CYBER SOCIALIZING AND THE GROWTH OF HI-TECH CRIMES AGAINST WOMEN*

ABSTRACT

In this digital age, Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is benefiting billions across the world by bridging certain gaps and multiplying human potential in every walk of life. With the advancement of ICT, the crime using internet has also widened its roots in all directions. The cyber-crimes pose a great threat to individuals. Cyber crimes against women are on the raise and women have been drastically victimized in the cyberspace. Socialization through Social Networking Websites (SNWs) has become a favorite hobby for self supporting, educated, independent, modern women of the 21st Century. The social networking websites help users make new "virtual friends" and offer "promise" to reunite with old friends and relatives. Most women users avail this new way of socialization as a stress – reliever. Cyber socializing through SNWs help women users to share with like minded friends, their emotional needs, personal problems, culinary skills, tips for child care and health care including pregnancy and post pregnancy issues. These women users discuss these "needs", tips and even their "mood swings" with their virtual friends who become "emotional comfort zones" for them either by writing on walls of some group/community forums or on the walls of their friend's profiles. Even though social networking websites have opened a wide window for socializing, they have also opened flood gate for various crimes against women in the cyber space. This paper examines the victimization of women in the social networking websites and ascertains the reasons for the growth of such victimization.

Keywords: Cyber Socializing, Women, Victimization, Social Networking Websites (SNWs).

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INTRODUCTION

Technological developments related to communication have developed a communion among the people, who lives world apart. The internet is one of the greatest inventions in the arena of communication. With the advent of internet, the whole world has become a global village. It has created a virtual world with no boundaries, which gives people ample opportunities to ameliorate both personal and professional relationships across borders. The socio-economic and cultural facets of life have been tremendously affected owing to the rise of globalization. The cyberspace has been a blessing to human civilization. Internet has connected people around the globe. The desire to know what is unknown is indispensable of human nature. It is the desire to know about the people, who inhabit the earth, has aggravated the urge of discovering the untraded path. This has led to the unearthing of the cyber world. One of the benefits which internet has provided to every section of the society is empowerment, including women.

Cyber socializing has become hugely popular, and Web sites that help people meet potential dates, find new friends and keep track of old ones are big business. Hundreds of sites attract millions of users, and more sites come online daily. Born along with the Internet in the early 1970s, cyber socializing has helped people worldwide link to others with common interests for conversation and support. Nevertheless, new social-networking sites like Facebook and Tumblr raise more troubling privacy issues than traditional Internet chat rooms. Visitors to such sites can access not only individuals' posted profiles but also profiles of their friends. Parents and law-enforcement agencies worry that predators can use the information to contact vulnerable teens. Adult internet, as a sexual as well as non sexual entertainment started getting popularity challenges from the Social Networking Websites (SNWs) where communication became more transparent. In the SNWs users could create their own "profiles" providing their names, residences, schooling and college information, likes and dislikes to "find new friends" or "to relocate long lost friends". These SNWs were able to attract teens and women as they felt the danger of unknown sexual predator or problems of privacy could be lesser here. But mostly they remained oblivious of the fact that their identity could be exposed for worst making them potential victims for online sexual assault, stalking, identity theft, cyber gender harassment and even domestic violence by a suspicious spouse or even ex-spouse. Popularity of social networking reached its highest peak which led to the inevitable growth of gender harassment in the cyber space globally.

The Social Networking Websites (SNWs) have developed a new arena for socializing. Irrespective of any distinction, women in the society are exulting with this liberation to the fullest. From online shopping to net banking, from e-ticketing to e-tax filling, it has made the life of Indian women easy. It has enabled women to fight for equality even within the confines of their society. They can now share their experiences to the whole world, and this advantage of being able to share their success stories as well as their problems have given them a platform in the global world. Along with providing them with a platform to voice their struggles and success in life, it inscribes new spaces of power, which is accompanied with knowledge. Ironically, on the one side, the internet is serving as boon, but on the other side, it has made the life of women insecure due to rising cyber crime in the virtual world. Women of all ages and milieu are in jeopardy with the coming up of internet. India is predominantly patriarchal and orthodox country and women who are victimized are mostly blamed and online victims are no exception. There are instances where marriages of women victims were stopped due to their online victimization. Also, there is less legal protection to them compared to their western counterparts and the Indian women victims do not get adequate solutions for their victimization from the ISPs governed predominantly from a western cultural perspective

PATTERNS OF VICTIMIZATION OF WOMEN IN THE SNWs

Women in the SNWs are victimized in different patterns by the abuser who can be an individual or even a group of individuals. The victimization type differs on the basis of various factors, for example, on the basis of the victim's sexuality, her ideologies, her marital status, her profession and professional commitments, the regularity of her participation in some chosen groups, the language she may use, her popularity in the groups etc. Again, the abuser can be both male or female. Similarly, the offences can be either sexual or non sexual in nature. In most cases, male harassers attack the victim for sexual purposes like morphing, using the image for pornographic purposes, cyber stalking etc. and non sexual purposes such as harassment and bullying. Female perpetrators however, victimize the victim mainly for ideological differences, hatred or for taking revenge. Such attacks may not be sexual in nature. Based on the above criteria the typology of the offences against the women victims in the SNWs is framed as follows:

1. *Cyber verbal abuse by groups of perpetrators expressing hatred:* This can be described as "cyber mob attack" where a female member of the SNW may be attacked by a group of perpetrators both in the community wall and also in her own message board.

2. *Cyber defamation targeting the individual self*: Emotional breakups may lead the male member to spread lies about the female member to other members through his own posts, community walls etc.

3. *Cyber stalking*: The female member is stalked in all the groups she joins, her friends' walls are constantly watched for seeing her posts, her own write ups and her activities online.

4. *Morphing*: The photographs of the female members are taken from the personal albums and they are morphed for pornographic purposes by using parts of the pictures, for instance, the head or up to breast.

5. *Cloning:* Cloned profiles or fake profiles of female victims are created by stealing the personal information of the female member. The cloned profile presents the original profile in such a manner that people are duped. The cloned profile then asks the friends of the original member to become his/ her friend and crack the privacy of other members besides using the original member's information for evil purposes. Female members in the popular SNWs like Facebook, Tumblr and MySpace often face this problem.

6. *Cyber obscenity*: The victim's photograph is used, morphed and distributed in the internet with obscene postures. The harasser may also post messages using obscene languages to her wall. Cyber obscenity can also be practiced by way of hacking the profile of the female member. Then the original photographs posted in the mentioned profile are morphed and the profile name and information as well as the morphed photographs are used to send obscene messages to the "friends" of the original profile owner and also to wider audience.

7. *Hacking:* Particular targets are chosen and their profiles are hacked. Their personal information is used for evil purposes. The harasser may even distribute open invitations for having sex with the profile owner at her home address.

8. *Cyber harassment*: This may include constant messaging to the profile's wall or personal email id which is shown in the profile, regular peeping in as a visitor and leaving messages in her wall, continuously sending request for friendship, joining groups where she is member and constantly posting messages disagreeing with her, etc.

9. *Virtual rape*: This is a violent type of cyber victimization where the targeted woman is taken up by a harasser. He either posts constant messages like "I will rape you" or "I will tear you up" etc, or particular community members may "mob attack" the targeted female with such words which successfully generates more enthusiasm among other unrelated members to comment on the victim's sexuality. The profile owner then becomes a hot topic for erotic discussions, vulgar name calling etc.

10. *Banning a female member and restraining her from expressing her views*: This generally happens in a male dominated group or community where the moderator or owner or group members may victimize the targeted female member by banning her for her own feminist ideologies even through the group or the community could have been created for letting people express their own ideologies. The reason could be that the majority of the group may be pro feminist or some individual members dislike the straight forwardness of the female members in discussing the problems of women in everyday world.

11. *Cyber bullying and name calling*: The harasser may constantly bully the target in the SNW, both in her wall and in the groups or communities where either he or she is member. Even though this is a gender neutral cyber offence, women are most chosen targets for their sexuality, emotional breakups or even domestic violence. The ex-spouse or the ex-lover constantly bully the woman to vent out his anger in public.

12. *Domestic violence and cyber flame*: As mentioned above, separated partners may take up SNWs to vent out their anger against the female member. In such cases the ex-partner starts bullying the woman first and then provokes her to have "online fights".

13. *Impersonation and cheating:* SNWs give wide options for creating profiles under pseudo names, hiding one's real age, sex and other information. Further, the creation of multiple profiles of the same individual using different email ids is also possible in the SNWs. This gives the opportunity for mischief mongers to impersonate and flirt with female members'. The harasser drags the victim in an emotional relationship and she is encouraged to share her secrets, and even have erotic chats with the harasser. When the victim finally pressurizes to meet him in person, either he blackmails the victim or cheats the victim. However, impersonation and cheating can even happen for financial issues in the SNWs as well. The harasser may promise the victim some online or offline monetary gain by showing his fake credentials and there by later on dupe the victim.

14. *Blackmailing and threatening:* This happens due to the easy availability of the personal information of the women members in the SNWs. Ex-spouses, mischief mongers and stalkers may threaten and blackmail the woman for various reasons which may even lead to shut down the profile of the female member. This can even have an offline effect where miscreants may physically threat and blackmail the woman with her secrets that she may have shared with her friends in groups or communities.

REASONS FOR THE GROWTH OF VICTIMIZATION OF WOMEN IN CYBER SOCIALIZATION

1. *Easy availability of victims' (women's) personal information:* SNWs are made to let other people know the existence of the profile owner. Hence users give away their vital information like residential address, marital status, age, phone numbers, likes and dislikes etc. Even though many SNWs provide options for using pseudo names and publication of such information as only "optional", many first time registrants, including women, float their personal information in the web through these SNWs without actually knowing the dangerous effect of it. This gives a huge opportunity for harassers to victimize the targets.

2. *Ignorance and negligence of the users:* Women are prone to all sorts of cyber crimes like hacking, stalking, morphing, cyber cheating, cyber defamation, and cyber sexual abuse. Social Networking Websites (SNWs) have become breeding grounds for such crimes. The question which haunts researchers is: Why women are the targeted majority in the SNWs? We feel that among several factors which push women to become victims in the SNWs, the ignorance of the policy guidelines and safety measures stands first. The SNWs presently give wide options to protect oneself from being harassed in various modes like setting up security measures, "locking" personal albums and message boards, blocking the harasser, preventing aliens from seeing one's personal information, preventing unknown persons from writing in one's message board, blocking and banning individuals from community and groups and hiding one's profile from the internet search.

3. *Scheming ways to hide one's real identity under camouflaged profiles:* The SNWs allow a user to change his pseudo name and address at a regular interval. Even though this step was taken up by the SNWs for benefiting the members to change their physical and geographical location and at the same time saving themselves from perpetrators, this has encouraged the perpetrators to

commit a crime and hide under a new identity. These hide and seek games by the perpetrators increase the risk factor of women members of the SNWs.

4. *Lackadaisical response of the SNWs:* Most of the SNWs have an option to report any abuse of their services. This includes reporting of cyber harassment, cyber bullying, cyber threats, and cyber pornography. But in most cases SNWs have their own policies to treat the post as defamatory or harassing. Sometimes delayed response or even nil response from the website authorities increase the panic in the victim and the harasser gets infinite opportunities to harm the victim's reputation within the stipulated time. It is noteworthy that, most of the SNWs declare in their privacy policies that they will not take any responsibility for any sorts of harassment caused to the users by other users. However, they provide safety tips in the menu bar and warn the users that their profile may be removed if it is reported that the said profile is harassing others, creating hate campaign, soliciting pornography etc. It is unfortunate that these guidelines are not followed properly.

5. *Lack of uniform laws, conventions and rules:* Most happening in the SNWs, are not universally recognized by any uniform law, convention or rules. The offences are not legally defined; hence perpetrators often escape punishment. This creates bigger problem for victims, especially women. The lack of universal laws to regulate social networking websites and the nil legal recognition of the offences that happen against women in the cyber space thus encourage the growth of online victimization of women.

REASONS FOR THE GROWTH OF CYBER CRIME AGAINST WOMEN IN INDIA

The transcendental jurisdiction of Internet causes the major threat to the society in the form of cybercrime. The main victim of this transgression can be considered women and children. It is very common phenomenon that the important information of the net surfer is being disclosed easily by the owners of cyber café and then it is used for illegal purposes. Although acquaintance with technology is positive aspect that can be considered important for the development of any country but at the same time it is becoming the source to increase the crime rate with technology against the weaker section of the society. The reason for the increasing cyber crime rate against women can be categorized into two folds:

1. **Legal Reasons**

Cybercrime against women is on at alarming stage and it may pose as a major threat to the security of a person as a whole. In India the term "cybercrime against women" includes sexual crimes and

sexual abuses on the internet. India is considered as one of the very few countries to enact IT Act 2000 to combat cybercrimes. The object of the IT Act is crystal clear from its preamble which shows that it was created mainly for enhancing e-commerce hence it covers commercial or financial crimes i.e. hacking, fraud, and breach of confidentiality etc. but the drafters were unaware about the safety of net users. Cyber defamation, email spoofing, cyber sex, hacking and trespassing into one's private domain is very common nowadays but IT Act is not expressly mentioning them under specific Sections or Provisions. Indian Constitution guarantees equal right to live, education, health, food and work to women. But the same modesty of women seems not to be protected in general.

2. **Sociological Reasons**

Most of the cyber crimes remain unreported due to the hesitation and shyness of the victim and her fear of defamation of family's name. Many times she believes that she herself is responsible for the crime done to her. The women are more susceptible to the danger of cyber crime as the perpetrator's identity remains anonymous and he may constantly threaten and blackmail the victim with different names and identities. In India, most women still do not go to the police to complain against sexual harassment, whether it is in the real world or the virtual world. They prefer to shun off the matter as they feel that it may disturb their family life.

REMEDIES FOR THE INCREASING HI-TECH CRIMES AGAINT WOMEN

1. The increasing number of crimes against women is a huge concern for any state or country however, crimes through cyber socializing make it even more challenging as criminals have the opportunity to create fake identities and then after indulge in illegal activities. To counter this Government should make stricter laws to apply on the Internet Service Providers (ISP), as they alone have the complete record of all the data being accessed by anyone surfing on net. ISPs should be made to report any suspicious activities that any individual is indulging into, this will help to curb crimes in nascent stage.

2. Legislation needs to make strict regulation for cyber cafes, who should keep a record of their customers who utilized their internet services, often people go to cyber cafes to indulge in criminal activities so as their own IP addresses are not revealed in any future investigation. This is another manner to mask identity.

3. People need to be cautious over which parts of their daily lives are being recorded by cameras and should act modest in such times. Awareness over cyber culture and its drawbacks also need to be improved amongst people. People need to be made aware of their rights.

4. Email spoofing is possible because of Simple Mail Transfer Protocol (SMTP), the main protocol used in sending email, does not allow an authentication mechanism. Although an SMTP service extension allows an SMTP client to negotiate a security level with a mail server, however this precaution is not always taken. So women should take precaution and always add the SMTP service extension with the SMTP client.

The chief problem of crimes through cyber socializing lies in the modus operandi and the persistence of the cybercriminal. The police, judiciary and the investigative agencies need to stay abreast with the latest developments in web-based applications so that they can quickly identify the actual perpetrator. It is the job of the legal system and regulatory agencies to keep pace with the Technological developments and ensure that newer technologies do not become tools of exploitation and harassment. Governments can take legislative measures that ensure human rights; especially women's rights are protected online just as they are physical spaces. Legislation should not just protect users; however, it should also educate and inform all groups on how to exercise their communication rights. At the same time, Individuals must become savvy both online and offline; know how to take precautionary measures in cyberspace and how to seek recourse if their rights are violated. Cybercrimes such as morphing, e-mail spoofing do-not have a moral backing in society and hence are taken lightly. This brings us to the most important part where social advancement is needed, people need to recognise the rights of others and realise what constitutes a crime. They must learn not to interfere with the private lives of others, respect towards women in society needs to increase. All this can only be done if young kinds are taught from a young age to respect women. Hence, to counter cybercrime against women, not only stricter penal reforms are needed but also a change in education system is a huge requirement. Such change cannot come from within a single block of society but people, Government and NGOs etc. need to work together to bring forth such changes.

CONCLUSION

The main aim of cyber socializing is to give the users opportunity to meet with old and new friends, increase networks and socialize without actually going in person to the social gatherings. But this

is not a hazard free zone. The main drawback of cyber socializing is the uncertain reliability of the "virtual friend" we meet up every day in the SNWs. At the same time, many users treat cyber socializing as a space for over riding their freedom of speech and expression. This attracts many offences like cyber flame, cyber hate speech, cyber bullying and cyber eve teasing etc. Online socializing never remains risk free for women mainly due to their sexuality. Majority of the cyber crimes targeting women happen in the SNWs but as no society can be crime free, online societies are no exception. Cyber crime exists and it is growing in number through SNWs, mails, online chat rooms etc.

Social networking websites provide a wide range of social activities to be carried out in the cyber space. It is therefore very obvious that online socializing is also as vulnerable as real life socializing. But the patterns may differ due to the hi-tech nature of the offences. The attackers may or may not be known to the victims and reasons and motives behind victimization are mostly emotional issues. The harasser also uses the broader platform of the cyber space to victimize the target under camouflaged identities. Moreover, the unequipped, not-so-fitting, or developing laws, where such offences are not recognized or are yet to be recognized, help to expand the pattern of victimization day by day.

The two main reasons which attribute towards the growth of online victimization of women in the SNWs are: absence of proper gender sensitive universal cyber laws and lack of awareness of the safety modes among users of the SNWs. The SNWs are considered as a large global platform to express one's ideologies, thoughts and feelings about others. Every individual is supposed to use this platform at his or her own risk. Unfortunately, there are less laws and policy guidelines to regulate cyber space and this insufficiency gives full freedom to the perpetrators. This is a perfect example of how ignorance of cyber-social rules and norms coupled with weak laws can encourage criminalization in the online socialization. Laws can draw a defining line for limiting individual's behavior. But it depends upon the individual to make use of the laws to make their living space including cyber space more safe and beautiful.