Indian Women at Risk in the Cyber Space: A Conceptual Model of Reasons of Victimization

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Abstract

Cyber crimes against women are on the raise and women have been drastically victimized in the cyberspace. Some perpetrators try to defame women by sending obscene e-mails, stalking women by using chat rooms, websites etc, developing pornographic videos where women are depicted in compromising positions mostly created without their consent, spoofing e-mails, morphing of images for pornographic content etc. The sex-offenders look for their victims on social network websites, and also on job or marriage websites where people post their personal information for better prospect. The revealing of personal information has made women more a casualty of cyber crime. It is evident that victimization of women is leading to cyber crime and vice versa. While there are many instances where women in western countries are victimized, there is a raise of such victimization of women in the eastern regions such as India and these women are relatively with less legal protection and they are unique than their western counterparts (Halder & Jaishankar, 2008, 2009, 2011b). This paper attempts to find out the various reasons behind the fact as to why Indian women are being victimized and a conceptual model of cyber victimization of Indian women is proposed.

Keywords: Women, Cyber Crime, Victimization, Social Networking Sites, Globalization, Patriarchy, Conceptual model.

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

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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 (Halder & Jaishankar, 2009).

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 (Halder & Jaishankar, 2009). 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. In this context, Halder and Jaishankar (2009) have opined: "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…" (p. 6) 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 (Halder & Jaishankar, 2009). While many women are victimized online, what makes Indian women unique? India is predominantly patriarchal and orthodox country and women who are victimized are mostly blamed and online victims are no exception (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011a). 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 (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011b).

In this article, an attempt is made to find out the reasons behind the online victimization of Indian women and a conceptual model is developed for the same.

A Conceptual Model of Reasons of Victimization

The Figure 1 represents a conceptual model of reasons of Indian women victimization, online. It could be concluded from the model that various drivers in the form psychological, sociological, computer knowledge, and technological gap are triggering cyber crime through women victimization. It is interesting to find out that due to the following reasons, women are being victimized, and that is leading to cyber crime in many different ways. Another triggering factor which results in cyber crime is through miscreant`s outlook. Thus, it could be traced out that various reasons are making women victimized, which in turn is leading to cyber crime. Similarly a vice versa relationship could be found between cyber crime and miscreants outlook. The conceptual model is explained in detail below.
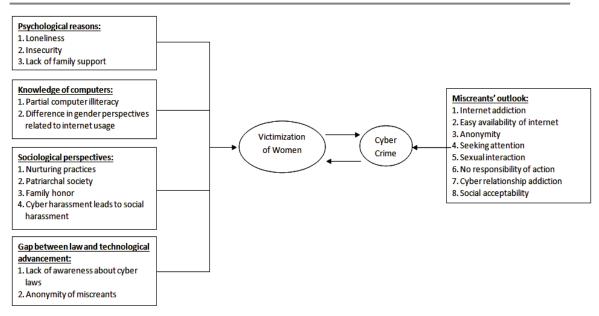
Figure 1: *Conceptual Model of Reasons of Victimization*

1. Globalization, Women's' Identity Crises and Emotional Exploitation: Psychological reasons

It is a well-known fact that with rapid development in every sphere, life styles of individuals have witnessed a sea change. With the rise of urbanization and globalization process, the Indian family structure has changed. Traditionally, joint family system existed in India. Joint family served as the basis of existence for Indian people. However, migration from village to city in search of job has changed the whole scenario. This has led to the nuclear system of family. With the coming up of nuclear family, individual privacy became the prime focus of families. Family members are concerned for their own privacy and the practice of sharing and caring went into background. These practices have resulted in shallow relationship. Although people live together, due to increasing pressure of work, nobody has time for anybody. Within a family it is women, especially the home makers who are mainly victimized as they have became more aloof than before as the men are busy in their professional quest and in their own social circle. Hence, women often face the existential crises. Unable to find answers to their own crisis of life they very often regress in their past, and as a result they encounter feelings of loneliness and depression.

To overcome depression and loneliness women, especially, home makers, tend to find a support outside their family circle. It is because of this reason that they tend to rely on strangers and make them their confidante. With technology, they easily get the chance to interact with them through chat rooms, video chat, instant messages etc., while sitting at home (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011b). In order to come out of the loneliness, they indulge in chatting. Mostly conversation takes place among friends or family members, but sometimes unable to find any close friend, women indulge in chatting with strangers (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011b). Chatting with strangers becomes a source of catharsis.

Predictable acumen guides us to consider that women are more emotionally expressive than men are. Parkins (2012) in his study about gender and emotional expressiveness concluded that women are more emotionally expressive than men are. For this reason, it

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becomes easy for the culprit to win over the confidence of lonely women. In an emotional state, females tend to reveal a lot about their personal information. This is not only restricted to personal information, they even tend to reveal bank details, property details, details about family members, exchange photos, mobile numbers etc. After receiving this type of information, the miscreant can use this information against the woman for causing harm, and it is one of the prime reasons for causing some of heinous cyber crimes. Sometimes it becomes so intense that it may lead to rape, murder, kidnapping etc (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011b). In majority of the cases, these crimes are intentional, but sometimes it may occur due to priming. Finn and Banach (2000) have referred to these kinds of risks in their study. These types of risks develop because of cyber socializing (Halder & Jaishankar, 2009), which sometimes leads to the development of emotional relationship between opposite genders, and women become easy victims of these relations because of their emotional weakness (Whitty, 2005).

2. Computer Knowledge: Partial computer illiteracy

Partial computer illiteracy refers to the incomplete or fractional knowledge in handling or operating computer system and its application. Computer literacy does not only include browsing the internet through Google or the use of social networking websites like Facebook, Twitter, or Orkut. Computer literacy should include privacy protection, protection from spy ware, internet viruses like Trojans, tracking cookies etc. Although there is abundance increase in the number of computer users, sadly a large segment of people are still unaware of the safe and secured usage of computers (Halder & Jaishankar, 2010). One of the possible explanations of this could be because of the fact that in India the advent of the computer was marked up by the snowball effect. This could be explained by the fact that initially very few people had learned computers by taking the help of the professionals. People started practicing computers with the help of their friends, peers, classmates etc. This resulted in computer literacy, but that was incomplete, and therefore, it had led to partial computer illiteracy.

The concept of computer illiteracy could be explained in terms of gender differences also. Researches show that many surveys have been conducted to investigate the impact of gender difference on computer literacy. To a large extend the results revealed that computer literacy rate of males are higher than that of females. Halder and Choudhuri (2011) conducted a study to explore computer self-efficacy and computer anxiety on trainee teachers. The results significantly marked the role of gender differences. Male trainee teachers displayed higher computer self-efficacy, and lower computer anxiety score than female trainee teacher. Busch (1995) examined the impact of gender differences in self-efficacy and attitude towards computers. This study reported that gender differences were strongest with regard to complex computer task. However, no significant differences were reported in terms of simple computer task. Males had significantly higher self-efficacy expectation than females. Male students reported less computer anxiety and higher computer confidence than the females.

A close analysis of these results of the studies shows that males have a better edge in computer literacy domain than females. Some cultural connotation could be sighted for this phenomenon to explain. India is country, which is dominated by patriarchy. Although sea changes could be seen where parents are now accepting that there is no difference between a male and a female child, still male has a higher status in society. The study of Busch (1995) highlighted some of the major points as to why knowledge related

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to the usages of computer and internet is considered as a male dominated domain. He explained that males are encouraged to have more social networks, whereas females are expected to study at home. It was also noted that more male students than female students reported to have computer access before college.

There is a common difference among men and women regarding the significance of internet related to four different issues. These issues are accessibility to internet, viewpoints of both the genders about the technology, potentiality to use internet, different scope and ways of using internet. Widespread research has been done and accordingly, it is explicable that in today's world both men and women have almost equal access to internet. Women are also less proficient in using this technology and they mainly use computer and internet as an instrument for gathering knowledge, acquiring support, looking for empowerment, which will facilitate them to develop and unshackle them from the fetters of societal norms (Shalhoub-Kevorkian & Berenblum, 2010). However, victimization of women through social networking websites is mainly because of their negligence. Halder and Jaishankar (2009) argue:

> The SNWs presently give wide options to protect one self 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 (p. 19).

Women are less aware of the privacy policies and safety tips of using networking sites (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011b). This is mainly because of difference in approach of both the genders towards this modern technology. In spite of the differences between approaches, power relations in the social order cannot be ignored, as it plays a great role in aggravating women victimization. The relation between gender and technology is affected by status, traditions and customs, age, identity, edification, knowledge of internet, revenue, and race because it is mainly dominated by male, as they are proficient in using computer and the virtual communication network:

> It is especially the domain of young, sexually-oriented men, who dominate the Net by virtue of their computer competency and superior number. They enforce their sexist gender constructions in many areas, not just in sexual ones. Resistance is impossible. The Net actually encourages abusive behavior because of the anonymity it offers (Döring, 2000, p. 13).

3. Sociological Perspective: Nurturing practices and the patriarchal Indian society

Indian society is predominantly patriarchal in nature, and this is a major reason for women becoming victims of cyber crime (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011b). The cause behind it is that men attach respectability of a family on the honor of the women members, which makes women vulnerable. In India, gender differences cast a tremendous effect on nurturing practices. Where a male child is taught to be tough and robust, a female child is expected to be shy and submissive. Females are taught to shun their voice for the fear of being stigmatized. Because of this type of nurturing practice, they become accustomed of ignoring imperative matters, by saying nothing had happened. Society decides the role of

men and women. Men have to be serious, dignified, responsible, rational, unemotional, bold and dynamic, whereas women must be coy, understanding, patient, compassionate, emotional, and must accept sacrifice for her family (Geetha, 2002).

Halder and Jaishankar (2011a) have described in their work that how gender cyber harassment leads to secondary victimization of women. According to them, the process of secondary victimization starts "after the victim begins interacting with reporting agencies, her family and friends and society as a whole" (p. 4). Out of the fear of causing denigration to her family, she shies away from going to the police station. Halder and Jaishankar (2008) assert:

> The victim shies away from the police in fear of defamation of her profile as well as her family's name and often the victim is made to believe that she is the person who is responsible for the crime done to her by being trapped foolishly" (p. 58).

Also, it is the woman's vulnerability that gives the power to the miscreant(s) for abusing her. The perpetrator can even change his or her identity in the cyber world because it is very difficult to trace the person who is behind the computer screen (Jaishankar, 2008). Taking advantage of this, he or she can even start blackmailing and threatening the victim. Women, out of fear of being harassed by the police and losing support of the family, shun off the matter and this gives the culprit courage to repeat his wrong doings and the virtual world also gives him enough space to hide himself.

The Centre for Cyber Victim Counseling (CCVC), an NGO, has presented a report on Cyber Victimization in India, in which the centre has taken 73 respondents of which 60 were females and the rest 13 males (Halder & Jaishankar, 2010). These respondents are from different parts of India, who have some knowledge about computer, are techno savvy, and even use social networking sites for hanging out in the virtual world. They have faced different types of victimization such as receiving abusive mails with sexual images, getting threatening mails, profile being hacked etc. However, even among the 60 female respondents not everybody has reported. From the survey, it has been found that only 35% of the women have reported about their victimization, 46.7% has not reported and 18.3% has been unaware of the fact that they have been victimized. This report proves that women prefer not to report about their victimization owing to social issues (Halder & Jaishankar, 2010).

4. Cyber harassment leads to social harassment

The developments of technologies have made it easy to communicate, and also to exchange information, which has led to the increase in cyber harassment because it enables the perpetrators to hide their identity in the virtual world. The internet being a virtual world, sexual harassment is prevalent to a large extent. There are several ways, in which online harassment takes place. Sometimes it is verbal and sometimes it is also graphical but in both ways (Halder, 2013), it can be active or passive form of online deliverance. The active verbal form of sexual harassment prevailing in the cyberspace is primarily based on erotic messages sent via e-mail, chat rooms etc. These disgusting messages include mortifying remarks related to gender and sexuality, which are focused in the direction of the victim by the harasser. The comments associated with gender and sexuality is considered offensive only when these remarks are not provoked or approved by the addressee. The passive verbal form of sexual harassment is different from the active form

because in this form of nuisance only one person is not victimized rather it is directed to probable receivers (Barak, 2005).

Other than the verbal form, the graphical form of sexual harassment can also be both active and passive. The former includes sending pornographic pictures, videos etc. to a particular individual while the latter comprises of online pornography sites where such kind of videos, pictures or movies are published. These forms of harassment can be illustrated to be the basic ways in which individuals are victimized in the virtual world of cyberspace (Barak, 2005). Apart from harassing or sending unwanted sexual messages, sometimes people are also forced to enter into sexual communication or cooperation by threatening the individual. Online sexual coercion also takes place by bribing or seducing the victim in order to give vent to the intension of the perpetrator. With the coming of internet, it has become easy for people to pursue others. Sometimes the miscreant even flashes video recordings or messages in the internet and tries to malign the character of the woman, who was involved with him for taking sheer pleasure of her helplessness. Society puts the blame mainly on woman, which makes her life more awful. For this reason, a woman abstains from complaining even if she is victimized because once the crime is reported it is flashed through media or internet, and then it becomes more difficult for the woman to live in the society (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011a). She is considered a social stigma by the people (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011b), who inhabit the society.

5. Gap between Legal Actions & Technological Advancement and the cloak of Anonymity

One of the main reasons behind the increase of cyber crimes against women in India is the less legal protection (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011b). Halder and Jaishankar, in their book "Cyber Crime and the Victimization of Women: Laws, Rights and Regulations", have said that, "The issues of women's rights in cyber space could be contributed largely to the sluggish modes of the governments in executing the gender equality and gender justice promises made by the States in the form of fundamental rights" (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011b, p. 56). They have also reported in India cyber gender harassment is often seen as "less important sexual harassment" (p. 10).

Laws related to cyber crime in different countries like Canada, Australia, USA, UK, India etc. are mainly associated with the augmentation of e-commerce, and for this reason, the laws mainly covered commercial and financial crimes, which include hacking, deception etc. Some laws have been designed for email spoofing, cyber sex, trespassing into others' privacy etc (Citron, 2009b; Halder & Jaishankar, 2011a). However, the laws related to cyber crime against women are correlated to sexual crime and abuses on the internet, but there are many practical difficulties associated with punishing the miscreant. Primarily, many women are not aware of the laws against cyber crime (Halder & Jaishankar, 2008). The report presented by CCVC has also shown that among the 73 respondents 80.8% has no knowledge of the fact that cyber stalking, cyber bullying, sending threatening messages etc. if reported are penalized (Halder & Jaishankar, 2010). Moreover, among women only 8.3% has reported to the police. If a crime is not reported, no action can be taken against it. This also results in increase of cyber crime against women as the miscreant(s) goes scot free.

In 2008, Indecent Representation of Women (Prohibition) Act was shaped mainly to deal with representation of women, which perhaps do not come under the scope of 'obscenity.' Halder (2013) puts forth that, "It is definitely a welcome move as India may

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get a law focused solely on the victimization of women through indecent portrayal, but at the same time, the concept of indecent representation of women must be freed from patriarchal meanings of social value and morality" (p. 28). Her words again prove that the mindset of people needs to change in order to bring altercation in the position of women and to grant justice to the victimized women.

Apart from the legal gap the provision of anonymity by the cyber space is a reason for the victimization of women (Citron, 2009a&b). The cyber world is a virtual space where it becomes very easy for the perpetrator to manipulate his identity and hide. The reason behind it is that even if the source from which the offensive matter has been posted can be detected, the police find it difficult to trail the offender. The culprit uses the information from the matrimonial or job sites where people give their credentials for better prospect and this information also makes them a victim. This can be precisely explained by the Space Transition Theory of Jaishankar (2008). According to this theory, "Identity Flexibility, Dissociative Anonymity and lack of deterrence factor in the cyberspace provides the offenders the choice to commit cyber crime" (p. 293). Further, Balakrishnan (2009), the then Chief justice of India, opined:

> The World Wide Web allows users to circulate content in the form of text, images, videos and sounds. Websites are created and updated for many useful purposes, but they can also be used to circulate offensive content such as pornography, hate speech and defamatory materials. The widespread circulation of such content is particularly harmful for women. The pervasive gender-discrimination in our society is further heightened since the digital medium provides the convenient shield of anonymity and fake identities. Errant persons become more emboldened in their offensive behavior since it is presumed that they will not face any consequences (p. 1).

6. Miscreant's Outlook: Cyber addiction and opportunity for sexual communication

Excessive use of internet has become part and parcel of many people's day to day life. It can be said that undue use of internet means becoming addictive to it. Many critics have termed it as Technological Addiction (Griffiths, 1995, 1998). It is similar to drug addiction because internet starts dominating life of people, their thoughts, feelings, behavior etc. It also affects modifications of temperament of the users. For these reasons, dependency on internet is a behavioral addiction. Young (1999) claims, that, internet addiction is a broader term, which incorporates five specific types of obsession. These obsessions are sexual attraction in which adults watch websites for cyber sex, cyber porn videos, pornographic picture library etc., involvement in online relationships, online trading or shopping, web surfing and playing computer games. According to Griffiths (2010), the medium being anonymous, people engage in behavior that they would do only over the internet. Some people who are addicted to internet are mainly engaged in:

> … text-based virtual realities and take on other social personas and social identities as a way of making them feel good about themselves. In such cases, the medium of the internet may provide an alternative reality to the user and allow them feelings of immersion and anonymity, feelings that may lead to an altered state of consciousness for the user (Griffiths, 2010, p. 465).

There are reasons behind people becoming addicted to internet, and also abusing the facility available. Internet is now easily available which has given the internet users both access and opportunity to misuse the resource. Moreover, wide accessibility of internet has made it cheaper, so it is easily affordable (Temmel, Theuermann, Ukowitz, & Vogrin, 2001). It is a virtual world where there is no physical existence of the person; the anonymity of the user facilitates open communication among the users that promotes development of online relationship. Primarily, people start interacting online in order to overcome social isolation, but ultimately they become obsessed with the digital world of the internet. Internet provides the addict the opportunity to escape from the stress and strains of everyday life. Some people cannot express themselves in front of others but discloses their feelings more effortlessly to their online friends. In addition, with the passage of time, relationships through internet have become socially acceptable. All these factors have together made people addictive to internet and it is the craving, which leads to exploitation of the use of the technology (Griffiths, 2010).

The internet has become an opening for sexual communication. Coming of internet has aggravated the online business of pornography and has also lead to the developments of adult chat sites. It has developed long distance online relationship, which starts of probably through emails or through a casual conversation over chat rooms. These informal conversations can escalate into a serious cyber affair. Ultimately, those people who are involved in romantic relationship through internet start exchanging erotic dialogues among themselves. This aggravates online sexual conversation among strangers. These online relationships are ambiguous because people, who get involved in these kinds of relationship mostly try to derive pleasure like sexual gratification where there is no need to fulfill any responsibility.

According to Griffiths (1999), there are mainly three types of relationships those are prevalent through internet. The first type of relation is generally between people, who never meet and enjoys sexual talk over net. This kind of relationship is normally short–lived and the cyber partners may even have real life spouse. They most of the time do not consider the online sexual relationship as being disloyal to their spouses. The second type involves people, who meet over net, but ultimately wants to maintain their relationship offline by meeting, exchanging letters, gifts etc. And the last form of online relationship engages people, who also get connected through internet, but maintain their relationship online for years only because they may be separated from each other owing to their belonging to different countries and can meet very rare. This type of relationship is most difficult to maintain because the two people must have the ability to afford their relationship on monetary grounds (Griffiths, 1999).

Conclusion

According to Foucault (1980), technologies use the power in a sophisticated and institutionalized way. It allows us to take a full grip of the knowledge of victimization of women. Foucault has pointed out how the power of technology has influenced relationships on the ground of gender and has also lead to the persecution of women. Such abuse of the power of technology and other reasons behind online victimization of women has been delineated in this article. In order to find the relationship among the various aspects of cyber crime a conceptual model has been proposed. Future work could be carried out by empirically testing and validating the model.

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