

Research Article

Internet Abuse: A Newer form of Sexual Harassment

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A B S T R A C T

Face to face sexual harassment is a well-known, commonly occurring, extensively investigated, and treated to some extent social problem. Sexual harassment behaviours are classified into the categories of gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion. Evidences show that sexual harassment behaviour occurs as a product of person and situation characteristics and has substantial personal and organizational costs. This article reviews the available information on sexual harassment in cyberspace, equates this phenomenon with what has been learned about sexual harassment offline, describes specific characteristics of online culture and technology that reinforce the behaviour, and proposes ways of promoting prevention.

Keywords: Sexual Harassment, Internet, Prevention, Computer-Mediated Communication

Introduction

Throughout the history of mankind, millions of women across the globe have experienced violence or live with its consequences on an everyday basis. They have remained the subjects of men's cruelties much of which remained accepted, condoned and even legally approved.^{1,2} In older times, Roman law permitted men to chastise their wives, even to the extent of death, and the burning of alleged witches in medieval Europe was accepted by both, the church and the state.^{3,4} In India, *satee*, the practice of burning of widowed women alive with their dead husbands, was considered an act of merit for a faithful, pious and devout wife. Honour killing is not a rare occurrence in modern India with its roots in ancient religious scriptures.⁵ Whether it was Sita's fire-trial or Dropadi's disrobing incident, there have been countless instances depicting women's victimization across world's history and geography speaking volumes on the violation of women's human rights and invasion of their dignity. The history of violence against women is closely related to the historical view of women as

property of men and the gender role of subservience they occupy in the society.⁶ Women's experience of pervasive sexual intimidation and outright abuse is a consequence of social pathology which makes regular headlines of daily newspapers in current times and include, rape, intimate partner violence, sexual coercion, sexual abuse by non-intimate partners.⁷

Sexual harassment is one form of sexual crime that is commonest of all sex-related crimes and widely prevalent at workplace all over the world. In the recent years, sexual harassment has been extensively researched in terms of its prevalence, correlates, individual and organizational outcomes and prevention; covering psychological, sociological, medical, legal, and educational aspects of the phenomenon.⁸ There are several ways to express sexual harassment but the central feature of the act is, 'unwanted or unwelcome conduct of sexual nature'. Of the several modes to inflict sexual harassment, internet is one, which is frequently used to harass women sexually, during the recent times. Most victims of sexual harassment on the

Internet are women, though other populations have been targeted as well.⁹

Review the literature on sexual harassment in cyberspace provides newer insights in terms of its similarities with offline harassment, analysis of the dynamics of online sexual harassment, adverse effects of sexual harassment due to Internet on the victims, and to design a preventive program.

Internet as a device can be used to pursue both, healthy and pathological behaviours, it is exploited for good or for evil purposes.¹⁰ It can be used for constructive, and positive advancement and joy of people and also for negative aspects that humiliate, terrorize, and block social progress. Sexual harassment on the Internet leads to significant emotional harm and causes adverse mental health effects on the users of Net and thus prevents them from legitimate use of Internet for the fear of getting sexually harassed.

Offline Sexual Harassment

Face-to-face sexual harassment in social environments is widespread at work, educational institutions, factories, construction sites and agricultural fields.¹¹ Depending upon the type of behaviours, their causes, correlates, impact on victims and the personal coping, the phenomenon is classified into three distinct categories: gender harassment, unwanted sexual attention, and sexual coercion.¹²

Gender harassment is unwelcome verbal and visual comments and remarks insulting women because of their gender or use or intend to provoke negative emotions with specific visual stimuli such as pornographic pictures in public or in places where they deliberately insult, telling smut jokes, and degrading remarks. *Unwanted sexual attention* may include stalking, staring at a woman's breasts or making lewd comments about a woman's body. *Sexual coercion* is using physical or psychological pressure to get sexual cooperation such as unwelcome touching, offering bribe or threatening for sexual favours.

Sexual Harassment in Cyberspace

The above mentioned three face to face types of sexual harassment also exist on the Internet but most common form on the Net is *gender harassment*, and *unwanted sexual attention* and *sexual coercion* occur least often than offline. Sexual harassment in cyberspace commonly occurs in the form of *active verbal sexual harassment* which comprises offensive sexual messages, actively initiated by a harasser toward a victim. The verbal harassment often include gender-humiliating comments. A study on Internet found that 62% of the adolescent girls using internet received unwanted sex-related e-mails to their personal addresses, 92% of these mails came from unknown senders.¹³

In passive verbal category, the harasser does not target directly to a particular person but, to potential receivers.

A university professor in Kolkata, equated a virgin woman with a 'sealed bottle' in his social media post which he asserted was for 'fun' in a closed group without targeting any particular individual but the state's women commission took it otherwise and university authorities had to divest the don of his teaching assignments and an inquiry initiated by the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) of the university.¹⁴

Graphic representations can also be active and passive like the verbal. Intentionally sending of erotic and pornographic still pictures or videos through individual online communication channels is *Active graphic gender harassment*, like e-mail, or an online environment. Recipient of the mail may react variedly depending upon her sensitivity on the material sent whereas pictures and videos are published on web sites in *Passive graphic gender harassment* type. Sexual harassment comes into effect when web users do not know in advance and have no prior clue what is going to offend them. Sexual harassment is highly prevalent where pop-up windows and redirected links to porno sites are forced.

Subjective experience of sexual harassment is determined by the personal sensitivities and preferences of the recipient and the nature of the verbal or graphic stimulus in terms of explicitness, blatancy, and clamorous-ness, in addition to its continuity and repetition. These factors decide the intensity and the gravity of sexual harassment.

On the internet, the unwelcome sexual conduct often requires a direct and personal verbal communication between a harasser and a victim which may appear in the form of messages with sexual overtone such as asking about a victim's sex organs (how dense is the growth of your pubic hair?), sex life (are you very hot in the bed?), or intimate subjects (are you menstruating at present?); or invite, insinuate, or offer sex-related activities (join me in the bed and have fun). To label sexual attention as sexual harassment, it must be uninvited and unwelcome on the part of the victim and the person who deliberately enters a chat room for the sake of finding partner, is obviously consenting, even inviting, sexual comments. Therefore, a message of sexual attention cannot be regarded as sexual harassment in this context because the recipient has deliberately entered into the chat knowing its consequences. The basic motive of the harasser may be to cause emotional hurt and not necessarily to gain sexual cooperation.

Internet related sexual intimidation is different from gender harassment and unwanted sexual attention, because it involves the use of various means such as online, to elicit sexual cooperation by putting some kind of pressure on a victim. Use of physical force is not possible online but the victims may feel threatened of physical force on the Internet similar to as it is experienced in face-to-face encounters. Online stalking or *cyberstalking* is a form of psychological

pressure to achieve sexual gains-that is, a form of sexual coercion.¹⁵

Sexual harassment on Internet is similar to the harassment which occurs face to face. The only difference is that the perpetrator uses his technical knowledge to harass the victim in case of Internet harassment. Sending frightening or sexually offending e-mails, viruses, and flooding an e-mail inbox of woman recipients are actually sexual coercion.¹⁶

Bribery and seductions are other forms of sexual coercion to achieve sexual gains; online mode is an easy and convenient way to convey such messages in an effective manner particularly for those perpetrators who have high writing skills. These forms grant impersonation and cheating of innocent people by use of incentives-baits-to encourage sexual cooperation particularly the paedophiles operate online and seduce young children through the effective use of luring and offering various attractive baits.¹⁷

Prevalence of Sexual Harassment on the Internet

There are no studies on the extent and prevalence of sexual harassment in cyberspace to date; it is only the general impression and sporadic reports which estimate the magnitude of the problem. Sexual harassment of women by e-mail is referred as a common abuse at workplaces. Internet provides a convenient vehicle to force sexuality on women through its non-social and social uses. Sexual harassment online downplays the positive process of empowerment that women gain from its egalitarian use; it serves as an ideal medium for sex offenders to commit sexual harassment because of its unique characteristics. [18] Several research studies provide some indication of the scope of sexual harassment behaviour on the Internet at workplace. In a British survey, 41% of the regularly Internet using women received unsolicited pornographic materials or were harassed or stalked on the Internet.¹⁹ In a survey of American teenagers, 19% of the youths, mostly older girls, had experienced at least one sexual solicitation while online in the past year.²⁰ In India, there have been some studies with almost similar magnitude of the problem.⁸

The Dynamics of Online Sexual Harassment

Face to face sexual harassment is determined by the interaction of the personal characteristics of the individuals and the characteristics of the situation, and the same holds true for online sexual harassment as well. Social disinhibition promotes exposure of an individual's true self on one hand and the special features of computer-mediated communication on the other. It makes the human behaviour more closely reflect authentic inner personal needs and desires. The personal factor is the satisfaction of a perpetrator's sex drive-the perpetrator's need for power and domination. In cyberspace, the online disinhibition

effect causes Internet users to behave less defensively and more naturally. Powerful factors that exist in and around the cyberspace are anonymity, invisibility, lack of eye contact, easy escape, and neutralizing of status. These factors show the real intentions of the harassers when they are online. Internet provides a platform for harassers to behaviour uninhibited and more consistently with their real personality characteristics in expressing themselves. Such a free expression may not be possible in face to face interaction. Internet communication also provides the harassers the anonymity, affordability, acceptability, and aloneness to make the use powerful enough to influence surfers' behaviours. Internet use makes them more daring to involve in sex-related adventures when online.²¹

While online, the male users' personal needs, values, desires, habits, and expectations become more apparent and their intentions to harass get accelerated by the effects of increased salience of social identities in online situations. Social Identity of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) may follow group standards of behaviour rather than individual standards. The online behaviour is affected by disinhibition which the harasser carries. The Social Identity of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE), or their combination are the underlying factors for the dynamics of online sexual harassment. Disinhibited behaviour reinforces a person's true self which allows him to behave according to his inner urges while online. SIDE process follows typical male-dominating, power-based, masculine attitudes and behaviours toward women in their online interactions, making a fertile ground for sexual harassment.

In the cyberspace, the situation in which sexual harassment occurs is extremely important. In addition to encouraging and reinforcing harassment behaviours, the given situation also makes the environment conducive in which the harasser receives consistent reinforcement for his sexual adventures. The harasser can take advantage of anonymous, and invisible, a prominent feature of Internet technology. Internet technology also provides easy-to-execute and untraceable escape route mechanisms which make harasser's task easier. The highly interactive nature of cyberspace reinforces, contributes, maintains and escalates the sexually harassing behaviours. Enforcing Internet related laws is often problematic and often there is breaking of law. Harassers' misadventure is further reinforced by the lack of clear legal boundaries in Internet interaction, and the absence of visible authorities for punishment, encourage people with criminal intentions to do what they would have been restrained from doing in offline face to face interactions. Public records including a great amount of private information that can be abused by cyber harassers, is easily accessible with internet use and cyber stalking.²² There are several online environments which are characterized by an antiwomen spirit. Their attitude

is communicated by verbal messages, by providing links to selective sites, and by displaying obscene pictures degrading the dignity of women. Sexual harassment in the offline domain has a consistent relationship with the social norms, and the degree of tolerance is positively correlated with the extent and severity of harassment.

Those who are high on proclivity to sexually harass, get further reinforced in cyberspace, which further strengthens their proclivity, clearly generates the dynamics of sexual harassment on the Internet. A person who tends to sexually harass would not have behaved this way without the situational opportunities provided by the Net. Harasser's intention and opportunity provided by the situation combine to cause sexual harassment on Internet.

Women who innocently use the Net for legitimate purposes like academic pursuits or office assignments, or seeking health information, may come across dangerous situations. Similarly, women who seek online friendly connections often encounter harassment.²³ The men in position of power often express their attitudes on the Internet even when gender differences are supposedly minimized.²⁴⁻²⁵ Gender inequality often expressed by gender-stereotypic behaviours, has not been reduced by online anonymity. Different populations behave differently online, according to their culture and indigenous social background toward children²⁶ women²⁷ or ethnic groups²⁸ a fact that might trigger stereotypic, sometimes hostile, behaviours by other groups. Internet provides new ways of being in the World, but not in a way which is intrinsically mysterious or different from other aspects of being. The frames for action in cyberspace are not necessarily less or more problematical than in real life—because they are part of real life.

Effects of Internet Sexual Harassment

Offline sexual harassment has a severe impact on its victims²⁹ which include decline in work performance and professional satisfaction at work. There is decreased motivation and lower productivity and psychological impact in the form of negative emotions which may cause depression. Negative psychological, occupational, and economic effects of sexual harassment on the victims are well documented³⁰ and job-related negative effects lead to decline in the work productivity of the victims.^{31,32} Sexual harassment has direct effects on women's physical and mental health; there is close association of sexual harassment with eating disorders, psychological distress, lower self-esteem, sleep disorders, depression and suicidal proclivities. Women victims of sexual harassment have problematic effects in regard to their sexual attitudes and behaviours. They suffer Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), immense disruption to their lives and proneness to physical injuries, substance abuse and contemplation of suicide.

Prevention of Sexual Harassment on the Internet

Offline sexual harassment prevention often involves three parallel ways: legislation and law enforcement, changing of the organizational social culture and education and training of potential victims as well as of potential harassers.³³

Legislation is needed to draw well-defined boundaries for interpersonal sex-related behaviours and to define the sanctions attached to unlawful conduct. Legislation also plays an important social role in communicating the social context of what is accepted and what is not in a given society and thus, serves as a clear sign of values and morals. Implementation of laws is necessary so that they do not just remain theoretical declarations. No doubt, law enforcement is of top priority in all societies, their usefulness in cyberspace is only partial for a number of reasons.

In India, the Information Technology Act, 2000 deals with cybercrime against women and children. Sections 66E, 67, and 67A of the Act provide for the punishment and fine for voyeurism, publishing or transmitting of obscene/sexually-explicit material in electronic form. Sections 354A and 354D of Indian Penal Code provides punishment for cyber bullying and cyber stalking. Section 79 of the Information Technology Act, 2000 provides for certain due diligence to be followed by intermediaries failing which they would be liable. The Information Technology (Intermediaries Guidelines) Rules, 2011 notified the intermediaries inform the users of computer resource not to host, upload, display, modify, publish, transmit, update or share any information that is grossly defamatory, paedophilic, harmful, obscene, pornographic, harms minor in any way, violates such other law.³⁴

No doubt, the legal guidelines for internet use are important and they should be there but they have as limited role in preventing sexual harassment. To control sexual harassment effectively online there should be a change in the cultural norms in which sexual harassment occurs. Educating the potential victims and harassers regarding ethics and cultural values will go a long way to prevent sexual harassment online.³⁵ Focus on these two independent factors will change the behavioural product of people.

Change in cultural norms should include the clear, and consistent messages of zero tolerance for sexual harassment without laxity in this approach. People should appreciate interpersonal sensitivity and have respect for women.³⁶ An awareness should be created among people by conducting training workshops for potential victims, the harassers and the people in general.

It is easier to create awareness in the offline situations but difficult in cyberspace because of the inherent culture of

the Internet where there is limitless space and multicultural users. It may be possible in local online communities through the exercise of responsible, dedicated leadership armed with a firm anti-sexual harassment policy. Continued messages, attractive banners, and well defined sanctions against any deviation from norms of internet use are helpful in preventing sexual harassment on internet.

The subject of sexual harassment on the Internet should be taught in schools in the framework of programs devoted to smart and safe Internet use. An educational intervention will help the children and the potential victims and the harassers to review standards of netiquette behaviour, together with identification of hostile and malicious communications.

Conclusion

Internet is a great source of receiving and disseminating information, it has revolutionized and influenced the lifestyle of people in various ways. It has a great potential to empower women, children and people with disabilities. It may cause devastating effects including sexual harassment. Anonymity make this medium more prone to provide the means needed for sexual harassment, despite the ability of surfers to mask their identifying features as well as their ability to abruptly disconnect contact at will.

Steps should be taken to prevent sexual harassment online by educating people against violent, threatening, domineering, hostile and malicious Internet culture. A consistent, comprehensive, and determined delivery of messages against sexual harassment on Internet will go a long way in reducing its prevalence. Legal provisions are necessary though their role is limited in cyberspace.

Conflict of Interest: None

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