Factors Influencing Sexual and Reproductive Health-related Misuse of Digital Media in Bangladesh: A Qualitative Investigation

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Abstract: This study explored factors influencing the sexual and reproductive health-related misuse of digital media in Bangladesh. The study adopted Key-Informant-Interview (KII) among the Nineteen (19) relevant key informants including academicians, researchers, policymakers, and activists. The thematic analysis of the transcripts was carried out. The mean age of the informants was 40 (SD+/-6.8) years with having a minimum level of a bachelor degree. Easy access to indecent (porn) sites, low self-awareness of the girls in using social networking sites and other digital devices, the culture of injustice and muscle-men phenomenon, parent's negligence, and the level of awareness were found as the major factors behind the misuse of digital media in the form of cyber-bullying, sexting, revenge porn, sextortion, access to and production of porn videos, etc. This study revealed that women and girls are the prime victims of the misuse where the worst form of victimization is to lead a deplorable life as a sex-slave and persist with chronic mental disorders. The study recommended that the complete ban on provocative indecent websites, high level of awareness among the women and girls, seeking immediate help from the law-enforcement agencies, and importantly, parents' full-fledged care and attention.

Keywords: Sexual and Reproductive Health, Digital Media, Misuse, Pornography Control, Mental Health, Bangladesh

Introduction

Digital devices are being unprecedentedly embraced around the world especially in developing countries like Bangladesh largely for social networking sites, video applications, or intending to meet the growing needs of communication at every moment[1]. However, digital media are often being used in a range of indecent ways causing them to vandalize all of its benefits[2].Misusing of digital media encompasses a range of perspectives i.e. politics, religion, security, sexual and reproductive health (SRH), etc. As the misuse related to SRH has been playing a predominant role in comparison with other domains and the vulnerable group of the population, girls, and women, are immensely affected beyond the borders[3].This domain gets conspicuous in different forms ranging the access to and production of porn-related content, cyberbullying, sexting, revenge porn, sextortion, etc. The victims are either intentionally or unintentionally involved in these types of activities and the offenders take the advantage of the situation[4]. A wide range of literature from a diverse background across the globe figured out the issue of misusing the digital media in terms of victimizing the aspects of sexual and reproductive health as an issue of grave concern, which was demonstrated in the recent studies conducted among the US women on cyber harassment[5].

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Some other studies also documented the cyberbullying and the linear relationship between the rate of sexual offences against children and internet availability among middle school.[6,7], exposure to pornographic content and the motivation of kids to harm sexually against others[8]. Nevertheless, some prominent institutions like the crimes against children research centre, Thorn, etc. addressed how the abuse related to technology harming our decent lives[9]. The aftermath of the misuse of digital media turns massively that were revealed in several studies including uncovering a link between cyberbullying victimization and low self-esteem, family problems, academic problems, school problems, and offline delinquent behaviour[10,] a significant connection between pornography and sex trafficking[11], cyber-bullied youth who attempted suicide, reported having suicidal thoughts[12] which is considered as well one of the steps to commit suicide i.e. to forth out the idea, thoughts, planning, attempts towards suicide[13]. Consequently, suicidal cases (more than 10,000 people) have drastically increased in recent years among young adults in Bangladesh.[14] Another recent research finding identified the depth of online sexual harassment of the adolescent girls which focused to explain the situation only, not resolving that problem[1]. The existing laws dealing with sexual harassment in social media and other digital platforms in Bangladesh are inadequate and ineffective[2] A local NGO surveyed the misuse of technology and the involvement of children in which they presented the situation and in-depth insights and impact of child pornography[15]. The lack of scientific study related to addressing the factors behind the victimization from the digital media across the population of all ages motivates us to work on this phenomenal issue.

Materials and Methods

The Study Site

The study was conducted from May to October 2018 among the key-informants including academicians, researchers, policymakers, and activists working in the fields associated with this research issue.

Participants Selection

Snowball sampling technique was employed for the recruitment of the study participants. This sampling technique is often used to recruit the appropriate participants in qualitative research[36]. Individuals who were thought to have knowledge and experiences regarding SRH related misuse of digital media in Bangladesh were selected on a purposive basis for ensuring more insightful inputs into the research findings[34]. Nine-teen key informants (4 male, 15 female) participated in this study. Participants were recruited from diverse backgrounds with different roles ranging from academia, research fields, policymakers, and social activists, and GO/NGO officials to understand the depth of the current issue.

Qualitative Tools and Data Collection

To explore the influencing factors for SRH related misuse of digital media, the study interviewed the key informants. Keeping in mind the key objectives and research questions of the study, contemporary literature reviews regarding misuse of digital media and its influencing sexual and reproductive factors, the study team used an interview guideline was used to probe or check the answers given by the KIIs.The authors took the specific advices from the public health specialists, health economists, anthropologists to get the context of the sudy while developing the guideline for KII. The KII guideline was then pre-tested before going for the final interview with the key informants. Each interview session takes 35 to 40 minutes duration. KIIs were carried out in the Bengali Language. The developed guideline of the study incorporates the points like the current victimization of women and girls through digital media and the underlying factors behind the victimization. Additionally, the investigators asked them regarding their perception on misuse of

SRH domain, how women and girls become victims, current situations of the ground. Eventually, they were requested to deliver their intuitive opinion about the depth of this problem and the ways to overcome it.

Data Analysis

The interview sessions were recorded and then transcribed into English from Bengali. The data were classified and rearranged theme-wise with relevant quotations, then coded manually based on research objectives. The thematic content analysis was performed to provide the descriptive results. Though the information was collected from the separated key informants, inferercne were made from the overall scnerio on the spcefic topics.

Ethical Consideration:

The procedures of institutional ethical clearance and the issue of informed consent were strictly followed. Additionally, the anonymity during presenting information along with confidentiality. Before initiating the interview sessions, the investigators clearly explained the objectives of the study. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) of the Institute of Health Economics of the University of Dhaka reviewed and approved the protocol of this study.

Results

Socio-economic characteristics of the participants

Among the informants, three quarters (79%) were female and one quarter (21%) were male. The mean age of the informants was 40 years with a standard deviation of 6.8 years. About half were academicians and the rest were researchers, journalists, NGO workers, and mass-media experts. The respondents had a similar level of education: most of them had masters and above degrees. The median monthly family income of the informants was BDT 43,263.

Sexual and Reproductive Health related Misuse of Digital Media

Misusing digital media in terms of sexual and reproductive health was found at a level of grave concern. The informants revealed their sagacious remarks based on the fact on the ground. This domain of misuse was described in different approaches. Based on the interviews, the following schematic diagram was depicted (Fig.1). It can be materialized into two distinct ways based on how it occurs, i.e. online to online and offline to online. The first category implies that the entire process of harassment happens online where both of them (miscreants and victim) may be known personally outside of online where both intentional and unintentional nexus can prevail from the corner of the relationship. Intentional relationship in online to online category refers to that the victim is interested to strengthen her relationship with the offender though she never meets him in person. Once, the offender apprehends his desired photos and videos, he starts blackmailing for showing more nude photos and videos and in some cases monetary demand. Unless she fulfills his demand, those photos and videos will be uploaded through social media, or porn sites, or any possible sites.

Unintentional Relationship in online to online category encompasses that both the victims and the offender do not know each other in person but strategically, the victim has fallen into a trap created by the offender, and indeed, the victim is no longer interested to conduct such obscene acts what the offender threatens. From offline to online, tells us that both the victim and miscreant know each other outside of

online, i.e. friends, family members, known individuals,etc. An intentional relationship begins with the mutual consent of both the victim and offender. They may eager to enhance the depth of their relationships through sharing indecent photos of their own by using social media applications. Afterward, they can come closer to make an intimate relationship which can be filmed by their will or secretly by the offender. After that, two things could happen. Firstly; after breaking the relation up, the offender can expose those intimate materials through digital media for jeopardizing the victim's life. Secondly; the offender (especially men) can start blackmailing to continue sexual relations with him which is termed as "sex slave" whenever he desires, women should be there for saving her social respect. In terms of unintentional relationship, the victim may know the offender in person or not but the victim is no longer interested to a have sexual relation with the offender. By any means, the offender manages to capture the video of an intimate moment and the later step is as like the intentional relationship. These identified steps behind the curtain of misuse can be presented in the following schematic diagram.
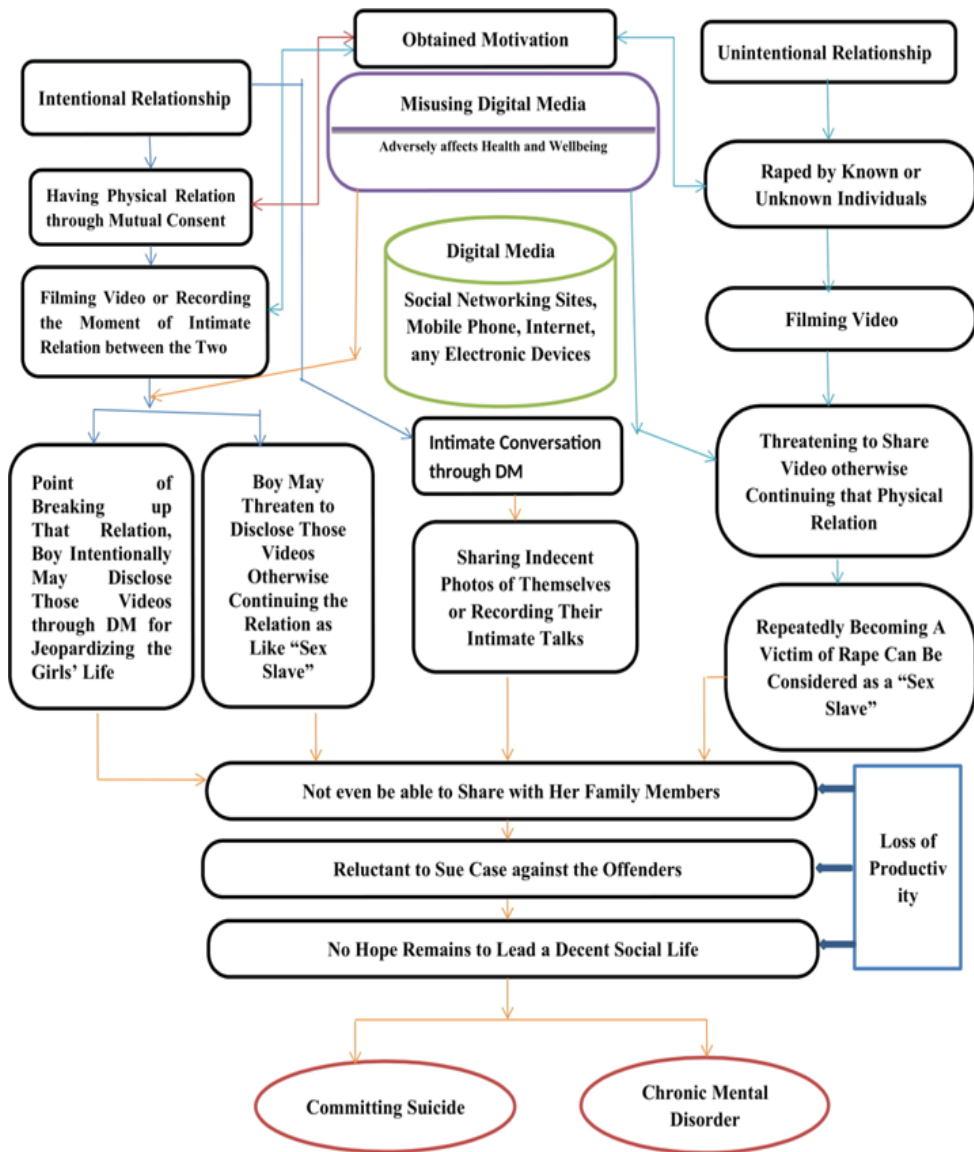

Figure 1: Schematic Diagram of Micro- events behind the Misuse of Digital Media

The victims attempt to keep them aloof from filing any case what ultimately becomes a matter of discomfort and transforms their social life from dignity into debasement. Ultimately, no hope remains to lead a respectful life in the society that triggers out either to commit suicide or to subsist with a chronic mental disorder.

Influencing Factors That Provoke Misusing Digital Media

The study results addressed four major influencing factors of misusing and those are as follows:

1. Unwise provision of devices without decent direction

It was figured out from the KIIs that the provision of digital devices is boosting up through transforming the norm of offering gifts. Without having a proper knowledge regarding do's and don'ts, digital devices are reaching towards the hands of users. As the parents, as well as elders, are not concerned regarding the misuse, the prevalence of misuse is escalating.

> "Most of the cases, the parents provide smartphones or any other digital devices to their children, especially, during a special occasion from the point of love but they don't pay heed to ensure the issue of decent use" (KII, Academician).

> "….. this is due to a lack of knowledge and awareness of the parents and their guardians. Those who know are more- cautious in delivering digital devices among the teen-ager university students" (KII, Academician).
> "…….to hold up the social status in the community, the guardians deliver smart devices without decent direction and watching their activities" (KII, Researcher).

> "Digital devices are at our hands without having a proper knowledge regarding safe use of devices and internet" (KII, NGO Worker).

2. Culture of injustice and the power of muscle-men

Unanimously, all the informants were deeply concerned regarding the culture of injustice and how it provokes them to commit further offences. They opined that the offenders are attached with powerful elites and muscle-men in terms of most of the cases. As a result, cases related to rape and sexual violence are not sued in comparison with the actual number of incidents. Even though those cases were filed, a lengthy process, fear or mediating with the offenders by monetary benefit is halted to get the offenders punished. So, the end line of most of the cases is not satisfactory.

> "the wide-spread existence of the culture of injustice inspires the offenders to act upon this type of heinous crime which escalates the heights of misuse over years…" (KII, Researcher).

> One of the informants opined as like the following;
> "..muscle-men are the key to infringe the rules and regulation that leads to a higher risk of vulnerability.." (KII, Activist)

3. Low self-awareness of the victims
Significantly, those girls were not aware of building a relationship. exposed that the truth of possessing a somewhat level of knowledge of the ways of misuse of digital media can affect them horrendously.

> "women and girls are mostly the victims of this domain. Majority of them are not aware enough to handle digital devices. That's why they often become victimized in several ways" (KII, Researcher).

> "Women and girls who easily trust other people and share their private issues are more vulnerable than others" (KII, Academician).

> "This is very unexpected that the women and girls are falling into a trap sketched by the offender due to lack of awareness" (KII, Journalist).

Due to the paucity of awareness, women and girls are becoming the victims in the form of cyber-bullying, sexting, sextortion, and revenge porn. In multi-dimensional ways, the perpetrators were targeting the victims.

> "..the victims, particularly, the women and girls are attacked by the offenders through applying complex and complicated strategies. In order to save them, knowledge dissemination can play an instrumental role…"(KII, Researcher).

Mostly, the victims were targeted in a more disguised way. In terms of operating social networking sites including sharing photos on Facebook, videos in youtube and other sites, etc. The victims needed to have a rigid stand on privacy in terms of messaging, sharing images, and posts[27].

4. Easy access to porn sites
It had been becoming so worrying matter to prevail the easy access towards pornographic related sites. Evidence showed that the school-going children in Dhaka city watch erotic porn videos. individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes conducive to sexual aggression and engage in actual acts of sexual aggression[25]. This misuse keeps a pivotal role to bolster the obscene across society which is perceived by most of the respondents of this study.

> "From the curiosity and the addiction, youth watch indecent pornographic contents frequently just a single click. This easy way of access accelerates this misuse as a   grave concern" (KII, Academician).

> "A complete blockade must be imposed on pornographic contents and a stricter form of implementation of the pornographic control act needs to be enforced" (KII, Researcher).
> "…amending the 'pornography control law-2012' with firm crackdown needs to be materialized.."

Discussion:

The study informants were mostly academicians from different backgrounds, particularly from social science. They all unanimously acknowledged sexual and reproductive health-related misuse of digital media as a

grave concern escalating at an alarming rate. Different studies identified that the depth of different forms of misuse has been widening by leaps and bounds in Bangladesh. According to the Police, cases related to sharing obscene photos as well as videos of women and girls through social networking sites rises by 200 times[14]. Notably, a larger proportion of women and girls are becoming more victims due to the misuse related to sexual and reproductive health compared with men. More than 17000 allegations were filed in which about 70 percent of accusers were female what symbolizes that women are more vulnerable in comparison with their male counterparts.[14]

This study explored the approaches to happen this misuse namely building relationships either intentionally or unintentionally. The approaches include cyber-bullying, sextortion, sexting, and revenge porn. The victims may be targeted through browsing different websites, predominantly social networking sites. The offenders use technical devices like computers or cell phones, to harass, threaten, humiliate, or otherwise hassle their peers. About 49% women and girls became a victim of cyberbullying in Bangladesh[17]. A youth was arrested in Dhaka on the charge of spreading obscene photos and video clips of a seventh-grader[19]. Misuse may happen in a form that when an offender threatens to distribute the victim's private and sensitive material if the victim denies sharing with them the images of a sexual nature, sexual favours or monetary benefits which is termed as 'Sextortion'[18]. Text messaging is considered a preferred mode of communication compared to phone calls. Girls face greater pressure to send 'sexts' and much harsher judgment when those images are shared beyond the intended recipient[20, 28]. A university teacher accused of sexual harassment and blackmailing to build a sexual relationship[21]. Revenge pornography implies the practice of distributing nude or sexually graphic images of an adult individual without the consent of the person present in the photograph or video[22]. A revengeful once-partner, hacker, or anyone else can upload a sexually graphic image to a website where millions of people can view and share it[23]. A Bangladeshi cricketer was arrested for doing an act like this[24].

In this study, the informants opined based on their research experience that only few adolescent children are luckily be informed clearly about the misuse and risk of the internet from their family where the majority of them receive a somewhat level of direction from their parents. The parents are less or unaware about in what way their children using internet-connected cell phone, tab, and laptop[25]. A controlled environment for the adolescent is instrumental as availing the opportunity of accessing pornographic contents is natural among the youth[29].

Additionally, the informants stated that very few girls and women are strictly aware of misuse. As the sheer victimization belongs to the women and girls, they suppose to be more cautious in dealing with digital devices[35]. Majority of the adolescent girls are not aware in building intimate relationships. The perpetrators are taking advantage of treating the victim like a sex-slave. Having easy access to indecent pornographic content creates a conducive environment for the malpractice of digital media affecting mental disorders. Evidence shows that about 77% of the school-going children in Dhaka city watch erotic porn videos [27]. Wright et al. concluded, after examining twenty-two studies, as "little doubt that, on the average, individuals who consume pornography more frequently are more likely to hold attitudes conducive to sexual aggression and engage in actual acts of sexual aggression"[26]. This misuse keeps a pivotal role to bolster the obscene across society which is perceived by most of the informants. The government needs to amend the 'pornography control act-2012' to tackle the misuse at massive level[31].

The prime motivation of the government to stand against the pornographic contents is to bear the negative effects that can be understood by the following some of the literatures; About 77% of young women say they feel pornography pressurizes girls or young women to look a certain way and 75% say it has influenced them in the way they act [30]. About 46% contend that the impact of anti-pornography law on society will be good [31].

Bearing the attributes of threatening to marriage, to family, to children, and individual happiness and being one of the factors of undermining social stability[34], actions against the pornographic contents prevalent worldwide are divided into three large, to impose a total ban, to impose partial ban based on age-specific, and to open without any restrictions.

On the ground of horrendous victimization in multi-dimensional ways from the perpetrators, the victims eventually become compelled to lead a deplorable life with different forms of mental disorders. This transformation of mental distress leads to substantial productivity loss in the society which is estimated by the Lancet Commission report on mental health as a cost of $16 trillion by 2030 and 12 billion working days lost[33].

Conclusion

On the ground of grave concern due to widespread sexual and reproductive health-related misuse of digital media in Bangladesh. One of the key factors behind this heinous crime is a low level of self-awareness of the women and girls what needs to be mitigated by raising a massive awareness campaign at all levels. Importantly, parents need to be educated with the appropriate level of knowledge regarding the use of digital devices with wise provision. Lack of self-awareness and knowledge of the women and girls play a predominant role in materializing the misuse of digital media. Along with the aspect of awareness, the culture of justice needs to be demonstrated for building trust what will certainly motivate the victims to approach the law-enforcement agencies immediately after becoming experienced of such incidents for halting further harm. Importantly, a rigid blockade needs to be imposed on all the provocative elements including access to and production of indecent and pornographic contents by amending the "pornography control law 2012". Last but not the least, concerted endeavour is inevitable to tackle the misuse related to SRH related affairs.

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