

CYBER ABUSE PROJECT PODCAST 1.6

Leah

My name is Leah Aldridge and I am the project manager at the California Coalition Against Sexual Assault which is working in partnership with Break The Cycle on this Cyber Abuse prevention project. Joining me today is Soraya Chomali with the Women's Media Center Speech Project. Welcome Soraya!

Soraya

Thanks so much for having me Leah!

Leah

Fantastic! Can you tell us a little bit about the work that you do with the Women's Media Center and the Speech Project?

Soraya

Of course! So the Speech Project is an initiative started by the Women's Media Center that focuses on expanding women's civic and political participation specifically though by raising public awareness and media awareness of online harassment and it's impacts on women's free speech.

Leah

That sounds like some very important work and I'm very happy that you and your team are doing that work. I'll bet it's pretty impactful with the populations that you work with?

Soraya

We started our work really focusing on women in the public eye meaning mainly in media or in politics because women who engage in media and politics are very visible and are claiming public spaces in a way that some people have a really hard time with but in fact the dynamics of abuse that we see in the abuse of women in media and politics really do replicate intimate partner violence and the power and control mechanisms that are so familiar in that space. So, we work very very closely with organizations that fight domestic violence, rape culture, stalking because what we've seen is that technology enabled extensions of that violence are profuse. So, we try to understand it and to help people that are doing that work.

Leah

One of our guests talked about how the internet and the digital sphere is indeed a public sphere and what cyber-stalking and abuse was doing was silencing women in this public sphere. Do you feel the same way?

Soraya

Oh, absolutely! It's a very powerful indicator of the hostility that women encounter when they claim this very masculine right to authority or leadership or expertise in public.

Leah

Amazing! And we don't even realize in many instances that this is occurring; how the digital sphere has replicated what goes on in the physical material world.

Soraya

I think that's right. What we see online is not really new and different in principle but it is new and different in amplification and scope.

Leah

Amplification and scope. I think that that's very important to pay attention to. Well our conversation today is going to look at how we frame the stories of survivors who experience physical and online abuse and making sure that were framing it from a trauma-informed perspective and hopefully in doing so we feel that we can improve investigative processes for fact finders and criminal justice professionals and we also hope to improve the public's understanding of physical and online abuse as these stories appear in traditional and social media. Let me start off by asking you this question: Do you find in your work that people tend to minimize the experiences that women experience in the digital sphere compared to what they experience in the physical and material world?

Soraya

Well I think actually they're both minimized. If you think of the way that stalking is treated it's very hard for example to have stalking treated seriously by law enforcement. We're still in a situation where the victims of stalking are not extended any protection or serious consideration until something bad has happened right? Stalking is sort of elusive in many ways and so we see this same treatment of threats against women online. They somehow enter the realm of less important, less real, minimized in terms of the potential risks.

Leah

Yes and we find that our data supports that there is a minimizing, as you say, certainly in the real and material world as well as in the digital sphere and unfortunately what that does is it gives some law enforcement or criminal justice professionals, family members, friends, and so on to take it less seriously and therefore not move on those complaints about feeling stalked and so on and what some of our other guests have pointed to is—is that the interesting thing about having cell phones, laptops, computers, tablets—is that people can get to you at any time and you can't really escape that because we are so... our lives are so closely intertwined with our technology in this day. Do you find that people are experiencing increased senses of anxiety or the ill-effects of such behavior more increasingly because of the digital technology? So, Soraya if you could tell us what are some of the typical circumstances and conditions where survivors of online

sexual or dating abuse and stalking tell their stories? Like, who do they tell them to, how often times do they find themselves having to repeat their stories, experiences during investigations. What're kind of the typical conditions in which survivors will have to tell their stories?

Soraya

Well I think that really runs the gamut, right? I mean some survivors go straight to social media to share their stories because they feel no institution is listening to them. So, we've had cases were women who've been raped for example, have gone to Twitter and described what happened to them in very open and graphic terms because they feel that otherwise their stories will be silenced and denied. In other instances, women are sharing their stories between themselves and other women as a support mechanism, right? Enclosed private groups for example; there are advocacy and activist groups that bring communities of women together to tell these stories. Sometimes it's just that women are writing articles or they're writing about violence and that's the platform of choice. In each of those there are varying levels of safety, privacy, and exposure. So, if you write an article in a public platform it can mean horrific commentary in comments or trending hashtags that are shaming, all of the variations that you can imagine come with the choice of where to share these stories.

Leah

Do we find that survivors are more and more turning to social media outlets to tell their stories? That they are willing to risk the blowback because it's important that they get their story out there in the way in which *they* want it revealed?

Soraya

I think certainly some do. We don't really have any quantitative research about that so I can talk anecdotally. I mean certainly we've seen instances where there was a viral letter by the woman who was raped by Brock Turner at Stanford University and you know letters like that can be hugely impactful. I mean that letter was shared over a million times in just a matter of a day. It gave insight into rape that rarely shows up in a news article for example, right? But even that woman who was anonymous when she wrote the letter—I remember I wrote a piece about that for Rolling stone online and she was being doxed in the comment section right? Like people were sharing private information with malice so that other people can find her. So, there are risks that come with sharing this information.

Leah

Given the risks and the blowback and the denial and the shaming. Given all of that. Why is it so important for survivors to tell their stories and how important is it for us—the general public-- to hear those stories?

Soraya

I think it's very important because what we really live with at the moment is kind of this epistemological void. We have a huge gap in public understanding of women's

experiences of harassment and violence because it's often the fact that this violence is cloaked in shame, we're expected to deal with it in private to keep ourselves safe. While I appreciate every single one of these stories that's told publicly because I think that they are critically important to offset the traditional media control of those narratives, I don't think that any individual victim should be responsible for taking that burden on because it comes with a great cost. That's a really deeply personal decision.

Leah

Well, have you found that criminal justice professionals, the media, other fact finders treat cyber-based abuse differently than in-person abuse?

Soraya

So, we have a lot of stories from victims of abuse and from experts that describe law enforcement and the judicial systems' lack of understanding or appreciation for what online harassment is. Literally what it is, how it works, what its mechanisms are. Over and over again the police are very ill-equipped to understand the technology, they are predisposed in many instances to dismiss it as not real and all that's deeply endangering to victims, right? I mean, we really need our institutions to not be so far behind the change in technology and social morays that we're living with.

Leah

Do you find that victim-blaming is as common for cyber-based abuse as it is for those who are physically assaulted or abused?

Soraya

Well I think we have lots of good examples of that where women are publicly shamed often in Virahog hashtags for acts of violence against them. I mean I'm thinking of several cases of teenage girls who were filmed being assaulted performing sexual acts without their consent and then having those images turned them into victim blaming and shaming mechanisms. So, hashtag 'Jada Pose' was one example of that, another one called hashtag 'Slain Girl' was an example of that and so we see in those hashtags, in those naming, blaming and shaming hashtags, a real cultural disposition to blame the victim.

Leah

Which is consistent with the real material world?

Soraya

Yes. I think that's right.

Leah

Do you find that their approach to asking questions can be victim-blaming or shaming also?

Soraya

Well it's very hard to... I mean that's hard to say because in fact there is no authority for this right? In some instances, people go to the police, in some instances they go to a social media company to ask that data be taken down. There's so many different authorities involved that it's hard to say in some cases it's all contextual, in some cases yes it's very victim-blaming in other cases they're very responsive.

Leah

Do we have any reports of places where fact finders are improving in their ability to get to the bottom of the story?

Soraya

Honestly, no. It still feels very much like a wild west situation where people are making it up as they go. I mean it really shouldn't be that way, we're now 10 years into this, at least, in terms of social media but no I don't think we have good institutional responses, I really don't.

Leah

Would you recommend standardized training for fact finders whether they be law enforcement, or medical professionals, or private attorneys or advocates; would there be a good model for approaching the way in which we gather this information particularly around people who are experiencing cyber-abuse and harassment?

Soraya

Yeah. I mean I think that trauma-informed responses should be the same regardless of the media. So, in the same way that institutions that understand what's going on. In the same way that they hopefully are moving towards a value sensitive, trauma-informed solution we would want to see that in institutional responses to online variations of the same abuse.

Leah

Do you have any examples of that?

Soraya

Well there are some platforms that have established themselves as ways for... as sort of safe spaces. Right? Places where victims of abuse can report their abuse or get community support and work with people who could either service proxies for them or help them buffer themselves from the kind of long-term effects. I have not honestly seen a really good example to date. I mean it's very hard. It requires huge investment of time and money and even though social media companies are responsible for largely creating the context that we see abuse flourishing in, they haven't really spent a whole lot of money and resources to fund solutions-based responses.

Leah

How can first responders use the trauma-informed approach to gather information and facts that create a more comprehensive picture of survivors' experiences?

Soraya

Well again I think it depends on the context. I mean, unfortunately the first responder on a social media platform is automated right? It's very often the case that someone is reporting something and then gets an automated response. So, the context is really important and it's... I think some companies are trying to take better victim-centered approach, but that's also very hard to automate right? In terms of law enforcement again it really is contextual. Some law enforcement organizations are trying and others just are not there, they're not close to being there and so I just think that the context matters and there's no way to give a sort of blanket description of what's happening.

Leah

Okay well let me ask you this. What would be helpful for criminal justice professionals, again: law enforcement, officers, judges, attorneys, and campus administrators and other first responders, to know? What would be helpful for them to know about capturing survivor stories in cases that involve online dating or sexual abuse or stalking?

Soraya

Well I mean first of all I think that whether its online or off it's helpful for them to understand the stereotypes of the biases that we know exist when survivors come forward right? And then to really understand what the medium itself affects in people psychologically, I mean it is really anxiety provoking and frightening to have your identity excoriated in public in social media and understanding those effects on victims neurobiologically is important right because there are neurobiological impacts to being retraumatized or revictimized in those ways and similarly we know from studies that online harassment and abuse actually takes a greater toll on people than in person abuse or harassment because there's the quality of abuse never ending or going away or being able to be avoided in many cases. So, it helps for the first responders to have training in the specific mechanisms of online harassment and violence.

Leah

And when you say mechanisms do you mean what it looks like, its long-term effects, the impact that it can have, the ability for there to be mob or you know kind of mob hashtag piling on?

Soraya

Right. And also, I mean you know It's very easy for example, to engage in photo manipulation online. It's very easy to end up in a situation as a victim as you feel like you're playing whack-a-mole because an abuser will you know impersonate you in email, will set up a Facebook account that's false, will tweet defamatory information, will

move across platforms very effectively so that there is no place where you don't feel violated. Again, there are so many possible first responders, right? It's just hard, I mean if someone is being harassed online, they could turn to a friend and that person is technically the first responder, they could be engaged with a stranger and that person would be the first responder.

Leah

So, in general though I think that a good rule for us to follow just as concerned citizens or loved ones, neighbors, classmates, peers, is to believe a survivor and give them a platform for people to safely share their experience and be good allies in fighting against victim-blaming and shaming and this is what we mean by upstander/bystander behavior?

Soraya

If we could begin with social and emotional learning in development in early childhood. We would have fewer problems with victim-blaming and the denial of what victims are saying is true right? I mean a lot of what we think of as bystander intervention is an effort to unlearn lessons of childhood right? Like to re-socialize people to understand the mechanisms of abuse and how not to actually amplify those mechanisms. That bystander intervention is really important but so much of the work of bystander intervention is actually teaching...

Leah

That's brilliant. I'm so glad you said that.

Soraya

...If we actually socialized children to believe girls and women when they speak.

Leah

Beautiful! In the absence of having any data or anything qualitative to evidence whether you know first responders are doing a good job or bad job of conveying information, how important is it then for fact finders, investigators, law enforcement and the like, to convey survivor stories in a sensitive way? How important is that?

Soraya

I think its vitally important. I think that it makes all the difference right to survivors but also to public understanding, to really understand what it means to listen to someone with empathy and compassion and to believe them when they speak.

Leah

What about the media and we mean traditional and online or digital: news, entertainment social media, how good a job are they doing in conveying complexities around survivor stories? Especially in light of so much coverage around 'me too' how good a job are media doing in conveying survivor stories?

Soraya

So, the Women's Media Center has actually done a series of reports analyzing news coverage of rape stories, particularly college rape stories, and of 'me too' stories and you know some media are doing a good job but there's still really prevalent biases in media and in how stories of abuse are covered. So, for example in terms of rapes on campuses a ridiculously large percentage of stories are written in media sports departments because so many times athletes are involved and the problem with that is that the people writing the stories are not experts in assault, they tend to be men interested in sports, that's why their doing the jobs they're doing, about 93% of sports writers are men. When men in that position write stories, they focus on the legalistic issues not on the psychological or social impacts or the long-term effects on victims. They tend to interview fewer victims than women do and their sources tend to have less balance—gender or racial balance—and that ends up affecting the way stories are told and the way the public understands them and I think we see those patterns reproduced very often. Media will focus on the most salacious and outlier types of assaults like violent gang rapes instead of the more common assaults which take place in or near a home perpetrated by someone who is known to the victim and that also skews public understanding so media has a lot of work to do. It has to do with medias lack of pluralism in its own institutions, lack of inclusivity.

Leah

What are some of the most common social media platforms that 12-24-year-olds are using today and how are they being misused?

Soraya

So, I think a lot of people in that age range are using Instagram and Snap much more than, for example, Facebook or even Twitter. Those platforms allow more of an impersonal broadcasting in one case, like Instagram uses pictures you can control who sees your pictures, same thing with Snap. There's sort of a different medium where people can be much... in more control of their identities and what they share with whom and I think that that's important because as the technology has been abused people have adapted and particularly young girls. Young girls are always at the forefront of these technology migrations so when Facebook became hostile to girls they migrated over to Instagram and then migrated over into Snapchat and you know that migration for example really drove Snapchat's success, it really drove Instagram's success and so if you really want to understand abuse and efforts to counter-abuse it helps to look at the behaviors of teenage girls adopting technology.

Leah

How does the framing of a survivor's story impact their credibility when it appears in media?

Soraya

When it appears, I think it impacts it tremendously. I mean I think there's no doubt at all the way a story is framed is really shaping public understanding. That's you know how we come to think about events in the world. So, it makes a huge difference.

Leah

Do you have any ideas or suggestions about framing? So, for example point of view might be an important way to frame a survivor's story—using "I" statements.

Soraya

For sure! And I think too, point of view but also sourcing—who are you talking to? Who are you asking? Whose expertise are you counting on? I remember being asked to do an interview on gang rape it took place at a high school and the other guest on the show was a sex expert, a doctor on sex addiction, and in fact gang rape has nothing to do with sex addiction at all. Having an expert on sex addiction really distorts understanding of what gang rape is right and so gang rape is often a bonding ritual, it's a paternal ritual, it is not about any individual person's sex addiction and a sex addiction expert may have commentary on gang rape but, it probably makes more sense to find an expert who understands rape.

Leah

Or, an expert who understands the psychological tendencies associated with that kind of bonding ritual behavior.

Soraya

Right.

Leah

Very interesting. Well once a survivor's story becomes public, what can they expect afterwards? We talked a little bit earlier about the survivor of Brock Turner's assault and we can point to people like Christine Blasey-Ford and her experience as a adolescent. Once those stories become public what can those survivors expect?

Soraya

Oh, I mean I think there are real risk for survivors, right? We just have too many examples of survivors being targeted for public shaming and abuse. It would be unrealistic to say that survivors shouldn't expect that because unfortunately we still live in a world where that is predictable. It means invasions of privacy, it means public shaming, it's just the difficult truth.

Leah

And in the case of someone like Christine Blasey-Ford she is what we would call in this field the "ideal victim".

Soraya

This woman really was in the narratives that we tend to prefer culturally she was the perfect victim. She was deferential, she was respectable, she was you know very demure, she was a white woman I mean there where on and on and on and on. Even though she displayed this kind of “perfect victimhood” it didn’t matter and I think that came as a shock to a lot of people.

Leah

How can advocates, first responders, and other criminal justice professionals protect survivors from future online harassment? Is that possible?

Soraya

I don’t think that you can... you can’t stop it, you can’t prevent the abuse but you can provide communities of support, people who will take on the survivor’s social media and run interference for them so they aren’t subject to the abuse. There are lots of support mechanisms that you can put in place if someone’s going to come forward with a story. You know it’s kind of a tax though because in fact it costs money to secure your digital identity, to find people who can help you to develop networks of support like that but I think it is necessary.

Leah

Are there any stories that you would want to share that help highlight our understanding of the complexities around online harassment and abuse?

Soraya

No, I think what’s really important in any of these cases or stories is that everybody really needs a deeper better understanding and commitment to citizenship and to digital citizenship, right? Like engaging with civility, respecting people, treating them with empathy and kindness and unfortunately, we can have very little expectation of that in the current environment, right? But, in the process of trying to get there and in the process of understanding what it means to operate in this medium we need to develop new and different rules about our own privacy, about how we represent ourselves, about our identities and very often were making it up as we go right because the technology comes at us so fast and furious and no one is really teaching children or even teenagers how to think about it. In an absence of guidance people do the best that they can but leave themselves exposed. So, I would really urge people to think hard about their own privacy, about their own identities online and how they form networks and relationships because it’s still the case online or off that we *do* have to be responsible for staying safe. As much as I wish our communities were safer places for us... they’re not. So being able to develop good digital skills is very important; understanding digital security and privacy being among the foremost of those.

Leah

Digital security and privacy. Is that something that you think millennials and the generation coming up behind them really understand or even value?

Soraya

I think that they have a very well-developed sense of what the technology needs. But it's interesting because I think that a lot of people are very alert to managing their identities online and that they have very little—and I think it's true, I think it's accurate—they have very little expectation of privacy in the way that privacy may have at one point been understood and it seems pared to try and pursue it and I think that's realistic. If you're going to be online and you're going to be engaging in social media you really shouldn't have an expectation of privacy because it's elusive and there are just not enough features, functionality, and controls that you can learn or use or adapt quickly enough.

Leah

Then that speaks to the point that you made about representing ourselves in the digital sphere?

Soraya

Yeah, I mean I think some people really do that well you know if they're using Instagram, they made a choice to use a platform that gives them a lot of control. They can have private accounts, they can have public accounts, they can have shared accounts and that kind of flexibility and adaptability is very important you know because then you have more control over how you appear and are represented.

Leah

Do you have any thoughts about this phenomenon of nonconsensual sharing of intimate images and how that factors into survivors telling their stories about what happened?

Soraya

Yeah! I mean absolutely. The thing about nonconsensual sharing is that it is the perfect example of traditional patriarchal mores, right? If you consider the fact that women are the vast majority of victims of what's called "revenge porn" (I don't really care for that name but that's the common name) and girls are much more likely to be the subject of nonconsensual sexting. So, even though boys and girls tend to sext at roughly the same rates and often within the parameters of a relationship like a boyfriend and a girlfriend who are 14 might do that. Boys are 2 to 3 times sometimes 4 times more likely to then non-consensually pass those photographs along and that's a form of sexism that goes unacknowledged. When people talk about sexting they wash out the gender dynamic of sexting and teenagers and it should be something we pay attention to because already by the age of 12 and 13 boys are entitled and they feel entitled to use images of girls as currency for their own status and to violate girls privacy or dignity by proliferating these images and so again it's not so much the technology as the ethos that they're growing up with which is that somehow that's not only okay but for certain boys it's desirable to abuse girls in that way.

Leah

Do you think it would be helpful in the social and emotional rearing of young people that we have conversations about body autonomy?

Soraya

Absolutely! You know people should be you know you don't want to talk to a 4-year-old obviously about rape or sex their just too young they don't want or need that information but you *can* talk to them about respecting other people's boundaries, listening to people's words, not touching people without asking. I mean there's so many ways that you can actually teach children respect for other people that's not gendered. The issue is we have this really very gendered childhood politeness rules and you know we grow ladies and gentlemen instead of just decent people and the minute you start gendering things you create a hierarchy that is unhelpful for the purposes of stopping abuse.

Leah

And you know the focus of this particular podcast is about survivors' stories. Is there anything in particular that you want to say specifically about survivors telling their stories?

Soraya

Actually, I think a lot of positive changes have happened in the last 5/6 years which is that there's a lot more public awareness in support for survivors telling their stories. I mean we focused a lot on the negative aspects but in fact if you think about 'me too' as a global movement it's an incredibly hopeful movement because it means that millions of women are taking a chance in telling their stories in the belief that they will be believed, which we probably wouldn't have said 15 years ago, right? I mean its huge! Its huge commentary to have enough of a mass movement of people coming forward with stories of harassment, rape, and abuse and trusting that someone's going to listen to them and take it seriously and I think that's really positive. I think it's incredibly hopeful.

Leah

How do we build that momentum and sustain that? How do we build the space for more people to be able to tell their stories and have positive impact?

Soraya

Well you know I think we continue doing what we've been doing. Which is to listen, to support survivors when they speak, to ask them what it is they want. I think that's really important. Does a survivor want his or her story shared? That's an important question because even though it has public value we can't make that assumption because it will have such a tremendous impact on this person's life right but understanding, if we go back to what we were saying earlier, understanding how important the first-responder role is, understanding what it means to be trauma-informed in your approach and that's not something just for experts it really is a skill that everyone should have. That we should all understand how prevalent these violations are and how to have compassionate responses.

Leah

And just to be clear to be trauma-informed and survivor-centered means allowing survivors the space and the latitude to identify what has happened to them and allowing them and trusting them to be the authorities of their own experience so that they can articulate what happened to them rather than having someone say 'what did you do wrong?'.

Soraya

Right and also to have a population that is informed and educated about the dynamics of abuse and sexual victimization because we know that there are neurobiological effects, we know that victims have fragmented memories, we know that you know people can be re-traumatized and so for example in media it's very important if your doing investigative journalism to get the facts and to get all sides of the story and there all of these traditional ways of constructing stories that *in fact* ignore and undermine the experiences and the physiological and mental effects of trauma. If you took the standard approaches to journalism that are endorsed by major organizations and you didn't adapt them to understand what we know about trauma you would in fact hurt victims and distort rape narratives which is what we've been living with.

Leah

And we know that media has the ability to do this, right? We know that there is precedence for this historically, media outlets would not disclose the name of survivors. We know that they have journalistic ethics with regard to what happens to children.

Soraya

Right there are all sorts of rules about covering rape and there are all sorts of biases, right? So, we know that Black male perpetrators are more likely to be shown in photographs, right? That's a bias that perpetuates a myth about racial victimization of white women. I mean there all kinds of things that we know about media that really need to be constantly challenged. It's really more a matter of will than information.

Leah

Fantastic! Any parting thoughts you'd like to share with us?

Soraya

No, I don't think so. Thank you so much for inviting me and for focusing on this topic.

Leah

Thank you so much Soraya. We really appreciate you participating in our Cyber-Abuse Project.

Soraya

Yes, and good luck! It's really wonderful to know you're doing this work.

Leah

Thank you so much.

Leah

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