Cyber Bullying in Online Teaching During COVID-19
Experiences of Female Educators in India

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Abstract

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 in India triggered a nationwide lockdown and the education system too took one of the largest hits with most institutions shifting to online mode of teaching, posing a variety of challenges. The challenges were spread across a wide area, ranging from basic facilities like stable, high-speed internet and mobile phones or laptops to the lack of prior experience in teaching online, creating a sense of pressure as India converted to almost a full-time online teaching system. This naturally triggered a series of incidents, often in forms of incident messages, online class disruptions and 'misuse' of the online learning mediums to create chaos by students who found a way to take mischief making to a whole new level, and resorting to bullying in the cyberspace. While a number of studies are focusing on the challenges faced by students and understanding cyber bullying amongst classmates, the only literature available from the teachers' point of view is in media coverage of such incidents, making this research essential for understanding challenges faced by educators. Hence, this study makes an attempt to understand experience of female teachers especially in context of untoward incidents happening while online teaching. An online survey was conducted in the present study and it was found that female teachers are facing incidents, which to some extent can be termed as cyberbullying.

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INTRODUCTION

When Prime Minister of India Narendra Modi announced the first 21 day lockdown in a national television address in March 2020, (Hebbar, 2020) forcing the nation into effective shut down including the closure of educational institutions, little did anyone know that the 21 day period will drag through more than a year bringing in a paradigm shift in how education is imparted in the country.

This change which was to go on and create a lasting impact on the education system of India, affecting its Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) target commitments in the long run, especially SDG 4 (Quality Education). In several reports in the early days of the pandemic when nations across the world retorted to lockdowns and shut downs to combat the spread of the virus, United Nations has not only warned of a direct disruption of the SDG 4 (Quality Education) but also of the repercussions on the targets of other goals interlinked with SDG 4 (Quality education) including those in SDG 5 (Gender Equality) and SDG 3 (Good Health and Well Being) (Srivastava, 2020)

And just like the rest of the world, India, faced its fair share of challenges, especially with access to education, as it staggered and realigned its education strategy to help students access education.

Although the advent and availability of fast, cheap connectivity since the introduction of 4G has introduced online learning in bits and pieces across India's urban pockets, a renewed interest, this time fuelled by necessity was established in the role and utility of online and digital learning at the time of a crisis across the whole world (Bordoloi et al., 2021). And since the shift was so sudden and unprecedented, it was observed that the decision for a shutdown in India just like in many nations left very little time for educational institutions to prepare for remote teaching alternatives (Daniel, 2020)

In India, this challenge was met with a variety of approaches. While many schools and colleges switched to online mode of learning almost immediately, the government had to intervene and facilitate the use of internet in teaching in several parts of the country also. Platforms like Shagun (for school students), SWAYAM Prabha (32 Direct to Home educational television channels), SWAYAM Massive Online Open Course (for students from Grade IX to post graduate) along with *Shodh Ganga* and *Shodh Gangotri* for research scholars were engaged as open source learning platforms for students which could be accessed from anywhere through an internet connection (Tekwani, 2020). But replacing teachers right away was a

far cry from what was practical and several video conferencing platforms like zoom, google classroom, google meet and cisco webex were engaged to virtually engage with students, while other platforms like whatsapp and email were also engaged in dispatching information regarding classes (Mathivanan, et al., 2021; Sathish, et al., 2020). This led to the rise of a series of challenges ranging from online evaluation, creation of digital learning materials and lack of technical knowledge for teachers who had to undergo this sudden shift to the online mode (Kamal and Illiyan, 2021)

In the national capital, female teachers of Delhi University reported exceedingly increasing incidents of sexual content being shared or used to disrupt classes, including strangers logging in to classes using the meeting IDs shared for the same by teachers. Incidentally following similar issues, Singapore banned several video conferencing applications in educational use to avoid the harassment of teachers (Iftikhar, 2020).

While there have been many instances of 'untoward experiences' by female educators; the accounts have been limited to a handful of newspaper headlines and online blogs only.

COVID-19 AND EMERGING NEW NORMAL

Akin to the introduction of the concept of water less alcohol-based sanitizers and wearing of masks in all public spaces to avoid contamination, the new normal post COVID-19 dictated practices like a digital shift for online launches and events, online versions of games like *ludo* and in some cases, even the live telecast of wedding ceremonies. In fact, when popular matrimonial app cum website Shaadi.com launched *Shaadi Meet* — a video calling feature on its platform on June 19, 2020 for potential bride and grooms to meet each other for the first time over a video call, over 105,000 people used the feature within two days (Dash, 2020).

Just like every other sector, education, which was probably one of the most affected sectors due to complete shutdown, had to go through a sea of changes too. Sun and Chen (2016) outline how even small decisions became challenging due to the inability of teachers to have a face-to-face connect with students. Since teachers were unable to facilitate free conversation, they were often unable to help students at the other end of the screen to actively interact and collaborate, preventing effective learning.

Nambiar (2000) says that there were several types of new platforms adopted by teachers which included

online video calling facilities (zoom and google meet), team management dedicated services (google classrooms and microsoft teams) and messaging services (whatsapp and mailing lists). All of these brought in new challenges and struggles in the process of learning to use them for teaching.

Cyberbullying Female Educators: Veiled Gender-Based Violence and the Need for Secrecy

Where there is anonymity, there is a space for encouragement of pulling something that one wouldn't do in broad daylight. The onset of COVID-19 has forced education online but only a chunk of the students has been able to benefit as the coverage is not absolute. Belur (2020) writes how at a time when teachers themselves were learning to engage technology to remotely teach from scratch, students who had better understanding of the platform did not refrain from using technology to cause distress and harm to the teachers

From critiques of pronunciations and spelling mistakes to students going to the extent of posting social media videos depicting teachers in poor light that went viral; the experience has been extremely overwhelming and high pressure for educators across the country (Belur, 2020).

Although almost everyone has come across 'funny teaching fail' videos, and one simple search of the hashtag #OnlineClassGoneWrong returns 176 videos from 149 channels in YouTube India, with views as high as 4,85,000, there is a hush-hush around the reporting of such incidents in the public domain. Even in the handful of newspaper and online platform coverages, most teachers sharing experiences tend to go anonymous. In one such article by *The Print*, an online journalism portal, a teacher goes on record to state how online bullying is the biggest challenge for female educators in a stark contrast to other similar stories, where names of teachers are changed (Sharma, 2020).

Hence, for the purposes of this study of cyberbullying, the researchers have chosen the experiences of female educators to evade the term cyberbullying or cyber harassment and retorted to the use of a much looser umbrella concept and perceivably less harsh terminology 'untoward incident' for helping the respondents come out with answers without having to fear the judgement and ridicule.

The definition of cyberbullying given by Patchin and Hinduja (2006) as "wilful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices,"

is used to categorise these incidents as bullying through the research.

The term 'female educators' cover individuals who identify as females and are engaged in teaching students at school, undergraduate, post graduate and PhD level. This study also includes female educators who teach on online platforms like YouTube, Unacademy, Udemy, Byju's and Coursera along with coaching institutions for competitive examinations across online and offline platforms.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The research questions in this study were aimed at developing a preliminary understanding of the following facets to this phenomenon, based on the experiences shared by the female educators:

RQ1: Are untoward incidents happening to female educators in online classes and if yes, how often?

RQ2: Do these incidents meet the definition of cyberbullying as given by Patchin and Hinduja (2006) and to what extent?

RQ3: Do age and cyber literacy levels affect such untoward incidents?

RQ4: What is the effect of these incidents on educators facing them and what is the way forward/aftermath?

METHODOLOGY

To fulfil the aim of the study, survey method was used. A cross-sectional survey was conducted to collect the data for the study. Under survey method, fully structured questionnaire was used as a research tool to collect data. In the questionnaire both close-ended as well as open-ended questions were included to get quantitative and qualitative data respectively.

Due to the lack of mobility during COVID-19, data was collected through an online survey. The questionnaire was converted into a google form for online sharing. The google form was shared on two online platforms namely WhatsApp and Facebook. The sampling method used was volunteer sampling, wherein the respondents themselves chose to be a part of this study (Jupp, 2015). Hence, non-probability sampling was followed in the study.

Since the study aimed to understand the untoward incidents happening to female educators, responses received were filtered to get responses from female educators. A total of 45 responses were received which were complete in nature and could be used for data analysis and interpretation.

The categories in the questionnaire included both closed ended and open-ended questions.

RESULTS

Occurrences of Incidents

The age distribution of respondents is a key demographic data collected as a part of the questionnaire. The data captured in the same is as follows:
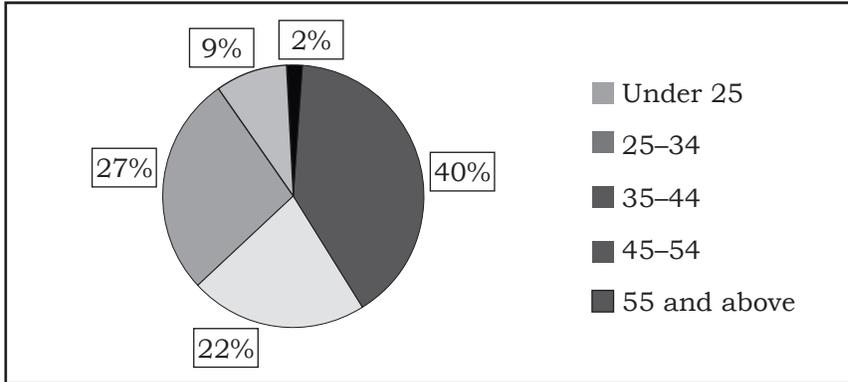

Fig. 1

As Fig. 1 shows, the age distribution of respondents indicates that there are inputs from all the age groups and the highest share of respondents (40 per cent) was from the age group 25–34 years while the share of respondents from age groups 35–44 years and 45–54 years remained roughly same at 22 per cent and 27 per cent respectively.

The data captured shows that 37 per cent (n=17) reported incidents with self while 60 per cent (n=27) reported incidents with some colleague/s as shown in Fig. 2.
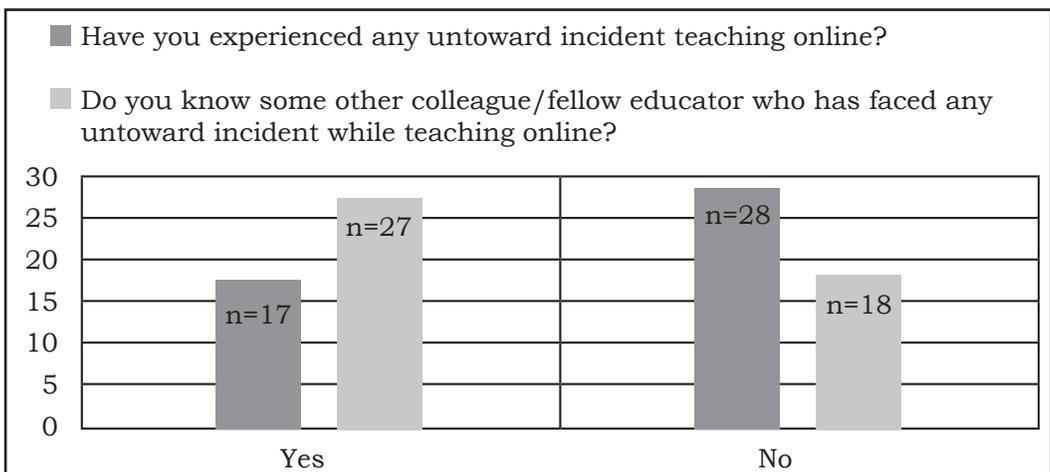

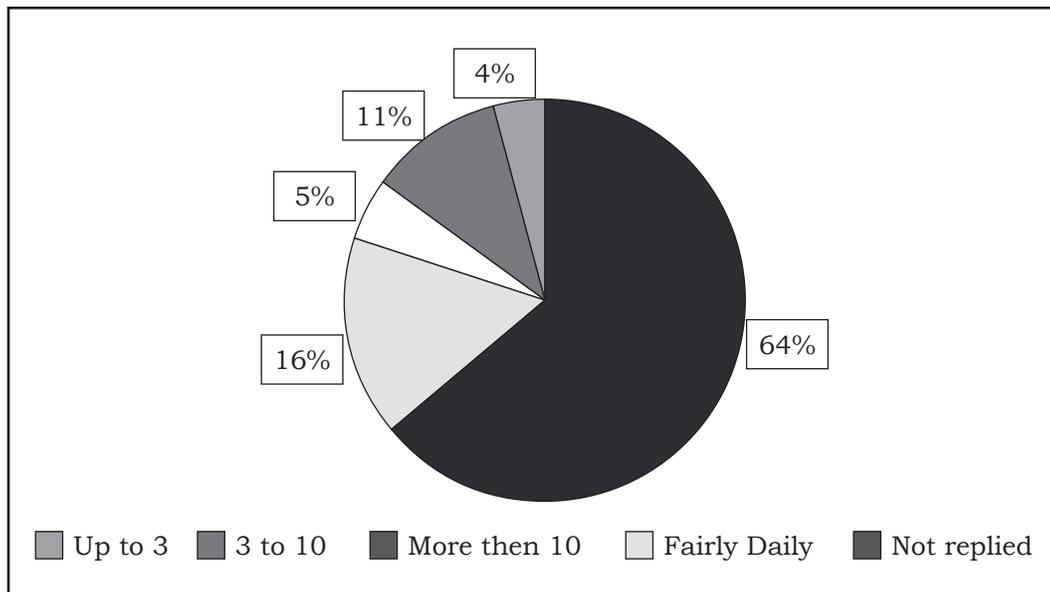*Fig. 2: Incidents experienced by female educators and their colleagues*

Fig. 3: Number of incidents reported by the respondents

As Fig. 3 shows, a total of 64 per cent of the respondents said that the number of incidents experienced by them or their colleagues was up to 3, 16 per cent experienced 3–10 incidents.
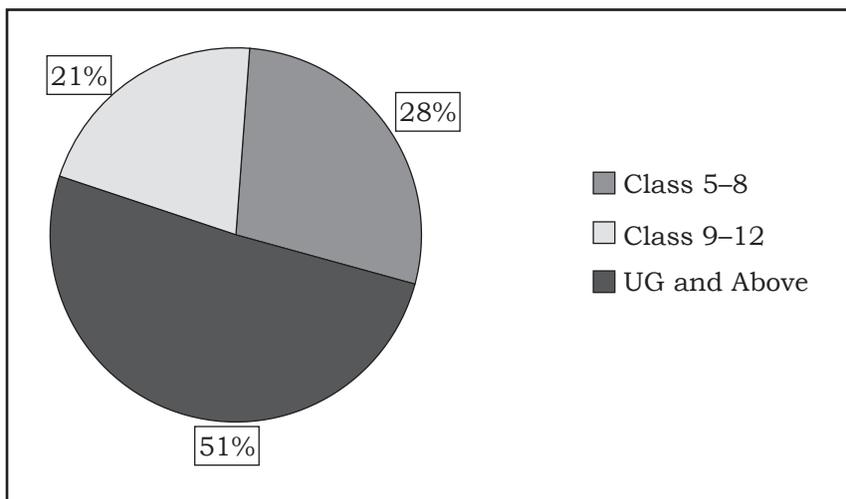

Fig. 4: Teaching level in relation to number of incidents reported by the respondents

As Fig. 4 shows, the maximum number of incidents were experienced by educators teaching students in Classes 9–12, which ideally is between ages 14–18. A total of 51 per cent of such 'untoward incidents' were reported during online classes by the respondents teaching Classes 9–12.

Understanding the Incidents: Are they Necessarily Cyberbullying?

The questionnaire also captured the type of incidents, defined by the following index in an attempt to code the same from the semi open answers from the respondents on the question as follows—

Category 1: Students using technology to prevent you from joining classes/ disrupting classes

Category 2: Sharing of untoward and/or sexual content

Category 3: Unwanted messages in groups, DM

Category 4: Bullying or threats by anonymous handles on your personal ID

Category 5: Parental interventions in between classes

Category 6: Students turning off cameras or passing comments or using chat board during classes to cause disruption

Category 7: Others

The most prevalent type of incident is category 6 as Fig. 5 shows, that is 'students turning off cameras/passing comments or using chatboard during classes' that accounts for 70.45 per cent of total incidents described.
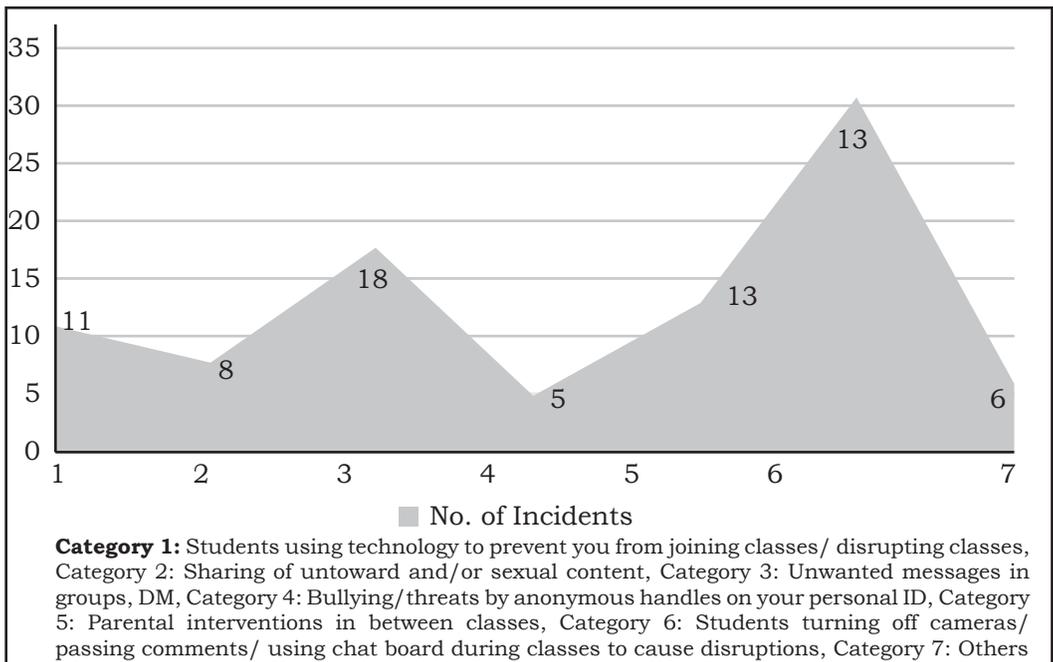

Category 1: Students using technology to prevent you from joining classes/ disrupting classes, Category 2: Sharing of untoward and/or sexual content, Category 3: Unwanted messages in groups, DM, Category 4: Bullying/threats by anonymous handles on your personal ID, Category 5: Parental interventions in between classes, Category 6: Students turning off cameras/ passing comments/ using chat board during classes to cause disruptions, Category 7: Others

Fig. 5: Type of Incident Vs Number of Incidents

As shown in Fig. 5, further observation reveals the share from response categories—1, 'Students using technology to prevent you from joining classes or disrupting classes' is at 25 per cent, 2, 'Sharing of untoward and/or sexual content' is at 18.18 per cent, 3, 'Unwanted messages in groups, DM' is at 40.90 per cent and 4, 'Bullying/threats by anonymous handles on your personal ID' is at 11.36 per cent. They also rarely are in isolation but can be determinedly classified as more 'intended' as a disruption than category 6.

Another category, that a student has no control over was 5 'parental intervention in between classes' which also receives a mention in the 'other' incident category when a respondent noted that her class was disrupted by a 'naked man', most probably a relative or family member on camera. With 13 incidents reported in the category, this is the third highest cause of classroom interruption, indicating a trend of helicopter parenting where teachers are under constant surveillance by parents in their own (digital) classrooms.

This set of questions are instrumental in capturing the essence of 'intent' to determine if the incidents are wilful in nature, to meet the definition of cyberbullying by Patchin and Hinduja (2006).
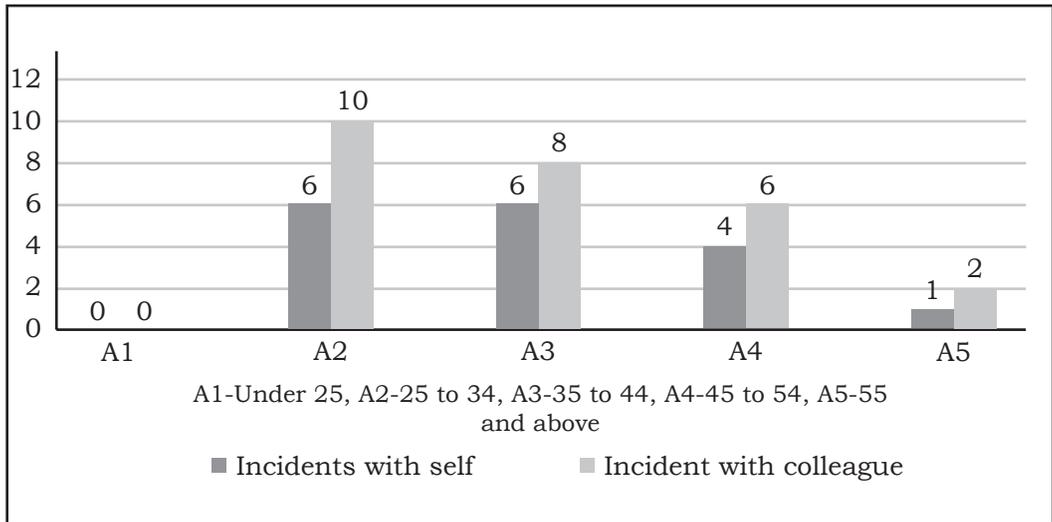

Fig. 6: Perception of respondents on role of cyber literacy and age on 'untoward incidents

As Fig. 6 shows that incidents are highest in the age group of young female educators, between the age group of 25 to 34, followed closely by the group 35 to 44. When looking at the total share, the division is as follows—
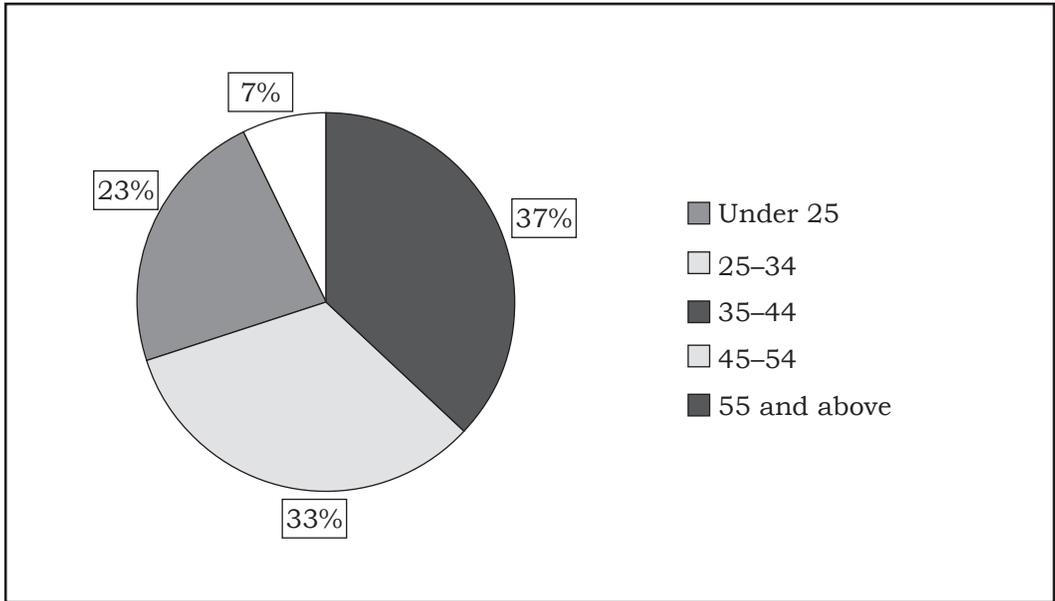
Fig. 7: Teaching level in relation to number of incidents reported by the respondents

Table 1 records how cyber literacy skills are related to the incidents reported by the respondents with themselves. As one can observe, even respondents who consider themselves to have expert cyber literacy, have not only experienced such incidents, but also form the largest chunk of respondents who have encountered such experiences.

Table 1
Cyber Literacy Level Vs Respondents Experiencing 'Untoward Incidents'

Cyber Literacy Level/ experiences of incidences	YES, experienced	NO, Did not experience
Fair	3	6
Excellent	5	15
Expert	9	6

This indicates that though the level of cyber literacy might not be instrumental to the incidents occurring; it creates more awareness and hence increases the recognition and ultimate reporting of such incidents. It indicates that knowledge (awareness) of the subject and the challenges have a positive impact on the ultimate reporting by the victim (Salmivalli et al., 2011) 764 primary school children from Grades 3 to 5 (9–11 years of age). Fig. 8 is a graph based on the data from Table 1.
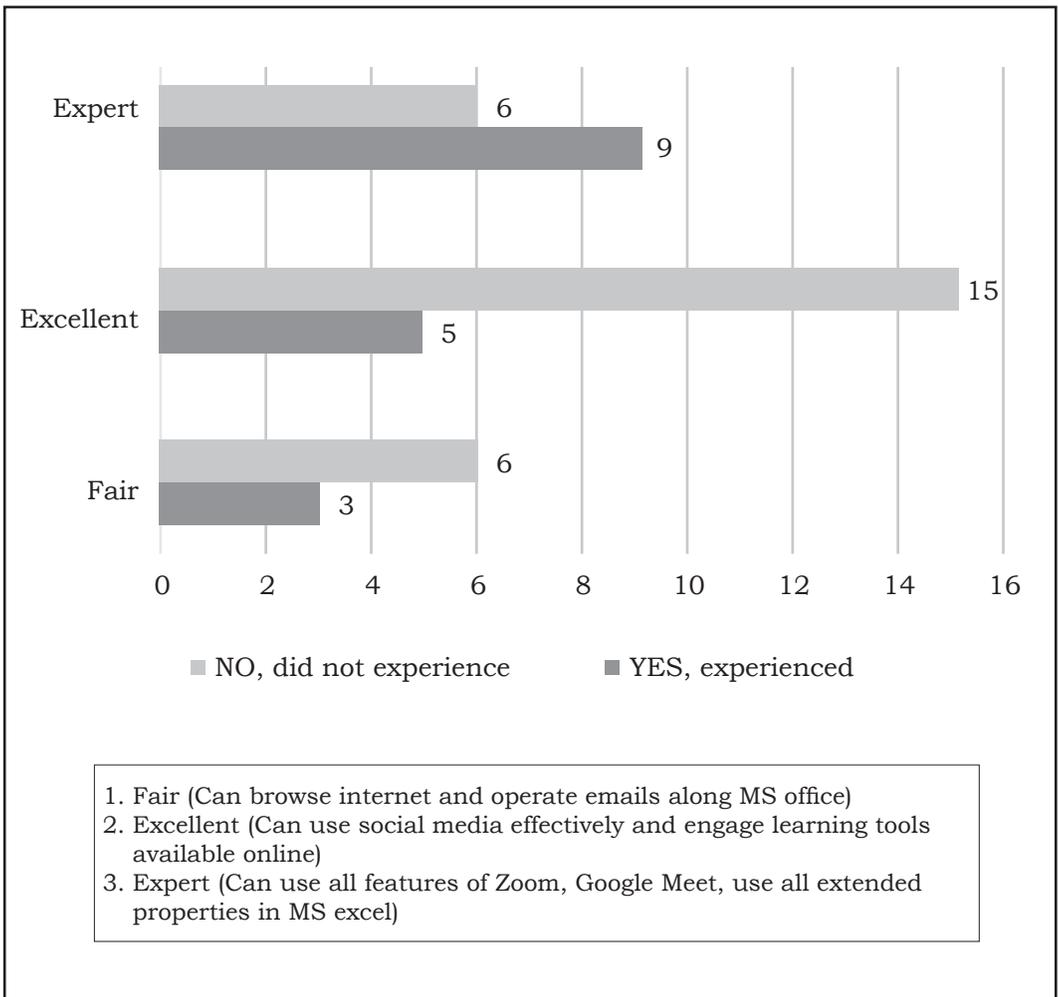

Fig. 8: Cyber Literacy Level Vs Respondents Experiencing 'Untoward Incidents'
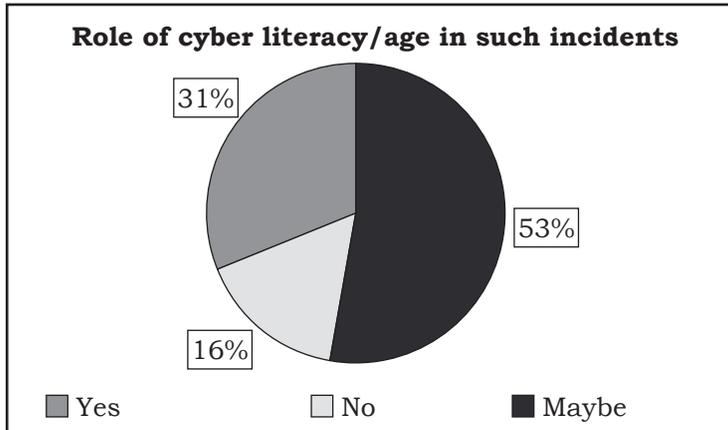
Role of cyber literacy/age in such incidents

31%

53%

16%

■ Yes   □ No   ■ Maybe

Fig. 9: Perception of respondents on role of cyber literacy and age on untoward incidents

Fig. 9 indicates the perceptions of the respondents on role of cyber literacy on 'untoward incidents' and 53 per cent of the respondents acknowledge that age and cyber literacy have a role to play in the incidents.

Acknowledging the Incidents— Perceiving Harm

When a respondent said that they themselves experienced an untoward incident (n=17), the questionnaire was automated to redirect to learn more about their experiences. While most educators chose 'Loss of Focus and interest in teaching' (n=8) as the repercussion, many perceived that the repercussions were non-existent as they chose the option 'None' (n=4) while merely a couple (n=2) chose to say that such incidents have effects on personal life and conflict as a theme of the aftermath emerged in interaction with students (n=1) and authorities (n=2).

The definition of cyberbullying by Patchin and Hinduja (2006) requires the target to recognise or perceive harm for an incident to be termed cyberbullying. Both loss of focus and interest in teaching and effect on personal and family life is indicative of that perception by the respondents.

In the same question framed for the repercussions of same incidents on colleagues, as many as (n=8) responses recorded said that 'Mental health problems like anxiety, depression' were experienced by their colleagues while (n=18) reported 'Loss of focus and interest in teaching' as a result of such incidents. Conflict as a theme also was more prominent, with n=8 cases with students, (n=3) with parents and (n=4) with authorities recorded.

Incidentally even in this category, respondents chose the 'None' options four times (n=7), indicating that peer involvement in identification and combating of

such incidents as with other anti-bullying interventions will be crucial in near future (Salmivalli et al., 2011) 764 primary school children

from Grades 3 to 5 (9–11 years of age.

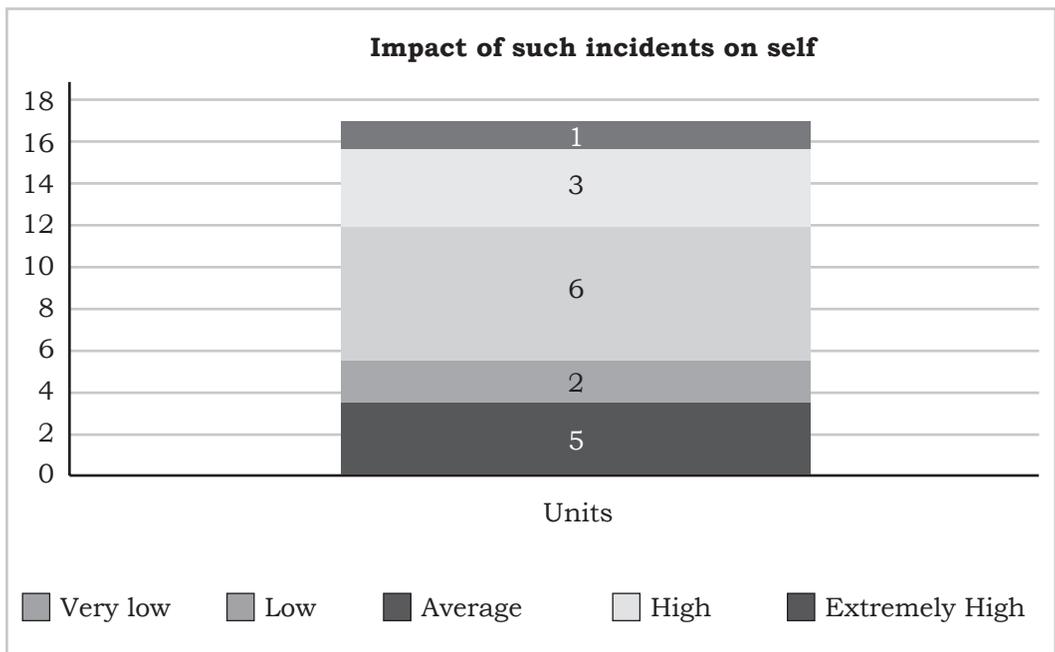Hence, the respondents, though in veiled attempts, acknowledge a certain perception of harm.

Fig. 10: Percieved impact of the 'untoward incidents' on the respondents

The conditional questions for the 17 respondents who answered in affirmative to the question about the experience of untoward incidents in online classrooms included a rating-based question on the extent of impact of such incidents on them mentally. Described on a 5–point Likert scale, 1 being the lowest (Very Low) to 5 being the highest (Extremely High), the distribution was highest at the point 3: (Average) followed by point 1: (very low).

Fig. 10 indicates that n=5 respondents said that the effect on them was 'Extremely High' while n=6 respondents rated the effect as 'Average'.

The Aftermath of the Incidents

When a respondent said that they themselves experienced an untoward incident(n=17), the questionnaire was automated to redirect to learn more about their experiences. In the data that was captured in the responses,

it was apparent that the educators preferred 'corrective' measures in the aftermath of such situations with most educators choosing 'Explain to children and/or have a counselling or interaction session' (n=15) option as one or more of the ways they chose to handle the situation

When redirected to the exact same question with similar options of the experiences shared by the colleagues of the respondents, incidentally, the choice of 'complaint to authorities' (n=18) came as the most retorted to solution chosen by their colleagues as observed by the respondents which was closely followed by "complain to parents" (n=13).

In response to the question asking for suggestions/ experience/ learnings that can be engaged in dealing with the issue, a total of 23 respondents shared insights as it wasn't a compulsory question. The observations are as follows:

Need for Training, Counseling and Sound Mental Well-being

The major theme emerging from the discussions was the need of training: at all levels including that of teachers, students and even parents. Quoted directly from the entry recorded in the excel sheet, the following observation sheds light on how an educator of students between Grades IX–XII perceives the problem:

"The untoward incidents mostly occur among the students of age 13–21. The other cohorts are either mature enough or innocent enough.

Children must be encouraged to take lessons on bullying, creating a learning environment while taking classes at home, and monitored through a stronger IT dept."

The theme of such trainings is continuously repeated with more than 12 respondents arguing for some form of training or other.

The types of trainings suggested include:
1. Training for teachers to make classrooms safer
2. Parent and student training on ethics and moral values
3. Counselling and sensitization towards cyberbullying

Capacity Building and the Power of Inciting Discipline

Capacity building of teachers is also an equally crucial suggestion that comes up but what is more interesting that the three respondents chose to speak of repercussions and punishments to instil a sense of discipline in the students misbehaving in the online classes.

"Most such problems are faced at school level. So, for the present format, I think teachers should be given control of 30 per cent of marks for online behaviour and etiquettes,"

Wrote a respondent adding that a log record checker can be added to exactly determine if the student was actually on the screen attending the class or surfing something else.

Parenting the Bullying Behaviour Out

The onus on parental role in combating the situation is also high in the

responses recorded, especially with a focus on helping joint counselling and training with the students. One respondent wrote:

"Students, be it of any age group should be taught at their homes the simple concept of respect. Parents should play an active role in monitoring their children's behaviour while attending the class. Students should also realise being behind the screen is easy but such activities make them more of a coward and less of a genuine being,"

Another respondent says that a mechanism should be devised so that students don't feel ignored during the online classes. One respondent also suggested for once a week online etiquette class for both parents and students, subtly indicating the need to combat the issue of helicopter parenting and preventing a parent becoming a perpetuator of an untoward incident during online classes recorded across the country (Belur, 2020).

Raising a Complaint, Reporting the Incident

Ranging from a strict parent teacher meeting organised after three warnings and counts of misbehaviour to suggestions to escalate it to the authorities, filing a complaint is a recurrent theme in the answers provided when asked for suggestions on the issue. But, that's not all. Some respondents mentioned filing police complaints and FIRs in response to such incidents. To quote

a respondent, the reply paraphrased for quality says:

"One should report the matter to cyber security department at once without panicking. Don't ignore minor incidents as these can lead to major issues later."

A Support System for Teachers

In what looks as a call for help and a request for stopping such incidents against teachers, a respondent's reply is particularly eye catching.

"They are just done for fun or to unleash personal grudges against the teacher, but no one realizes that it leaves the teacher helpless and anxious," writes the respondent, drawing attention as a call for help for intended perpetuation of harm and bullying. Another respondent observes:

"Teachers need support from authority and society instead of being reprimanded," drawing attention to the fact that online classes have brought teachers under the cruel lens of scrutiny that is not only exhausting but also overwhelming (Sharma, 2020).

The Role of Warnings: Screening Troublemakers

Although some respondents chose to walk the harsh road, many suggested a system of warnings, mostly three, to ensure that the incidents are in fact intentional and no student is reprimanded without establishing their intent to cause disruption. One respondent writes that a student

could be given a warning first, but if 'it' (the untoward behaviour in online classes) continues; the child can be removed from the class.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

On analysis of the data, the researchers arrived at the following inferences and findings:

1. As per definition of cyberbullying considered for purposes of this paper, the incidents can now be categorically defined as 'willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones, or other electronic devices', meeting all three requirements willful (done with intent), repeated more than once) harm (harm perceived by target) and perpetuated through computers and cell phones.

   The researchers found that such incidents were not only happening (RQ1) but were also meeting the three parameters that add up to classify them as cyberbullying of female educators (RQ2). The evading of the term cyberbullying and cyber harassment has in fact helped in establishing how many counts of incidents ignored as classroom disruption is in fact by definition cyber bullying of female educators and teachers (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006).

2. There is a relationship between cyber literacy and the incidents (Fig. 8) which is an increased level of awareness resulting in an increased reporting of such incidents both as a victim and a bystander (Salmivalli et al., 2011) 764 primary school children from Grades 3 to 5 (9–11 years of age. This means, the better the level of cyber literacy and awareness, the higher is the reporting of any incident.

3. The perception of harm by the victim is form of effect on mental health to other consequences have been measured and established, with a focus on the loss of interest in teaching as a major aftermath in the majority of cases.

4. As combative interventions, training and capacity building are two crucial elements that need to be brought together and implemented across educational institutions but more importantly, focus should be directed to training of students and parents too to ensure a synchronisation. Teacher support cells, especially since the extensive mentions of 'conflict' with authorities, students and parents are imperative and mechanisms to address the grievances of educators need to be set up so that the victims of cyber bullying amongst them don't have to 'ignore' the problems anymore.

CONCLUSION

The answers from respondents have helped the researchers to develop an understanding of the research questions posed at the beginning of the research. Although the literature

review of existing newspaper and media coverage and social media platforms confirmed the prevalence of such incidents of online classes being disrupted by students, the research questions provided an in-depth insight and a roadmap for a structured probing into various facets like intent, cause and effect of such disruptions and establishing them as cyberbullying. The paper has also explored different approaches at handling such incidents and has found that interventions, training and capacity building are two crucial elements that need to be brought together and implemented across educational institutions. Most importantly, the paper suggests that focus should be directed to training of students and parents too.

FURTHER RESEARCH

Though the study has tried to explore the different avenues of the cyberbullying narratives of female educators involved in e-learning during COVID-19, the number of respondents (n=45) is a small sample. Long form qualitative interviews can be done in the future to expand on the knowledge generated by this paper. There is also need for further research into adult cyber bullying as with in other forms of bullying, literature on adult cyberbullying is sparse. This research paper is intended to draw attention to one of the less spoken of and written about aspects of e-learning, a challenge that every educator is trying to overcome.

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