



# Prevalence of Cyberbullying among Women in North East India: A Study of Challenges and Safeguards

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**Abstract :** *Today we live in a digitally empowered society and due to the growing internet utilization there is a huge risk to women through cyberbullying on various social networking platforms. Cyberbullying is the use of technology to harass, threaten, embarrass, or target another person. Online threats and mean, aggressive, or rude texts, tweets, posts, or messages all count. So does posting personal information, pictures, or videos designed to hurt or embarrass someone else. With each year the rate of cyberbullying is on the rise, causing adverse effects. Unfortunately, a lot of women are indeed the victims of cyberbullying. Online harassment not only places a heavy burden on women's freedom of expression, civic participation, and democracy; it has the potential to limit their educational and economic opportunities. Although the government has made steps to provide a safe online environment, there is still very little public awareness regarding the legal remedies that may be used to combat cyberbullying or serve as a deterrent. The purpose of this study is to examine the nature and prevalence of growing trends of cyberbullying among women of Northeast India and to explore existing legal frameworks and provisions for cyberbullying regulation in India. The research method selected for the present study is exploratory in nature and is based on the secondary data and review of literature related to the existing strategies on cyberbullying.*

**Keywords :** *Cyberbullying, women in India, cyberspace, legal remedies, online harassment.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

The improvement of technology is one of the key elements driving India's fast development. It is crucial to emphasize that every revolution has had a positive impact on humanity.

India certainly advances in the field of technology, and more specifically, information technology, at a rate that is exceptional. In order to achieve its goal of inclusive development, the concept of a modern India has placed a significant emphasis on science and technology. Modern advancements in communication speed and efficiency are establishing whole new benchmarks and are an essential tool for fostering creativity, invention, and other similar activities. Cyberspace is now a fluid environment where communication can take place with much ease.

On the other hand, threats and unfavorable impacts do not go unnoticed in the cyberspace. The internet and recent technology developments have allowed criminals to conceal their true identities and engage in illicit activity in the virtual world at an alarming rate, posing a severe threat that needs to be immediately addressed. Despite all the benefits of advancing technologies, cybercrime has unanticipated consequences. Cyberbullying is one such issue that has emerged as a consequence of inappropriate internet usage.

Women in particular are more prone to being victims of cybercrimes, which are illicit activities committed online. Women are particularly vulnerable to these online cyber-attacks due to a number of circumstances, including a lack of online privacy, unawareness etc.

### 1.1. Concept of Cyberbullying

Bullying committed via modern technologies is referred to as cyberbullying. It can happen on social media, messaging apps, gaming platforms, and mobile devices. It is a pattern of behaviour intended to frighten, upset, or humiliate those who are the target.



Bill Belsey, a Canadian educator, is the originator of the word "cyberbullying." Cyberbullying is described as the excessive use of communication and information technology to defame, hurt, or otherwise negatively impact another person. It is a behavior in which the victim of bullying experiences negative effects. It is a deliberate effort that may be made repeatedly or just once. The bully may be an someone known ,stranger or a group.

Willard (2003) originally defined cyberbullying as a language that is “defamatory, constitutes bullying, harassment, or discrimination, discloses personal information, or contains the offensive, vulgar or derogatory comment”(p.66). While this outlined the form of the language, it did not define the tools that were used for engagement or how differ from traditional bullying.

Similarly, (Harvard Law School,2016) found that with the inception of the digital landscape, forms of offline bullying like social exclusion and gossiping can be reformed and can take new forms like impersonation, online hacking of others' accounts, and circulation of inappropriate photos and videos online.

## 1.2. Women and cyberbullying

The growth of social media, the rapid spread of smartphone information, and the expanding use of the internet have all contributed to the rise of cyber violence against women and girls , a problem that is becoming so much more of a global issue with potentially severe societal and economic repercussions. According to research conducted by the World Health Organization, one in three women will experience some form of violence in their lifetimes. Regardless of the relatively recent phenomenon of internet connectivity, it is estimated that one in ten women have already been the victims of cyberviolence since the age of 15. Women are frequently silenced by online abuse or self-censor their ideas out of fear of retaliation. As a result, such abuse and violence prevent women from exercising their rights to freedom and equality of expression. It is vital to make sure that this digital public space is a secure and empowering place for everyone, especially women and girls, as access to the internet is increasingly becoming a need for economic well-being and is viewed as a basic human right.

Cyberbullying towards women can manifest in numerous ways, each presenting distinct challenges and having various impacts. Here are some common forms of cyberbullying women face :

### Written-Based Cyberbullying

- **Online Harassment and Trolling:** Women often face persistent harassment derogatory comments, unsolicited messages, and targeted attacks on social media platforms. This harassment can focus on their appearance, opinions, or personal lives, aiming to demean and intimidate them.
- **Threats and Intimidation:** Cyberbullies may issue threats of physical harm, sexual violence, or other forms of intimidation to instill fear. These threats, even if not acted upon, can create a profound sense of insecurity and anxiety, affecting a woman's sense of safety both online and offline

### Image based cyberbullying

- **Revenge Porn :** This involves the non-consensual sharing of intimate photos or videos, typically by an ex-partner, with the intention of shaming or humiliating the victim. This can damage the victim's reputation and relationships, both personally and professionally
- **Impersonation:** Creating fake profiles or accounts to impersonate the victim, often posting harmful or defamatory content in their name. This can lead to severe emotional distress, social stigmatization, and potential legal repercussions for the victim.
- **Morphed pictures :** involve altering images using software to create misleading or harmful representations of individuals. This can include changes to facial expressions, body shape, or inserting the person's image into inappropriate or compromising scenes.

### Physical cyberbullying

- **Doxxing :** Real-world harassment or threats resulting from the online publication of the victim's personal information, such as their home address. This can lead to a heightened sense of fear, physical danger.



- **Cyberstalking** : this form of cyberbullying escalates to offline stalking, where the perpetrator tracks the victim's physical location, often facilitated by information gathered online. The victim may face physical threats, vandalism, or other forms of harassment at their residence or workplace, leading to severe stress and potential relocation, and may require legal intervention to ensure the victim's safety.

### 1.3. Cyberbullying Scenario in Northeast India and Arunachal Pradesh

Cyberbullying has the potential to spread across geographical boundaries and although there is limited research on the instances of cyberbullying in this region, we are not too far from the day when cyberbullying will turn into a serious concern for the people of Northeast India. More and more individuals are now exposed to various contemporary methods of communication as huge tech businesses enter the North-east India market every year in an attempt to boost internet connectivity. With their increasing reliance on the internet, it is consuming every aspect of their everyday lives, from online shopping to using multiple social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. And just as every side of the coin with all the benefits we gain from technological dependency it also exposes us to heinous crimes over internet.

Few such cases of cyberbullying that came to the light in recent times in Arunachal Pradesh were:

A report that was published by Arunachal 24. in which a team of Bomdila police, led by OC PS Bomdila arrested a man from Assam in connection with a cyberbullying case. The arrested man is a resident of Solmara district Sonitpur, Assam. According to police, the person acquired the mobile no of the victim and started sending obscene messages and videos on WhatsApp. Later also posted on various social media that the victim is a solicitor(prostitute) thereby damaging her image. The Victim started receiving numerous phone calls from various men. He further blackmailed the victim that he would reveal the name of the person from whom he got the victim's number for 50000/-. (January 25 2021)

In another case reported by The Arunachal Times, a former TV actor and fitness instructor was arrested by the Arunachal Pradesh Police Special Investigation Team (SIT) for running a pornographic adult entertainment website called 'Desimasalaboard,' which consisted of morphed images of innocent, unaware women, including an Arunachalee girl. (September 24, 2021)

Though its hard to ascertain which specific group of women are more vulnerable to cyberbullying Women who play the role in the society as Public figures, elected officials, journalists, content creator, social activists, and defenders of women are subjected to online violence on almost a daily basis. Today Social media has become crucial for women to use it as a platform to express their concerns, strengths, and to highlight their abilities and accomplishments. However, it fails to shield women, who are forced to deal with the worst hate comments by trolls which sometimes even leads up to threats against them.

One such instance is the recent case of Roshni Dada. For speaking out on an MTV reality show about polygamy, patriarchy, and the preference for a male child that is present among her own tribe, nyishi, soon after the episode was aired on television she was publicly labelled as ungrateful for the support she had earlier received from the people and anti-tribal throughout social networking platforms. And for quite a long period of time She was subjected to trolls and hateful remarks.

India has had several cases of violence against female journalists in the digital sphere over the years. despite playing a vital role as public watchdogs in democratic societies, it is frightening to see how frequently they receive threats of murder, rape, physical harm, and graphic images over internet. In the year 2018 Investigative journalist Rana Ayyub experienced relentless online abuse, violent threats, and even doxing, in which personal information about her, including her address, was posted online, after a false tweet with a communal sentiment was linked to her.

A similar case took place in the state of Meghalaya where the Editor of Shillong Times and Padma Shri award winner Patricia Mary Mukhim whose house was attacked with a petrol bomb said she had received a 'death threat' on social media four-five months ago and that she had filed an FIR in this connection. This exemplifies how virtual trolling can also translate into real-life stalking and violence.

Arunachal Pradesh have also witnessed such incidence when On the 18 April 2020 edition of The Arunachal Times, a report by the newspaper's Associate Editor, Tongam Rina, on the alleged rising instances of wildlife hunting in the state during the lockdown was published under the headline: Wildlife hunting on spike. Immediately following the publication of her report, Tongam Rina came under a barrage of online criticism for her reporting, and people began using cyberbullying to express their dissatisfaction. a Facebook user violated the Information Technology Act of 2000 by editing a her photo to create an obscene image and posting it over social media. Arunachal's growing troll



army created some extremely graphic memes, and the situation only got worse when Tongam faced threats of physical harm on several online posts.

In 2021, with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic which induced lockdown, majority of the people's online activities surged leading to an expected increase in the rate of cybercrimes including cyberbullying. Many healthcare workers such as doctors and nurses experienced some form of cyberattacks during this time which was mostly due to misinformation and stigma associated with covid. One such case came forward when a person deliberately used objectionable words against the nursing fraternity on social media later the Arunachal Pradesh branch of the Trained Nurses Association of India (TNAI) lodged an FIR against him for the same.

With the internet available in almost every part of the state, the fight against growing case of cyberbullying continues. The most recent report was on 29<sup>th</sup> November 2022, where a young man from Changlang was arrested under Section 292/509 IPC, r/w 66 (e)/67 (a) of the IT Act on the charge of cyberbullying. He had created a fake Facebook profile of the complainant, and was sending obscene messages to all her friends.

As the recent findings indicate the prevalence of cyberbullying in India, there is still insufficient research on the incidences of cyberbullying among women in the Northeast India hence this paper aims to examine the prevalence of cyberbullying among Northeast India and to study various legal remedies and preventive techniques which are existing in order to curtail cyberbullying.

## **2. Literature review**

In a research on online violence against women done by Amnesty International in 2017, it was found that over 70% of the women who had experienced some form of abuse on social media had changed how they used it, and a 1/3 of them had stopped posting their opinions on certain topics.

Online abuse of women is merely an extension of offline violence committed against them because of their gender; it targets their sexuality, treats them like objects of desire, and feeds into gender stereotypes. In the research led by Machackova et al. (2013) and Carter and Wilson (2015) which indicates that girls are affected by cyberbullying more than boys, possibly due to the increase in social media use. In addition to cyberbullying, girls are more vulnerable to cyber victimization, often in the form of sexual exploitation or harassment (Chisholm, 2006).

## **3. Redressal under Indian laws**

The Supreme Court of India first addressed cyberbullying in the historic case of *Vichada v. State of Rajasthan*, which established bullying regulations to shield women from sexual harassment. When there was no explicit law in India, some of the sections provided some consolation to limit the culture of abuse through social media or by using digital devices.

### **3.1 The Information Technology Act**

The Information Technology Act of 2000 (Amendment 2008) plays a crucial role in regulating the use of information technology in India. Although cyberbullying is not explicitly defined as an offense in this Act, it includes several provisions that can be effectively used to protect women against online harassment and abuse. Here are some relevant sections with a focus on women's safety:

**Section 66(D) of the Act:** This section addresses online fraud and misrepresentation. Anyone who creates a false online identity to mislead others, often used in cases of impersonation or identity theft to harass women, can be prosecuted under this law. Penalties include up to three years in prison and/or a fine of Rs. 1 lakh.

**Section 66(E):** This section makes it illegal to capture and share images or videos of a woman's private areas without her consent. This provision is particularly relevant in cases of revenge porn or unauthorized distribution of intimate images. Penalties include up to three years in prison and/or a fine of Rs. 3 lakhs.

**Section 67:** This section targets the transmission of obscene material. Anyone who publishes or transmits, or causes to be published or transmitted, obscene material, including explicit images or videos of women, can face severe penalties. This section is critical for addressing issues like non-consensual pornography and cyberstalking. Penalties can be up to 5 years in jail and/or a fine of up to Rs. 10 lakhs.

**Section 67A:** This section specifically deals with the publishing or transmitting of sexually explicit material. If anyone publishes or transmits material that is sexually explicit in nature, they can be prosecuted under this section.





This is crucial for protecting women from the dissemination of explicit content without consent. Penalties can be up to 7 years in jail and/or a fine of up to Rs. 10 lakhs.

Section 67B: This section addresses child pornography. While it broadly covers protection for minors, it is also vital in preventing the exploitation of young girls online. Penalties include up to 5 years in jail and/or a fine of up to Rs. 10 lakhs for the first conviction, with increased penalties for subsequent convictions.

These sections provide legal remedies that can be effectively utilized to protect women from various forms of cyberbullying, online harassment, and abuse, offering a robust framework for their safety and recourse in the digital space.

### **3.2 Indian Penal Code**

The official criminal code of India was first issued in 1860 and is known as the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Cyberbullying is not specifically mentioned in the law as a form of harassment. However, a number of laws, including the following, may address the crimes of cyberbullying:

Section 354(C): In accordance with Section 354(C), it is illegal to take a woman's picture when she is in her personal space without her consent or permission. If the accused continues to break the law, he will likely receive a sentence of 3–7 years in prison. However, the penalty may range from 1–3 years in jail.

Section 354(D): A person may be punished under Section 354(D) if they secretly watch or observe another person's online actions with the intent to cause them damage or other harm, or if they do so to hurt or negatively impact them personally. The maximum punishment is three years in prison.

Section 499: According to the Penal Code, someone who defames another person may face punishment. Social media or the internet may be used for defamation.

Section 507: The penalties outlined in this section will apply to anyone who uses social media or the internet to intimidate, threaten, or coerce another person into doing something against their free will. The maximum sentence is two years in prison.

Section 509: Under Section 509, anyone who makes an attempt to undermine the modesty of another woman may face legal action. This includes conduct that takes place online or on social media. Up to one year in prison is possible as a punishment, along with or without a fine.

### **3.3 Government initiatives**

**Cybercrime against women and children scheme**

A grant of INR 87.12 crore was given to states and UTs under the CCPWA scheme for the establishment of cyber forensic training laboratories and the prevention of cybercrime. Additionally, INR 6 crores were provided to improve police and prosecutor training. Different divisions formed under the CCPWA plan are in charge of reporting online criminal actions and related investigations, assessing cybercrime complaints, and spotting any concerning cybercrime circumstances.

**Digital shakti**

The National Commission for Women (NCW) launched the fourth phase of Digital Shakti Campaign, a pan-India project on digitally empowering and skilling women and girls in the cyberspace. Digital Shakti started in June 2018 to help women across the nation to raise the awareness level on the digital front, to build resilience, and fight cybercrime in the most effective ways. Through this project, over 3 lakh women across India have been made aware of cyber safety tips and tricks, reporting and redressal mechanisms, data privacy and usage of technology for their benefit.

*Indian cybercrime coordination centre (I4C)*

The Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) established the Indian Cybercrime Coordination Centre (I4C) to serve as a focal point for the national campaign against cybercrime. It seeks to offer a platform for the coordinated and thorough handling of cybercrimes. In order to prevent, identify, investigate, and prosecute cybercrimes, one of the key goals of I4C is to establish an ecosystem involving academics, business, the general public, and the government.

**NCCR**

The National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal is a tool that allows anyone to report an online cybercrime that has been perpetrated against them. On August 30, 2019, the Ministry of Home Affairs launched this portal. This initiative submits



online complaints by the victims who have faced criticism, especially women and children. They provide immediate action on the filed complaints with the help of local police.

#### 4. Conclusion and Recommendation

Information communication technology are emerging as one of the most powerful tool for women empowerment at a global level but in order to enhance the use of enabling technology requires elimination of online violence against them. A safe online space has the overall impact of strengthening and promoting freedom of speech because it fosters an environment in which more people, particularly social groups that experience the most discrimination in other public settings will get an opportunity to take part in these media.

Over time, the Indian Government has launched various schemes , online reporting portals , helpline numbers for women and children, and amended the required legal provisions of the IT Act and Indian Penal Code against the cyberbullying. But often the litigation process in tackling incidences of cyberbullying becomes extremely tedious and cumbersome .because digital evidences play a crucial role in solving cyber related offences hence in the failure of timely action it will result in loss of evidence and this is one of the biggest reason why reported crimes often leads to a dead end. Because the cyberspace is constantly evolving this calls for systematic efforts to empower women to advocate for their rights and enable them to navigate the digital world safely. The need of the hour is to incorporate practical, safe and confidential reporting processes and provide accessible counselling and rehabilitation services.

Community guidelines of social media platforms clearly indicates that targeted abuse based on a person's gender or other forms of identify would not be accepted but they usually fail to translate this into real-time action and accountability. While most platforms have strict protocols to monitor abuse in English, the ability of AI to catch instances of abuse in local languages is limited, which makes it easier for trolls to use offensive words in their native language and in a region like the North East India wherein local dialect is pretty common, hence When women report abuse on social media platforms, the most common response they receive from them is that the action reported does not 'violate their community standards. States should also focus on promoting awareness campaigns that will educate on awareness and knowledge around tools and resources available to users to report online abuse, inappropriate content, or behaviour in order to create a better and safer digital experience for women.

Indian women today are more empowered than ever, thanks to the limitless opportunities the internet has provided for working online. The digital space offers a vast array of possibilities for women to explore careers, start businesses, engage in learning, and connect with a global community. This empowerment is transforming lives, breaking traditional barriers, and fostering economic independence and personal growth.

However, the key to unlocking the full potential of this empowerment lies in creating a supportive and safe digital environment. When women have access to the right platforms and a community that champions their participation, it leads to greater inclusivity. Such an inclusive digital space encourages more women to engage confidently and actively, contributing their voices, skills, and innovations to the online world.

Therefore, ensuring a safe digital space that is free from the threat of cyberbullying is paramount. It involves implementing robust measures to combat online harassment, providing education and resources about digital rights and safety, and fostering an environment where women feel protected and valued.

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