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The Changing Face of Gender-Based Cyber Violence during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Unmasking Virtual Identities

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Abstract. In early 2020, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 spread across the globe, resulting in the World Health Organization classifying it as a pandemic and declaring a state of emergency. In response, many governments enforced lockdowns and implemented social distancing regulations to mitigate the risk of spreading of the virus. The intersection of the pandemic with the lack of gender-based emergency intervention strategies has endangered women and girls from two conflicting sites. They are confined at home, vulnerable to experiences of intimate and gender-based violence with limited available services to ensure their safety. This “shadow pandemic” has further increased gender-based cyber violence (G-BCV) where cyber perpetrators hide behind virtual identities to benefit from patterns of power and privilege, sexism and misogyny, racism, classism, and homophobia embedded in *cyberpower*. The magnitude of G-BCV is multifaceted in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. We advocate for coordinated prevention and intervention strategies during public health emergencies in order to tackle and mitigate G-BCV risks.

Keywords: COVID-19 Pandemic, Gender-Based Cyber Violence, Virtual Identity, CyberPower, Gender-Based Violence

Introduction

In early 2020, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19 spread across the globe, resulting in the World Health Organization (WHO) classifying it as a pandemic and declaring a state of emergency (WHO, 2020d). As the pandemic continued to cause illness and claim lives, the Canadian government, guided by the advice from the Public Health Agency of Canada, enforced lockdown and social distancing regulations to mitigate the risk of spreading of the virus (Government of Canada, 2020). As a result, public schools and post-secondary institutions were forced to suspend their in-person activities and transition their programs to virtual course delivery, coinciding with the mandatory closure of non-essential services (Government of Ontario, 2020). Although deemed necessary preventative measures, this lockdown upended the daily lives of most people by disrupting their work, socialization, and family dynamics.

These public health regulations presented unforeseen challenges including but not limited to daily activities, the economy, employment, health, parks and recreation, and many essential social services—including violence against women (VAW) support services targeting marginalized women and girls. The interruption of VAW services was in spite of warnings from UN Women (2020a) and other reports that gender-based violence (GBV) and threats to women and girls had only increased since the onset of the pandemic, including intimate partner violence to sexual assault and harassment, and sex trafficking (Dunham, 2020; Associated Press, 2020). While the lockdowns isolated some women and girls at home, others particularly essential workers were more likely to experience sexual violation during lockdown, where streets and public transit is less populated (UN Women, 2020a). The United Nations entity for gender equality, UN Women (2020a), uses the term *shadow pandemic* to refer to this alarming gender-based human rights violation (Khanlou, et al., 2020a). The shadow pandemic has resulted in increased demand for emergency shelters and safe homes in various countries, including Canada (Graham-Harrison, 2020; UN Women, 2020a).

Shifting people's work to their homes, and the isolation, fear, and uncertainty wrought by the pandemic has resulted in a greater reliance on information and communication technologies (ICT) and virtual spaces. From March to April of 2020 alone, reports indicate there was a 535% rise in daily traffic on Zoom, a prominent video conferencing service (Loots, et al., 2020; Paul, 2020). This virtual "new normal," although successful in bridging work, education, and socialization while under public health restrictions, has far-reaching implications for women and girls. One such example is the rise of "Zoom bombing" or video hijacking pranks (Paul, 2020), which can involve cyber bullying and cyber sexual violence (Loots, et al., 2020) such as bombarding women with unsolicited pornographic videos or sexually explicit material when they attempt to join work related

virtual meetings or social events (UN Women, 2020b). A report by the United Nations (UN) early in the pandemic suggested there had been a 600% increase in malicious emails, with one cyber attack every 30 seconds (Associated Press, 2020).

Another gendered impact of social distancing regulations that is less openly discussed is the closure of adult entertainment services. As warned by the UN Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute (UNICRI), the pandemic has increased demand for online pornography (2020). An online survey of over 1500 adults on changes in their sexual relationships during the pandemic found that 20% reported having a new addition to their sex life, such as sexting, sending nude photos, having cybersex, or watching pornography (Lehmiller et al., 2020). The recent increase in the online porn industry has increased the vulnerability of women and girls towards gender-based cyber violence (G-BCV), including sexual exploitation and sex trafficking (Trueman, 2020). For instance, the office of the eSafety Commissioner of Australia reported a 50% hike in G-BCV in one month (UN Women, 2020b).

Reports further reveal a major spike in online stalking, bullying, sexual harassment and sex trolling during this period (Loots, et al., 2020; UN Women, 2020b). Although the COVID-19 pandemic may appear responsible for increased incidences of G-BCV on the surface, such a perception will present gender-based violence as merely a predictable outcome of public health emergencies. This assumption has two possible interrelated downstream effects that tactically allow further violence. First, it will diminish the consequences/responsibilities of cyber crime prevention strategies when women and girls' human rights are violated. Second, it will leave unchallenged a chain of systems that permit, sustain, and perpetuate power and control where G-BCV is exercised. G-BCV is a manifestation of misogyny, sexism and homophobia perpetuating violence against women and girls both locally and globally. It can also intensify during public health emergencies because government priorities shift toward emerging health threats and minimizing socio-economic disruption, with less attention given to women's safety (WHO, 2020c). It is predicted that G-BCV will increase ever more post COVID-19 due to the already weakened economy and enforcement (UN Women 2020b).

As academics with extensive experience in the fields of social work and nursing, and specifically with gender-based violence and gender-based cyber violence, we argue for coordinated prevention and intervention strategies during public health emergencies to mitigate G-BCV risks. Our previous study on cyber sexual violence (Cyber-SV) found that G-BCV exists on a continuous spectrum extending from online while causing transnational harm, trauma, shame, and humiliation to offline where women become a subject of direct violence (Pashang et al., 2018). These unique features make discourse about G-BCV complex and its impact multifaceted. As such, we consider G-BCV a human rights concern with far reaching consequences at the individual, family,

community, and transnational levels (Pashang et al., 2018). As emphasised by the UN, there is a pressing need to ensure a secure, functioning cyberspace (Associated Press, 2020) where women and girls are not at risk of cyber exposure and G-BCV.

We acknowledge that cyber crime in general, and cyber sexual violence in particular, affect all members of society regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, and particularly lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer or questioning, and Two-Spirit (LGBTQ2S+) individuals. However, this article specifically explores the impact of G-BCV on women and girls who may or may not identify as any given gender or sexual orientation. The theory section will be followed by the exploration of an analytical lens utilizing *virtual identities* within the context of *cyberpower*. In this article we refer to virtual identity as mask worn by cyber perpetrators to cover their real identities in order to avoid social sanctions or legal percussion, whereas cyberpower extends such discourse to virtual spaces. The article will conclude by providing three recommendations for how to best confront G-BCV.

Literature Review

Gender-based violence against women and girls, including intimate partner abuse, is a universal concern (UN Women, 2020a). In 2020, at least 18% of women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 reported physical and sexual abuse by their intimate partners (UN Women, 2020a). Many incidences of GBV, however, are kept silent. While over 35% of women will face some form of sexual or intimate violence in their lifetime, health crises places women at even higher risks of GBV (WHO, 2020b; Khanlou, et al., 2020b).

Women and girls are not only subjected to abuse in their homes, but also at their workplaces, educational institutions, public spaces, and communities. This is mostly caused by the lack of legal enforcement, preventative policies and front-line services that together they deepen a vulnerable state for women and girls beyond direct abuse, to include cyber violation. Gender-based cyber violence as a layer of the shadow pandemic is worsened due to the lack of attention and resources given to GBV protective measures (UNICRI, 2020; WHO, 2020c).

With the initial spread of COVID-19 and the enforcement of lockdowns, many organizations relied heavily on information and communication technologies (ICT) and virtual spaces for service delivery, collaboration, and employee engagement. Schools and academic institutions were among the most affected, being left with no option but to abruptly transition to virtual learning. In addition, physical and social distancing regulations resulted in a major shift in the ways in which people communicated and socialized with one another, also heavily relying on these systems. This increased reliance on ICT and virtual spaces raised significant concerns about the occurrence of cybercrimes (UNICRI, 2020;

UN Women, 2020b; Associated Press, 2020).

The discourse around cybercrimes is evolving and complex. The term includes offences committed by means of a computer and computer networks, through spreading of computer viruses, hacking and other forms of attacks (McGure & Dowling, 2013). Gender-based cybercrimes in particular have become increasingly common and more widespread during the pandemic (Ragavan et al., 2020). According to pre-pandemic reports, by age 15, 23% of women had experienced online abuse or harassment, and 10% had experienced some form of online violence (UN Human Rights Council, 2018; European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). In Canada, it is reported that one in five women experienced online harassment in 2018 (UN Women, 2020b).

Gender-based cyber violence does not occur in a vacuum, it is a by-product of a system that tolerates victimization, trafficking and sexual violation of women and girls throughout their lifespan. Because the COVID-19 pandemic is the first major public health emergency of the social media age, ICT is being increasingly used as a means of spreading the shadow pandemic of gender-based violence (UN Women, 2020b).

The shadow pandemic has added a new dimension to the ongoing issue of gender-based violence against women and girls. Lockdowns and social distancing regulations have increased demand for online pornography which consequently place women and girls at a higher risk of becoming the target of sexual exploitation, forced drug addiction and sex trafficking to respond to such demand (UNICRI, 2020; UN Women, 2020a; Trueman, 2020). Sex trafficking often rampant during economic difficulties or public health emergencies. The pervasive nature of online pornography and online sex work enables sex traffickers and cyber perpetrators to adopt to the emerging ICT tools and circumstances not only to identify and recruit victims but further learn about supply and demand drivers (Phoebe, 2021). This adds another layer of complexity to the health and safety of women and girls during these stressful and life-threatening times. On one hand, women and girls' livelihood and survival has depended on ICT during the COVID-19 pandemic, but on the other, they are consequently subjected to sexual exploitation and ICT related violations and harms more than ever.

In recent decades, the Canadian government has enacted laws such as Bill C-13, the *Protecting Canadians From Online Crime Act* (Government of Canada, 2015), to criminalize the non-consensual sharing of intimate images. And at the global level, given that cyber violence breaches international human rights laws, many countries have also implemented cybercrime legislation to tackle gender-based cyber violence ranging from sexist, derogatory comments and trolling, to everyday threats and stalking. Despite such growing concern, governments have been slow to apply their legislative powers in regulating online platforms (Mudgway & Jones, 2020). For instance, most multilateral institutions are investing to tackle cybercrimes during the pandemic, focusing on those deemed a risk

to the economy, medical and research information, corporations, cybersecurity, and infrastructures, as well as specific fraudulent financial activities (Associated Press, 2020; UNICRI, 2020; WHO, 2020a). While it is critical to implement global laws, policies and regulations to dismantle all forms of cybercrimes during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, such prioritization should not exclude the human rights of women and girls.

A recent report by the United Nations (2018) from before the pandemic revealed that at least 80% of sexual depictions of children were that of girls. Young women between 18 and 29 years of age are at high risk of becoming the target of cyber violence (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014). In a 2017 survey by Amnesty International, 23% of the respondents across eight developed countries reported having experienced online abuse or harassment more than once in their lifetime (Amnesty International, 2018). The UN Human Rights Council implies the widespread online violence against women a main reason behind women and girls falling behind in the global digital divide (UN Human Rights Council, 2018). More recently, an artificial intelligence apps such as “DeepNude” and “deepfake bot” have extended gender-based cyber violence to a new imagination. In exchange of a small amount of money, these apps allow users to upload a clothed photo of a woman or girl and strip them into a nude sexual object without their knowledge or permission (Hao, 2020).

Gender-based cyber violence is further intended to control, expose, shame and humiliate women online for the purpose of extorting money or sexual favours, known as *sextortion* (The Economic Times, 2020). Perpetrators of sextortion often rely on indecent exposure, unsolicited obscene pictures, abuse, hacking, threats, and ransom demands (The Economic Times, 2020). These online violations often lead to offline sexual exploitation and sex trafficking (UNICRI, 2020). The humiliation of sexual exposure has detrimental social, mental and physical health impacts on women and girls including depression, isolation, suicidal thoughts and unwillingness to use ICT (Pashang et al., 2018). Therefore, G-BCV not only risks women and girls’ safety, it also limits their access to technologically-based employment and education, as well as participation in social and political opportunities, particularly during public health emergencies.

Analytical Exploration: Virtual Identity

As the world focuses on preventative measures to mitigate health threats caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, governments are also being vigilant for cybercrime. The lockdown regulations that have caused a reliance on ICT, has also unduly led to higher occurrence of cybercrime (WHO, 2020a). Cybercrime is not gender neutral; the intersection of cyberspace with gender holds the potential to perpetuate gender-based

cyber violence. However, this is not to hold women and girls' reliance on ICT during the pandemic lockdown responsible for cyber violations, as such a claim provokes two interrelated concerns. The first problem occurs when looking at social categories without understanding how they are constituted, and the second lies in producing social media related identity politics (Jibrin & Salem, 2015).

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, rather than problematizing the lockdowns for the spike in gender-based cyber violence, the focus should be placed on interrogating a set of systems that perpetuate gender subjugation while reinforcing identity politics. Identity politics is deeply rooted in social media culture, where on one hand it shapes our views on emerging issues, and on the other it provides a platform to construct and adopt varying personal and global identities (Kelner, 2005). One such identity is the *virtual identity*, which often masks the offline identity one holds or presents in a public arena, for fears of legal percussion or distortion of public image. The costs of the pandemic have been substantial for women and girls—particularly those associated with the interruption to the criminal justice enforcement, where cyber perpetrators using virtual identities can act with impunity since gender-based cyber violence often occurs in virtual spaces (UN Women 2020b).

Virtual identity is constructed behind a screen, through a forged, imaginary, idealized, or real identity—all depending on the nature of virtual transaction. It can glorify, sexualize, or shame bodies of known or unknown individuals without their knowledge or their consents across the globe (Pashang et al., 2018). Virtual identity continues to benefit from the same patterns of power and privilege, sexism and misogyny, racism, classism, and homophobia embedded in the cultural fabric of society. That is to say, cyber-perpetrators with virtual identities are equipped with the power of harming gendered identities through a screen at any time and place with the speed of a network, without making any connection between the self and the exposed gendered body, or the violent act and its impact on the survivor. Online pornography in particular thrives in a sex-charged culture, leading to harm within the shadow pandemic of gender-based cyber violence. For instance, 88% of pornographic content depicts scenes of violence against women and girls (Trueman, 2020). Virtual identity is therefore tantamount to patriarchal violence. It is embedded in *cyberpower* at the interrelated crossroads of individual, social and imaginary levels, as described by Jordan (2003). Cyberpower is an extension of patriarchal socio-political and economic structure that afford cyber perpetrators with the mean to justify the commodification of women's sexual labour, in addition to a systemic power to shame and exploit their bodies virtually in order to sustain such power and privilege. The ideological discourse beneath cyberpower and its implications are presented in the form of gender-based cyber violence.

Virtual identity recreates a sexualized and victimized gendered identity, and cyberpower extends the discourse of patriarchal power by

connecting virtual identity (cyber-perpetrators) with the object (technology), and cyberspace (imaginary) with objectified and sexualized bodies (women and girls). While the real-world places certain legal constraints on the objectification of women's bodies, particularly for underage girls, virtual identity is capable of breaking through these limitations by normalizing the objectification of women across their lifespan with impunity. This increases as the cyber-perpetrator loses control in the real world due to pandemic restrictions, including from isolation and loss of freedom of movement to lack of access to adult entertainments, their need for to gain cyberpower increases. This need is permitted by a patriarchal system where gender-based violence and gender-based cyber violence are tolerated at best and promoted at worst.

While on the surface, G-BCV is sustained to gain power and control specifically over sex and the sexuality of women and girls, it also affects women and girls' voices as active digital citizens (UN Women, 2020b), despite increased digital social and political activism against gender-based cyber violence. As such, it is critical to address and prioritize the problem of G-BCV during the COVID-19 pandemic—and beyond.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This article expanded on the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic has created a concurrent shadow pandemic (UN Women, 2020a), endangering women and girls from two conflicting sources. On one hand, many have been confined to their homes, leaving them vulnerable to intimate partner and gender-based violence. On the other, limited services available to ensure their safety during lockdowns have left them more vulnerable in public spaces outside the home as well (Khanlou et al., 2020b). This situation reveals the shortcomings of the existing gender-based intervention and prevention strategies, where women and girls are left to fend for themselves when these are closed down or de-prioritized during emergency situations.

The cost of the pandemic has incurred for women and girls is complex and multifaceted. However, women and girls are not passive citizens. To confront GBC and G-BCV, women across the globe have formed various digital campaigns such as *Take Back the Tech* and *#SheTransformsTech*, and launched ICT regulation tools and ICT research and technology developments to address G-BCV (UN Women, 2020b).

In conclusion, we argue that a set of prevailing patriarchal values embedded across social systems have exacerbated violence against women and girls during the COVID-19 pandemic. We have specifically focused on gender-based cyber violence, noting that girls and women at risk have not been fully protected during this period, despite rising incidences of cyber violence. The inaction of law, policy and practice allow the formation of virtual identities where cyber-perpetrators gain and maintain

cyberpower.

Expanding on the recommendations put forth by UN Women (2020a; 2020b), we advocate the following action items:

I. Ensuring safety of women and girls

The magnitude of gender-based cyber violence is multifaceted in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The disruption to programs serving women and children, and the inability of governments to prioritise their safety and human rights is concerning. We advocate for safe, universal access to ICT and virtual spaces for all women and girls. Any public health response to the pandemic must include secure access to ICT with strong enforcement measures where impunity of cyber-perpetrators (virtual identities) to enact G-BCV is not tolerated. This includes social media platforms that, on one hand, promote online sexualized violence against women and girls, and on the other, reinforce the formation of virtual identities within the context of cyberpower.

II. Improving violence against women (VAW) programs

During the lockdown stages of the pandemic, many in-person VAW services were suspended despite increasing instances of intimate and gender-based violence. When women and girls' only escape from abuse is to leave home, and public spaces are no longer safe due to suspension of public services (UN Women, 2020a; Khanlou et al, 2020a), This places them at higher risks of sex-trafficking and virtual sexual exploitation such as online pornography. Alternative accommodations beyond temporary shelters as well as emergency financial subsidies must be made available to marginalized women and girls.

III. Systemic and coordinated approaches to unmask virtual identity and interrupt cyberpower

Gender-based violence is a historical and systemic problem, and gender-based *cyber* violence, while only a recent concern, has far reaching negative effects on women and girls. Dismantling it requires commitments to intervene and prevent its reoccurrence in the future. We envision such commitment in the form of "cyber rights" as a matter of women and girls' human rights. Systemic and coordinated approaches to unmask virtual identities and interrupt cyber perpetrators' cyberpower is critical. This can be achieved through gender-based education within all institutions, human services and government organizations, public and academic institutions (including allocation of research funding), information and communication technologies (including cyber spaces and social media), as well as the Canadian criminal justice system. In doing so, Canada can become a global leader in promoting the need to address G-BCV during public health emergencies as the matter of the human rights.

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Soheila Pashang RSW, holds a PhD in the field of adult education, community development and counselling psychology from the University of Toronto and a Master's degree in the field of Social Work. Her interdisciplinary lifelong education has enhanced her perspectives to value research, theory, as well as experiential learnings that takes a person-centered approach to advocate for social justice. As a clinical therapist, she operates Dr. Soheila Pashang Counselling and Consulting tele-virtual clinic where she relies on her decades of working with interdisciplinary sectors within the health, settlement and the justice system including working with immigrants and refugees, families dealing with physical or developmental challenges, gender violence, mental health, addictions, childhood sexual trauma, grief and loss, and those who had encountered the criminal justice system. In 2018, she collaborated in an exploratory research to understand the mental health impacts of cyber sexual violence against young women. Her other recent work includes qualitative research on the issue of sex trafficking in Canada, racial justice, and grief in times of pandemic.

Nazilla Khanlou RN, PhD, is the Women's Health Research Chair in Mental Health in the Faculty of Health at York University and an Associate Professor in its School of Nursing. Professor Khanlou's clinical background is in psychiatric nursing. Her overall program of research is situated in the interdisciplinary field of community-based mental health promotion in general, and mental health promotion among youth and women in multicultural and immigrant-receiving settings in particular. She has received grants from peer-reviewed federal funding agencies to conduct research on gender-based violence. She has also collaborated in research on the mental health impacts of cyber sexual violence against young women. Dr. Khanlou was the 2011-2013 Co-Director of the Ontario Multicultural Health Applied Research Network (OMHARN). She is founder of the International Network on Youth Integration (INYI), an international network for knowledge exchange and collaboration on youth. She has published articles, books, and reports on immigrant youth and women, and mental health. She is involved in knowledge translation to the public through media.

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Conflict of Interest

Authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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