



Virtual Reality and Real Threats: Gender Violence in a Digital Age

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The many forms of violence against women and girls can be understood as gender violence as the victim is targeted based on a 'gendered' idea of lowliness. This can include threats and arbitrary deprivations of women's freedom in both public and private spheres, as well as violence that causes or is likely to cause physical, sexual, or psychological injury or suffering. One definition of violence is when an adult in a relationship abuses their position of authority to exert control over another. It involves using violence and other abusive tactics to instill fear and control in a relationship. While violence can happen to both men and women, women are typically the victims. In addition to being abused or neglected, children who live in households where there is domestic violence are at a grave danger. Violence against children, family members, and acquaintances can occur, even if the woman is typically the main victim.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), there isn't a single, agreed-upon definition of violence against women. Broadly it includes any act or omission that causes harm to women and keeps them in a subordinate position. Also, structural violence for e.g. poverty and unequal access to health services, education are also forms of violence. Nearly one in three, or 30% of women in the world have undergone physical or sexual violence from an intimate partner, non-partner according to a 2018 WHO analysis of prevalence data from 2000–2018 across 161 countries and areas on behalf of the UN Interagency working group on violence against women (WHO, 2021). Gender violence is rooted in the theory that the cause of domestic violence is one person's arbitrary belief in the right to exert power over another person, interpersonal interactions or interpersonal relations and is situated in the socio-economic and political content of power relations (Kelkar, 1991).

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Today, however along with these traditional kinds of violence which occur on a regular basis we find new forms of gender violence emerging in the digital age. With the emergence of a new knowledge era and cyberspace the forms of violence against women have also changed. Threats, cyberpornography, blackmail, and the publication of pornographic sexual content are the most frequent cybercrimes against women. Stalking, bullying, defamation, morphing, and creating false profiles are also included. People can transcend the limits of "physical" or "real" identities thanks to modern technologies, and can create new networks and interactions in these fluid places, navigating new, and often, multiple identities. These identities become essential to understand social relationships in cyberspace, and consequently, relationships can become abusive and violent. Images, especially of women, have enormous currency in digital spaces, thanks to their widespread and easy access. The porn industry, in this context, has unprecedented reach, both in terms of audience and exploitation, sustained mostly through the images of willing and unwilling women. Images on the internet or through mobile phones have often been used by stalkers to denigrate, intimidate and harass women on- and off-line.

Cybercrime is the term used to describe illegal behaviors carried out via the internet and digital devices with the intention of intruding into another person's private space and upsetting them with offensive material and inappropriate behavior. In today's digital age, using the internet for social, educational, recreational, or professional purposes has become commonplace. Women have been using social media platforms and internet platforms for business and education. Although the majority of people utilize the internet and other digital platforms for a variety of recreational and educational reasons, many criminals take use of these resources to harass and abuse online users, particularly women. Because it involves the use of cyberspace, this kind of illegal action is known as cybercrime.

The Internet in particular has facilitated the spread of information on matters relating to politics, the economy, culture, social development and others. The 'information superhighway' has opened up the 'possibility that all and sundry in the electronic age can interact with each other through electronic machines which serve as a superhighway for the transmission of messages' (Nyamnjoh, 2005: 5). This 'information superhighway', brought into existence by the inter-connection of different computers in one huge network, is what is called cyberspace. In many ways, the subsequent development of other such technologies coheres around or depends to some degree on the Internet, which links in with several distinct technologies, including the World Wide Web, instant messaging (IM), chat rooms, online games, and file-sharing or peer-to-peer software. The Internet may hold centre stage in any discussion of policy in this area, but it is not alone. Mobile phones and their supporting networks are rapidly becoming a significant component of ICTs. Global positioning system (GPS) technology is also beginning to integrate with mobile phones and aspects of the Internet. New games consoles are more sophisticated and increasingly will incorporate many more interactive components, including the ability to tap into the Internet.

Hence, technological developments in information and communications have presented rich and varied opportunities for advancements in the empowerment and participation of women and girls. New platforms now exist from which to raise awareness and disseminate information which have enabled women access to a wealth of information, presented new modes of communication, and new means of mobilization. However, the reverse side of this is that the proliferation of digital technologies and the anonymity of the user have enabled the development of innovative tools and programmes to increase violence against women and girls. Unfortunately, along with the myriads of possibilities brought about by technological developments, new risks and types of violence have also emerged. One such form of violence is cyberbullying, which occurs on the internet and mobile phones and can be initiated in cyberspace, and is an extension of face-to-face bullying. Cyberbullying can include threats and attempts to humiliate its subject through the posting of embarrassing pictures or personal information. It can be particularly difficult to hold perpetrators to account since bullies can easily conceal their identity online.

Technology has also played a role in enabling and exacerbating violence which takes place offline. It offers possibilities to store and share personal information about ones' movements, social life and finances which have offered increased possibilities for partners or family members to exert control in the lives of others. Furthermore, the anonymity afforded by the internet has exposed women and girls to specific risks, including the possibility that those who they are communicating with are doing so under a false identity. The rise of the global criminal economy has brought about many new technologies that are used as weapons by the cyber criminals but no longer only by them but also by others and this is used to harass women on a large scale. Two such examples are password breakers and online pornography that go under the guise of ethical hacking and many e-mail accounts are compromised. The line between cyber security and ethical hacking and cyber harassment is thin because of the legal definitions.

Taking place at United Nations Headquarters in New York, the 57th Session on the Commission of the Status of Women, from 4-15 March, 2013, governments made a range of commitments directed towards harnessing the possibilities offered by information and communication technologies and making cyberspace safe for women and girls. These included building mechanisms to prevent the use of social media and ICTs to perpetrate Violence against girls and women including the criminal misuse of ICTs for sexual harassment, sexual exploitation, child pornography, and trafficking in women and girls, as well as emerging forms of violence like cyberstalking, cyberbullying, and privacy violations that jeopardize the safety of women and girls. They also backed the creation and application of social media and ICTs as tools for women's and girls' empowerment, including information on how to stop and address violence against them (U.N. Women, 2013). During the pandemic, online gender-based violence increased dramatically worldwide, and most countries found it difficult to address the invasion of women's online privacy in the absence of robust legal protection. Although victims of online abuse can be of any gender, women and girls make up the majority of these victims. Women and girls who are at the intersection of social disadvantages like race, class, caste, religion, and disability are especially suffering. Women of color are more vulnerable to online violence, including women with disabilities, members of ethnic or religious minorities, and lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or intersex (LBTI) women are subjected to abuse on social media. Peer-inflicted online abuse affects women in positions of authority as well as young people. Those who dare to challenge patriarchal stereotypes and advocate gender empowerment are frequently the targets of this power struggle. The digital sphere has repeatedly focused on women in leadership roles, whether they be public personalities, journalists, legislators, influencers, environmentalists, or other activists. Numerous people have experienced persistent trolling and smear efforts that diminish their agency and delegitimize their place of employment.

There is still a lack of awareness and attention on violence against women in the internet realm. Some nations tend to focus on specific types of digital offenses, while others integrate cybercrimes against women into the broader framework of women's safety, child rights, and Internet safety. The negative consequences of online aggression against women, which can result in social, economic, and psychological harm, are frequently overlooked by this bracketed approach. It may impair women's freedom of speech and political engagement, which could have detrimental effects on democratic debate. Naturally, there are other players as well, particularly the "social media giants," who are exempt from international agreements like the Istanbul Convention or The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Additionally, law enforcement organizations frequently downplay the dangers of cybercrime against women, denying that it may be just as menacing and disrespectful as physical abuse.

Passing the modification to the Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act 1986 (IRWA), which has been stalled in parliament for more than nine years, would probably be a good place to start for India. This is necessary since, in its current form, IRWA mainly forbids the derogatory portrayal of women in commercials, publications, writings, artwork, or figures. Unfortunately, this seems outdated given how quickly the virtual world is growing and how women are being victimized by a never-ending list of tactics, including cyberstalking, bullying, defamation, cyber pornography, morphing, maliciously distributing personal images,

zoom bombing, online trolling, blackmailing, threats, and intimidation. This need a dynamic and adaptable legislative framework that can adjust to safeguard women's rights.

We therefore see that the rise of the knowledge economy has brought about a fundamental shift marked by the use of computers and the knowledge component in most fields of production. Women have also entered the economy in large numbers in various capacities. One of the reasons is, the creation of new spaces with a knowledge economy has also helped the participation of women in last numbers. However, the issue of harassment of remaining new spaces which paradoxically has brought them into public visibility but at the same time has made them subjects of new forms of harassment is under researched and does not find mention in many of the policy documents. One of the prime reasons for this is that the focus of the researchers is predominantly on the much touted success of the IT and on the flip side of the information technology workers, generic problems are given high visibility whereas the problems that have a general component given less visibility. NASSCOM, the premier IT policy formulation body in India focusses on core areas like markets and trends, emerging areas and only recently has focused on best practices. In the case of the policy documents most of the IT policy documents of major countries and organisations have not focused on the issue of sexual harassment.

Virtual bullying or cyber bullying: one of the main problems associated with the cyber world is the ascription of new identities that are digital and these identities are in the form of cell phone numbers, email ids, social networking profiles and profiles on matrimonial websites and new applications, popularly termed as Apps. Most of the women who enter into technology feel new sense of world being open to them by these new applications as the male gaze of the physical space is not apparently present in these media in the traditional forms. Cyber criminals uses the internet to threaten somebody consistently. This crime is often done through email, social media, and other online mediums. Social media, blogs, image-sharing sites, and lots of different ordinarily used online sharing activities offer cyber Stalkers a wealth of data that helps them arrange their harassment(Cyberstalking, 2024).

But women like other entrants to the new media often find that many of these identities have become their enemies in the form of threats that are mild to very severe and sometimes brutal and fatal. In the case of cell phone, we see that large number of mobile phone numbers have been the targets of unsolicited spam and calls. In many places like entering office complexes, residential complexes, shopping complexes, in the name of security requirement one is required to write down one's name and the identity along with the mobile phone number on a sheet of paper which would be maintained by the security on the entrance. It is at this particular point of time that two types of violations occur, both of which are concerned with privacy. Firstly the numbers of many people along with the emails are compromised and sold to many database companies for marketing purposes and other related purpose. Secondly some anti social elements deliberately follow the women and note down the phone numbers and send messages to them, this is done after they write down the numbers and then the stalkers follows and while writing down his own number also collects the number of a person and thus starts a cycle of harassment. Such small slips have become synonymous with danger so much so that giving one's mobile phone number is a very dangerous activity and this has become the subject of stories in many small towns and metros and has also become a popular theme in many detective and crime serials underlining the notoriety of such harassment. Another method of harassment is a sending of lewd and bulk sms. Many companies have also been barred from sending sms. It is also a known fact that many of the attackers are known people. (Jaishankar, K., & Ronel, N :2013, 115-117.)

In IT companies the HR department is very reluctant to reveal the numbers and factors and real aspects of sexual harassment which seems to be paradoxical and anachronistic. Paradoxical because the workplace in the IT sector is fully monitored by cameras at all strategic places and other snooping devices and anachronistic because in the age of IT and a paperless office one also needs to have a new age laws that are advanced and not laws that are antiquated. However, the companies are not called upon the law of the land but rather maintain good management practices that would deter such harassment at the work

place. This harassment takes many forms like peeping over the screen summoning women colleagues to discuss matters repeatedly, use of language that borders on certain indecent nature. Two of the sources for the study of such phenomena are fieldwork and it is reported that many women colleagues routinely face such harassment including the comments about their dress and appearance, lack of cooperation by teammates, gossip at the canteen, and similar other unwelcomed comments and messages both verbally and also on electronic and paper bulletin boards and this is reported in empirical studies.

Many confessions by women employees stand as testimonies of harassment by stalkers who the women report as facing psychological problems and problems of rejection. Another grim reality is of the rapes that go unreported or do not feature in limelight, these incidents happen in the vast and lonely IT corridors. IT corridor here means not only the inside environment but the locality where a large number of IT firms function, meaning, the office and the entire office and the entire walled campus and the Special Economic Zone. Thus the built environment of the office is one space and the other open spaces are also equally unsafe. This may also possibly explain the high rate of attrition. Cyberspace must be a safe space for women and girls. To do that, we need to build active online communities to take action against online violence against women. In order to disrupt human trafficking, researchers are starting to investigate how anti-trafficking actors comprehend and use technology (Thakor and Boyd 2013). Others have, however, shown how organized state, non-governmental, faith-based, and corporate anti-trafficking efforts have pushed a "neoliberal carceral agenda reliant upon punitive systems of control" (Bernstein 2010, 67). They have also documented the rise of a transnational anti-trafficking rescue industry (Gallagher *et.al.* 2011). Few studies have looked at these trends collectively or how and in what ways anti-trafficking technologies are reimagining anti-trafficking engagements in conjunction with coordinated efforts mediated by and through innovative platforms (e.g., machine learning, predictive analytics, mobile and social media technologies, etc.).

Today, in the 21st Century, AI, Artificial intelligence is transforming industries, automating tasks, enhancing decision-making, and driving innovation. AI's impact is vast, influencing healthcare, finance, retail, and more, while also raising ethical and societal challenges. The outcome of applying advanced artificial intelligence (AI)-based technology that makes it possible to superimpose voices and faces on audio or video. This produces information that is phony but incredibly lifelike. This technique has occasionally been used to manipulate political statements, sell pornographic content illegally, extort people, or make fun of private people and celebrities. Deepfakes' association with retaliation through the distribution of private and sexually explicit content is among their most unsettling features. This happens when someone's partner, ex-partner, or other third parties share or threaten to share private, sexually explicit photos of them without that person's consent in an effort to control, discipline, or harm their reputation. These gender biases pose a risk of further stigmatizing and marginalizing women on a global scale for it reinforces patriarchal roles, norms, and structures, serving as a significant obstacle to achieving gender equality.

In some ways the spread of IT enabled services has been immensely beneficial to both women and men especially those who have adequate skills but lack the resources to invest in higher education (Pande, 2006: 195). Yet it cannot be denied that the boom in information and communication technologies (ICTs) over recent decades has brought completely new ways of establishing and maintaining relationships. Cyberspace is a new social environment that is distinct and yet can encompass all the physical places in which people interact. While it has increased connectivity and networking it has also lead to an increase in violence against women. Hence there are special challenges and there is a need to give this issue the special attention that it needs and identifying potential harms, understanding the perspective of young people, and enacting practical measures to assure young girls and women their right to protection. The first step needs to be to formulate a policy for the protection of women and girls and this should be the starting point.

Therefore, combating online crimes against women requires a thorough examination of the problems caused by ingrained injustices such as misogyny, harmful societal standards, and mentalities that contribute to the consolidation of violence. Perhaps taking a proactive, multifaceted approach will help combat these

crimes head-on. States should be able to guarantee that victims of violence online can report crimes without worrying about becoming victims again. Rather than merely deleting or removing objectionable remarks, social media companies should create strong gender-sensitive policies and redressal mechanisms that allow women to use online areas without fear. Globally, the decentralized cyber world is expanding unchecked, posing governance and regulatory difficulties that need for new legal protections that advance women's rights. Perhaps one of the most important gaps that needs to be filled is training law enforcement personnel to investigate and punish internet criminals. In order to ensure digital security, it is necessary to increase public awareness and provide educational institutions with knowledge systems that can spread knowledge about the dangers of the internet.

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