gaps in information that occurred in the quantitative survey due to challenges around language and terminology. The qualitative survey participants were chosen out of those who indicated that they were interested in speaking further about their experiences in using the internet. Of the 103 respondents, 50 indicated interest. From these, 13 respondents were chosen keeping in mind their language use (five for Tamil, four for Sinhala and four for English), on the basis of identities, as well as on the basis of their responses on topics that could be explored further through deep dives. The interviews were conducted in Tamil, Sinhala and English depending on the preference of the interviewee and then translated into English.<sup>11</sup>

## Research limitations

The limitations of this regional monitoring research differ from the limitations of this report, which brings each of the country reports together. For instance, the comparisons made in this report across the three countries don't necessarily consider the varied social, political and economic landscape. Additionally, all comparisons drawn are limited because we don't know whether those who were surveyed were of similar economic/social background in

the different countries, making the comparisons often conditional in this regard.

The findings of this research have to be viewed in the context of several limitations and challenges. Each of the countries reported limitations in detail in the country-specific reports. These are merely a summary of the common limitations and those that stood out in each country.

First, the research was conducted across different social groups in different locations. Each research team had varied experiences during the process of fieldwork. The thematic area chosen in particular for the qualitative study varied based on the target group. All the observations made about India were done through secondary research and literature review, as the India partner did not participate in the regional monitoring survey. Finally, although this is considered as a regional analysis, most of the cities studied were in proximity to the researchers or the institutions and communities they worked with, except in the context of Sri Lanka, where specific regions outside the capital city were chosen. There were also unintentional exclusions of diverse marginalised communities such as people with disabilities in most of the surveys,<sup>12</sup> almost no participation of intersex people in Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka, and low numbers of trans-men in Nepal and Bangladesh. However,

dex.php/s/etpDJAS7w7Poi3B (en) <https://files.bodyanddata.org/nextcloud/index.php/s/BtD6TbqBxGz2ErZ> (nepali). Identities experiencing the internet - Nepal Survey Report <https://files.bodyanddata.org/nextcloud/index.php/s/jsnQBzfGyDso4Kj> (en)

11 Perera, S., & Ibrahim, Z. (2021). *Somewhere Only We Know: Gender, sexualities, and sexual behaviour on the internet in Sri Lanka*. APC. <https://erotics.apc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Somewhere-Only-We-Know-Online.pdf>

12 Self-reporting of disabilities is often low because of the stigma attached to disability around the world, and in South Asia.



across all countries, there was a uniform observation that translation from English to the local languages – especially with regard to gender and sexuality terminology – had its limitations.

Although partners did manage to focus on marginalised communities, the social and economic difference in each country might make the understanding of marginalisation different. Therefore, in our analysis we attempt to look for patterns of experience of sexual expression while using online spaces in the region. One of the unforeseen challenges with regard to finishing the research and writing up the reports was the toll of the unprecedented pandemic situations in our countries. There was a substantial emotional and mental toll from COVID-19. For example, the Nepal researchers were caught up in “firefighting” misinformation and violations of privacy during the process of writing up the research reports. It is also important to point out that the research was completed before the COVID-19 crisis hit the countries, but this report was published after. The report must be read in this context, since the pandemic also shifted internet use in most of our countries and this combined research does not reflect that.

Sri Lanka reported a limitation where the first draft of the survey (developed by APC, as it was for the three countries) was sent much later than the planned timeline and therefore could not be shared with local LGBTIQ community members for their feedback before being

finalised. There were also some challenges encountered in translating the survey to Tamil and Sinhala, the key issue being that some of the terminology in English, such as queer or non-binary, did not translate into the local terminology or understanding. Some respondents noted that while the survey recognised gender as cis or trans, some of them identified as simply man or woman even if they were not cisgender. They felt the survey didn’t have a place for their identity. During a focus group in the Eastern province, respondents raised that they found the phrasing of “ethnic minority” to be problematic and would have preferred for the answer to be phrased as “discriminated or marginalised on the basis of ethnicity”. Therefore, many chose not to identify as an ethnic minority in the survey, a decision that the researchers respect while acknowledging that the representation of different ethnicities will not be reflected quite well in the findings.

## THE POLITICS OF ACCESS TO THE INTERNET

For a while now, feminists have discussed access to the internet as a feminist issue, especially in the global South. In South Asia, research has shown us that age and gender play a significant role in determining internet access across the region.<sup>13</sup> Data from the International Telecommunication Union shows that women are more likely to be “unconnected” compared to men. This data also shows that “women in Southern Asia are three times less likely to use

<sup>13</sup> Kemp. S. (2020, 30 January). Digital trends 2020: Every single stat you need to know about the internet. *The Next Web*. <https://thenextweb.com/growth-quarters/2020/01/30/digital-trends-2020-every-single-stat-you-need-to-know-about-the-internet>



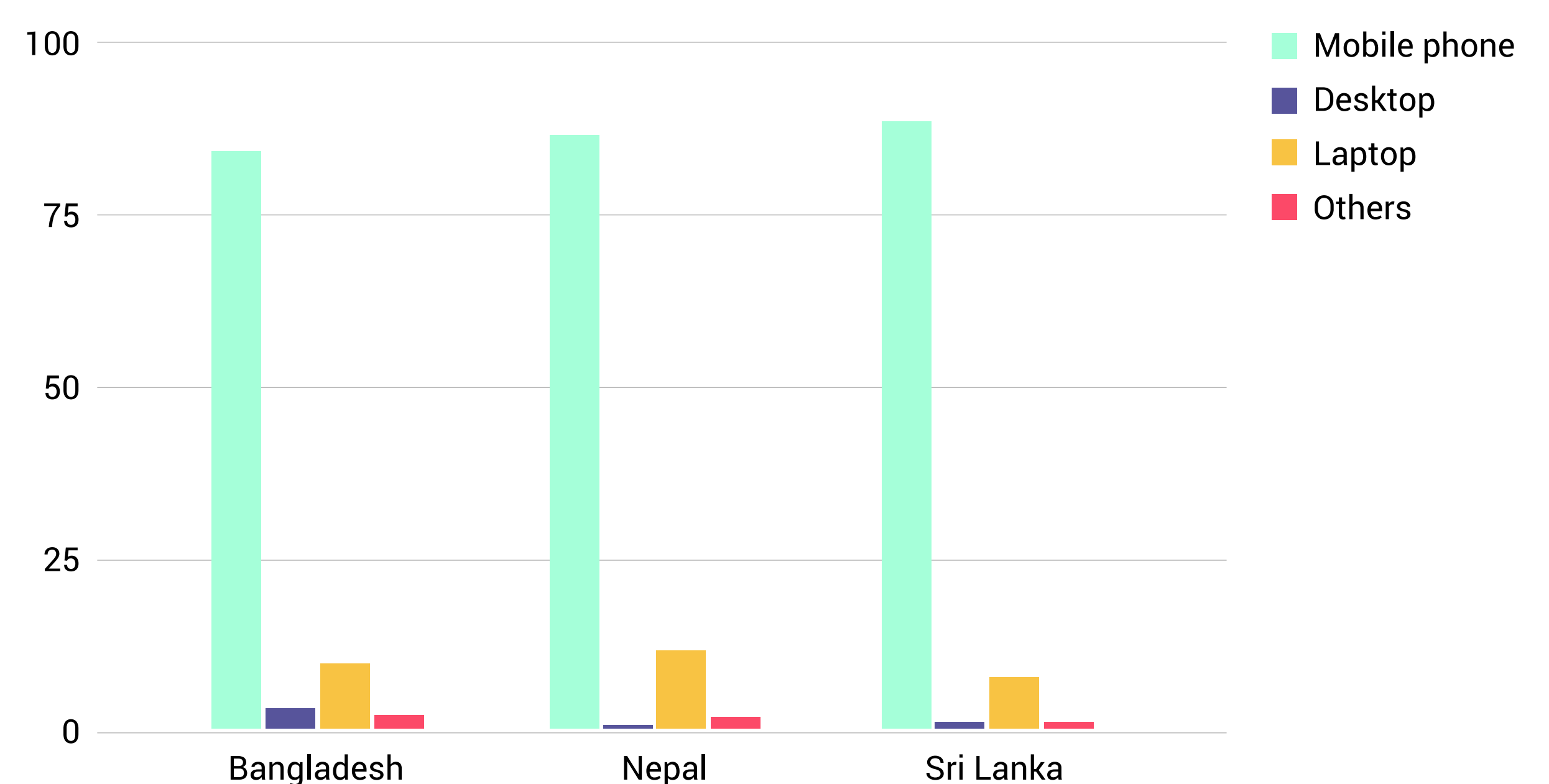
social media today compared to men, offering meaningful insight into broader internet connectivity in the region.” In India the gender disparity is said to be worse than in the rest of the globe. For instance, 114 million more Indian men have their own mobile phones compared to women.<sup>14</sup> Apart from gender, the other barriers to accessing the internet and phones include affordability of internet service as well as devices, proficiency of language to use the internet in, and accessibility of content and websites – in terms of the needs of people with disabilities as well as other marginalisations.

With regard to language, in the 1990s it was estimated that “English made up 80% of all online content.”<sup>15</sup> This has shifted and that percentage has decreased, but some languages still account for a major proportion of the internet. Those languages include English, Mandarin, Spanish, Japanese, Arabic, Portuguese, German, French, Russian and Korean. So it is important to ask the question of how the language we speak predominantly affects the way we use the internet.

For instance, about 90% of India’s new internet users consume content in local languages.<sup>16</sup> However, although Hindi is widely spoken across the country, a KPMG-Google report stated

that “over 60% of rural users consider language a barrier to accessing online government services.”<sup>17</sup> Our regional monitoring study across Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka reinforced existing research on language, as nearly 80% of the respondents used the internet in more than one language and many of them leaned towards the local language.

Graph on device most used to access the internet



When it comes to devices used for access to the internet, in Bangladesh, mobile internet users make up the bulk of the number of internet users at over 80 million, which has mostly been achieved through easily accessible smartphones and cheaper data plans.<sup>18</sup> According to the telecom industry in Nepal, there has been an increase in internet penetration,<sup>19</sup> with studies showing that it is mostly used for work-related engagement and for social networking alongside e-commerce. Social media and instant messaging/VoIP apps have seen an exponential rise

14 GSMA Connected Women. (2015). *Bridging the gender gap: Mobile access and usage in low- and middle-income countries*. [https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/GSM0001\\_03232015\\_GSMAReport\\_NEWGRAYS-Web.pdf](https://www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/GSM0001_03232015_GSMAReport_NEWGRAYS-Web.pdf)

15 Consumers International. (n/d). Over 7000 languages are spoken in the world today, but not many are represented online. <https://www.consumersinternational.org/news-resources/blog/posts/over-7000-languages-are-spoken-in-the-world-today-but-not-many-are-represented-online>

16 Singh, J. (2019, 4 December). 90% of new internet users consume content in local languages. *Entrackr*. <https://entrackr.com/2019/12/ninety-percent-of-new-internet-users-consume-content-in-local-languages>

17 Bhattacharya, A. (2017, 3 May). Regional language internet usage is where the real growth will be in India. *Scroll.in*. <https://scroll.in/article/836355/regional-language-internet-usage-is-where-the-real-growth-will-be-in-india>

18 Dhaka Tribune. (2018, 21 September). *BTRC: 90.05 million internet users in Bangladesh*. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/technology/2018/09/21/btrc-90-05-million-internet-users-in-bangladesh>

19 Nepali Telecom. (2019, 12 March). Internet users in Nepal increases rapidly, penetration reaches 63 percent. <https://www.nepalitelecom.com/2018/01/internet-in-nepal-users-rapid-increase.html>



as internet coverage became more widespread. For social media, Facebook and Twitter are the most popular platforms, whereas for “over-the-top” (OTT) apps, Viber, WhatsApp and Messenger are at the top.<sup>20</sup> However, it is important to note that internet diffusion, as indicated by the census data in Nepal, has been mostly Kathmandu-centric. The use of the internet would significantly improve if high speed internet were to reach all places in Nepal.<sup>21</sup> Price remains one of the strongest factors for mobile internet adoption across the world. While internet access and usage are low in Sri Lanka, with 34% internet penetration<sup>22</sup> and 40% digital literacy, research shows that almost all internet users in Sri Lanka are social media users.<sup>23</sup> Here as elsewhere, cheaper data plans and smartphones have driven the increase in usage.

This can be seen in our survey as well. In all three countries, an overwhelming majority of respondents accessed the internet on their phone, with less than 2% using desktops or tablets and around 5% to 8% accessing it on their laptop.

The above descriptive presentation of data on access and usage of ICTs is basic statistical information and indicates the progress of each country's investment in the infrastructures of internet and mobile technology. It does not, however, give more information to respond to the everyday use and purpose of each individual's use of

technology. Issues of meaningful access across gender and sexualities are not included in the “access” conversations. It is against this background that we are exploring expressions of sexuality, play and pleasure in the South Asian region.

In Nepal's qualitative research, they found that access played a huge role in the disability community. The internet had reduced barriers to access for persons with disabilities and lowered the barriers to access for previously inaccessible things like information, education, friendship, community and even dating. One participant shared: “For instance, even when I am here, when I can't go to places, we create groups. When I could not go to college, my friends share(d) information on what was taught. And everything. It is very easy.”

This increase in access due to technology has been observed by many people with disabilities. In another example, a disabled woman activist in Nepal said in the qualitative research: “I am disabled and my family and friends don't allow me to go out of my house as they want to keep me safe from outside or they don't want me to do work. I can't imagine my life without the internet. My life will be dull.”

However, access to technology and, by extension, the internet is limited for people with disabilities for many varied

20 Nepali Telecom. (2020, 29 February). OTT apps like Viber, WhatsApp troubles telcos in Nepal. <https://www.nepalitelecom.com/2018/01/ott-apps-viber-whatsapp-troubles-telcos-nepal.html>

21 Regmi, N., & Chautari, M. (2017). *Expectations versus reality: A case of Internet in Nepal*. *Electronic Journal of Information System in Developing Countries*, 82(7), 1-20. (<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1002/j.1681-4835.2017.tb00607.x>)

22 <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?locations=LK>

23 Zainudeen, A., Galpaya, H., Amarasinghe, T., & Mohamed, F. (2019). ICT access and use by women in the Global South. Presentation at “Imagine a Feminist Internet: South Asia” on 21 February, Negombo, Sri Lanka. <https://lirneasia.net/2019/02/ict-access-and-use-by-women-in-the-global-south-presentation>



reasons. A study conducted by the Centre for Information and Society observed that there are about 60 million people in India who have disabilities; however, nearly 75% of those come from rural areas and 42.5% are women. These two factors acting together are a huge barrier for digital accessibility in India.<sup>24</sup> The study also observed how many of the government websites and other information-oriented websites in India that were studied were inaccessible to a large extent to people with disabilities. We can assume (due to lack of many studies at this intersection of disability, gender and technology) that the situation is similar across South Asia.

## The legal terrain of access to the internet

Across South Asia, we share a common legacy of strict legislation with regard to data protection and cybersecurity. But additionally, there is little to no concept of the right to privacy. Through the imposition of frameworks like the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), there are some discussions beginning here, but community-led reflection is still in the nascent stage in the region.

Some legislations across Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka are similar. However, over the past few years, we have seen the tightening of these legislations leading to a significant impact on

the future of privacy in the South Asian region.<sup>25</sup> These laws – because of their usage by governments to curb expression and their effects on the rights of individuals and communities – must be critically challenged. We briefly explore below the region's response to the tightening of laws and the furthering of digital surveillance and curbing of freedom of expression.

In October 2018, Bangladesh passed the Digital Security Act. Researchers and activists criticised this law heavily for the “newly defined restrictions on free speech that it contains.”<sup>26</sup> In the past few years, the Bangladesh government has responded to dissent by clamping down on free speech through arrests of journalists, writers, poets and artists. As recently as April 2020, news reports show that Shafiqul Islam Kajol,<sup>27</sup> a journalist; Toufique Imrose Khalidi, editor-in-chief of bdnews24.com; Mohiuddin Sarker, acting editor of jagonews24.com; Rahim Suvho, the Thakurgaon correspondent of bdnews24.com; and Shaown Amin, a local journalist, were accused under the Digital Security Act.<sup>28</sup> This law was enacted in Bangladesh as a response to the criticisms against the ICT Act. However, it has been observed by critics that the Digital Security Act “casts an even wider net over free speech and dissent than its predecessor. The Act not only broadens the scope of what constitutes online crime but also takes away the few legal protections granted under the ICT Act.”<sup>29</sup> Similarly, the change in legal frameworks

24 <https://cis-india.org/telecom/knowledge-repository-on-internet-access/accessibility>

25 Ikigai Law. (2019, 9 August). Introduction to Digital Security Laws in Nepal, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh. <https://www.ikigailaw.com/introduction-to-digital-security-laws-in-nepal-sri-lanka-and-bangladesh>

26 Krishna, R. (2019, 5 October). How dissent is prosecuted in Bangladesh. *Observer Research Foundation*. <https://www.orfonline.org/expert-speak/how-dissent-prosecuted-in-bangladesh-56190>

27 Rabbi, A R. (2020, 1 April). Amnesty: Second Digital Security Act case filed against Kajol on day of disappearance. *Dhaka Tribune*. <https://www.dhakatribune.com/bangladesh/dhaka/2020/04/01/second-digital-security-act-case-filed-against-kajol-on-day-of-disappearance>

28 The Daily Star. (2020, 29 April). 'It is an attack on freedom of expression'. <https://www.thedailystar.net/city/news/it-attack-freedom-expression-1897708>

29 Krishna, R. (2019, 5 October). Op. cit.



in Nepal has been having its effect on usage of the internet, especially with regard to free online expression. Recently, the Nepal government introduced new laws and policies around information and communications technologies which directly impact Nepalis' right to privacy and freedom of expression.<sup>30</sup> A legislation was tabled which imposes strict penalties for "improper" social media posts. This has raised concerns about the ways in which this legislation would suppress dissent and freedom of speech. The news reports around it show us: "Under the proposed law, the government would have the power to block social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube unless they register in Nepal. And social media posts deemed defamatory or against national sovereignty could be punished with up to five years in jail and a fine of 1.5 million Nepalese rupees [USD 13,000]."<sup>31</sup> Activists in the country have been resisting the passage of this bill, which will have strict consequences on the usage of internet in Nepal, especially as the internet has become a growing space for public discourse – and particularly for marginalised communities. For example, in 2019, Pashupati Sharma was forced to take down their song "Lutna Sake Lut", which created discussion within hours of its release. The song trended on YouTube through word-of-mouth publicity.<sup>32</sup> This instance shows us how freedom of expression on the internet is a vital part of dissent and how many individual instances already

deter people from doing so. Thus, legislation that imposes restrictions can only make things worse.

Journalists and editors of newspapers and weeklies have also been detained and arrested for publishing controversial content. A news report stated: "In a similar case, Arjun Thapaliya from Siraha district, Nepal was arrested for liking a post on Facebook. Thapaliya who used to work for Anukalpa Daily had written an article about a person who was alleged with sexual harassment. His friend had shared the piece on Facebook and just like any other person, he 'liked' his friend's post. However, that one like on Facebook landed Thapaliya in jail!"<sup>33</sup>

Restrictions on internet services, especially mobile services, or the slowing down or targeted blocking of sites like Facebook or YouTube have also become common practice in the name of public safety and order. In 2018, there were 196 large-scale internet shutdowns in 26 countries. India topped the list with 134 shutdowns, whereas Bangladesh also made the list of countries that shut down their internet too often.<sup>34</sup> Most of these were to curb the political unrest in the country. So there is a palpable fear among governments with regard to the freedom associated with the internet.

In 2019 alone, there were at least three internet shutdowns in Sri Lanka. After the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019,<sup>35</sup> the

30 Khadgi, A. (2019, 19 April). Is cyberspace in Nepal actually free for public expression? *The Himalayan Times*. <https://thehimalayantimes.com/kathmandu/is-cyberspace-in-nepal-actually-free-for-public-expression>

31 Phys.org. (2019, 20 February). Nepal social media bill sparks freedom of speech concerns. <https://phys.org/news/2019-02-nepal-social-media-bill-freedom.html>

32 The Himalayan Times. (2019, 17 February). Activists turn up the speakers and dance to Sharma's "Lutna Sake Lut" at Maitighar. <https://thehimalayantimes.com/nepal/activists-turn-up-the-speakers-and-dance-to-sharmas-lutna-sake-lut-at-maitighar>

33 Khadgi, A. (2019, 19 April). Op. cit.

34 Edwards, J. (2019, 30 June). All the countries where someone managed to shut down the entire internet – and why they did it. *Business Insider*. <https://www.businessinsider.com/countries-internet-shutdown-statistics-2019-6>

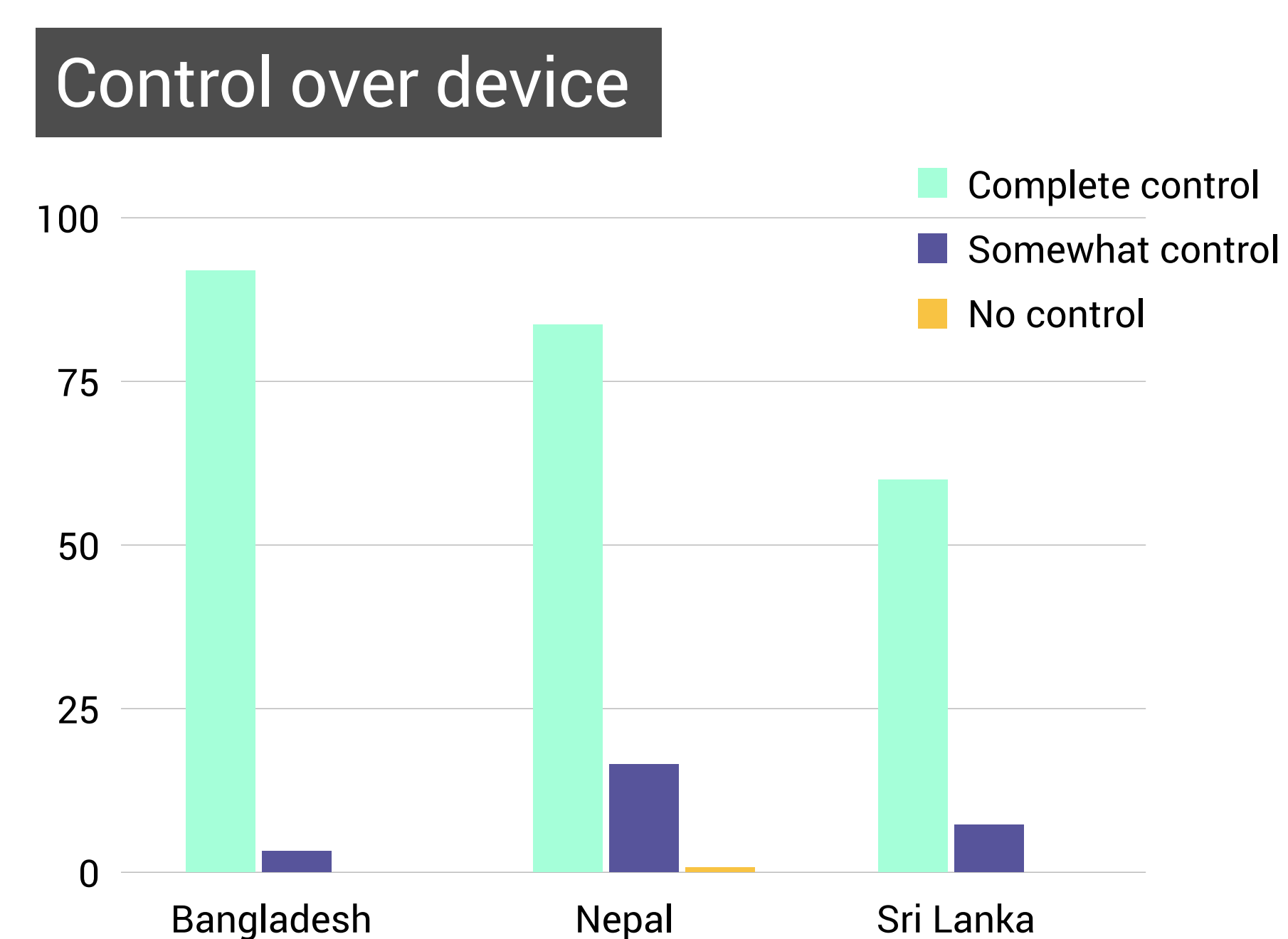
35 On 21 April 2019, Easter Sunday, three churches in Sri Lanka and three luxury hotels in the commercial capital, Colombo, were targeted in a series of coordinated Islamic terrorist suicide



Sri Lankan government blocked access to social media sites including Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, WhatsApp and YouTube, along with the chat app Viber. In a policy brief for the non-partisan Toda Peace Institute last year, Sri Lankan researcher Sanjana Hattotuwa felt that many governments in Sri Lanka have “flagged Facebook and social media as the sole or primary progenitors of violence, ignoring the fact that government itself has done little to uphold the rule of law or address the root causes.”<sup>36</sup>

The blocking and censoring of specific websites, especially news websites, has been going on for years. So, if your livelihood is dependent on the internet, such shutdowns can have an effect on your monthly income. Melony, a 46-year-old cisgender gay man from Sri Lanka, who has been performing drag for over 20 years and began using the internet 10 years ago, shared his experience. He has been able to shift his work as a sex worker online and now 100% of his clients find him online. When some of the websites he advertises his services on were blocked by the government, in the period around 2010 to 2015, he experienced a loss of income. They were unblocked after the government change in 2015. However, because Sri Lanka recently went through another government change, he felt it was possible for the sites to be shut down again. Melony also shares that the police and law enforcement are aware that sex workers use the internet to solicit customers

but that so far they have not tried to interfere with this except in the cases of underage people.



In a study done by Ayesha Zainudeen, Helani Galpaya, Tharaka Amarasinghe and Firas Mohamed on ICT access and use by women in the global South, they found that there were “large gender gaps in mobile ownership, broadly in line with income levels, but India, Pakistan, Bangladesh were far worse than poorer African countries.”<sup>37</sup> Unsurprisingly, these gaps get more pronounced with socioeconomic backgrounds and rural women reportedly had the lowest internet use.<sup>38</sup>

In the survey in Bangladesh, 92% of the respondents reported control over their device, but cis men reported the most control. In Nepal, however, 83% of the respondents reported complete control while 16.5% reported “somewhat control” over their primary device. Due to a technical error in the survey administrator repeating a question in the Tamil survey form in Sri Lanka, this question was unanswered by about 30 respondents. Therefore, it is difficult to understand a

bombings. Later that day, there were smaller explosions at a housing complex in Dematagoda and a guest house in Dehiwala. A total of 267 people were killed and more than 500 injured.  
<sup>36</sup> Matsakis, L., & Lapowsky, I. (2019, 23 April). Don't Praise the Sri Lankan Government for Blocking Facebook. *Wired*. <https://www.wired.com/story/sri-lanka-bombings-social-media-shutdown>  
<sup>37</sup> Zainudeen, A., Galpaya, H., Amarasinghe, T., & Mohamed, F. (2019). Op. cit.  
<sup>38</sup> Ibid.



pattern, although over 60% of those who responded said they have full control over the primary device they use to access the internet.

However, there have been instances in Bangladesh, as observed by the researcher, where women themselves have registered a Facebook account or a mobile phone in a male relative's name. This in many ways is seen as a way to be "protected" from the harm that follows from using your own name and gender on the internet.

A woman with a disability shared in the qualitative research done in Nepal how her access to the internet was mediated by her husband. She said: "I mostly share all my arts and paintings in internet. He (husband) tells me concentrate on my work and that he'll look after the (social media) posts." She also stated that this improved her access to video calling deaf people in India, which doesn't happen often in Nepal.

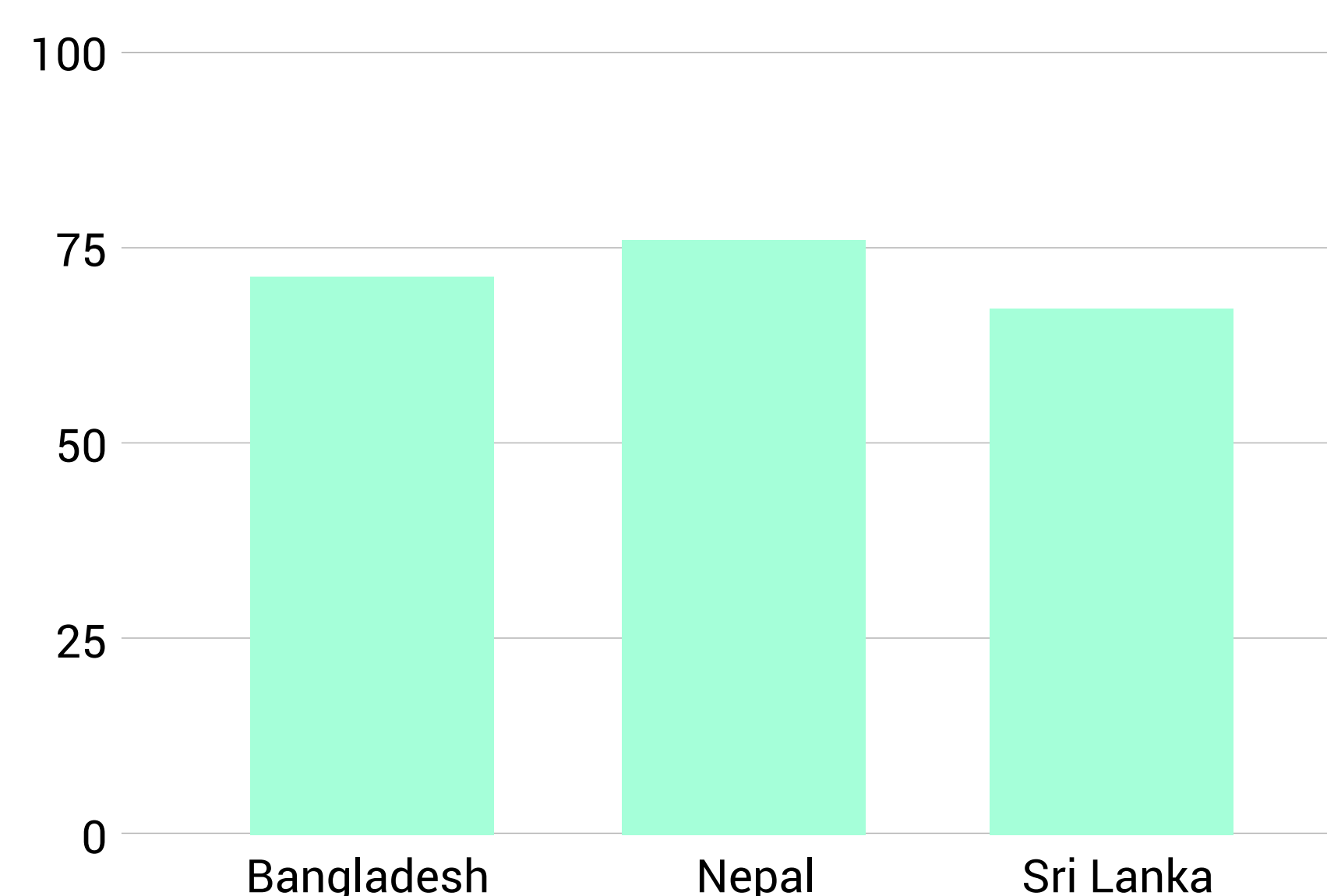
Similarly, a deaf woman shared how access to the internet improved her access to her community. But this increased access resulted in her husband restricting or mediating her access. Thus, though many of those in the quantitative survey reported that they had control over their devices, deeper conversations revealed how other identities like disability and sexuality, among others, hindered complete control over the device.

## DOES THE INTERNET BUILD MORE CONNECTIONS?

In a review of the research on sexuality, gender and technology undertaken in India for the first EROTICS exploratory research study, Richa Kaul Padte notes:

On the one hand, the internet has allowed LGBTQI people living in India the opportunity to mobilise, organise, and explore their sexualities through anonymous identities. But on the other hand, virtual spaces are not divorced from the real world, and the prejudices that queer people face offline extend online too, leaving many people to question what it means to articulate a queer identity, and whether the internet really is the democratic space many initially assumed it to be.<sup>39</sup>

### Response to the question: Does the internet connect us?



In our regional survey, 76% of the respondents from Nepal, 72% from Bangladesh and 68% from Sri Lanka said that the internet connects them to people more easily.

<sup>39</sup> Padte, R. K. (2013, 15 March). EROTICS India: Women, sexuality and the internet. *GenderIT.org*. <https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/erotics-india-women-sexuality-and-internet>



The interviews from Sri Lanka give us more insight on how these connections form and how they shape up.

Aarya, a transgender heterosexual woman from Sri Lanka, explained in her interview that many diaspora Tamils reach out to her to try and connect when they come to Colombo. She felt that they are slowly opening up to talk about issues related to transgender people. She explained that using the internet for self-expression had provided others “who may be feeling the same way, the confidence to reach out and connect.”

For Shirani, a transgender heterosexual woman from Sri Lanka, the internet provides her with a “huge opportunity to give information to the society and to my community” and she has even made her mobile number available on her personal and work social media accounts. “We used to get a lot of wrong information,” says Shirani, emphasising how seriously she and others in the community take their role in providing correct and timely information. In her interview she said that she received calls “even at midnight because confusion or worry about gender identity can have a toll on people’s mental health and they seek community when they feel the most alone.”

A few participants in the Bangladesh qualitative study felt that not everyone was able to find the necessary support or even know where to find supportive networks. The researcher says:

They also shared examples of counselling experts who berated patients,

pushed heteronormative ideas of family, law enforcement members who immediately linked sexual expression with illicit behaviour or criminality or otherwise favoured men. “We rely on our friend lists” or “I have a selected group of friends” echoed many of the respondents from sex workers to queer participants, emphasising the necessity of trusted, personal and informal networks in the absence of many formal ones.

This is interesting, because it is evident that not everyone has the same access to supportive networks, or even knowledge of their existence. Similar experiences were reported by a few women with disabilities from Nepal, as will be seen later in this report.

Realising that one is not alone is a feeling many of those with marginalised identities understand very well. The internet therefore plays a role in connecting us. This answer stood out in terms of the need for the internet in finding community in Nepal:

I think the internet is a space that allows me to communicate my thoughts in whichever manner I choose to present them, and that grants the platform a value that is hard to fully express. However, I also recognise that the most important forms of self-expression I take part in do not really require the internet all that much. So it helps solidify my right to self-expression, but I don’t believe it is an absolute prerequisite for it.



Though the internet does build connections and community and is used as a space for activism across the countries, many of the participants in the research shared how they navigated expression and presence on the internet.

In the interviews conducted in Sri Lanka, Aarya spoke of her access to the internet, which was controlled due to her identity as a transgender woman. She felt that who controlled her access had shifted from parents, to school, to now her lover. She shared that her lover has her password and therefore, her usage is also limited. Additionally, she said: “We are careful in what we post on our page. There is no freedom. So, we share information on a closed group only. Not in public. I don’t even have any freedom to post my picture as I wish.” She has also faced identity theft, where her picture was downloaded and used on another fake profile that posted damaging content.

Two other respondents – Vijay, a cisgender heterosexual man, and Lakshmi, who did not want to identify by a particular gender identity in her survey response but identified as a woman in her qualitative interview – felt that their identity had not affected access to the internet, although for Lakshmi, her identity had affected the way she uses the online space. She thinks before posting a picture or posting about her feminist politics because of the comments she has received. “Sometimes to avoid such comments I don’t share things on Facebook,” she explained. “But

I somehow still continue to write, although I don’t write about some things to avoid these unnecessary comments.”

## **Internet as a space to learn how to communicate and build empathy**

Research has revealed that WhatsApp was the most-blocked platform due to internet shutdowns in 2019. Top10VPN reported that the app suffered 6,236 hours of disruption in 2019,<sup>40</sup> with countries like Sri Lanka and Sudan among the worst affected. This use of social networking was reflected in our own research as well. But we find that there is more to it.

To explore how the internet is used as a space to communicate, we asked participants in the research about what they used the internet for. Across the three countries, usage was similar. In Nepal, 76% of the respondents used the internet for social networking followed by 74% using it for email. Most of the responses provided that were above 50% were work or social connection related. The usage was similar in Bangladesh, where most of the respondents were students. Hence the internet for research received a high percentage of 65%, and social networking, chatting and emails topped the list for usage with 75%, 66% and 78%.

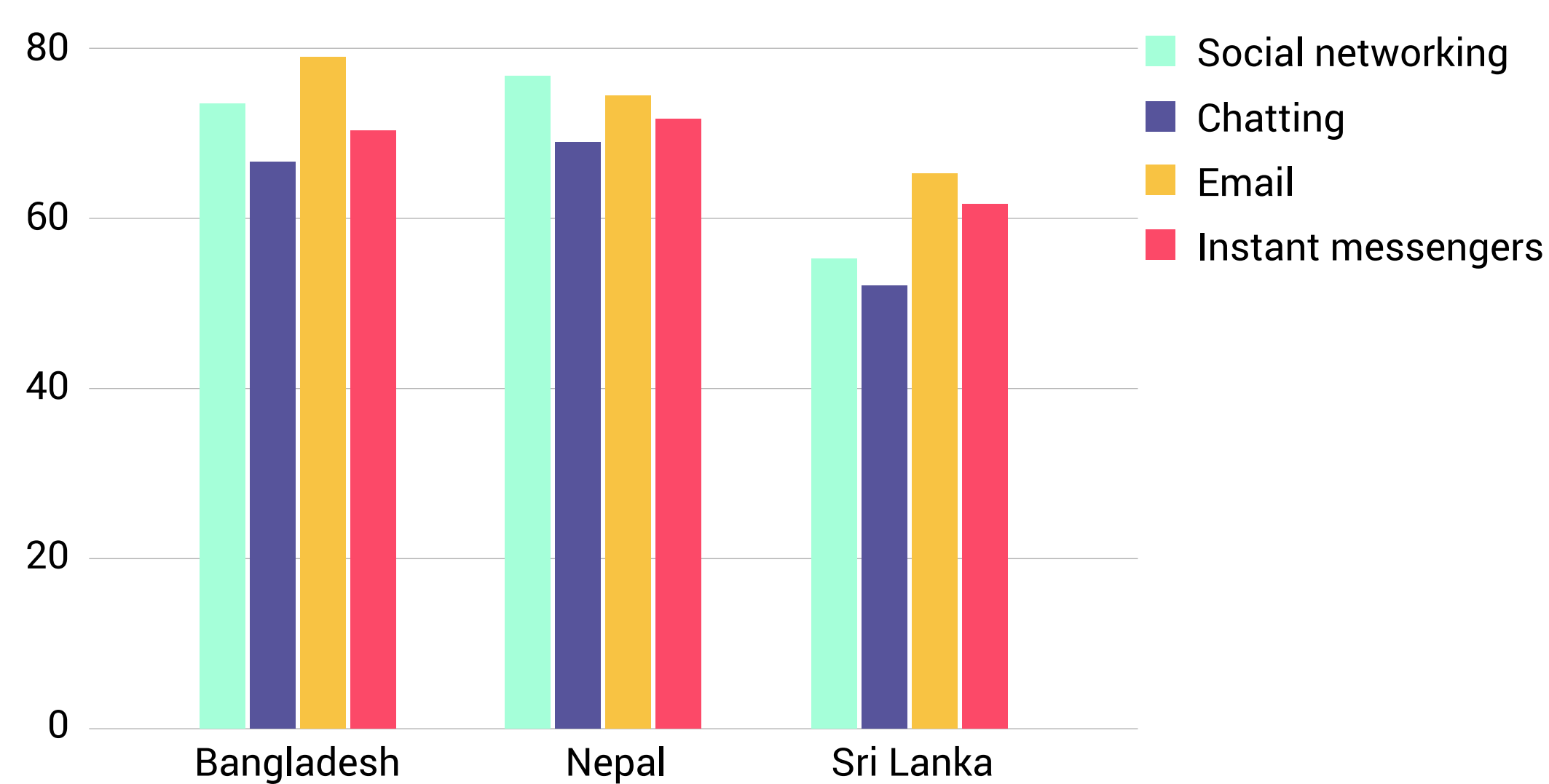
While work and email received the highest percentage in Sri Lanka, more than 50% of the respondents used it for social networking and building of community. However, this was explored in

<sup>40</sup> Woodhams, S., & Migliano, S. (2020, 7 January). The Global Cost of Internet Shutdowns in 2019. *Top10VPN*. <https://www.top10vpn.com/cost-of-internet-shutdowns/2019>

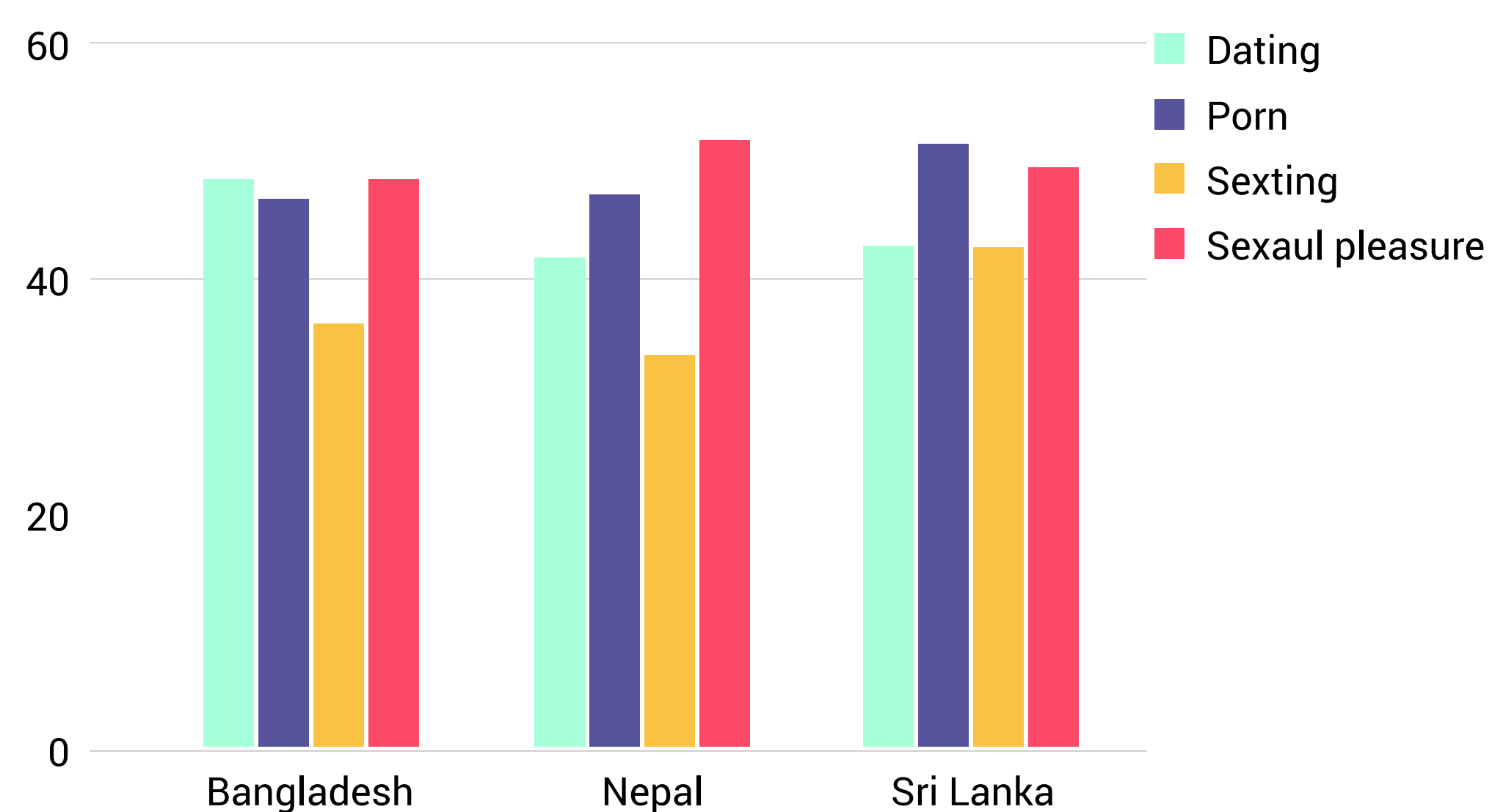


more detail through the interviews, and the following interpretations of the responses to this question were observed. It was found that individuals interpreted it differently depending on what they do most while being on the internet, as well as what most people get on the internet most for. For example, some interpreted the question around health information as something you will always get on the internet to look for and not offline. There was also some additional confusion because some activities were entirely internet-based (emails, chatting, social networking) while others were not (work, health information, etc.).

#### Usage responses: Always



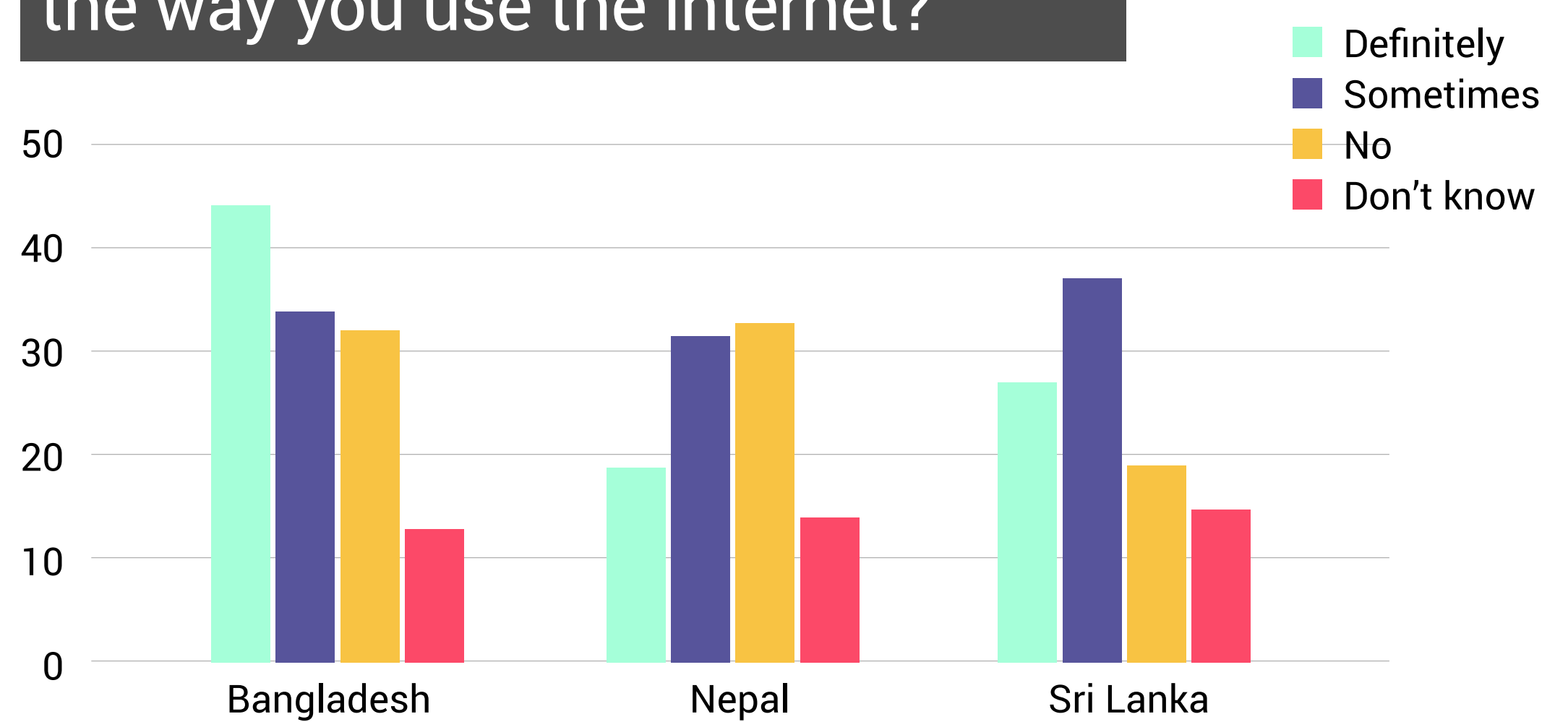
#### Usage: Sometimes



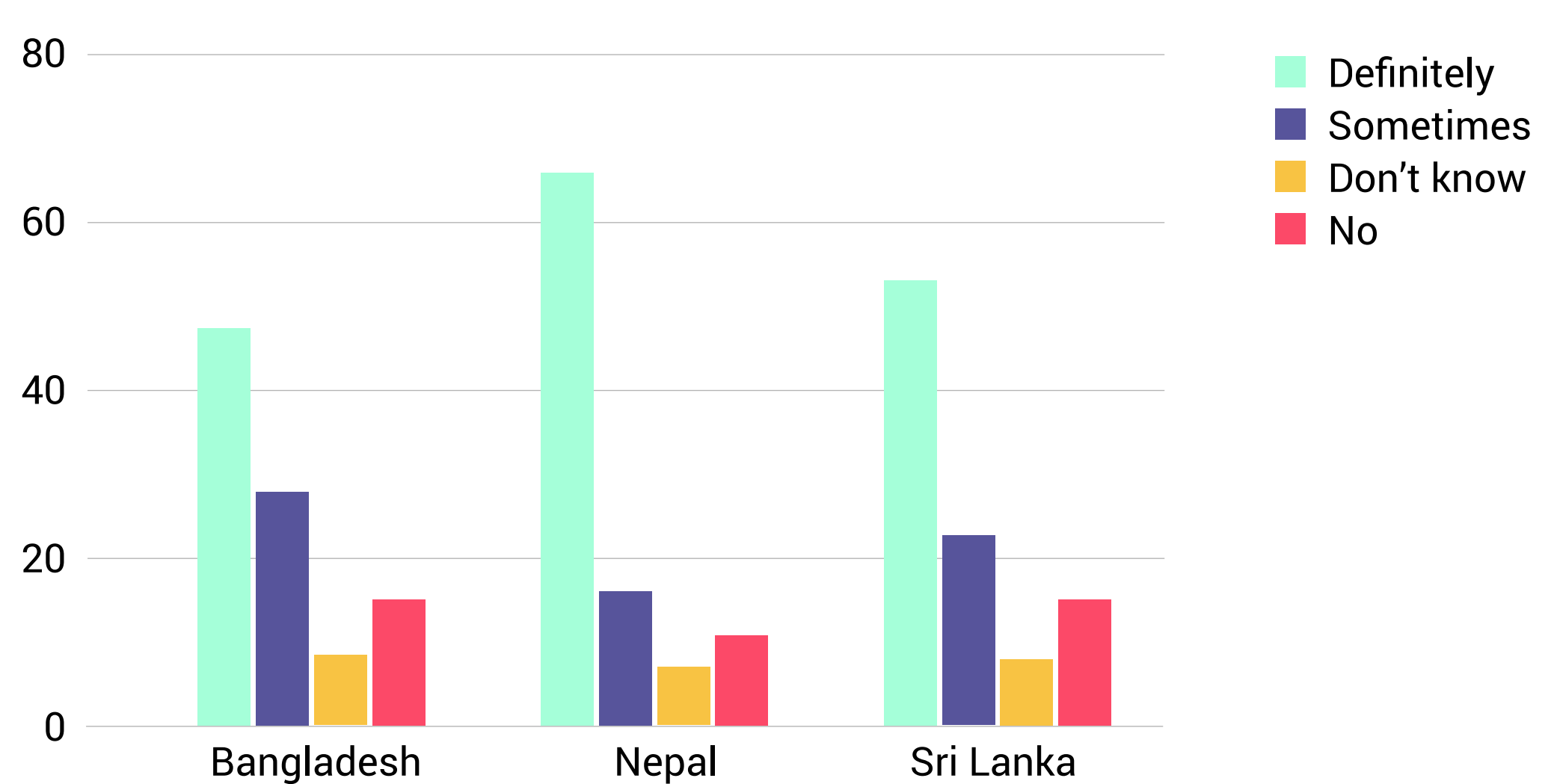
These responses give us the indication that the internet is used by many for creating connections and learning new information. There has also been a shift in gender and sexuality understanding because of exposure to the internet. For

instance, in Nepal, although more than 33% of the respondents felt their gender and/or sexuality did not affect their usage of the internet, over 60% of the respondents did assert that access to the internet had changed their understanding of gender and sexuality.

#### Has your gender identity affected the way you use the internet?



#### Has access to the internet changed how you perceive people of different gender and sexual identities?



In the quantitative survey, some of the participants from Bangladesh shared how their experience of using the internet has enhanced their understanding of the different sexual and gender identities. One of them said:

I never really knew about trans\* and I always thought that gender and sex meant the same thing. Growing up, I was also taught that gay people were mentally ill but after communicating with so many different people and understanding how sexual



identity works I realised that I was wrong about gay and trans\* people (the idea of trans\* people being mentally handicapped).

Many respondents suggested that the increase in exposure to empathetic stories of different people in different situations has helped expand their understanding of gender and sexuality and built their empathy. One participant said:

It has taught me to always ask a stranger what pronouns they prefer before initiating a conversation. It has also taught me to be more mindful of throwing around words like “gay” or “lesbian” lightly or jokingly, because some people might identify as such and find it offensive and hurtful.

In the Bangladesh qualitative research interviews, it was observed that:

[A]n overwhelming number of them including those interviewed credited porn in facilitating their sexual awakening and education, in addition to talking to friends. Shailen however did not feel comfortable talking about “personal” interests with friends, so his source of education was for the most part from watching porn. Several sex workers mentioned mobile recharge, photocopying and compose shops where they could download music and video, including porn. Asked specifically about porn, respondents said they did not agree with the government porn ban, found it to

be instructional, although they also shared their discomfort and distaste at the kinds of porn available. Porn or not, a majority of the respondents credited the internet as a major source of their sex education. “Often civil society is not in step with society,” said a participant clarifying how overwhelmingly any effort to deal with questions of sexuality meant avoidance as if to address it without addressing it or criminalising it, wondering whether this kind of approach of trying to wish sex away has in fact done more harm than good.

The internet has in many ways enhanced people’s experiences due to increase in exposure to content created by people across the spectrum. The diversity of voices definitely has a role to play. But among those sharing their experiences and living their lives on the internet, who sees themselves as a creator of content?

### **Who creates LGBTIQA content?**

Across all three countries we see a trend in respondents consuming content to a larger extent than creating content (a higher percentage used the internet daily for consuming content, as compared to a higher percentage using it weekly for creating content). The sample in Nepal was composed of heavy users, with 79% using the internet daily for consumption of information. In addition, more than half used it as a content creator of blogs, vlogs, memes, code, Instagram posts, uploading photos, etc., with 25% of them creating content daily and 26% doing so at least once a month.



Through the qualitative research done in Sri Lanka, this aspect was explored in more detail. The responses from the interviewees shed some light on who is perceived as a creator of content. It is interesting that most of the respondents in Sri Lanka (82%) see themselves as consumers of the internet daily, but not many see themselves as producers of content on a daily basis (30%). This raised some questions on whether and why they passively consume information, as well as what they understand and perceive production or creation of content to be.

Hiran, a cisgender gay man who is a YouTube star, is very clear that he is a content creator. The very first video that Hiran uploaded to his YouTube channel went viral and he attributes this to the fact that it was possibly the first of its kind in Sri Lanka: an openly gay man cross-dressing and performing. Hiran was influenced by the content produced by Lilly Singh<sup>41</sup> and recalls that in Sri Lanka, the most popular YouTube stars at the time were cisgender heterosexual men like JehanR and Gappiya.<sup>42</sup> He reminisces about making the first video and notes that he didn't necessarily plan it and just went with how he felt at the time; that he "had to stop doing nothing and make something, anything." He made the video using his laptop webcam and it remains one of his most popular videos to date.

For her part Lakshmi has been able to find clarity on issues of sexuality and gender using the internet, particularly

through Facebook, websites and YouTube. Based on this she has also produced some content in Tamil. She considers herself a producer of content and describes this content as posts about discrimination and oppression in society on platforms such as Facebook. She also considers pictures she puts up – often of nature and also pictures of herself – as content.

Krishani, a cisgender woman who identified as straight but also possibly bisexual, says she has learned a lot online about the rights of women, and the internet has also helped her learn a lot more about the LGBT community. She doesn't really see herself as a producer of content, or does not consider the posts she puts up on platforms such as Facebook as content. For her, "I think a producer of content in my opinion – Instagram influencers who make videos, have blogs, or personally or professionally who does it as their job, but their thing, not for a place or media house."

## Understanding discourse and systems behind online violence

**"A feminist internet works towards empowering more women and queer persons – in all our diversities – to fully enjoy our rights, engage in pleasure and play, and dismantle patriarchy."**

– Preamble, Feminist Principles of the Internet

We have made strides towards a feminist internet, and through our research

<sup>41</sup> Lilly Singh is a Canadian YouTuber, comedian, talk show host and actress who gained fame on social media.

<sup>42</sup> Jehan and Gappiya are YouTube stars from Sri Lanka whose channels can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/user/jehanr/about> and <https://www.youtube.com/user/gappiya/about>



over the years, we do know that the internet is a beautifully freeing space when it comes to gender expression or sexuality. However, like in the physical/offline world, it is also used as a system of surveillance that attempts to control us. For instance, online avenues of freedom are constantly under threat. Sexuality on the internet counts on trolls and other well-wishers to control and protect the family honour, religious tradition or nationalism. Heteronormative patriarchy then exercises control over women's bodies and through the stigmatisation of homosexuality, queerness and "obscenity" controls the discourse online as well as seeking to reduce the ways in which people behave. The system of course is aided by discriminatory law, which goes back decades in the region and which has been "transferred into the new legislation around the internet, giving higher and unrestricted powers."<sup>43</sup>

In South Asia in particular, we have seen governments exercise control and instead of "protecting citizens, these laws often work to undermine digital security and chill speech".<sup>44</sup> In *'Don't Let It Stand'*, a study on online gender-based violence conducted in India in 2013 by the Internet Democracy Project, the researchers argue that online violence is a different form of the offline violence:

In reality, the hierarchies of the real world are all too often not effaced

in the virtual world; instead, they are reborn and reconstructed in such a way that new mediums become the sites for old discriminations. Despite the Internet's empowering potential, the gender-based hierarchies, violences, and manifestations of discrimination that women (or people who do not define their genders as singularly male) must face on a daily basis are also paralleled online, in India as elsewhere.<sup>45</sup>

In research conducted on the Indian law on obscenity, it was argued that:

The concept of "obscenity" [...] emerged as Christian missionaries, English educationists and administrators mingled with Brahminism, social reform and bhadralok, or the respectable gentry. These groups "perceived the social world as frighteningly lacking in normative regulation and moral authority," writes Banerjee.<sup>46</sup>

It is important therefore to discuss how obscenity enters the online space as a way to control and restrict sexual expression. Similarly, in Sri Lanka, obscenity, profanity and public performance laws such as the Obscene Publications Act are used to control, censor and criminalise "carnal intercourse against the order of nature" and "acts of gross indecency".<sup>47</sup>

43 hvale.(2018, 4 May). In plain sight, on sexuality, rights and the internet in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. *GenderIT.org*. <https://www.genderit.org/articles/plain-sight-sexuality-rights-and-internet-in-dia-nepal-and-sri-lanka>

44 Verma, M. (2017, 18 October). South Asia: how trends in ICT law and policy are impacting digital rights. *Access Now*. <https://www.accessnow.org/spotlight-south-asia-trends-ict-law-policy-impacting-digital-rights>

45 Kovacs, A., Padte, R. K., & Shobha, S. V. (2013). *'Don't Let it Stand!': An Exploratory Study of Women and Verbal Online Abuse in India*. Internet Democracy Project. <https://cdn.internetdemocracy.in/idp/assets/downloads/reports/women-and-verbal-online-abuse-in-india/Internet-Democracy-Project-Women-and-Online-Abuse.pdf>

46 APC. (2017). *EROTICS South Asia exploratory research: Sex, rights and the internet*. [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Erotics\\_1\\_FIND.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/Erotics_1_FIND.pdf)

47 Ibid.



In an attempt to understand how expansive experiences of online gender-based violence are, Point of View, India explored the possibility of going beyond the “online” to the “digital”. In their publication *Free To Be Mobile*, they ask some pertinent questions which include: What does technology-enabled violence look like? What are the implications of gender in this context? Some of the stories in *Free To Be Mobile* are rooted in low-income communities “among teenagers, women, trans and queer persons who can’t afford smart phones.” Through these stories we can see how gender plays out in “a million different ways”:

Teenage boys hacking the WhatsApp accounts of teenage girls. Fathers tracking daughters through itemised phone bills. Rural journalists receiving endless calls from strange men. Trans women constantly facing demands for sex on social media. Brothers tracking and throwing sisters off messaging apps.<sup>48</sup>

### **“I didn’t respond to the message”**

In the qualitative research conducted in Nepal, it was observed that women with disabilities face a different kind of violence online. Women with disabilities spoke about receiving many messages of “appreciation” which hinted at societal perceptions of beauty and who can occupy spaces online. “You don’t seem disabled” was the most common message that women with disabilities received online. The assumption in this

statement is that disability and beauty cannot co-exist, and therefore if beautiful the person must not be disabled. This shows us how pervasive the idea of only “able bodies” being beautiful is. Another telling reaction is one of “shock” on a disabled woman’s photos of travel to foreign countries, which also makes assumptions on the range of life experiences available to persons with disabilities. It is the compliment giver’s expectation that those with disabilities should only be able to have a narrow set of experiences, not rich, beautiful experiences of travel in foreign lands, giving speeches and attending international events.

In the same vein, a participant with a strong interest in beauty and makeup shared this experience:

I used to wear full makeup earlier... and people did not think I was disabled. “When we look at you in photos... you don’t seem disabled (using derogatory words for disability). Are you trying to attract and confuse men?” These types of comments come on Facebook and also from the (disability) community. I started deleting those comments, now I only have people from the disability community, and a few members from my family (in Facebook).

This results in the creation of safe spaces or spaces where disabled women only interact with other disabled people on the internet. Though there is agency

<sup>48</sup> Point of View. (2019). *Free to be Mobile*. [https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/FTBM\\_Web\\_final.pdf](https://www.apc.org/sites/default/files/FTBM_Web_final.pdf)



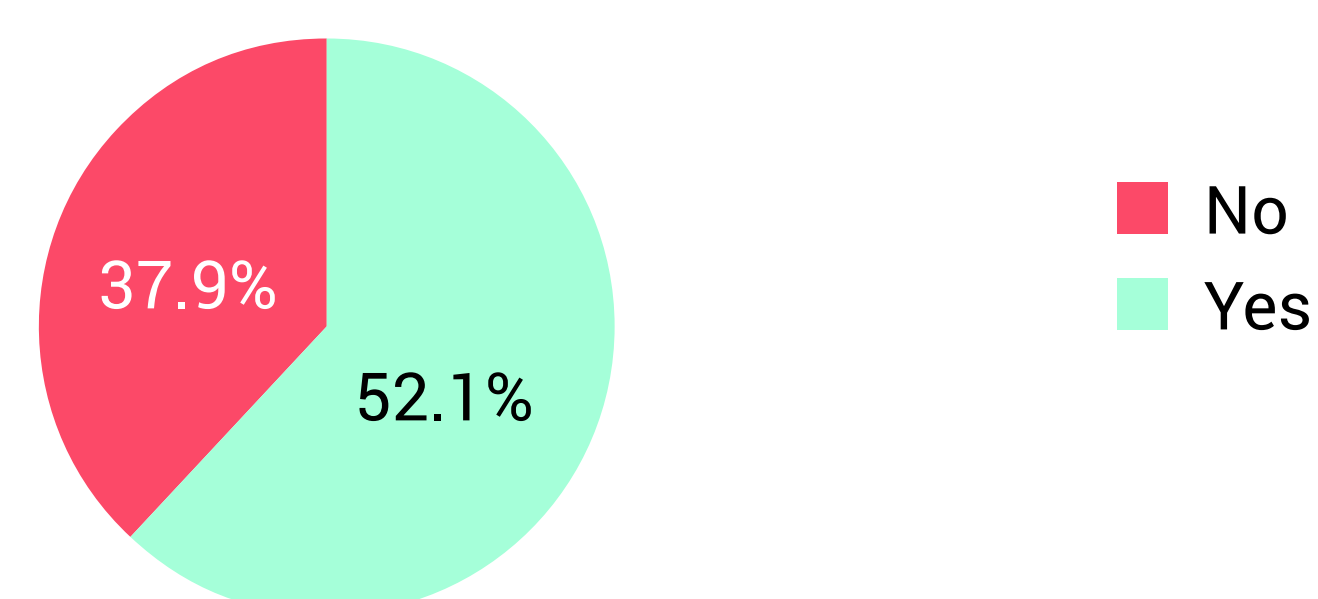
in this action, there is a lot to reflect on about the kinds of spaces provided for women of all kinds to exist on the internet and express their sexuality or gender expression without having to be questioned or subjected to micro aggressions of ableism.

Another participant shared an experience of violence in Nepal that had several layers of online harassment, including the technological aspect of the crime (modifying and superimposing images), fraud, impersonation, moralistic attitudes towards women's sexuality and the sexuality of women with disabilities. It started with a friend request sent on Facebook and evolved into stalking and asking for ransom for "photoshopped" intimate images. The full account of this experience is presented in the Nepal country report and gives us a glimpse into the multiple angles of harassment that women with disabilities face.

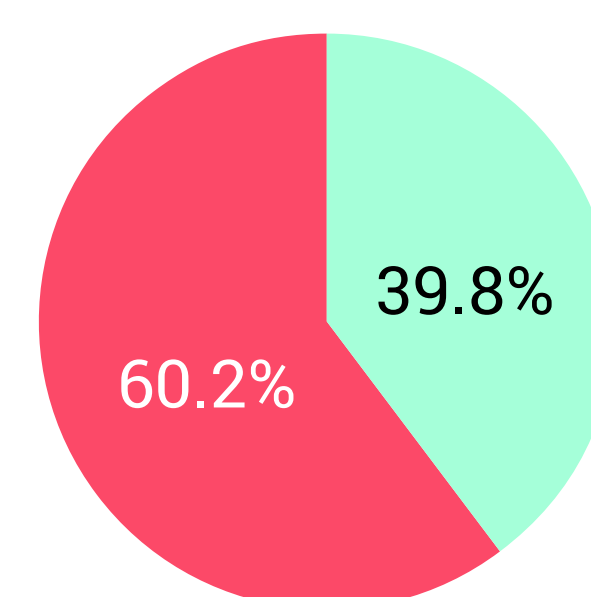
The range and scale of online violence against women and girls in Nepal was laid bare in an article that discussed the wide range of crimes committed against women across Nepal including extortion, blackmail and illegal sharing of private images and videos on social media as well as the sale of such visual content to porn sites.<sup>49</sup> The researchers found that the type of violence that was most commonly mentioned was receiving unwanted sexually explicit messages, and the second most common experience (46.5%) was receiving abusive comments, while 40% had

experienced hate speech on the internet and 38% had experienced abuse and/or shaming a woman for expressing views that are not normative, for disagreeing with people and also for refusing sexual advances.

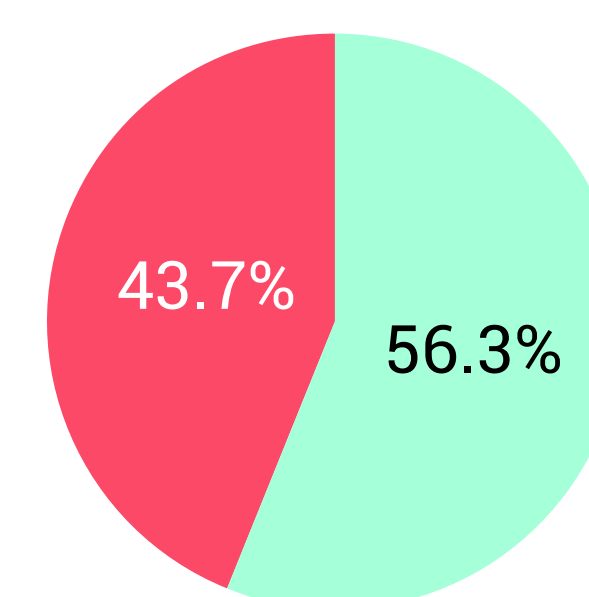
Abusive comments



Non-consensual sharing of private



Use of indecent or violent images



For Sri Lanka it was similar, with 62% of the respondents having been on the receiving end of abusive comments. This was the highest percentage of violence reported by all the respondents. The second most common form of violence reported (56%) was unwanted receiving of sexually explicit images and demeaning women through violent images. In terms of who gets harassed online, more than 50% agreed that not just women get harassed on the internet, although about 20% thought that it could be possible sometimes.

One respondent, Vijay, said the violence against women that he sees online mirrors the kind of violence they face in everyday offline life. He says his female friends talk about it, seek help

49 Devkota, S. (2020, 14 February). Crossborder cybercrime and punishment. *Nepali Times*. <https://www.nepalitimes.com/banner/crossborder-cybercrime-and-punishment>



for the violence they face online, and come to him for help because he works in the field of IT. He stated:

It's true that women face harassment on the internet, it's a well-known truth. It also happens for the sexual/gender minority groups. In such situations we have helped to get legal aid and we have supported people in all the ways possible.

For Hasini, the further down one goes on what she calls the "privilege scale", the more harassment people face, and this is not necessarily something faced only by women. She was also concerned about people who may not be able to handle the trolling, bullying and harassment online. Hasini was talking about the intersectionality of identities here and the complexity of privileges – she mentioned that while it's true women face considerable harassment/violence/abuse because of their gender, in some contexts, factors like ethnicity come into play, for women and others too.

Lakshmi says that in her observations online, when people have a gender expression that goes beyond the binary of man or woman or have a sexual orientation that is not heterosexual, and they express that online, they face considerable harassment and criticism. "You can't bear to see the comments sometimes, it is so bad," she said. And in her experience, all the negative comments she has seen in cases like this have been by men.

In the interviews conducted, Krishani spoke of a culture of "naming and

shaming" – where someone could screenshot a post or comment they didn't like and post it online – and a personal experience she went through as well:

This was a political opinion [details not provided] I had sent to someone I knew, on WhatsApp. It was private to someone I went to school with, I didn't realise I hadn't had a conversation with them before, but they were on my contact list. They didn't recognise my number and said, "Who is this, I am going to report it." They took a screenshot and posted it online with my profile photo and my number was visible. A person scolded me in filth and this post was seen by 140 people and shared about 30 times. I had to change my profile picture to something else (to distance myself from the harassment)."

In Bangladesh, experience of violence on the internet was marked by experiencing abusive comments, which ranked the highest. Receiving unwanted sexually explicit images, experiencing sexist or gendered language and hate speech also ranked high. Most of these were dealt with by the respondents by reporting to the platform itself or blocking the user.

A cis woman participant who identified as bisexual interviewed as part of the qualitative research conducted in Bangladesh commented:

With a locked Instagram I feel more comfortable, it's for a closed group



of people I trust. Sometimes I would share a photo or post that would be more intimate and there would be likes and comments but no worry of harassment, stalking, or lewd comments.

“I have more control on Instagram and it feels how Facebook was when I was first on it,” mentioned another straight female participant. “Don’t really use Facebook, other than to know what’s happening in class, for class work,” echoed several student participants, men and women, and when asked what they used for more personal interactions they replied, “Messenger.” Like Messenger, messaging apps such as WhatsApp and dating apps like Tinder afforded a space for sharing, communicating and sometimes meeting new people, but in a more controlled way. But the platforms of choice showed some variance across class, with Instagram and Tinder to a lesser degree more popular with respondents who had more of an urban, middle-class upbringing; those with more non-urban ties, even with middle class backgrounds, were not as familiar with Instagram or Tinder or did not use them. Use of Messenger and WhatsApp were common across all groups in varying degrees. The sex workers interviewed, who were all cis women from working class backgrounds, used Messenger, WhatsApp and even Facebook more heavily than the others interviewed, with the addition of another messaging service, imo.

The countries in the region have repeatedly responded to many incidents of sexual violence by banning pornographic sites, and over the past few years especially. In Nepal, the government announced a ban on pornographic websites, claiming in a statement: “In order to prevent the access of such content through electronic media, the need of pulling down such websites inside Nepal has become necessary.”<sup>50</sup> This was done in addition to the fact that it is already illegal to produce pornographic content in the country. Activists, especially sexual rights and digital rights activists, felt it was not a useful tactic.

As feminist activists, we already know that there is no clear proof that the banning of porn reduces the violence present in society.<sup>51</sup> In a piece arguing against the ban, Shubha Kayastha spoke about the impact of censorship on access to information and to diversity in general:

It is much more than just a ban on allegedly obscene material. It infringes on the right to information and freedom of expression. Moreover, such internet censorship shrinks the already small space available for women and queer people to explore their sexualities. It can lead to blocking access to materials that provide people with sex education, information related to sexual and reproductive health, and sexually transmitted diseases.<sup>52</sup>

50 India Today. (2018, 22 September). Nepal to ban porn sites to curb rising rape cases. <https://www.indiatoday.in/world/story/nepal-to-ban-porn-sites-to-curb-rising-rape-cases-1346296-2018-09-22>

51 Bada Math, S., Viswanath, B., Maroky, A., Kumar, N., Cherian, A., & Nirmala, M. (2014, April). Sexual Crime in India: Is it Influenced by Pornography? *Indian Journal of Psychological Medicine*, 36(2), 147-152. <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4031582>

52 Khayastha, S. (2018, 1 October). The problem with Nepal’s porn ban. *The Record*. <https://www.recordnepal.com/the-problem-with-nepals-porn-ban>



In an opinion piece, Kayastha and Indu Nepal referred to a study where adolescent girls in the periphery of Kathmandu chose recharging of their mobile phones over buying cosmetics, stating, “And they did so to make calls, take selfies, research for school, listen to music, play games, and use social media and messaging apps.” Research has shown that allowing young people to use the internet more freely means they will report violence more easily. It shows that young people “are adapting and sometimes thriving as they embrace 21st-century media.”<sup>53</sup>

## Expression in sexuality

In Bangladesh, if experience of pleasure on the internet is broken down, those identifying as heterosexual and cis men reported getting the most pleasure on a scale of 1-10, their experience being moderately to highly pleasurable. It is also interesting to note that a high number of hijra respondents reported experiencing pleasure on the internet.

Through the qualitative study conducted in Bangladesh, it was observed that in Lubna’s case, an online and Tinder encounter turned relationship became abusive. From emotional abuse to physical threats, threats of blackmails to actual threats to her family and social circle, sustained stalking and harassment in every platform, she was forced to restrict her online presence. There was of course the subsequent fear, anxiety and emotional toll she suffered as a young, queer woman living away

from her family in Dhaka. Now she mostly used emails and only limited social media with privacy settings, reducing her interactions to trusted or tested contacts, curbing also her expressions of sexual interactions or interests online, which was never easy to begin with.

Others also echoed this trusted and tested method, improvised individually and on a case-by-case basis, but generally it meant contacts made online, even on Tinder, had to be within two degrees of separation – “somebody in the network would know somebody who would know this person” or they would share at least one common network with friends, extended family or professional relationships. Using this method also worked for queer-identified Tuli, who had a more extensive social media presence but was still mindful of what she posted (nothing personal on her public profile) and who she friended or followed. Here case is somewhat exceptional, as she reported that she has not had any unpleasant experiences on the internet, including Tinder. She realised her experience was unique, but also credited a supportive family:

My parents are openly affectionate to each other. When we were young and our parents were young too, they regularly made our home available to single friends who had to hide their romantic entanglements from their parents. I can openly talk to them about sex and romance and the things I don’t want to talk about

<sup>53</sup> Lewis, R., Rowe, M., & Wiper, C. (2017). Online Abuse of Feminists as An Emerging form of Violence Against Women and Girls. *The British Journal of Criminology*, 57(6), 1462-1481. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azw073>



or share, they understand. They don't need to know everything, but they respect that.

While there may not be absolute freedom of expression for anybody anywhere in the world, many of the tips and tricks suggested by the respondents were ways to navigate this difficult terrain and "systematic crackdown on political dissent."

The survey in Nepal showed the same leanings towards using the internet for work and to keep in touch on social media. However, in terms of ratings of the internet's importance in one's self-expression, when disaggregated by gender, we can see that the LGBTIQ community does not have scores towards the lower range, indicating that they value the role that the internet plays in self-expression in their lives.

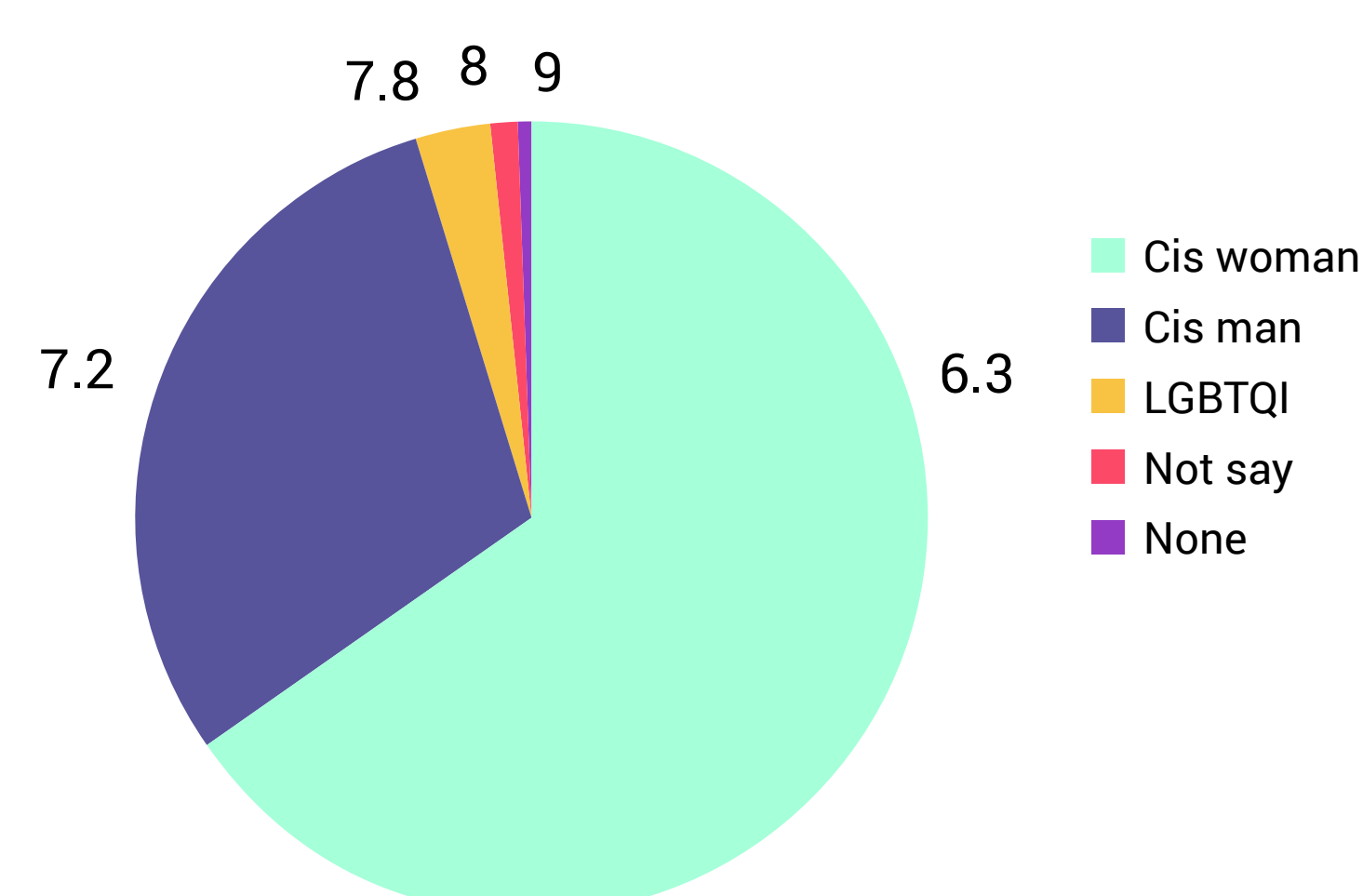
In terms of what platforms are used for self-expression, the majority reported using various social media platforms: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. One response mentioned dating apps like Glued and Grindr, and one user shared the details of how they use the various platforms available to them:

This one is hard to answer. I use Twitter to share my views and opinion, Insta for my pictures, Facebook is for family, Medium is for blogging and all, Reddit to get info about new interesting topics and YouTube for entertainment.

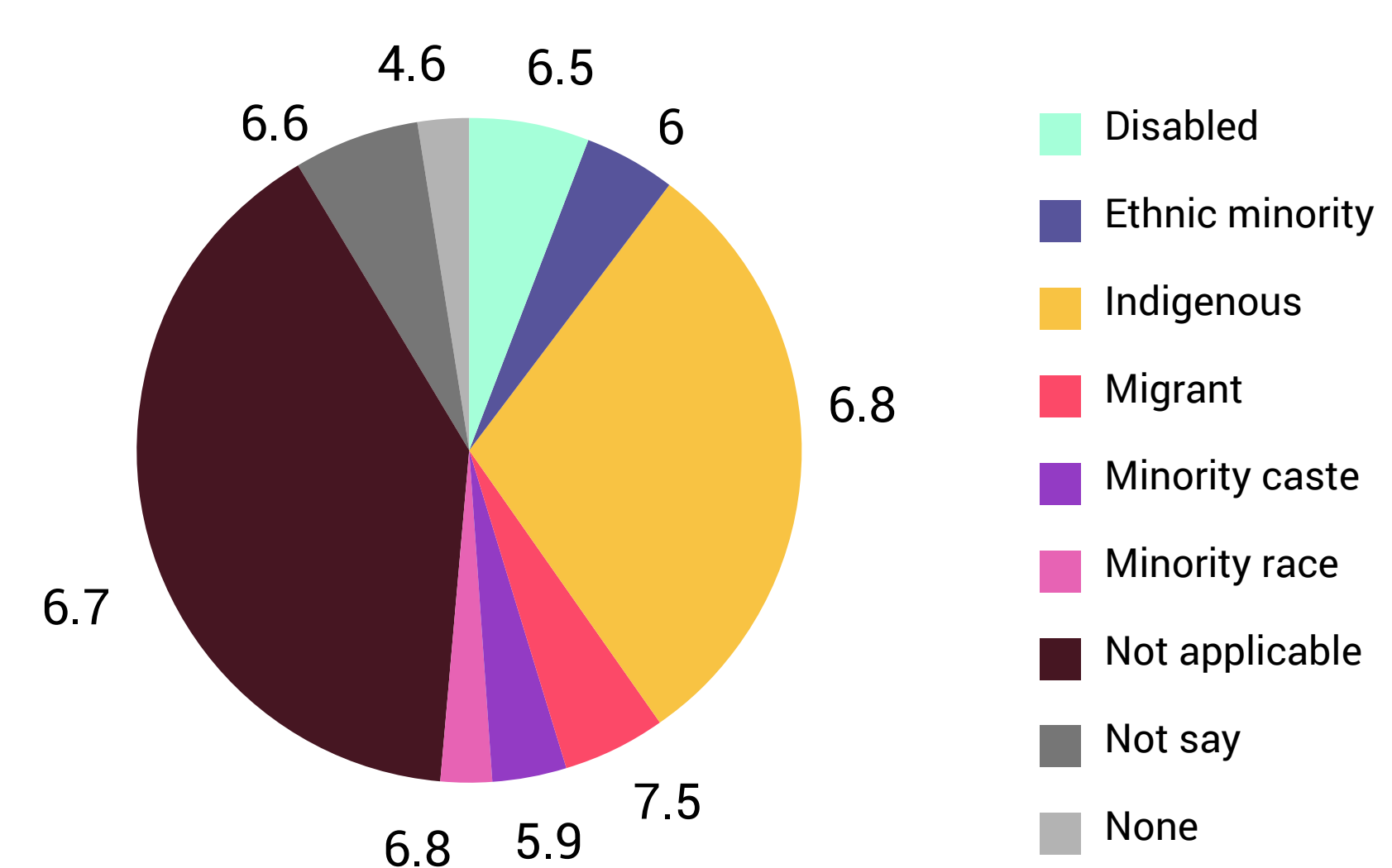
Another respondent commented:

I feel like the internet has given me a platform to voice my opinion and give validation through the engagement I receive. Through the communities I have found on the internet, I have seen and met people with similar interests, struggles and viewpoints. This has helped me express myself more cohesively and informatively.

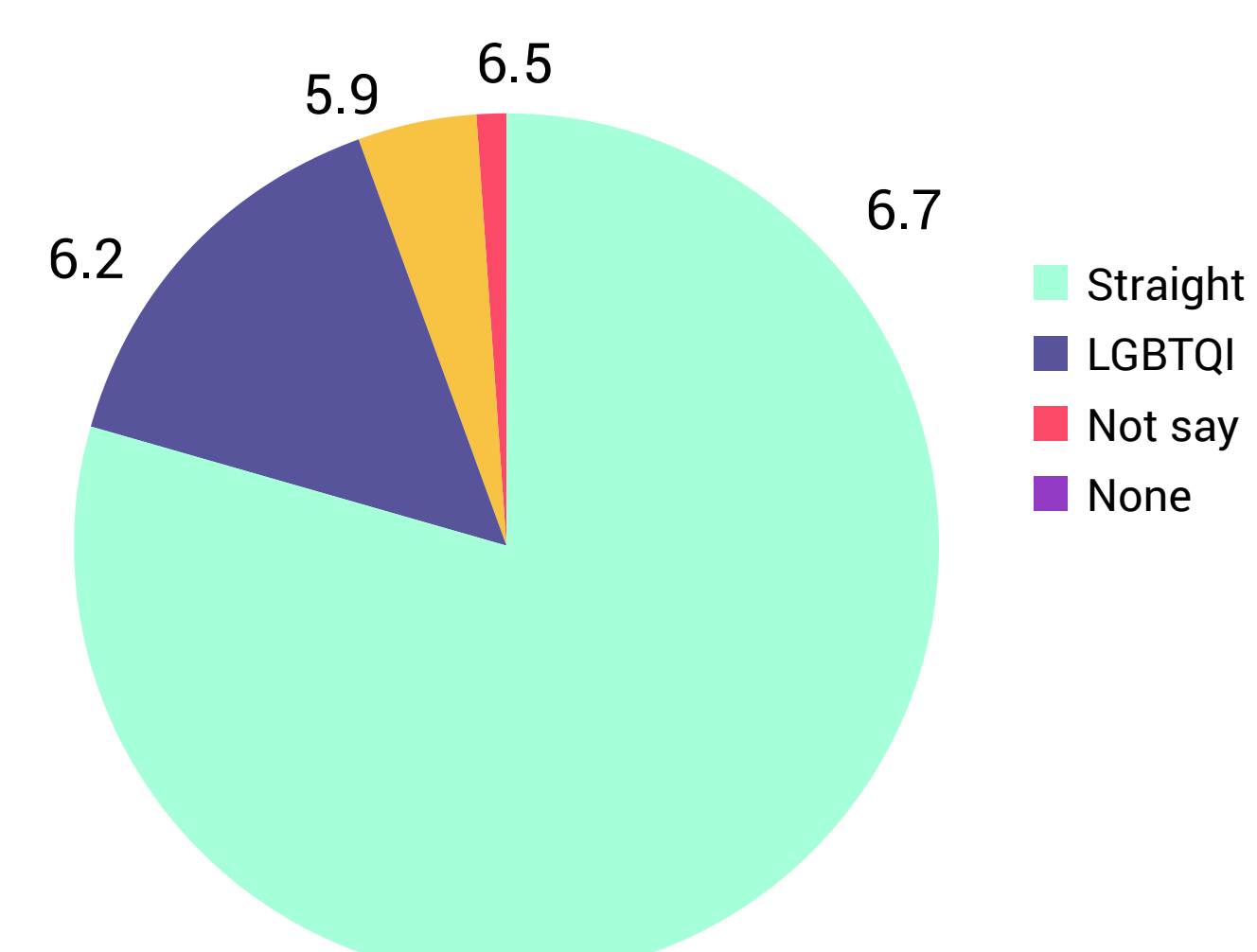
Sexual orientation: How pleasurable is your experience of using the internet ( 1 to 10, 10 is highly pleasurable)



Marginalisation: How pleasurable is your experience of using the internet ( 1 to 10, 10 is highly pleasurable)



Gender: How pleasurable is your experience of using the internet ( 1 to 10, 10 is highly pleasurable)





Meanwhile, 77% of the respondents felt that the internet connected them to others with more ease. Many of the remaining answers spoke about the virtues of research and learning information quickly from the internet. Similarly, 82% of respondents felt they could access information that is taboo/stigmatised by society on the internet, reiterating the linkage between change in opinion and access to diverse people and information.

In addition to finding community, some responses also noted how the internet contributes to the widening of one's social circle, and amplifies one's message to instantly reach a wide range of people, thus holding particular importance in self-expression, as put by this person in Nepal's qualitative research: "I can express my thoughts to a larger group of people who could potentially share my views."

In Sri Lanka, 32% of cis women and 50% of trans women respondents rated 10 for the role the internet plays in their self-expression, whereas only 22% of cis men rated 10 for the role the internet plays. However, since many postoperative people felt the binary of cis and trans did not suit them, it is not possible to draw any conclusions here. But previously, when gender and sexual expression was studied through TikTok videos on the internet uploaded by Sri Lankans, it was seen that:

A majority of the performers presented their gender expression

as women. While their gender identity could not be conclusively determined based on the gender expression on their videos or their profiles, most of them presented as cisgender.<sup>54</sup>

It was also observed here how many of the performers conformed to heteronormativity, something that could be explored through this research's in-depth interviews.

In the interviews, it was found that reasons for self-expression and/or self-censorship on the internet are complex and varied from person to person, according to the various identities they hold as well as the intersecting axes of privilege, oppression and inequality. For example, heteronormativity in expression of the self may afford you more space than if you were located outside of this space. Hasini, a cisgender woman, feels that if she wants to express a view, she prefers face-to-face conversations rather than using the internet to express herself to many people, because she feels safer with the former. On the other hand, Vijay, a cis het man who also belongs to an ethnic minority, feels that his ethnicity has not affected his ability to access the internet, especially when considered with his privilege as a cis het man:

What I mean is there is no one [who] stopped me from using the internet for any of my identities. But when the state brings a ban it's for everyone. All are affected. So, on a

<sup>54</sup> Perera, S., & Wijetunga, M. (2019, 10 May). How Tiktok is a platform for performance and play for women in Sri Lanka. *Gender IT.org*. <https://www.genderit.org/articles/how-tiktok-platform-performance-and-play-women-sri-lanka>



personal level I would say nothing is affected.

For Vijay, the speed at which it is possible to obtain information online, and how that same speed breaks down barriers in distance to allow faster communication, are also conducive factors for more expression on the internet.

Hasini, who is primarily English speaking and uses the internet in English, says she limits her usage of the internet for three reasons: “Because I am a woman, I live in a small city, I run a business that involves children.” She adds though that the main reason overall is that, as a person who deals with anxiety, the internet can be a space that aggravates her mental health, and so she would rather limit her usage and engagement instead:

I think that I have a mild case of anxiety and so I limit myself because I can't deal with the responses and don't need to deal with the back and forth of responses and the way things are perceived by people. People also don't understand what you are trying to say – when you put something that is anti-colonialist, then they ask, do you hate white people? Sometimes I just don't have the bandwidth for it.

## CONCLUSION

The process of working on this research closely with the country partners from Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh was an invitation to reflect on how we can practise the ideas and values of feminist research through our collaboration. From the design of the research to the framing of the questions, the process was participatory. As the regional coordinator, I worked on the broad themes we would cover first, and this document was shared with the local partner-researcher teams as well as the team at APC. Through their collective feedback, the themes were converted to questions and the questions went through an iterative process based on every researcher's insights and expertise.

Some of the broad discussions were particularly insightful. How we chose to list different gender and sexual identities, their definitions and the multiple choices people could make; the awareness that a “minority” in one country might not be a “minority” in another country; options for self-identification for people outside of the common terms we hear during the scope of our work; and finally, using language which is inclusive of multiple identities and doesn't exclude anyone.

These complexities of identity and being in the world were part of the navigation of this feminist research on the internet and an essential part of bringing to the fore the many ways in which our identity influences our positions as researchers or research coordinators and the steps that need to be taken to build a more



diverse pool of resources and understanding of the feminist internet.

This specific regional survey, along with its in-depth qualitative case studies, focused on asking questions through the framing of the five clusters of the Feminist Principles of the Internet (FPIs): access, movements, economy, expression and embodiment.

Access was a huge conversation across the research conducted in all the countries. The experiences shared vary from how access affects usage for people with disabilities in Nepal, to how cheaper mobile phones and internet connections are not a magic wand. As one queer participant commented in the qualitative study done in Bangladesh: "Even if I could access information online, learn, read from available materials, I couldn't really internalise or absorb that without a space to discuss them." In Sri Lanka, the in-depth interviews

conducted by Sachini Perera and Zainab Ibrahim tell a story about changes in empathy but also a reduction in isolation.

The links between access and usage and of course, expression! are integral to each country survey. More access to the internet and more usage result in different things. It is important to note that many of the respondents felt that their gender identity had not affected the way they use the internet. However, access to the internet had changed their perceptions of gender and sexuality.

So does increase in usage of the internet by diverse people improve or change our understanding of the world? It would be a simplistic answer to say yes, but many of the responses show us the ways in which we (un)learn as the internet's access improves in our communities.



