Update Report on

Violation of Human Rights Due to Digital Imposition:

Increasing Cyber Crimes threatening digital freedom and rights of Women: A Study in Mapping of Digital Vulnerabilities of Women in Assam and Telangana

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1. Introduction

When the Covid-19 pandemic broke out in 2020, news about violence against women being on a rise also came out from various countries around the world. Women face violence and harassment at various levels – at work, outside the household, within the household in the domestic sphere, and more recently – online. The last one – cybercrimes against women – have seen a steady rise, especially in India. Thus, cyber-crime might be defined as a synthesis of crime and technology. Cybercrime refers to crimes committed over the internet in which the perpetrator, hidden by the curtain of a computer screen, is not required to make personal contact with another person and may not always disclose their name.

The number of cyber crimes has been increasing over the years. According to the data from the a total of 50,035 cases were registered under cyber crimes in 2020, showing an increase of 11.8% in registration over 2019 (44,735 cases). 60.2% of cyber-crime cases registered were for the motive of fraud (30,142 out of 50,035 cases) followed by sexual exploitation with 6.6% (3,293 cases) and Extortion with 4.9% (2,440 cases)[1].

Among states with at least 1,000 cases, Telangana (87 per cent) and Gujarat (64 per cent) saw the most severe rise. The northeastern state of Assam followed at third, with 58 per cent growth. In terms of the crime rate, or cases relative to every 1 lakh people, Assam again stood at third, with a rate of 10.1 (one case per 10,000 people). This was behind Karnataka (16.2) and Telangana (13.4). Crime rate against women in Assam is 154.3, which is almost thrice the national average of 56.5. Uttar Pradesh registered the most cases of crime against women at 49,385, recorded at crime rate of only 45.1. However, Assam, which recorded 26,532 cases has a crime rate of 154.3[2].

It is to be noted that the state of Assam does not fare very well in terms of gender equality as seen from the state's SDG indices. Cyber crimes against women can be divided into numerous categories like sexual harassment or exploitation, violence of privacy, bullying, abuse, publication or transmission of sexually obscene and explicit content. Cyber crimes against women represent not only a violation of women's human rights but also indicated the condition

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[1] National Crime Records Bureau. (2020). "Crime in India 2020". Ministry of Home Affairs.
[2] National Crime Records Bureau. (2020). "Crime in India 2020". Ministry of Home Affairs.

of the women in the particular society. Crimes against women like domestic violence and sexual harassment become anonymous or easier to carry out in the online space. Misogynistic or abusive behavior towards women gets protected in the Internet in the disguise of anonymity and is further perpetuated because cyber crimes are difficult to trace back.

Similarly, cyber crimes in Telangana have risen by 87% in 2021. This is a huge rise in the newly formed state and there are many socio-economic reasons behind this. The Telangana government has decided to bring in new laws to counter such crimes but the rate of increase is an appalling statistic.

How and why digital freedom and rights of women are violated through increasing cyber crimes against women in Assam and Telangana?

It has been noted and seen from the data that there is a rise in cyber crimes against women in Assam and Telangana and all over the world. The reasons behind this are manifold – women's vulnerability in the digital space as well as the anonymity that the digital space gives to offenders. It is true that offline crimes are more recognizable, easier to deduce, and more traceable. However, it is also true that offline crimes against women are never going to reduce.

What the digital space does is that the same groups of people – women and the offenders are brought into a space which increases the vulnerability of the already vulnerable group and makes it more difficult to hold the offenders accountable. The women in the digital space are the same women who are vulnerable in the larger/offline space. It is to be noted that offline vulnerability is now shifting online – it has become complicated, diverse, and more difficult to navigate.

What is also true is that women and people as a whole are less informed and aware about the perils of online and digital spaces. While women are often aware of the dangerous environment around them, they hardly know if they are vulnerable online. Vulnerability in the digital space,hence, could be because of ignorance about potential threats, anonymity provided to offenders in the digital space, lack of awareness regarding protective measures, and the existing structural violence and inequality against women.

1.1 Research Design

The research design is the overall strategy that we will choose to integrate the different components of the proposed study in a coherent and logical way, thereby, ensuring that the study will effectively address the research problem, as above. The design, as laid out below, shall constitute the blueprint for the collection, measurement, and analysis of data and help to obtain information relevant to the research problem; in entailing the type of evidence needed to evaluate the proposed program, and accurately describe and assess meaning related to an observable phenomenon.The research design of the proposed study shall constitute the following key components:

1. The Scope of the Study and research problem
2. Research hypotheses [i.e., research questions] central to the problem
3. Describe the methods of analysis to be applied to the data in determining whether or not the hypotheses are true or false.

2. THE RESEARCH PROBLEM

The rise in crimes against women has been very strong and rapid in states like Assam and Telangana. The crimes against women range from domestic violence, assault, rape, dowry deaths, and acid attacks. Cyber crime is a new form of crime against women which gives assaulters a leeway and lack of accountability in the guise of anonymity.

While cyber crimes are in rise across the country, Telangana, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, and Assam are the worst performers in this. While India emerged as the third most vulnerable country in terms of risk of cyber threats such as malware, spam and ransomware in 2017, cyber crimes against women started breeding in the country given the rampant presence of crimes against women in general.

This research study aims to understand cyber crimes in all districts of Assam and Telangana (urban and rural) where they are at rise with other determinants of gender inequality. Assam and Telangana have both seen overall crimes against women as well as cyber crimes against women at rise. The project seeks to understand what are the major ways women are targeted in the online space, how far this is related to the state of women in the particular state, their own agency, freedom, and education level. Do different women face cyber crime differently? Are the experiences of a Muslim cyber crime victim similar to a tribal woman's experience? Research in the West has shown that ethnic and religious minority women are more at risk as compared to other women. Keeping this in mind, we propose to construct a Gender Digital Vulnerability Index which will seek to understand what makes women vulnerable.

Construction of a Gender Digital Vulnerability Index

Till date, there is no such index which measures the digital vulnerability of different groups of people. While there are gender vulnerability indices, there are no such indices to understand digital vulnerability even though women are far more susceptible to be victims of online abuse. We propose to create a Gender Digital Vulnerability Index for Assam and Telangana to understand the vulnerabilities of women of different religions, ethnicities, tribes, castes, and regions. Assam is a diverse state with strong identity connotations and politics. Telangana is a

newly formed state with new laws to counter cyber crime against women. This index can be extended for all regions in India and elsewhere.

Our index will comprise of 5 factors which includes (i) Digital Literacy, (ii) Economic Level, (iii) Social Level, (iv) Location, and (v) Education and Health. Digital Literacy will take indicators like access to hours of Internet and use of digital devices. Economic level will look at income, ownership of house/land, and ownership of cars. Social level will include indicators like religion, caste, ethnicity, and tribe. Location will include urban-rural dichotomy and access to highways nearby. Education and Health will include indicators like years of schooling, access to insurance, and presence of chronic diseases.

The index will give us idea of how vulnerable women across diverse social groups in both the states are. In addition to this, the project also tries to explore, understand, map, and analyse these vulnerabilities for each group of women. The project further aims to gap the area in understanding the relationship between condition of women, their education, agency, and their probability of being a cyber crime victim.

What is the Gender Digital Vulnerability Index?

The Gender Digital Vulnerability Index constitutes of the following parameters:
- (i) Digital Literacy,
- (ii) Economic Level,
- (iii) Social Level,
- (iv) Location, and
- (v) Education and Health.

Each of these factors will have the following parameters and weights:

Parameter	Weight
1. Digital Literacy	1/5
(i) Number of hours of Internet access in a	1/10

week	
(ii) Number of digital devices one uses	1/10
2. Economic Level	1/5
(iii) Income	1/15
(iv) Land owned	1/15
(v) Car owned	1/15
3. Social Level	1/5
(vi) Religion	1/15
(vii) Caste	1/15
(viii) Ethnicity	1/15
4. Location	1/5
(ix) Urban or Rural	1/10
(x) Distance to nearest highway	1/10
5. Education and Health	1/5
(xi) Years of schooling	1/15
(xii) Access to Insurance	1/15
(xiii) Presence of Chronic Disease	1/15

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

i)   What are the determinants of digital vulnerabilities of women leading to increasing cyber-crimes against women?

ii) How visible and invisible are the digital vulnerabilities of women in the cyber and digital space, affecting her digital identity, participation, rights and freedom towards exclusion?

iii) How are the layers of socio-economic-cultural and institutional and occupational participation and presence connected to the levels of digital vulnerability and eventual cyber-crimes against women?

We have developed a questionnaire to address the following research questions. We will construct the gender digital vulnerability index on the basis of the questionnaire.

4. **RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Empirical Study

The study is primarily empirical. Primary data will be collected from women of age group of 15-60. The age range is selected to understand how women of various age groups face cyber crime.

The states selected will be Assam and Telangana which have both seen a high rise in cyber crimes against women in the last 3 years.

A qualitative study will first help in getting an idea about the various factors that can impact digital vulnerability. The qualitative study would include Focus Group Discussions with young working women as well as students. Structured and semi-structure questionnaires shall then be used to collect primary data from women of all religions, castes, and tribes.

Secondary data including studies, reports and data prepared by government and non- government organizations shall be used for the study.

The methodology that will be deployed for this study would be in the following stages:

➢ **Secondary Analysis and Literature Review**: A thorough analysis of the research that has already been done in academic and news reports. There seems to be a large literature gap when it comes to studies done on cyber crimes and agency of women. The literature study will give us a historical idea of cyber crimes across the world.

➢ Followed by **Primary Research**: The primary research method to be employed for this study are in-depth structured questionnaire backed interviews.