

# Cyber Harassment and Safety of Women in the Digital Age

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## **Abstract**

The digital era has opened new avenues for communication, education, and social interaction, yet it has simultaneously given rise to novel forms of harassment and exploitation, disproportionately affecting women. In India, cybercrimes such as online harassment, cyberstalking, revenge pornography, cyber defamation, sexual abuse, cyber extortion, cyberbullying, and phishing have surged, impacting women across all social and economic backgrounds. These offences infringe upon fundamental rights, including the rights to privacy, life, and dignity, and inflict significant psychological, social, and economic harm on victims. Despite the existence of legal protections, including the Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023, and platforms like the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal, underreporting remains widespread due to fear, lack of awareness, and distrust of law enforcement. Emerging technologies, such as deepfake morphing and other digital tools, further heighten women's vulnerability online. This

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paper examines the causes, patterns, and consequences of cybercrime against women, assesses current legal frameworks, and evaluates government initiatives, stressing the need for strengthened laws, digital literacy, and societal awareness to ensure a safer cyberspace for women.

**Keywords**

Digital harassment, cybercrime, women's safety, cyberstalking, revenge pornography, online abuse, gender-based violence

**I. Introduction**

In today's highly interconnected world, the rise of the internet and digital technologies has transformed communication, commerce, and social interactions. Yet, this digital revolution has also fueled the growth of cyber harassment, a widespread and damaging form of abuse that leverages online platforms to threaten, intimidate, or harm individuals. Cyber harassment takes many forms, such as cyberstalking, online bullying, trolling, and the spread of harmful content. Recent trends show a troubling rise in both the frequency and intensity of such incidents, affecting people across all age groups and backgrounds. Social media, messaging apps, and other online platforms have become common arenas for perpetrators, many of whom exploit the anonymity these spaces provide.

The challenges of combating cyber harassment are complex, spanning legal, psychological, and technological dimensions. Victims often endure serious emotional distress, breaches of privacy, and reputational harm, while law enforcement struggles with issues of jurisdiction and the rapid evolution of digital threats. Addressing this issue demands a comprehensive approach that integrates technological innovations, stronger legal protections, and public education. Advanced detection systems and content-filtering algorithms play a crucial role in prevention, while updated cyber laws are needed to safeguard victims and deter offenders. Equally important is raising awareness and educating users about the warning signs and risks of online abuse, which can help create a safer digital environment. As the internet continues to shape everyday life, cyber harassment has

emerged as a critical global concern. This form of online abuse—targeting individuals emotionally or psychologically—varies across regions but carries severe consequences everywhere. This article explores the multifaceted dimensions of cyber harassment, highlighting recent research and strategies developed to confront the problem. With the rapid expansion of digital communication, the threat of cyber harassment has become more pressing, leaving profound impacts on both individuals and society at large.

## **II. Impact of Cybercrime**

Women remain among the most vulnerable victims in today's era of rapid technological advancement. In modern life, digital intervention—through computers and related technologies—permeates nearly every aspect of existence, reflecting both its positive and negative dimensions. Cybercrime has emerged as a **global challenge**, with its growing prevalence posing significant threats to privacy, security, and individual well-being. The parallel rise of technological development, cybercrime, and female victimisation has heightened concerns about personal safety in the digital age.

The internet, the world's largest network and information system, continues to expand rapidly, reaching even the most remote regions due to advancements in telecom infrastructure. With its constantly growing user base, the internet has become a central driver of globalisation, reshaping traditional realities and certainties. While it brings vast opportunities, it also presents serious risks and challenges to human security. Despite these challenges, the internet has undeniably transformed human civilisation by connecting people across borders and fostering global interaction. Rooted in human curiosity and the innate desire to explore the unknown, the digital world has opened new pathways for discovery and communication. In this pursuit of knowledge and connection, the **cyber world** has emerged—an expansive space offering both promise and peril.

## **III. Types of Cybercrime against Women**

### **Email Harassment**

Email harassment is a form of cybercrime in which threatening emails or messages are sent, often accompanied by the creation of

false identities, websites, or online profiles with the intention of targeting and harassing a particular individual. In India, this is among the most common cybercrimes directed against women. Similar to the concept of unsolicited letter harassment, email harassment includes bullying, threats, blackmail, and even fraudulent schemes through email. However, it becomes particularly problematic when the harassment originates from fake or anonymous accounts, making it harder to trace the offender. The consequences for women can be severe, often leading to intense **emotional distress, anxiety, fear, and a sense of vulnerability**, as their personal safety and privacy are undermined.

### **Cyberbullying**

Cyberbullying refers to the act of harassing, threatening, or humiliating someone through digital platforms such as social media, dating applications, or online gaming communities. It involves the deliberate use of technology to target individuals, often by spreading hurtful content, abusive comments, or intimidating messages. Among young girls and women, cyberbullying has become one of the most widespread forms of online abuse. While it can affect both men and women—making it a largely gender-neutral crime—teenagers are particularly vulnerable. Victims are often targeted on the basis of their **appearance, body type, family background, religion, race, fashion choices, behaviour, or financial status**. For women and adolescent girls, this form of abuse can have especially damaging effects, leading to feelings of insecurity, anxiety, and social isolation.

### **Cyberpornography**

Cyberpornography represents one of the most serious threats faced by women in the digital space. It encompasses the use of computers and the internet to create, distribute, or access pornographic content, including images, videos, texts, and photographs. With the proliferation of online platforms, pornographic material has become widely available, reportedly constituting a substantial portion of internet content. For women, this issue becomes particularly alarming when **cybercriminals manipulate or alter images**, often superimposing their photographs onto nude or sexually explicit bodies.

Such acts not only compromise a woman's dignity and integrity but also subject her to severe emotional and psychological trauma. The misuse of digital tools for producing and circulating sexually exploitative material highlights the darker side of technological progress, where women's identities and images are exploited without consent, leaving them vulnerable to defamation, harassment, and long-term reputational damage.

### **Cyberstalking**

Stalking refers to the act of persistently monitoring or following someone, and when this behavior takes place online, it is termed **cyberstalking**. It is one of the most common cybercrimes faced by women in India. Cyberstalking is characterized by a **pattern of continuous online harassment**, where the perpetrator tracks, observes, or intrusively monitors the victim's digital activities. This may involve spreading false allegations, making defamatory statements, or even misusing personal information. Perpetrators often rely on social media platforms, emails, chat applications, and other digital communication tools to intimidate or harass their targets. For women, such acts create an ongoing sense of vulnerability, invasion of privacy, and fear, often extending into their offline lives as well.

### **Cyber Hacking**

Cyber hacking is a form of cyberviolence in which perpetrators deliberately target individuals by breaching their online accounts or digital profiles to misuse personal data for malicious purposes. In some extreme cases, hackers have been known to post obscene invitations or exploit compromised accounts to humiliate or endanger the victim, particularly women. From a legal perspective, cyber hacking is recognised as a punishable offence under multiple laws in India. Under the **Indian Penal Code (IPC)**, Sections 379 and 406 are relevant, while under the **Bhartiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023**, Sections 303 and 316 apply. Additionally, Sections **43(a)** and **66** of the **Information Technology (Amendment) Act, 2008** directly address offences related to hacking. If found guilty, the accused may face **up to three years of imprisonment, a fine of up to five lakh rupees, or both**. Legally, the offence is considered cognizable,

compoundable, and bailable, and any magistrate is empowered to try the case with the consent of the recognised court where prosecution is ongoing. Cyber hacking, therefore, not only violates an individual's privacy but also represents a grave threat to personal safety, dignity, and digital security, disproportionately impacting women in the online space.

### **Cyber Defamation**

Cyber defamation is a form of online offence in which false or damaging information is spread about an individual through computers and the internet. It involves publishing defamatory, libellous, or even pornographic material on various online platforms with the intent to harm the reputation of the victim. On social networking sites, blogs, or online forums, a user's bulletin board or comment section can be easily misused, as anyone may post disparaging remarks or offensive content that becomes visible to a wide audience. This public visibility intensifies the impact of the defamation, often resulting in reputational harm, emotional distress, and social stigma for the victim. The terms "**cyber smearing**" and "**cyber defamation**" are often used interchangeably to describe this offence. For women in particular, such acts can be devastating, as they target personal dignity and social standing, leaving long-lasting consequences in both digital and real-world spheres.

### **Cyber Grooming**

Cyber grooming refers to the practice of an adult establishing an online relationship with a minor with the hidden intention of arranging sexual encounters. It is a manipulative process in which perpetrators exploit digital platforms to befriend young individuals, often with the ultimate goal of **sexual abuse, exploitation, or trafficking**. The grooming process typically involves **building trust** with the child through constant communication, emotional manipulation, and false promises. Once trust is established, the offender seeks to obtain sensitive or explicit material—such as sexual conversations, photographs, or videos. This content is then often weaponised through **blackmail or threats**, compelling the child to provide additional inappropriate material or comply with the

perpetrator's demands. Cyber grooming, therefore, represents one of the gravest online threats to children and young women, as it not only violates their physical and emotional safety but also has long-term psychological consequences.

#### **IV. Legal Framework of Laws Aimed at Preventing Cybercrime Against Women**

The **Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act, 1986** has been recognised as a key legislative tool for protecting women; however, it requires amendments to explicitly cover offences in virtual environments. Although the **Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act)** and the **IT Rules, 2021** provide a legal foundation for taking punitive action against cyber offenders, the inclusion of online offences under older legislation has been pending in Parliament for nearly a decade. Courts in India reportedly place greater emphasis on **offline offences** against women compared to those committed online. When a case involves both online and offline charges, judicial focus often leans toward offline violations. This imbalance highlights the need for reforms to ensure that **justice is administered fairly**, irrespective of whether the offence occurs in physical or digital spaces. The IT Act, 2000, conferred **legal recognition to electronic transactions and activities**, including digital contracts, property, and rights, and criminalised their violation. Penalties under this Act are stringent, and they were further strengthened by the **Information Technology (Amendment) Act, 2008** (Act 10 of 2009). Certain cybercrimes can now result in **life imprisonment and fines up to**

**₹10 lakh**, while damages caused to computers, systems, or networks—through viruses, service interruptions, or other malicious acts—can attract **compensation up to ₹5 crore**. Despite being one of the few countries with comprehensive cybercrime legislation, India's IT Act **does not sufficiently address issues specifically affecting women**, leaving gaps in protection against gender-based online abuse. Strengthening these provisions is essential to safeguard women from the growing threat of cybercrime.

#### **Key Sections of the Information Technology Act, 2000 (Amended 2008)**

**Section 66A:** This section addresses the transmission of **inflammatory or offensive communications** via electronic communication services, including emails or messages that mislead or deceive the recipient about the sender's identity, such as **IP/email spoofing**. Violations under this section are punishable with a **maximum of three years in prison or a fine**.

**Section 66B:** Covers the **theft of computer resources or communication devices**, with penalties including **up to three years of imprisonment and a fine of ₹1 lakh, or both**.

**Section 66C:** Pertains to **identity theft**, including the unauthorised use of someone else's **electronic signature, password, or other forms of digital identity**.

**Section 66D:** Addresses **cheating via computer resources or communication devices**, punishable with **up to three years of imprisonment and a fine of ₹1 lakh**.

**Section 66E:** Focuses on the **violation of privacy**, such as disseminating or publishing another person's private information without consent. Penalties include **up to three years of imprisonment, a fine of ₹2 lakh, or both**.

**Section 66F:** Defines **cyberterrorism**, including attempts to threaten national **unity, integrity, security, or sovereignty** by unauthorised access to computer systems or disrupting authorised access.

**Section 67:** Deals with the **publication or transmission of pornographic material** via electronic means. The 2008 amendment expanded this to include **child pornography** and required intermediaries to maintain records of such content.

These provisions collectively aim to **safeguard individuals and society** from a wide range of cybercrimes, establishing both **criminal liability and deterrent measures** under the IT Act.

#### **Section 72: Violation of Confidentiality and Privacy**

Section 72 of the IT Act imposes **penalties for breaches of confidentiality and privacy**, including unauthorised access to confidential diaries, records, or personal information. Offenders are

liable for fines and legal action to protect individual privacy in digital environments.

## **V. Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita's Provisions on Cybercrimes against Women**

### **Sexual Harassment (Section 75):**

Under Section 75(1), a man is considered guilty of sexual harassment if he commits any of the following acts:

1. Physical contact or advances involving unwelcome and explicit sexual overtures.
2. Demands or requests for sexual favours.
3. Displaying pornography to a woman against her will.
4. Making sexually coloured remarks.

These provisions extend to **online contexts**, ensuring that sexual harassment in cyberspace is also punishable under the law.

### **Voyeurism (Section 77):**

Section 77 addresses **voyeurism**, criminalising the act of observing or recording a woman performing private acts where she would reasonably expect privacy. It also covers **sharing or distributing such footage**.

- **First conviction:** Imprisonment for **1 to 3 years** and a fine.
- **Second or subsequent conviction:** Imprisonment for **3 to 7 years** and a fine.

These sections highlight the BNS's commitment to protecting women from **sexual harassment, privacy violations, and cyber exploitation**, complementing the IT Act in addressing gender-based online offences.

### **Stalking (Section 78)**

Under Section 78(1), a man is guilty of stalking if he:

1. **Follows or repeatedly contacts a woman** to establish a personal relationship, despite clear indications that the woman is not interested.

2. **Monitors a woman's online activities**, including her use of the internet, emails, or other electronic communication platforms.

This provision extends legal protection against both offline and online stalking, addressing persistent harassment that threatens a woman's personal safety and privacy.

### **Word, Gesture, or Act Intended to Insult the Modesty of a Woman (Section 79)**

Section 79 criminalises any act intended to **insult a woman's modesty**, including:

- Uttering offensive words or making insulting sounds.
- Making gestures or exhibiting objects meant to be seen by the woman.
- Intruding upon a woman's privacy in a manner that compromises her dignity.

Offenders may face **imprisonment of up to three years and a fine**, emphasising the protection of women's dignity and personal space.

### **Organised Crime (Section 111(1))**

Section 111(1) addresses **continuing unlawful activities conducted by individuals or groups**, including:

- Kidnapping, robbery, vehicle theft, extortion, land grabbing, contract killing, and economic offences.
- Cybercrimes, trafficking of persons, drugs, weapons, and illicit goods or services.
- Human trafficking for prostitution or ransom.

Such activities, whether carried out individually or as part of an organised crime syndicate, often involve the use or threat of violence and are subject to stringent legal penalties.

### **Defamation (Section 356)**

Section 356(1) defines defamation as any act in which a person, **by words (spoken or intended to be read), signs, or visible representations**, makes or publishes an imputation concerning another individual with the intent to harm—or with knowledge or reasonable

belief that it may harm—the reputation of that person. Under this provision, **publishing false or damaging information** about someone is considered defamation, except in specific cases outlined by the law. This section protects individuals, including women, from reputational harm and ensures legal recourse against malicious or false statements.

## **VI. Cybercrimes in India**

Cybercrime in India has been growing rapidly, mirroring a global surge in digital offences. In 2018, **208,456 cybercrime cases** were reported and investigated. By the first two months of 2022 alone, **212,485 cases** were recorded, surpassing the total for all of 2018. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to a sharp rise in cybercrime, with incidents increasing from **394,499 in 2019** to **1,158,208 in 2020**, and **1,402,809 in 2021**. In 2022, the overall increase in cybercrime was **15.3%**. Alongside this, the number of compromised websites in India has also surged: **17,560 websites** were hacked in 2018, rising to **26,121 in 2020**. In 2021, ransomware attacks targeted **78% of Indian organisations**, with **80% of these attacks encrypting data**, compared to global averages of 65% encryption and 66% attacks. To address this challenge, the **Indian Cyber Crime Coordination Centre (I4C)** was established by the Ministry of Home Affairs, providing a structured framework for law enforcement. Complaints registered through I4C demonstrate a marked rise over the years: **26,049 in 2019**, **257,777 in 2020**, **452,414 in 2021**, **966,790 in 2022**, **1,556,218 in 2023**, and **740,957 in just the first four months of 2024**.

The most common cybercrimes include **sextortion, OTP scams, fraudulent gambling apps, algorithm manipulations, illegal loan apps, and online investment fraud**. In 2023 alone, the I4C documented over **100,000 cases of investment fraud**. In the first four months of 2024, **4,599 digital fraud cases** resulted in losses of **120 crore**, while **20,043 trading fraud cases** caused financial losses totalling **₹ 1,420 crore**. These statistics highlight both the growing scale and economic impact of cybercrime in India.

## **VIII. Constitutional Protections against Women**

The **right to privacy** is a fundamental aspect of individual liberty and dignity under **Article 21 of the Indian Constitution**. While

privacy is not absolute and may be subject to reasonable restrictions, any limitation must satisfy the criteria of **legality, necessity, and proportionality**. The Supreme Court has recognised privacy as inherent in other fundamental rights, such as the right to life, personal liberty, equality, freedom of speech, and religious freedom.

Key judicial milestones include:

- **Gobind v. State of MP (1975):** Introduced the **compelling state interest test**, ensuring privacy is limited only when clearly justified.
- **PUCL v. Union of India (1997):** Affirmed the right to privacy in **telephone communications**.
- **Justice K.S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017):** Recognised privacy as a **fundamental right** under Article 21, linking it to other essential freedoms and confirming that restrictions must meet legality, necessity, and proportionality standards.

#### **Landmark Cybercrime Cases Protecting Women:**

- **State of Tamil Nadu v. Suhas Katti:** The accused harassed a woman online by creating a fake email account to post offensive content. Convicted under **Sections 469 and 509 IPC** and **Section 67 IT Act**, he received rigorous and simple imprisonment along with fines, marking a milestone in cyber law enforcement.
- **Shreya Singhal v. Union of India:** Challenged **Section 66A of the IT Act**, which criminalised online communication deemed offensive or misleading. The Supreme Court struck down Section 66A, emphasising the **right to free speech and expression**, noting the distinction between mere discussion/advocacy and incitement to public disorder.

These rulings collectively **strengthen the legal framework protecting women** from online harassment and uphold the constitutional guarantee of privacy and dignity in digital spaces.

#### **Conclusion**

Women in India face a growing threat of **online harassment and cybercrime**, which has escalated in frequency in recent years.

These offences can have severe consequences, including **financial loss, reputational damage, and emotional distress**. While India has a relatively robust **legal framework** to combat cybercrimes against women, law enforcement and the judiciary continue to face challenges in effectively addressing these offences. The government has implemented various laws and initiatives to prevent and report cybercrimes, yet addressing the **root causes**—such as patriarchal attitudes, gender-based discrimination, and lack of awareness about cybersecurity—remains crucial. Organising **workshops and educational programs** on cyberspace safety is essential for empowering women to protect themselves online. However, societal change must begin at home, fostering respect for women and a spirit of solidarity. As Swami Vivekananda aptly said, “*The nation which does not respect women will never become great.*” Legal sanctions alone, such as fines or imprisonment, are insufficient to prevent cyber victimisation. Perpetrators can exploit false identities, social media platforms, and online services—including WhatsApp, Google, Yahoo, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter—to further harass victims. This highlights the need for **digital literacy and awareness**, enabling individuals and students to use online applications safely and report crimes effectively. Ultimately, the internet can be both a **blessing and a curse**. While it offers countless opportunities, users must remain vigilant about **their privacy and rights**, and learn to use technology responsibly and securely to minimise risks.

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