

EROTICS SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL MONITORING SURVEY

BANGLADESH COUNTRY REPORT



APC
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COMMUNICATIONS

EROTICS SOUTH ASIA REGIONAL MONITORING SURVEY
Bangladesh Country Report

AUTHOR

Parsa Sanjana Sajid

PROJECT ASSISTANCE

Zahra Mayeeshah Lateef

Saima Akhtar Afsha

Tasnuva Kalam

DATA ANALYSIS ASSISTANCE

Henry Ratul Halder

ADDITIONAL ASSISTANCE FROM

Tazrin Siddiqua

Golam Moula Bhuiyan

Md. Shakhawat Hossain

Jarin Tasnim Diba

COPY EDITING

George Smith

DESIGN AND LAYOUT

Tanvir Hassan

EROTICS South Asia Regional Monitoring Survey: Bangladesh Country Report
Published by APC 2020

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	Page 1
INTRODUCTION	Page 2
METHODOLOGY	Page 3
Survey questions	Page 3
The sample	Page 3
Data analysis	Page 3
Privacy and consent	Page 3
Limitations	Page 3
BACKGROUND	Page 5
FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	Page 7
Survey respondents at-a-glance	Page 7
The internet can be a source of knowledge on gender and sexuality	Page 9
Activities on the internet	Page 11
On self-expression and pleasure, respondents rated their experience on the internet as moderate to high	Page 11
Respondent experience of violence was more widespread than their participation in violence	Page 13
Preferred responses to violence are those considered to be within reach	Page 14
EMERGING ISSUES + LOOKING AHEAD	Page 15
ANNEX I: REFERENCES	Page 16
ANNEX II: SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE	Page 17

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This survey was prepared as part of the Association for Progressive Communications' EROTICS South Asia (Bangladesh) project on sex, rights and the internet. In 2019-20 the EROTICS project launched a regional survey spanning Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, the partner countries in the project. The surveys were launched in each country separately and this report presents the findings from the Bangladesh survey. The author would like to thank the Association for Progressive Communications (APC), particularly hvale vale and Tigist Hussen, for their generous support and feedback, and Srinidhi Raghavan for coordinating the regional survey launch.

Earlier discussions with EROTICS regional partners in India, Nepal and Sri Lanka particularly with Shubha Kayastha, Kabita Bahing, Smita Vanniyar, Sachini Perera, Zainab Ibrahim and Subha Wijesiriwardena were helpful in laying the grounds for this project including this survey. In Bangladesh, a team of research coordinators and field assistants steered the survey launch and implementation and I am immensely grateful for their dedication.

I would like to acknowledge the survey respondents without whose participation and input this report would not be possible.

The APC EROTICS project is funded by AmplifyChange.

Parsa Sanjana Sajid
Dhaka, Bangladesh

INTRODUCTION

Half of Bangladesh's over 160 million people are internet users, conducting many of their personal, professional, financial affairs online. As the number of internet users has continued to rise in tandem with the kinds of things done online from business and entertainment to essential communication, digital spaces have become an important avenue to understand the state of sexual rights and sexual expression in Bangladesh.

With the goal of that understanding in mind, the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) funded a two-year project in Bangladesh as part of its "Expanding the EROTICS Network in South Asia" project with support from AmplifyChange. Originally launched under the banner "Exploratory Research on Sexuality and the Internet (EROTICS)" in 2009 to research and advocate on internet-related challenges in South Africa, Brazil, India, Lebanon, Indonesia, the United States, in its current iteration the program maintains a South Asia focus.

Current programs are in Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka, to assist with comprehensive locally informed strategies across the region. The EROTICS South Asia Regional Monitoring Survey is part of that effort with surveys launched nationally in Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka in 2019 and completed in early 2020.

In Bangladesh, the first year of the project consisted of exploratory research to understand online sexual expression and was based on in-depth interviews and community discussions with university-aged students, sex workers and queer community members. The second year turned to this survey as a continuation of the work to understand digital space and sexual expression. We hope that together the interviews, discussions and surveys will offer insights into how people navigate the internet in Bangladesh, will reflect community priorities and needs and will inform advocacy and policy campaigns around sexual rights and expression.

The survey targeted similar demographics and frequent internet users as the exploratory research, primarily young adults/university students, professionals, sex workers and queer community members. It was distributed online but also included in-person survey interviews with the specific intent to reach sex workers, the hijra community and university students. Our intention was for the survey to convey a pattern of digital space use as well as to engage with the greater community's vulnerable and ignored and to explore their internet use (e.g. sex workers, hijra community).

METHODOLOGY

The EROTICS Regional Monitoring Survey for Bangladesh was launched in November 2019 and closed in February 2020. The survey was available online but also fielded in-person. A more detailed breakdown of the methodology is below.

a. Survey questions

The survey consisted of 30 questions that explored the topics of sexual behavior and sexual expression online. We collected demographic information including gender and sexual orientation. Our goal was to understand how people in Bangladesh navigate the internet particularly as it relates to their sexual expression, understanding and behavior. The survey was available in both Bangla and English. Since this is a regional survey, questions needed parallel construction for regional cross-comparison. As such, most of the questions were regionally aligned, however, we customized a handful for Bangladesh. For example, the Bangladesh survey included the locally specific term “hijra” as a category under gender and added “marginalized based on religion” as an option for question 4c to reflect local contexts.

b. The sample

The target sample size for the survey was at least 200 respondents; by close we had 228. The survey was widely distributed but we also took care to include cohorts who tended to be frequent internet users and were students, professionals, sex workers and queer. Although it is not always easy, the survey team made attempts to ensure diversity in gender and sexual orientation, economic and educational background, religion and ethnicity. Responses came through a combination of two methods: i) online sharing of the survey link, and b) outreach to groups to arrange in-person surveys.

For the first method, the survey link was widely shared through personal and professional contacts, Facebook and Whatsapp groups for university, media, queer organizing and other professional and advocacy networks. For the second, we trained field organizers and made outreach efforts including but not limited to harder to reach, at-risk groups who nonetheless relied on the internet such as hijra community groups and sex worker support networks.

To reach the goal of at least 200 responses, we estimated approximately 80 of the responses would have to be in-person and trained field organizers and implemented an outreach strategy accordingly, assigning approximately 16 in-person surveys to each organizer. Outreach by organizers was especially needed because, after the initial surge of online shares and responses, response rates tend to slow, so we needed a complementary collection method. We also anticipated that with the in-person surveys some respondents may have needed additional explanation for some of the questions; field organizers were trained to provide any such clarifications.

As part of the in-person survey method, field organizers inputted the survey directly online (rather than recording answers on paper and later inputting online) in real-time on their respective mobile phones. Finally, and most importantly, for the in-person surveys we made every effort to make responding convenient for the respondents, meeting them where they were or at their preferred locations and attempting to ensure that they felt safe and comfortable taking the survey at those locations.

c. Data analysis

Most of the analysis was done through cross-tabulation and, on select outputs, we conducted chi-square tests. The demographic makeup of Bangladesh is homogeneous: An overwhelming majority, or approximately 98 percent, are Bengali Bangla speakers, and almost 90 percent are Muslim. However, a sample size of 228, even if representative, will render marginalized respondents statistically insignificant – a fundamental weakness of statistical analysis. This is why the qualitative research in the first phase worked with specific underrepresented communities and in the future similar surveys may target particular communities (for example, ethnic and linguistic minorities, the disabled or differently abled) to investigate community-specific issues of online expression.

d. Privacy and consent

With the survey we maintained every effort to ensure the privacy and safety of respondents. The introduction to the regional survey reflects that. For Bangladesh specifically, an extra section elucidating privacy and data usage was added. Also for Bangladesh, specifically for question no. 15, which had a descriptive sub-section, we appended another privacy and consent form only for the in-person surveys as those required first recording and then inputting the responses. The field organizers and all others involved with the survey were also trained on informed and ethical consent, privacy and anonymity issues and on safe space guidelines when administering in-person surveys.

e. Limitations

There are several limitations to the survey. Since no questions covered hometown or residence location, we do not have accurate information about the geographic distribution of the respondents within Bangladesh. The in-person surveys took place in Dhaka and its vicinity and the survey link was shared through the networks mentioned above. Despite every effort for diversity, the responses show some shortcomings, the most notable of which is the absence of people with disabilities or divergent abilities among the respondents. While this limitation is notable, it should be considered that because of the stigma attached to people who are disabled/differently abled, and because of the confusion surrounding the definition of mental/emotional disability and a general lack of acceptance of mental health conditions, it is also possible many would not self-identify or self-report as disabled/differently abled.

With the survey design, despite explanations, some of the gender and sexual orientation terms may not have been familiar or widely used even among some non-binary respondents. This was not only a matter of translation as evidenced by the terms being unfamiliar both in English and in their Bangla translations. The issue was more of vernacular or local categories of identification and classification which global terms, even with Bangla translations, cannot fully capture. Though problems with terms were not widely reported by respondents or organizers, it was discussed during some of the responses and is worth flagging.

Lastly, the survey was conducted pre-COVID-19, concluding in February 2020. The first COVID-19 case in Bangladesh was confirmed on March 8th and a lockdown was announced beginning March 26th. The survey results will be published in a new local and global circumstance. To understand these uncertain times will require other efforts and methods, but we surmise that the results of the survey are still helpful in understanding patterns of internet use in the country and future projects can build on the findings presented here.

BACKGROUND

Internet use has skyrocketed in Bangladesh over the last decade. The latest estimates from the Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission (BTRC), counts internet users in the country at over 100 million out of a population of 160 million. And of those more than 95 million relied, as of March 2020 estimates, on mobile phones to access the internet. And as of February 2020, Bangladesh had 5.7 million broadband connections. The trade association of internet service providers reported that home internet use increased rapidly during the coronavirus lockdown. Beginning in March, home data usage increased by 50 percent, offset by a sharp decline in corporate internet use. Yet BTRC data showed both the number of mobile subscribers and the number of mobile internet users dropped in April (a decline of 1.46 percent and two percent respectively), though overall internet use still rose.ⁱ

While these data attest to the internet as an everyday necessity in Bangladesh, underlying economic and social conditions affect people's access and use. There are also infrastructure issues. For example, mobile internet download speed in Bangladesh has been among the slowest in Asia and has slowed further during the pandemic. An explanation for the slow speed came from a representative of the mobile telecom operators' association speaking to a national daily: The network spectrum was strained by increased data consumption caused by promotional rates at cheaper prices and a rise in at-home entertainment, education and work.ⁱⁱ

The high mobile ownership has a gender gap, according to a recent study. And the gender gap intersects with the urban-rural divide, with rural women least likely to own or use mobile phones. In the afore mentioned study 61 percent of women reported mobile ownership compared to 86 percent of men. When asked about mobile internet use, 33 percent of men reported to be mobile internet users compared to 16 percent of women.ⁱⁱⁱ

The data however may not give an adequate picture of access and usage patterns. While Bangladesh's gender divide is one of the prominent disparities within the society's patriarchal structure, its granular tendencies may not register accurately in a survey. There are instances where women register a SIM under a male relative's name to feel secure, but these women would have access to and use of a mobile device. On the other hand, women face greater control and surveillance of their mobile use and online activities, a problem that greater mobile ownership and internet access and use cannot solve. Also to note in Bangladesh, sometimes Facebook is so synonymous with the internet that people would be unfamiliar with terms such as "internet," "online" or the "web" but would identify themselves as Facebook or Messenger users.

Expansion of technologies of control have accompanied greater internet use. Measures of control include broader use of vaguely defined cyber-crime statutes, most notably the Digital Security Act (DSA). From March 2020 until June 2020, the government had arrested or detained 142 people for "reporting, spreading 'misinformed' news, or their social media activity;" this number is compiled from media reports, so the actual number could be higher.^{iv} Amnesty International estimates more than 800 cases filed in the January–September 2020 period alone.^v

Vague offenses such as spreading rumors, tarnishing the image of the nation, posting, liking or sharing offensive content can be grounds for arrest under the DSA. And without any strong privacy legislation and safeguards, the government and private companies are free to access, mine, sell user information including metadata or to incriminate users at will. Legislation aside, the digital infrastructure, from online spaces to chat platforms, has always operated under a surveillance regime and the COVID-19 crisis has become another justification to expand that regime. The Bangladesh police unveiled a movement and location tracking app for the city of Chittagong in April^{vi} and an assortment of private companies and even individuals have jumped into the fray to develop and assist the government with facial recognition and location tracking apps.^{vii}

From the often coterminous vantage points of control and commodification, the digital sphere becomes another mechanism through which to maintain a docile, checked in place polity. Stifling control is also on display when access to the internet is withheld citing law and order concerns. Ahead of the general election in 2018, the government slowed, limited or shut down mobile internet access across the country.^{viii} And under Bangladesh government policy, “Rohingya refugees in Cox’s Bazar [were] unable to legally acquire SIM cards, and telecommunications operators were directed to restrict internet coverage in [the] camps from September 2019.”^{ix} Although 3G and 4G internet were restored in August 2020^x after sustained pressure from civil rights organizations, the use of the restrictions makes apparent the near boundless reach the government will employ to control the populace.

Policing and surveillance in Bangladesh are of course not simply administrative issues when people, especially women, queers, other minorities face harassment, threats of violence, stalking and constant disciplining, in what we can think of as an architecture of social surveillance and discipline. Multiple respondents interviewed for the exploratory qualitative research spoke of being wary of family members and friends on Facebook and of feeling cautious about posting photos particularly if they were women or queer. A cis male interviewee recalled facing derision of his “maleness” and derogatory comments for posting pictures of himself in “ladies’ clothes.” Employers and educational institutions are also known to discipline and surveil employees and students, issuing guidelines on appropriate online conduct and profile management. Where we as a greater community need multiple modes of intervention to address hurtful and bigoted comments and threats of violence, it is telling that the architecture of discipline only works to preserve the interests of the powerful, whether that be the state or institutions, and to limit dissent, but neither to protect the vulnerable nor to act in any way to overturn majoritarian politics, patriarchal policing and capitalist extraction. It is ultimately a sad irony to hope that any of these current digital platforms, embedded and wedded to capitalist circulation, will fundamentally upend any of these damaging forces when their very purpose is to reinforce them. Still, digital networks are an integral part of how we live, and it is just as vital to envision, subvert, work towards alternate digital spaces as it is to understand how people experience and inhabit the current ones. With this survey as we do the latter, we must in conjunction also do the former.

Against the aggregate data, social norms and legal and policy environment, however, what does the internet mean to its users in Bangladesh? What do they learn, what do they face, how do they live online? The qualitative research was an exploration of these questions through in-depth interviews and focus groups with overlapping communities of university aged youth, queer community members and sex workers. By purposefully including these same underrepresented groups and relying on a different method this survey is an attempt to gain greater understanding of internet use in Bangladesh and is one of the first surveys to include detailed questions about use, access and behavior particularly pertaining to gender and sexuality. Together, the results of this survey and the findings from the qualitative report can provide a snapshot of online sexual expression in Bangladesh.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

a. Survey respondents at-a-glance

Almost 54 percent of the respondents were students and average respondent age was 25. Respondents' young age reflects Bangladesh's young demographic, as the country's median age is 27.6 years.

With gender, the breakdown between cis men and women was almost even with nearly 43 percent identifying as cis men and about 40 percent identifying as cis women; approximately six percent identified as hijra. Asked about sexual orientation, just over 77 percent of respondents identified as heterosexual/straight, with bi/pansexual as the next highest category at approximately 11 percent. Languages spoken and used on the internet generally overlapped with languages used in Bangladesh with most reporting using Bangla and English.

Congruent with country data reported in a previous section, almost 85 percent of respondents relied on their mobile devices to access the internet. Almost 92 percent across all genders reported full control of their device though there were predictable differences: Almost 97 percent of cis men reported full control, while 88 percent of cis women and 77 percent of hijras said they had full control over their devices.

Figure 1: Gender Distribution (in percent)

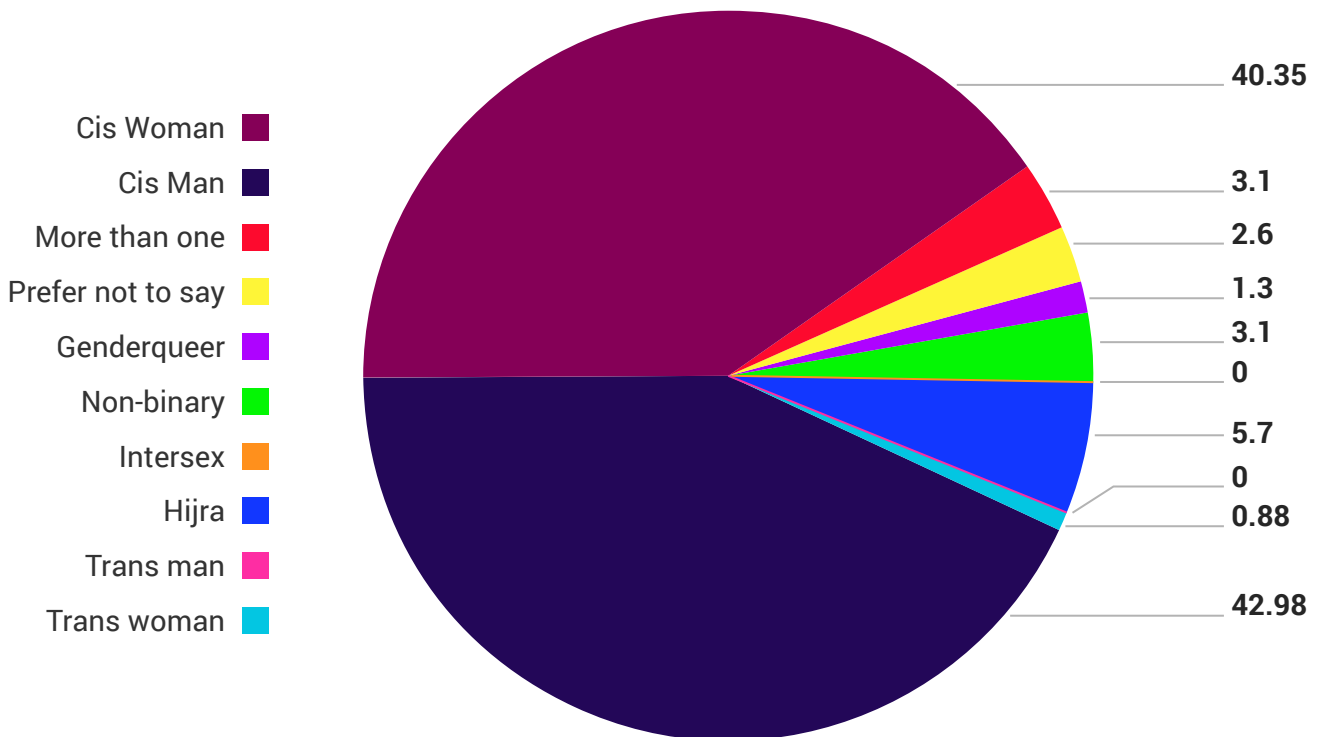


Figure 2: Distribution of Sexual Orientation (in percent)

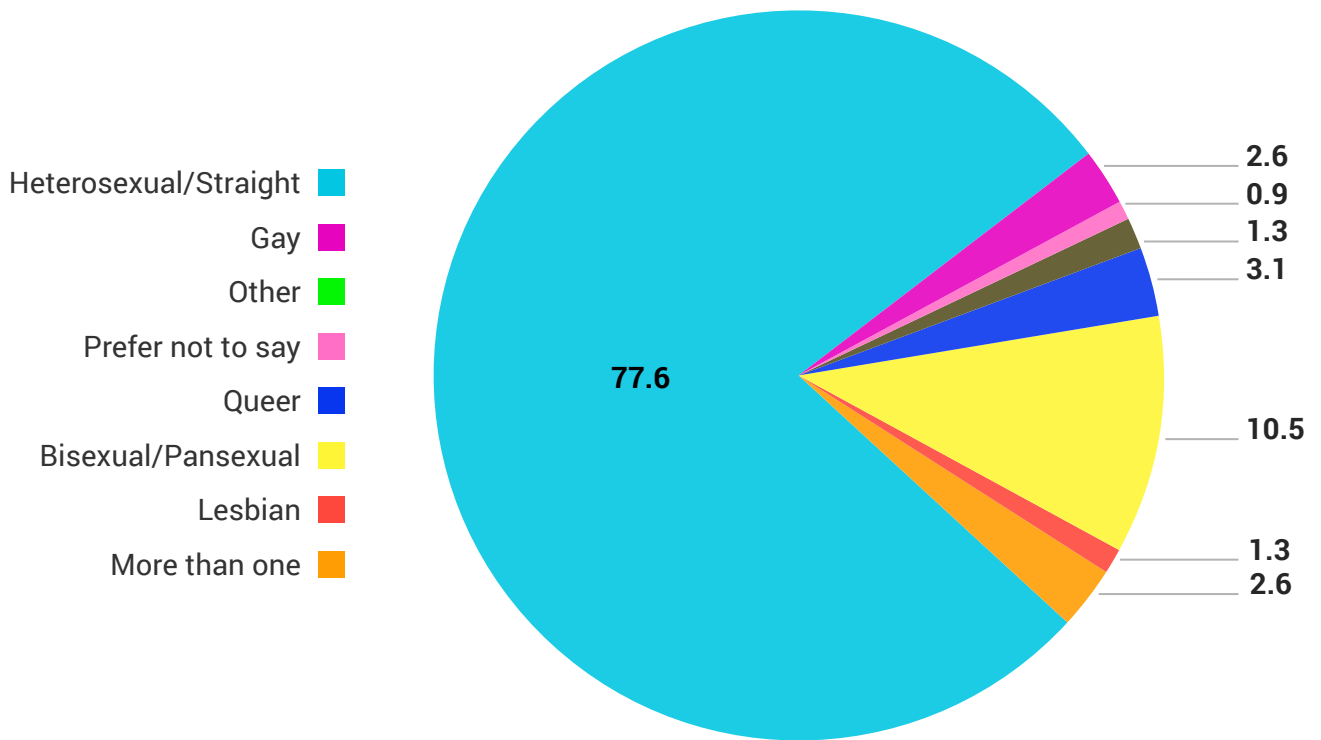


Figure 3: Occupation

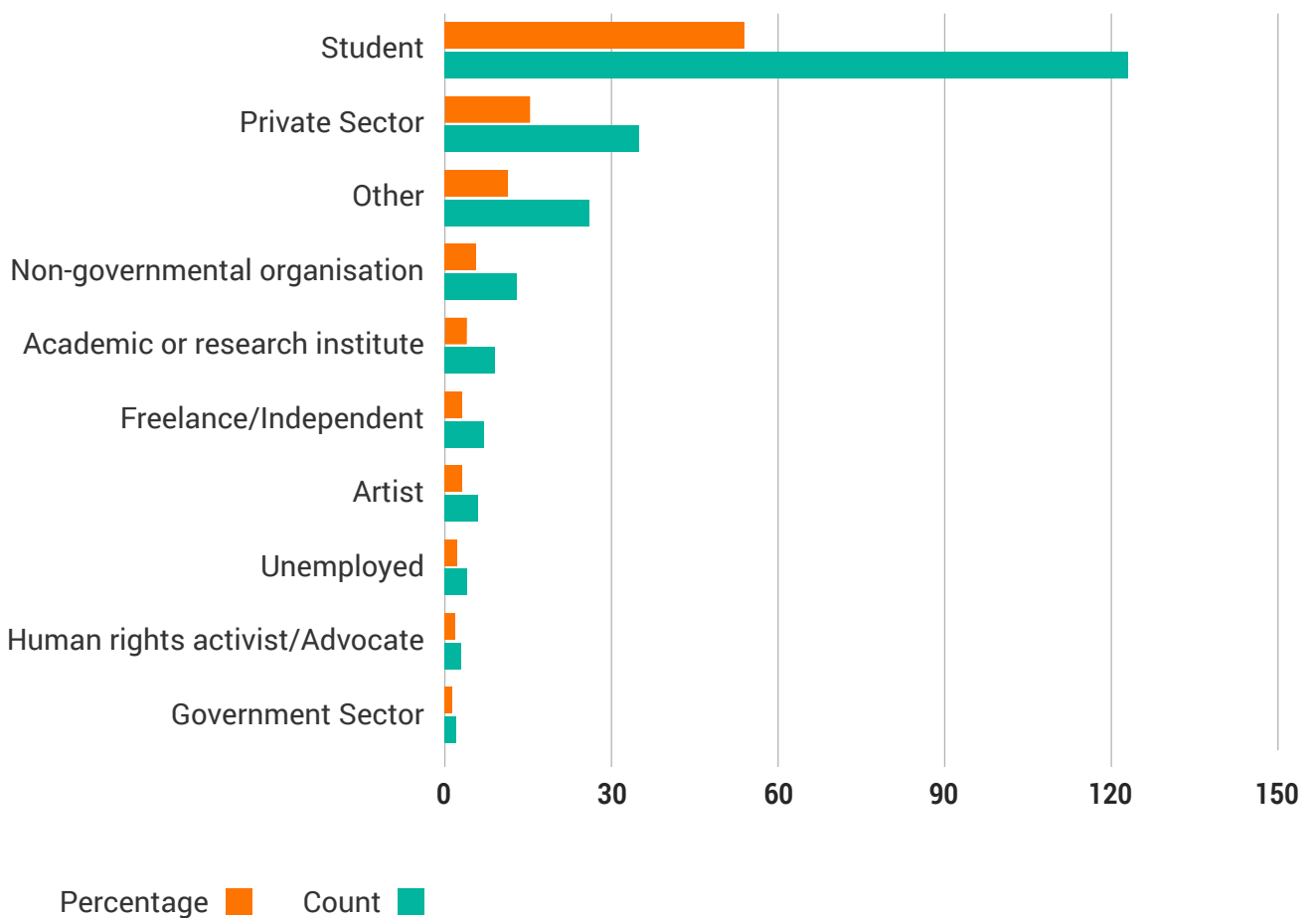
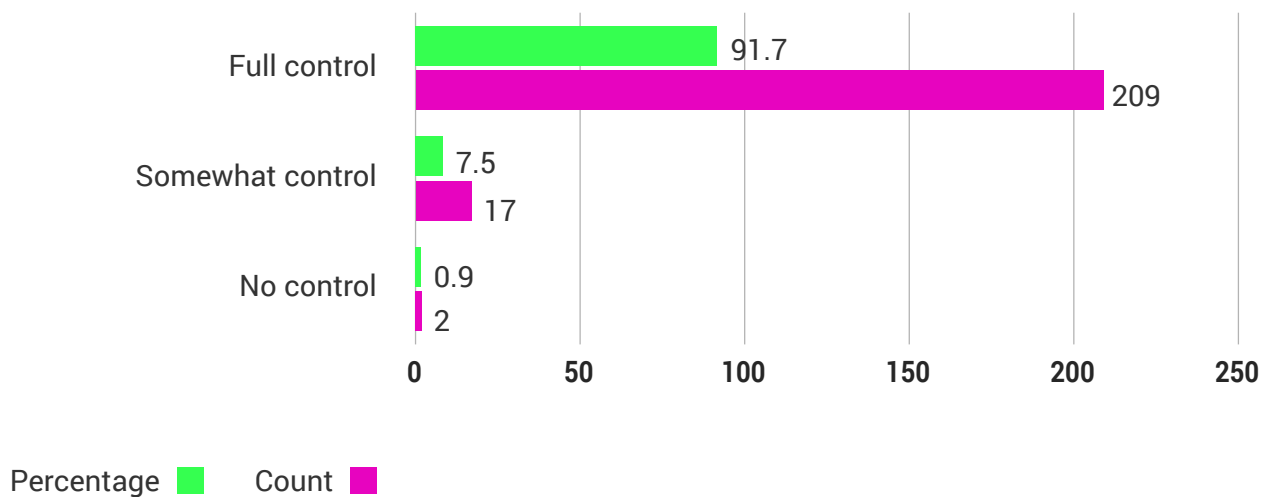


Figure 4: Control over Device



b. The internet can be a source of knowledge on gender and sexuality

The survey results indicate that the internet has changed respondents' understandings of gender and sexuality. When asked about the influence of the internet on changing their understanding of gender and sexuality, over 50 percent answered "definitely" and over 28 percent answered "sometimes." Respondents primarily credited finding networks and new information for their shifts in understanding. Asked to explain, one respondent said, "Access to the information I got on the internet helped me figure out that it was okay to feel the way I did in terms of questions around my own sexuality."

Another said, "It [gave] me access to knowledge and networks in the community." A look at the breakdown by gender and sexual orientation reveals that for non-binary and non-heterosexual people, the internet was even a bigger factor in changing their understandings. As one respondent put it: "Access to internet allowed me to explore more about my queerness and queerness in general, its history, its politics here and abroad, and I came across stories of gender exploration similar to mine that helped me solidify my identity."

Change in Understanding of Gender and Sexual Identity because of the Internet (Percent who answered "definitely")	
Gender	Sexual Orientation
Cis woman 50 percent	Heterosexual 43 percent
Cis man 48 percent	Gay 83 percent
Hijra 54 percent	Lesbian 100 percent
Non-binary 71 percent	Bisexual/pansexual 71 percent
	Queer: 86 percent 86 percent

Nearly 15 percent however did not think the internet had changed their understanding of gender and sexuality. One person responded: "The garbage is similar offline and online." Another complained that "cyberspaces" were still hetero masculine. "[The] internet doesn't provide enough

materials to understand gender and sex” added a respondent. Instead, academic knowledge, workshops, offline study were among the stated sources of understanding gender and sexuality for some respondents.

The potential for the internet to change attitudes and understandings is tempered by narrowed points of entry, filter bubbles and the echo chamber of algorithms. Users see the information platforms think they should see unless a user actively seeks out specific information from particular sources. Searches and time spent on the internet, site recommendations, sites visited, are all influenced by events and other people in the user’s physical space, which is why we must understand the capacity of the internet to change perspectives as more diffused than causal.

Take, for example, the much-publicized ban on porn in Bangladesh. Policymakers and many women’s rights advocates blamed pornography for pervasive anti-social behavior, particularly violence against women, and several respondents on this survey also shared the discomfort with overly sexualized media and a media, cultural, entertainment landscape saturated with violence and misogyny. But also, as discussed in detail in the exploratory study, *Safety, Agency and Surveillance: An Exploration of Sexual Expression and Digital Spaces in Bangladesh*,^{xi} a vague definition of pornography, broad criminalization of any sexual content, absence of any clarity on pornographic materials (in both production and content), detract from much needed and deeper discussions on sexual agency and intimacy. Such discussions are one avenue through which to address the violence of the status quo.

As one respondent discussed, where sex becomes taboo, pornography becomes educational (of course the substance of that education may be good or bad depending on the kind of porn one gravitates towards, which applies to other types of formal education too):

“ Access to the internet aka porn was my sex education. The proliferation of porn gave me access to different categories including homosexual/bisexual porn. This normalized how I view sexual orientation. Also access to internet gave me knowledge of gay movements across the world, saw YouTube videos of unusual sexualities (attracted to objects, etc.) and fetishes. All this broadened how I view gender and sexuality [different] from the very binary notion that I learned from society.”

The internet in this example is instrumental in changing attitudes, augmenting knowledge. But instead of seeing the internet as an inert source, it is more illuminating to understand its role as a node in a diffused learning environment where available information, knowledge about how to find information and where to look for it, self-directed exploration, bubbles of feedback loops, recommendations by others, social reinforcement or lack thereof, overlap and contribute to that change in attitude and knowledge.

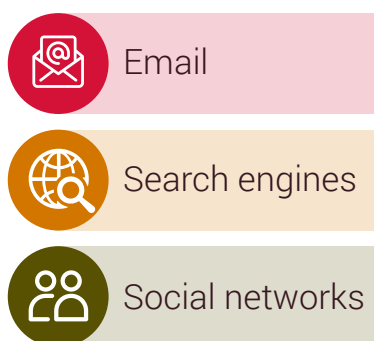
To expand on the respondent’s answer, exploration of porn is the education they sought against an absence of sex education; they knew how and where to look, and one or a few references opened paths to other references in algorithmic chain reactions – a desire for alternative avenues of knowledge and for subversion of overly worn paths, facilitated by the internet. Yet it is inadequate to posit the internet as an unvarnished source. At work is a self-reinforcing pattern of algorithmic loops and the searcher’s intentions, both influenced by structural conditions.

For example, it is wholly predictable that so many search and platform algorithms boost patriarchal, racist tropes under the guise of neutrality. And that includes much of what we consider established knowledge and prevailing social and economic arrangements, not just porn. De-platforming then should mean overturning these arrangements; de-platforming could also remake the internet. The blanket ban on porn only manages to criminalize all sexual content and exchange causing more harm than good.

c. Activities on the internet

The top three most frequent internet uses were: Email (by almost 79 percent of respondents), search engines (by around 75 percent of respondents) and social networks (by almost 74 percent of respondents). For each of these uses, non-binary and cis men reported higher usage rates than cis women. Instant messengers (by 71 percent of respondents), video streaming (by 68 percent of respondents), chatting (by almost 67 percent of respondents), research (by around 64 percent of respondents) were also popular activities. Most respondents saw themselves as consumers rather than creators of internet content. Although we observe lower percentages for activities such as dating and sexting, frequently reported activities such as the use of social networks, chatting and instant messages may also include the former.

Figure 5: Most Frequent Online Activity



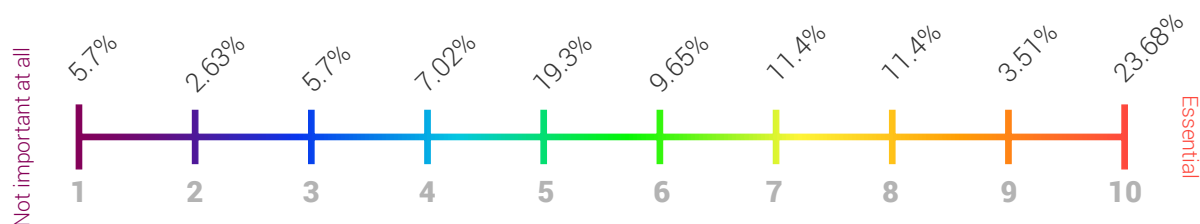
Respondents were split on the question of whether their gender and sexual orientation affected their internet use, with around a third reporting “sometimes” and another third reporting “no.” There was no significant variation along gender and sexual identity in answering this question. Around a fifth said their gender or sexual orientation definitely affected their internet use. We found heterosexual responses on the questions of both gender and sexual orientation affecting internet use significant at a 95 percent significance level.

It appears there is at least a moderate influence of gender and sexuality in how respondents used the internet, but since our survey did not specifically ask how, we cannot report the specific effects of gender and sexuality. Since over 90 percent of respondents reported they had full control of their devices, we do not anticipate a significant proportion would have faced restrictions as a likely effect, though it is still possible for a small minority, as is the possibility that restrictions could include other measures, such as financial constraints, besides control of device.

d. On self-expression and pleasure, respondents rated their experience on the internet as moderate to high

On a scale of 1 to 10 with 10 being the highest, approximately 24 percent of respondents rated the internet as an essential (score of 10) component of their self-expression and another 19 percent rated it as moderately important (score of 5). Around 11 percent of respondents rated the internet as of moderate to high importance (scores of 7 and 8) in their exercise of self-expression. Analysis of self-expression along gender and sexual orientation shows similar patterns, that is, most rated the internet as of moderate to high importance with around a fifth to a quarter finding it essential. Cis men and cis women rated the internet as essential at percentages of 21 and 24.5, respectively; similarly, almost 24 percent of heterosexual respondents viewed it as essential. But notably, 61.5 percent of hijra rated it as essential while those who identified as gay rated it as of low to moderate importance.

Figure 6: Importance of Internet for Self-expression



On the question of whether they found their experience on the internet pleasurable, most respondents found it to be moderate to highly pleasurable. Fifteen percent ranked it 10 (on a scale of 1 to 10), 25 percent rated it at 8 and 22 percent rated it at 7. Though the pattern generally holds through gender and sexual orientation, analysis does show a modest effect for these variables. To note, more hijra respondents (69 percent) viewed the internet as highly pleasurable than any other cohort.

The ability to find information on the internet and to build and connect with a community appears to be related to respondent experience of self-expression and pleasure and why it ranked high for 20 to 25 percent of respondents. One respondent explained:

“I got to explore what a sensitive issue gender is becoming got to understand that it may not always be as simple as a binary classification which we are assigned with way before our birth. It made me think, perhaps it’s not as straightforward as binary classification simply by the physical appearance of the genitalia alone.”

Another respondent: “It has opened a lot of avenues and given me access to a lot of information which I could not have accessed had I not been on the internet, thereby making the person I am today.” Perspectives such as these convey a sense of appreciation for the internet as a resource and space that had been otherwise missing. But for others who rated the pleasure of their experience as moderate to somewhat high, there is more ambivalence and awareness of the transaction involved, from loss of privacy to surveillance on the internet, to the fact that physical interactions and spaces may be more pleasurable to many. One respondent mentioned, “Various social media and Google use my identity and using it they prompt the advertisement and they also give it to the telemarketers, that’s why I try to avoid it.”

In June 2020 a university professor was arrested over a critical Facebook post that the government alleged targeted a just deceased health minister. The post, however, pointedly named no one but, rather, listed a series of negligent and corrupt activities.^{xiii} In a constant mental and emotional gymnastics, internet users weigh the risks posed by laws such as the DSA that criminalize dissent and rampant data mining against the necessity of online participation and its attendant solace and pleasures.

e. Respondent experience of violence was more widespread than their participation in violence

Unsurprisingly respondents reported experiences of violence on the internet more commonly than they reported participation in violence. Approximately a third took the survey in-person, so they had to interact with a survey interviewer, but whether they took it in-person or online, it is reasonable to assume most people characterize or perceive their own acts more positively than would others. So it may have been easier for respondents to identify a comment directed at them as abusive than to think of a comment they made as abusive. It is likely then that self-reporting influenced data about participation in violence.

The top three instances of violence respondents reported being subjected to were: Abusive comments, hate speech – social media posts and/or email often targeted at an identity – and sexist and/or gendered name-calling. Other types of violence were reported widely, as well, including: Unwanted receipt of sexually explicit material; abusing and/or shaming women for expressing views that are not normative, for disagreeing with people or for refusing sexual advances; mobbing, including the selection of a target for bullying or harassment; impersonation and identity theft; unauthorized access or controlling of access; use of indecent or violent images to demean women; non-consensual sharing of private information; and direct threats of violence, including threats of sexual and/or physical violence.

Chi-square analysis of experience of violence data along gender categories reveals that at 95 percent significance, 63 percent of cis women significantly experienced unwanted receipt of sexually explicit materials compared to 35 percent of cis men. Experience of abuse for expressing non-normative views, for disagreeing with people or for refusing sexual advances was reported by almost 86 percent of non-binary respondents at a 95 percent significance level. Approximately 69 percent of hijra respondents were subjected to mobbing and 31.5 percent of cis women and 69 percent of hijra respondents reported impersonation or identity theft at a 95 percent significance level. Direct threats of violence were reported by 20 percent of cis men and almost 86 percent of non-binary individuals at a 95 percent significance level.

With sexual orientation, at 95 percent significance, 64 percent of heterosexual and 87.5 percent of bi/pansexual respondents reported receiving abusive comments. A full 100 percent of queer and 45 percent of heterosexual respondents said they received sexist and/or gendered comments or name-calling and 75 percent of bi/pansexual and almost 46 percent of heterosexual respondents received unwanted sexually explicit materials at a 95 percent significance level. And almost 67 percent of bi/pansexual, 86 percent of queer and 39.5 percent of heterosexual respondents said they were subjected to abuse for expressing non-normative views, for disagreeing with people or for refusing sexual advances at a 95 percent significance level. Nearly 25 percent of heterosexual and 50 percent of bi/pansexual respondents experienced direct threats of violence at a 95 percent significance level.

Asked about their participation in the same types of violence, the top three instances were: abusive comments; other (without specification); hate speech, social media posts and/or email often targeted at identity and use of sexist and/or gendered comments or name-calling. Participation in other types of abusive or violent behavior was not widely reported.

Chi-square analysis of participation in violence along gender and sexual identity shows that at 95 percent significance, 17 percent of cis women and nearly 77 percent of hijra respondents admitted to making abusive comments on the internet. And 14 percent of cis men and nearly 12 percent of heterosexual respondents admitted to unauthorized access and controlling of access at a 95 percent significance level.

f. Preferred responses to violence are those considered to be within reach

The most common response to violence was blocking (almost 58 percent) followed by reporting the incident to the platform (almost 56 percent). Sizeable responses also included ignoring (46 percent) and/or retorting (21 percent). Notably, reporting instances of violence to the legal system was far less common (under 10 percent). Given that legal recourse risks unwanted exposure and more harassment, can be lengthy, cumbersome and costly without clear benefits, and that often it is not even clear to people what legal options they have, it is reasonable to exhaust all other measures before turning to a dubious legal system. Findings here also uphold participant assertions from the exploratory research *Safety, Agency and Surveillance: An Exploration of Sexual Expression and Digital Spaces in Bangladesh*^{xiii} about legal options.

The data from both studies suggest that most find the legal system unsupportive, ineffective and potentially harmful. The difficulty of finding legal help, a complicated thicket of laws, the strain on money, time and emotional wellbeing, the inability of legal interventions to solve particular instances of violence or to do so quickly may explain respondent aversion toward attempts at legal redress. While there is room for improvement in making legal options easier, streamlined, trustworthy, we must also stress an abundance of laws or reliance on the legal system cannot address the endemic and more networked social problem of violence on the internet and may simply reinforce the carceral, punitive tendencies of the state.

Analysis of responses by gender shows cis men (50 percent) were more inclined to ignore instances of violence than cis women (39 percent) and cis women (65 percent) were more inclined to block than cis men (51 percent). Women across all categories face more scrutiny, harassment and violent threats, which may explain why women were more likely to block and less likely to ignore violence. With regard to sexual orientation, however, we found blocking was more common among those who identified as gay (83 percent) than those who identified as heterosexual (57 percent), bi/pansexual (62.5 percent), queer (43 percent) or lesbian (67 percent). Chi-square analysis shows that at 95 percent significance, 65 percent of cis women reported instances of violence to the platform. With 95 percent confidence, we also found that almost 71 percent of bi/pansexual and almost 42 percent of heterosexual respondents ignored instances of violence.

Asked whether they spoke to anyone about the violence nearly 62 percent responded affirmatively, while 25 percent said no; notable here is that almost 13 percent refrained from answering the question. Breakdown by gender shows almost 71 percent of cis women, 70 percent of hijra, 71 percent of non-binary and 51 percent of cis men (the last was significant at a 95 percent confidence level) spoke to someone about the violence they faced. In terms of sexual orientation, almost 59 percent of heterosexual, 62.5 percent of bi/pansexual and 83 percent of gay respondents spoke to others about the violence they encountered online.

The pattern that emerges is of general preference for availing responses within easy reach, like blocking or reporting violence to the platform. Though these recourses may not be as effective – reporting a complaint to a platform can yield results spotty at best – actions that are one or a few clicks away may give users a sense of ease about taking action. A higher proportion of blocking, reporting or talking about violence may be an outcome of specific groups encountering more violence.

In examining the choice to talk to someone about instances of violence, we may consider that support networks of friends and/or family may be therapeutic for some; in addition, in cases where an abuser or harasser is known or part of one's social/kin network(s), it is common to turn to mutually known people or others in the network to intervene, in the hope that the message would reach the abuser, in which case talking is more than therapeutic as it becomes an action towards ending the abuse or for gaining some form of redress via social networks and an action that can be classified as “within reach.” Effective measures to address violence must evaluate the ease and benefit for users and to what extent the burden should fall on an individual user without platform-wide, structural, societal changes.

EMERGING ISSUES + LOOKING AHEAD

The goal of this survey was to understand online behavior and expression in Bangladesh particularly pertaining to gender and sexuality. The findings from the survey, together with the exploratory research, help us have insights into how people here are navigating the internet. The survey results presented in this report, along with the other country-specific surveys in Nepal and Sri Lanka constituting the EROTICS regional monitoring survey, provide us with a region-specific outlook on internet use and access.

The Bangladesh survey results suggest that the online ecosystem both mitigates (e.g. access to like-minded networks, information otherwise unavailable) and exacerbates (e.g. experience of and participation in abusive, denigrating behavior) existing social norms. We found that people rated their experiences on the internet moderately to somewhat highly pleasurable, and found it an important outlet for their self-expression and spent most of their internet time in emails, searches and social networks, but were both subjected to and participated in abusive comments, insults targeting an identity, name-calling and hate speech. Our findings show respondents addressed these instances of violence with methods such as blocking or reporting encroachments to the platform instead of turning to the legal system.

Although the survey did not directly ask questions about the effect of underlying conditions on internet access and use, responses indicate that users are likely to respond to circumstances as when they indicated turning to porn from lack of sex education or that other factors – such as the Digital Security Act, economic and social volatility and, going forward, pandemic induced uncertainties – also affect their online behavior. With regard to COVID-19, as more of our activities shift online, what are the fault lines? Directed to move their classes online, several public universities in Bangladesh have declined, with the correct assertion that many of their students cannot easily access or afford data plans either due to loss of income or poor service in many parts of the country. Such digital divides are likely to intensify across multiple sectors. And there are disadvantages to the transition itself.

For example, when employers connect remote working with increased productivity, workers' leisure and free time further erode. When the popular platform Zoom refused to enable end-to-end encryption for free calls, it was yet another case of platforms aiding unfettered surveillance. And in Bangladesh, already embattled political and social spaces (both on- and offline) must contend now with physical restrictions and dramatic expansion of punitive measures for online expression. We should also consider the extent to which online spaces create new terms of exchange that can or do transfer offline. These new terms of exchange do not necessarily replicate established offline exchanges and have the potential to alter and subvert the dynamics of those exchanges. These findings also make clear that expressed online behavior is influenced by structural conditions. Our results show there is scope for community-level collaborations and engagements – creating resources, opening up spaces, producing shared norms – both to transform online experience, and for those online transformations to address and even help dismantle some of the destructive normative underlying conditions and assumptions on which the internet operates.

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EROTICS - Regional Monitoring Survey (Bangladesh)

Please read the instructions before filling out the survey:

- *This survey aims to understand more deeply how people use the internet (on any devices) in their work, personal life, activism, etc.*
- *All responses will be kept anonymous and confidential. Some questions are optional.*
- *We appreciate the time you have taken to answer these questions. All answers will help us in understanding your usage of the internet. We will be producing country and region-specific reports on internet, gender and sexuality to share any unique patterns specific to your country and region and to ensure that our advocacy is informed by specific priorities and needs of local communities.*
- *This survey will take you between 25 and 30 minutes to complete.*
- *This survey is applicable to those who are Bangladeshi.*

A note about informed consent and privacy: By agreeing to proceed with the survey, I can confirm I have read the above information. I understand my participation in this survey is voluntary and I have the right to withdraw at any time without any reason and without detriment to myself. I also understand that once the survey is completed and submitted, it will not be possible to remove the anonymized information. I agree that any data collected here shall be subsequently published in anonymous form.

There are 30 questions in this survey. Questions marked (*) are required.

1. Location*

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Bangladesh

2. What do you do?*

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Non-governmental organization
- Academic or research institute
- Student
- Freelance/Independent
- Artist
- Human rights activist/advocate
- Government sector
- Private sector
- Unemployed
- Other

3. Age*

4a. Gender*

Please choose **all** that apply:

- Cis woman** (Women who identify with the same gender as that assigned to them at birth can choose cis woman)
- Cis man** (Men who identify with the same gender as that assigned to them at birth can choose cis man)
- Trans woman** (This term refers to individuals assigned male at birth who identify as women)
- Trans man** (This term refers to individuals assigned female at birth who identify as men)
- Hijra**
- Intersex** (Term for a combination of chromosomes, hormones, internal sex organs, and genitals that differs from the two expected patterns of male or female)
- Non-binary** (A gender identity label used by some people who do not identify with the binary of man/woman)
- Genderqueer/gender non-conforming** (A gender identity label used by people who have a gender expression that does not conform to traditional gender norms)
- Prefer not to say**
- Other**

4b. Sexual orientation*

Please choose **all** that apply:

- Heterosexual/straight** (Heterosexual refers to attraction to members of the other gender/sex)
- Gay** (A sexual identity term used by some, but not all, people who are mostly or only attracted to those of the same gender/sex)
- Lesbian** (A sexual identity term used by some, but not all, women who are mostly or only attracted to other women)
- Bisexual/Pansexual** (Bisexuality refers to attraction towards men, women and non-binary people. It does not imply equal degree of attraction, simply significant attraction towards all or more than two genders)
- Queer**
- Prefer not to say**
- Prefer to self-describe**

4c. Other identities*

Please choose **all** that apply:

- Disabled/differently abled**
- Ethnic minority**
- Indigenous person**
- Migrant**
- Marginalized group on the basis of caste**
- Marginalized group on the basis of race**
- Marginalized group on the basis of religion**
- Prefer not to say**
- Not applicable**
- Prefer to self-describe**

5. Email/contact details

6. Languages spoken*

7. Languages used on the internet*

8. Where do you access the internet?*

Please choose **all** that apply:

- At home
- At work
- While traveling
- At university/college
- At cybercafe
- Other

9. What is the device you most often use to access the internet?

Please choose **only one** that applies:

- Desktop computer
- Laptop computer
- Mobile phone
- Tablet
- Other

10. How do you rate your skills for the below statements on a scale of 1 to 10 where 10 is can do with ease and 1 is never done before?*

Please choose the appropriate response for each item:

- Can build a website
- Can write code
- Can use search engines
- Can blog
- Can participate on social networks
- Can participate in forums/groups on the internet

11. How much control do you have over your primary device that you mentioned in 9?*

Please check the statement(s) that are the most applicable to your situation.

Please choose **only one** that applies:

- Full control** (I own the device, I don't share it with anyone, I don't need permission to use it)
- Somewhat control**
- No control** (I don't own the device, I share it with others, I need permission to use it)

12. How often do you read the terms and conditions before installing a mobile application or computer software?*

Please choose **only one** that applies:

- Always
- Sometimes
- Never

13. Has your gender identity affected the way you used the internet?*

Please choose **only one** that applies:

- Definitely
- Sometimes
- I don't know
- No

14. Has your sexual identity affected the way you use the internet?*

Please choose **only one** that applies:

- Definitely
- Sometimes
- I don't know
- No

15. Has access to the internet changed how you understand gender and sexual identity?*

Please choose **only one** that applies:

- Definitely**
- Sometimes**
- I don't know**
- No**

Why?*

16. Has access to the internet changed how you perceive people of different gender and sexual identities?*

Please choose **only one** that applies:

- Definitely
- Sometimes
- I don't know
- No

17. How important is the internet in your self-expression on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 is essential and 1 is not important at all?*

18. What do you use the internet most for?*

Please choose the appropriate response (**always, sometimes, never**) for each item:

- Work
- Research
- Dating
- Chatting
- Calls
- Sexting
- Porn
- Gaming
- Social networking
- Video streaming
- Blogs
- Forums
- Email
- Instant messengers
- Sexual pleasure
- Banking or financial transactions

- Health information including sexual and reproductive health
(pregnancy and menstrual apps)
- Search engines and other websites
- Livelihood

19a. How often do you use the internet as a consumer of content on the internet?*

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Daily
- Weekly
- At least once a month
- Rarely
- Never

19b. How often do you use the internet as a creator of content (blogs, vlogs, memes, code, Instagram posts, uploading photos, etc.) on the internet?*

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Daily
- Weekly
- At least once a month
- Rarely
- Never

20. Please rate the following questions based on your experiences.*

Please choose the appropriate response (**definitely, sometimes, I don't know, no**) for each item:

- Diverse people participate and engage in debate/conversations on the internet
- The internet connects me to people more easily
- I can find information on the internet about topics that are considered taboo/problematic by society
- Only women get harassed on the internet
- The same violence we see in the offline world is replicated on the internet
(threats, violence etc.)

21. Have you experienced any of the following?

Please choose **all** that apply:

- Direct threats of violence, including threats of sexual and/or physical violence
(e.g. threat like "I am going to rape you")
- Abusive comments
- Unwanted receiving of sexually explicit materials
- Hate speech, social media posts and/or email, often targeted at an identity
(speech or expression that specifically attacks a person's or a group of people's race, religion, gender identity or sexuality)
- Use of sexist and/or gendered comments or name-calling
- Unauthorized access and controlling of access
- Non-consensual sharing of private information
- Use of indecent or violent images to demean women
- Abusing and/or shaming of a woman for expressing views that are not normative, for disagreeing with people and also for refusing sexual advances
- Advocating femicide (Femicide is generally understood to refer to the intentional murder of women because they are women, but a broader definition includes any killings of women or girls. This definition might not be inclusive of intersex persons)

- Impersonation and identity theft
- Mobbing, including the selection of a target for bullying or harassment
- Other

22. Have you participated in any of the following?

Please choose **all** that apply:

- Direct threats of violence, including threats of sexual and/or physical violence
(e.g. threat like "I am going to rape you")
- Abusive comments
- Unwanted receiving of sexually explicit materials
- Hate speech, social media posts and/or email, often targeted at an identity
(speech or expression that specifically attacks a person's or a group of people's race, religion, gender identity or sexuality)
- Use of sexist and/or gendered comments or name-calling
- Unauthorized access and controlling of access
- Non-consensual sharing of private information
- Use of indecent or violent images to demean women
- Abusing and/or shaming of a woman for expressing views that are not normative, for disagreeing with people and also for refusing sexual advances
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- Impersonation and identity theft
- Mobbing, including the selection of a target for bullying or harassment
- Other

23. What was your response to the violence?

Please choose **all** that apply:

- Reported it to the platform
- Ignored it
- Retorted back
- Reported to a legal system
- Blocked
- Other

24. Did you talk about this with anyone?

Please choose **only one** of the following:

- Yes
- No

25. Rate your experience of using the internet from pleasurable to not on a scale of 1 to 10 (10 is highly pleasurable).

26. Are you interested in talking to us more about your experience of using the internet? If yes, please share with us the best way to reach you.

Thank you for completing this survey.

About the Association for Progressive Communications (APC)

APC is an international network of civil society organisations founded in 1990 dedicated to empowering and supporting people working for peace, human rights, development and protection of the environment, through the strategic use of information and communication technologies (ICTs). We work to build a world in which all people have easy, equal and affordable access to the creative potential of ICTs to improve their lives and create more democratic and egalitarian societies.

To learn more, please visit: <https://www.apc.org/>

About Exploratory Research on Sexuality and the Internet (EROTICS)

EROTICS is a network of activists and researchers working on the intersections of sexuality and the internet. It is an APC project. Funded by AmplifyChange, APC expanded the project under the banner “Building EROTICS Networks in South Asia” spanning Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka. In Bangladesh, the project primarily focuses on sexual expression and rights in digital spaces.

To learn more, please visit: <https://erotics.apc.org/>

About AmplifyChange

AmplifyChange is a multi-donor challenge fund to support civil society advocacy for sexual and reproductive health and rights, and aims to empower young people, men and women to realise those rights.

To learn more, please visit: <https://amplifychange.org/>



AMPLIFYCHANGE

EROTICS

SOUTH ASIA

REGIONAL MONITORING SURVEY

**Bangladesh
Country Report**



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