Dealing with ever-growing cyber-harassment against women

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While the spread of the internet targets to carve out a path towards an equal and inclusive world, women disproportionately face violence and harassment in this cyberspace. Such harassment impedes their freedom and basic human rights. However, this issue is overlooked in most cases.

According to PrivaC, Bangladesh's first non-government cybercrime countermeasure services organisation, they have commonly dealt with cyber offences like cyber sexual harassment, cyberstalking, cyberbullying, blackmailing, threatening, revenge pornography, hacking, phishing, and so on in Bangladesh. Here is a handout of some options that you may pursue if you face any form of cyber-harassment.

Document all the proofs of the harassment
Keeping a record of any cyber-harassment is useful while reporting it to the police or to alert others about the abuser. Documentation may seem time-consuming and can trigger your trauma. However, saving all relevant evidence is important to expose the abuser.

Nuzhat Minhaz, Founder of PrivaC, shared about a common form of cyber sexual harassment such as blackmailing or revenge pornography by a former partner. She said, "A former partner may blackmail someone with sensitive information, images or videos, and threaten to spread those. To seek legal help, it is important to keep documentation of that person's threats. And make sure that the abuser does not get to know about the documentation until you seek help from the police. Otherwise, it may trigger your former partner to publish your sensitive information."

WHAT TO DOCUMENT
1) Messages sent on social media platforms
If someone is sending you inappropriate and offensive content to harass you, take screenshots as evidence before the abuser removes those to save themselves from being exposed or punished. There are some default apps available on Windows desktops and smartphones to take screenshots or screen recording. You may use downloadable screen recording apps (e.g. Screenshot touch, AZ Screen Recorder) in case those default apps are not working.

2) Threatening emails
In case you are being threatened or harassed through emails, be sure to document the harassing messages along with the header containing the IP address. It may help law enforcement to identify the actual sender. Open an email and find three vertical or horizontal dots or the 'More' option. Click on 'View raw message' or 'Show Original'. On somewhere between 'Received:' lines, you will find the IP address (for example, 192.158.1.38). Remember, just copy and paste the offending email to seek help. It is better not to forward the original email.

3) Record harassing texts and calls
A harasser, knowing you personally or having a contact number of yours, may call you over the phone or text you. Take screenshots of those texts and record the calls. If your smartphone does not have any default app for recording calls, you can use apps like Cube ACR and Automatic Call Recorder.

Report and block the harassers on social media platforms and phone
Remember that social media platforms have their own terms of service in the case of online harassment. Each has its own features and processes for reporting and blocking. Most of them have specific instructions available in their 'Help Centre'.

For example, to report harassment on messenger, open the chat of the abuser and go to the 'Conversation information'. Click on the three dots and open 'Something's Wrong'. Select a category such as Harassment, Sharing Inappropriate Things, and so on based on the conversation, and click 'Send Feedback'. Block that abuser so that you do not receive further harassing messages and calls. Similarly, you can report and block an abuser on WhatsApp, and mention which act of that person has violated its terms and policies.

In addition, you can block a harasser sending you offensive texts and calls by clicking 'Add to Blacklist' on your smartphone. If you cannot find this option, use apps such as Truecaller, Calls Blacklist – Call Blocker, Should I Answer?

Take legal help
Bangladesh Police have already launched 'Police Cyber Support for Women - PCSW', an all-women special wing to provide help to the victims of cyber-harassment. Victims can contact this wing by dialling 999 from any part of the country for any emergency, and their hotline is 01320000888. They can also be reached via their Facebook page with the same name and email (cybersupport.women@police.gov.bd). For legal assistance, this cell helps the victims to contact the nearby police station.

Moreover, anyone can contact PrivaC which helps cyber victims by connecting them to verified professional services such as medical, psychological, legal, and technical. "We connect cyber victims to specific legal resources according to their situations by emotionally empowering them in the process. We recommend cyber victims to have some form of personal support (family, friends, etc) when they are reaching for legal solutions, as the process can be emotionally challenging, especially if it is faced with social stigma surrounding being a victim (for example, victim-blaming, public shaming, etc).", said Nuzhat.

Reach them out on their Facebook page or via email (privac.report@gmail.com).

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