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Let safety become a right, not a reward. Let cybersecurity be justice in action. Let no one arrive online barefoot and alone again

Cyber Sakhi: a digital safety friend for those left behind

by Maanya Chauhan

Some step into the digital world guided by maps, guarded by laws, and fluent in its signals. Others arrive barefoot, in the dark with no instructions, no warnings. Just unfamiliar links, unfamiliar threats, and silence when something goes wrong.

Across the world's widening digital divide, millions of women and young people in underserved communities are stepping online not with curiosity, but with caution and sometimes, fear. For them, the internet is not a space of empowerment, but a maze of risk, written in a language they were never taught to read.

Cyber Sakhi¹ emerged in response to that silence. It is not just a tool or an initiative. It is a hand extended across the gap. A youth-led movement built on listening before acting, translating digital safety into languages, contexts, and care systems that mainstream frameworks overlook.

Because true cybersecurity cannot exist in isolation. It must include the invisible. It must protect the excluded. And it must begin not with code, but with compassion.

Cybersecurity, for many, is discussed in the language of firewalls, encryption, and global policy. But in underserved communities, the threats are closer to home and far more personal: a message that steals a widow's savings, a stranger who hijacks a girl's identity, or an app that watches silently, without consent.

“In places where access to technology is growing faster than access to education, millions are being left digitally exposed.”

¹ Cyber Sakhi is an independent, student-led cybersecurity initiative that I founded, focused on improving digital safety awareness among underserved communities in India. Through hands-on workshops and a lightweight Chrome extension, it supports first-time internet users – especially women and youth – in recognising online risks through simple, multilingual, and easy-to-understand guidance.

For first-time internet users, especially women and youth in rural India and beyond, the internet arrives not as a gateway to progress, but as a battlefield without armour.

Today's threats evolve faster than defences. AI-generated scams mimic trusted voices. Spyware hides in ordinary apps. In local dialects, misinformation spreads unchecked. First-time users face an invisible war that no one has taught them the rules.

Too often, workshops assume prior knowledge.

“Tools are created by those who have never sat in a community hall with a broken fan and no Wi-Fi. And policies are written far from the voices they claim to protect.”

What is missing is not awareness, it is access. Access to safety that feels familiar. Solutions that feel human. And digital empowerment that does not shame or intimidate, but understands.

This is not just a gap in technology. It's a gap in empathy. One that continues to widen as global digital inclusion accelerates without guardrails for the most vulnerable.

And it's not unique to India. Across underserved communities globally, young users are stepping online into the same darkness, with no tools and no shields. This is a shared global silence, and we must respond together.

Cyber Sakhi did not start in labs or boardrooms. It emerged from whispered concerns and quiet stories shared behind workshop doors, where a single wrong click carries more fear than any promise the internet holds.

We began with listening. Not surveys or checklists, but real conversations with women, girls, and youth who had been left to fend for themselves online. What we heard shaped everything: the confusion, the isolation, the quiet aftermath of harm.

So, we responded with something simple but radical: care-informed cybersecurity.

Cyber Sakhi delivers hands-on digital safety workshops in local languages, in familiar places —



schools, NGOs, and even under trees when walls are not available. We demystify the web, decode scams and explain settings that protect instead of confuse. Each session builds a bridge from fear to agency.

To extend our impact beyond the classroom, we built a lightweight Chrome extension tailored for first-time users. It flags unsafe links, alerts users in real-time, and provides friendly prompts in simple language. Just support, exactly when and where it's needed.

But Cyber Sakhi is not just a service, it is solidarity. It is tech that remembers the human. It is a promise that no one should face the internet alone. What does change look like when it's not captured in spreadsheets?

It looks like a grandmother in a village using a borrowed smartphone to report a scam message, and then teaching her neighbours how to spot one. It looks like a girl, once silenced by online harassment, now standing in front of her class explaining two-factor authentication.

Cybersecurity is no longer only about firewalls and passwords. It is a question of justice. Of dignity. Of who gets to feel safe online, and who is left to fend for themselves.

“The digital divide is no longer just about access. It is about agency. As technology evolves, so must our empathy, our systems, and our solutions.”

Tools alone rarely heal the trauma of being silenced or scammed. It takes people, community, and a commitment to showing up where no one else does. Cyber Sakhi is more than a project. It is a beginning.

It is grassroots innovation rooted in care. It is digital resilience built from the bottom up. It is proof that when young people lead with empathy, they can build what policies overlook and power structures delay.

And if one young changemaker can do this with limited resources, imagine what becomes possible when institutions, innovators, and communities move in sync in partnership.

The future of cybersecurity is not written in code. It is written in compassion.

“The question is not whether we can protect the most vulnerable. It is whether we choose to.”

And if we do, then safety will no longer be a privilege. It will be a promise.

Yet, this is only the beginning. Cyber Sakhi is a seed — not a solution in full bloom, but proof that empathy, when paired with technology, can shift realities. We dream not of scaling metrics, but of expanding dignity. Of a world where every woman, every girl, every first-time user logs on without fear.

We imagine local champions leading safety circles in their villages. Policymakers who listen to lived experiences before writing laws. Global institutions resourcing not just the largest organizations, but the most courageous grassroots initiatives.

The Internet should not belong only to those who are digitally literate, powerful, or already protected. Its future must be shaped by those who were once silenced and who now speak, not only in technical terms, but also in the language of care.

If Cyber Sakhi can emerge from whispered fears and still find a voice, then what else becomes possible when the world starts listening?

Let safety become a right, not a reward. Let cybersecurity be justice in action. Let no one arrive online barefoot and alone again.

About the Author

Maanya Chauhan is an 18-year-old cybersecurity undergraduate and youth changemaker from India, passionate about bridging the digital safety gap in underserved communities. She is the founder of Cyber Sakhi, an initiative that empowers first-time internet users, especially women and youth, through hands-on workshops and a custom-built Chrome extension offering real-time privacy alerts. Maanya has led digital rights sessions in collaboration with grassroots NGOs and is committed to building inclusive, human-centered technology that centers empathy, justice, and access for all.

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