Nonparticipation of Bangladeshi Women in #MeToo Movement

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ABSTRACT
In October 2017, an unprecedented social media movement started where women from all around the world publicly shared their untold stories of being sexually harassed using the hashtag #MeToo (or some variants of it). While this movement raised voices against sexual harassment across the globe, many women in South Asia did not participate in this movement. In this paper, we present our study on non-participation of many Bangladeshi women in this movement through an anonymous online survey (n = 180), and an in-depth interview study (n = 30). Our study shows that many Bangladeshi women, despite being supportive of the movement, did not participate in this movement because of several social, cultural, and infrastructural reasons. We use transnational feminism as a theoretical framework to explain their non-participation. We further discuss how the lessons learned from this study help us better understand the participation, functioning, and impact of social media movements.

1 INTRODUCTION
"I was 16. My middle aged male boss harassed me. I never talk about it. He wasn’t the last."

This and many such tweets started to explode the Twitter newsfeed soon after actress Alyssa Milano encouraged spreading the #MeToo phrase as part of an awareness campaign in order to reveal the ubiquity of sexual harassment, tweeting: "If all the women who have been sexually harassed or assaulted wrote 'Me too' as a status, we might give people a sense of the magnitude of the problem" on October 15, 2017 [9]. However, the origin of #MeToo dates back to 2006 when social activist Tarana Burke launched a grass-roots level campaign for “empowering through empathy” for the women of color within their community [19]. Milano’s call for sharing harassment experiences with #MeToo hashtag that followed her own allegation against Harvey Weinstein, an American film producer, for sexually abusing her [12] took the original movement to a whole new level and millions of women around the world started participating. Before this, a few other hashtags were also used for similar purposes 1, including #MyHarveyWeinstein, #YouOkSis, and #SurvivorPrivilege. However, none of them could create such a massive movement on the social media.

After Milano’s tweet, within 24 hours, there were more than 4.5 million posts on different social network platforms with hashtag #MeToo (or some variants of it) [17]. There were millions of posts on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and other social media where victims of sexual harassment were sharing their experiences, revealing the name of their harassers, accusing institutions of not being strict about harassment, and reflecting on different laws and policies. While the majority of the victims were women, there were also victims of other genders. Moreover, many other users joined this movement by posting with this hashtag to show their support for the cause. Women from all over the world, women of different age groups, of different colors, and of different professions shared their experiences of being harassed at their home, at their workplace, at public places, and in social network platforms. These hashtagged posts were also shared, re-posted, and re-tweeted. The silence around sexual harassment was broken, and the tabooed topics of “sex” and “harassment” were widely discussed.

While many women around the world participated in this movement, many of them did not. Their non-participation is not often caused by the unavailability of technology, inability to communicate over digital media, or their difference from the spirit of this movement. In this paper, we present our study on the participation of women in #MeToo movement through a set of methods and their corresponding data - (a) an anonymous online survey of 180 Bangladeshi women, and (b) in-depth interviews of 28 Bangladeshi women. Based on all these data, we intend to make the following contributions: (a) present the contents that have surfaced through the voices of the women who participated in the #MeToo movement, (b) present why many Bangladeshi women did not participate in this movement, (c) propose a methodological suggestion to better understand the operation of an online global movement.

2 RELATED WORK
Sexual harassment is bullying or coercion of a sexual nature or the unwelcome or inappropriate promise of rewards in exchange for sexual favors [16]. This is a serious offense that causes several negative impacts on the victims’ physical, psychological, and social health [7, 11]. Most incidents of sexual harassment remain unreported [2]. Many women do not talk about the sexual harassment that they experience [1]. In the western world, studies show that such a silence is sometimes caused by the fear of retaliation [4, 8] -
the fear that the allegation could be trivialized and ignored, or could even backfire. In some other cases, women do not report because they cannot imagine other people helping them, which is known as “bystander effect” [3]. Moreover, many workplaces harbor a “masculine culture” where harassment is seen as an act of power, and the female workers often prefer to keep silent about the harassment they experience in order to fit in and be “one of the guys” [6]. Speaking out is even harder for women in many places in the south Asia. In most places in the Indian subcontinent, for example, “sex” is a tabooed topic, and talking about sexual harassment is seen as an act of immorality [15]. This challenge is compounded by the strong patriarchal culture [10] in India and the middle-east [18], where women often depend on men for most things needed for their living including shelter, education, transportation, and health [13].

The #MeToo movement on Twitter and other social media is hence considered revolutionary. Such voluntary and spontaneous participation of millions of women across the globe in breaking down a silence that had long been suppressing them was unprecedented in the history. Since information and communication technologies are not equally distributed over all the countries in the world and overall communities, not everyone can participate in an online movement despite their interest. However, the objective of many online movements like #MeToo goes far beyond the interest of the comparatively privileged groups, and to the interest of the people who are not possibly connected to social media. The voices that are not heard over social media are hence important to learn for the success of a movement. In this light, it is important to know who is not participating in an online movement and why. We use transnational feminist framework [14] to understand the participation of Bangladeshi women in #MeToo movement.

3 DATA COLLECTION

Online Survey Data: We conducted an online survey among the women in Bangladesh to understand their participation in the #MeToo movement. We prepared a survey questionnaire using Google Form 2 and shared that to an assorted set of Facebook users. 180 women participated in the survey. Their participation was voluntary and anonymous. Table 1 shows demographic (age, education, occupation) information of the participants. About 69% of the participants are from the 21-30 age range, 72% completed Bachelors or a higher degree, and 61% are students.

In Person Interview Data: In order to get a deeper understanding of Bangladeshi women’s participation in the global #MeToo movement, we conducted a semi-structured interview study with adult female social media users in Dhaka, Bangladesh. We prepared a questionnaire of 15 questions around the participants demographic information, use of social media, opinions about sexual harassment, and online protests. It should be noted that, since sexual harassment is a tabooed topic in Bangladesh, we refrained from asking any direct question regarding our participants’ experience with it. All the interviewers were Bangladeshi women. We used ‘snowball sampling’ [5] for recruiting our participants. We started by interviewing participants within our social network first, and then we recruited more participants following the suggestions of our already interviewed participants. We stopped when we reached a theoretical saturation. A total of 30 participants were interviewed. Our participants were within the age limit from 20 years to 45 years. All of them graduated high-school. 18 of them were undergraduate students in different universities. 6 of them graduated college and were doing jobs. The rest 6 graduated from college and were homemakers. The participation in this study was voluntary. The interviews were conducted in Bengali. All the interviews were audio recorded upon the consent of the participants. The audio records were later transcribed and translated by the members of our research team.

4 ONLINE SURVEY DATA ANALYSIS

We asked 5 questions in the survey. English translations of the questions are provided below-

Q1 Are you aware of the recent #MeToo movement?
Q2 Have you ever been sexually harassed?
Q3 [Q2 == YES] Did you share your harassment experience in the social media?
Q4 [Q2 == YES & Q3 == YES] Why did you share?
Q5 [Q2 == YES & Q3 == NO] Why didn’t you share?

Among the 180 survey participants, about three-fourths (134 women) were aware of the #MeToo movement in the social media. So, it can be reasonably claimed that the #MeToo movement was successful in reaching to the majority of the women of Bangladesh who are active on Facebook. However, out of all the 137 participants who self-claimed to have been sexually harassed, less than one-third (33 women) of them shared their experience during the #MeToo movement while the majority (104) didn’t. Table 2 and 3 shows the distribution of sexually harassed participants across age and occupation categories, respectively.

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Table 1: Demographic distribution of the survey participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Category</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Education</th>
<th>Freq.</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below 21</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>8th Grade</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>10th Grade</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>12th Grade</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>Service Holder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Bachelors</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>Business Woman</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Masters</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Ph.D.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Distribution of sexually harassed women of different age categories.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Category</th>
<th>Sexually Harassed</th>
<th>Sexually Harassed</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Below 21</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Above 40</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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https://goo.gl/forms/BJ0lsOsgWBpwtEoi2
Table 3: Distribution of sexually harassed women of different occupations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Sexually Harassed</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>76.92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housewife</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>90.90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service Holder</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>85.11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Women</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undisclosed</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4.1 Why Share?

Answers to the question Q4 reveal the intention of the participants behind sharing in the social media during the movement their sexual harassment experiences. We provided a number of possible answers to the question Q4. The participants could select multiple answers or provide their own answer in case the already provided answers were not reflecting their intention. Figure 1 shows frequency of the answers selected by the participants. The most common reason behind sharing harassment experience during the movement appeared to be that the other sexually harassed girls would get the courage to protest a sexual harassment. Some participants also saw that as an opportunity to exercise their freedom of expression. Only 4 participants selected the “The harassers will get humiliated socially” or “The harasser may get punishment according to the law” options. This indicates that the sexually harassed women in Bangladesh may have low confidence that the harasser will be brought under the book or be humiliated socially. Answers to question Q5 further supports this observation.

4.2 Why Not Share?

Answers to the question Q5 reveal the mindset of the bigger population who were sexually harassed but didn’t share their experience in the social media during the #MeToo movement. Figure 2 shows frequency of the reasons behind not sharing sexual harassment experiences. The participants could select multiple reasons if those were appropriate for her. The figure shows only those reasons which were selected by at least two participants. About 30% of the participants (41 women) who claimed to have had sexually harassed didn’t feel comfortable about sharing harassment experience in the social media. 25% (34 women) believed that no good would come through sharing those experiences over social media. This again shows the frustration of the victims. Besides these reasons, 19% of the victims didn’t share either because of family pressure or they didn’t want their relatives or friends to know.

Figure 2: Reasons behind not sharing sexual harassment experience during the #MeToo movement.

Even though the survey data gave us an overview of the perception of the Bangladeshi women, the responses were not very detailed. The reason could be due to the online nature of the survey. However, the survey allowed us to understand the perception from a large (n=180) sample. Nonetheless, to have a deeper understanding of the sexual harassment situation, we conducted an in-person interview with 30 participants. The next section provides findings from the interviews.

5 IN-PERSON INTERVIEW DATA ANALYSIS

Our interview participants shared with us about their involvement and experience in different online feminist movements. Only two out of our thirty participants told us that they joined the #MeToo movement and shared their harassment stories publicly. The other 28 participants did not. From our interview data, a number of themes surfaced which provide us with a deeper insight into the tensions and politics around voices of women over online social media in global feminist protests or movements.

5.1 Cultural Difference

While supportive of #MeToo movement, none of our participants took part in that movement. One of the main reasons for them was the cultural difference, as twelve of them mentioned. They said that they did not find this movement culturally appropriate in Bangladeshi society. Their responses have highlighted how talking about sex in public is a topic that is not culturally appreciated in Bangladesh. One of them has said, “It is not about women actually. Even men do not talk about their sexual experiences in public. That is not our norm here.” (bank officer, 32 years)

A similar sentiment has been shared by the other such participants, too. For example, one of our participants is a 36 years old women who worked in a Bank as a cashier. She was harassed by her immediate boss in her office. She shared her experiences with a couple of her female colleagues, and she discovered that some of them also had similar experiences with her boss. She then reached out to a senior female officer of her office who held a higher position than her immediate boss. That lady took the issue seriously and let the Bank authority know. Later, our participant was placed in a different group, and the accused was warned. Our participant believes that her boss deserved much more punishment than he received. However, she does not believe that she should talk about that openly, especially in a public forum.

In a follow-up question, we asked our participants if they were inspired seeing so many women participating in #MeToo movement and disclosing many hidden crimes by men. While the response
Ten out of thirty interview participants told us they did not share varied in a range from ‘definitely yes’ to ‘maybe’, our participants repeatedly reminded me of the cultural difference. For example, one of our participants said, “Yes, I am inspired. I also feel like I should talk. I should let the world know we live among some heinous beasts. I also think the culprits should be punished. I think it is my responsibility to do something so that another innocent girl does not get molested tomorrow. ... But I also have to keep in mind that it is Bangladesh. I need to take my step keeping in mind the cultural differences. If I take a wrong step, I will do more harm than good. Shouting in public maybe counter-productive here, both for you and the women you try to help. ... Not all the battlefields are same.” (33 years, homemaker)

This sentiment was shared by all of our participants. They all said that they do not think describing harassment incidents in public is aligned with typical Bangladeshi culture. Some of them said that there is no single Bangladeshi culture, and many Bangladeshis practice many things that others do not. However, the typical Bangladeshi culture does now allow men and women talking about sexual harassment in public. Although some of them (eight) did not like this part of the culture and believe that the culture needs to be changed, they agreed that a protest through a public announcement of harassment is not applicable for today’s most prevalent culture in Bangladesh.

5.2 Social Resistance

Ten out of thirty interview participants told us they did not share their harassment incidents over social media because of a range of social constraints and bindings. For example, one of our participants in a 29 years housewife, who lives with her in-laws in Dhaka. Her in-laws’ family is very conservative and our participant needs to follow a set of family rules in her communications both inside and outside the home. She said that her in-laws are connected to her on Facebook, and if she shares something that is objectionable to her in-laws, they tell her to remove those. She has been told to behave ‘in a decent and polite way’ on Facebook. In their day to day conversations at home, her in-laws often criticize women who use ‘foul words’ or discuss ‘private matters’ on Facebook. So, our participant thinks that if she shares about her harassment incidents on Facebook, her in-laws will not be happy with that. She said, “Once I shared a post of another woman. The post was about gender equality and why a woman should be allowed to wear whatever she wants. My father-in-law saw that post. Later on that day, in our dinner table, she raised this discussion. He was explaining why the women who talk about such ‘nasty’ things publicly are bad, and why we all should ignore them. It was clearly meant to be a signal to me. I never have shared any such post later, let alone talking about those by myself.” (student 25 years)

Such social constraints do not only come from in-laws. Three of our participants said that their own family (parents in two cases and elder brother in one case) also suggested them not to make any ‘feminist’ post on Facebook. For four of our participants, they faced similar obstacles coming from their workplaces. One such participant said, “A few of my office colleagues were gossiping about Facebook shares. They all were criticizing women who talk ‘nasty’ stuff online. One of them mentioned a post where a woman probably discussed about her past abusive relationship with her ex-husband. My colleague called her ‘shameless’. Others also agree. They all said that that woman must have some faults and she was using Facebook to get attention of other men. ... So, I know I will be a topic of their gossip if I post something from my experience. Although I know, even within those women (her colleagues), many have abusive relations with their husbands. They shared that with me in private conversations. But they don’t like talking about it publicly” (bank officer, 31 years)

5.3 Perceived Futility and Lack of Hope

Twenty of our participants believe that it is pointless to share the harassment stories of a Bangladeshi woman in public, because ‘nobody cares’. They explained to us why they think such a movement will not bring much change to the widespread misogyny in the society. One of them told us, “In America, when some women told in public how they were harassed by a man, other people supported those women. Even people from media, government, and non-profits offered their help. The culprits were caught and punished. That happened because their society does not want such thing to exist. Also, the culprits were punished because the law-enforcing agencies are honest and effective. In Bangladesh, neither the society nor the Police will help you. So, all you will bring for you is an additional shame if you share your harassment online in public.” (student, 23 years)

The responses of these participants expressed their deep frustration regarding this issue. Several of them mentioned different rape incidents that took place in different parts of the country. They told us how there were big social media campaigns against those rape cases, but the perpetrators were not punished. One of our participants said, “Show me one case where such social campaign could help punish one rapist or one harasser in Bangladesh. Then what is the point of shouting there?” (student, 27 years)

6 DISCUSSION

In this paper, we have presented two different sets of data and corresponding analyses to deepen our understanding about (non) participation in the global online feminist movement, #MeToo. The online survey data shows that many Bangladeshi women, although they had experiences of being harassed, did not participate in that movement because of many social and cultural reasons. In the interview study, we could go into the details of those resistances and realized why many of those women did not or could not participate in this movement. This study provides us with some insights important to CSCW, ICTD, and social computing communities that aim to understand the role of computing in a social setting in a comprehensive way.

REFERENCES


Nonparticipation in #MeToo movement in Bangladesh: #MeToo


