

Prevalence of Cyber Bullying Among Women in A Rural Community, South Kerala: A Community Based Cross Sectional Study

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Abstract

Background: Social media has grown to be the most influential and important virtual space that has revolutionized the digital world since its inception across diverse settings, but has also increased the rate of cybercrimes committed against women. This study was aimed to estimate the prevalence of cyberbullying, types of cyberbullying, response when cyberbullied, perceptions on cyberbullying and its association with sociodemographic variables among women residing in a rural community at southern Kerala.

Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted among 289 women in a rural community in Thiruvananthapuram district, Kerala using a pre designed, pretested interviewer administered questionnaire. Cyberbullying was found to be prevalent (10.4%) and the most common form of cyber bullying was impersonation (40%) and (33.33%) of them reacted by deleting their accounts. Majority (52.2%) of the participants belong to the age group of (31 - 45) years, were graduates (62.3%), married (85.8%) belonging to low socioeconomic strata (70.2%) of the society. Majority (83.8%) of women have a special preference to face book among the various social media sites. There was a statistically significant association between demographic variables such as Age (p value 0.001**), Educational qualification (p value 0.038*), Occupation (p value 0.030*), Socioeconomic status (p value 0.006**) and type of family (p value 0.005**).

Conclusion: Although digital revolution has been a boon, this study has revealed a vivid picture regarding cyberbullying, the hidden arena of concerns faced by women.

Keywords: Cyber bullying, Women, Rural Community

Introduction

Cyberspace is a borderless realm “created through the interconnection of millions of computers

by a global network which is built as a layered construct and is a space characterized by the people technology elements, bounded by logical territories

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and inhabited by zeroes (00000) and ones (11111)¹. Cyber world has created a new perspective in human behaviour and has redefined a new world packed with uncertainties in the realm of human enterprise. Cyberbullying has become a significant public health concern over the last years. It is reported as an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or an individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend himself or herself.² Very often the indirect nature of cyberbullying makes it difficult to evaluate the intentional or reactive nature of the attack. The forms of cyberbullying^{2,3} include:

1. Exclusion: It is the premeditated exclusion of someone. Exclusion is a factor in both online bullying and physical bullying scenarios.

2. Harassment: It is a broader term which refers to a constant pattern of sending hurtful or threatening online messages with the intention of doing harm to someone.

3. Outing/Doxing: It refers to the act of openly revealing sensitive or personal information about someone without their consent with the objective of embarrassing or humiliating them.

4. Trickery: It incorporates the element of deception. The bully develops cordial relationships with the victim and give them a false sense of security, but later discloses.

5. Fraping: It occurs when a bully posts offensive stuff using the name of the victim on social media.

6. Masquerading/Impersonation: It happens when a bully creates a false online identity or profile with the intent to bully someone online

7. Dissing/Denigration: In this a bully spread cruel information about their target through public posts or private messages to either ruin their reputation or relationships with others.

8. Flaming/Roasting: It is the act of using abusive language or profanity to publish insult online.

Kerala known as God's own country has a high hold on patriarchal system where men hold primary power and predominate in roles of political leadership but women are expected to be ideal and restrict themselves from voicing their thoughts for their

benefit. But over the last decade as the technology development has become rampant, various social networking sites has emerged and women shows the courage to express their views publicly.

During COVID-19, there has been an increase in usage of social media among women as they were confined to home due to imposition of stringent rules due to lock down. On the other side there has also been a surge in the reported cases of crimes committed online against them. As per the statistics of National Crime Records Bureau⁴, in 2020 nearly 426 cybercrimes have been registered out of which 246 (58%) of them were against women. Kerala is in the 6th place when it comes to cyber-crimes in India. Nearly 5 out of 8 cyber cases committed are against women and most women bullied online are teenagers or young women. Kochi, the commercial capital of Kerala reports the most cyber cases in Kerala. Cyber bullying, sexting, violation of privacy are the common cybercrimes seen.

The increasing number of cyber-crimes against women also brings to lime light that the women who are open about their opinions are the main targets of cyber bullies even to the extent of death threats⁵. Cyberbullying is related to significant mental issues. They face negative consequences such as higher rates of depression, anxiety, reduced feelings of self-worth and difficulty in sleeping. Higher number of physical issues such as headaches, stomach aches, increased instances of eating disorders and suicide attempts has also been observed among those who were bullied. A cross-sectional study conducted in Saudi Arabia to estimate the prevalence of mental health issues associated with cyber victimization among 179 female nursing students reported to have low self-esteem (19.55%), depression (30.17%), Internet addiction (49.16%) and anxiety (34.64%) respectively⁶. Men who defend the harassed women are also the target of cyber bullies on social media. Ni et al. (2020) also on a cross-sectional study in China examined the impact of social media, for probable anxiety and depression in the community and health professionals among 1577, identified that about one-fifth of respondents reported anxiety and depression in long term use of social media⁷.

Gender differences exist in cyber victimization. Girls in real life may be incapable or may not be

having the physical capacities to bully but in an online environment they are able to cyberbully¹⁵. Women seek online environment for social networking, which poses them a greater risk of becoming a cyberbully victim¹⁶.

Over the past years as the reported incidence of cyber bullying is on the higher side and there is a paucity of literature in this, the researcher through this study aims to understand the prevalence of cyberbullying among women in a rural community.

Objectives:

1. To estimate the prevalence of cyberbullying among women in a rural community, South Kerala.
2. To identify the forms of cyberbullying and the response shown by the victims of cyber bullying.
3. To understand the perceptions regarding cyberbullying among women using social media in a rural community
4. To identify the association between cyber bullying with selected socio demographic variables.

Materials and Methods

A descriptive cross sectional study design was amended for the current study. This study was conducted among women from a rural community in the southern side of Thiruvananthapuram district, South Kerala from August - November 2022. Purposive sampling technique was adopted. The sample size was taken as 289 women in the age group of 18 - 45 years based on previous prevalence of cybercrime among women⁴ was 58% with allowable error of 10%. A pretested predesigned questionnaire was prepared by the investigator and validation of the tool was done by five subject experts and the content validity index is (CVI=0.8). Translation and back translation was done and the translated version illustrated good internal consistency with Cronbach's Alpha >0.8) and The data collection was done after obtaining Institutional Ethics Committee. Prior permission was also obtained from the Panchayat president of that particular community. Pilot study was done and the study was found to be feasible, no further modifications were done

The data was collected by the investigators along with the support of the local volunteers by visiting the individual households. To ensure uniformity in data collection a training program was given to the local volunteers also made to understand about the purpose of the study and the ways to do data collection. The study participants were given a copy of information sheet and after explaining the study purpose to the participants, an informed consent was obtained and a self-administered questionnaire was given. The duration of data collection per participant was about 30 minutes. Covid appropriate behaviours were followed and the filled questionnaires were collected in a cloth cover. Arrangements were also done to seek help with the counsellors of the nearby hospital in case any participant experiences significant emotional distress after data collection. Local volunteers were also instructed to maintain anonymity and confidentiality and all measures were taken to prevent the leak of data to the public. Women residing in rural community was asked to fill a self-administered questionnaire and the response rate was 95%. About 5% of the questionnaires which were incomplete were excluded from the study.

Results

Distribution of study participants based on sociodemographic variables (N=289)

Majority (52.2%) of the study participants were in the age group of 31 - 45 years, (85.8%) of them married, (46.4%) of them were homemakers and (81%) belong to nuclear family. [Table 1]

Distribution of study participants based on prevalence of cyberbullying (N=289) The prevalence rate of cyberbullying among women in the rural community was (10.4%) [Figure 1]

Distribution of study participants based on their response to cyberbullying (n=30)

Around (33.33%) of the study participants deleted the account when bullied online, (30%) of them posted a public reply. (20%) ignored, (10%) seek others help, while only (6.67%) contacted the cyber cell. [Table 3]

Distribution of study participants based on their perceptions regarding cyberbullying (N=289)

Majority (56%) of women agreed that cyber bullying is normal in the world of social media, and (53%) agreed that they are bullied online either through threats or body shamming. If cyber bullied (57%) of women expressed it is better to remain silent and nearly (82%) of women agreed to inform law enforcement to handle cyber bullying. [Table 4]

Table 1: Distribution of participants based on sociodemographic variables (n=289)

Sl. No	Variables	f	%
1.	Age in years		
	18 - 30	138	47.8
	31 - 45	151	52.2
2.	Marital Status		
	Married	248	85.8
	Widowed	5	1.7
	Separated	4	1.4
	Divorced	2	0.7
	Single	30	10.4
3.	Educational Qualification		
	Illiterate	5	1.7
	Primary	20	6.9
	Higher Secondary	84	29.1
	Graduate	180	62.3
4	Occupation		
	Skilled	119	41.2
	Unskilled	36	12.5
	Home Maker	134	46.4

5	Socioeconomic status		
	BPL	86	29.8
	APL	203	70.2
6	Type of Family		
	Nuclear Family	234	81.0
	Extended Family	41	14.2
	Single Parent Family	7	2.4
	Step Family	6	2.1

Table 2. Distribution of study participants based on types of cyberbullying (n = 30)

Sl. No	Type of Bullying	f	%
a	Masquerade	12	40
b	Harassment	6	20
c	Trickery	4	13.33
d	Denigration	8	26.67

Table 3. Distribution of study participants based on their response to cyberbullying (n=30)

Sl. No	Response to Bullying	f	%
a	Contact Cyber cell	2	6.67
b	Ignore	6	20
c	Post a public reply	9	30
d	Delete account	10	33.33
e	Seek others help	3	10

Table 4: Distribution of study participants based on their perception regarding cyberbullying (n=289)

Sl. No	STATEMENTS	Agree		Neither agree nor disagree		Disagree	
		f	%	f	%	f	%
1	Cyberbullying is normal in the world of social media	162	56	90	31	37	13
2	Women are cyberbullied through threats or body shamming	154	53	113	39	24	8
3	Cyber bullying happens as a defence mechanism for their own security	69	24	156	54	64	22
4	It's better to remain silent if cyber bullied	165	57	98	34	26	9
5	Law enforcement agencies should put forth stringent measures to handle cyber bullying	237	82	40	14	12	4

Prevalence of Cyberbullying

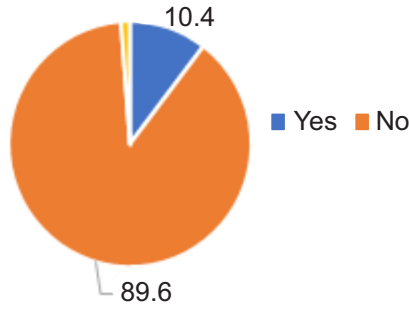


Figure 1: Distribution of study participants based on prevalence of Cyberbullying (n = 289)

Table 5: Distribution of study participants based on association on prevalence of cyberbullying with selected sociodemographic variables. (n=289)

Sl. No	Variables	Yes (n=30)		No (n=259)		df	p Value
		F	%	f	%		
1.	Age in years					1	0.001**
	18-30	23	76.67	115	44.4		
	31-45	7	23.33	144	55.6		
2.	Marital Status					4	0.015*
	Married	24	80.02	224	86.49		
	Widowed	2	06.66	3	1.156		
	Separated	2	06.66	2	0.77		
	Divorced	0	0	2	0.77		
	Single	2	06.66	28	10.81		
3	Educational Qualification					3	0.099*
	Illiterate	1	3.33	4	1.55		
	Primary	0	0	20	7.72		
	Higher Secondary	5	16.67	79	30.50		
	Graduate	24	80.00	156	60.23		
4	Occupation					2	0.073*
	Skilled	17	56.67	102	39.39		
	Unskilled	5	16.66	31	11.96		
	Home Maker	8	26.67	126	48.65		
5	Socioeconomic Status					1	0.007**
	BPL	3	10	83	32.04		
	APL	27	90	176	67.96		
6.	Type of Family					4	<0.001***
	Nuclear Family	22	73.33	212	81.85		
	Extended Family	2	6.66	39	15.05		
	Single Parent Family	2	6.66	5	01.93		
	Step Family	4	13.33	2	0.77		
	Childless Family	0	0	1	0.38		

Discussion

The results of the present study demonstrate the intricacy on cyberbullying and its forms among women residing in a rural community. Important findings are extrapolated from the current study. The generalizability of study findings was limited only to the women in the age group of 18 – 45 years in rural settings. Future studies are recommended among women in diverse settings to get a vivid picture on this issue in the iceberg.

In this study cyberbullying was found to be prevalent (10.4%) among women in rural community. This value is most likely to be lower than the actual prevalence as the participants had to fill the questionnaire in their home environment and were often accompanied by their own spouses or other family members and also due to the stigma associated with the topic. These findings are in par with the study finding of Changho Lee et al⁸, where the prevalence rate was (14.6%). Contrary to this Ranjith et al on his study has found the prevalence rate⁹ of cyber bullying as (37%). The higher rate may be due to the population which has differed. Another cross-sectional study among 501 female adolescents in Nepal identified that the prevalence rate of cyberbullying is (32.5%) which is on the higher side¹⁰.

S. Aberna et al identified the forms of cyberbullying¹¹ as Impersonation, hacking, trolling and message bombing which are congruent with the findings of the present study where Impersonation (40%), denigration (26.67%), harassment (20%) and trickery (13.33 %) were the common forms of cyberbullying faced by women.

Around (33.33%) of the study participants in the current study deleted the account when bullied online, (30%) of them posted a public reply, (20%) ignored, (10%) seek others help, while only (6.67%) contacted the cyber cell. Peter J R Macaulay et al in his study¹¹ has identified similar response of victims of cyberbullying such as seeking empathy, asking a friend's help, challenging and ignoring the matter¹². Sumera Saleem et al on the study on identifying the association¹² of cyberbullying with variables identified age, socioeconomic status and digital divide as significant factors.¹³ These findings are in par with the current study which identified that there is a

statistically significant association of cyberbullying with demographic variables such as Age (p value 0.001**), Educational qualification (p value 0.038*), Occupation (p value 0.030*), Socioeconomic status (p value 0.006**) and type of family (p value 0.005**).

Sociodemographic factors play a major role in being victimized. Adolescent girls are more likely to have experienced cyberbullying in their lifetimes. In a cross-sectional study among 765 young students, in Spain majority (72.9%) of them were women under 20 – 30 years of age. Women aged under 20 obtained higher values in all the different sub-scales than those in the 20-24 age range¹⁴

IMPLICATIONS:

Evidence based interventions with a strong theoretical framework, integrating the application of theories in interventions, promoting proactive and reactive approaches in combination were found to be effective in reducing cyberbullying to a certain extent. These interventions are designed to combat cyberbullying by adopting various strategies in the young age itself. Individual training on prevention of cyberbullying. victims receive instruction on how to advocate for themselves and protect themselves against continued bullying without relying on teachers, peers, or parents through cyberbullying sensitization symptoms. This empowers them to avoid shame and prevents labelling as victims. They do not need to disclose their personal struggles and secrets to their acquaintances, which maintains their self-identity and self-esteem. Continuous improvement, updating and contextualization of the program and comprehensive integration is needed to promote safety and empowerment.¹⁷

Conclusion

The present study concluded that cyber bullying is prevalent in community in various forms and the response of victim varies. These findings add credibility to the fact that cyberbullying is prevalent in diverse settings. Though significant association was found among the demographic variables, there still exists lacunae in understanding the real picture of cyberbullying. This lacuna can be brought to the limelight and remedial measures can be identified by exploring further through community based

participatory research among the public and community stakeholders.

Public health stakeholders can play a pivotal role in minimizing cybervictimization through implementing preventive measures across all sections and settings of the society. Action-based research will enable to foresee the strategies which can be adapted among weaker sections of community to prevent being cybervictimized. It's equally important to ensure that the public will be aware about the hidden trap in cyberspace and adapt appropriate cybersecurity measures to forego with a healthy mental wellbeing.

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