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As tech spreads, Myanmar women become victims of 'revenge porn'

As tech spreads, Myanmar women become victims of 'revenge porn'

Ei Cherry Aung / Myanmar Now 05 Oct 2016

As tech spreads, Myanmar women become victims of 'revenge porn'

Like many 20-year-olds in Myanmar, Ma Yadana Kyaw Thu* has had a Facebook account for several years to share her thoughts and photos, and to stay in touch with friends.

But then, earlier this year, she started receiving disturbing phone calls from unknown men. After a while she realised someone had created a fake Facebook account in her name that publicised her phone number and falsely claimed she was selling sex.



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Panicked and embarrassed, she quickly changed her phone number, while telling friends and family in Yangon's Mingalar Taung Nyunt township she lost her phone.

"My friends and I reported the abusive account to Facebook, but I didn't want to file a case at the police station. If the court case lasts too long I would be absent from work a lot," Ma Yadana Kyaw Thu said. "Also, I don't want my parents and relatives to know about this."

She said she had no idea who was behind the abuse, adding that it took several months before Facebook removed the fake account.



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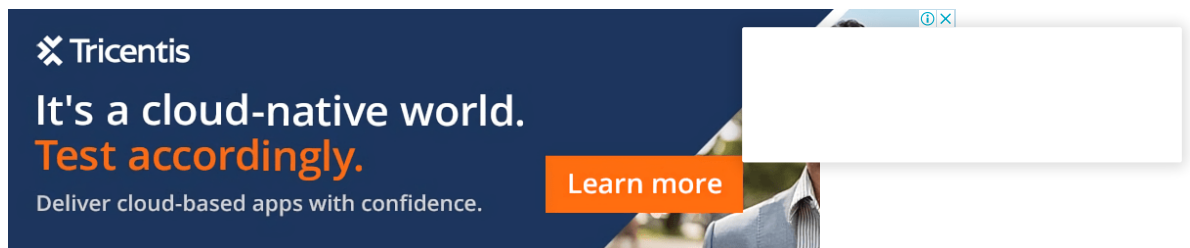
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Ma Khine Thu Zar, a 30-year-old married women from Tarmwe township, recalled how she suffered harassment after she lost her mobile phone last year.

A man who found her phone tried to extort K100,000 (about US\$85) from her, threatening to otherwise release her private pictures on Facebook with her name and Photoshop them to make her appear nude.



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Ma Khine Thu Zar tried to file a police complaint but after spending a day waiting at the local station she realised police were not going to take any action. She was distraught for weeks until the threats stopped.

"I worried that photos would appear on other websites, or that my husband would divorce me," she told Myanmar Now.



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Women's rights and tech-focused activists say such [online abuse cases are quickly becoming more frequent](#) after internet and [mobile phone use increased](#) in Myanmar in recent years, reaching 11 million internet users with 43 million SIM cards sold.

'Revenge porn' abuse hits Myanmar

Myanmar's exposure to the downsides of social media networks includes [hate speech, cyber-bullying](#), sexual harassment and, most recently, the unauthorised online publication of intimate photos and videos.

The latter phenomenon – dubbed "revenge porn" in Western countries, where it has become a growing problem – has recently emerged in Myanmar, said Daw Aye Thada Hla, a communications coordinator of Myanmar Gender Equality Network.

She said a growing number of victims of this abuse, mostly young women and girls, experience its devastating social and psychological impact.

“Private video clips are found on social networks, but most of the victimised girls did not seek legal help,” Daw Aye Thada Hla said, adding that it was common for the perpetrator to try to extort money.

Sometimes photos are taken by ex-boyfriends or stolen from devices, she said, while pictures are also shot of couples’ intimate moments in the park.

Ko Nay Phone Latt, an online activist and a Yangon Region parliament member for the National League for Democracy, said the revenge porn phenomenon appeared to be spreading.

“In the past it was only a problem for celebrities, but now we heard it is happening to many normal girls on Facebook,” he told Myanmar Now.

Ma Ei Myat Noe Khin, program associate of Phandeeyar, a Yangon-based organisation for tech start-ups, said victims often felt stigmatised in Myanmar’s conservative society, even by other women.

“Some women put the blame for cyber abuse on the victim,” she said.

Sexual violence facing women, such as rape and domestic abuse, is often surrounded by a [culture of silence](#) in Myanmar, and victims struggle to find justice in a law enforcement and court system that is ineffective and corrupt.

Govt should raise awareness

Some urged the government to work with NGOs to [raise public awareness about online abuse](#) and its prevention, and toughen penalties for abuses.

MP Ko Nay Phone Latt said, “The Ministry of Information should run education programs on the effective and proper use of social media.”

Ma Ei Myat Noe Khin of Phandeeyar echoed his remarks, saying, “Cyber abuses should be prevented through measures improving security and privacy.”

Ko Yatanar Htun, program coordinator of the Myanmar ICT for Development Organisation (MIDO), said, “Few people understand cyber abuse and that internet technology can be used in many ways, including the spread of false information on social media.”

MIDO runs campaigns against hate speech and anti-Muslim sentiment propagated by Buddhist nationalists in recent years. It also raises awareness about online abuses.

Ko Yatanar Htun said it would help if victims participate in campaigns and publicly speak out to warn others against abuse and loss of private photos.

Shin Thant, a network coordinator with Colours Rainbow, which advocates for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, said men’s conservative attitudes on women’s roles and sexuality should also be addressed.

Criminal punishment?

According to MP Ko Nay Phone Latt, the government could [develop tougher laws against cyber abuse](#), and law enforcement should investigate serious cases.

Revenge porn has become a public concern in many countries in recent years, prompting legislation that specifically criminalises non-consensual sharing of intimate photos or video. In Asia, the Philippines government passed the Anti-Photo and Video Voyeurism Act in 2009.

Activists said Myanmar police could take action under the 2013 Telecommunication Law’s Article 66(d), which sets a fine and prison term of up to three years for extortion, threatening or defaming someone “by using any telecommunications network”.

Criminal laws punishing physical and sexual abuse could also be amended to include online abuse, Daw Aye Thada Hla of the Myanmar Gender Equality Network said. She added that the long-awaited National Prevention of Violence against Women bill includes online abuse as an offence.

A police officer at the Tarmwe Township Station in Yangon said police were reluctant to take action in cases of cyber abuse and need district-level approval to accept a complaint due to a lack of IT knowledge in the force.

“We can’t accept an official complaint on cyber abuse in the absence of our police officer-in-charge,” said the police officer, who asked for anonymity.

Human rights lawyer U Robert Sann Aung said authorities only ever prosecuted online offences dealing with theft of government data.

He added it would be hard for a civilian plaintiff to know how to file digital evidence of online abuse with the police.

“Actions are being taken against only for national-level cyber crimes at the moment. I don’t know of any prosecution for cyber-related complaints by ordinary people,” he said.

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ဓာတ်ခွဲစစ်ဆေးသူစုစုပေါင်း (Total Specimens Tested) - **8,147,519**

ပိုးတွေ့လွန် (Lab Confirmed) - **613,227**

ပိုးတွေ့သေဆုံးလွန် (Death among Lab Confirmed) - **19,434**

ပိုးတွေ့ပြန်လည်သက်သာ (Recovered)- **592,189**

last updated on 23-5-2022, 8:00 PM

Abbreviation

Case Count

Visualization: eHealth Unit, Department of Public Health, Ministry of Health and Sports