Emotional Violence against Women in Public Sphere of Bangladesh: Youth Narratives and Policy Options

Mizanur Rahman and Mohammad Tareq Hasan

Abstract

This paper analyses the occurrences of ‘emotional violence’ against women in the ‘public sphere’ of Bangladesh. Most common acts of violence in public space in Bangladesh are gossiping about someone, staring straight at the women, passing comments impersonally but indicatively, pulling scarf or touching indecently in public places and transportation. In the virtual world, common acts of violence are sending ‘indecent’ messages, pictures, videos and web links to random women, bullying someone on Facebook, opening a fake Facebook account using a picture of a woman. These so-called ‘fun activities’ for some people bring emotional sufferings for women. In most cases, abused women ignore the incidences. Based on the findings, we argue that the practice of patriarchy is embedded in relation to other forms of hierarchy and domination, which always renders men a higher social position compared to women. Thus, the feeling of committing a violent act and getting away without any consequence creates a condition of new violence. We have found that male respondents are more ignorant about laws preventing VAW compared to females. In protesting and taking legal initiatives, women face some challenges imposed by family and society.

Keywords: VAW (violence against women), emotional violence, psychological violence, virtual violence, public sphere, Bangladesh

Introduction

Many people suffer from emotional violence, which no less destructive than any
Emotional Violence Against Women in Public Sphere of Bangladesh

other form of violence and unfortunately emotional violence is very often understated or ignored. Violence can take many forms that occur in different places—domestic violence in the home; sexual abuse of girls in schools; sexual harassment at work and in public spaces, rape in cities and in rural areas, in refugee camps and as a tactic of war (Violence Against Women and MDG, N.D.).

Some forms of violence are already established firmly like rape and physical assault. On the other hand, there are many acts, which arguably depends on the interpretation to be qualified as an act of violence. For instance, someone indicatively sings a song near a girl, the lyrics may offend the girl, but the person can deny the charge by arguing that singing is his freedom and did so to please him and not to offend anyone. Some people might find it is okay to do this, while others may have different viewpoints.

Emotional violence is indeed a very subjective matter, which is deeply rooted in religious and cultural values, social norms and standards. Therefore, many abusive actions are not recognized as ‘violence’. Thus, based on youth perspective, the study intends to analyze emotional violence against women in the public spaces in Bangladesh.

We pursued the following research questions:

- What are the activities and gestures that are perceived as emotional violence for women in real and virtual life?
- What are the major causes of emotional violence and how prevalent is this form of violence in Bangladesh in both virtual and actual public spaces?
- To what extent and why do people blame the victim?
- Are present youth in Bangladesh aware of the existing legal norms and supports?

The findings of the study are organized into three parts for better discussion purpose: The first part covers how undergraduate students do perceive emotional violence, and what sort of acts trigger emotional violence in public spaces. The second part presents the opinion of the young respondents about ‘to what extent victims are responsible for the abuse.’ The third part explains how much young Bangladeshi students are conscious and aware of existing laws and institutional supports in relation to preventing violence against women in public space.
Significance and rationale of the study

Studies on an understanding of emotional violence from the societal perspective are scarce at both the national and international level. While VAW is a global concern, critical data on violence against women is highly deficient. A major reason for this lack is the definition of violence against women varies across surveys, cultures, or locations (Carlson et al., 2015:82).

With the onset of globalization and technological innovation, people have more platforms to fulfill their needs of socialization. Technology has triggered virtual social spaces like Facebook, Instagram. The virtual world has become a new platform to harm women (Baker et al., 2013:2). The abuse through technology was not incorporated in the definition of ‘eve-teasing’ in the legal documents. Bangladesh Metropolitan Police Ordinance defines ‘eve-teasing’:

- Willful and indecent exposure of a person in a street or public place within sight of a woman,
- Willful pressure or obstruction on any woman in a street or public place,
- Insult or annoyance towards a woman by using indecent language or making indecent sounds, gestures, or remarks in any street or public place.
- Language or making indecent sounds, gestures, or remarks in any street or public place.

Frequencies and proportion of different occurrences and acts that cause ‘emotional violence’ cannot be captured properly by going through the criminal records and cases registered with police departments. Such violence remains unreported in most cases - this context worked as a source of inspiration to conduct the present study with a view to capturing youth understandings of ‘emotional violence,’ and the findings of the study possibly produce useful input that will help to conceptualize VAW in the public sphere in a more inclusive manner.

Conceptualizing emotional violence and scope of the present research

By incorporating different forms of violence, WHO (2005:4) adopted the following general definition:

“Physical violence means a woman has been: slapped, or had something thrown at her; pushed, shoved, or had her hair pulled; hit with a fist or something else that could hurt; choked or burnt; threatened with or had a weapon used against
Emotional violence against women in public sphere of Bangladesh

her. Sexual violence means a woman has been physically forced to have sexual intercourse; had sexual intercourse because she was afraid of what her partner might do, or forced to do something sexual she found degrading or humiliating. Though recognized as a serious and pervasive problem, emotional violence does not yet have a widely accepted definition, but includes, for example, being humiliated or belittled; being scared or intimidated purposefully.

Intimate-partner violence (also called “domestic” violence) means a woman has encountered any of the above types of violence, at the hands of an intimate partner or ex-partner; this is one of the most common and universal forms of violence experienced by women.”

It is apparent from the WHO’s definition that VAW takes many forms from overt to subtle including physical violence, sexual, and emotional violence. Any of these can occur in the domestic sphere as well as in the public sphere.

![Figure 1: Types and arenas of violence](image)

Emotional violence is also known as ‘emotional abuse’ or ‘psychological violence.’ The scope of the present study is only limited to the ‘emotional violence’ in the ‘public sphere.’

![Figure 2: Scope of the research](image)
Women are possibly more empowered now than ever in Bangladesh, which increases their mobility in public places like office, restaurant, school, college, bus, train where they face different forms of emotional violence. We should acknowledge that none of our respondents are currently involved in any formal job, nor they got any job formal job experience. Workplace is a big part when it comes to defining the scope of public space, and emotional abuse in ‘workplace’ was not covered in the present research. For the present study, a working definition of ‘emotional violence in the public sphere’ is formed to guide the research:

Any gesture, dialogue, remark, indecent language, object, obstruction, threat, impression, and any other indication are “emotional violence” if committed in a common public place within the sight of a woman by a stranger or a group of strangers or by someone (who is not the victim’s intimate partner), that causes mental or emotional abuse to the woman.

**Theoretical discussion**

There are a large number of studies on domestic violence compared to other forms of violence against women. A considerable amount of research is available on emotional abuse in the workplace. It is hard to come by theories pertinent to explain emotional violence taking place in common public space.

Based on extensive literature review, Loraleigh Keashly (1997) recognized seven dimensions of emotional abuse in her paper where she covered both conceptual and empirical issues of workplace emotional abuse. Though, workplace violence does not fall in our research scope, nevertheless, we can get some insights from these dimensions:

**Table 1: Categories of abusive behavior**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nonverbal</th>
<th>Verbal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Aggressive eye contact: glared at, meaningful glances</td>
<td>• Direct (Observable): Yelling, screaming, cursing, rude, hostile, nasty, belittling comments</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Intimidating physical gesture: finger pointing, slamming things down, throwing object</td>
<td>• Indirect: Gossip, Unreal, blame for errors.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Inappropriate or excessive use of memos, emails, text.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1. Emotional abuse includes verbal and nonverbal moods of action. Keashly (1997) mentioned a comprehensive list of various behavior, below we mention some we deem relevant to our study.

2. Behaviors are emotionally abusive when they are of a repeated nature or part of a pattern of behaviors (see Keashly 1997: 101-103).

3. When behaviors are unwelcomed and unsolicited can be viewed as emotionally abusive. These behaviors may differ in terms of their perceived appropriateness or offensiveness to different people (ibid: 103).

4. Behaviors are emotionally violent when they violate the standard of appropriate conduct. This covers the behaviors, which are considered as unethical, unreasonable, inappropriate, illegitimate, unfair, excessive, misuse of authority, and mistreatment.

5. Behaviors that result in harm to the targets in terms of the target’s sense of him/herself. It may affect victims' self-esteem, anger/resentment, and feelings of helplessness or powerlessness.

6. Behaviors are emotionally abusive when the actor intended to harm the target or when the actor could have controlled the behavior itself. It reflects the intention of the perpetrator matters; emotional abuse involved some 'intent'. Though it is controversial as to whether intent should be included in assessment of abuse. Some approaches claim only impact should considered (ibid 96, 108)

7. Behaviors are emotionally abusive when the actor is in a more powerful position relative to the target Superior can derive power not only from formal authority but also in terms of relative influence. Local gangster could be a relevant example in this case.

In addition, the concept of “patriarchy” is relevant for a theoretical understanding of violence against women (specially ‘emotional violence’). Through this approach, we may understand the problem of violence against women in the specificity of the local social contexts rather than as individual attributes of the people who are motivated to dominate. Similarly, post-structural feminism emphasizes gender subjectivities and discursive nature of identities.

The core concepts of patriarchy—systems of male domination and female subordination, oppression, and exploitation—has been appearing in the literature in the guise of the terms such as male-dominated society, sexuality and gender inequality (Hunnicutt 2009:553, see also Walby 1989). We believe emotional violence against women in Bangladesh could be better comprehended if the explanations are centered on gendered social arrangement and power that reinforce domination. Sylvia Walby (1989:220) identified six patriarchal structures that all together
constitute the system of patriarchy; this includes: patriarchal mode of production, patriarchal relations within waged labor, the patriarchal state, male violence, patriarchal relations within sexuality, and patriarchal relations in cultural institutions. In contemporary Bangladesh, all these structures operate in a cross-cutting manner making violence against women even more perverse.

Following Hunnicutt (2009), we believe, the violence against women can be explained by considering:

- The range and varieties of patriarchal manifestations in a specific context.
- How men are situated in their own scheme of domination (in relation to other males) as violence against women is a product of social structural conditions.
- Patriarchal ideology may endure despite structural gains in gender equality.
- The practice of patriarchy is embedded in relation to other forms of hierarchy and domination.
- Patriarchal systems are not as simple as a strict relation between the oppressor and the oppressed.

As we are focusing on emotional violence against women in the public sphere, which we believe is a particular manifestation of violence in the changing context of Bangladesh as with the structural changes in the society (through education, economic empowerment, and accessibility) women are taking part more in the public sphere. We must take the approach to understand the forms of violence that women face in the public sphere as an enduring feature of patriarchy and power relations in the society at large. We will manifest how the gendered power arrangements structure human action (see R. P. Dobash et al. 1992) and argue against a focus on the individual characteristics of the victim, offender or situation as it conceals the ways in which every act of violence against women is embedded in a larger social organization (Walby 1989:224). The patriarchal social structures are institutionally rooted through religion, educational institutions, media and there are more than many discourses on femininity and masculinity (see Walby 1989). We felt that this theory might be helpful to understand the perception and attitude of youth towards emotional violence, and how do they construct the definition of emotional violence. Attitudes have a fundamental and causal relationship to the perpetration of violence against women (Flood and Pease 2009:126).

Violence against women in the public sphere is a manifestation of public patriarchy, which is different from private patriarchy that excludes women from certain areas of social life. It takes form collectively in relation to the cultural construction of men and women. Here, we believe Judith Butler’s (1988:519) argument is
relevant for understanding violence against women, as gender is not a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; instead, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time through a stylized repetition of acts. Thus, gender identity is a performative accomplishment compelled by social sanction and taboo. Analyzing violence against women in the public sphere of Bangladesh would illuminate how gender is constituted through the performative act (reproduction of gender identities as discrete and binary categories of man and woman by performing it consciously or unconsciously) in continuous negotiation with the patriarchal structure.

Patriarchy mostly refers to the values, a social system where male domination is a predominant feature, women are expected to be obedient and submissive at all times. To supplement the patriarchy theory, we believe Hofstede’s Masculinity vs. Feminity (MAS) trait able to bring meaningful insight in the present study. One advantage of Hofstede’s dimension is that he has measured country wise cultural dimension including MAS. Hofstede used score-based analysis; he assigned a score for each cultural dimension for each country for a more analytical understanding of a country’s culture. Bangladesh has scored 55 (out of 100) on the masculinity dimension and can be considered a Masculine society (Hofstede Center).

Among Hofstede’s six major cultural dimensions, masculinity relates to the societal norms governing the societal roles attached to women and men. In a masculine society, the boy should fight back when attacked, but girls should not fight. In such a context, gender role is well defined, any deviation from the socially expected roles might be considered women’s fault. Therefore, along with other aspects of emotional violence, we have tried capture to what extent female victims of emotional violence are to carry the responsibilities.

Therefore, for our understanding of the emotional violence in public sphere, we took into consideration the notions and practices of patriarchy, gender performativity through femininity and masculinity. For this research, we have used “emotional violence” as the dependent variable, and our independent variables are: conceptualization of emotional violence, patriarchal values, masculine approach toward actions of males and female, awareness of the existing legal norms and available support services.
Methodology

A series of nineteen in-depth interviews with university students were conducted to collect primary data. The study aims to understand youth perception towards emotional violence. Therefore, we purposefully interviewed undergrad students since they mostly belong to a certain age range (18 to 24). In addition, to access and explore the online world, a minimum level of education or knowledge is required, university students fill that criterion as well. To enhance our response rate, we studied only university students. The study incorporated both public and private university students. The field data were collected in September-October 2017.

As we are considering ‘emotional violence’ against women in public spheres, we deem it necessary to focus on the youth given the scope of the research. The composition of our respondents is given below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Public University</th>
<th>Private University</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name of the Institution</td>
<td>Dhaka University, Jahangirnagar University</td>
<td>BRAC, Daffodil, &amp; North South University</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings of the study

Part 1: Perception and attitude towards emotional violence in the public sphere

Prevalence of emotional violence

Respondents of the present study believe that emotional violence has become so prevalent that it happens in the daily interactions. The students termed the frequency of the emotional violence as either ‘common’ or ‘very common’ in Bangladesh. They opined that the trend is upward moving.

VAW is done through mundane daily interactions, for example: passing indirect comments, gestures or looks. It might not directly address a woman or done as a ‘joke.’ This can be identified from one of the comments:
Emotional Violence Against Women in Public Sphere of Bangladesh

“I think emotional violence is very common in public spaces. You can witness it in any public space where random people are gathered together. In situations where a group of men that are sitting close to a random woman or women, it can be seen men are staring at her. (...) If you keep your ears open, then you can also sometimes hear them pass indirect comments about the women too.”

Commonly, when women are on the street, they have to face people who use abusive words towards them. One male respondent mentioned, “emotional violence could occur when men are sitting around a woman not even saying anything make her feel uncomfortable. This could be done simply by staring at the girl.” We can call these sorts of incidences as “the silent treatment” (see Keashly, 1997: 87).

Our respondents perceived that when anyone says something indecent about another woman, it creates a mental pressure on the woman. On the streets or public transports (e.g., buses) when someone tries to pull the scarf or touch them, it creates emotional trauma for the women (unlike conventional physical violence). Even virtual violence through messages, comments, and sharing of the personal and other types of photos were identified as forms of emotional violence.

Table 3: Common means and practices of emotional violence in real life public sphere

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Means of Violence</th>
<th>Common practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eve teasing using abusive words</td>
<td>Common language ‘Maal,’ uttering sensitive body parts name and make dirty joke on that, singing song, blowing the whistle when any woman is in sight.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body gesture</td>
<td>Laughing at the women showing middle finger, flying kiss, touching own penis, giving a dirty look at the women,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Body touch</td>
<td>Touched by the fellow passengers in public bus and by strangers in a crowded place like busy shopping mall (for example: New Market, Dhaka), bus conductor touches the body in disguise of helping women to get on/off the bus, passenger sitting next or behind a woman often times use elbow to touch the breast or other body parts of the woman.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is not only men, but a woman can also be responsible for emotional violence towards another woman, as one female respondent mentioned:

“Well, when a woman emotionally abuses another woman, probably it is not with sexual connotations. Maybe it is like when I am doing something, then someone (a wom-
Respondents were asked to mention the places where women commonly may become victim of emotional violence. Our respondents replied that it could happen anywhere. Nevertheless, places that are filled with young people; who are just hanging out could turn out to be a place of harassment for women. The place that is more prone to be a place of violence for women is public transport, one of the female respondents mentioned, “As local buses are crowded and the seats are small, guys intentionally touch women. I myself had faced a similar situation, and I shall not forget that day ever”.

Findings from the interviews show that quite visible differences do exist between men and women’s perception of vulnerability that they face; women perceive that they are more vulnerable to the male gaze than is the case for men. Therefore, even though violence against women can take different forms, it is necessary to take into consideration the emotional effects of the different forms of violence to which women are more exposed.

The ideas of emotional violence can be related to the idea of ‘constructed gender’ as a cause of perceived natural sex difference (Butler 1990). As well as the activities associated with gender norms become abusive during public engagement between different genders, i.e., the “fun” activities by men become emotionally abusive for women (cf. Keashly 1997). We think the ideas of gender in Bangladesh, which is performed through social roles, and patriarchy is the cause that renders the possibilities of emotional violence against women in public spheres.

**Emotional violence in virtual spheres**

Virtual social media has become a new tool for harassing women, which in turn sometimes is the outcome of entertainment for young males. A male respondent mentioned:

> “A few people I know from my residence hall, including my roommates and their friends have an unusual way of entertaining themselves. They tend to look for random woman online and start ‘in boxing’ for their amusement. These include sending obscene pictures, disturbing and indecent comments.”

Because of the social media, people have become easily accessible; practically now anyone is vulnerable as any person could send messages, whatever or whenever he or she wants. Even in the comment section on Facebook or Instagram, people are bullying or talking in a sexist tone towards women. When these abusive incidences occur repeatedly, behavior perceived as more abusive than when it
was the first time the actor had behaved this way (Keashly 1997). We assumed that a common act of victim is to ignore the incidence(s), but it becomes repetitive in nature, it becomes almost impossible to overlook and it has a severe toll on victim’s psychology. However, our respondents mentioned that it is so easy to do such things on Facebook/Instagram/YouTube and there is no real consequence for abusing someone.

Further, when a woman uploads pictures then, some people download those images and open fake accounts on Facebook by using those downloaded images. One of the female respondents mentioned,

“Sometimes you will find people whom you do not know or even recognize commenting on your posts or pictures; they send messages and sometimes even pictures (some of which are disgusting or indecent). Some even send videos or website links.”

Women face harassment through the online platform, as it is easy to hide identity using fake accounts. A respondent mentioned a case; a fake Facebook ID was harassing her friends. Since it was a fake account, police could only tell the victim that the ID originated from somewhere around Munshiganj (a district beside the capital), not from her university area. It is not that only strangers commit emotional violence via internet, it can be committed by someone who was a friend or in a relationship. Sometimes, after a breakup, the men publish private chat records or photos in the public groups of the social media. Such harassment also happens when a woman refuses to someone’s love proposal—this kind of news is quite frequently publishing in the national dailies.

We could identify from the interviews that emotional violence in the virtual media happens, as it is possible to remain anonymous and it is believed to be ‘fun activities’ by the people who commit such acts. Sometimes it is done as revenge against women for public shaming.

Violence in actual life and virtual life

Regarding the rate of real life and virtual life violence, we found a mixed picture, though most of the respondents mentioned that real-life violence happens more while virtual violence is also on the rise. A male respondent mentioned:

“If we talk about the prevalence, I think virtual abuse will be higher because anyone at any time can say whatever he/she want towards whomsoever they want. There is no real way to stop someone from virtually abusing you. You may be able to remove the ‘comment’ or report the ID of the abuser (in the case of Facebook), but there are no real-life consequences for the person who commits such abuse.”
There were different views as well, one of the male respondents mentioned that the frequency of violence is higher in real life in comparison with the virtual world.

“In the case of Bangladesh, harassment is more prevalent in real life rather than the virtual world. Because in the virtual world, one can react against such abuses, for example, ‘blocking’ the abuser. […] However, in real life, a woman cannot react immediately whenever violence takes place. Because of this, in real life, abuses and violence against women occur more frequently.”

However, it is apparent that emotional violence against women is increasing both in real and virtual mediums. Female respondents, on the other hand, regarded real-life violence more harmful. One of the respondents mentioned, “I think in real life we are hurt most. The virtual world is a different dimension, where physical abuse is impossible. I think emotional violence happens more in real life.” Another female respondent mentioned the effects of real-life violence persist longer. She mentioned:

“I think, we are abused more in real life. In real situations, the effects last a lifetime, whereas that is not the case in the virtual life. Especially in villages, in rural areas, young women are not that much in contact with the virtual sphere, they are victims of incidents that occur in real life, in real public spheres.”

In the present socio-economic context, women face both the real-life violence as well as violence via the internet. However, the effects were differently experienced and expressed by the respondents.

**Domination as social norm and VAW**

In most cases, the sufferers of emotional violence in the public spheres do not react because they consider themselves as ‘weak’ compared to men. Values and norms of ‘masculine’ culture implanted beliefs into the women’s mind that they are not supposed to fight, they are supposed to be ‘tender’ and ‘soft.’ The fear of social stigma prevents them from reacting publicly—a clear demonstration of male domination in society. The social norm of male supremacy also inhibits other male onlookers not to react and stop incidences of VAW in public spaces. Other reasons, mentioned by male respondents, include women are not brave enough to protest rather try to minimize the consequences. Female respondents mentioned, by not protesting against violence, they try to save themselves from further ‘violence.’ One of the female respondents mentioned:
“I think women usually do not react in cases of violence against them in public space. Most women do not react as they think the society will blame them or that they feel people will judge them and question their attitude and their families’ character.”

However, in a few cases emotionally abused women show explicit reaction, as mentioned by one female respondent,

“One of my friends, who was commented upon by a truck driver, managed to hand that driver over to the police. Nevertheless, this is a rare case, normally we just say something, or we tend to avoid the situation. We do not take any firm action against them.”

It is evident from the comments of both male and female respondents; in cases of emotional violence in the public space protests are rare. Both the ‘sufferers’ and ‘spectators’ try to avoid and ignore such incidences. As women (and also men) do not protest, men (who commit such violence) tend to believe it can be done and can be gotten away with. This tendency has long-term implication for the persistence of VAW. Regarding violence by a woman towards another, one of the female respondents reported:

“It depends actually! When a female is an oppressor, then, of course, it is only going to be emotional abuse. However, for men, if they attempt something physical, then my reaction has to be different. I must remain cautious. I might have to slap him or run if necessary. However, when it comes to females I do not think I would ever have to go that far; my verbal response would be enough.”

If we try to make sense of the non-action of either male or female against the incidence of emotional violence, we can identify how the genders affect the possible acts by those who suffer violence in the public sphere. The nature of ignorance of emotional violence by the men and women can be seen as a performative act (Butler 1988) through which they perform their gender identities based on patriarchal notions. As women consider themselves as ‘weak’ compared to men and they are to be ‘tender’ and ‘soft’, the incidences emotional violence in public also become event when women ‘perform’ their gender. Ideas, values, norms regarding what a woman should not indulge into, e.g., arguing and complaining, inhibit them from public protest. The findings also make it evident that the larger social structure based on patriarchy become conducive for the prevalent nature of emotional violence in public spaces in Bangladesh (cf. Walby 1989). Because of this sometimes victims are held responsible for the occurrence of emotional violence as we will be discussed in the next section. Based on the findings, we argue that patriarchal ideology may endure despite structural gains in gender equality leading to more women in the public spheres. Therefore, we need to take into consideration the prevailing gender norms of society.
Part 2: Causes of emotional violence and to what extent victims are perceived responsible for the abuse

**Causes of prevailing emotional abuse against women in Bangladesh**

From field data, five major causes of emotional violence in the public sphere have been recognized: i) patriarchy, ii) family values, iii) the process of gendered socialization, iv) social norms and v) values. On the other hand, in virtual space, pornography addiction and easy access to the virtual platform where the guilty person is not facing punitive punishment are the primary causes of abuse.

All respondents mentioned about the ‘social values’ and ‘norms’ while they were explaining the causes of female abuse. The existing societal norms reflect a masculine culture, which provides the male an upper hand over the female counterparts in Bangladesh. A male respondent made ‘process of gendered socialization’ responsible for the occurrences of VAW.

From an early age, women learn that they are weaker than men and they are lower in terms of status—a typical characteristic of ‘masculine society.’ If a woman grows up amidst such cultural and social norms, this naturally affects their belief system and they start to perceive that she is truly helpless and cannot do anything on her own. To become a ‘real woman’, one has to be soft-spoken, tender and caring and must not demonstrate aggressive behavior or even should not protest against the abusive acts.

By performing gender roles consciously or unconsciously, both men and women learn masculine and feminine characteristics and what is expected and accepted. As a result, men learn to be dominant and women learn to be submissive. Moreover, many men are not aware of their limits, how to conduct, and what is permissible under ethical and moral values. The aspect of genders in the social spaces in a way results in violence against women while hindering those who dare to resist these acts. Further, it has become easier to abuse someone in virtual space, and the responsible persons do not face any punitive action, so this sort of internet-based violence is increasing day by day.

The study interlocutors mentioned that the performativity aspects of gender norms arise from family practices. Currently, however, people are more concerned about formal education directed at material success and do not give much concern to ethical and moral values.
Public response to female abuse in public sphere

Prejudice is one of the leading obstacles in tackling VAW. As women do not protest, the perpetrator of violence gets away and commits the same form of violence again. If people react and publicly protest, such incidences will decrease. Therefore, the strategy to tackle violence in the public space could be an overt protest. Observing but not reacting is the standard practice in Bangladesh. As we can identify from an excerpt of a respondent, “It is a common thing in Bangladesh for people to observe and not react.” This statement sums up the view of all respondents regarding the public response. People do not bother if they do not know the woman, they feel comfortable just to walk away and “turn a blind eye” to the incident.” In many cases, the offender is highly powerful (e.g., political, financial, or networking power), and people tend to remain quiet and refrain from coming forward.

The extent to which women are responsible

We asked our interlocutors, ‘to what extent do they think women are responsible for the abuse they face.’ The respondents were divided in their opinion on this issue. Half of the respondents expressed they do not believe that a girl’s attitude and clothing cannot be excused for justifying the violence. Women have the right to choose their own outfit. Men should behave the way they are supposed to, even if they feel like being provoked. The rest half thinks that presently women in Bangladesh are imitating the western-style revealing clothes, a few women also indulge in provocative gestures that provoke many men to indulge in harassing them.

One male respondent expressed,

“Not everyone receives the same education, specially they do not learn how to respect women. However, yes, maybe the woman is responsible for the abuse or emotional violence in some situations due to certain problems which lie in her outfit. […] I am not saying that everyone should wear a burka; having said that women who dress in a modest way are less likely to be abused. So basically, the woman’s fault mainly lies in the way they dress up while for men the fault lies in their low morality and ethics.”

A female respondent shared her thoughts in the following manner:

“In some cases, women are responsible for being harassed by the men. I believe a woman should never lower her own status and position. If they do not respond to an unknown person’s “hi/hello” on Facebook, then the abusers would not send messages to her. Again, women should keep in mind where they venture and dress accordingly to avoid harassment.”
These statements reveal that prevailing gender identities and how males perceive females in Bangladesh tend to legitimize VAW. This indicates the masculine nature of the Bangladesh society that permits and legitimizes the emotionally abusive actions against women.

**Part 3: Awareness about existing legal services**

*General awareness of legal provision*

About half of our male respondents, surprisingly, admitted that they did not have any knowledge about the existing legal framework. One of our female respondents also stated, she is aware of the fact that Bangladesh has strong laws, but nothing more than that. One male respondent stated, “there is a law on violence against women and males are highly frightened by this law, but I am not sure if the law is properly applied or not.”

Besides, many respondents mentioned that NGOs are working in Bangladesh to provide support to victims and to empower women. According to them, NGOs are also doing some awareness raising programs, but they were not able to specify any particular NGO initiative or project.

In general, except for a few, most respondents talked about ‘Police’ and “RAB” (Rapid Action Battalion) as law enforcement agencies without specifying any particular laws, branch or any other initiatives. Besides, a female and a male private university student expressed that they had heard about a hotline and one male mentioned about “one-stop crisis center.” To sum up, young people have limited knowledge regarding government initiatives and other institutional measures against VAW.

*Challenges for victims to obtain legal assistance*

One respondent stated, “As women do not generally want to make private issues public; it hinders them (women) from seeking legal aid. Furthermore, women are not allowed to seek legal help due to various discouragements from their own families and others in society”. This statement sums up the typical challenges’ women encounter in Bangladesh.

From the discussion, it appeared that if women tend to seek for legal help, the society discourages them and even tries to find faults with the victims, i.e., accuse the victim of being irresponsible and inviting the abuse”, as stated by a male respondent. An abused woman is more likely to avoid reporting to the authorities to avoid societal gossips that may ruin a victim’s image.
Another barrier identified was the law enforcing agency’s unwillingness to register the case if the perpetrator is politically or socially powerful. Many consider that going to the police is associated with more hassles, social embarrassment and financial burden. Besides, women are not aware of the prevailing laws, and therefore the victim is unable to seek proper legal assistance.

Policy options

We have become aware of various challenges and loopholes during the present study that hinders complete eradication of emotional violence in the public space, and eventually, we have recognized some tentative options, which policy stakeholders may ponder. It is important to mentions that following options are not concrete policy suggestions, these are just few issues to ponder. We believe it may help further researches with a view to providing specific public policies.

Consciousness-raising initiatives

Youth are not fully aware of their rights regarding the abuse in public sphere. Emotional violence should be taken into consideration in all its specificity such as teasing through comments, gestures, look in real and in virtual mediums. Media and social networking sites should probably be used to raise awareness of their rights.

Breaking free of the gender roles and norms based on patriarchal notions

One of the main reasons for VAW in public sphere is the patriarchal norm that considers women as weak and soft as compared to men. Thus, a woman has to face emotional violence when she is out of her usual gender role of a ‘homemaker.’ Study interlocutors suggested socialization of children at home could be a way to deconstruct patriarchal values, norms, and traditions to equal rights and status for women in society.

Formulate and enact unified laws

The 1860’s penal code focused on different forms of sexual assault without incorporating crime like eve-teasing. Later, ‘Women and Children Repression and Prevention Act-2000’ was enacted and made eve-teasing - making obscene comments or gestures- a punishable offense (up to seven years of simple imprisonment or meticulous imprisonment for two years). “The act was amended in 2003 according to which no one can be charged with sexual abuse of a woman until it is physical” (Islam and Amin 2016:4). Therefore, gaps in the laws and interpretation and application of the laws often are in favor of the perpetrator to use the gap to escape punishment. Thus, stricter penalties are to be in place and enacted.
An ICT law has been enacted for regulating online behavior, which covers a few specific types of online abuse, the government needs to criminalize these new forms of abuse against women.

**Social campaign and sanctioning collective hatred**

Having said that, tougher penalties have to be in place and enacted, mere legal framework and actions cannot wholly eradicate VAW. Owing to the very nature of emotional violence, in most cases, it is subject to the interpretation and situation. For instance, if someone fell on a woman on purpose under the pretense of losing balance in a public bus or a crowded place, it would be difficult to prove whether it was intentional or accidental. We need to arrange social campaigns and sanction collective hatred toward these incidences. Mass and online Media can be used as our respondents confirm that online media is the primary source of their information.

Taking punitive action will not completely wipe out these forms of violence, so we urge for the launch of social campaigns to promote negative sanctions against abuse in public places. Further study can be incorporated to find an effective social campaign strategy to fight against emotional violence against women.

**Incorporating emotional violence in policy-making phase**

It is necessary to incorporate ‘emotional violence’ in national and international development policy. Closer examination reveals that VAW is highly relevant to all MDGs goals (WHO 2005). Unfortunately, Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) do not address the issue of emotional violence against women. Including emotional violence in a more concrete manner in the global agenda will push the partner countries to be more serious on the emotional violence issue.

**Mainstreaming emotional violence against women into contemporary political discourse and agendas**

Bangladesh has the best position in South Asia in gender gap/equality index with a big jump from 2016 (72nd) to 2017 (47th), despite the achievement, emotional violence is an under-addressed issue in political discourse and public agenda setting in Bangladesh (The Daily Star 2017). We strongly urge for the inclusion of this in our mainstream political discourse, debate and agenda setting.

**Enhance cooperation and connection with social media authorities**

The law enforcement agency often struggles to track the violence committed using the online platform since they do not get proper support from the social
media authorities. The government should give utmost priority to enhance collaboration with ‘social media authorities’ (ex: Facebook authority). At the same time, the government should be cautious about the violation of ‘right to privacy.’

Priority public bus

The most common playground for the abuser is, ‘public bus’ is the most common playground for the abuser. Taking a public bus is like a bad dream for many women in Bangladesh. The usual norm is to keep a few reserved seats (like 5-7 seats) for women and disabled people. However, during the rush hour, getting on a bus is a huge challenge. Here we propose that every bus should have at least two doors; for the women and the other for others use. Already ‘female bus service’ has been launched, but the number and frequency of the bus service need to be increased.

Educate young people regarding the opportunities and challenges of online media

Students or younger generation tend to make mistake or may become a victim of emotional violence at their early age due to their ignorance, especially in the cyber world which may have a devastating impact on their life. Addressing their ignorance and educating them to become a responsible internet user can protect them from becoming a potential victim of a future cyber bully. Considering the magnitude of the impacts of social media on teens and the youths, including a separate course or focused chapters in the school or college course curriculum could be a good idea, where teacher–students can do some open discussion about users’ responsibility during internet surfing and using the social media. Also, various workshops on ‘tips for online safety and privacy’ and “social networking do’s and don'ts” - can be arranged at the university level. Similar training and workshops can be organized in various ‘public’ and ‘private offices’ as a part of staff development programs.

Concluding remarks

In the present paper, we have talked about the emotional violence in public space, particularly the incidences that the youth faces in daily life. We believe that we have only scratched the surface on the field of emotional abuse in public space, and therefore, more systematic studies with a broader range of respondents need to be undertaken to frame and criminalize the acts that cause emotional abuse for the women. It will help to prevent some subversive forms of abusive acts towards women.
Notes

i. We refer patriarchy as social arrangements that privilege males, where men as a group given socially approved structural and ideological power to control and dominate women as a group. This is a hierarchical arrangement of the social space (Hunnicutt 2009).

ii. https://www.hofstede-insights.com/country-comparison/Bangladesh/


iv. RAB is an elite anti-crime and anti-terrorism force formed in 2004. RA consists of members of the Bangladesh Police, Bangladesh Army, Bangladesh Air Force, Border Guard Bangladesh and Bangladesh Ansar.

References


Emotional Violence Against Women in Public Sphere of Bangladesh


