

REVIEW ARTICLE

Protecting children from online sexual abuse in Bangladesh: A policy brief

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ABSTRACT

Background: Online sexual abuse is a growing concern in Bangladesh, particularly as children are increasingly accessing the internet and social media. This paper reviews the prevalence and impact of online sexual abuse on children in Bangladesh, and provides policy recommendations to protect children from this type of abuse.

Methods: This policy brief was prepared after reviewing findings of the research works conducted on online child sexual abuse.

Results: Around 86% female and 91% male children of Bangladesh use the internet. Among the internet users, about one in two children are sexually abused. In addition to the Children Act 2013, the government of Bangladesh enacted the ICT Act 2006 and the Digital Security Act 2018 to address cybercrimes. However, these acts do not specifically address the issue of online child sexual abuse. In addition, the legal provisions lack strict enforcement and the media at times discloses the identities of child victims including images.

Policy recommendations: The government, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders need to take a comprehensive approach to protect children from online sexual abuse including improving the legal framework, strengthening child protection mechanisms, increasing awareness and education on safe internet use, and empowering children and their families to report incidents of online sexual abuse. Anonymous reporting system needs to be developed and strict legal measures must be enforced.

Conclusion: Protecting children from online sexual abuse requires a sustained multi-stakeholder approach that involves the government, civil society organizations, parents, educators, and children themselves.

Keywords: online sexual abuse, children, policy recommendations, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

More than 60% of the world population use the internet and majority of these users are children.^{1,2} The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) defines children as a person below the age of 18 years. Although children are exposed to the internet from an early age, the interactive age to use the internet is 12 when children are able to understand life experiences. Approximately three fourth of the children aged between 12 to 17 years are regular users around the world.²

Children are more adaptive in accepting the newer technologies that emerge every day, including the use of the internet.³ With the proliferation of social media platforms, the lines between privacy, safety, supervision, and regulations are increasingly becoming

blurred.¹ Consequently, children are more likely to get exposed to sexualized content and different forms of internet abuse.^{3,4}

Online abuse refers to improper use of the internet which is an extension of the traditional form of abuse in cyberspace where perpetrators can hide behind the screen.⁵ The different forms of cyber abuse include cyberbullying, cyberstalking, phishing, online sexual abuse, and hacking.⁴

The prevalence of online child sexual abuse varies across studies primarily due to methodological differences.³ Empirical studies conducted in western world have reported online child sexual abuse prevalence rates ranging from 30-40%, while in South Asia including Bangladesh, the prevalence rates have been observed to range from 50-60%.⁶⁻⁸

HIGHLIGHTS

1. Online sexual abuse is a growing concern in Bangladesh, particularly as children are increasingly accessing the internet and social media.
2. The government, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders need to take a comprehensive approach to protect children from online sexual abuse.
3. Protecting children from online sexual abuse requires a multi-stakeholder approach that involves the government, civil society organizations, parents, educators, and children themselves.
4. There is an urgent need for sustained efforts to prevent and respond to this growing problem in Bangladesh.

Online abuse has long-term consequences on children ranging from poor school performance, depressive disorder, anxiety, low self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorder, substance abuse, self-injury, and suicidal ideation.⁹ Victims of cyber abuse are also at higher risk of physical consequences like sleep disturbance, headache, dyspepsia, peptic ulcer, and poor appetite.^{10, 11}

The aim of paper is to examine the prevalence and impact of online sexual abuse on children in Bangladesh and provide policy recommendations to protect children from this type of abuse.

METHODS

We summarized the findings of various studies on online child sexual abuse conducted in Bangladesh. Through a comprehensive review of scientific publications, web documents, newspaper articles and government reports, we examined the prevalence and risk factors of online child sexual abuse within the local context. Furthermore, policy recommendations have been proposed based on different empirical findings after reviewing the pertinent literature on online child sexual abuse in Bangladesh as well as around the world.

RESULTS

Prevalence in Bangladesh

Online child sexual abuse is a less explored area in Bangladesh. Internet users in Bangladesh have increased exponentially with high-speed internet connectivity since 2013, bringing the total number of

users to 10 million.¹² A large number of these users are children. Almost 32% of children in Bangladesh aged between 10 and 17 face cyberbullying and cyber harassment.¹³ Mubassara et al., in their study, found that about 21% of rural children in Bangladesh reported that they received sexually explicit messages, and 17% reported receiving videos or pictures with sexual content.¹⁴ Newspaper reports also show a considerable number of children getting exposed to unpleasant online experiences.¹⁵ A recent study found that 86% female and 91% male children of Bangladesh use the internet where the most common pattern of abusive events include receiving vulgar friendship request from unknown persons (47%), online sexual propositions (35%), receiving pornographic texts or audios (29%), receiving pornographic videos (29%), requests for inappropriate images or videos (19%), and requests to send naked or half-naked images or videos (18%).^{16, 17, 18}

Risk factors

Different researchers have identified the risk factors for being a victim of online abuse. Field revealed that female children, authoritarian parents, homosexual children, and children between 14 and 17 years of age were at a higher risk of becoming victimized among the demographic factors.¹⁹ Again, children having access to private computing space, adding strangers to their social media, using chat rooms, playing online games with strangers, and sharing passwords with friends were significant contributors to being victims.⁴ Among the psychological risk factors, depressive symptoms, low self-esteem, anti-social behavior, and emotional immaturity were significant contributors.¹⁴ According to the study conducted by Salwa et al., the odds of being sexually abused online for urban children was double that for rural in Bangladesh, while every additional hour of internet use per day increased the chance of being sexually abused online by a factor of 1.09. Moreover, navigating to more social media sites and greater internet device usage increase the likelihood of online child sexual abuse.¹⁶

Legal framework

The international significance of children's justice emerged with the United Nations Convention on the

Rights of the Child (UNCRC) in 1989. Bangladesh ratified the UNCRC and enacted the Children Act of 2013 to meet international standards. This act incorporates two approaches to safeguard children.¹⁹ The protective approach focuses on shielding children from mistreatment and includes provisions such as establishing children's courts and prohibiting the publication of reports revealing the identity of the child. However, these provisions lack strict enforcement, as the media sometimes discloses the identities of child victims including images.

The Children Act mandates the establishment of a 'child affairs desk' in every police station led by a Child Affairs Police Officer (CAPO). The CAPO is responsible for maintaining separate records for cases involving children, coordinating with probation officers and parents or caregivers, addressing the child's basic needs, assessing the child's age, exploring diversionary measures, and preparing separate charge sheets for child offenders. Nevertheless, implementation of these provisions has been lacking, even after a decade since their enactment.¹⁸

On the welfare side, the Children Act promotes methods to reintegrate child offenders into the society, such as diversion, family conferences, the establishment of child development centers and certified institutes.¹⁹ However, compliance with these legal provisions has not always been consistent in Bangladesh.

In addition to the Children Act, the Bangladeshi government enacted the ICT Act of 2006 to address cybercrimes, and the Digital Security Act of 2018 to prevent the spread of hate speech, extremism, and terrorist propaganda through various media channels. However, these acts do not specifically address the issue of online child sexual abuse.

Global initiatives

There have been several global strategies and initiatives aimed at protecting children from online sexual abuse. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is one of them. The SDGs include targets related to ending violence against children, including online sexual exploitation and abuse. Target 16.2 calls for ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking, and all forms of violence against and torture of children, while target 8.7 aims to eradicate forced labor, modern slavery and

human trafficking, including child labor and child recruitment.²⁰

The Global Alliance Against Child Sexual Abuse Online is an initiative launched in 2012 by the US Department of Justice, which brings together governments, NGOs, and the private sector to combat the sexual exploitation of children online. The alliance focuses on four key areas: prevention, deterrence, victim identification and support, and international cooperation.²¹ The WePROTECT Global Alliance is another international initiative launched in 2014 to combat online child sexual exploitation and abuse. The alliance brings together governments, industry, and civil society to address the issue through various strategies such as increasing awareness, building capacity, strengthening legal frameworks, and developing technology solutions.²²

The Child Online Protection Initiative (COP) was launched by the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in 2008 to protect children from online risks such as cyberbullying, online sexual exploitation, and exposure to harmful content. The COP initiative focuses on promoting awareness and education, developing technical solutions, and improving policy and legal frameworks.²³ The European Union's Safer Internet Program on the other hand aims to promote a safer and better use of the internet and new online technologies by children and young people. The program provides funding for various activities such as research, awareness-raising campaigns, and the development of technical solutions to protect children online.²⁴

These global strategies and initiatives reflect the recognition of the importance of protecting children from online sexual abuse, and highlight the need for coordinated efforts by multiple stakeholders to address this issue in Bangladesh.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

While the internet has brought numerous benefits, it has also created opportunities for child sexual abuse, which has become a growing problem. Children are particularly vulnerable to online sexual abuse as they may not understand the risks of the internet and how to

protect themselves. Online sexual abuse takes various forms, including the distribution of child sexual abuse material and grooming, and requires the collaboration of multiple stakeholders to prevent it. Such stakeholders include governments, law enforcement agencies, technology companies, civil society organizations, and parents. Protecting children from these dangers is an essential issue that needs immediate attention.

The proposed recommendations aim to protect children from online sexual abuse in Bangladesh by implementing the following measures:

1. Awareness

Raising awareness among children, teachers, parents, and communities about the dangers of online sexual abuse is critical. It is important to first educate people about the harmful consequences of online child sexual abuse and how to prevent it. The Scandinavian countries have been successful in reducing child maltreatment by raising awareness in their society. In the 1960s, child maltreatment was widespread in Swedish society, and even positive attitudes toward maltreatment were prevalent. However, the Swedish government took several initiatives to increase awareness, resulting in a decline in maltreatment and positive attitude rates even before enacting laws to ban it. Awareness can be done through a variety of means, such as:

- a. *Public campaigns:* Public awareness campaigns can be launched through various media outlets, such as television, radio, and print media, to reach a wider audience and educate them about online sexual abuse and how to prevent it. A study by the Australian Federal Police (AFP) found that public awareness campaigns were effective in raising awareness about online sexual abuse and in encouraging victims to come forward. Bangladesh has success stories in improving maternal and child health, fighting child marriage, ensuring vaccination including COVID-19 and some other public health program.^{26, 27} It is high time that campaigns need to be designed and implemented for the prevention of online child sexual abuse.
- b. *School-based programs:* Children should be taught about the dangers of online sexual abuse in

their schools, through age-appropriate programs and activities. This should be mandatory for all schools in Bangladesh. A study by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) in the UK found that school-based education programs were effective in raising awareness about online safety among children and reducing the risk of online sexual abuse.²⁸ The formation of sexual harassment prevention committee at every educational institute can also help to make children aware about online sexual abuse. In 2009, the High Court of Bangladesh issued an 11-point directive on the prohibition, prevention, and redressal of sexual harassment in the workplace and educational institutions in response to a writ petition filed by the Bangladesh National Women Lawyers Association (BNWLA). This included the formation of a five-member harassment complaint committee, headed by a woman, at every workplace and institution to investigate allegations of harassment of women. However, it took the Supreme Court over a decade to form its own committee, which only happened in 2021. It is important that all educational institutes and workplaces follow the High Court's direction and form such committees that can address issues of online sexual abuse.

- c. *Workshops and trainings:* Workshops and trainings can be conducted for teachers, parents, and communities to educate them about online sexual abuse and how to prevent it. A study by the Internet Watch Foundation (IWF) found that parent and teacher training programs were effective in reducing the risk of online sexual abuse among children. Similar workshops and training need to be conducted through a national wide formation of a committee to fight online sexual abuse.²⁹

2. Strengthening school environment and educational curriculum

In the education curriculum of Bangladesh, students from class five onward learn about internet from the subjects Digital Technology and Information and Communications Technology. There are chapters on how to use the internet and seek digital services. Children can also learn how to protect their privacy in

the internet and seek assistance in case they face problems regarding child marriage. As online child abuse is widely prevalent and a growing public health concern, there needs to be a specific chapter included in the textbooks that discusses the different forms of child abuse and how children can protect themselves from such abuse. In addition, the lessons should be taught as such that children can implement them in real life. The practical section needs to be given more importance rather than just limiting students to learning theories. It is often found that teachers do not discuss details about sexual abuse. It is still considered a taboo. The classroom environment needs to be made as such that children can ask for details about sexual abuse, share their experiences with the teacher and get help from the teachers in dealing with online sexual abuse. The cadet colleges and some English medium schools have counselling facilities.³⁰ However, all schools should have psychological counselling facilities where children can share their problems and ensure their mental wellbeing. The overall environment of the schools should be made as such that children can solve real-life problems rather than just confining themselves in the textbooks and running after marks.

3. Implementation of laws and policies

The government of Bangladesh implemented the Children Act to consolidate laws related to children's rights. It adopted the protective approach to safeguard child offenders, established Children's Courts, and imposed restrictions on trial attendance and the publication of identifying information. However, enforcement of these provisions has been lacking, as the media sometimes reveals the identities of child victims. The act also requires the establishment of child affairs desks in police stations, led by a designated officer, but the implementation has been inadequate. The welfare approach aims to reintegrate child offenders through diversionary measures and other initiatives, but compliance has been inconsistent. The government should enforce these policies rigorously, with support from the judiciary, civil society, and the international community. Moreover, there needs to be a specific definition of online child sexual abuse from the

government of Bangladesh which can help in preventing sexual abuse of children online through legislation. Strengthening laws and improving enforcement is crucial in preventing and protecting children from online sexual abuse where the following measures need to be taken:

- a. *Criminalizing Online Sexual Abuse:* Bangladesh should criminalize online sexual abuse, including the distribution of sexual abuse materials, grooming, and other forms of online exploitation. This will provide a strong deterrent against online sexual abuse and make it easier to prosecute perpetrators.
- b. *Improving Law Enforcement:* The Bangladesh government should improve law enforcement efforts to combat online sexual abuse, including increasing the number of law enforcement officers trained in investigating online sexual abuse and providing them with necessary resources and technology. A study by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) found that improved law enforcement was effective in reducing the incidence of online sexual abuse.³¹⁻³³
- c. *International Cooperation:* Bangladesh should participate in international efforts to combat online sexual abuse, such as Interpol's Project VICC, which aims to prevent the distribution of child sexual abuse material and other forms of online exploitation. This will provide Bangladesh with access to international expertise and resources and help to ensure that perpetrators are held accountable, regardless of where they are located.

4. Technical Measures

Children spend a lot of time on the internet and their online activities are increasing day by day, thanks to the widespread of web-enabled devices. Some children access adult content out of their adventurous nature, while many children come across unwanted sexual content unintentionally. YouTube has a "kids' mode" and some mobile devices have restriction modes. However, most of the content on the internet is not child friendly. Some governments of the world like

China and countries of the middle east have banned certain apps and games which are addictive to children.³¹ The government of Bangladesh have banned pornographic websites in 2018. However, these banned websites can be easily accessed by using proxy servers. The government needs to make the internet safe for children by filtering contents. In addition, the devices that children use need to be made “child-protected”. Parents and caregivers must ensure that there are safety features added on any and all devices that children use. The safety features should be as such that children will not be able to access adult content from their devices, no advertisements or pop-ups will appear which redirect children to sexual content, and automatically abusive content will be restricted. It also needs to be supervised that children cannot access the devices that adults use without safety features. Providing technical measures is critical in preventing children from accessing harmful or inappropriate online content. These measures include:

- a. *Internet filters*: Internet service providers need to install filters that block access to websites containing child sexual abuse materials and other harmful contents. A study by the International Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (ICMEC) found that the use of internet filters was effective in reducing the availability of sexual materials.³²
- b. *Parental controls*: Parents should be encouraged to install parental controls on their children's devices, such as smartphones and laptops, to restrict access to inappropriate online content. These controls can be used to block websites containing sexual materials and harmful content, and monitor children's online activities.
- c. *Age verification*: Websites containing adult content should be required to implement age verification measures, such as requiring users to provide proof of age, to prevent children from accessing inappropriate content. A study by the European Commission (EC) found that age verification measures were effective in reducing the exposure of children to inappropriate online content.³³

Conclusion

Online sexual abuse of children is a growing problem that warrants counter-actions. By implementing the measures outlined in this policy brief, Bangladesh can take steps to prevent and protect children from online sexual abuse, and ensure that they can use the internet safely and responsibly.

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Conception and design- MIIT, MAH. Acquisition, analysis, and interpretation of data- MIIT, MAH. Manuscript drafting and revising it critically- MIIT, RN, MAH. Approval of the final version of the manuscript- MIIT, RN, MAH. Guarantor accuracy and integrity of the work- MIIT, RN, MAH.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflict of interest to declare.

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