CHAPTER 26

Adolescents mobilising in real life and online

The Bangladesh context

Pragyna Mahpara, Sahida Islam Khondaker and Taslima Aktar

INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh has seen an exponential increase in the number of internet users over the past few years. This rise in internet use has also shaped how adolescents use the internet and why. Internet access helps adolescents understand social issues and different forms of injustice through the information that is available online. It helps them to engage with a wider community and provides an arena in which they can develop a social conscience. Participating in social movements, both in-person and online, enables adolescents to identify and challenge social injustice, which in turn contributes to their civic engagement[1] – one of the major indicators for exercising voice and agency. Today, online civic engagement opportunities appeal to adolescents more than ever, as they provide a wider platform for engagement opportunities than is available to them locally, and offer the possibility for private or even anonymous civic involvement.

This chapter is based on the findings from a qualitative study entitled 'New Forms of Adolescent Voice and Agency in Bangladesh through the Use of Mobile Phones and ICT', conducted by BRAC Institute of Governance and Development as part of the Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence (GAGE) longitudinal research programme.[2] The chapter explores adolescents' voice and agency through civic and digital civic engagement, through

DOI: 10.4324/9781003341666-30

three case studies on in-person and virtual mobilisation around social issues and countering violence.

ADOLESCENTS DEVELOPING VOICE AND AGENCY THROUGH CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

GAGE's conceptual framework covers six key domains in which adolescents develop capabilities. The adolescent voice and agency domain focuses on 'the ability of adolescent girls to meaningfully participate in household, school and community life – which is key to them developing the skills required for political participation in adulthood' (GAGE Consortium, 2017). A number of indicators are used to unpack voice and agency. These include adolescents' access to information online, opportunities to learn new skills, ability to increase their decision-making capacities, developing online risk recognition and mitigation skills, and creating a sense of belonging to a larger virtual community through civic engagement. This chapter focuses on two indicators that broadly relate to adolescents' civic engagement and citizenship practices: how adolescents organise and participate in movements and build their leadership skills; and how they recognise certain forms of social injustice in the form of online violence and take actions (individually and collectively) to claim their space online.

Adolescents' civic engagement is centred around working individually or collectively to effect change through voluntary activities focused on helping others, achieving a public good, or solving a community problem. This also acts as their mechanism to claim their rights (Sarker and Islam, 2017). It enables them to become better informed about current events and enhances their social contact, helping them become agents of change. Like adolescents everywhere, Bangladeshi adolescents are striving to have their voices heard by taking part in organised civic movements. They are mobilising against injustice and claiming their rights (Kaiser and Prieto, 2018). However, Bangladesh has relatively few formal platforms for adolescents' civic and political engagement, so their participation remains limited (Lenzi et al., 2015). This is where the internet and access to digital technologies come into play, as it allows adolescents to use social media platforms to mobilise against social injustice.

MOBILE PHONE AND INTERNET ACCESS IN BANGLADESH

In line with the increasing global trends of digitisation, the Bangladesh government launched a Perspective Plan in 2008 with a strategic goal to establish

a Digital Bangladesh. Its goals included ensuring internet access for all citizens at minimal cost, and digital literacy among all secondary and primary school students (Hossain et al., 2019). The country experienced a threefold increase in the number of internet users, from 31.1 million in February 2012 to 110.8 million in October 2020 (Bangladesh Telecommunication Regulatory Commission [BTRC], 2020). By October 2021, almost 80% of the population was internet users (BTRC, 2020). By 2020, Bangladesh also had one of the world's highest rates of mobile phone coverage – 74% of people aged 15–65 (BTRC, 2020).

GENDER GAP IN ACCESSING THE INTERNET

Despite the increasing trends of digitisation across Bangladesh, access to information and communications technology (ICT) remains unequal, both geographically (with a 38% urban–rural gap in internet use) and by gender (with a 62% gender gap) (GSMA, 2019). The National ICT Household Survey 2018–2019 further found that among non-users of the internet, only 4.8% of people do not use it because they have no permission to – but 95.4% of those respondents were female. These respondents were mostly aged between 15 and 24 years old (Access to Information [a2i] Programme & Access for Affordable Internet [A4AI], 2019).

SOCIAL MEDIA AS PLATFORMS OF MOBILISATION

In Bangladesh, social media plays an important role in enhancing people's civic engagement. A total of 29.7% of the population in the country are social media users (Kemp, 2022). The rise in internet use has seen social media platforms emerge as effective mediums for virtual mobilisation on human rights and social justice issues (Mahpara et al., 2021). This has democratised public spheres, taking social movements to the streets from the digital space, and it has enabled adolescents to engage with social justice issues, not just in person but virtually too. This is building adolescents' confidence as they are finding many ways to participate in their societies – be it challenging injustice, fostering peace, or exploring innovative solutions to local challenges. This is also developing their voice and agency – enabling them to be active agents of change and developing a sense of civic engagement, both in the virtual world and in their real lives.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter draws on qualitative research with 68 adolescents from three schools, selected as proxies for different socioeconomic groups: an

English-medium school from the capital city Dhaka, a rural school in Cumilla (a district in the south east part of Bangladesh), and a school from settlements in Dhaka (proxies for high-income, middle-to-lower income, and low-income groups, respectively). English-medium schools are private and the fee structure is much higher than for any type of government school. The research wanted to explore whether class and gender differences impact adolescents' access to certain types of mobilisation opportunities and platforms, which would in turn affect their civic and digital civic engagement. The study was conducted from July 2019 to February 2020, during that time Bangladesh witnessed various social movements campaigns on improved road safety, and combatting in-person and cyber-based sexual harassment, among others. The research wanted to capture whether and how adolescents participated in these movements.

Data collection involved vignettes used in focus group discussions (FGDs) with adolescents from grade 8 (aged 14 years). In each school, two FGDs were conducted, one with boys and one with girls. From each focus group, three boys and three girls adolescents were selected for further in-depth interviews.

CASE STUDIES

The following case studies reflect how adolescents in Bangladesh have mobilised, in-person and virtually, to engage with social issues and to counter violence. Case studies 1 and 2 are based on national events, while case study 3 brings out a broader context of the growing violence against women and girls online.

Case study 1: Road safety movement, 2018

In 2018, Bangladesh witnessed a large-scale movement organised by adolescents after the death of two students in a road accident. This nationwide movement escalated into a mass protest, initiated by students in Dhaka. As well as protesting in-person, they used social media (particularly Facebook) to organise and mobilise, maximising their outreach. By blocking the roads at major points and checking drivers' legal documents, the students demanded justice for several students who died in road accidents, as well as protesting the absence of proper licensing and maintenance of traffic regulations (The Daily Star, 2019a).

Though most of our study respondents reported participating virtually in this movement, some reported participating in-person.

Case study 2: Nusrat murder, 2019

Nusrat Jahan Rafi, a 19-year-old Bangladeshi student, was murdered in her madrasah building in 2019. She was set on fire by some of the madrasah authorities after she had protested sexual harassment by the principal. Nusrat's case became a major national issue that stirred public sentiment on sexual harassment (The Daily Star, 2019b). Our respondents were aware of the murder, and many of them – particularly the female respondents – reported that they had demanded punishment for the perpetrators by protesting online.

Case study 3: Rising rates of online violence

In Bangladesh, increased internet use has also contributed to rising rates of violence against other users (particularly women and adolescents), discouraging many women and girls from going online (Mahpara et al., 2021). Although men and women alike face some forms of harassment and violence online, some groups (women, adolescents and people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations) are often targeted. According to one study, 73% of women internet users have reported experiencing cybercrime (Ahmed et al., 2017). The National ICT Household Survey 2018–2019 reported that of people who do not use the internet because of security issues, 94.6% were female (Access to Information (a2i) Programme & Access for Affordable Internet (A4AI), 2019).

In November 2020, the police set up a cyber-support unit for women to deal with cybercrime and online violence. Within a year, it had received 17,280 allegations of cyber harassment from women (United News of Bangladesh, 2021). Other studies have found that common forms of online violence against women and girls include threats to publish private photographs on social media, sexist or misogynist comments, sending sexually explicit images, and stealing someone's photo and merging it with pornographic images (The Daily Star, 2021).

FINDINGS

Our study respondents had participated and engaged with all three case studies, sometimes in-person, sometimes virtually, and sometimes both (Huq et al., 2021). This section unpacks how they mobilised and illustrates how adolescents are claiming their space online by identifying violence in social media, and individually and collectively developing mitigation strategies among their peers to counter such violence.

Physical participation

All the adolescents in our research were aware of the road safety movement, and many had participated in it, though most had participated virtually (only a few reported participating in-person). Most of the virtual participation was in forms of sharing posts and contents in social media. In Bangladesh's context, proactive engagements in forms of signing petitions or blogging on social media are systematically complex and often require access to formal channels. This is even harder for adolescents considering the resources and support available to them. Therefore, sharing posts, even as empathetic 'consumers' is a form of proactive engagement. In terms of physical participation, many adolescents, particularly girls, had expressed their interest to join the movement in-person but could not due to mobility restrictions on girls. One of the girls from the Dhaka school explained: 'Our parents wouldn't have allowed us because we didn't have any idea or experience of participating in a physical movement'. However, it was easier for boys to participate in-person. A boy from the English-medium school said: 'I went to the movement physically with some of my elder brothers from Niketan and some of my school friends'. Physical participation was also limited due to security concerns, with most adolescents reporting that it was safer to participate online. As a boy from the English-medium school commented: 'When the situation got violent, we came back. Then I shared the photo of the movement online'. None of the adolescents reported that they had participated physically in protests about the Nusrat murder.

Our findings show that none of the adolescent girls – irrespective of their socioeconomic background – were able to participate physically in the social movements. This was mainly because of cultural restrictions on their mobility, enforced by parents and teachers and their wider community. In terms of differences by socioeconomic background, only boys from the lower income group did not mention having participated in the road safety movement. This is most likely because adolescents' civic engagement (in-person or physical participation) is often through voluntary activities, for which adolescents from poorer backgrounds rarely have time, as they struggle each day to earn enough to meet their basic needs (Tamanna, 2018).

Virtual participation

Most of the adolescents in our research participated in the road safety movement virtually, typically using Facebook to share photos and videos and express their views to the larger national and global community online. This virtual participation helped them express their opinions, organise, and build youth leadership and a sense of responsibility to fight against injustice or call

for change. One boy from the rural school explained: 'One of the older boys in my neighbourhood asked me to join everyone else on Facebook to make sure that nobody can drive a vehicle without a licence. I supported them'. Girls from the English-medium school could participate virtually easily. They reported trying to attract international media attention by using hashtags and tagging global celebrities on posts supporting the movement. Beyond national issues like the road safety movement, girls from the English-medium school engaged in social media on global issues such as global warming and Amazon rainforest fires. These issues were not however mentioned at all by adolescents from the lower socioeconomic groups. This could be because of their unlimited access to the internet and devices, which enabled them to have their own Facebook accounts and have more exposure to global issues discussed in social media platforms as opposed to the other adolescents from different socioeconomic backgrounds.

Many adolescent girls from the middle- to lower-income and low-income groups also reported taking part in virtual protests about the Nusrat murder. Although they did not create or write any new content on the issue, they proactively shared posts on Facebook, using the *#JusticeforNusrat* to show their support. They explained that protesting on the issue was necessary, as they considered it to be a grievous crime and an injustice. They also felt that sharing the news on social media was necessary to spread awareness and demand justice. As one girl from the low-income group said: 'A few days earlier, Nusrat was murdered. A lot of people joined the movement to protest against the murder. I shared some posts about it. I shared those posts to demand punishment for the perpetrators'.

Of the adolescents in our research, only girls reported protesting virtually about the Nusrat murder when asked during discussions on sexual harassment; no boys reported that they protested on this issue. While discussing the nature of sexual harassment, the adolescent girls voluntarily raised the issue of Nusrat murder (without the research team having to probe on the issue). One possible reason could be that girls could relate to what happened to Nusrat, as they experience sexual harassment in their communities almost daily, whereas boys are much less likely to.

However, despite their emotional attachment to both the road safety movement and the Nusrat cause, it was more difficult for girls from the Dhaka and rural schools to participate virtually because they did not have access to a mobile phone or internet-capable device. Instead, they relied on Facebook accounts and devices they shared with their siblings and parents.

Some of the adolescents in our study did not participate in any social movement or protest, virtually or physically. These were typically girls from both the middle-to-lower and low-socioeconomic backgrounds. We

asked them what kind of online movements they would like to be a part of. One girl from the Dhaka school replied: 'I want to be a part of movements against child marriage, dowry, eve-teasing, etc. I will get involved by telling my friends. I will let them know through a Facebook post. After that, people will discuss it and share their opinions about how to proceed…'. This showed that despite having interest to engage with issues, some adolescents had fewer opportunities to participate.

Adolescents claiming their space online

One of the most striking findings of our research was the online violence adolescents have experienced, ranging from blackmailing, bullying, stalking, fraud, and deception to offensive memes, sexual harassment, invasion of privacy and leaking/misuse of private information, body shaming, sending explicit content/pornography, and distortion/photoshopping images.

The most common form of online violence reported by adolescents was blackmailing. They were aware of the risks of exchanging photos online, and girls in particular reported their fears of trusting someone online. Boys also reported being cheated and harassed online, as one boy from the Dhaka school said: 'A person who is a hujur (religious teacher) told me to send him an inappropriate picture on Messenger. He used abusive language and told me to send it quickly. Then I verbally abused him too in a video call. I blocked him on Facebook afterwards'. Cyberbullying and body shaming were also mentioned. Girls from the Dhaka school shared how they refrained from posting their own pictures on Facebook for fear of being called 'fat' or 'ugly'. Similarly, girls from the English-medium school emphasised their concerns over the constant pressure they feel to portray themselves as 'perfect' in social media to avoid body shaming.

Identifying these forms of violence as a form of social injustice and violation of their right to safe space online is an essential skill for adolescents to develop, especially because the internet is such a relatively new technology. Adolescents are not only learning to protect themselves online but are also developing strategies, individually and collectively, to mitigate these violations and to claim their space in the virtual world. This both enhances their agency in using the internet and broadens their scope for future digital civic engagement. They are acquiring this knowledge through discussing it with their friends and peers. The strategies reported by adolescents include controlling privacy modes in social media, switching applications, reporting and blocking accounts, filtering fake accounts, and verifying friend requests. Adolescents were acquiring this knowledge in multiple ways. Most of them reported of developing mitigating strategies by discussing with their friends

and peers, while others reported observing social media behaviours of users to counter harassment. Some of the adolescents were even first-hand victims of online violence, and therefore developed counter strategies through learning by doing.

The most common form of collective action taken was reporting and blocking fake accounts. Adolescents stated that when they get harassed by a particular ID on Facebook, they discuss it among their peers and take collective action like mass reporting of the ID. One boy from the English-medium school explained: 'When someone sends a request with wicked intentions, we report him. If he gets 10 reports against him, his account will be blocked'. They can also identify fake accounts by the outlook and activities of the profiles. Some reported blocking people from their friend list for inappropriate behaviour, as a girl from the rural school noted: 'When I sense that they are saying or going to say something bad, I block them immediately'. This helped them verify the friend requests they receive and filter their friend list and spam messages. The English-medium school adolescents had developed the most strategies to mitigate online violence and harassment. They tended to use social media platforms with better privacy and security options, such as switching away from Facebook to apps like Instagram instead.

DISCUSSION

Our findings suggest that the nature of adolescents' participation in civic engagement or digital civic engagement depends on the type of issue that is being mobilised for. For example, issues like road safety and sexual harassment are issues that adolescents can relate to in their everyday lives. Participation also depends on how easy it is to access certain devices, mediums, and platforms. These can enable adolescents to mobilise with a much larger community and on global rather than local or national issues only. Finally, our study indicates that the types and degree of adolescent participation vary according to the individual's gender, age, and socioeconomic background.

Adolescents from all three schools were able to identify issues of social injustice such as road safety, sexual harassment, and online violence. Identifying issues was a reflection of their agency, which enabled their subsequent civic engagement. They were aware that these issues should be challenged and combated. They were engaging with these issues in-person and virtually. However, girls' participation in these movements – whether virtually or in-person – was limited by restrictions on their mobility and by limited access to phones and internet-capable devices (either due to lack of affordability, or cultural norms, or both).

Adolescent boys were more easily able to participate in social movements in-person, than girls. However, socioeconomic background appears to play a crucial role. Though physical participation was more accessible (and comparatively easier) for all adolescent boys, it was more difficult for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who had to prioritise their livelihoods and meeting basic needs.

Most of the adolescents reported that they were more comfortable with virtual participation in social or protest movements. They felt it was easier to mobilise and participate online, and reported that social media platforms enabled them to spread awareness to a wide audience quite easily. Again, virtual participation was easier for adolescent boys, as they tend to have easier access to phones and the internet. Girls from middle-to-lower and low-income backgrounds faced restrictions in participating online, as most of them only had access to shared devices. Girls from the higher income background were more able to participate in virtual social or protest movements as their family's wealth status allowed them unlimited access to devices and ICT. This unlimited and uninterrupted access allowed them to spend more time on the internet for different purposes and gave them a sense of belonging to a larger virtual community. It also enabled them to engage in issues beyond national boundaries, such as global warming and Amazon rainforest fires – issues not at all mentioned by adolescents from other socioeconomic groups.

The most popular form of collective action taken by adolescents was developing mitigating strategies to counter online violence. This was the only issue where there was no gender gap. All the adolescent boys and girls in our study were equally concerned about online violence. Not only did they show personal agency in being able to recognise it as a form of social injustice, but they were also able to reclaim their space by taking collective measures, with their peers, such as mass reporting of suspicious IDs and blocking perpetrators of violence.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has reflected on how adolescents are engaging with broader social issues and claiming their rights to basic safety and security, physically and virtually. The internet and social media platforms are helping adolescents support and strengthen these movements. Both the physical and virtual worlds are playing equally significant roles here; taking movements beyond the streets and transferring them into online spaces. Our findings

FIGURE 26.1
14-year-old boy working with his cousin at a shop, Chittagong, Bangladesh.

have reflected that within their limited scope of participation such as limited access to internet and devices, and existing gendered inequalities (which restricts the scope for girls further), adolescents are being able to participate in movements, recognise certain forms of social injustice, and take actions (individually and collectively). This is contributing to their critical thinking in addressing social injustice and developing a sense of responsibility towards their civic and digital civic engagement. This is helping them become concerned citizens as they progress to adulthood. They are concerned about their interpersonal safety, for which they are taking collective as well as individual measures to reclaim their spaces and rights. By expressing a concern for interpersonal safety and collective well-being, adolescents' online- and in-person civic engagement sees them expanding what it means to be a 'concerned citizen' as they progress to adulthood.

NOTES

1 Civic engagement, as defined by the American Psychological Association (2009), refers to 'individual and collective actions to identify and address issues of public concern'. When those actions involve social media of any kind to mobilise around social issues, it is known as 'digital civic engagement' (Cho et al., 2020).
2 Commissioned by the Responsive Research and Evaluation Fund.

REFERENCES

Access to Information (a2i) Programme and Access for Affordable Internet (A4AI) (2019) *Bangladesh National ICT Household Survey 2018–2019*. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Division, Ministry of Posts, Telecommunication and Information Technology. (https://1e8q3q16vyc81g8l3h3md6q5f5e-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Bangladesh-National-ICT-Household-Survey.pdf)

Ahmed, S., Kabir, A. and Sharmin, S. (2017) 'Cyber-crimes against womenfolk on social networks: Bangladesh context' *International Journal of Computer Applications* 174(4): 9–15. (www.researchgate.net/publication/319858143_Cyber-crimes_Against_Womenfolk_on_Social_Networks_Bangladesh_Context)

American Psychological Association (2009) 'Civic engagement'. American Psychological Association website (www.apa.org/education-career/undergrad/civic-engagement)

BTRC (2020) Internet Sibers in Bangladesh October, 2020. (www.btrc.gov.bd/content/internet-subscribers-bangladesh-october-2020)

Cho, A., Byrne, J. and Pelter, Z. (2020) *Rapid analysis: digital civic engagement by young people*. New York: UNICEF Office of Global Insight and Policy. (www.unicef.org/globalinsight/media/706/file/UNICEF-Global-Insight-digital-civic-engagement-2020.pdf)

GAGE Consortium (2017) *Gender and adolescence: why understanding adolescent capabilities, change strategies and contexts matters*. 1st edn. London: Gender and Adolescence: Global Evidence.

GSMA (2019) *The mobile gender gap report 2019*. London: GSMA. (www.gsma.com/mobilefordevelopment/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/GSMA-Connected-Women-The-Mobile-Gender-Gap-Report-2019.pdf)

Hossain, Z., Hashmi, Y. and Mezbah-ul-Islam, M. (2019) 'ICT facilities and literacy in rural non-government secondary school libraries of Bangladesh' *School Libraries Worldwide* 25(2): 66–79.

Huq, L., Khondaker, S., Mahpara, P., Sultan, M., Khondoker, Z.A. and Syed, S. (2021) *New forms of adolescent voice and agency in Bangladesh through the use of mobile phones and ICT*. Dhaka: BRAC Institute of Governance & Development.

Kaiser, S. and Prieto, G.N. (2018) Engaging the youth in Bangladesh: a showcase of the Youth Democracy Academy DHAKA, BANGLADESH, the Youth Democracy Academy. (https://www.idea.int/news-media/news/engaging-youth-bangladesh-showcase-youth-democracy-academy)

Kemp, S. (2022) "*Digital 2022: Bangladesh*" in "Digital 2022: Global Overview Report". (https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-bangladesh?fbclid=IwAR2LGsIIeJR0ibY6mr1HaT1UqCHl5MNYeJKp6np8f7PgWqo415Ua75HG7qs#:~:text=Social%20media%20statistics%20for%20Bangladesh,in%20Bangladesh%20in%20January%202022)

Lenzi, M., Vieno, A., Altoè, G., Scacchi, L.D., Perkins, D., Zukauskiene, R. and Santinello, M. (2015) 'Can Facebook informational use foster adolescent civic engagement?' *American Journal of Community Psychology* 55(3–4): 444–454.

Mahpara, P., Antara, I.J. and Pabony, N.A. (2021) 'A nascent threat in the digital space: violence against women seems to know no bounds' *The Business Standard*, 13 December. (www.tbsnews.net/thoughts/nascent-threat-digital-space-violence-against-women-seems-know-no-bounds-342763)

Sarker, M. and Islam, S. (2017) 'Social capital and political participation: a case study from rural Bangladesh' *European Review of Applied Sociology* 10(15). (https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/7cc3/84eca553467737b8a7b3b4a35f3d500c7a03.pdf)

Tamanna, M. (2018) 'The political perception of youth in Bangladesh' *International Journal of Law Reconstruction* 2(2): 85 (http://jurnal.unissula.ac.id/index.php/lawreconstruction/article/view/3162)

The Daily Star (2019a) 'Students call off demonstration till March 28. Case filed over student's death' *The Daily Star*, 20 March. (www.thedailystar.net/city/road-safety-movement-in-bangladesh-students-blockade-dhaka-roads-1717726)

The Daily Star (2019b) 'A well-planned, grisly murder Investigators reveal how Feni madrasa principal and others plotted, executed the killing of Nusrat' *The Daily Star*, 29 May. (www.thedailystar.net/frontpage/nusrat-jahan-rafi-murder-a-well-planned-grisly-murder-1750333)

The Daily Star (2021) 'Key findings of the survey on online violence against women 2021' *The Daily Star*, 24 November. (www.thedailystar.net/news/bangladesh/crime-justice/news/77pc-women-victims-online-abuse-2902411)

United News of Bangladesh (2021) 'Cyber bulling against women is increasing: IGP' *UNB News*, 16 November. (https://unb.com.bd/category/bangladesh/cyber-bullying-against-women-is-increasing-igp/82433)