

The Perils of the Net: Online Sexual Violence



based on a study by the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center (KSVRC)

condensed by Mylene Soto

A 15-year old female teenager, home from a hectic schoolday, decides to relax in a chat room. While typing away, from out of the blue, this message pops up:

“Can I see under your skirt? Come on, let’s see what’s inside of your underwear. I want to put my head down between your knees.”

Sexual violence: old and new

Ten years ago, sexual violence in Korean society was considered the bad luck of a few women, not a serious social problem. Media trivialised the issue further by treating cases of sexual violence as isolated incidents of assault, instead of violence committed against women by virtue of their being women.

Countering Online Sexual Violence



The first cyber violence organised by the KSVRC in 1997 gave the following tips on countering online sexual violence:

- ◆ save the contents of the conversation in chat rooms
- ◆ save all other proofs such as E-mail received, or information about a survivor that appeared on the bulletin board
- ◆ demand an immediate halt to the harassment and a public apology
- ◆ visit a counselling centre

In the mid-1980s, in Korea as in the rest of the region, women woke up to the reality of violence against women. Korean women organised and launched various campaigns to confront the phenomenon. Firm in their opposition to domestic violence, rape, sexual harassment in the workplace, and other forms of violence against women, they paved the way for the 1993 passage of the Special Law for Sexual Violence. As a result, 47 counselling centres and an additional six facilities to support victims of sexual violence were established. These institutions are now the nexus of relentless education on the prevention of sexual violence, the most common forms of which are rape, sexual harassment or conduct, exposure or “flashing” of sex organs and obscene phone calls. Hidden anxiety, fear or restrictive behaviour is also considered indirect sexual violence.¹ Sexual violence is so grave an offence

that it is considered not only violence against a woman but also violence against the family.²

However, a new form of sexual violence—online sexual violence—has emerged. Online sexual violence includes all acts that may hamper another person’s online communications by creating a threatening or hostile environment that uses unsolicited sexually graphic, obscene and improper language and/or images. With online sexual violence, sexual metaphors, approaches or suggestions are employed to deliberately provoke a woman’s discomfort or unease.³

In the United States, any violent action in relation to sex is also classified as online harassment. However, the KSVRC applies a broader definition and includes violence that suppresses women or worsens the cultural distortions of sex and gender common in Asian societies. Online sexual violence thus also includes obscene language or threats, spam mail, interruption of a person’s online communication, and other problems that hamper online communications. For the WHOA, a Website of an anti-online harassment movement, online harassment refers to any action to cause harm to others for no particular reason—including upsetting, abusing or verbally threatening someone.⁴

Accompanying the phenomenal growth of Internet usage in the 1990s is the spread of the problem of online harassment. During a cyber conference marking the International Social Violence Expulsion Week in Korea in 1998, Unitel, a PC (personal computer) communication service, sponsored a survey to determine the extent of online sexual violence. Thirty percent of the respondents experienced sexual violence online.⁵

A study by another PC communication service, Nownuri, reveals that 68 percent of male respondents and 95 percent of their female counterparts either saw or personally experienced sexual violence online. In addition, six percent of male respondents admitted to committing some form of online sexual violence themselves.⁶

Types of online sexual violence

The Korea Sexual Violence Relief Centre

(KSVRC), which sponsored the 1998 cyber conference, lists the various cases of online sexual violence and harassment as:

Messages with sexual undertones. Sexually graphic messages and/or illustrations are sent to victims by E-mail. These are automatically displayed when the recipient opens her mailbox. The assailant could also use a chat room frequented by women and girls whom he can tell from the sound of their names or IDs. He

The aftermath

In 1992, a middle-school girl committed suicide after being sexually insulted and chased in a chat room by a group of men. Entries in her diary revealed her tremendous humiliation on being called a whore online. One survivor equated her experience with the shame associated with rape.

According to survivors, the most common advice they receive is that they simply shut off

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singles out one and barrages her with sexual comments. Such sexual remarks can be received within 30 seconds of entering chat rooms. Sexual violence also comes in the form of jokes that have double (sexual) meanings or insult others.

Unwanted proposals for sexual conversation. Online proposals for sex, similar to obscene phone calls or proposals for phone sex, have also become so frequent that women subscribers of communications services subconsciously half-expect to receive one such sick proposition whenever they log in. The proposals vary from: "Seoul, want a quick sex with a man of a huge dick?," to "Wanna get naked?" Refusal to take part could mean being chased by abusive language, or more of sexually harassing memos or mail bombs.

Posting an individual's personal information on public electronic bulletin boards. Publicising an individual's real name, telephone number, pager number, ID and personal letters on bulletin boards also constitutes online harassment. One victim recalls the time her personal details were provided to open dating sites and bulletin boards lodged inside obscene sites. For several months, she was paged or phoned by complete strangers. Sometimes an assailant would post fake messages—messages that sounded as if the sender (the woman victim) was in need of, and prepared to pay for, sexual service.

the PC or stop using computer communication facilities altogether. This advice springs from a mistaken belief that the harassment stops once the computer is turned off, or that one can easily dispose of obscene mail, pictures and graphics once you click 'delete'.

The KSVRC has found that 66.4 percent of victims surveyed simply ignored the offensive messages, 1.3 percent actually disconnected the service, and 31.3 percent filed formal complaints with their Internet Service Providers (ISPs). But are ISPs responsible for the sexual violence online?

ISPs are expected to provide their customers a secure communication environment to protect their clients' rights. But most of the ISPs are not showing any effort to settle complaints of online sexual violence filed with them. A number have even chosen to look the other way—to ignore the increasing prevalence of sexual violence online.

In one instance, the victim managed to store the attacks as files and subsequently sent these to her ISP. However, the ISP's only response was a warning to the assailant. At the same time, it ordered the survivor's ID, Slut, deleted because the name was offensive and invited attack.

In response, the KSVRC organised a support committee that sent the ISP a complaint letter asserting her right not to be discriminated on the basis of appearance, viewpoint or personal preference. The letter also demanded a public apology. The company initially ignored the

committee, prompting this to go to the press and publicise the case. Only then did the ISP pressure the assailant to issue an apology.

For that matter, some ISPs are even the ones complaining—over the number of complaints of sexual violence they receive from customers. “Why make a big fuss of the issue?” some ISPs ask. Majority seems to have adopted a hands-off policy on online harassment and sexual violence.

Turning the wheel: the KSVRC’s services

Unfortunately, there are as yet no legal parameters defining and circumscribing online sexual violence and harassment. The Special Law for Sexual Violence limits the usage of X-rated communication services, but has no effective provision for the prosecution of cases of online sexual violence.⁷ The seclusion of users’ “real identities,” and state guarantees of free enterprise which ISPs often invoke, moreover, render the identification of an assailant extremely difficult or remote. Absent too are assistance programmes for the victims.

In the past, the KSVRC, which provides medical and legal assistance to survivors of sexual violence, averaged 4,000 to 5,000 offline counselling sessions a year. But since 1997, more and more survivors have turned to E-mail for support and advice, in part because of easy access to cyberspace and also because of the anonymity survivors enjoy online.

From 16 online sessions in the latter half of 1997, the group registered 93 sessions in 1998. The number of victims seeking online help should further increase as word of the service spreads.

The KSVRC has been able to persuade the major ISPs such as Unitel, Chollian, Channeli and Netsgo to provide detailed information on sexual violence. The information can be obtained from the centre’s Website (<http://www.sisters.or.kr>) which was developed by several volunteer Website designers. It is contained in the Data Centre and the Counselling Corner section. The Resting Corner section includes a bulletin board, news bulletins from the counselling centre, and information for new members. The Provoking Media Corner monitors media reports while the Prosecuting Corner encourages victims to file charges against negative portrayals of women or discrimination against them.

Agenda for action

Online sexual violence worsens the marginalisation of women by progressively narrowing women’s access to communication space. It impedes the creation of a knowledge/information society and fosters instead a violent culture that suppresses women and intensifies unequal gender relations. In short, online sexual violence is an abridgement of women’s right to free and safe computer-communications environment.

By now, the ISPs should be the first to recognise the magnitude of the problem of online harassment and sexual violence. They should be able to guarantee women safe telecommuting. Among others, ISPs should help or initiate the development of support mechanisms for the survivors. At the same time, without in any way censoring or limiting Korean women’s access to the Net, the state should put in place legal measures that will prevent and eliminate online harassment and sexual violence, and punish the offenders. ☺

Footnotes:

¹Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center (KSVRC), “What Is Sexual Violence?,” 1991, p. 1. KSVRC Website: <http://www.sisters.or.kr>.

²Cho Joo-hyun cho, “Research Tendency of Domestic Sexual Violence,” Data collection marking the opening of the Korea Research Institute of Sexual Violence within the Korea Sexual Violence Relief Center, 1997, p. 54. KSVRC Website: <http://www.sisters.or.kr>.

³Jin-wook Chung, “The Actual Condition of Online Sexual Violence,” Data collection for a conference by the National Congress Party, 1999, p. 1.

⁴WHOA Website: www.whoa.femail.com.

⁵The survey was conducted between 25 November and 9 December 1998. However, the data gathered was not gender-disaggregated.

⁶The survey was undertaken between 16 and 22 April 1998 among 891 men and 477 women subscribers.

⁷Per Article 14 of the Special Law for Sexual Violence, anyone caught using a phone call, letter or computer with the purpose of inducing one’s or other’s sexual desire, or delivering any language, sound, writing, image, illustration or object to make another feel unpleasant or cause sexual embarrassment through an online communication service, may be imprisoned for no more than one year or fined no more than 300 million won.

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