



## Defending Digital Rights: Ensuring Safe Spaces for Women's Advocacy

08 March 2025

On this International Women's Day, the Asian Federation Against Involuntary Disappearances (AFAD) reaffirms its unwavering commitment to amplifying the voices of women leading the fight against enforced disappearances. Their struggle transcends the search for missing loved ones—it is a profound resistance against systemic oppression, intersectional discrimination, gender-based violence, economic marginalization, and digital repression. Women, particularly those impacted by enforced disappearances, are not merely victims but leaders, organizers, and human rights defenders shaping transformative justice movements.

Digital platforms have become a double-edged sword in this struggle. While younger activists harness social media, virtual memorials, and online petitions to document violations and demand accountability, these spaces are also weaponized to silence women's voices. Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) face technology-facilitated gender-based violence, including online harassment, doxing, and sexualized abuse, which compound existing inequalities. "I regularly received hateful comments whenever I reported on controversial issues... Some called me a hooker. I got sexual comments or pictures of genitals," shared Ploy, a woman journalist interviewed by Amnesty International. Her experience reflects the global epidemic of online violence faced by women human rights defenders, who are attacked both for their activism and their gender. The digital divide exacerbates inequality by perpetuating deeply uneven access to technology, shaped by historical disparities linked to gender, race, disability, and poverty, and these systemic inequities are further weaponized through repressive digital laws that disproportionately target women human rights defenders (WHRDs). During crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, climate disasters, and rising authoritarianism, marginalized women—particularly those from racialized or low-income backgrounds—face heightened barriers to digital inclusion, limiting their access to resources and global networks [1].

Across South Asia, governments increasingly use digital laws to suppress dissent and restrict freedoms. In Pakistan, the amended Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) enables state surveillance and vague charges to criminalize activists [2]. In Nepal, the proposed Social Network Bill 2081 has faced widespread criticism for enabling censorship and granting authorities sweeping powers to impose severe penalties for vaguely defined offenses. There is a risk that the bill could silence dissent at a time when families of the forcibly disappeared continue to demand truth and accountability from the government. It could also restrict digital freedom for the next generation of these families, potentially preventing them from advocating for justice and meaningful government action through the digital civic space on enforced disappearances [3]. The draconian PTA continues to be used by the Government of Sri Lanka to target and harass minorities, activists, journalists, and critical voices. Despite assurances to amend the problematic legislation, proposed amendments have fallen severely short of safeguarding rights protected by international human rights law and the Constitution of Sri Lanka. The Computer Crimes Act No. 24 of 2007 has not faced significant opposition. However, the "Online Safety Act No. 9 of 2024" is being opposed by human rights activists and international organizations, who argue that it

suppresses freedom of expression. Several cases have already been filed against some YouTube activists under this law [4]. These laws amplify risks for women, who already face intersectional discrimination and online gender-based violence, turning digital spaces into tools of repression rather than empowerment.

This year, AFAD emphasizes the intersectional nature of women's struggles, connecting offline systemic injustices to online repression, and asserts that securing digital freedoms is not merely a technical challenge but a feminist imperative to advance truth, justice, and accountability. AFAD calls for the repeal of oppressive digital laws and an end to state surveillance targeting women activists, while urging governments to close the digital divide by ensuring equitable access to technology and safeguarding women's rights to privacy and free expression. States must also address emerging AI-driven threats, such as facial recognition, biometric categorization, and predictive policing systems, which enable discriminatory surveillance and social control. Additionally, AFAD stresses the critical need for digital security training and safe spaces to protect activists from online harassment and gendered attacks, ensuring women can advocate for justice without fear of repression. These measures aim to dismantle systemic inequalities, combat technology-facilitated violence, and uphold the rights of women human rights defenders in both digital and offline spheres.

Join us in solidarity to ensure women's rights are protected both online and offline. Their courage deserves nothing less than a world free from fear, censorship, and violence.

## **PROTECTION NOT PERSECUTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS DEFENDERS.**

### References

[1] Amnesty International, Gender and Human Rights in the Digital Age (2024):  
<https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/pol40/8170/2024/en/>

[2] Pakistan's Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) :  
[https://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/679255ee36f45\\_595.pdf](https://www.na.gov.pk/uploads/documents/679255ee36f45_595.pdf)

[3] Nepal's Social Media Bill 2081 [https://nepalnews.com/s/long-reads/nepals-social-media-bill-2081-a-fine-line-between-regulation-and-censorship/?utm\\_source=chatgpt.com](https://nepalnews.com/s/long-reads/nepals-social-media-bill-2081-a-fine-line-between-regulation-and-censorship/?utm_source=chatgpt.com)

[4] Draconian PTA

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/ASA3752412022ENGLISH.pdf>