



EXPLORING THE MECHANISMS AND IMPACT OF ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT AGAINST WOMEN

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ABSTRACT

The rapid advancement of digital technology and artificial intelligence has fundamentally transformed communication, providing unparalleled connectivity and convenience. However, this technological evolution has also brought to light, a troubling increase in online violence, particularly affecting women. Women are disproportionately targeted by various forms of online abuse, with sexual online harassment emerging as a particularly severe and widespread issue. This paper delves into the mechanisms and dangers of sexual online harassment, shedding light on how it manifests and the significant risks it poses to women's safety, dignity and overall well-being.

Sexual online harassment encompasses a range of unwelcome and inappropriate sexual behaviors conducted through digital platforms, including social media, email, and messaging apps. This form of harassment is not limited to a single type of behavior but includes various harmful practices such as unsolicited sexual advances, explicit and threatening messages and the non-consensual sharing of intimate images. The paper defines online sexual harassment as any unwelcome sexual behavior facilitated through digital means, highlighting specific manifestations such as "cyber flashing" (the sending of unsolicited sexual images), "revenge porn" (the distribution of intimate images without consent to cause harm or extortion), and "creep shots" (sexually suggestive images taken and shared without consent). The study reviews existing literature and case studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of these behaviors and their impacts. It explores how societal and technological factors contribute to the proliferation of online sexual harassment, including the anonymity afforded by digital platforms, which often emboldens perpetrators and complicates efforts to hold them accountable. Additionally, the paper examines the emotional, psychological, and social consequences faced by victims, such as anxiety, depression and social isolation, which underscore the urgent need for effective interventions and support systems.

By offering a nuanced analysis of online sexual harassment, this paper aims to contribute to the ongoing discourse on this critical issue. It seeks to enhance awareness of the various forms of online sexual harassment, elucidate the broader societal implications, and highlight the need for comprehensive strategies to address and mitigate this pervasive problem. Through a detailed review of the mechanisms and impacts of online sexual harassment, the paper advocates for strengthened legal frameworks, improved support services and targeted educational initiatives to combat this growing menace effectively.

KEYWORDS: Online, Sexual harassment, Women

Introduction

Online violence against women and girls is a pervasive and alarming global issue. Research indicates that approximately one in three women has experienced physical or sexual violence, with a growing portion of this abuse occurring online. The anonymity of the internet often emboldens perpetrators, complicating reporting and prosecution and increasing the frequency of these offenses. The interplay between physical and online violence is evident, as individuals subjected to physical abuse are frequently targeted in digital spaces as well (König, Gollwitzer, & Steffgen, 2010).

A Pew Research Center study reveals that women are more likely than men to experience online sexual harassment (16% vs. 5%) and stalking (13% vs. 9%). Young women are particularly vulnerable, with 33% of women under 35 reporting online sexual harassment compared to 11% of men in the same age group.

In Sri Lanka, the difficulties faced by women in addressing online harassment are significantly exacerbated by prevailing cultural norms and inadequate legal frameworks. Cultural attitudes and societal stigma often discourage victims from coming forward, creating a barrier to justice and support. This stigma silences victims, who fear judgment or retaliation, and impedes their ability to seek help or legal redress.

The lack of specific legal protections for online harassment in Sri Lanka contributes to the problem, as existing laws do not fully address the complexities of digital abuse. Without comprehensive legal frameworks, victims find themselves with limited options for recourse, amplifying the emotional and psychological toll of harassment.

Understanding online violence within the broader context of gender-based discrimination is essential. According to the International Center for Research on Women, technology-facilitated gender-based violence includes harmful acts that target individuals based on their sexual or gender identity, utilizing digital technology to perpetrate harassment, intimidation, and exploitation (Hinson et al., 2018). The UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women further defines online violence as gender-based violence that is facilitated by information and communication technologies (ICTs), disproportionately affecting women (UN-SRVW, 2018).

Scope and Nature of Online Sexual Harassment

Online sexual harassment is a growing issue with various manifestations. It predominantly affects younger women, who are more vulnerable in digital spaces.

- *Non-Consensual Sharing of Intimate Images*

Non-consensual sharing of intimate images, often referred to as "revenge porn," involves distributing private sexual content without consent. This form of harassment is typically used to retaliate or coerce, causing severe emotional distress and long-term impacts on victims' personal and professional lives.

- *Sexualized Bullying*

Sexualized bullying includes sending unwanted sexual messages, making inappropriate comments, or sharing explicit images. This behavior creates a hostile environment, leading to significant emotional pain and diminished self-confidence.

- *Exploitation and Coercion*

Exploitation and coercion involve threats to share intimate content to force compliance. This manipulation creates a hostile environment, leading to psychological distress and a sense of helplessness.

- *Doxxing*

Doxxing involves publicly sharing personal information without consent, leading to fear for personal safety and ongoing anxiety. This act disrupts victims' sense of security and can have long-lasting mental health effects.

- *Cyber Stalking*

Cyber stalking consists of persistent, unwanted contact intended to intimidate or frighten the victim. This behavior severely impacts the victim's mental health and sense of safety.

- *Grooming*

Grooming is a manipulative process where an adult builds trust with a child online, intending to exploit them sexually. The emotional and psychological harm inflicted through grooming is profound and lasting.

- *Up Skirting and Voyeurism*

Up skirting and voyeurism involve capturing images or videos of individuals without their consent, often exacerbating other forms of harassment like revenge porn.

- *Trolling and Message Bombing*

Trolling and message bombing involve creating a hostile online environment through inflammatory comments or overwhelming messages. These tactics contribute to a toxic digital culture, making it challenging for victims to maintain their online presence.

The "Nth Room" scandal, which came to light in early 2020, involves a series of digital sex crimes orchestrated through various online chatrooms. The scandal centered around a network of chatrooms on the encrypted messaging app Telegram, where perpetrators created and shared explicit content involving coercion, blackmail, and abuse. The chatrooms, known as "Nth Room" and its variations, were operated by individuals who referred to themselves as "room masters" or "operators." These chatrooms functioned as platforms for distributing illicit content and controlling victims. Victims many of whom were young women, were lured into these chatrooms under false pretenses or through coercion. Perpetrators would manipulate victims into performing sexual acts on camera, often using threats or blackmail to maintain control. Once content was recorded, it was used to coerce the victims further. The perpetrators would threaten to release intimate videos or images unless the victims complied with additional demands. The psychological and emotional impact on victims was profound. Many experienced severe trauma, including anxiety, depression and long-lasting effects on their personal and professional lives.

Mechanisms of Online Sexual Harassment

- *Platforms and Tools*

Various digital platforms facilitate online sexual harassment. Social media sites like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and Twitter are common venues where perpetrators exploit their reach to harass. Messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram offer privacy that can be misused for harassment. Online gaming environments also see harassment, with anonymity enabling abusive behavior.

- *Anonymity and its Impact*

The internet's anonymity allows perpetrators to hide their identities, reducing accountability and emboldening them to commit severe harassment. Impersonation,

where fake accounts are used to deceive and exploit victims, further complicates accountability and privacy.

- *Psychological Manipulation*

Psychological manipulation is central to online harassment. Grooming and coercion use deceptive relationships and threats to exploit victims, creating a profound sense of confusion and distress.

Impacts of Online Sexual Harassment

- *Emotional and Psychological Effects*

Victims of online sexual harassment often experience anxiety, depression, and PTSD. The constant fear and invasion of privacy lead to persistent emotional pain and diminished self-esteem.

- *Social and Professional Consequences*

Online harassment affects victims' social and professional lives, leading to withdrawal from social interactions and challenges in maintaining job performance and relationships.

- *Long-Term Effects*

The long-term impact of online harassment includes chronic psychological trauma and difficulty in regaining a sense of normalcy and security. Comprehensive support and intervention are essential for recovery.

Current Legal and Support Frameworks

- *Legal Protections*

Legal protections against online harassment vary. In Sri Lanka, the legal framework is still developing, and existing laws do not fully address digital harassment. Computer Crimes Act No. 24 of 2007 addresses various forms of computer-related crimes, including unauthorized access and data manipulation. However, its provisions do not specifically target online sexual harassment or cyberstalking, leaving significant gaps in addressing such issues. Penal Code of Sri Lanka covers general offenses related to sexual violence and harassment but lacks specific provisions for online or technology-facilitated harassment. Provisions related to criminal

intimidation, defamation, and obscene publications could be applied to online contexts but are often inadequate for dealing with the complexities of digital abuse. Globally, efforts to enhance legal protections are ongoing, but their effectiveness depends on implementation and enforcement.

- *Support Services*

Support services include counseling, therapy, and legal aid. These services play a critical role in helping victims cope with emotional and psychological impacts, though barriers to access and societal stigma persist.

Prevention and Advocacy

- *Educational Campaigns*

Educational campaigns are vital for raising awareness about online sexual harassment and promoting safe online practices. Training for professionals like social workers and law enforcement is also crucial for effective response.

For example, a successful initiative program called, Safe Sisters, which is a joint initiative of Internews and DefendDefenders that seek to address the growing epidemic of online violence against women, by empowering women to learn digital safety skills to protect themselves online. The Safe Sisters fellowship provides digital safety skills-building, ongoing mentorship and hands-on training opportunities for women especially human rights defenders and journalists to become digital safety trainers and resources for their own communities.

- *Policy Recommendations*

Recommendations include developing comprehensive laws targeting online abuse, improving enforcement, and enhancing support services. Increasing public awareness and reducing stigma are also important.

- *Role of Technology Companies*

Technology companies must implement robust safety measures, including effective reporting systems and collaboration with experts to combat harassment and support victims.

Conclusion

Online sexual harassment represents a serious and escalating threat to women's safety and well-being in the digital age. This article has examined the various forms of online sexual harassment, including non-consensual sharing of intimate images, sexualized bullying, exploitation and coercion, doxxing, cyberstalking, grooming, upskirting, voyeurism, and trolling. Each form of harassment not only inflicts immediate emotional and psychological damage but also has far-reaching impacts on victims' social and professional lives.

The anonymity of digital platforms, coupled with the rapid evolution of technology, has created a challenging environment for combating online harassment. This anonymity emboldens perpetrators, complicates legal responses, and hinders effective enforcement of protections. Psychological manipulation and the exploitation of digital tools further exacerbate the issue, making it essential to address these challenges comprehensively.

To effectively tackle online sexual harassment, it is crucial to strengthen legal frameworks and enhance support services for victims. Developing comprehensive laws specifically targeting online abuse, improving enforcement mechanisms, and expanding mental health and legal support are vital steps. Additionally, educational campaigns and training for professionals can help raise awareness, promote safe online practices and equip individuals to respond effectively to harassment.

Technology companies also play a significant role in this fight. Implementing robust safety measures, effective reporting systems, and collaborating with experts are necessary actions for creating safer digital spaces.

Ultimately, addressing online sexual harassment requires a multi-faceted approach involving legal reforms, societal change and proactive measures from both individuals and institutions. By working together, we can mitigate the impact of online harassment and foster a safer, more respectful digital environment for all.

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