

The Mental Health Impact of Cyber Sexual Violence (Cyber-SV) Against Emerging Young Women (EYW)

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Introduction

Cyber sexual violence (Cyber-SV) is an intentional act to control, shame and humiliate emerging young women (EYW - age 19-29) and includes all forms of online gender and sexual exploitation with potential of endangering EYW's personal privacy and safety. Cyber-SV is perpetuated by both male and female who may or may not be known to EYW who participate in recording, distributing, viewing, and re-distributing textual and images/videos, to those that are produced by EYW themselves, and are [re]distributed with or without their consent. The online violation can potentially lead to offline violence from [non]intentional sexual violation to sexual exposure and stalking to harassment, physical and sexual harm, and derogatory action or behavior (Halder, 2015; United Nations, 2015; Safety Net Canada, 2013). These online and offline forms of sexual violence leave permanent trauma and public memory of shaming and blaming that can result in internalization of trauma and mental health challenges from anxiety and depression to self-inflicted harm behaviours as an option to cope with trauma, or suicidal ideation as the only remedy to end such trauma. The impact of Cyber-SV further results in EYW isolating themselves from social arena by withdrawing from friends and families, social networks, employment, and education system as well as other daily lives activities. Cyber-SV against EYW is therefore a systemic extension of violence against women with the intention of controlling, humiliating, and shaming EYW.



"I come home from summer camp and one of the girls that I've met in my bunk, we were like 15 or 16 girls in a cabin, and she had a conversation with a guy, he sent it to his friends, who sent it to all of us that knew each other and it was like, you know we're talking about stuff and he violated her trust and sent it to all of us, and they also sent, uploaded a picture that she had sent to him through MSN, and sent it off as well and I remember getting emails about it too, ... everyone was talking about it, there was the gossip, it was like oh you go on MSN and that's like what you were talking about. The hot topic of the day I guess." (EYW, Focus Group 1).

What did we do?

This qualitative research relied on anti-oppression and gender-transformative health promotion framework (Pederson et al., 2014) that is women-centered, trauma informed, and equity-oriented to explore the mental health implications of Cyber-SV on EYW.

In total, we interviewed 25 EYW from diverse regions of the world, and 14 key community informants from interdisciplinary fields. The interviews were conducted from July to August 2017.



“He also traumatized her by going on her social media and save pictures that she had uploaded herself on Facebook and he would write over them with, I don’t know paint tools I guess, and just click “slut” and things like that, and like his whole dorm ganged up on her, they had a board in their dorm that had her pictures tagged onto, and then whenever she would show up in the dorm they would harass her and like throw things at her, like very very demeaning things to her. I just felt really bad about it. (EYW – Focus Group).

What did we find?

The following four themes emerged from participants’ narratives and textual analysis:

1. Lack of definitional clarity

Presently, various gender neutral terms is used such as *cyber bullying*, *cyber shaming*, *cyber stalking*, *cyber victimization*, and *cyber violence against women* is used to refer to Cyber-SV against EYW. Lack of definitional clarity can make patriarchal Cyber-SV go unchallenged and remain intact.

“As a service provider within the VAW sector; I think the problem is that the government does not know how to define [it], and that is why they don’t do anything. So, coming up with a solid definition for them to turn to, could be very helpful” (Focus Group – Service Provider).

2. Age of becoming a target of Cyber-SV

Although we interviewed EYW between 19-29 years of age, we learned that the majority of participants became targets of Cyber-SV between the ages of 10-15. On average EYW reported being the target of Cyber-SV 1 to 5 times. Some reported knowing at least 1 to 10 other EYW in their social networks who were the target of Cyber-SV.

“I was in elementary school and social media was gaining more and more attention” (EYW- Individual Interview).

3. Perpetrators of Cyber-SV against EYW

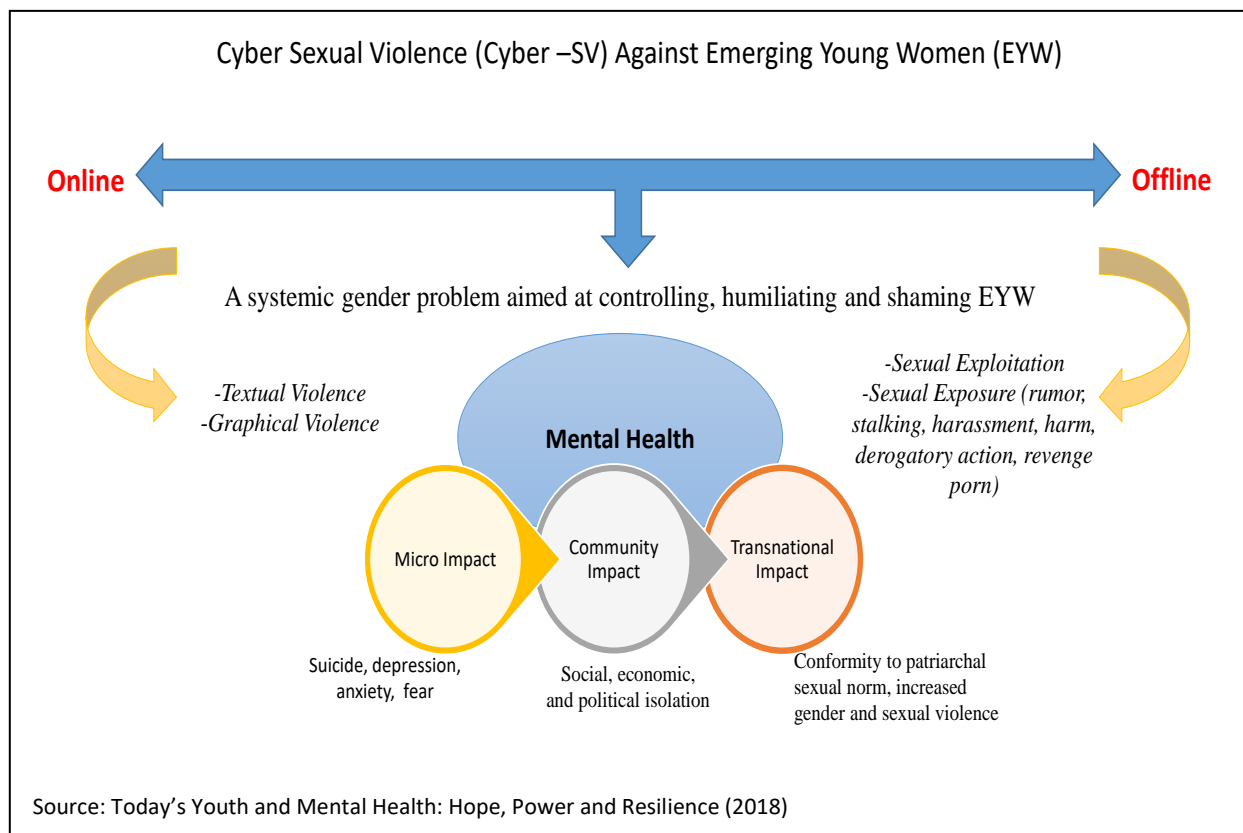


Unlike general perceptions, young girls like their male counterparts actively engaged in shaming other EYW. This finding suggests that the ideology of sexism and other forms of oppression underpinning Cyber-SV have created a new form of gender-based violence that is rooted in technological advancement, perpetuated by popular ‘social media’ culture, and consumed by peer pressure.

“...you think it’s more of a private shame if it only happens to you, than when it happens in the public. Because when there is an audience then it’s not only your shame, it will become public” (EYW-Art Session).

4. Mental Health Impact

Mental health impact of Cyber-SV is complex and long-term leading to social isolation and shaming both On/Of-line. The impact of shaming is multilayered and pervasive across different dimensions of one’s social life.



Recommendations for Policy, Practice or Further Research

Based on our findings, schools and academic institutions are the primary spaces and places where Cyber-SV against EYW takes place. However, according to our research participants, these intuitions are not equipped with the knowledge and expertise to intervene, prevent and offer mental health support to EYW and their families. Our participants recommended the need for more public education and awareness of cyber-sexual violence within the education system.

Participants who have contacted law enforcements (including the police), social media outlets and other institutions, felt they were not adequately supported. There is a need for progressive changes in law, education, criminal and privacy law, and the need for organized advocacy work to advance the issue.

Participants recommended training on the topic of Cyber-SV for the primary healthcare providers, mental health workers as well as other professional and community members who may work with the EYW in order to more adequately address the mental health needs of EYW.

"I was just thinking about the language that is being used now, like calling women survivors rather than victims, that I feel that maybe if we somehow change the language then we might assist in empowering women" (EWY- Focus Group).



About the Researchers

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Art Work: Produced by EYW during the Art Session

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