

Social Media and the Harassment of Women and Children: A Growing Digital Crisis

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
	The convergence technologies of the Personal Computer, the Smartphone, and the Internet have brought about an unprecedented growth in business, communication, healthcare, education, and governance. They occupy an important place in the lives of people all over the world, irrespective of age, sex, religion, race, or social, cultural, and economic conditions. Despite its inevitability and profound contribution to humanity, social media has been utilized by online crooks in an undesirable manner, dehumanizing women and children. Cyberbullying, trolling, blackmailing, and several other forms of harassment of women and children go on unabated, thereby driving innocent and unsuspecting individuals to severe psychological, mental, and social trauma. The introduction of various cyber laws and legislations does not seem to serve the intended purpose, with online crime continuing to grow each year. It is the need of the hour for all to use social media responsibly, carefully, without disclosing important personal information, and sharing only those things that may not harm even if they fall into the hands of digital miscreants and lawbreakers. Keywords: Cyberbullying, Trolling, Digital Threat, Body Shaming, Social Media

Introduction

Is social media truly helping women's voices to be heard? Is it really a space of empowerment – or has it become another battlefield where dignity is constantly at risk? These are questions that we often ignore but feel every day when we scroll through our screens.

Social media was created to give people a space to connect and express freely, but for many women, it has turned into a place of judgment, comparison, and fear. Whenever women raise their voices about social or personal issues, it somehow hurts the fragile ego of some men. This results in online trolling, edited photos, fake videos, and abusive comments that destroy a woman's confidence. These are not just online activities—they create real emotional pain. Many young girls now hesitate to post or speak online because they fear being targeted.

Objectives

This paper aims to explore various issues that women and children face in the digital world, their silent sufferings, emotional and psychological pain, and the hardship they endure from online harassment. The study also seeks to highlight certain legal provisions and safeguards that have already been in place in the Indian context. The study is based on library research, particularly drawing on secondary sources such as government data, organizational reports, newspapers, and research articles.

The Rise of Social Media Abuse and Crimes

Today, social media has become part of our daily lives. Social media use became more rampant irrespective of age or sex during the Covid pandemic. People stayed home, worked online, and students attended classes through digital platforms. This increased the number of users, but it also opened new doors for cybercrimes and harassment. According to the National Crime Records Bureau, India recorded 44,546 cases of cybercrime in 2019 compared to 28,246 in 2018, which is an increase of 63.5% (Sharma, 2020).

For women, children, and transgender individuals, this rise meant both opportunity and risk. Many used social media to express themselves and build communities, but the same platforms also exposed them to hate comments and digital abuse.

Children and Online Vulnerabilities

Smartphone use and online presence among children have increased manifold. What once started as a space for online classes, creativity, and connection has slowly turned into a place where innocent young people are at risk. Many young girls, in particular, use social media to express themselves freely, but behind every post or video, there are hidden dangers that they often cannot see.

One heartbreaking case took place in West Bengal's South 24-Parganas, when a 17-year-old girl allegedly committed suicide after facing humiliation when her ex-boyfriend uploaded obscene photographs of her on social media (Teenage girl commits suicide, 2016). It showed how one careless or cruel digital act can destroy a young life and leave lasting pain for families and friends. Hundreds of thousands of such cases are being reported continuously all around the world.

This incident reminds us that the digital world, although modern and open, can be just as unsafe as the streets outside. It calls for parents, teachers, and the community to guide children not only in how to use technology but also in how to protect their emotions and dignity online.

The Influence of Lifestyle and Early Marriage

Not everyone gets the chance to live a luxurious life, yet social media constantly shows images of wealth, beauty, and comfort. When young people, especially girls, see others sharing their glamorous lifestyles online, they begin to compare their own lives and dream of living the same way. But when reality doesn't match what they see, frustration grows. Some end up searching for quick ways to earn money, and sadly, a few even fall into the trap of men who take advantage of their vulnerability, sometimes pushing them into exploitation or abuse. Another worrying trend is how social media glorifies relationships and marriage. Young girls see posts of "perfect" couples and happy married lives and start to desire the same, without understanding the responsibilities and emotional maturity that come with it. In this way, social media silently shapes their aspirations and choices, often before they are ready to make them. It reflects how deeply online spaces can influence not just opinions, but life decisions, especially among those still discovering who they truly are.

Fashion and Body Image

The spread of Western fashion through social media has changed how many people think about beauty, confidence, and self-worth. While fashion once reflected culture and creativity, today it often pushes people, especially young girls, to chase the idea of 'Perfection'.

On social media, the pressure to look attractive is constant. Filters, trends, and influencer lifestyles make many feel "less" when they compare themselves to others. According to Khosla (2022), young girls who spend more time viewing beauty and lifestyle content on social media tend to report lower body satisfaction and self-esteem. Similarly, Aggarwal (2022) found that continuous exposure to body comparisons online increases anxiety and body image concerns among adolescents.

As a result, body shaming and low self-esteem have quietly become part of everyday life. The natural simplicity that once defined people's identities now fades behind a desire for validation through likes, comments, and followers. What was once a form of self-expression has, for many, turned into silent competition, where self-worth is measured by digital approval rather than personal happiness.

Psychological Impacts of Online Harassment

In today's world, one of the main causes of mental health problems stems from the growing influence of social media. For many young people, especially children, their mood and sense of self-worth now depend on the number of likes, comments, or shares they receive online. Over time, this attachment to virtual approval pulls them away from education, real social interaction, and basic manners.

What makes it worse is that the elders who are supposed to guide and protect the youth are often the ones criticising or commenting harshly on social media. Such behaviour creates deep feelings of anxiety, shame, and depression among young users — this is where "online abuse" truly begins. Victims of repeated trolling or digital humiliation often experience trauma, loss of confidence, and social withdrawal.

Continuous digital harassment may threaten someone's physical integrity, have a silencing effect on the victims, families, and friends, particularly women and young girls (EAP India, 2020). The constant exposure to cyber-bullying may lead to self-harm, isolation, suicidal thoughts, and ideation, while kids are likely to experience anxiety, depression, loneliness, unhappiness, and poor sleep patterns (EAP India, 2020).

Computer-Generated Images: A New Digital Threat

Technology has given people incredible power — but when it falls into the wrong hands, it stops being a tool of progress and becomes a weapon of humiliation. In recent years, photographs — especially those of women and young girls — have been stolen, altered, and turned into false or explicit images, often shared publicly to shame or blackmail them.

This trend represents a new form of digital patriarchy, where control over women's and queer bodies extends even into virtual spaces. Victims often suffer in silence, fearing social judgment and disbelief. The emotional toll is severe, leading to trauma, anxiety, and loss of trust in both digital and real-life spaces. This stands as one of the most dangerous forms of online gender-based violence.

Transgender Experiences Online

It is not only women who face these digital challenges. Transgender people, too, are frequently bullied, mocked, and targeted on social media. For many in the transgender community, online spaces are among the few places where they can express their identity freely and find a sense of belonging. Yet, these same spaces often turn hostile, filled with ridicule, misgendering, and exclusion.

Such experiences reveal how digital harassment intersects with gender, sexuality, and social stigma, reminding us that online safety must include all marginalized voices, not just a few.

Legal Framework for Cyber Crime in India

India has established several laws to address the growing threat of cybercrime, especially those targeting women and marginalized communities. The Information Technology Act 2000 serves as the primary legal framework for regulating online behaviour, protecting personal data, and punishing digital offenses.

Key provisions under the Act include

Section 66E – Punishes the violation of privacy through capturing, publishing, or transmitting a person's private image without consent (Information Technology Act, 2000).

Section 67 and 67A – Deal with publishing or transmitting obscene or sexually explicit material in electronic form, often applied in cases of revenge porn or deepfake circulation (Information Technology Act, 2000).

Section 66C and 66D – Address identity theft and cheating by personation, such as fake social media profiles or phishing scams (Information Technology Act, 2000).

Section 69A – Empowers the government to block public access to harmful online content in the interest of public order or national security (Information Technology Act, 2000).

Additionally, the provisions of the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (IPC) are also applicable to cyber offences:

Section 354A–D – Protects women against sexual harassment, stalking, and voyeurism, including acts committed through digital means (Indian Penal Code, 1860).

Section 509 – Criminalizes words, gestures, or acts intended to insult the modesty of a woman, which can include online abuse or offensive comments (Indian Penal Code, 1860).

In addition, initiatives such as the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal (2019) and the Cyber Crime Helpline (1930) have made it easier for victims to report incidents of online harassment, blackmail, and exploitation.

However, while these legal measures exist, their implementation and public awareness remain limited. Many victims hesitate to seek legal help, fearing the loss of family prestige and the harsh judgement of society. The thought that justice may never come often leaves them feeling hopeless. In some heartbreaking cases, this silence turns inward, ending in self-inflicted harm. Such realities reveal that the true barriers to justice are not only legal but also deeply cultural and emotional. Strengthening cyber laws, ensuring timely justice, and promoting digital literacy are crucial to creating a safer online environment for all.

Conclusion

Social media connects people, but also exposes the darkest side of society. For women, children and transgender individuals, it is both a tool of empowerment and a source of pain. The rise in online harassment, body shaming, and digital violence shows that digital spaces are not safe.

In the end, social media has become both a stage and a mirror — a space where voices are raised, yet often silenced. The struggle today is not only against online harassment but also against the distorted perceptions that shape how society sees women and other marginalized groups in the digital world.

Empowerment in the digital age is not only about speaking out but also about protecting our identity, dignity, and peace of mind from being misunderstood or misused. True empowerment begins when our voice and our silence both come from strength, not fear.

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