

Sextortion in access to WASH services in selected regions of Bangladesh

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**Sextortion in access to WASH services in selected regions of
Bangladesh**

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Sextortion in access to WASH services in selected regions of Bangladesh

Dr. Ortrun Merkle^a, Umrbek Allakulov^b, Debora Gonzalez^c

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Abstract

This paper investigates the incidence and risk factors associated with sextortion in accessing water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) services by women in selected regions of Bangladesh. Sextortion is defined as “the abuse of power to obtain a sexual favor” (IAWJ, 2012, p.9) and takes place at the intersection of corruption and sexual violence. The paper analyses original data from a standardized survey, alongside key informant interviews and focus group discussions collected in 2021 in four areas of Bangladesh. Bangladesh is an interesting case study as the WASH sector is still dominated by men and gender-based violence is widespread (World Bank, 2019). The data shows that 15% of women had experienced sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) when accessing water, toilets, or bathing facilities. About one-third (29.4%) of these cases were a form of sextortion. Sextortion incidents most commonly occurred in the WASH facilities themselves. The data also highlights several risk factors of experiencing sextortion such as poverty, relying on unprotected water sources, and lack of literacy. The research clearly highlights the need for further study of compounding risk factors and the importance of including sextortion considerations in WASH programs. The paper also provides insights into perceptions about sextortion and reasons why those affected may opt not to report incidents.

Keywords: Sextortion, WASH, Sexual and Gender-based Violence, Bangladesh, Corruption

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1. Introduction

It has long been acknowledged that many aspects of Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH) are highly gendered (MacArthur et al., 2020; Nunbogu & Elliott, 2022; White et al., 2002) and that women face an increased risk of violence when access to WASH services is not adequate (Gonsalves et al., 2015; Hirve et al., 2014; Jadhav et al., 2016; Kulkarni et al., 2017; Pommells et al., 2018). Despite understanding that there is an “increased vulnerability to violence linked to WASH”, not enough studies explore where these incidents of violence occur or document the different forms of violence (Sommer et al., 2015, p. 106). This paper will add to the newly emerging research on sextortion as a form of violence that individuals encounter in accessing WASH, with women and girls deemed to be particularly at risk (KEWASNET & ANEW, 2020; UNDP-SIWI Water Governance Facility, 2017).

Sexual extortion (‘sextortion’) is at the intersection of corruption and sexual violence¹ and is defined as “the abuse of power to obtain a sexual favor” (IAWJ, 2012, p. 9). It is differentiated from rape or sexual assault in that it involves a “quid pro quo” exchange in which the victim gives a sexual favor to obtain some benefit that the person in authority can provide or withhold. This is where the legal ambiguity of sextortion lies, as the absence of physical coercion may be seen to imply consent. However, the IAWJ warns that sextortion happens in a context of psychological coercion, that is, the perpetrator exerts coercive pressure, rather than consent being given freely. Just as power over someone is a crucial element of all sexual and gender-based violence, it is also a condition of corruption, and in particular, sextortion (IAWJ, 2012). It is also important to understand the role power plays in sextortion. “Much of the gendered experience of corruption in the water supply sector is tainted by the feeling of being powerless in relation to an authority upon which one relies for the fulfilment of a basic need.” (UNDP-SIWI Water Governance Facility, 2017, p. 5) The consequences of sextortion are dire and include direct and indirect economic consequences, as well as severe health consequences, such as the transmission of (sexual) diseases, unwanted pregnancies, and social and psychological consequences (Merkle et al., 2017; UNDP-SIWI Water Governance Facility, 2017).

Sextortion is a form of corruption that is very difficult to research “due to the social taboo frequently associated with sex crimes and the stigmatization of victims who speak up”(UNODC, 2020, p. 13) In addition, as sextortion is transactional in nature, survivors often are wrongly portrayed as willing participants, leading to further stigmatization and underreporting. Therefore, the number of sextortion incidents represented in this research paper does likely not cover the full extent of the phenomena.

While the field of gender and corruption research has been steadily growing, there is still a lack of research to better understand how corruption affects women differently in different sectors and the nature of the different forms of corruption that they experience, in particular sextortion (Eldén et al., 2020). Even less research has been conducted on what factors make women more likely to be exposed

¹ The World Health Organization (n.d.) defines: “Sexual violence is any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting. It includes rape, defined as the physically forced or otherwise coerced penetration of the vulva or anus with a penis, other body part or object.”

to this specific form of corruption. Here lies a major contribution of this research paper, which looks at the question of which factors make women vulnerable to sextortion in the WASH sector in Bangladesh.

Previous studies found that sextortion in WASH is a part of the lived reality of women in many places. A study in Bogotá, Columbia, and Johannesburg, South Africa, found frequent cases of sextortion. Women were demanded or offered sexual favours when they needed to access resources or services, for example to get water delivered, in return for intentionally misreading the water meter or not turning off the water supply (UNDP-SIWI Water Governance Facility, 2017). Similarly, a study in Kibera Project, Kenya found that sextortion was fairly entrenched in the study area with about 2 respondents in 10 reporting having heard about it (KEWASNET & ANEW, 2020, p. 24). Pommells et al. (2018), looking at case studies in East Africa, document cases of sextortion, such as skipping ahead in water queues and offering sex for water when users cannot pay the fees.

The aim of the study at hand is to assess the prevalence of sextortion among women in accessing WASH services and identify demographic and socio-economic factors associated with increased risk of sextortion in selected regions in Bangladesh. Bangladesh was chosen as the country of the research project for a number of reasons. Firstly, the Water Integrity Network – the organization commissioning the research – has an ongoing program in the country, which has brought together a network of organizations that works towards improving integrity and reducing corruption risks in the water and sanitation sector. Therefore, there is good potential for follow up-action based on research findings. Moreover, the local and regional idiosyncrasies in Bangladesh make it an interesting case study and potentially valuable addition to the growing evidence base available from other parts of the world. The high level of corruption, the country is ranked 147 of 180 countries on Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index, as well as the high level of sexual and gender based violence, also make it likely that sextortion, which lies at the intersection of the two occurs.

For this paper data was collected in four areas of Bangladesh spread across the three administrative districts shown in red in the map below: Satkhira (south west), Bandarban (south-east), and Dhaka (a central district, which is sub-divided into Dhaka North City Corporation and Dhaka South City Corporation). Bandarban and Satkhira are rural areas that are both water-stressed. Bandarban is a hilly region with a low groundwater table, whereas Satkhira is a coastal area where saline water is predominantly available (Ahmed et al., 2018; Chakma et al., 2021). In the two urban district of Dhaka, the survey was conducted in two slum areas: Korail, located in the Dhaka North City Corporation, and Rasulpur, located in the Dhaka South City Corporation. In the context of urbanisation, these slums have been growing in population size over the last three decades, whilst the provision of services such as access to safe drinking water and basic toilet facilities has not kept up. Korail covers approximately 100 acres and is home to more than 50,000 residents, most of whom live under the poverty line (BRAC, 2014). A major eviction drive around Dhaka in 2007-2008 saw many slum dwellers relocate to Korail, further deteriorating the living conditions and service access there. Rasulpur is located within the Kamrangirchar, peninsula area hosting one of the biggest slum areas in Dhaka South (Banglapedia, 2021). WASH facilities in the area are poor and provide only limited access to safe water and sanitation.

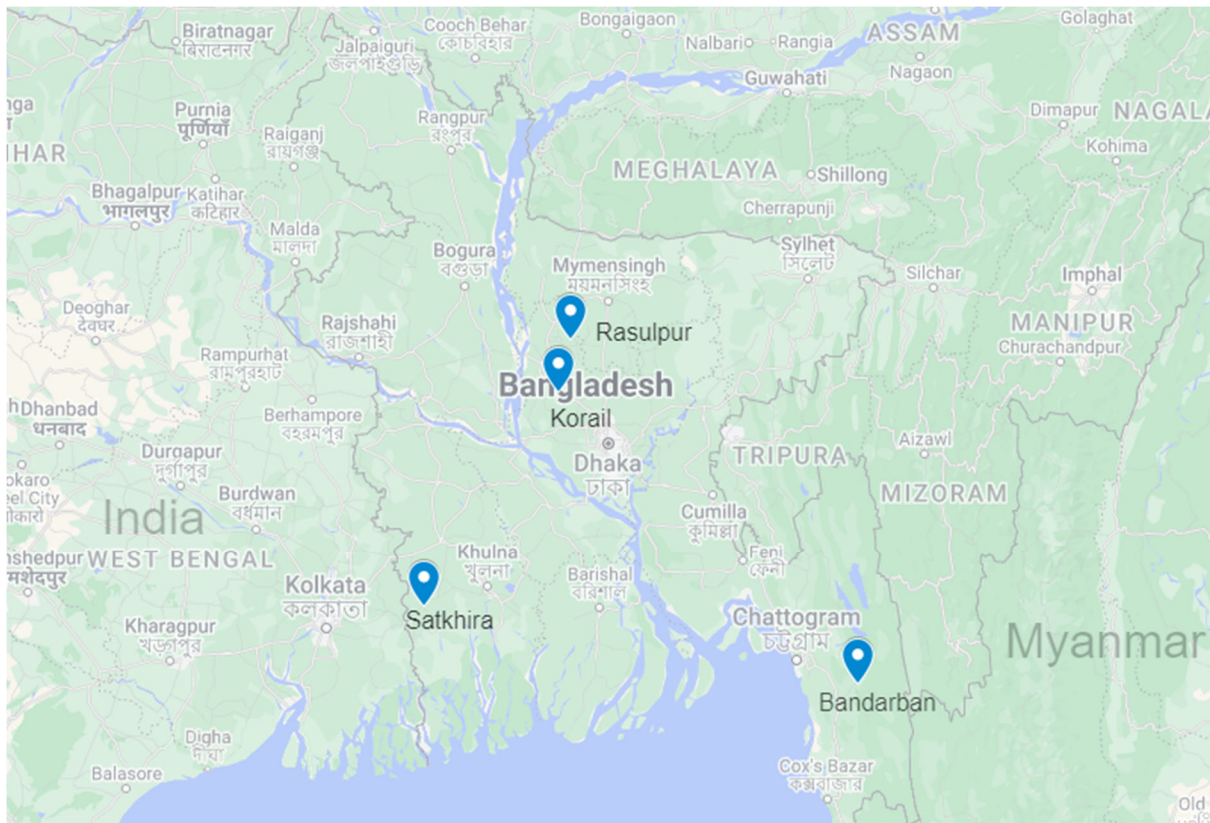


Figure 1 Location map of study areas

Bangladesh is an interesting location to conduct this research for several reasons. The country is still experiencing challenges with regards to access to WASH services, with only 59% counting with safely managed access to drinking water, 39% with safely managed access to sanitation, and 58% with basic access to hygiene (WHO & UNICEF, 2021). In a regional comparison, Bangladesh is faring worse than most of its regional neighbours in both sanitation and hygiene, and scores in the middle field for water (WHO & UNICEF, 2021). Further, the decision making on WASH is dominated by men (Livani et al., 2021). A 2017 study, for example, shows that in the south-west of the country, only 20 percent of representatives in water management organizations are women and typically they are not present in high level positions (Buisson et al., 2017). In addition, only 6 percent of the workforce in water and sanitation utilities are women (World Bank, 2019) Sexual and gender-based violence (GBV) is also a serious concern in the country. The organization ODHIKAR has been compiling data on different forms of GBV, however, the resulting numbers are likely only a small fraction of the actual cases. The organization's data on average identifies over 800 rapes annually in the twenty-year period between 2001 and 2021. For the past ten years (2011-2021), they also collected information on over 3000 girls reporting to have been sexually harassed and stalked (*Odhikar | Statistics on Violence against Women*, n.d.). Young, unmarried women are especially exposed to sexual harassment (Camellia et al., 2012; Nahar et al., 2013). The World Bank in 2013 estimated that more than 50% of women in rural Bangladesh experience domestic violence regularly, and this number is likely an underestimation (World Bank, 2013). Male violence against women is also closely linked to existing gender and social norms. Fattah and Camellia (2020, p. 784) found that “majority of both men and women in the rural areas of Bangladesh adhere to hegemonic gender norms and attitudes that justify, promote, and perpetuate violence against women. These norms, beliefs, and attitudes are routinely and systematically translated into practice by men and are justified by them to exert control over women's body through the use of

violence and simultaneous victim blaming” Interestingly, the authors also find that women also hold the beliefs, norms and attitudes. Understanding these norms is essential to understand in the context of sextortion, where these norms likely aid in allowing sextortion to continue and prevent victims from reporting. In addition, significant issues of shame and stigma still prevent women from reporting violence both inside and outside the home (Kishor & Johnson, 2005; World Health Organization, 2005). A report by Human Rights Watch (2020) for example, shows how survivors of abuse by husbands or in-laws rarely report the abuse as it is considered a private matter, and highlights how the country is lacking robust services and reporting mechanisms for survivors of GBV.

This paper not only adds to the emerging literature on sextortion in the WASH sector, but also gives further insights into factors that make women more vulnerable to this form of corruption. The paper is structured as follows: it will first give an overview of household access to water and sanitation services and the experiences of sexual and gender-based violence of respondents. Next, the paper will discuss the types of sextortion that respondents experienced, where sextortion occurs and what factors make women more vulnerable to sextortion. The paper will continue with a discussion of the role of social norms on the occurrence of sextortion and the likelihood of reporting. The paper will close with a conclusion and recommendations.

2. Methodology

The findings presented here rely on information obtained through a standardized survey (1200 respondents), alongside 21 key informant interviews and 5 focus group discussions. All phases of primary data collection, including enumerator training, supervision, random sampling, were conducted by two local organizations, the Development Organisation of the Rural Poor (DORP) and Change Initiative (CI). Data collection took place between September and December, 2021. A stratified purposeful sampling (Sandelowski, 2000) approach was chosen, whereby local organizations identified water stressed areas. The study was built around the expectation that in these areas, prevailing conditions may create vulnerabilities for sextortion. Data were collected from a comparable sample size of respondents in each of the four targeted geographic areas, to enable regional comparisons on sextortion prevalence. Only women were interviewed, as previous studies showed that the group was disproportionately affected by sextortion, both in the water and sanitation sectors, and in other contexts (Feigenblatt, 2020; UNDP-SIWI Water Governance Facility, 2017). The age cut-off for the survey were respondents aged 18 and above, due to the sensitivities involved in doing research with children. The number of participants in the focus group discussions ranged between 4 and 13. Data collection using the standardized survey was carried out using both mobile devices paper questionnaires, which were then manually input into a central database. The standardized survey comprised both general questions about the profile and experience of the respondent and their household members, as well as specific question about the respondent’s experience with sextortion, if any.

3. Access to Water and Sanitation services

Most of the households covered were male-headed, with three quarters of respondents (74.8%) reporting to be spouses of the head of household. The average household size was found to be 5. Respondents came from a variety of ethnicities (Bengali, Chakma, Marma, Mru, Tanchangya and Tripura). The majority (60.6%) of respondents rely on public taps / standpipes as their primary source of water, followed by boreholes (17.2%). Only 1% of respondents has direct access to water piped into

their compound, yard, plot or dwelling. Some access water primarily through protected springs and wells (5.6%) or water piped to a neighbour’s house (2%). The remainder of respondents (13.6%) indicated relying on unprotected sources, which include unprotected wells and springs, rainwater collection and surface water. Nevertheless, more than half of respondents (56.6%) indicate having access to water close to their homes, reporting it takes less than 5 minutes to walk to and from the water source (excluding queuing times). Queuing times were reported to be below 5 minutes by two thirds of respondents (68.6%).

Water insecurity in the four weeks prior to the survey date was measured using the Household Water Insecurity Experiences (HWISE) Scale (Young et al., 2019). The HWISE Scale is measured through 12 questions on experiences of water availability, accessibility, use, acceptability, and reliability. Each question contains four response options (never = 0, rarely = 1, sometimes = 2, often/always = 3) that are summed together at the household level. The scores can range between 0-36. The households of respondents with a HWISE Scale score of 12 or higher are considered water insecure. Overall, 23% of respondents live in water insecure households according to the HWISE scale. Among the four regions in the dataset, Korail has the highest concentration of water insecure households (52.3%), followed by Bandarban (29.2%), DSCC (6.7%), and Satkhira (3.6%). The severity of water insecurity also tends to be higher in the study areas with higher concentration of water insecure households. The median of the HWISE Scale scores in Korail and Bandarban are 12 and 7, respectively. This contrasts with Rasulpur and Satkhira, where the median scores are 0 (Figure 2).

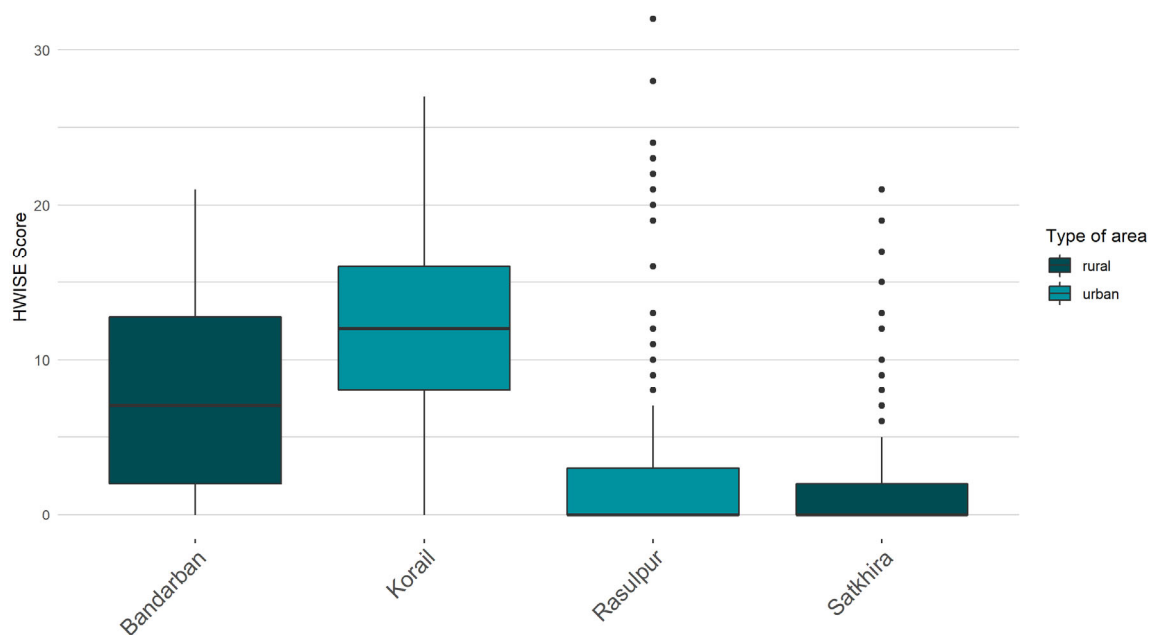


Figure 2 Distribution of HWISE Scale scores in the study areas

Assessing water insecurity in the past 4 weeks illustrates that water stress is very acute for some. Nearly a third (29.3%) reported that they or someone in their household worried about sufficient access to water to cover all household needs three times or more within the last four weeks (see Figure 3). Furthermore, 10% of the respondents reported that they or a member of their household had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a personal favour for an official working for the government or Water Service Provider in order to get the needed services in the past 12 months.

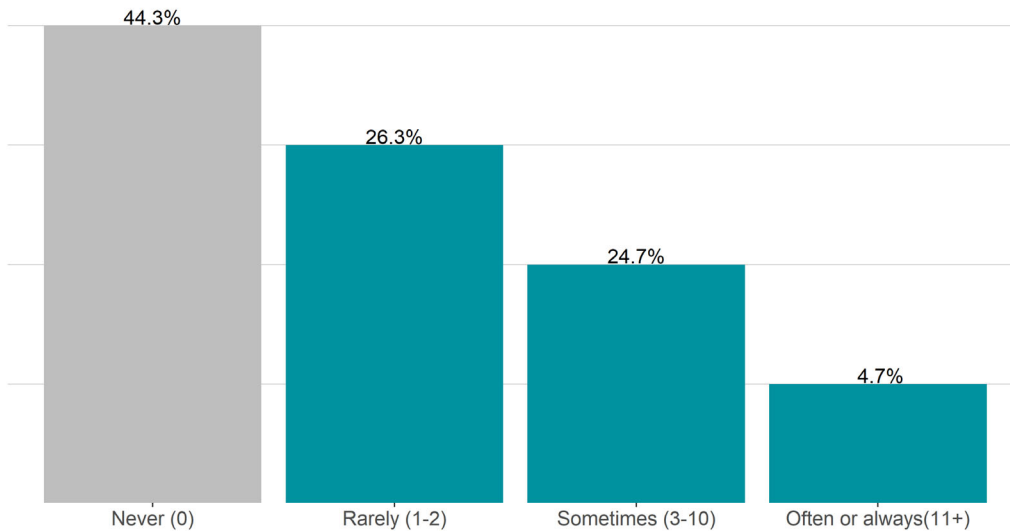


Figure 3 Respondent's and family's worry about water to cover household needs in past 4 weeks

4. Sexual and Gender Based Violence

Sextortion takes place at the intersection of corruption and gender-based violence. Sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) is defined as “any harmful act of sexual, physical, psychological, mental, and emotional abuse that is perpetrated against a person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (i.e. gender) differences between males and females (UNOCHA, n.d.). In addition to the sexual component, there are three distinct features that need to be present for the corruption component in sextortion: “abuse of authority; a quid pro quo exchange; and psychological coercion rather than physical force” (IAWJ, 2012, p.9). On the latter, the sexual component in sextortion does not have to involve sexual intercourse but can also comprise acts such as exposing private body parts or posing for sexual photographs (ibid.). These three elements are important in that they allow professionals to recognize when sexual abuse is also sextortion. To understand sextortion it is essential to also investigate how SGBV is prevalent and accepted in a society and which norms allow SGBV and sextortion to continue. Hence, the survey examined nine different forms of SGBV, four of which are considered sextortion:

Four forms of Sextortion	Other forms of SGBV
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Someone demanded sex or sexual activity* in exchange for (access to) water / toilet / bathing facilities ○ Someone demanded sex or sexual activity as payment for debt owed for water / toilet / bathing facilities ○ The respondent offered sex or sexual activity in exchange for water / toilet / bathing facilities ○ The respondent offered sex or sexual activity as payment for debt owed for water / toilet / bathing facilities <p>* e.g. kissing, fondling/groping, touching private parts</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Someone forced the respondent into sexual intercourse by holding them down or hurting them in some way ○ Someone attempted to force the respondent into sexual intercourse by holding them down or hurting them in some way ○ Someone groped, fondled, or kissed the respondent ○ Someone touched the respondent’s private parts ○ Someone made suggestive remarks, gestures, jokes or written words of sexual nature

Table 1 Forms of sextortion and SGBV included in the survey

Demands for sex or sexual activities are those initiated by an individual in a position of power in exchange for a service, whereas offers of sex or sexual activity are initiated by a person dependent on an access to a service which they fear not to otherwise be able to obtain. Thus, acts of sextortion should not be misinterpreted as acts that women gave consent to, irrespective of the women being demanded a sexual act or having offered it. Rather, the power imbalances in these exchanges lead to “coerced consent” (Eldén et al., 2020). Since water is a life-sustaining resource, those in power know that the person in need of access is in a desperate situation and may be willing to go to extreme lengths to secure access. This is particularly important to remember also when discussing the prosecution of sextortion cases.

180 respondents (15% of respondents) reported having experienced at least one of the nine forms of SGBV considered in the survey whilst accessing water, bathing facilities or toilet facilities. A fifth of affected respondents (21.1%, 38 individuals) reported experiencing SGBV whilst accessing multiple services.

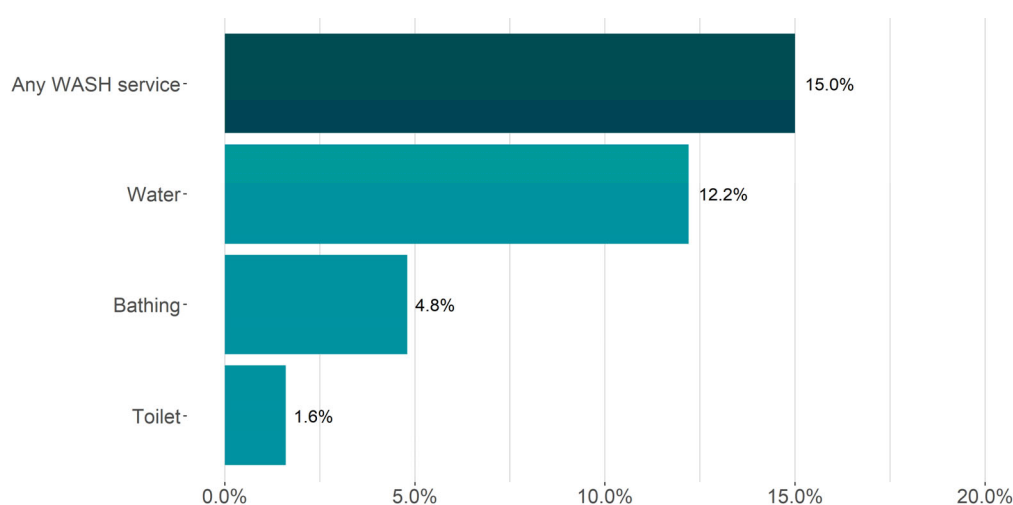


Figure 4 SGBV incidents when accessing water, toilets, bathing facilities

As illustrated in Figure 4, 146 respondents (12.2% of respondents) reported having experienced at least one of the nine forms of SGBV whilst accessing water. Of these, over a third (35.6%, 52 individuals) reported experiencing multiple forms of SGBV whilst accessing water. The second most frequent occurrence of SGBV incidents is related to bathing facilities. Here, 57 respondents (4.8% of all respondents) reported having experienced at least one of the nine forms of SGBV whilst accessing bathing facilities. Nearly a third (29.8%, 17 individuals) reported experiencing multiple forms of SGBV whilst accessing bathing facilities. Regarding toilets, 19 respondents (1.6% of all respondents) reported having experienced at least one of the nine forms of SGBV whilst accessing facilities. A quarter of these (26.3%, 5 individuals) indicated having experienced multiple forms of SGBV whilst accessing toilet facilities.

5. Sextortion: Who experiences it and where does it take place?

5.1. Types of Sextortion

Roughly one-third (29.4%) of the reported cases of SGBV involved sextortion, meaning the respondents were either demanded or offered sexual favours in return for water or sanitation services. 4.4% of respondents (53 individuals) reported experiencing at least one of the four forms of sextortion when

accessing water, bathing facilities or toilet facilities. Of these, 10 respondents had experienced sextortion in multiple service areas. As has been well documented, social stigma, fear and shame prevent women from reporting sextortion to the authorities. The transactional nature of sextortion renders it a particularly sensitive topic, as those experiencing it are often framed as complicit, despite the clear power imbalances at play. This may have influenced responses to this survey as well. Therefore, it is important to also consider how many respondents have heard about or witnessed sextortion. Whilst 4.4% of respondents reported a direct experience of sextortion, 8.4% indicate that they had heard of someone experiencing it or had witnessed an incident. Figure 4 below summarizes these findings.

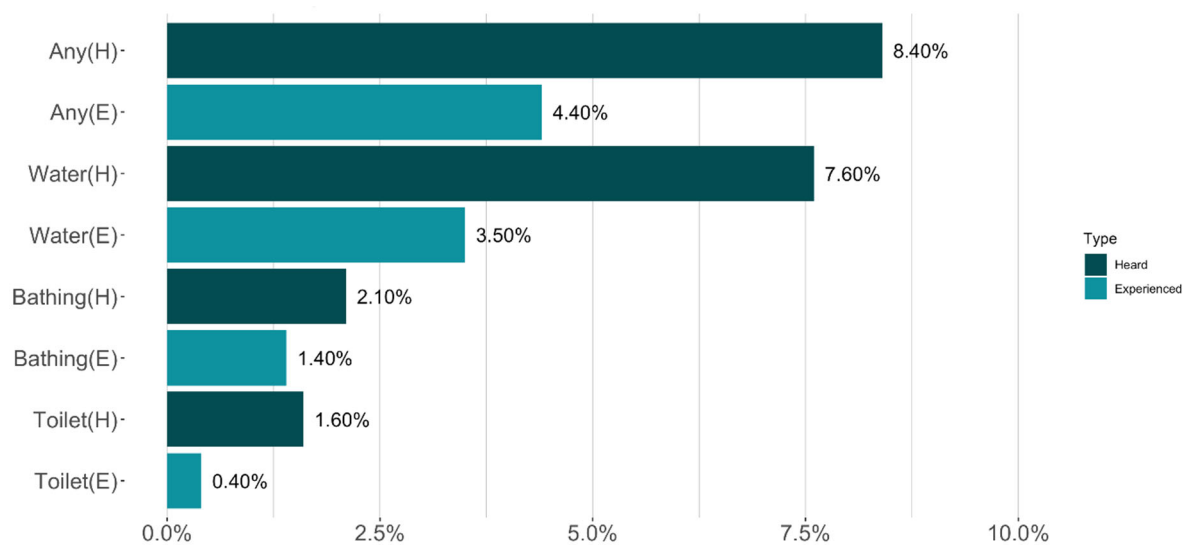


Figure 5 Prevalence of sextortion incidents, heard of and experienced, related to accessing different WASH service areas

Among those who directly experienced sextortion, 42 respondents (3.5%) reported experiencing sextortion whilst accessing water. Nearly a quarter of them (23.8%, 10 individuals) indicated having experienced more than one form of sextortion when accessing water. For bathing, 17 respondents (1.4%) reported experiencing sextortion whilst accessing facilities, with one indicating having experienced two forms of sextortion. For toilets, 5 respondents (0.4%) reported experiencing sextortion whilst accessing toilet facilities, with no respondents indicating having experienced multiple forms. About a third of those who experienced sextortion also reported having had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a personal favour in the last 12 months. When comparing this to the data of sextortion incidents that respondents heard about, access to water is again the area with the highest number of sextortion incidents (7.6% of respondent had heard about or witnessed someone experiencing sextortion when accessing water). Respondents also were aware of incidents that happened when others were accessing bathing facilities (2.1%) and toilets (1.6%).

5.2. Where does sextortion take place?

Respondents were distributed equally across the four assessed administrative areas, with each respondent group accounting for about a quarter of all responses (25.2% each in Satkhira and Korail, 24.8% each in Bandarban and Rasulpur). The greatest number of sextortion incidents (39.6%) were

reported in Korail, followed by 28.3% in Bandarban, 17% in Satkhira and 15.1% in Rasulpur (see Figure 6).

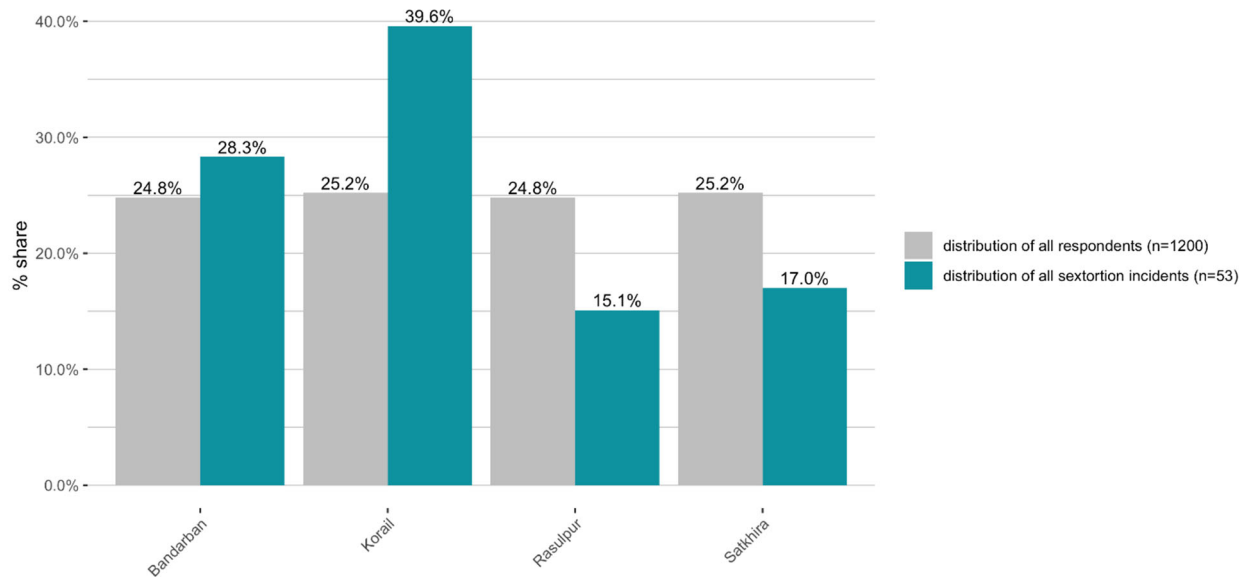


Figure 6 Respondents and sextortion incidents, disaggregated by study area

The 53 reported sextortion incidents reportedly occurred across 79 locations (e.g. because the same respondent reported having experienced multiple incidents in different locations). As illustrated in Figure 7, the most common location of sextortion incidents were at the WASH facilities themselves, accounting for 44.3% of all reported locations. About every fifth location where sextortion incidents occur is located between the affected respondent's house and the facility (20.3% of reported locations). Other locations were elsewhere indoors (13.9%), elsewhere outdoors (11.4%) and in the house (10.1%).

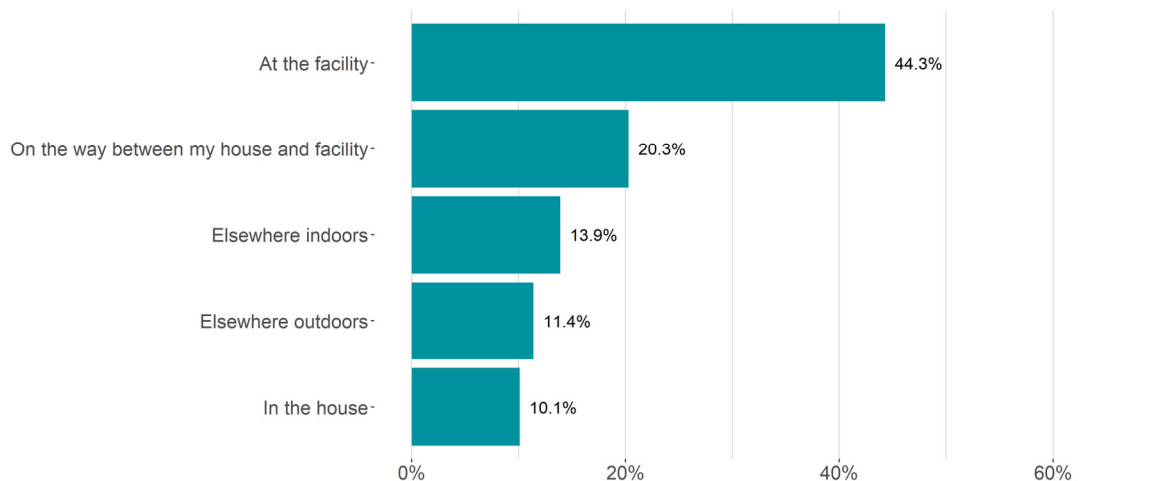


Figure 7 Locations of sextortion incidents when accessing facilities

There were 42 respondents who reported experiencing incidents when accessing water. The incidents experienced by these respondents occurred in 53 distinct locations. For sextortion related to accessing toilet facilities, there were 5 respondents who experienced incidents, which took place in 5 locations. For bathing, 17 respondents reported experiencing incidents, in 21 distinct locations.

For those reporting incidents when accessing water, the most frequently cited location in which sextortion incidents occurred is the water point / source, accounting for more than half of reported locations (54.7%, 29 reports). This is followed by incidents on the way between the house and water point (26.4%, 14 reports). For those reporting incidents when accessing bathing facilities, the most frequently cited location in which sextortion incidents occurred was also the facility (28.6%, 6 reports). Unlike in the case of water, except for one instance, incidents were not reported on the way between the respondent's house and the facility. In the case of toilet related sextortion incidents, the response rate was too low to draw meaningful conclusions.

It stood out that none of the few respondents with direct access to toilet facilities (in the form of flush to piped sewer systems or hanging toilets / latrines) reported having experienced sextortion. Direct access to toilet facilities in one's home was also highlighted by participants in focus group discussions as a key measure to reduce risks faced by women and girls. This is in line with research on sexual and gender-based violence that shows that open defecation increases women's risk to violence (e.g. Saleem et al., 2019).

5.3. Power dynamics

Overall, 57.2% of reported sextortion incidents were solicited, whereas 42.8% were offered, according to respondents. That sextortion can be both solicited and offered has also been shown in the study by UNDP-SIWI (2017) which found, particularly in Johannesburg, that women explained that as they did not have the means to pay a monetary bribe, they actively offered sex instead. Importantly, the study found that even when women are the ones offering the sexual bribe, it must be remembered that "the power dynamic always represented a structural power asymmetry in favor of the public official receiving them" (UNODC, 2020, p. 44). This includes the asymmetric power between men and women, as Pommells et al. (2018) show in their study, which highlighted that one major factor for the vulnerability of women and girls to sexual violence in East Africa is that the water sources are controlled by men. Hence, this discussion around who offered or solicited should not be misinterpreted to imply that the women has given consent or is guilty of misconduct (Eldén et al., 2020). This is especially important to keep in mind for any legislation criminalizing sextortion, which needs to be designed in a way that does not criminalize the victim.

Figure 8 shows how solicitations and offers varied by type of WASH service. For bathing, an equal number of sextortion incidents was related to solicitations and offers (9 cases each), whereas for water and toilets, more incidents were based on solicitations than on offers (31 solicitations versus 23 offers for water, and 4 solicitations versus one offer for toilet).

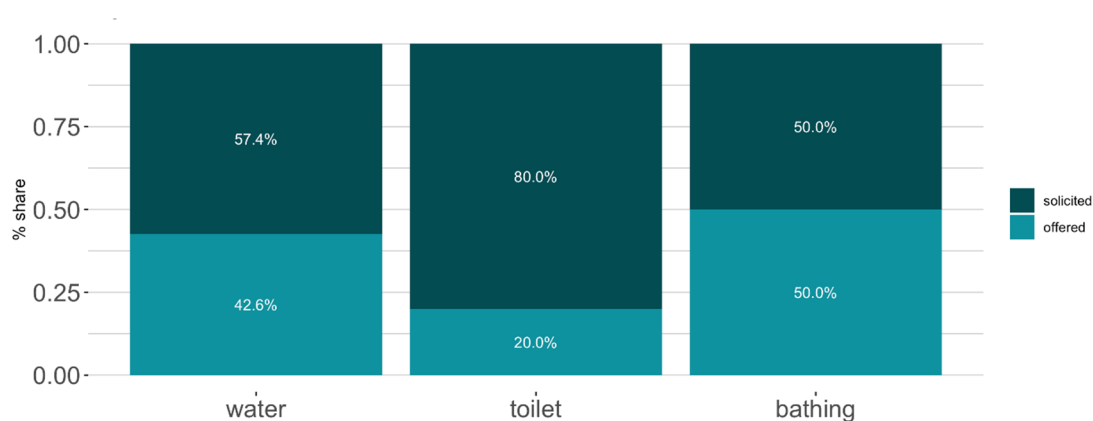


Figure 8 Sextortion incidents - solicited vs offered

Given the position of women in society and the associated norms and inequalities along gender lines, one can expect that the power dynamic in the instances where sextortion was offered by the women surveyed was similarly asymmetric as described in the case of South Africa. As a focus group participant in the Bandarban District said “Even though it may seem like the women give consent, they are socially pressured into acting in such a way”.

5.4. Who is experiencing sextortion?

Arguably being female is not the only factor that potentially makes a person vulnerable to sextortion, yet little has been researched about who is more likely to experience sextortion and why. It has been well documented that sextortion occurs at all levels of society and all sectors (Carnegie, 2019; Feigenblatt, 2020; IAWJ, 2012), yet several factors have been identified that make women more vulnerable to sextortion. As Nancy Hendry of the IAWJ states “vulnerability is really what makes sextortion possible. If you were not vulnerable and did not feel coerced in some measure, then what you would have is a total consensual relationship”. (Eldén et al., 2020, p. 51)

Previous studies hint at age being a factor, which is confirmed in this study’s sample, but in a different way than expected. Previous studies indicate that younger women are more vulnerable to sextortion. A study by Khanna and Das (2016), for example, finds that adolescent girls face a higher risk of sexual harassment in sanitation. However, as Figure 9 indicates, in this study the respondents aged 18 – 25, who constitute nearly a quarter (22.5%) of all respondents, only reported 7.5% of sextortion incidents. Over half of all sextortion incidents (58.5%) were reported by respondents aged 26 to 35, who constitute a little less than half (46.6%) of all respondents. A third (34%) of sextortion incidents were reported by respondents aged 36 to 50, who constitute a little less than a third (27.7%) of all respondents. No sextortion incidents were reported by respondents aged 51 and above, who constituted 3.2% of all respondents.

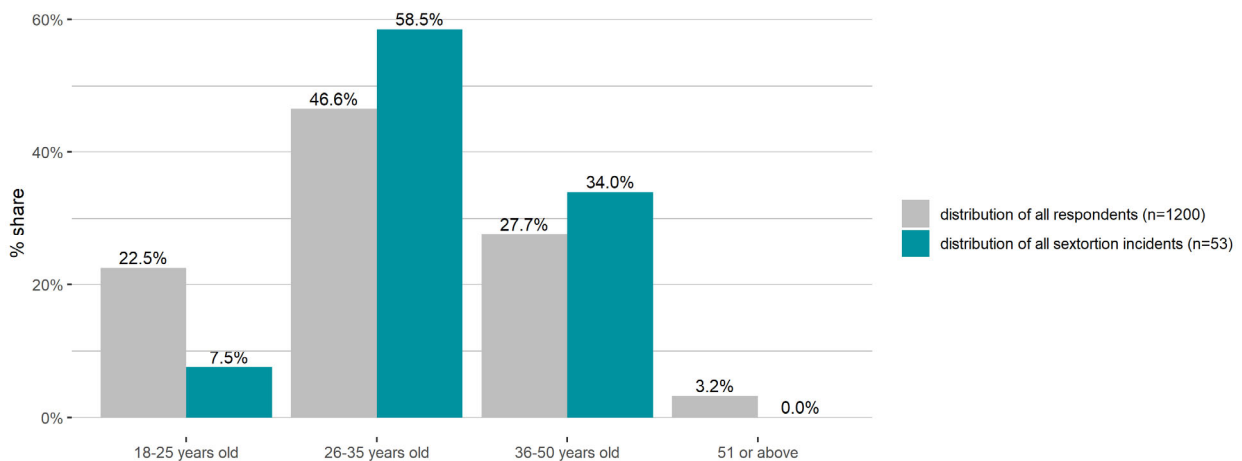


Figure 9 Respondents and sextortion incidents, disaggregated by age

However, more research would be needed to find out if this somewhat surprising age distribution is the result of other factors. Explanatory factors could be family or community dynamics where younger women are less likely to interact with officials in these areas or face more pressure to hide incidents, e.g. as an incident becoming public could hamper marriage prospects or lead to shaming the family. In general one could expect that the age difference in those that experience sextortion that can be seen in the data can be explained by cultural and social norms that shape the position and roles of (young) women in society. A few focus group participants also hinted at another explanation arguing that that sextortion cases have been more widespread in the past and have now been reduced. All of these potential explanations would require further investigation.

It is not possible to draw conclusive inferences about ethnicity as a possible factor of vulnerability to sextortion, since the survey included too few members of minority ethnic groups. The most prevalent ethnic group are Bengali, who make up 75.5% of the sample. Of the reported sextortion incidents, 71.7% were reported by members of this ethnic group. Given the low number of respondents from minority ethnicities who simultaneously experience sextortion, further research is needed to determine the impact of ethnicity for vulnerability to sextortion.

Previous studies show that women living in poverty are particularly vulnerable to sextortion, as they lack the means to pay with money and/or goods and therefore have to rely on their body as the only remaining currency (Merkle et al., 2017). Our survey results also show that poverty is a risk factor. We use a variation of the Lived Poverty Index (Mattes, 2008), which is a measure of deprivation of basic necessities, as a proxy for poverty at the household level. As Figure 10 illustrates, respondents who reported having experienced sextortion in accessing WASH services tend to come from households with a higher level of LPI, where a higher score indicates a more acute level of poverty.

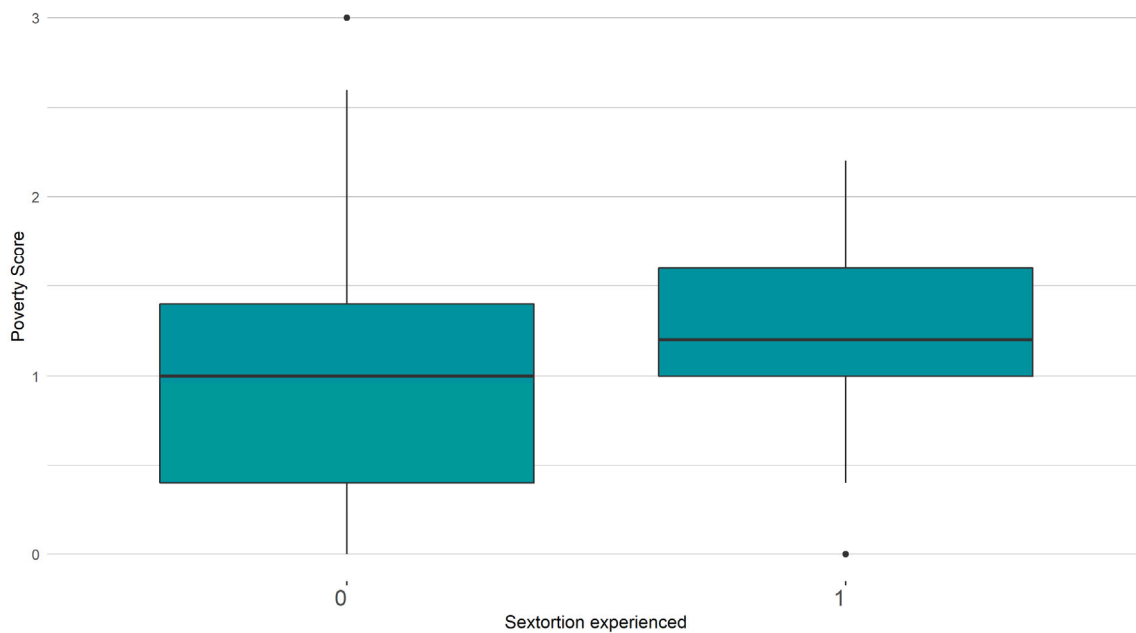


Figure 10 Distribution of poverty scores by sextortion

Notably, those who reported relying primarily on unprotected water sources were disproportionately affected by sextortion incidents: whilst 13.6% of respondents relied on unprotected sources comprising surface water, rain water, unprotected wells and unprotected springs as their main source of water, these respondents accounted for a quarter (26.4%) of incidents reported². At the same time, none of the respondents with direct access to water in their homes and compounds reported being exposed to sextortion (see Figure 11).

² The incident itself may have occurred at a different water source, since the question captures the respondent's main water source, not the source frequented at the time the sextortion incident happened.

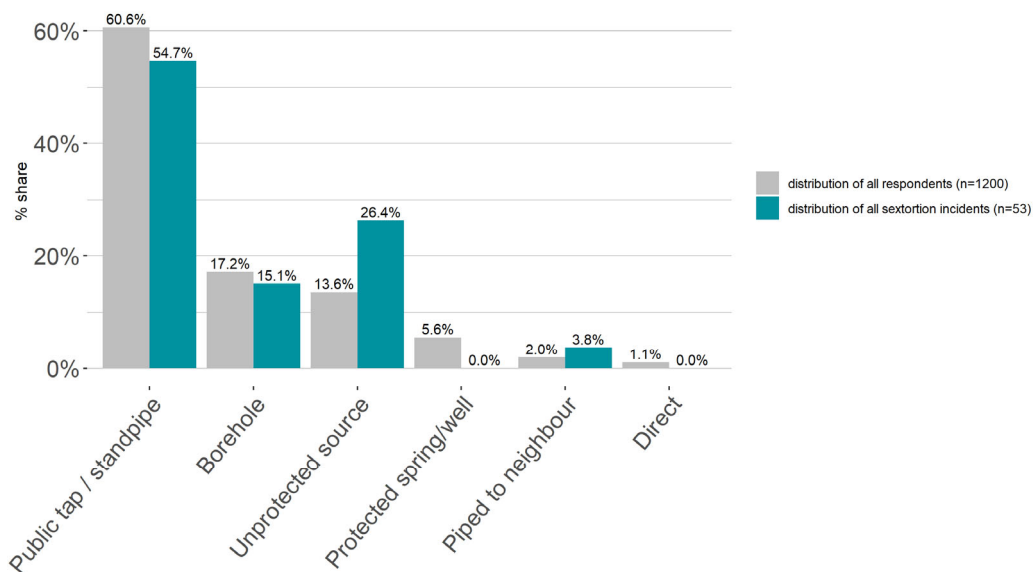


Figure 11 Respondents and sextortion incidents, disaggregated by main type of water source

The analysis also clearly shows that respondents from water insecure households are more likely to report having experienced sextortion. In total, 23% of respondents live in water insecure households, whereas over 43% of sextortion cases were reported by this group (see Figure 12). The water insecure households were also those who paid for bribes to receive WASH services more often in the past year, accounting for 57% of such experiences. This indicates that users from water insecure households often find themselves subject to the discretion of service provider officials, who may choose to extort bribes or sexual favors from these users in exchange for service.

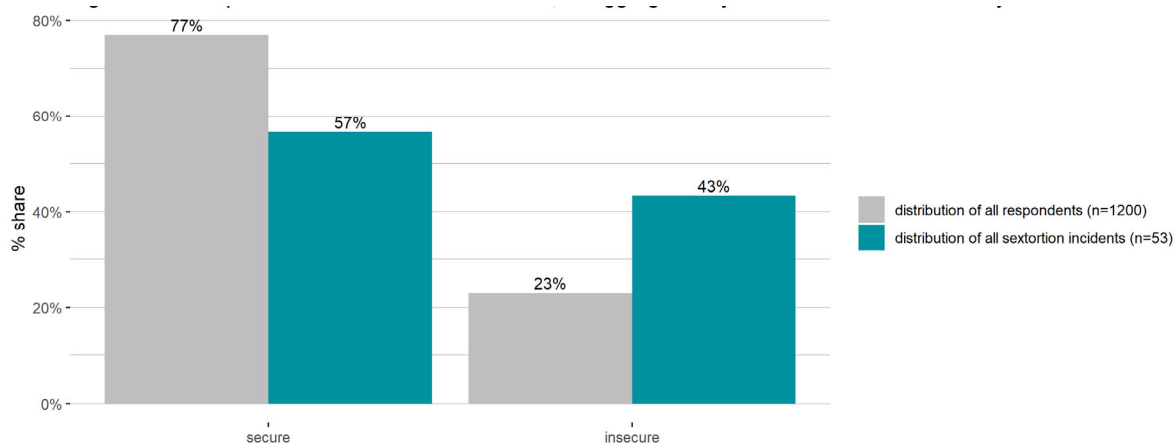


Figure 12 Respondents and sextortion incidents, disaggregated by Household Water Insecurity Level

The two worst affected areas for sextortion incidents, Korail and Bandarban, also account for the largest shares of households who are water insecure according to the HWISE scale, making up 89% of water insecure households across the assessed four areas. In Korail, more than half (52%) of households were found to be water insecure, this amounts to 57% of all water insecure households in the four identified areas. In Bandarban, nearly a third (29%) of households were found to be water insecure, this amounts to 32% of all water insecure households in the four identified areas.

The findings above stand in stark contrast to other SGBV incidents (excluding sextortion), which affect water secure and water insecure households proportionally to their representation in the sample, as illustrated in Figure 12 and Figure 13.

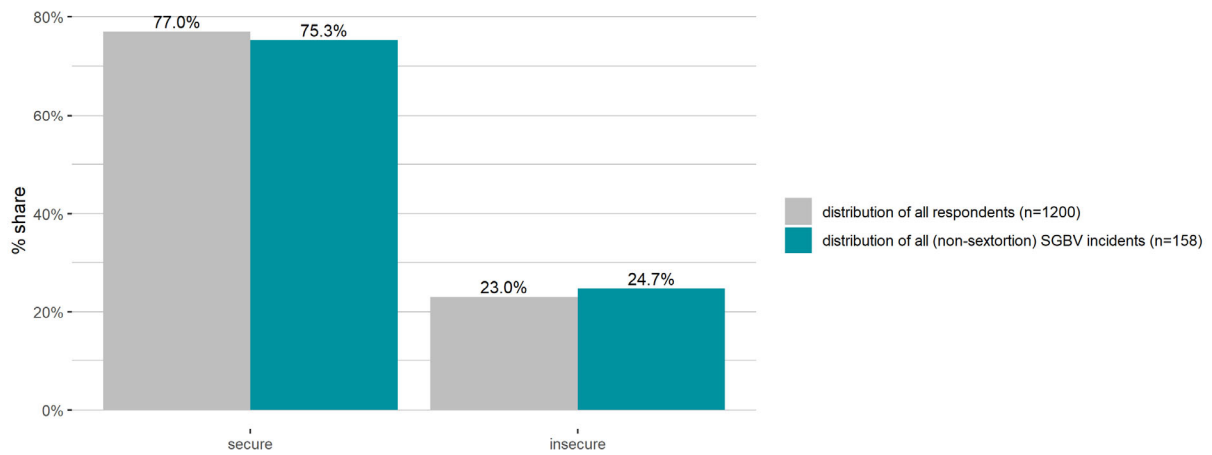


Figure 13 Respondents and (non-sex-tortion) SGBV incidents, disaggregated by Household Water Insecurity Level

In addition to the role of water insecurity, the focus group in Korail highlighted the importance of poverty and other compounding factors that make women more likely to fall into poverty in determining if someone is likely to experience sextortion in WASH. Participants argued that “the victims are either financially unstable, widowed, separated, or involved with opposite political views”. The same focus group also highlights the importance of understanding the power asymmetry between public officials and women: “They are helpless to report to the police and take any legal action as the perpetrator service providers are powerful with their political connection and maintain strong lobby with the local administration”. A focus group participant in another district also emphasized that the power asymmetry between poor citizens and public officials hinders crimes from being reported or punished: “People don't support the poor, when we ask for help or try to complaint a crime, nobody believes us. Everyone believes the rich and the people in power” (FGD participant, Rasulpur).

Another factor that makes women particularly vulnerable to corruption, according to findings in this study, is the level of literacy. This is in line with previous research that finds that a “person’s access to resources, opportunities and choices, and power and voice directly impacts the vulnerability in relation to persons with entrusted authority on which the person depends” (Eldén et al., 2020, p. 51). The vast majority of sextortion incidents (72%, 38 cases out of 53) affect those who are not literate or only partially literate. As illustrated in Figure 14, illiterate people (those who can neither read nor write) constitute 40.2% of the sample, but account for 54.7% of sextortion incidents. If we additionally consider those who are only partially literate (can only read or write, not do both), who constitute 10.9% of the sample and account for 17% of sextortion incidents, the combined share increases to nearly three quarters (71.7%). In comparison, those who are literate make up nearly half of the sample (48.9%) but account only for 28.3% of the reported sextortion incidents.

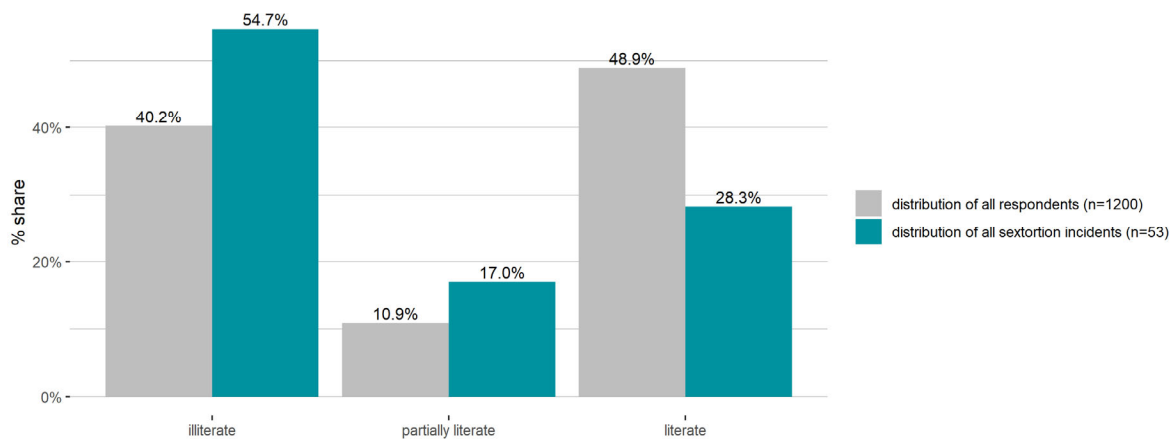


Figure 14 Respondents and sextortion incidents, disaggregated by literacy

Previous research shows that “socially marginalized groups, such as people with disabilities who may have problems accessing latrines, or those from lower castes where entrenched discrimination may prohibit the use of common sanitation sources, may experience increased difficulties in safely meeting their daily water and sanitation needs” (Sommer et al., 2015, p. 106).

Regarding disabilities, 202 respondents indicated that they suffer from at least one type of impairment (visual, hearing, mobility/physical, mental, speech, other). A comparison of this group versus those who do not suffer any impairment does not show a significant difference in the prevalence of sextortion incidents within each group. Respondents with disability constitute 16.8% of the sample and account for 13.2% of incidents reported, whereas those without impairments constitute 83.2% of the sample and accounted for 86.8% of reported incidents. However, it must be noted that the survey only captured seven respondents who reported both an impairment and a sextortion experience. Thus, the results should be interpreted with caution. Of the seven respondents, five were people affected by a mobility/physical impairment. A more comprehensive analysis with a larger number of respondents with impairments might yield different results, and help to shed light on the question if women with (multiple) impairments are more affected, and with regards to the relative prevalence of sextortion incidents.

5.1. Urban (slum) - rural dynamics

Two study areas were urban slum areas, and two rural areas, with an equal number of respondents interviewed in urban slum and rural settings. Of the households found to be water insecure according to the HWISE scale, two thirds (64%) were located in urban slum areas, compared to one third (36%) in rural areas. Urban slum areas also featured higher values for the maximum, median and mean poverty score (3, 1.2 and 1.3, compared to 2, 0.6 and 0.7). Only 40% of respondents in urban slum areas were found to be literate, compared to 58% of respondents in rural areas.

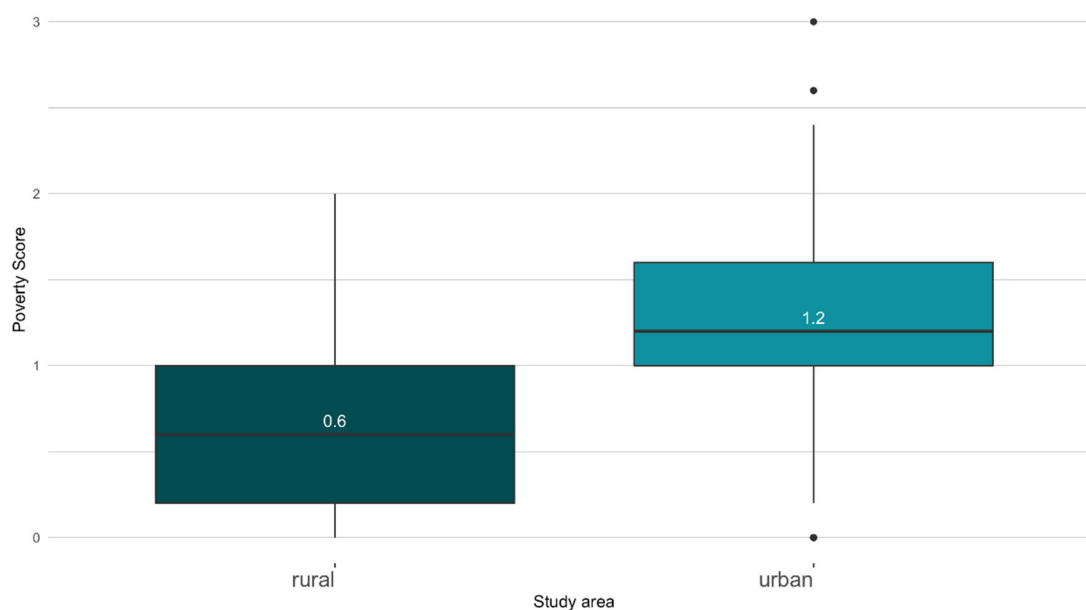


Figure 15 Distribution of poverty scores by urban and rural study areas

Urban slums accounted for a substantially higher share of bribes paid (82%, compared to 18%). This means that 17 of every 100 urban slum dwellers confirmed that in the past year, they or a member of their household had to pay a bribe, give a gift, or do a personal favor for an official working for the government or Water Service Provider in order to get the services they needed, compared to 4 of every 100 rural respondents. There were also more sextortion incidents reported by respondents in urban slum settings (55%) than rural settings (45%).

The comparison between urban slum areas and rural areas indicates that the situation is particularly dire in urban slum areas, which due to their irregular status can experience added challenges with obtaining safe access to water, sanitation and hygiene. Whereas generally speaking, urban areas tend to do better than rural ones in accessibility, availability and quality of drinking water and in basic hygiene services (WHO & UNICEF, 2021, pp. 35, 76), the same trend does not appear to hold for urban slum areas, according to the findings in this study, thus exacerbating the risk of sextortion in these areas. The much higher rate of respondents who reported having to pay a bribe in the past year to obtain access to water services also underlines that the environment is rife with corruption. These factors combined suggest that the risk of sextortion remains high for urban slum dwellers.

5.2. Under which conditions does sextortion take place?

About half of respondents each reported paying / not paying for access to their primary water source (50.4% paying, versus 49.6% not paying). A greater number of sextortion incidents when accessing water were reported in the paying group (64.3%, 27 cases) than in the non-paying group (35.7%, 15 cases). Fewer respondents indicated paying for toilet facilities (18.6%, 223 respondents). All five sextortion incidents when accessing toilets were among the non-paying group. Similarly, 18% of respondents (216 individuals) indicated paying for bathing facilities, but none of the 17 sextortion incidents when accessing bathing facilities were related to the paying group.

The majority of respondents indicate that they knew their perpetrators: 69% of respondents who experienced sextortion when accessing water, 100% of respondents who experienced sextortion when accessing toilet facilities, and 65% of respondents who experienced sextortion when accessing bathing facilities. Most perpetrators are reported to act alone, though 14% of sextortion incidents when accessing water and 6% of sextortion incidents when accessing a bathing facility were committed by a group. All perpetrators were reported to be male in all three service categories. A key informant in Korail highlights the importance of the power asymmetry between survivor and public official: “It is a very rare case that, this Sextortion news comes out, as the victims feel unsecured and scared of the service providers, they (service providers) are politically connected and intimate with the local administration. “

The focus group discussions put a lot of emphasis on the role facilities (or the lack thereof) play in creating an environment in which sextortion is more likely to occur. Some respondents suggested a decrease of sextortion incidents, linked to improved infrastructure (Rasulpur and Korail) among other factors. Participants suggested that whilst sextortion incidents may have decreased due to some improvements in infrastructure, other forms of SGBV were on the rise.

There was general agreement that key solutions and mitigating mechanisms include the provision of better water supply installations, such as deep tub wells, in proximity to houses. Affordability of the service is key, including safety nets for those who lack financial security. The installation of adequate toilet and sanitation facilities, if possible at the household level, was also identified as an opportunity to mitigate risks. If toilet and washing facilities are shared, participants emphasized the importance of lockable doors and sufficient privacy. FGD participants in Rasulpur and Korail described a substantial improvement compared to the situation 10 years ago, linked to more adequate services at an affordable rate, and to landlords dealing with the utility providers. Key informants had very mixed opinions on the question of whether existing measures are sufficient to fight sextortion or not. They all agreed, however, that sextortion is an unacceptable practice. One key informant sums up the importance of having water and sanitation services inside the houses:

I believe it [sextortion] will be decreased if every family has a toilet. Legal water connections must be improved in order to ensure women's safety. We must be vigilant so that no one can take advantage of our helplessness. We, men and women, must work together to put an end to this type of blackmail. Nobody can take advantage of our awkward circumstance if we have separate toilets and bathrooms separated by walls. As a result, women and girls can go about their daily lives in safety. The police force should also support us because they are less interested in assisting disadvantaged women. Furthermore, if parents raise their children properly, women and girls are less likely to find themselves in awkward and dangerous situations. Legal action must be taken against illegal waterline dealers by law enforcement. (KII-2 Korail, Dhaka North City Cooperation)

5.3. Norms and Responses to sextortion

The understanding that the occurrence of corruption is closely linked to gender norms is getting increasing attention in the literature (e.g. Echazu, 2010; Esarey & Chirillo, 2013; Kubbe & Merkle, forthcoming; Merkle, 2018). Sextortion, like sexual and gender-based violence, is particularly influenced by the gender norms that shape how society expects women and men to behave. This also

impacts how being a survivor of sextortion is stigmatized and therefore how likely women are to report experiencing sextortion. Research clearly shows that sextortion for the survivor is closely tied to fear, shame and stigma, which leads to serious under-reporting (Eldén et al., 2020; Feigenblatt, 2020; Hossain et al., 2010; UNDP-SIWI Water Governance Facility, 2017).

The discussion around gender norms in WASH is also not new, as the structural responsibilities around WASH are typically related to the traditional roles of women and girls, such as child care, cooking, cleaning and water collection (Fisher et al., 2017; White et al., 2002). Thus, “WASH access, use, and control are embedded in a complex web of socio-cultural and political networks that impose social relations at different scales” (Nunbogu & Elliott, 2022, p. 7).

The questions of how individuals and communities respond to sextortion and whether perpetrators are held accountable are strongly impacted by social norms: gender norms that see women in subordinate positions and accept the dominant position of men sustain gender-based violence (Banarjee, 2020; Dery, 2021; Massey, 2013).

The survey also highlighted the social stigma connected to sextortion. On the question of how respondents view sexual relationships with providers of water or sanitation services, 39.7% indicated that it is not good that it happens, but placed the responsibility with the users, i.e. the women, rather than the powerful party, i.e. the public official. Only a third (33.4%) described people having sexual relationships with service providers as victims who need support. A minority (7.3%) described such relationships as normal and acceptable, whilst 6.5% described them as beneficial for users because they get better services (no queuing, affordable water, free toilet/bathrooms, etc.). Figure 16 illustrates these findings.

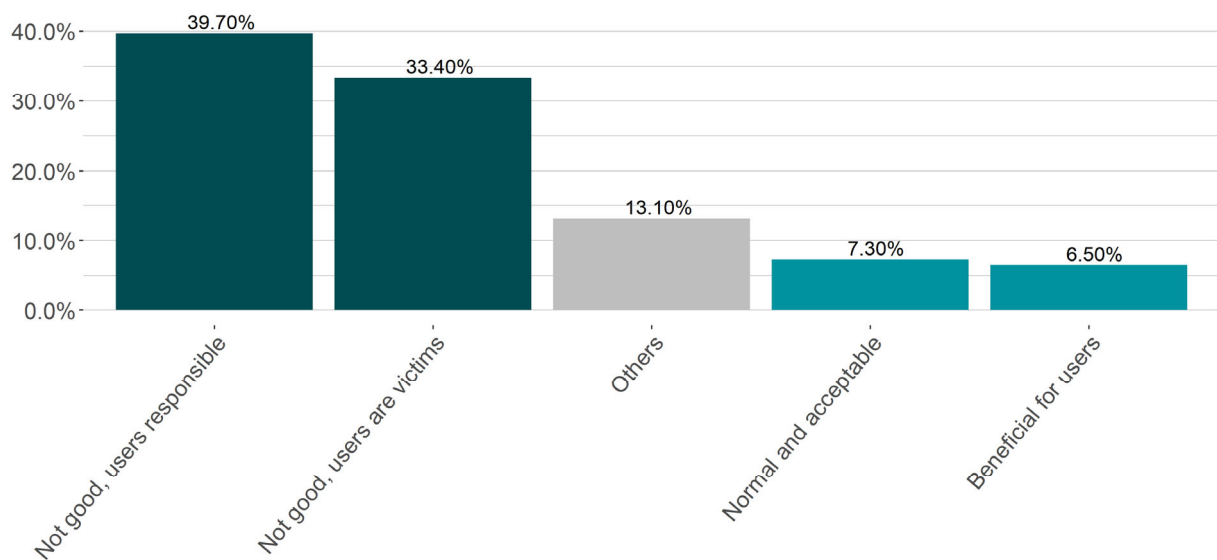


Figure 16 Opinions on sexual relations with water providers

When asked in which circumstances the respondent thinks it is acceptable for a woman to build a sexual relationship with a water operator/vendor, the vast majority (92.2%) indicated that women should never form such a relationship in any circumstances. In light of this, stigma may prevent some women from reporting experiences of sextortion, and the real number of women affected may be higher than is reflected in surveys such as the one conducted here. While no research has been done estimating how sextortion is underreported in surveys, research on SGBV shows that a multitude of factors, such as

stigma and shame (Kishor & Johnson, 2005; World Health Organization, 2005), the expected impunity of perpetrators (e.g. Hynes et al., 2004), or the normalization of such violence (Fugate et al., 2005) prevent women from reporting (Palermo et al., 2014). Nevertheless, some respondents conceded certain scenarios within which they think it acceptable for a woman to build a sexual relationship with the water operator/vendor, in particular when this is the only means to get water. A few also mentioned that factors such as care responsibilities for sick or elderly people, a lack of enough water for cooking or household chores, or long queuing times could justify entering into such relationships. This is once again in line with gendered expectations that women should put their care responsibilities above all else. Studies on Bangladesh also show that women do not only face a risk of violence outside the home but also inside the home, for example when they cannot fulfill their roles in the household due to water insecurity (Collins et al., 2019; Pommells et al., 2018). This additional burden likely forces women to expose themselves to dangerous situations when accessing water and can be expected to also make them less likely to report abuse experienced when fetching water.

The survey also clearly shows the social stigma for survivors of sextortion, where 39.6% of respondents who experienced sextortion state that it damages the family honor (Figure 14).

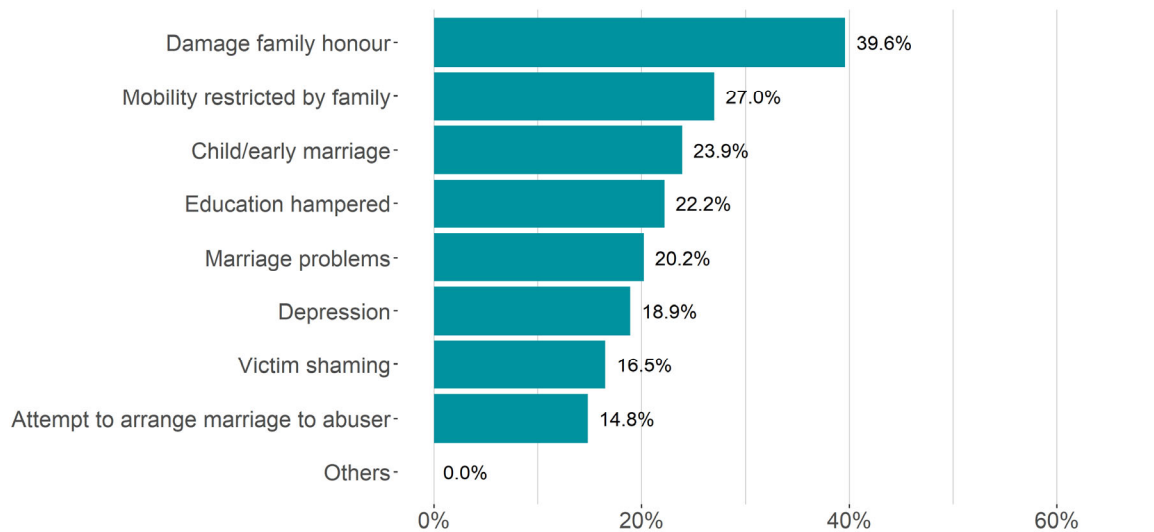


Figure 17 Expected consequences of sextortion incidents for those who experienced sextortion

As per Figure 18, a large number of respondents indicated that survivors should report to their family members (35.3%), but many fewer thought survivors should report to the police (11.7%).

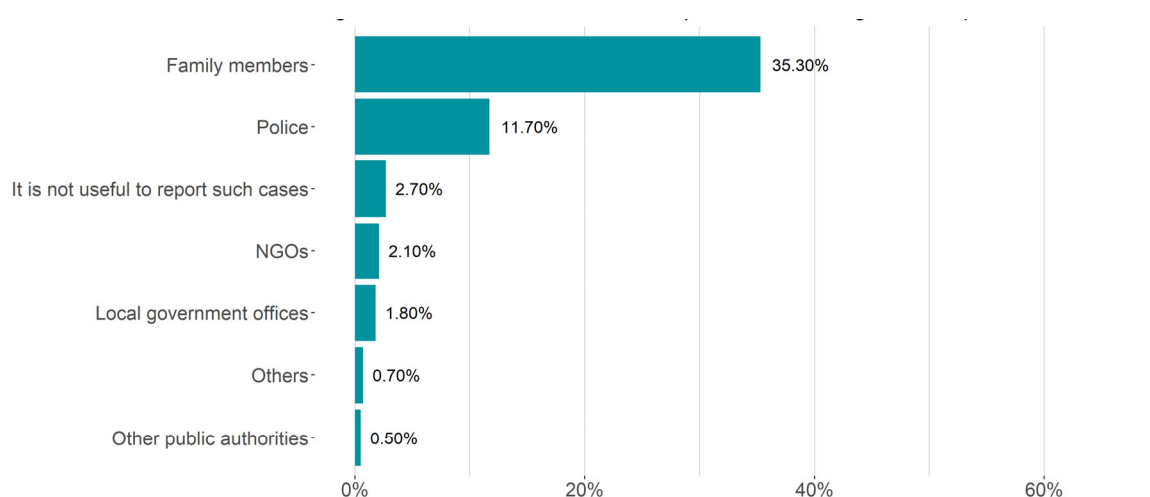


Figure 18 Who survivors report to, according to all respondents

This is likely linked to shame and stigma and the fear of damaging the family honor, but also an expectation that the police will not be helpful. In Bangladesh, corruption plays an important role in determining who has access to the judicial system, and “[t]he demand for money for government-provided legal representation puts those without power or financial means at an even further disadvantage” (Humans Rights Watch, 2020, p. 47). As additional obstacles, “when women or girls do go to the police after an assault, they frequently face obstruction from police officers. This can range from disbelief, refusal to file reports, and corruption, to negligence towards investigations. Women rarely trust that the police will offer them protection or that they will uphold the rule of law” (Humans Rights Watch, 2020, p. 38). At the same time, women face severe pressure from their communities to not report sextortion. As a focus group participant from the Satkhira District stated: *“She will get ostracized by her society. Her family starts to judge her negatively. A victim of sextortion faces deterioration of her mental and physical health.”*

In line with this, of the respondents that had experienced sextortion, several did confront their perpetrator but very few reported the incident to the authorities. Of those who experienced sextortion when accessing water, 45% confronted their perpetrator, compared to 20% for toilets and 41% for bathing. In the case of sextortion incidents related to water, 40% asked for help from family, compared to only 20% (1 individual) in the case of toilets, and 35% in the case of bathing. Help from a friend was also solicited by 17% of respondents in the case of water and 6% in the case of bathing. Only 5% reported the incident to the police in the case of water, and none of those who had experience sextortion when accessing toilets or bathing made use of police or a helpline to report. For reporting cases, the focus group highlighted that affected individuals in some areas (Rasulpur and Korail) prefer using local structures and councilors, rather than reporting to the police, due to concerns about corruption.

In the focus groups, victim-blaming was mentioned as a key factor contributing to the deteriorating physical and mental health of affected individuals, some of whom commit suicide. Additionally, the strain on relationships and marriages was frequently mentioned as an adverse consequence and a reason why some affected individuals may opt to not report incidents. This would then also explain why the survey recorded 41 instances where respondents opted not to share their experience with family, citing the following reasons:

	Number of respondents citing the reason		
	Water	Toilet	Bathing
Concern that the family/partner would react excessively and become worried	20	3	4
Fear that family would stop them from going out or reduce their freedom to move outside	10	2	7
Respondent regards the issue as something to solve by themselves	9	1	1
Fear that their family would hold them responsible for the incident.	8	0	0

Table 2 Reason for not sharing about sextortion incidents with family

Nearly half of those who did decide to disclose to their family an experience of sextortion when accessing water (7 out of 15) indicated that their family reacted by restricting their movement. The share was even higher among those who had experienced sextortion when accessing a bathing facility, with 7 out of 8 indicating that their movement was subsequently restricted. But respondents also had an opportunity to discuss how to deal with the situation (11 out of 15 for water, 3 out of 8 for bathing). One respondent indicated that their family took them for professional counselling. Where actions were taken after discussing incidents with members of the household, these included taking the case to the area chief (7 cases for water, 4 cases for bathing), discussing between families (5 cases for water, 3 cases as bathing) and taking the case to a religious leader (2 cases for water only). Three respondents indicated not taking any action in the case of water, and one in the case of bathing.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

This study has shown that sextortion is a phenomenon present in all four assessed areas of Bangladesh. It disproportionately affects individuals who are water insecure, and individuals who are illiterate or only partially literate. Women in water insecure households constitute two out of every 10 respondents, but account for four of every 10 reported sextortion incidents. More than two thirds of incidents (71.7%) were among people who are illiterate or only partially literate. Among the three WASH services examined, the risk of sextortion is the highest in accessing water, which accounts for four out of every five reported incidents.

Access to water is a life-sustaining requirement and a human right. Everyone should be able to obtain access without needing to fear exploitation and/or abuse. As this study has shown, 4.4% of respondents reported a direct experience of sextortion, and nearly twice as many (8.4%) confirmed having heard of or witnessed sextortion incidents. There is considerable stigma attached to the topic of sextortion, therefore the reported prevalence in this study is likely to underestimate the true extent of the problem. The study has shown that a lack of trust in authorities and their ability or preparedness to prosecute perpetrators leads to only a small proportion of incidents being reported to the police. Whilst public opinion largely considers sexual relations with water providers to be bad, more respondents placed the responsibility with users, rather than regarding them as victims.

While this study is still exploratory in nature, several key recommendations can be identified from the findings. Advocacy with governments and service providers is key. Adequate mitigation mechanisms can only be designed and implemented by keeping the issue of sextortion on the radar of decision-makers and operators. In FGDs, respondents emphasized the provision of better water supply installations in proximity to houses as a principal solution. Indeed, a disproportionate percentage of sextortion incidents were reported among users who rely primarily on unprotected water sources (26.4% of cases, despite this type of source only constituting the main water source for 13.6% of respondents). Where resources are lacking to implement such solutions, other monitoring and accountability mechanisms become even more crucial to protect users from the possibility of exploitative practices, such as paying bribes or sextortion. Besides better access to water and sanitation, investment in human capital and capabilities is also necessary to reduce risks, especially in light of the heightened vulnerability to sextortion identified among those who are not (fully) literate. Just as key is awareness raising on the topic at the community level, jointly with the establishment of safe and adequate reporting channels. Where authorities are not trusted, other actors, including NGOs, faith-based organizations and CSOs, may be able to offer support to survivors and continue to raise attention to the issue with authorities and service providers.

Further research on this topic in other countries, and in particularly in contexts with water insecure households, including slums, informal settlements, refugee camps, is crucial to raise attention to sextortion and to hold service providers accountable. In particular, large-scale surveys using purposeful sampling methods could help delineate the prevalence of sextortion across minority groups, such as ethnic minorities or sexual minorities. Further research could also expand the focus by including men and boys in the sampling.

To meet the goals set under SDG6 of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, it is crucial to identify the various risks and challenges that continue to prevent billions from accessing safe and affordable water and sanitation. This paper has sought to contribute evidence and insights into one such risk, sextortion, which continues to obstruct universal access to water and sanitation.

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