

**Cyber-violence and Gender: Insights from the COVID Pandemic**Farhan Ahmed<sup>1</sup>**Abstract**

Gender is considered a socially constructed perspective of human beings. It has crossed centuries with evolved dimensions. This paper describes a version of the gender dimension in correspondence to cyberspace. This technological emancipation of women paved the way for long-term underlying patriarchic practices of societies to cross into cyberspace. Due to the influx of individuals of all ages, nationality, political beliefs, and religions the internet serves as a platform to present and augment their personalistic viewpoints. Such practices are less supervised in developing countries vis-à-vis third-world states. But increasingly enough gender-based bullying shows dense data on the targeted debasement of females even in more progressive states. Cyberviolence, in many forms, carried the conservativeness and misogynistic nature of netizens into a much grander stigma. The availability of multicultural entertainment options, social media, and barrierless cyberspace have all contributed to the worldwide deviance in moral understanding. The bygone pandemic only attributed to these phenomena. In more nuanced terms, the paper's essence concerns itself with the frequency of cyberviolence against women in the face of a new-normal global pandemic setting. It aims to provide an overall outlook on this issue pertaining to the contemporary global zeitgeist.

**Keywords:** Cyberviolence, cyberspace, feminism, patriarchy, COVID-19, pandemic, gender violence.

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## Introduction

The advent of technology has both blessed and cursed the world's residents. Remarkable innovations date back to early mid-18<sup>th</sup> century Europe with the Industrial Revolution bringing about unique pieces of machinery followed by commercial straits in between nations. Centuries have passed, and the current world now expects a 4<sup>th</sup> industrial revolution that celebrates a complex web of technology, genealogy, and the material world with the help of artificial intelligence (Signé, 2020). But much like previous industrial milestones many areas of the world missed out and even received alternated and derogatory versions of reality. This writing's motive circumvents the negativity ushered by the specter known as the internet.

According to Siberay, cyberspace, cyber world, and virtual world are acronyms that define the digital environment where information or data-based interactions occur, manifesting a constantly interconnected domain—a platform in the internet where individuals despite any gender dwells is also a platform for cyber violence. Council of Europe describes cyberviolence as the instrumental use of computer machinery for threatening, facilitation, and bullying against individuals which at times predate economic, psychological, sexual, and physical consequences based on exploitation or manipulation.

Primarily, the internet is a place where people, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation have liberal access to voicing their opinions. This same internet has allowed access for diverse individuals to interact with one another. Although they belong to different parts of the world. Then arises the element of deviant activities. The inclusion of social media, and blog sources are breeding grounds for cyberviolence particularly against women. Given a world that preaches patriarchy, the overall universal social construction opposed to women is condescending. From social media comment sections to email-spam threats moving onto modern streaming and communicative platforms such as Twitch, and Discord, the varied level of unsolicited acts targeting women-hood is atrocious.

Diffusion of unique identities has also gotten themselves under the cyberbullies' crosshairs, continuing a morbid trend across the digital sphere. A multitude of cyberviolence occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic with more people frequenting cyberspace more than ever and over 52 percent of women and girls went through online negativity in 2020 alone (Spurek, 2021). A recent EU study found that one in three women over the age of fifteen had suffered some form of cyber-harassment as the number of women and girls using the internet

had increased by 50-70 percent since before the epidemic along with the increment of risk regarding cyber-violence (Cyber-Violence, 2021). It is because of this widespread publicity that cyberbullying targets women for easy prey (ukteam, 2021). Online-hate versus women is a varied version of offline gender discrimination that has persisted for centuries. Without this gender discrimination, cyberviolence, also cybercrime for that matter, against women could not have been sustained so severely. It is ingrained in society and one of the critical ways women are disadvantaged at home and in the workplace. Domestic and sexual violence as well as all other forms of physical, psychological, and economic abuse all stem from the same patriarchal process (Spurek, 2021). This article elongates the recent surge in cyberviolence in opposition to women's emancipation in digital domains with a contemporary analysis vis-à-vis general understanding. This paper's central concept is to further comprehend how cyberviolence towards women evolved into a much grander menace amidst the global Coronavirus pandemic.

### **Methodology**

This write-up abides by the qualitative framework of research correlating already established information. Secondary data is given primary importance due to limitations in recollecting unique empirical facts and figures. Albeit, the paper incorporates journal publications, newspaper articles, opinion pieces, blogs, reports, and books to justify the theoretical basis put forward. A few case studies or factual references i.e., Bangladesh are prioritized in an attempt to contextualize the writing in some manner. Therefore, the intent is to reconvene an analysis that respects the groundwork of gender studies and the role of gender in international relations. It is important to denote that this study presides over a universal construction of cyberviolence opposing women, instead of a strictly demarcated region, society, or community.

### **Variables among the Cyber Space and Gender**

Breck and Spetsidis (2020) linked cyber violence regarding women during the COVID-19 pandemic to gender disparity between men and women. Due to multiple socio-economic sectors falling under stagnation, there was a rise in internet usage, according to data published by Forbes. A sudden rush in the digital crowd saw a 50 to 70 percent hike with new users venturing into the internet, and the majority of them being unfamiliar with various interactive cyber platforms (Brečko & Spetsidis, 2020). Limited experience with the internet and scarce skills in dealing maturely have led to unprecedented events for these novel netizens. The

traditional social structure of various communities has been unwelcoming to women throughout the cyber domains. Besides women in particular, the United Nations vocalizes that identity references ranging from LGBTQ+ individuals, ethnic minorities, Indigenous women, and handicapped persons are more vulnerable to online harassment; furthermore, the lockdown started a 'gender emergency' situation for women under vehement cyber aggression (Brečko & Spetsidis, 2020). The authors opined that the perpetrators presumably were males and coercively produced fear, unattachment, and the threat of violence among female online browsers. The women were victimized by exploiting the specter of internet obtuseness.

Farhana Akter (2018) distinctly points out the concurrent condition for women in Bangladesh against violent online backlashes spurred by pre-existing social and physiological taboos. Young women are more vulnerable to online hate speech, revenge porn, inappropriate spam of their personal identities- photos, videos, and rape threats. In recent years, an inundation of new mobile phone users has been followed by their internet footprints. Since December 2018, the Bangladesh government's Information Communication Technology (ICT) Division's Cyber Help Desk has responded to over 17,000 complaints, of which over 70 percent came from women (Akter, 2018). Also, there is a lack of institutional control over internet usage in Bangladesh. Therefore, teenagers, the young population, are exposed to unsolicited websites and forums. When these people exploit their cyber freedom, the women are more often targeted with exploited imagery, and even death threats follow. The ramifications of cyber-violence against women extend beyond the victims in a somewhat conservative nation like Bangladesh. They eventually rip a hole in our social and moral fabric because of the domino effect they have on their families. Most people tend to believe whatever is put on social media. A shallow public psychology is caused by a lack of knowledge, ignorance, and education, a major factor in such a biased belief system. As a result, when a girl's exposed photos and a catchy made-up story are published online, most internet users don't bother to check to see if the story is true or untrue (Akter, 2018). The devastating effects from what it might seem a minute incident could result catastrophically.

Wang and Affoum (2021) construed a similar analogy to Breck and Spetsidis that the Coronavirus pandemic altered a new reality for cyber violence responders. To start off, the pandemic created a new normal lifestyle across the world, with overall lockdowns injecting unique internet users irrespective of their maturity level. The escalation of deviant activities has given birth to cyberstalking, public shaming, and fraudulence. The lockdown raised the mental and psychological severity of cyber violence against women because of helplessness.

Moreover, it has a substantial economic impact. For instance, recent research by the Australian Institute reveals that cyberbullying and online harassment have cost Australia an estimated \$3.7 billion in lost revenue and medical expenses (Wang & Affoum, 2021). Indifferent phenomena in numerous parts of the globe reapproached the necessity to tackle cyberviolence demonizing women. The authors underline the lack of strict cyber laws combatting cyber harassment of females, which many times reach their offline lives as well. The absence of legal protections in the hostile online environment hinders women's access to emergency services, affecting their freedom of expression and information. The digital gender gap stops women from gaining digital and computer skills

### **Theoretical Framework**

International Relations protrudes a discussion revolving around a set of theories, for which case, feminist ideas are imperative to execute this paper. At first, Feminism, in layman's terms, is the expansion of equality for women despite their biological sex and social gender. Liberal feminists establish their argument on this fundamental notion of feminism that women should not be excluded from socio-economic and political sectors. Modern times have allowed the participation of women in almost every employment platform. Democratic states have cemented suffrage rights with equal forms of liberty for women, albeit a country's political culture very much decides on women's equality. Nonetheless, the frequentation of women throughout cyberspace asserts credence to liberal feminism.

At the same time, the underlying narrative of radical feminism is persistent in the social fabric of many countries and regions. Patriarchy describes how traditionally established social structures institutionalize male supremacy, where the community practices men's social, physical, economic, and political hierarchy over women (Christodoulou, 2009). The influx and influence of cyberviolence targeting women is another extent of the traditional masculine worldview, and female counterparts are heavily subordinated if not dominated. Compared to the liberal approach, radical feminism has made several gains. For one thing, it rejects the divide between the public and private spheres, embracing the most essential principle of the modern feminist movement that personal is political (Beckman & D'Amico, 1994). In this regard, it does not replicate the liberal feminist association of the political with the public. It appears to reject the assumption that International Relations is primarily concerned with high politics of security and war issues. Because of the intensity of cyber harassment against women, integrating the worldwide similarity at academic and administrative levels, this issue is universally susceptible to a socio-political lens.

## **Reassessing the Linkage between Cyber-violence and Global Lockdown**

Currently, the expanding belief about cyber harassment of women goes past the predisposed notion that technological advancement produces unwelcomed byproducts, aggressive behavior. Instead, the imbued social illnesses such as patriarchy, misogyny, and illiteracy manifest an online version of women's hatred (Fairbairn, 2015). So, it is not uncommon for women to have their social media accounts compromised. Victims are targeted by uploading manipulated, indecent images of them online. In addition, the victim's Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter friends are sent explicit messages from her account to humiliate and degrade her. Blackmailing for financial gain, physiological torture, ego and power trips, the obsession with love and emotion, etcetera, are all common motivations for such cyber-crimes against women. Women between the ages of 18 and 29 in the United States, made up of only 9% of those polled, reported experiencing sexual harassment online in a survey (Wang & Affoum, 2021). As more and more lives moved online during the pandemic, internet usage increased worldwide; in 2020 alone, 800 million people had internet access for the first time, and 58 poor and medium-income nations used digital payments to distribute COVID-19 aid (Puliti, 2022). Global reports of an increase in online harassment of women and girls have surfaced since the beginning of the COVID-19 epidemic, with the most alarming spikes coming from the Middle East and North Africa, the Philippines, and India.

Another lingering aspect is how women are objectified multifariously in cyberspace. Explicit and not-safe-for-work (NSFW) content usually belittle females, not to mention the zeal of legal and illegal pornography. Not only are cyber domains used to exploit women's mental health and personal integrity, but larceny and fraudulence by hackers often exact women. Economic insecurity befalls the weak internet barriers, too. The COVID pandemic infuriated world denizens with boredom. The prevalence of novel internet users and the various forms of hatred towards women were apparent. The context of 'revenge porn' is generally instrumentalized through the internet. Recently, it has become a dangerous practice because of its flexibility. Revenge porn is seen as part of a larger culture of sexual harassment, including 'slut shaming,' and as potentially causing harm to women who encounter it (Fairbairn, 2015). Women are piercingly criticized for their outlook on personal life, especially seen with female celebrities and life. A counter-argument puts the media as the prime cause behind materializing womanhood. It enables the audience to criticize their personality in digital space. Sexual harassment, stalking, and Zoom bombing are only a few examples of online violence against women and girls (VAWG), which serves within the continuum that is often tied to offline

violence and continues to proliferate in a setting of constantly expanding digitalization (UN Women, 2022). Implications of VAWG on women and girls' health and welfare, in addition to the economy, society, and politics, can be just as detrimental as those of traditional forms of violence. Reports show that renowned female journalists, activists, and politicians are attacked online because they are easier to target. When a single act of hatred emerges, it usually rallies up a group's condemnation.

Young women and girls are more likely to experience online violence due to their heightened exposure to the phenomenon as a result of their disproportionate use of information and communication technologies (ICT) for educational purposes, information gathering, and social networking (Plan International, 2020). It is evident how the global pandemic rejuvenated this coordination of misogyny in cyber domains. But this issue is far more atrocious considering its spillover effect in women's offline lives. As articulated beforehand, females are not emancipated from cyber violence just by leaving the internet. They suffer the aftereffects from family and friends sprung by misinformation about themselves, which in many cases lead to suicides. There is still a wide gap in institutional jurisprudence regarding cyber security laws, particularly to combat online aggression against women. Impoverished countries surrounding the African continent merely accredit this issue all due to other high political concerns. In Bangladesh, the Digital Security Act 2018 has shed some light on countering cybercrime and bullying against women. Cyber Awareness Foundation found that 3 in 10 female victims don't know where or how to submit a complaint, and another 25 percent feel nothing would be done if they do (Reform DSA to Stop Harassment of Women, 2021). So, the propensity of laws is sparse already, and their inclusive reach among women creates another dilemma.

## **Conclusion**

If humans' technological milestones are perceived, the results show how they originated both benefits and consequences for women. Such narrative is vividly present in the rationale of this paper interlinking the internet and women. Cyber violence has taken a toll on individual users all over the world, but more distinctly on the women's demographic. If anything, the global Coronavirus pandemic taught a new-normal lesson for the world populace, in the process giving a boost to socially constructed pessimism opposing women, now flooding the internet sphere. Government-induced cyber security laws spearhead remedies, albeit social awareness is lacking vigorously. In less developed states, online issues singling out women prevail without jurisdiction. This has much to do with schools lacking the proper apparatus or curriculum to guide the youth regarding and awareness of such stigmas.

In Bangladesh, cyber crime against women is typically used to cover online sex abuse, such as altering a photo for pornographic reasons, harassing women with sexually explicit emails or texts, or cyberstalking (Rahim, 2021). Due to the present legal system's failure to uphold the rule of law, women are more likely to experience primary victimization than males. This results in a shallow reporting rate to law enforcement agencies. Growing up, their socialization process exonerates a fundamental understanding of gender equality at every level of life. This digital age requires a more comprehensive framework to provide moral lessons, including rudimentary etiquette traversing cyberspace. Otherwise, this post-pandemic era will preserve a spontaneous system of disparity between genders. An unwanted outcome where a significant part of the world's natives in women is derogated based on hatred.

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