

Original Article

Virtual Vulnerability: Addressing Cyber Harassment against Women in India

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Abstract - Cyber harassment against women has emerged as a pervasive and complex issue in the digital age, where the boundaries between online and offline worlds are increasingly blurred. This phenomenon manifests in various forms, including cyberstalking, revenge pornography, and online threats, and is often driven by gender-based biases and societal power imbalances. India has the 2nd largest internet users, consisting of 7 million. At the same time, the anonymity and accessibility of digital platforms have exacerbated these issues, making women disproportionately vulnerable to online abuse. At the same time absence of cyber sensitization, the lacuna in cyber hygiene, and the regulatory framework fuel the problem further. So, this premise tries to examine the cause of gender-based cyber harassment in India and explores the significant consequences of such harassment on women's mental health, professional lives, and overall well-being, highlighting the broader social and economic implications. Furthermore, the paper reviews existing mitigative measures, including legal frameworks, educational initiatives, and sensitization programs aimed at preventing and addressing cyber harassment. By analyzing the effectiveness of these strategies, the paper proposes a multi-faceted approach to enhance the safety and empowerment of women in the digital space.

Keywords - Gender, Cyber harassment, Online abuse, Cyberstalking, Cyberbullying, Security.

1. Introduction

Today, digital technology has become a part of people's lives and work because it mediates in storing data eases the process of functioning, and facilitates the network to connect people worldwide at an equal level. Still, it also creates barriers or problems and does not discriminate while attacking. Still, the specific study explicitly talks about the targeted victims, where the data indicates the particular section of the society that suffers. However, technology facilitated the emergence of new types of gender-based violence. A platform like cyber, on the one hand, tries to harm the victim's identity in different ways, either in real or in virtual lives. However, on the other hand, it is also widely used to organize the entire movement against any kind of violence that imprints its consequences not only in the virtual world but in the real world as well, e.g. #MeToo Movement, the movement that unites the female victims of the abuse and violence, and that brought the confidence among the women to agitate virtually against the harassment that they faced in their lives from different culprits. This case underscores the crucial need for solidarity among women, as it is through these situations that the true nature of the accused can be exposed. Often, the accused conceals their true self by presenting a façade of decency and goodwill, using this mask to gain public admiration and fame, while the darker side remains hidden from view. Thus, the real and virtual worlds are differentiated from one another. In the real world, there may be a distinct or negative identity. Yet, in the virtual or cyber world, the same identity might be presented as glorious where identifying the personality becomes difficult.



Undoubtedly, there is a plethora of Research on Cyber Harassment. However, there is a lack of literature specifically addressing the issue of cyber harassment faced by Indian women. Also, there remains a significant gap in understanding the unique challenge against Women, particularly how intersecting factors like race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and sexual orientation influence the nature and impact of online abuse. Existing literature only focuses on harassment in general forms, leaving out a comprehensive analysis of how women from diverse backgrounds experience and respond to this emerging threat from the cyber environment. Along with this, there is limited research on the effectiveness of the current legal framework, support systems, and technological interventions in addressing cyber harassment against women. This gap is further extended by the rapid evolution of digital platforms and the popularizing of social media platforms, which paralyzes the protective measures. Hence, in this premise, academia comprehensively explores Cyber Harassment against women, examines its cause and consequences, and suggests some mitigative measures that this paper aims at.

2. Methodology

This paper aims to examine various dynamics of cause and consequences of cyber harassment against women and tries to suggest some mitigative measures by taking into account qualitative research design. Further, in qualitative research design, descriptive, analytical, and exploratory research designs will be used and data will be collected both from primary and secondary sources. In primary sources, this paper uses an unstructured simple random sampling questionnaire method focusing on 50 samples from diverse backgrounds, and secondary data are collected from journal articles, newspaper articles, research manuals, government reports, etc.

3. Objectives

- To analyze the prevalence and forms of cyber harassment experienced by women across different demographic groups.
- To assess the effectiveness of existing legal frameworks and technological measures in safeguarding women from cyber harassment, highlighting shortcomings and opportunities for enhancement.

4. Discussion

4.1. Conceptual Understanding of Gender-Based Cyber Harassment

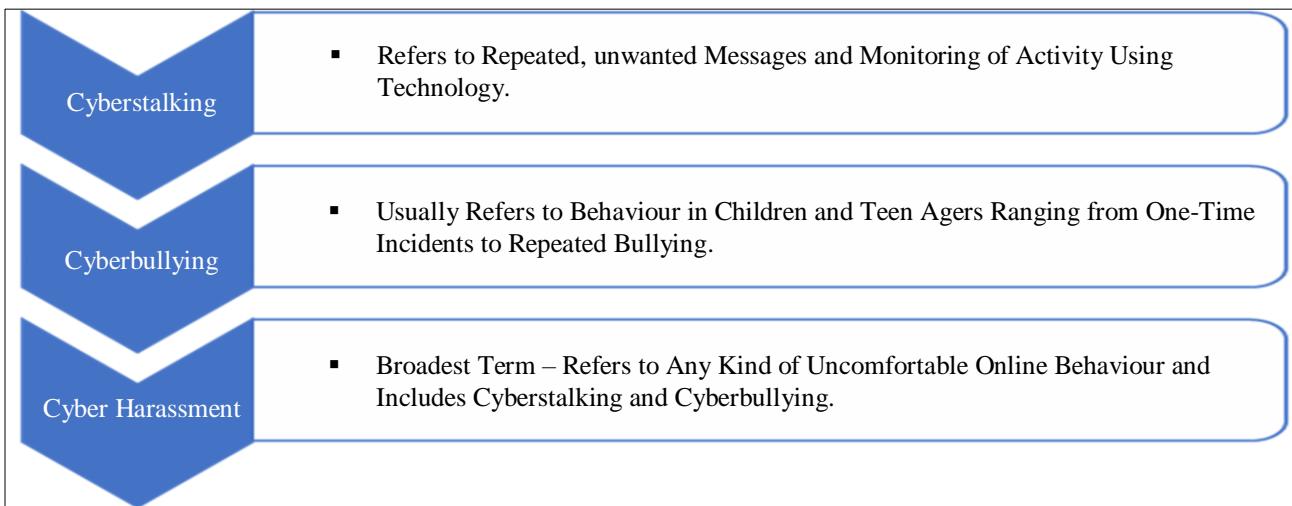


Fig. 1 Concepts of cyber harassment

Internet users are at an all-time high throughout the world today; with such technological advancement in the digital era, the nature of the new kinds of violence or harassment also got reshaped in the cyber world and evolved as a type of harassment, known by the term cyber-harassment which comprehensively defined by the UN

organization-UNITAD that “being on a cyber opens up many opportunities for the person but on the other hand, it also exposes the person to many online cases of abuse and if the online world is not properly handled then such social media platforms can cause a huge harm to the people”. Thus, cyber harassment is considered a threat that uses digital technologies to harm the target or the victims. There are different types of cyber-harassment, as given:

- Stalking-which aims the target to send them messages and calls to hurt the victim repeatedly.
- Trickery- it involves tricking someone into revealing their information by being the false identity on the cyber platform.
- Denigration- when someone sends or posts personal information about an individual or also tries to propagate false rumours about someone.
- Morphing- Using AI technology, attackers employ deepfake applications to swap a person's audio and image in a video with those of the victim, creating a convincing imitation that appears authentic with no visible signs of manipulation. This enables cyber harassers to produce any type of video featuring their victims, severely damaging the victim's identity and causing significant defamation and humiliation.

The term cyber harassment is also widely recognized by the term online harassment, although there is a very thin line between the different types of cyber harassment; for instance, cyberstalking is defined as stalking that is being done using technology, which includes unwanted messages, emails, etc. Cyberstalking also includes tracking down the individual through location monitoring. On the other hand, cyberbullying is used to describe the action of an individual to misbehave with others by means of calling them false or vulgar names on cyber platforms, which brings embarrassment to the victim. Their self-esteem gets low in their professional and personal life. As a result, victims' mental health gets damaged through as act, which demonstrates the virtual life impact on the real life of the individual, which is regarded as equally harmful in both worlds. One example of cyberbullying is making a meme about someone on any social media platform; it is considered one of the acts of cyberbullying that bring offensive embarrassment to the individual. Thus, cyberharassment is a product of both cyberbullying and cyberstalking, which mainly includes anything that falls under cyberbullying and cyberstalking is referred cyber harassment, which means any kind of inappropriate behavior that takes place online, such as cyber defaming, bullying, monitoring, harassment, stalking, abusing, doxing, threatening, propagating, etc. consequently it can be said that the people interchangeably use cyber-harassment since it involves the different aspects of the cyberbullying and stalking (Aranza, 2023).

4.2. Gender-Based Harassment: A World View

From the gender-based point of view, on the one hand, technological growth has embraced the life of a woman by enabling them with agency, providing them with facilities by breaking down the traditional barrier of restricting women within the four walls; today, it allows women to move or right to act or express freely around the world. It provided numerous opportunities for women to become a workforce, gain access to online education, and work online which also resulted in a better work-life balance for women and to achieve at a higher pace or to equally compete with men. The creation of social media gave new wings to women; it opened a whole new platform where women could become more expressive, and it has also kind of provided a space where they could connect to all around the world by being in their comfort zone and still share their views to the others and not just this such platform is used to fight for their right, express their solidarity, to question on the conventional social norm that is against the women (Nigam, 2024).

However, technology has also cast a shadow over women's progress. While the digital era has made many aspects of life easier for women, it has also introduced significant challenges. One major issue is the digital divide, which continues to affect women, particularly those from marginalized communities. The lack of access to the internet impedes their opportunities for growth and makes it difficult to acquire essential knowledge and educational experiences in today's connected world. Secondly, some instances demonstrate the misuse of technology has a

devastating impact on the lives of women today. Some reports and data demonstrate the increase in gender-based violence in India also proves the negative impact of technology on women's lives that with the increasing number of women netizens, there is also a higher risk of cyber harassment.

The National Crime Record Bureau (NCRB) report 2023 on the crimes against women shows that cyber-crimes against women are 11% higher than the general crimes rate of 4% that, has increased the total crime rate against women stands at 65.4% and 75.9% are charge-sheeted, which includes rape, attempt to rape, dowry death, acid attacks, kidnapping, etc. among other. However, the cases of cyber-crime saw a considerable rise in the year with 11%. The crimes under it are sexually explicit material of women were published which is registered around 2,251 compared to 1,896 in 2021, although it is the higher marked one the other incidents are such as blackmail, defamation, morphing, creating a fake profile, etc. (Chandrashekhar, 2023)

The above mention is just the registered cases of cyber-crimes and harassment. However, the actual figures are much higher in number as demonstrated in some of the studies conducted by the agencies. Studies also show that, especially in cyber-crimes, the victims usually do not report and just prefer to consult with the nearest one who further advises the victims to restrict themselves in cyberspace, which generally happens. The National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey (NISVS) reported that 16% of women have experienced stalking in their lifetime, which depicts the different images of cyber harassment in India. The Digital Citizen Alliance also reported that 61% of online defamation victims are mainly female.

Based on UN women article data, the most common forms of violence were misinformation and defamation at around 67%, cyber harassment, which took place at around 66%, hate speech at 65%, and impersonation of women in cyberspace at the rate of 63%, other are the hacking and the stalking which took place at the rate of 63%, astroturfing which is a coordinated effort to concurrently share the damaging content across the platform is of 58%, video and the photo-based abuse which is regarded as one of the most common among the teen's age groups is at 57%, doxing or revelation of the personal information about the victim in public is at 55%, violent threats- one of the widely used by the attackers on the social media platforms to threaten the victim is at 52%, and unwanted images or explicit content publishing on public and adult website or a social media group is happening at the rate of 43%. The UN women's study also reveals that COVID-19 resulted in a higher number of cyber harassment occurrences around the globe. And based on, before the pandemic there were 38% of women who were surveyed had experienced cyber-harassment or some kind of online abuse during the pandemic (FAQs: Trolling, Stalking, Doxing and Other Forms of Violence against Women in the Digital Age, n.d.). The data reveals that women are the all-time most targeted ones since they were seen as a more vulnerable section due to the conventional backwardness that women had to face for ages. However, as they were currently coming in the front (progressing) by equally competing in the digital age, again this time not just the conventional barriers that restrict them but the modern problems or technologically developed barriers are also growing in their way. Even though statistically speaking many women are less connected to the internet than men, such phenomenon is also known by the term Digital Gender Gap. According to the gender project published by Hindustan Times on the digital divide, India faces such a digital gap in more pronounced numbers. "National Family Health Survey data assessment found that only one in three women in India, which is 33%, have ever used the internet, which is much lower than men, whose number is even higher than the fifty percent, which is 57%". Such studies reveal that women lose a lot of opportunities due to the digital divide as a barrier to their financial independence, education, and freedom of expression in cyberspace. Not just this, but such barriers are also recognized by the government, which is why they called for the propagation of digital equality to empower women through its initiative of Digital India's National Broadband Mission and Direct Benefit Transfer, in which the focus was more on inclusivity to fill the digital gaps and more importance was given on part where women are more lagging in participating. (National Family Health Survey Report, 2019), (McDougal et al., 2022).

Furthermore, the situation is even worse in underdeveloped nations, where there are already several technical and cultural prejudices against women. As the data shows, "Globally, in 2022, 62 percent of men used the Internet, compared with 57 percent of women. Only 19% of women in the Least Developed Countries remained connected to the internet in 2020, compared to 86 percent in the developed world" (Nigam, 2024). The GSMA Mobile Gender Gap Report of 2023 highlights the parity between women and men in owning mobile phones, which remained lower consecutively in the second year as well, where women are 7% less likely to own a smartphone, which shows the presence of digital gender gap which is more likely occurs due to the presence of the social and conventional barrier which hinders to fill the gender gap. The report also emphasizes the fact that there is a requirement to fill such gaps with social awareness and political initiatives because such gaps will not likely to filled soon in regions like South Asia where the awareness is lower; therefore, if action is not taken against it, they would not be fill in its own. (The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2023, 2023)

4.3. Cyber Harassment against Women: Cause and Consequences

One of the significant causes for the increasing cyber harassment is the sudden growth of the internet that took place worldwide. The global interest in the internet started to reach its heights with the lowering of internet prices, especially in developing nations, particularly in India. Another factor that adds a major push is the easy mobility of electronic devices, earlier, which was just confined to the personal computer, which was only stationed in one place limiting its utilization. But, with the creation of the internet-enabled mobile phone, there has been a huge transformation in human lives. Further with the more advancements in technology and fast internet such as 3G, 4G, etc., the online services created a whole new virtual world with the fastest growing people presence in it from all around the world. Thus, the virtual world opened an entirely new opportunity along with the potential to connect with the entire world, but such advancement and growth in the digital era brought with it a lot of new challenges as well for its users (Kizza, 2023).

One of the core causes of cyber harassment can be viewed from the traditional point of view as well, where especially if we look at the Indian sub-continent, it is more filled with the customary and conventional laws with its core values, which if we critically look then it always tries to put the women under the domination of the men in society, many of the regions in India witnessed a tradition of the "parda pratha" which restricts the women activity in the society under the veil, which had also been given a patriarchal definition of protection and honour of a Women. Such traditions conditioned the society in a manner that even today, in some of the regions and societies of India, women were always seen as inferior to men, which is why they needed to be put under the protection of men. Thus, the whole patriarchal cycle of society runs in the name of women's reputation and women as an honour of the family that needed to be protected and hide behind the men. Such practices are relevant to date because a large number of people live with such a mindset, which has been put in their brains in the name of traditions and societal customs. As society advances technologically, more women are breaking such traditional barriers. It is also true that some individuals, families, and communities are evolving with modernity, allowing women greater freedom to pursue their aspirations. However, conflict arises when differing mindsets collide. Some people criticize women for their character, clothing choices, broader perspectives, or for being more assertive than men. Lacking the courage to confront differing views of women directly, these individuals often turn to cyberspace, particularly social media platforms, to abuse or criticize women.

Social media is one of the platforms that provide an open front for people around the globe. Earlier, with the creation of social media initially during the late 90s and early 2000s, platforms such as social media were observed as a positive platform for the people, but one of the reasons for this was that there were only a few people who were connected to the social media platform due to the limitation of the internet facility around the globe and secondly due to the high price which one have to pay to use the internet, since there were only some amount of people generally uses social media platform so, during that period it was positively welcome and accepted among the users. During the initial phase of its development, it not only cut down the huge distance for connection between people

but also opened a new way to connect with anyone around the world with just one click, and with that, there has been a rapid growth of social media usage. With the high number of smartphone users in the world, social media usage saw a huge jump in just one decade, and along with it, social media applications started to flourish, and today it is all-time high around the world.

Currently, social media platforms are widely being misused by many of the manipulator's groups or sections of society. On the one hand, social media is used to organize the users or the people against any ill or wrongdoing in society, such as the #MeToo Movement that united the women who have been sexually harassed in their workplace since it was started in the Hollywood industry and marked a huge impact on the other women victim to raise their voice against such harassment and On the other side, it is being used by those who try to damage, manipulate, harass, slander, pressurize, threaten, and humiliate other people, with women being the most vulnerable according to global data. Today, cyber crimes are arising on a larger scale, in which cyber harasser usually harasses women by sharing personal information on social media, by stealing the victim's personal information and using it negatively, also by posting false content about the person on social media platforms. "Based on the national Pew Research Centre survey in 2020, the percentage of online harassment takes place on different social media platforms such as Instagram (63%), Twitter (24%), WhatsApp (34%), Facebook (46%), Telegram (18%), and Snapchat (39%)" (Abarna et al., 2022). Currently, Instagram is at the top social media place where cyber harassment takes place through direct messaging, comments, and posts. As per the studies, women are the target of cyber harassment more than men, and the main activity is cyberbullying, which could lead to serious consequences for the women, which then followed by trolling, doxing, cyberstalking, defamation, revenge porn, hacking, and message bombing all such misconducts have a huge and lasting impact on the lives of the women (Elsafoury et al., 2021).

During the COVID pandemic in India, cyber harassment saw a substantial increase. The nationwide lockdown, which confined people to their homes, resulted in a surge in work-from-home setups and hastened the pace of digitalization. This shift made systems more vulnerable to cybercrimes, including attacks on critical information infrastructures such as banks and hospitals. Data leaks, phishing, and other malicious attacks have become more common. As people increasingly relied on social media to connect with the outside world, cyber harassment surged to unprecedented levels. Cyberbullying emerged as the highest during the COVID phase, especially against women. Another issue during the COVID-19 was working from home, where women faced a large issue of harassment from their workplace, whether it was related to their office timings, which were not bounded from 9 to 6 as per the survey but were misused by the offices, which pressures to work late or with no fixed timing, the study also highlights instances of cyber harassment related to remote work, where senior staff or supervisors often demand sexual favours from female employees, such as nude images or videos, under the threat of jeopardizing their job security (since the COVID phase witnessed high time job layoffs), another issue of the harassment that women faced is from electronic bullying from the workplace with the constant mailing, messaging with no time bound which impacted the women physically and emotionally (Jain et al., 2020).

4.4. Consequences of Online Harassment against Women

Sometimes, the things that sound easy could have a huge impact on the lives of people, just like the case of cyber-harassment, where the harasser can negatively harm the other just in a single click, and that's what makes cyberspace more dangerous. Such acts can be easily carried out by the attacker through phones, messages, emails, or through social media platforms in the forms of posting a hurtful comment like a rape threat, threatening message, or posting sexually explicit images of women to blackmail them or to ruin their life as revenge porn, typically by the former partner or jealous people to defame the women or cause her distress and bring embarrassment. But what the harasser can never realize is the psychological and emotional pain through which the victim has to go throughout her life (Jain et al., 2020).

- Physical and psychological: The very initial consequence that victims face is the trauma of dealing with that particular cyber harassment that will be going to haunt them for a lifetime. In many cases, those who fail to deal with such trauma end up taking an extreme step of suicide and self-harm, and in some cases, victims isolate themselves from the social world. In many of the cases, it has been observed that a person has to go through deep anxiety, depression, insomnia, and all such issues sometimes takes a lifetime to heal from the past trauma of harassment. The mentioned symptoms or issues cause a direct problem to the physical health of an individual; therefore it can be said that virtual world implications can have a direct impact on people's life.
- Career or Professional Loss: The professional and the career of the victim were directly affected by the cyber harassment, and the victim was unable to cope with her academic line easily; in some cases, it took a long time. According to the report, many women expressed a willingness to quit their jobs following incidents of cyber harassment to avoid future encounters with the perpetrator at work, as continuing their employment led to increased anxiety and depression. Additionally, rumours about the harassment often spread widely within their professional circles, severely affecting the victim's mental health. The societal backlash, including hatred, isolation, and victim-blaming, further compels victims to withdraw from public life.
- Negative Image or Victimization/ Takes Away Freedom of Expression in Cyberspace: Reports and surveys indicate that victims of harassment often lose confidence in their ability to work and struggle to erase the negative stigma associated with the incident. They also feel that such events curtail their freedom of expression and their ability to post freely as they did before. However, some victims eventually regain their confidence and strive to challenge the wrongdoing they face.
- Economic Impact: Due to the instances when women have to leave their jobs after cyber harassment due to the factor of not facing humiliation, which haunts most of the women post-harassment, in such cases, the women lose their financial independence, which further binds the victim mentality and physically. In many cases in the small society of India, the family also instructs the victim to leave the job and rely on them for to reason that by doing that, the cyber harassment event won't happen again, unaware of the fact that such instances can happen to anyone at any time. Also, there have been cases reported of online money fraud against women, or some of them took place through online dating applications where the harasser demanded financial help from the women and never returned them.

In the Indian context, every year the growing technological advancement leads to a growing number of users. From the political point of view, the government has initiated a few plans for engaging more people of India in the digital sector to make the nation more digitized. The "Digital India" government-initiated campaign aims to increase internet connectivity to rural India to make services throughout the nation more electronically enabled so that people do not have to rely on paperwork or stand long in queues to get their work done. While the widespread digitalization of India has brought numerous benefits, it has also led to a troubling increase in cyber harassment. Despite some assessments and preventive measures, certain groups, such as teenagers and women, have become particularly vulnerable to these rising threats. According to the study by "Microsoft on the Global Youth Online Behaviour Survey, which has been conducted among 25 nations around the world, India on the 3rd position with 53% of respondents among the children admitting cyber-harassment or online bullying" (Shetty, 2012).

4.5. Mitigative Measure

It has become impossible to imagine a life without the internet today, and there should not be any harm in using it. However, the number of misuses that have taken place also marked cyberspace with a negative image as well. The data suggests most of the cyber-harassment victims are mainly teenagers and women are also due to the reason of their unawareness of the negative or harsh impact of the virtual world on the real world. And as per the UN report on empowering women against cyber-violence describes that cyber harassment events are becoming graver every day as the internet adds more forms of cyber-crimes, especially against women. So, there is needed for some mitigative measures.

Another factor that instigates cyber harassment is the lack of a law enforcement agency that must investigate and perform serious punishment for such cyber crimes (Yadav, 2022). There are currently no proper investigating institutions for cyber harassment therefore, there is a requirement for the stationed institution purely to tackle such cases. Also, there is a clear lack of some serious laws, which is one of the provoking reasons for the harassers to commit serious cyber crimes against women. This is somehow connected with the low level of cybercrime reporting by the women, where they already knew about the consequences of late results or delay in the investigation process and the low level of conviction rates in the cases of cyber harassment.

Despite such loopholes in the nation's based cyber tackling body, there are some initiatives and programs that the government adopted to track down cyber-related issues. The government initiated a women's cyber cell helpline number to report any kind of cyber-related harassment against women, and another is the national cybercrime reporting portal, which allows people to report cyber abuse cases and, in return, provide the victim with information on safety measure and about laws enforcement agencies in tackling the situation.

The Cybercrime Prevention against Women and Children scheme was launched to provide financial assistance to victims and support investigations into all forms of cyber harassment. Additionally, the National Policy for the Empowerment of Women addresses issues related to gender-based abuse in cyberspace. The Digital India campaign has further empowered women to enhance their presence online. Several amendments have also been made to the IT Act of 2000 to address cybercrimes against women, introducing new definitions such as cyberstalking, cyberbullying, and cyber voyeurism. But the question that raises here is, despite the number of the initiative adopted by the nation, there is still a lack of awareness among the population regarding cyber harassment. There is also a lack of information regarding the laws and their punishment, which results in people not hesitate to commit such cybercrimes and even though they were aware, due to the non-seriousness of the punishment they motivate to commit even more heinous one like giving open rape threat to women or post online obscene content regarding the victim without any fear of law.

As we know "the modern problems require modern solutions" in the same way such issues related to cyberspace can only be prevented using the technological way only. Today, advancement totally changes our lives and even creates a new identity in the virtual world. Therefore, such technology or artificial Intelligence can play a significant role in preventing cyber harassment against women. Firstly, women need to become more aware of machine learning, which can help to prevent the real issues of cyber crimes against women. Thus, such AI tools can only help to track down the real perpetrator, which cannot be easy or possible to track in the physical world. As we see today, many of the real-world crimes are easily solved by using the technologies only, which cannot be solved by the investigation agency either. Almost all the nations around the world to solve the physical world crime use such AI tools for their ease. Therefore, in such a way, only a technology problem can also be solved by technological means, also it can help to even prevent future cyber crimes (Yadav, 2022).

The other factors that women themselves at own can adopt or use to tackle any cyber-related issues are protecting their PC or phone, social media or any other password platform by using strong passwords and also not sharing it with anyone like friends or relatives as such because the harasser can be anyone in the society today. Another is to keep their personal life more private and not over-sharing every location or unnecessary information in cyberspace because there can be chances, according to some reports, that women's information is mostly stolen through their social media platforms. Some of the studies also suggest that social media at large failed to protect the personal information of individuals even though they have adopted strict measures against any harassment or stealing but they fail to maintain the integrity of their users; therefore, keeping personal things private is the only key to being safe. There are other important device-related factors like using an updated anti-virus on laptops or PCs and also keeping check and cautious from any malware or phishing cases. Lastly, the most significant factor is to always report any kind of cyber-related harassment or incident to the authorities; if one wants to stay away from a long process of

physically complaining, then one can also get aid from reporting it either online or reaching out to the authorities through the women helpline number any time, also by reporting such incident can prevent any future cyber-crimes. One can make aware to another as well.

4.6. Legal Framework for Gender-Based Cyber Harassment

The stability and sustainability of a nation significantly rely on safeguarding its citizens from both internal and external dangers. In the digital era of the 21st century, where harassment can happen anonymously and transcend borders, it is crucial to have a well-structured legal framework that clearly defines cyber harassment and outlines appropriate penalties for offenders (H. Tiwari & Tiwari, 2020). In India, there were no specific legal provisions addressing cyber harassment until 2013, when the issue gained attention following the introduction of the 2nd Amendment Act of 2013. In this premise, the legal framework against cyber harassment in India can be summarized on the following grounds:

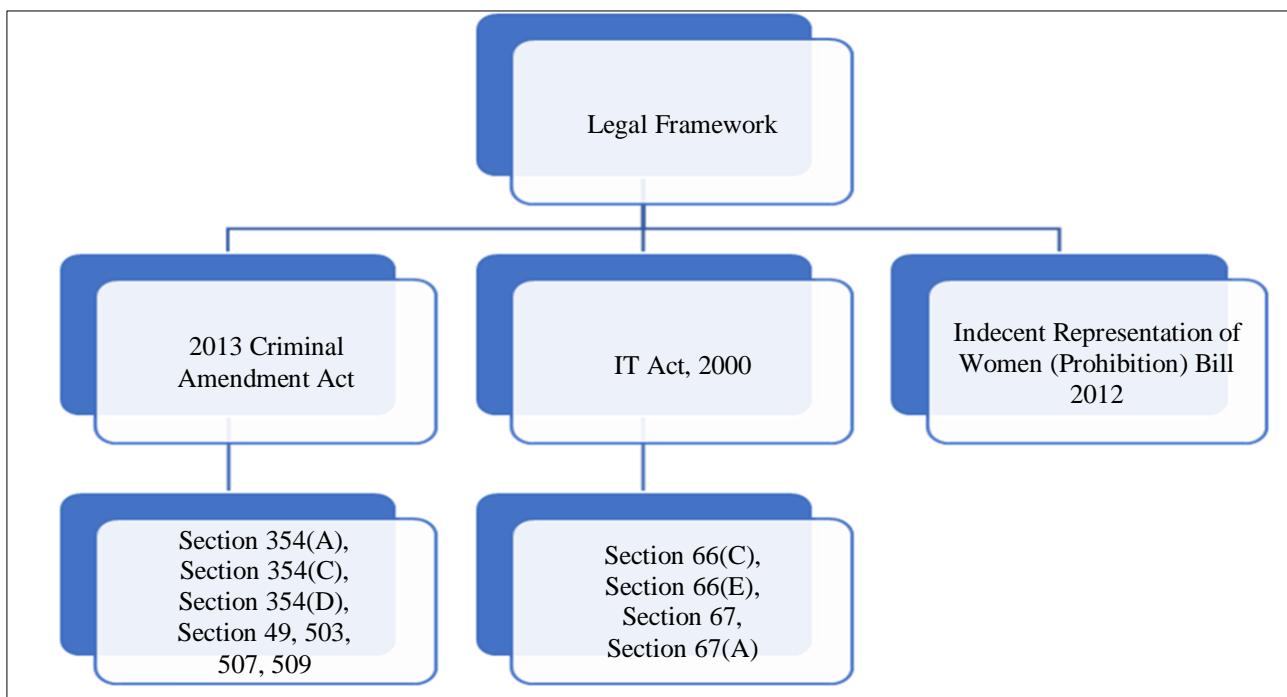


Fig. 2 Legal frame work against cyber harassment

1. Section 354A of the 2013 Criminal Amendment Act says that “A man who is asking for sexual favors, showing pornography without a woman’s consent, or making sexual comments in any form will be guilty of sexual harassment and could face up to three years in prison, or a certain amount of figure money will be fined.
2. Section 354 C 2013 Criminal Act defines “Voyeurism”, which includes secretly capturing or sharing images of a woman during a private moment without her permission. A man convicted under this section will face both fines and imprisonment of up to three years for a first conviction and up to seven years for any subsequent convictions.
3. Section 345 D 2013 criminal act discussion about the provision of stalking that includes cyberstalking. According to this act, stalking is defined as when a man continues to follow or contact a woman without her consent. If a person is found guilty of stalking, he/she can face up to three years in prison for the first offense, along with a fine. For any further conviction, he could face up to five years in prison and additional fines.

With these three major sections in the 2013 criminal act, there are also some other sections like 499, 503, 507, and 509 that deal with personal attacks or comments, Blackmailing, and online threats against women. in cyberspace. With this, the Information Technology Act of 2000 also provides some of the legal framework that is discussed below:-

1. Section 66c of the IT Act deals with the cyber hacking of personal information, whether it is an electronic signature or password or any unique identification feature of any other person.
2. Section 66E of the IT Act deals with the right to privacy or violation of the privacy of a person. It includes capturing or publishing any kind of personal information or images of private areas of a person without her consent is punishable.
3. Section 67 of the IT Act deals with obscene content.
4. Section 67 a makes the publication the transmission of sexually explicit material punishable.

Along with this, there is the presence of the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Bill of 2012. The Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act controls and bans the indecent portrayal of women in advertisements, publications, and similar media. The 2012 Amendment Bill aims to expand this law to include audio-visual media and electronic content, ensuring that indecent representation of women is also regulated on the internet and in online content. In Addition, Section 75 of the Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita covers sexual harassment, which was previously covered by Section 354A of the Indian Penal Code.

Undoubtedly, there are many existing laws in India for the protection of women's rights. However, there is the absence of any specific law that addresses specifically the nuances of cyber harassment against women. At the same time, existing laws are focused on general cybercrimes but fail to address gender-specific issues like online stalking, etc. Cyber harassment often occurs across national and state borders, creating jurisdictional challenges and making it difficult to enforce the law effectively. Another challenge is that many victims are unaware of the existing legal framework due to the absence of awareness programs. So, certain cases remain underreporting. The legal process in India is very slow and cumbersome, which is particularly problematic in cases of cyber harassment. So, there is a need for an effective and separate legal framework for such an emerging threat against women.

4.7. Online Survey

This study has taken a primary survey by using an unstructured blended questionnaire using Google Forms. The total number of respondents is 50 females from various backgrounds, such as from higher education and working professionals. Out of the total respondents, 91.7 percent of respondents are victims of cyber harassment in different forms, and 50 percent of respondents admit that this harassment impacts their psychological environment and day-to-day business. Out of the 91.7 percent, 58 percent of respondents experienced harassment at the age of 20-30. WhatsApp and Instagram remain the easiest platforms for culprits of harassment.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of cyber harassment incidents reported across different social media platforms. It shows that WhatsApp has the highest reported percentage (36%) of cyber harassment incidents. It is because of the direct messaging capability of WhatsApp that contributes to this. Instagram records the second with a substantial percentage (30%) of harassment cases, i.e. thirty percent. It is because of the visual content and social interaction facility provided by this application make it a frequent target for cyberbullying and harassment. Likely, Facebook has the lowest reported percentage of harassment at 16 percent. This is because of the better reporting mechanisms or possibly a shift of younger users to other platforms. Overall, the data suggests that messaging platforms like WhatsApp are more prone to misuse for cyber harassment than public platforms like Facebook. Instagram's substantial percentage highlights the risks associated with visually-driven social media platform interactions.

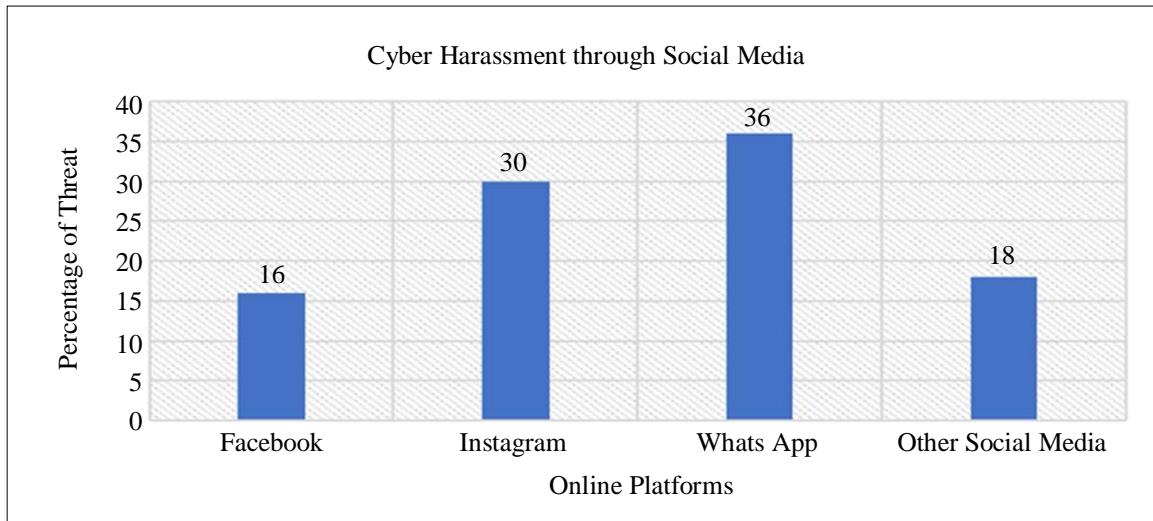


Fig. 3 Percentage of cyber harassment through social media platforms

Regarding the various types of harassment experienced by the respondents (see Figure 4), Cyber Stalking has the highest percentage of respondents, with 50% reporting experiencing this issue. This indicates that cyberstalking is a prominent concern compared to other forms of harassment. Abusive Comments are the second most reported form of harassment, with approximately 25% of respondents having faced this issue. Sexist Remarks and Texts are also notably reported, with around 10% of respondents encountering such behavior. Threatening Messages and Trolling have lower percentages, at around 5% and 2%, respectively, indicating they are less common but still relevant.

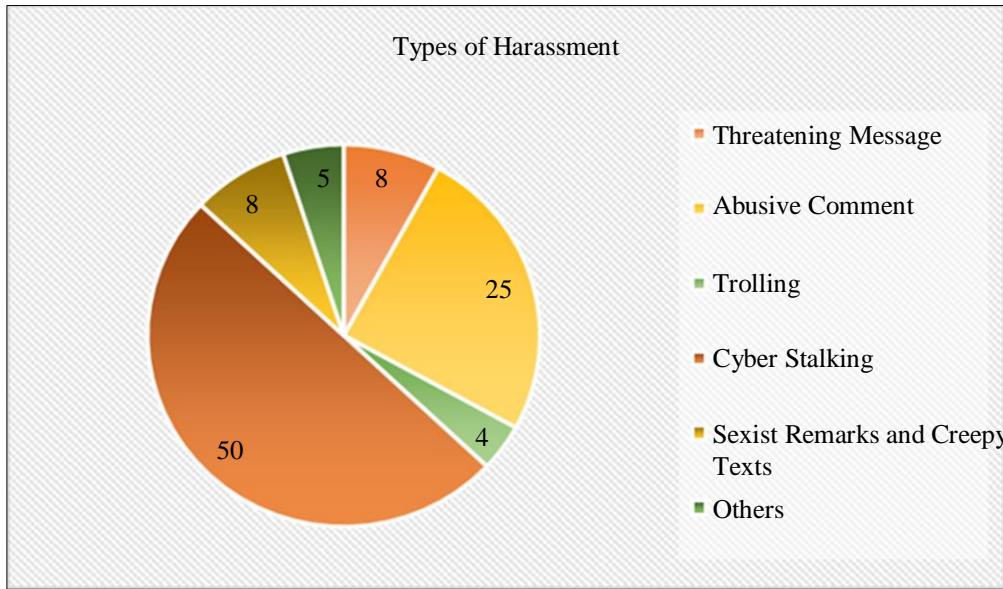


Fig. 4 Types of harassment experienced by respondent

The pie chart explains the respondents' views on different types of harassment that they have experienced. The pie chart suggests that 50 percent of the respondents are victims of cyberstalking through various social media platforms. After that, 25 percent of respondents faced harassment in the form of abusive comments. In like manner of trolling, the existing remarks are minimal.

4.7.1. Personal Experiences of Respondents

Based on answers from the questionnaire regarding the cyber harassment impact on women's careers, some of the women discussed how grave such cyber-crimes are and that such online harassment events affected their mental health due to which they had to deal with the problems of anxiety, depression and humiliations and all such ultimately impacted negatively on their grades or their studies. Also, according to some, they have felt like doing nothing for hours just thinking about such harassment, which also doesn't let them focus on their work or studies. Some of the respondents also cornered themselves and their professional life totally from social media by not sharing or being inactive on their social media accounts, which is also seen as harassment as such, had taken away the respondent's or victim's freedom to use the social media. These are not enough, but there are respondents whose daily life routines got disrupted due to the mental stress that they got from cyber harassment. Thus, it can be said that there is a direct link or impact of cyber harassment with the victim's career, which is linked through the trauma or mental stress with which the victim has to live throughout their life.

Based on the personal experiences faced by the respondents, one of the common types of cyber harassment that takes place most of the time is cyberstalking, which affects women so much in their lives that they feel more threatened by such acts. One of the commonalities among cyberstalking is that all such stalking did not even last for months. However, the respondents account that they have been stalked for years, where in some cases, the harasser uses different phone numbers to approach the victim through calls and messages. As per the few, some of the harassers stalked the victims online for almost two consecutive years and then got so much gut that the person started to harass the victim in person. Respondent explains how such acts of cyberstalking and harassment broke her mentally that she was unable to focus or to act freely in her life. Also, in cyberspace and particularly on social media, abusive and threatening comments are the second most serious concern as per the responses. Other than cyberstalking, the respondent also opens up about the threatening personal messages that they receive while openly sharing their opinion and by posting or commenting on some nation's political topic-related news. The most significant part is that the respondent mentioned how the person from the other nation threatened the victim through direct message, as it's seen in the abovementioned responses based on the questionnaire that there are very few women who took action against such cyber harassment. But still, there are some of the respondents who try to manage the situation and file cases in women's cyber harassment cell to punish the harasser so that the culprit would not go unpunished.

5. Conclusion

As the technology advancement took charge in the real world today in making people's lives more easy and accessible, it keeps impacting people in different ways even today; if we look at technology and its impact, then it can be viewed that it affects differently from a different section of the society in this way today while on one hand it positively impacts the people in corporate, business, economy, education, in generating knowledge then, on the other hand, it is also impacting the particular sections of the society negatively like women, as the paper discussed one aspect of it which is cyber harassment and its negative impact on women it is been observed that women are the most targeted section in society at almost every level, whether is about providing them with the internet connectivity which is denied in large scale to them even when they get such an opportunity then arises the issue of cyber-related harassment which haunts them and therefore limits women's freedom in cyberspace. The paper also discusses the study conducted by the author and co-authors with women of different age groups and professions on the topic of cyber harassment and its impact on their lives and how they have experienced such incidents and had dealt with the harasser in which the different response suggests the study in framing a pattern of the cyber-harassment that harasser usually maintain through the cyberstalking. The study concludes that harassers, even when aware of the consequences, continue their abusive behaviour without fear. Consequently, victims are often forced to limit their presence on cyber platforms where harassment occurs. Although a few respondents have pursued legal action against the perpetrators, there is a need for more individuals to take this step. Legal recourse is essential for preventing such harassment in the future.

However, the entire study indicates that most of the participants understand cyber-harassment and also about the seriousness of it, especially on social media, because, on such platforms, women are seen as the most vulnerable. The reason that came out of the study is initially the factor that they were seen as an easy target on social media platforms and, secondly, a weakness of the women in the technical field, which is due to the low confidence of women in the technical abilities, especially among the young generation which appears as a hurdle for them, and to be more private as much as required to avoid any such events of cyber-related harassment and lastly, the most prominent factor is to report the harassment is a main driver to prevent it (Kizza, 2023). Based on the analysis of the results, it is recommended that comprehensive awareness campaigns on cyber harassment, relevant laws, and policies be implemented across various levels—such as schools, universities, corporations, private and public institutions, and communities. This approach aims to prevent future harassment and address the increasing incidence of cyber harassment nationwide.

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