

The ebb and flow of 'eve-teasing' in the news

Front page coverage of street harassment of women in Bangladesh

Abstract: Eve-teasing is a euphemism for street-based sexual harassment, which is a widespread issue across Bangladesh affecting the emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing of Bangladeshi women. The media can play a vital role by covering news and raising awareness of eve-teasing. Historically, the headlines in Bangladesh focused on more overt forms of gender violence—rape, murder, acid attacks—framing eve-teasing as a mere nuisance, a fact of life in the country. How the media portrays eve-teasing in Bangladesh is a subject about which there is currently very little research. This content analysis of the two main national newspapers in Bangladesh assesses how the media reported street-based sexual harassment over the course of a seminal year—2010. It was during this year that the government of Bangladesh enacted the *Family Violence Prevention and Protection Act* in acknowledgement of the prevalence and seriousness of gender violence in the country. Similar acts had been passed by the governments of nearby countries India and Sri Lanka in 2005, and Nepal in 2008 (Fardosh, 2013). This study looks at how Bangladeshi newspapers covered 'eve-teasing' prominently (as front-page news), in a year when it was acknowledged as a serious issue, through the passing of a law by the Bangladeshi government.

Keywords: Bangladesh, communication, content analysis, culture, eve-teasing, framing, gender violence, journalism, newspapers, sexual harassment, South Asia studies

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Introduction

EVE-TEASING' is a colloquial euphemism for street-based sexual harassment in societies with links to the Indian subcontinent. Broadly speaking, gender violence is a serious issue across the Asia-Pacific region. For example, Melanesian societies have been described as having 'severe and pervasive' issues with violence against women (Newland, 2015, p.49) while in Fiji, where people of Indian descent make up 40 percent of the population, a survey found entrenched and repeated instances of violence against women and girls (Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, 2013). In Bangladesh—the focus of this study—eve-teasing affects the emotional, mental, and physical wellbeing of Bangladeshi women. It encompasses various instances of gender-based violence such as catcalling, verbal abuse, physical molestation, and assault. Ghosh (2011, p.100) identified eve-teasing as 'an attitude, a mind set, a set of behaviours that is construed as an insult and act of humiliation'. Ghosh (2011, p.100) notes that the term is superficially used by young men: 'The girls consider eve teasing to be something (of a) regular occurrence ... It's fine for those who accept eve teasing lightly, but a majority of the girls are badly affected both physically and psychologically.'

Fairchild (2010, p.192) outlined the broad ranging impacts of street-based harassment on the wellbeing of women, describing women's experiences of stranger harassment to be 'frightening, unpleasant, and disruptive; women frequently described themselves frustrated, disgusted and angered by the experience'. She further argues that street-based sexual harassment correlates with body objectification and fear of rape which is particularly the case when the phenomenon is widespread. 'Being catcalled, stared at, whistled at, and even groped and grabbed are monthly and weekly experiences, and for some women a daily experience' (Fairchild, 2010, p. 192).

Bangladeshi society is currently in a condition of progression from the traditional to the modern. In this transitional flux half of the population of Bangladesh comprises of women seeking employment and opportunities outside their home, contributing to the household income and asserting their economic, educational, and other rights. Within the urban lower, middle, and upper classes, women are moving into a workforce historically dominated by men. As Banks (2013, p.99) explains, in Bangladesh 'women face a complex balance between maintaining their household, employment and marital relationships, and men remain unwilling to accept additional challenges to their authority'. In this context eve-teasing 'can be seen as a symptom of this refusal to accept the societal change in power dynamics occurring as a result of increased female participation in Bangladesh's workforce. It frequently takes place around schools, colleges, and workplaces (Begum, Hossain, & Shahid, 2010). However, in Bangladesh eve-teasing is sometimes seen as a 'less serious' a form

of gender violence compared to, for example, violent physical sexual assault (Talboys et al., 2017). Bangladesh's suicide rate shows a skewed gender ratio, with women below the age of 49 dying by suicide at a rate of 20 per 100,000 people or more than twice the rate of men below the age of 49 according to findings by Bagley, Shahnaz, and Simkhada (2017). Among teenagers, girls in Bangladesh aged 15 to 17 die by suicide at a rate of 14 per 100,000 people—that is, 50 percent higher than boys in the same age bracket. The authors point out that given the stigma associated with suicide in a majority Muslim country like Bangladesh, the suicide rate is likely to be under-reported. They cite a highly patriarchal society, gender violence, forced marriage of girls at a young age, and various cultural (as opposed to religiously mandated) norms as possible reasons for the higher rate of suicide among women and girls in Bangladesh.

Although street based sexual harassment and gender violence more broadly have been documented throughout the Asia-Pacific, the saying 'eve-teasing' is a synonym referring to sexual harassment of women and girls in public surroundings, originating and used exclusively in South Asian societies (Natarajan, 2016). The phrase trivialises the seriousness of the practice, which can range from verbal harassment or lewd remarks directed at women and girls, to inappropriate physical contact and in extreme cases, severe cases of assault and ultimately acting to curb the participation of women in public activities (Kathpalia, Kumai, & Chander, 2019) and prompting women's rights activists to discourage the use of the term (Talboys et al., 2017). While high profile cases of sexual assault in Asian countries have led lawmakers to pass legislation punishing perpetrators, lingering gender inequality (such as differences in the perception of economic and social roles attributed to women and men) and deeply entrenched societal attitudes towards the rights of women and girls have led to difficulties in changing widespread cultural acceptance of eve-teasing (Natarajan, 2016).

The main studies into eve-teasing have focused on the context of specific countries or socio-economic circumstances; and have been conducted within sociological or criminology frameworks. For example, Talboys et al. (2017) conducted a mixed methods study into the prevalence of eve-teasing in nine villages in India's Punjab region. Through focus groups and semi-structured interviews, the researchers found that the residents of these villages viewed eve-teasing as staring, stalking, and inappropriate verbal or physical harassment. Furthermore, participants in the researchers' study saw the consequences of societal acceptance of this behaviour as detrimental to girls and women, could lead to the victims of eve-teasing suffering depression or committing suicide. A second mixed-methods study into eve-teasing focused on the Indian context looked at the experiences of female university students in Chennai. Through focus group discussions with the university students, interviews with law enforcement personnel based near the university campuses, and safety audits of the campus surroundings, Natarajan

(2016) found the students had a broad understanding of what eve-teasing was stemming from experiences with it or hearing about it from other students, and where and why it took place. Meanwhile the same study found, through interviews with local law enforcement, that the victims of eve-teasing were often reluctant to report it to loved ones or to the police, and would withdraw complaints over fear of reprisals from the perpetrators, or fear that the victim's marriage prospects would be harmed if the complaint was made public. The study found that local law enforcement deployed a number of ways to apprehend the perpetrators of eve-teasing such as undercover female officers posing as students on public transport routes out of campuses, or allocating more human resources to the problem (for example increasing the number of police patrolling outside the campuses, or having a minimum of two female police officers stationed near campus entrances).

The effects on the well-being of victims of eve-teasing in another rural part of India form the basis of a study by Kathpalia, Kumai, and Chander (2019). In this research, a survey of 200 women in the Kurukshetra district of Haryana state found that more than half had experienced sexual harassment at public places such as bus stops. The survey participants believed it had impacted on their well-being and self-confidence, increasing their anxiety and diminishing feelings of safety in public places. Suicide ideation was also reported as a consequence of eve-teasing by these rural women and girls. Conversely Misri (2017, p.305) notes how the notion of eve-teasing has also been linked to South Asia's female city dwellers—'the figure of the urban female college student, and occasionally to the female office worker in cities such as Delhi, Calcutta and Bombay'—and to the Biblical connotations of the 'temptress' who caused the fall of men from the heavens, thus drawing parallels between street-based sexual harassment and moral panic over educated, working women infringing on male-dominated public life.

Gender violence has also been noted as a serious issue in Fiji, where a large Indian minority resides. Fiji's rates of violence against women and girls are among the highest globally (Fiji Women's Rights Movement, 2016). Newland (2017) notes that while expressions of gender violence are culturally specific (to Indo-Fijians or Indigenous Fijians) gender violence is actually endemic across Fijian culture, and gender hierarchies underpin women's lives across Fiji's Christian, Hindu, and Muslim societies. While eve-teasing itself has not been the subject of extensive academic study outside of Indian contexts, research has been conducted on gender violence more broadly, in Bangladesh. Noting that in 2000 the United Nations cited Bangladesh as having the worst record of violence against women, Khan (2005) outlines gender violence discourse within a development studies framework. Khan (2005) concluded that the presence of international development organisations in the country have led to attempts to combat Bangladesh's patriarchal attitudes and practices, for example through

the funding of education, health, and microfinance programmes which have enriched and empowered women, but which have also led to push back from traditionalist forces arguing that the place of a woman is in the home. A study by Naved and Persson (2005) looked at factors associated with gender violence against spouses in Bangladesh using a behavioural science framework. Through interviews with more than 3,000 rural and urban Bangladeshi women they found that one of the strongest factors associated with gender violence in households was a history of such abuse from the perpetrator's father against his mother. In addition, communication between spouses, and educational attainment of the husband were also factors.

An exploration by Good (2007) of the reasons for eve-teasing and its persistence (set against longstanding socio-cultural perceptions of women during and after the colonial era) concluded that key periods of the country's history have contributed to the ongoing problem of eve-teasing, including independence and partition. Using historical, cultural studies, and gender studies frameworks, this study found (through interviews) a resignation among some women in India to the way they were treated publicly and a form of internalising their submissive place in Indian society. Good (2007) notes that existing literature on eve-teasing is minimal. There has been little research into its occurrence outside of specific contexts in India and very little research exists which use media studies frameworks to assess how eve-teasing is portrayed by major media outlets in a non-Indian context within the region.

Methodology

The local Bangladesh press paid significant attention to eve-teasing and sexual harassment as the government prepared to introduce the gender violence bill (Khan 2005). Our study uses a content analysis of the front pages of two national newspapers in Bangladesh, in 2010—the year in which the government of Bangladesh enacted the Family Violence Prevention and Protection Act in acknowledgement of the prevalence and seriousness of gender violence in the country. The data source for this study comprises articles from the *Daily ProthomAlo* and the *Daily Jugantor*; these two newspapers are among the newspapers with the highest circulations in Bangladesh in 2010 (*Bangladesh Pratidin* tops, 2014). Although published from the capital Dhaka, the newspapers are distributed throughout the country and cover national and international, as well as local, news. The versions of the newspapers subject to the study were stored in electronic format in a digital archive, as printed (they were not digitised in the sense that a content management system was set up in web form). Content analysis was chosen as the most appropriate method for the study given that the goal of the study was to assess how many times eve-teasing was reported as front page news in major newspapers in Bangladesh in the year following the

passing of an Act designed to clamp down on sexual harassment; this required the type of systematic examination of mass media that content analysis can provide (Mayring, 2004). The sample included articles from the daily editions of the *Daily ProthomAlo* and the *Daily Jugantor* from 1 January to 31 December 2010 and the electronic versions of these papers were searched for the term ‘eve-teasing’ on the front page.

Findings and discussion

In 2010, a total of 56 news stories from the two newspapers studied covered eve-teasing on the front page, in the context of reporting on the *Family Violence Prevention and Protection Act*. The front page stories on eve-teasing can be broken down per masthead as follows.

Newspaper	Editions	Total published news
<i>ProthomAlo</i>	365	32
<i>Jugantor</i>	365	24
Total	730	56

The space dedicated to eve-teasing can be described in relation to the entire front page using column centimetres (the standard measurement of the amount of content in print publications)¹ as shown in Table 2.

Newspaper	Sample number	Total front-page volume (column centimetres) in a year	Number of ‘eve-teasing’ related stories	‘Eve-teasing’ related news volume (column centimetres) in a year	Percentage
<i>ProthomAlo</i>	365	7254	32	1768	24.37%
<i>Jugantor</i>	365	7234	24	1114	15.4%
Total	730	14488	56	2883	19.89%

In terms of the breakdown of the type of news coverage, hard news was the preferred format (which was to be expected given that most of the coverage was in the context of the country’s lawmakers being in the middle of the process of getting a prominent gender violence related bill passed through the Bangladeshi parliament). Table 3 illustrates the different types of stories on eve-teasing.

In terms of the number of columns devoted to the stories, newsworthiness is signified by the amount of space devoted to a story (Milne, 2018). Column

Table 3: Different types of stories about ‘eve-teasing’

Newspaper	Sample number	Total front stories related to ‘eve-teasing’	Hard news	Hard news follow up	Feature	Investigative reporting	Explainers
<i>ProthomAlo</i>	365	32	22	9	4	9	7
<i>Jugantor</i>	365	24	16	5	4	7	8
Total	730	56	38	14	8	16	15

inches (converted here to column centimetres) have historically been the yardstick for news values—the more space given to a story, the more ‘newsworthy’ it is. For the *ProthomAlo* and the *Jugantor*, there were no five or six column stories (the largest possible) about eve-teasing on the front page in 2010. The majority of the front-page stories on eve-teasing in the two newspapers were single or double column stories (the size typically allocated to hard news stories). Table 4 captures the column treatment on eve-teasing by both newspapers.

Table 4: Column treatment of ‘eve-teasing’ stories

Newspaper	Sample number	Total front page stories related to ‘eve-teasing’	Column treatment				
			Single column stories	Double column stories	Three column stories	Four column stories	Five column stories
<i>ProthomAlo</i>	365	32	13 (40.6%)	12 (37.5%)	5 (15.6%)	2 (6.2%)	x
<i>Jugantor</i>	365	24	11 (45.8%)	7 (29.1%)	4 (16.6%)	2 (8.3%)	x
Total	730	56	24 (42.8%)	19 (33.9%)	9 (16.0%)	4 (7.1%)	x

The relationship between news values and visual imagery is well documented—for example, Pfau et al (2006) found that photographs can elicit a more visceral reaction from audiences or consumers of news while the addition of a photograph implies to the reader that a story is more ‘newsworthy’ (Zillman, Knobloch & Yu, 2001). Out of the newspaper stories devoted to eve-teasing on the front pages of these two Bangladesh dailies, only a small percentage were illustrated with visuals. Over the course of the year the *ProthomAlo* dedicated photographs to 30 of its front-page articles on eve-teasing adding up to a total of 383.8 column centimetres taken up by pictures. The newspaper’s total front-page volume (column centimetres) in a year is 2856—meaning that 5.29 percent of its ‘prime real estate’ (the front page) was devoted to visual illustrations to accompany the stories of street-based gender violence. Similarly, the *Jugantor*

allocated a picture 22 times over the course of 2010 to front page stories on eve-teasing, equating to 175 column centimetres of space in the newspaper's front page over a year. *The Jugantor's* total front-page volume (column inches) in a year is 2848 meaning that 2.42 percent of its front page was devoted to photographs to illustrate the reporting of street-based gender violence.

Most Bangladeshi newspapers publish black headlines, but practice the use of red, blue or other colours in headlines to emphasise and draw attention to specific news stories. In our sample the overwhelming majority of front page stories about eve-teasing used black headlines suggesting that while these stories were important enough to feature on the front page, the majority were hard news focused reports that the newspapers did not feel their readers' attention should be drawn to specifically. Twenty-seven out of the 32 stories about eve-teasing published on the front page of the *ProthomAlo* in 2010 used black headlines (93.75 percent of the headlines; two stories used a red headline (6.25 percent); three stories used a blue headline (9.37 percent). It was a similar scenario with the *Jugantor* and the 24 front page stories which were about eve-teasing in 2010; the majority (22 stories, or 91.67 percent) used the stock standard black headline while the remaining two stories (8.33 percent) used a blue headline.

Finally, we looked at the monthly distribution of front-page stories about eve-teasing in our sample, in order to investigate how often the newspapers covered these stories (Table 5). The *Family Violence Prevention and Protection Act* was passed by the Bangladeshi parliament in early October of 2010 (Khan, 2017), the year from which our sample was drawn. The analysis shows that stories about eve-teasing peaked in October and November for both dailies, but that no stories about eve-teasing made the front page in January, June and September for both dailies (and that none made the front page in February or March for the *ProthomAlo*, or December for *Jugantor*). This is not to suggest that there were no occurrences of eve-teasing in these months or that the occurrence was less in other months compared to October and November; rather that incidents of eve-teasing would be subject to the attention of major dailies in Bangladesh where the consequences and impact of the story are more newsworthy (such as when physical harm or suicide takes place as a result of the harassment).

In assessing the effectiveness of the *Family Violence Prevention and Protection Act of 2010*, Jahan (2017, p. 401) believes that prior to the enactment of this law the legal framework in Bangladesh had 'failed to provide any effective remedy for victims of domestic violence'. She points to the critical role played by advocacy and civil society groups in ensuring the act was passed and subsequently implemented. Prior to the act being passed, the potential of the media to highlight gender violence was observed by Khan (2005) who notes that beginning in the 1990s, a freer media environment began to flourish in Bangladesh and subsequently the number of media outlets increased along with the rate of reporting

Table 5: Front page stories on 'eve-teasing' by month

Months	Front page stories related to 'eye-teasing'	
	<i>ProthomAlo</i>	<i>Jugantor</i>
January	x	x
February	x	1
March	x	2
April	5	3
May	2	2
June	x	x
July	1	1
August	1	3
September	x	x
October	14	6
November	7	62
December	2	x
Total	32	24

on gender violence and sexual assault against women and children. While our analysis shows that only 32 news stories about eve-teasing made the front page of two major dailies in Bangladesh across 2010 when the gender violence act was passed (equating to less than 20 percent of the volume of column centimetres on the two papers' front pages), it indicates that more attention is being paid to this issue in Bangladesh's public sphere compared to previous decades.

We appreciate the strength of content analysis in providing quantitative data for analysis; equally we acknowledge one of its limitations in that the message of the media coverage cannot be investigated in depth by merely measuring column centimetres. When we look at the content of the front-page stories related to eve-teasing from our sample, we can break down the content of the hard news stories that focused on the consequences of the harassment for the victim, as follows:

Stories reporting on fatalities arising from 'eve-teasing'

- Six front page stories (two in the *ProthomAlo* and four in *Jugantor*) were about incidents where a victim of eve-teasing was murdered (by the perpetrators of the street-based gender violence)
- Ten front page stories (four in the *ProthomAlo* and six in *Jugantor*) were about incidents where a victim of eve-teasing died by suicide

Stories reporting on injuries to victims from 'eve-teasing'

- Three front page stories (one in the *ProthomAlo* and two in *Jugantor*) were about injuries sustained by victims of street-based gender violence

Stories reporting on victims being locked at home after 'eve-teasing'

- Ten front page stories (six in the *ProthomAlo* and four in *Jugantor*) were about the victims of eve-teasing being locked at home either for their own safety or out of a sense of shame against the family.

These figures make it difficult to ascertain that one paper or the other devoted more space on its front page to the issue. The quantitative findings from our content analysis suggest that in terms of total volume (column centimetres) the *ProthomAlo* seemed to cover street-based gender violence more than the *Jugantor*. Yet when we looked at the qualitative content of the stories, the *Jugantor* mostly covered the issue more from the perspective of the effects on the victims of 'eve-teasing', with more stories (as opposed to column centimetres) than the *ProthomAlo* about the deaths and injuries of the victims.

The quantitative findings in terms of the volume of front page space devoted to eve-teasing across the two mastheads can, however, be viewed in conjunction with our analysis of the monthly occurrence of a front page story on eve-teasing.

- The *ProthomAlo* did not put any stories about eve-teasing on its front page in these months in 2010: January, February, March, June and September.
- For the *Jugantor*, the months in 2010 where stories on 'eve-teasing' did not make the front page were January, June, September and December.

The comparatively larger amount of front-page real estate devoted to the issue in October and November can be attributed to factors such as the *Family Violence Prevention and Protection Act of 2010* being passed by Bangladesh's parliament in early October of that year.

Conclusion

Based on preliminary work on the topic of media coverage of eve-teasing, this article looked at the extremely under-represented study of the reporting of street-based gender violence, outside of India - the South Asian country which has dominated the negligible current literature on eve-teasing. Gender violence is a broad-ranging issue across the Asia-Pacific region, with research into the phenomenon spanning various geographic locations including but not limited to the Indian sub-continent and communities in the Pacific with and without cultural ties to the sub-continent. Within the broad scope of gender violence as a societal problem, street-based gender violence affects India's neighbours, but little research has been conducted on both eve-teasing as well as media cover-

age of eve-teasing, in countries such as Bangladesh. The year chosen for the sample was the same year in which Bangladesh enacted legislative measures to clamp down on eve-teasing and street-based gender violence. With 10 years having passed since the passing of the *Family Violence Prevention and Protection Act*, a natural progression of the preliminary research conducted for this study would look at how front page coverage of street based gender violence has evolved over that period of time. Further study on this issue might also take a qualitative method (for example textual analysis) to assess, for example, whether the impacts of the eve-teasing on the victim contributed to the decision-making by editors of the newspaper about the significance and placement of news stories covering the eve-teasing.

Note

1. The standard measurement of the amount of content in print publications which use multiple columns per page; a column inch historically referred to the space taken up by a column in width, by an inch in height, which has been adjusted in this article to refer to column centimetres—that is, a column in width, by 2.54cm in height.

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