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A NEW FACE OF MISOGYNY: ONLINE GENDERED ABUSE AND THE CRISIS OF DIGITAL EXPRESSION IN INDIA AND BEYOND

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Abstract

This research investigates a disturbing trend in digital spaces—the normalization of extreme gender-based abuse, sometimes as severe as rape threats and death threats towards women, disguised under “humor”, “dark satire,” or just an “opinion”. Under Article 19 of the Constitution, often misused as a shield for hate speech disguised as free expression, this disturbing rhetoric is defended in India.

“Misogyny” in online spaces—has now become coded, scalable, and deeply embedded in the fabric of digital life with increased algorithmic bias, anonymity, and virality. The study draws attention to the loopholes in India’s legal framework, which are being used more and more to shield hate speech online. Special focus is given to the misuse of free speech, especially under Article 19 of the Indian Constitution, which is often weaponized to justify hate speech as “opinion” or “humor.”

A comparative legal analysis shows that protections worldwide, including in India and other democracies, remain fragmented, insufficient, and outdated. This paper contends that safeguarding women online demands a comprehensive, intersectional, and forward-looking strategy—one that redefines legal standards, holds platforms accountable for algorithmic bias, and reimagines digital education to empower users to challenge normalized misogyny.

Introduction

“Misogyny and the abuse of power are everywhere. It is time to put an end to them all,”

— António

Guterres.

This urgent appeal from the UN secretary-general resonates strongly in the digital age—where the internet, once seen as a tool for equality and empowerment, has increasingly become a space of surveillance, harassment, and control—especially for women. Women in public roles

often face intense abuse, where their opinions or mere presence can trigger targeted harassment, memes disguised as humor, sexist comments, or threats, including rape and death threats.

This paper examines the nature and normalization of online misogyny on a global scale, with a focus on India. It considers the Indian constitution and explores key themes, such as the role of viral meme culture, the spread of toxic masculinity, and the rise of dangerous digital subcultures like the manosphere.

The paper also addresses the misuse of freedom of speech and expression, notably under Article 19 of the Indian Constitution, which is increasingly weaponized to justify hate speech, viewed as mere “opinions” or “dark humor.” It aims to highlight the rise and normalization of online misogyny through case studies, legal critiques, and emerging patterns. The proposed solutions encompass multi-stakeholder approaches, gender inclusivity, and education to foster safe and equitable digital spaces for all.

Understanding The Nature And Normalization Of Online Misogyny

Meme Culture and Normalization: Popular meme culture, often infused with misogynistic undertones, plays a significant role in normalizing and perpetuating gender-based abuse. For instance—“She deserves belt treatment,” “She asked for it,” “Women were better when they used to be inside four walls of home,” “Oh, what a pick-me and attention seeker,” and “women” sounds like lines from some violent script of some misogynistic movie. Such comments are not isolated incidents but reflect the realities thousands of women face on social media platforms. Popular meme culture, often infused with misogynistic undertones, plays a significant role in normalizing and perpetuating gender-based abuse. This phenomenon aligns with the concept of neo-sexism.

- **What is Online misogyny?**

These expressions reflect the pervasive and deeply entrenched nature of online misogyny—a form of gender-based hostility that manifests through derogatory remarks. Online misogyny is not limited to individual opinions; it is increasingly systematic and amplified by algorithm-driven echo chambers as well as by toxic online communities such as the manosphere and incel networks. Unlike offline spaces, digital platforms allow for the rapid and anonymous dissemination of such abuse, often

cloaked in the language of free expression. Alarming, such misogynistic discourse is sometimes propagated by women themselves, shaped by internalized patriarchal norms and societal conditioning. Understanding online misogyny, therefore, requires a critical examination of the cultural, psychological, and technological frameworks that enable and normalize violence in virtual environments.

- **Neo-sexism**

Refers to covert, subtle forms of sexist expression that deny the existence of gender inequality while simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal norms. Neo-sexist attitudes often manifest in online spaces as mockery of feminism, denial of women's experiences, and trivialization of gender-based violence, all of which contribute to the digital environment's hostility toward women.

- **Understanding the Fear Behind 'Jokes' and 'Opinions':**

Laura Bates, founder of the Everyday Sexism Project, said that, Girls who dare to express opinions about politics or current events often experience a very swift, misogynistic backlash. This might be rape threats or comments telling them to get back in the kitchen¹. Bates further highlights the deep and invasive nature of online abuse by stating that “ You could be sitting at home in your living room, outside of working hours, and suddenly someone is able to send you an incredibly graphic rape threat right into the palm of your hand. There tends to be a general reaction of, ‘if you know they’re trying to scare you, why would you be worried?’ But when you’re receiving the abuse on such a large scale, it’s hard not think that it only takes one person to follow through.

Mapping Misogyny In Indian Digital Spaces.

Viral Meme Culture and Toxic Masculinity:

In patriarchal societies, while there exists a heightened cultural fixation on preserving the notions of female chastity and moral purity, this is paradoxically accompanied by the persistent objectification and commodification of the female body. The mere presence of women in digital spaces is perceived as a violation of traditional gender norms. Just like women's participation in the real world is policed and scrutinized, similarly, women's engagement in virtual environments is subjected to misogynistic backlash, reinforcing existing gender

¹ Id

hierarchies within digital domains.

Digital spaces, especially social media, have battle grounds for the performance of toxic masculinity. Anonymity and the absence of regulatory oversight allow young men to use gendered abuse as a tool of dominance and peer validation. As articulated in *Firstpost* (2018), online spaces have become fertile grounds for the performance of hypermasculinity, platforms like Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and Facebook have become **sites of hypermasculine assertion**, where insults and threats substitute for dialogue.

Drawing from an analysis of over 30 million tweets between 2018 and 2021, the study identifies six dominant forms of misogyny:

- sexist abuse,
- sexual objectification,
- threats of physical or sexual harm
- assertions of female inferiority
- Justifications of violence
- and dismissals of feminist efforts².

The Rise Of The Manosphere: Algorithmic Misogyny And The Normalization Of Digital Hate

Defining the manosphere:

“Manosphere”—a “rapidly growing network of online communities that poses a serious threat to gender equality. These toxic digital spaces increasingly influence real-world attitudes, behaviors, and policies³. The manosphere includes various online groups such as incels (involuntarily celibate men), Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW), Men’s Rights Activists (MRAs), Pick-Up Artists (PUAs), and “red pill” or “black pill” communities. Despite their differences, these groups are united by a shared hostility towards women and feminism; they often promote hyper-masculine ideologies and portray men as victims of gender equality movements⁴. These narratives are not harmless rhetoric—they actively fuel online hostility, harassment, and real-world gender backlash as seen in cases like Gamergate, a harassment

² Nabamallika Dehingia et al., *Violence Against Women on Twitter in India: Testing a Taxonomy for Online Misogyny and Measuring Its Prevalence During COVID-19*, 18 PLoS One e0292121 (Oct. 25, 2023), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10599529/>.

³ United Nations, *A Growing Network of Online Communities Known Collectively as "Incels" — And Their Ideology Is Fueling Real-World Harm, UN Agency Warns* (June 25, 2025), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2025/06/1164531>.

⁴ Intunwatch, *The Manosphere’s Rise: How Online Misogyny Spills into Real Life* (July 2025), <https://intunwatch.com/the-manospheres-rise-how-online-misogyny-spills-into-real-life/>.

campaign where female gamers were targeted by alt-right, male supremacists⁵.

The Psychological Appeal and Danger:

The **appeal of the manosphere** lies more in the emotional validation it offers and not just in its ideology. According to the UK communications regulator Ofcom, the manosphere is a dangerously ambiguous space where satire and open debate often conceal radical misogyny. Initially, many socially isolated young men are not drawn by hate, but by a promise that promises them to restore traditional gender roles to reclaim lost male identity.⁶ In search of confidence and identity, young boys are increasingly drawn to masculinity influencers who offer validation but often promote harmful narratives that distort masculinity and reject feminism.

Manosphere—once limited to fringe forums—now influences schoolyards, workplaces, and even personal relationships. As UN Women’s Kalliopi Mingeirou notes, “these spaces exploit insecurities and spread misogynistic messages that undermine women’s rights⁷”.

Role of Algorithms in Amplification:

The **role played by algorithms** in this process is critical. A study by Movember Foundation has revealed that two-thirds of young men engage with such content, most of which is amplified by algorithms rewarding extreme and polarizing views that further strengthen sexist ideologies in everyday discourse⁸. Users who begin by engaging with seemingly harmless content, such as mental health advice, dating tips, or self-improvement videos, are quickly funneled into a dangerous pipeline of **hyper-masculine and misogynistic narratives**, increasing misogynistic posts from 13% to 56% in a mere span of 5 days. Social media algorithms are designed to maximize engagement, often by exploiting emotional vulnerability, especially among young people.

Normalization Through Micro-Dosing:

This low-level exposure to hate, often called micro-dosing, gradually normalizes sexism within youth culture. Over time, this algorithmic content shifts perceptions of perfection and fosters

⁵ UN Women, *Explainer: How to Counter the Manosphere’s Toxic Influence* (June 2025), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/how-to-counter-the-manospheres-toxic-influence>.

⁶ Analysis Desk, Intunwatch, *The Manosphere’s Rise: How Online Misogyny Spills Into Real Life* (June 20, 2025), <https://intunwatch.com/the-manospheres-rise-how-online-misogyny-spills-into-real-life/>.

⁷ United Nations, *UN Women Sounds the Alarm Over Online Misogyny* (June 27, 2025), <https://www.un.org/en/delegate/un-women-sounds-alarm-over-online-misogyny>.

⁸ Id

an environment where misogyny becomes mainstream, blurring the line between “joke” and “genuine hate is completely blurred. What was begun just as an entertainment turns into an ideology and it becomes harder for users to identify misogyny when it’s disguised as viral or meme content.

Case Studies

Deepika Ghose:

A female spectator later identified as Deepika Ghose gained unsolicited attention, when her brief camera shot was captured and went viral during a live broadcast. Her image was circulated all over the internet without consent, which was rapidly transformed into memes and became a ground for mass sexualised commentary. In response, she posted publicly: “*My name is Deepika Ghose, and that is probably the only thing that is being said about me which is 100% true.*” She described the experience as mentally distressing, and how the harassment, stalking, and emotional trauma she is facing⁹.

Kerala’s Blue Saree Teacher Case:

In 2023, a school’s Teacher’s Day photo featuring a woman in a blue saree went viral. Despite the image being dignified and contextually professional, a wave of memes and sexualised commentary was triggered. This case highlights how Female’s professional identity was ignored and she was reduced to a mere object of commentary, appearance, and perceived femininity¹⁰.

Apoorva Makhija:

In 2025, influencer Apoorva Makheeja, known as the “Rebel kid”, was brutally trolled and subjected to mass online trolling, including **rape threats, acid-attack threats, and character defamation** across **platforms like Instagram and X**. The trolling **continued unabated**, despite **legal complaints being filed**. Mukhija shared screenshots of the threats, stating they were just “1%” of what she received.

The **National Commission for Women (NCW)** took **suo- moto cognizance of the case**, demanding action. Yet, the case highlights how **gendered trolling persists despite**

⁹ Zoya Rehman, *Viral Culture & the Toxic, Invasive Trend of Online Trolling*, FEMINISMININDIA.COM (Aug. 9, 2021), <https://feminisminindia.com/2021/08/09/viral-culture-the-toxic-invasive-trend-of-online-trolling/>

¹⁰ Namrata Sadhvani, *The Blue Saree Teacher Case: How Kerala’s Sexualisation of a Teacher Reveals the Policing of Women*, FEMINISMININDIA.COM (June 16, 2020), https://feminisminindia.com/2020/06/16/blue-saree-teacher-case-kerala-sexualisation-policing-women/#google_vignette

institutional response, reflecting both platform impunity and weak enforcement¹¹.

In most of the cases examined, while the underlying motives of the perpetrators varied widely—from religious bigotry and political opposition to attempts at silencing dissenting opinions—the predominant method employed to express these motives was sexual objectification of these women, which bore no connection to their actual work, viewpoints, or personal decisions. This persistent trend illustrates how the reduction of women to mere sexual entities serves as a powerful mechanism to demean, silence, and exert dominance over them

Platforms or users	Type of Abuse Faced	Platform	Year	Country	Result/Consequence	Type of Harm Caused
Victims of 'Sulli Deals' App	Non-consensual listing of Muslim women for "auction," accompanied by derogatory comments	GitHub, Twitter	2021	India	Listed women's photos without consent, framing them as objects "up for auction," a gross form of sexual objectification	Psychological, Reputational ¹²
Victims of the 'Bulli Bai' App	Similar to 'Sulli Deals', doctored images of Muslim women are uploaded for "auction" with	GitHub, Twitter	2022	India	Their images were uploaded without consent and doctored to appear as if	Psychological, Reputational ¹³

¹¹ Livemint, *Rape Threats to Apoorva Makhija: NCW Takes Sua Motu Cognisance, Demands Action*, LIVEMINT (Apr. 10, 2024), <https://www.livemint.com/news/trends/rape-threats-to-apoorva-makhija-ncw-takes-suo-motu-cognisance-demands-action-11744295602458.html>

¹² Aatika H. & Areeb Uddin Khan, *Sulli Deals: An Everyday Reality for Indian Muslim Women in India*, FEMINISMININDIA.COM (July 14, 2021), https://feminisminindia.com/2021/07/14/sulli-deals-an-every-day-reality-for-indian-muslim-women-in-india/#google_vignette

¹³ Stuti Mishra, *Bulli Bai: Arrests After App Shared Photos of Muslim Women for 'Auction' in India*, INDEPENDENT (Jan. 5, 2022), <https://www.independent.co.uk/asia/india/bulli-bai-app-arrests-muslim-women-b1988504.html>

in virtual spaces.

Even when the provocations were politically or religiously motivated, the abuse frequently manifested in the form of sexualized insults, character defamation, and explicit threats, which highlights the sexualized abuse as a tool of digital subjugation.

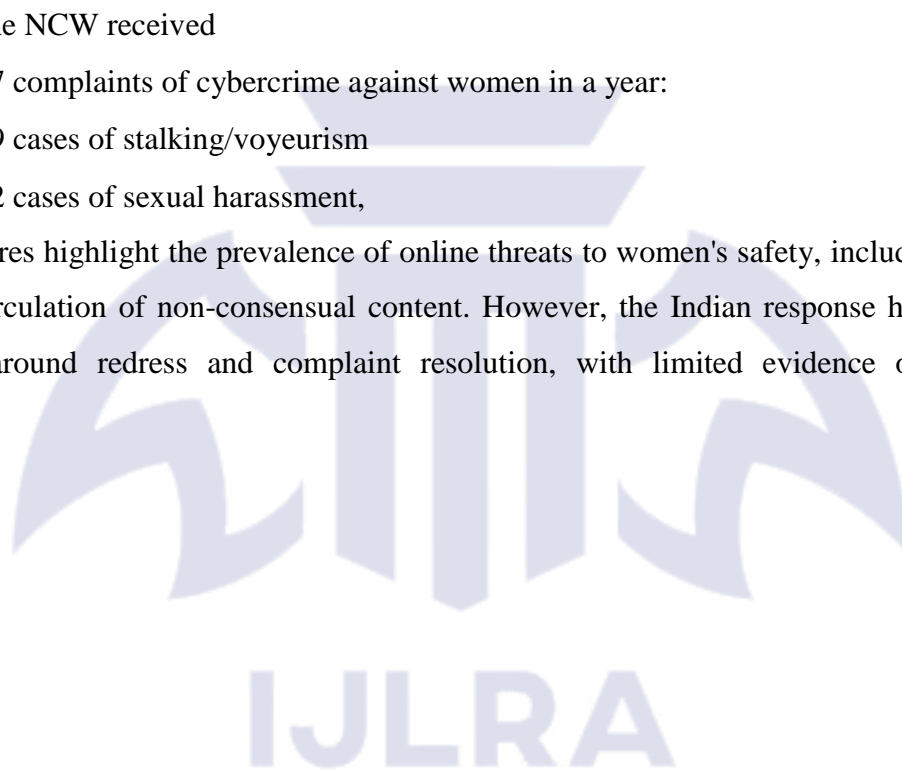
Global Comparative Landscape Of Online Gender-Based Violence

Various reports from different countries indicate that women experience severe forms of violence globally, however, the nature of abuse, reporting behaviors, and institutional responses differ.

In India, the NCW received

- 657 complaints of cybercrime against women in a year:
- 559 cases of stalking/voyeurism
- 852 cases of sexual harassment,

These figures highlight the prevalence of online threats to women's safety, including stalking and the circulation of non-consensual content. However, the Indian response has primarily centered around redress and complaint resolution, with limited evidence of proactive



	offensive captions				they were being auctioned or sold, which is a form of sexual objectification.	
Mhairi Black (S)MP	Regularly subjected to abuse, that alleges she is too ugly to be raped, with repeated slurs regarding her sexuality.	X (Twitter), Facebook, Instagram	2018	UK	In one of her speeches in Parliament, Black used the word cunt four times when reading out examples of the online abuse she receives.	Reputational ¹⁴
Gina Miller	Extreme racist and misogynistic abuse; distress; fear for the security of herself and her family, resulting in employing a security detail.	X (Twitter), Facebook	2019	UK	Campaign to stop Brexit (2016–2017), leading the case, which led to the Parliament voting on triggering Article 50 of the EU Treaty.	Psychological ¹⁵
Ashley Judd	Massive wave of gendered online abuse	Primarily on X (formerly	2015	USA	Filed police report; later became a	Psychological, Emotional, Reputational ¹⁶

	including rape threats, sexually explicit insults, dehumanizing name-calling, and coordinated trolling after expressing	Twitter)			global advocate for digital rights and spoke at TED on online misogyny	
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enforcement of preventive digital policies¹⁷. India’s legal response remains **largely redressive** rather than **preventive**.

United States:

In contrast, in developed nations like the USA, 1 in 4 American women have experienced online abuse, and 1 in 8 reported suffering from cybercrimes due to personal data being publicly available. The most common type of online abuse experienced by American women was

- cyberbullying (10%)
- sexual harassment (9%) and
- trolling (8%)¹⁸

Revenge porn, doxxing, swatting, and AI deep fakes were noted as having the most severe impacts on everyday life, including self-esteem, mental health, and financial well-being.

Notably, 69% of respondents expressed doubt that there are sufficient laws protecting victims of online abuse¹⁹.

United Kingdom:

In the United Kingdom, a YouGov survey (2022) revealed that:

¹⁴ Alexis Henshaw & Valentine Moghadam, *Online Misogyny as a Global Phenomenon*, in **The Emerald International Handbook of Technology-Facilitated Violence and Abuse** (Jane Bailey, Asher Flynn & Nicola Henry eds., Emerald Publ’g 2021)

¹⁵ Id

¹⁶ Ashley Judd on How to Put an End to Online Gender Violence, *Time* (Jan. 18, 2017), <https://time.com/4636607/ashley-judd-ted-talk-online-gender-violence/>

¹⁷ National Commission for Women, *Annual Report 2023–2024* (2024), <https://ncw.nic.in>.

¹⁸ National Organization for Women (NOW), *One in Four American Women Face Online Harassment* (2025), <https://now.org/reports/online-harassment-2025>

¹⁹ Id.

- 53% of people feel the internet is unsafe for women, and
- 43% of women say misogyny online limits their self-expression²⁰.

In journalism, the crisis is worse:

- In a global survey of over 900 women journalists, 55% of respondents experienced personal attacks, of which 40% were explicitly sexist or misogynistic. These may include hate speech, threats, doxxing (publishing private information online), and the dissemination of false narratives or stories about their lives.²¹.

According to a recent World Bank report, only 30% of countries have enacted legal frameworks that specifically address cyber harassment, which means that only 47% of women worldwide are afforded legal protection in this area.

Legal Protection Gap: A Global Failure

The United Nations has reported that globally, **nearly three out of four women (73%) have encountered cyber violence**, and women are **27 times more likely than men to be targeted**²².

A World Bank's 2023 evaluation discloses, only 30% of nations (58 out of 190 economies) have legislative measures that explicitly criminalize cyber harassment, that means more than half of the world's women are vulnerable in online environments. Even if there are such laws, their impact is very limited. Only 53 economies criminalize cyber harassment, and only 19 have well-established procedures for dealing with such crimes. This vacuum in legislation not only encourages perpetrators but also creates an environment of impunity that discourages women from speaking out online.

Many European nations either rely on existing general legal provisions or gradually introduce new, often gender-neutral, laws to address cybercrimes²³. Most European nations employ generic cybercrime legislation, which usually does not capture the gendered nature of online

²⁰ YouGov, *Online Misogyny Survey – UK Women's Euros Report* (Apr. 2022), available at <https://www.eehopeunited.co.uk/static/pdf/YouGov%20Online%20Misogyny%20Survey.pdf>.

²¹ International Media Support, *Safety of Women Journalists: Learning Brief No. 1* (Mar. 2024), available at <https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/IMS-Learning-Brief-1-Safety-of-women-journalists-1.pdf>

²² Ashley Judd, *Ashley Judd on How to Put an End to Online Gender Violence*, Time (Jan. 18, 2017), <https://time.com/4636607/ashley-judd-ted-talk-online-gender-violence/>

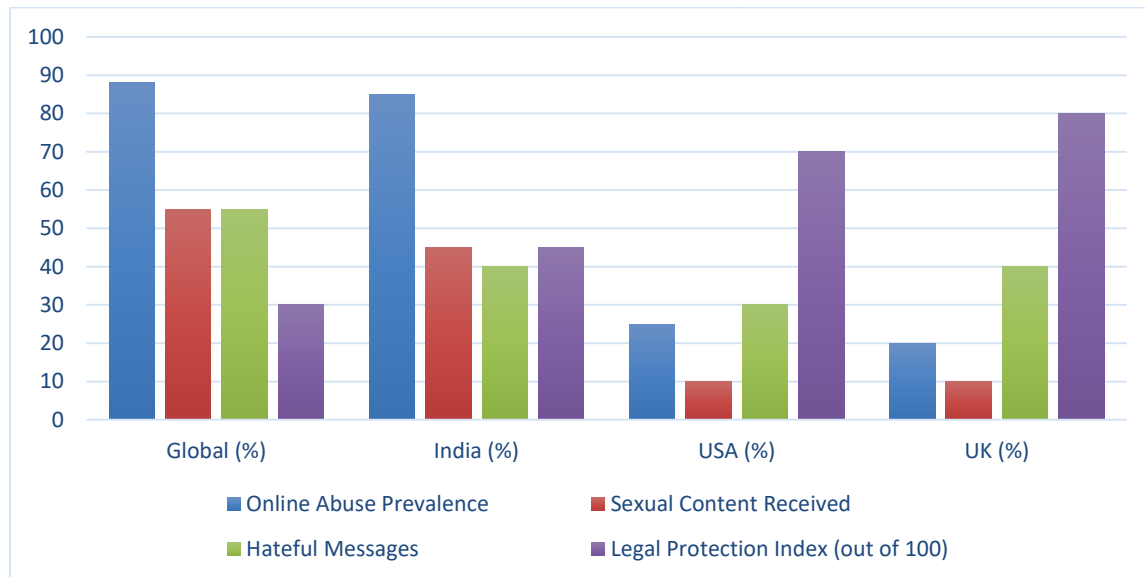
²³ World Bank Group, Women, Business and the Law, *Protecting Women and Girls from Cyber Harassment: A Global Assessment of Existing Laws* (2023), <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/39991>.

harassment. While there are models such as the Istanbul Convention, these are not implemented everywhere, and assistance to women is not available.

The law in America is primarily concerned with child pornography and exploitation, and there is no federal law criminalizing cyber harassment of adult women. This patchwork approach gives rise to enormous protection gaps even in sophisticated legal systems²⁴.

These findings collectively suggest that, worldwide, dedicated legal efforts to combat online violence—particularly gendered abuse targeting women and children—remain limited and fragmented.

Based on our understanding of various research reports and global surveys, we compiled and visualized key indicators of online misogyny in the form of a graph, aiming to provide a clear snapshot of how countries like India fare in terms of online abuse prevalence and legal responses.



Laws That Govern Digital Technology In India

A) INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY ACT, 2000

- **Section 66A:** Defines the punishment for any person who transmits obscene information, causes annoyance, inconvenience, danger, obstruction, insult, injury, criminal intimidation, enmity, hatred, or ill will.” However, this act was struck down in the landmark case of *Shreya Singhal vs. Union of India* because the words used in Section 66A were vague and broad, and thus could violate the freedom of speech and expression of an individual.²⁵

²⁴ Id

²⁵ *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India*, AIR 2015 SC 1523 (India) (striking down § 66A of the IT Act as vague and

- **Section 67:** “Whoever publishes or transmits in the electronic form any material that is lascivious or appeals to prurient interest... shall be punished.²⁶”
- **Section 67A:** “This section relates to the distribution or broadcast of material of this nature, as extended to a higher level of penalty.”
- **Section 67B:** “This section concerns child pornography and restricts it as a creation subject, a transmission method, and a browsing path.”
- **Section “66E—**“Whoever, intentionally or knowingly captures, publishes, or transmits the image of a private area of any person without his or her consent, under circumstances violating the privacy of that person, shall be punished.²⁷..”

B) BHARTIYA NYAYA SANHITA, 2023

- **Section 78:** Defines and punishes stalking and cyberstalking. It states that despite a clear indication of disinterest by a woman, if any man follows or attempts to follow to foster personal interaction or monitors the use of the internet, e-mail, or any other form of electronic communication by a woman, commits the offense of stalking.
- **Section 79:** This section concerns itself with “acts that are meant to outrage the modesty of a woman either by words, gestures, or by any other means using an electronic device.”
- **Section 356:** “Whoever, by words either spoken or intended to be read or by signs or by visible representations, makes or publishes in any manner any imputation concerning any person intending to harm, or knowing or having reason to believe that such imputation will harm the reputation of such a person is said to defame that person.”
- **Section 351:** “Criminal intimidation that includes threats to murder someone or to cause grievous bodily harm falls under this section, and it covers threats made through electronic means.²⁸”

violative of Article 19(1)(a).

²⁶ *Section 67: Punishment for Publishing or Transmitting Obscene Material in Electronic Form*, IT Law (Oct. 2013), available at <https://www.itforchange.net/rethinking-legal-institutional-approaches-to-sexist-hate-speech-india>.

²⁷ The Information Technology Act, 2000, §§ 66E, 67, 67A, 67B, No. 21 of 2000, *India Code*, <https://indiacode.nic.in> (defining offenses related to electronic transmission of obscene or private content, including child pornography and privacy violations).

²⁸ *Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023*, §§ 78, 79, 351, 356, No. 45 of 2023, *India Code*, <https://indiacode.nic.in> (covering stalking, modesty-based offenses, defamation, and criminal intimidation, including those committed through electronic means).

Critical Analysis of Legal Gaps In India's Cybercrime Framework Against Women

While the Information Technology Act, 2000, and the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS), 2023, inclusively provide the foundational legal framework for addressing various kinds of cybercrimes prevalent for women in India, significant gaps continue to exist in both their scope and enforcement. However, as these laws primarily focus on explicit acts of harm such as threats, obscene content, stalking, or repeated harassment, they remain largely reactive and fail to address. A critical gap lies in the absence of specific recognition of online misogyny and gender-based hate speech.

The law does not adequately address coordinated forms of abuse, such as mob-based trolling (often referred to as "dogpiling"), persistent slut-shaming, and ideological hate targeted at women, particularly through memes or so-called "dark humor." There is an urgent need for an Indian legal framework to explicitly criminalize sexist hate speech and platform accountability, which are currently absent from existing statutes²⁹.

Comparative Insights: UK and USA

Countries like the United Kingdom, with the enactment of the Online Safety Act, 2023, have moved towards a more victim-centric approach, which holds digital platforms accountable for removing hateful content, such as misogynistic speech, which explicitly does not meet the criteria of being criminal but is extremely harmful and dangerous³⁰. The Malicious Communications Act of the UK criminalizes sending messages intended to cause distress knowingly, regardless of format or platform³¹.

The United States criminalizes non-consensual pornography, cyberstalking, and threats through various state and federal laws such as the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA)³² and the Communications Decency Act³³. These advanced legal regimes are areas where Indian law on women's safety in online spaces remains reactive, sporadic, and insufficient, such as

²⁹ *IT for Change, Rethinking Legal-Institutional Approaches to Sexist Hate Speech in India* (Feb. 2021), available at <https://itforchange.net/rethinking-legal-institutional-approaches-to-sexist-hate-speech-india>.

³⁰ Online Safety Act, 2023, c. 43 (U.K.), available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2023/43/enacted>

³¹ Malicious Communications Act, 1988, c. 27 (U.K.), available at <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1988/27/enacted>.

³² Violence Against Women Act of 1994, Pub. L. No. 103-322, tit. IV, 108 Stat. 1902 (codified as amended in scattered sections of 18, 28, and 42 U.S.C.).

³³ Communications Decency Act of 1996, Pub. L. No. 104-104, tit. V, §§ 501–561, 110 Stat. 56, 133 (codified at 47 U.S.C. § 230).

collective harassment and emerging digital threats, although platform immunity under **Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act** remains contentious.

Emerging Threats Unaddressed By Indian Law

Moreover, the Indian legal framework also lacks gender-sensitive definitions of digital harm; it often applies gender-neutral language, which fails to address the gendered targeting nature of online abuse, specifically towards women, and its **intermediary liability** system lacks both clarity and enforcement strength. The absence of specific laws on AI-generated deep fakes, non-consensual image circulation, and gendered hate speech significantly hampers the protection of women in digital spaces. Even when provisions exist, Factors like encryption, jurisdictional challenges, case overloads, slow response times, and a lack of technical expertise hinder prosecution efforts, meaning that women often receive no timely redress. Consequently, many resort to **self-censorship** or withdrawal from digital spaces to avoid abuse.

If India aims to genuinely ensure digital safety for women, then moving beyond generalist penal provisions is the need of the hour. What is needed is a **comprehensive, gender-sensitive cyberlaw framework** that recognizes and penalizes **sexist hate speech**, enforces **platform accountability**, and criminalizes **emerging forms of abuse** such as meme-based harassment, digital mob attacks, and AI-facilitated image abuse.

Freedom Of Expression And Online Speech: Evolution, Misuse, And The Need For Reasonable Limits

In the digital realm, where the Internet has become such a powerful tool for people to express their opinions freely, without any threat or danger, this very right—Article 19(1)(a)—has often been manipulated to **shield hate rather than foster dialogue**. Once a means for fostering democratic dissent and resisting colonial censorship, Article 19(1)(a) is now frequently invoked to justify **rape threats, death threats, slut-shaming memes**, and other forms of **gender-based digital abuse**.³⁴ the internet has created an “echo chamber” where hate speech is normalized, and the issue is exacerbated by the anonymity provided by the digital world, which emboldens users to harass women with greater impunity Although Hon’ble Supreme Court struck down aSection 66A of the IT Act in *Shreya Singhal v. Union of India* (2015) for

³⁴ Amy Murtagh, *Fighting the Trolls and Online Violence Against Women*, **76 Socialist Lawyer** 4 (2017), available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.13169/socialistlawyer.76.0004>.

its vagueness, the **Supreme Court clarified that free speech is not absolute**. It reaffirmed that speech can be restricted under **Article 19(2)** if it causes **incitement to violence or poses a clear and present danger**. However, in practice, **constitutional protections are too often interpreted unilaterally**, by allowing **hate speech to masquerade as opinion or satire** in online settings.

The Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code Rules, 2021, despite their intent to regulate content, fail to define hate speech or mandate platform accountability clearly.³⁵. And hence, a regulatory vacuum is created wherein the platform and freedom of speech avoid responsibility is weaponised by users.

However, the internet has created an “echo chamber” where hate speech is normalized, and the issue is exacerbated by the anonymity provided by the digital world, which emboldens users to harass women with greater impunity. In reality, **unregulated and misogynistic expression directly contradicts the "reasonable restrictions."** Therefore, India must reframe **its approach to Article 19** by embedding it with **contextual nuance, ethical responsibility, and gender-sensitive safeguards**. Until then, freedom of expression will remain a free-for-some and silencing-for-others kind of weapon.

Author’s Critical Insights

What began as a study of online misogyny has unfolded into a deeper realisation— a reflection of how digital spaces have become mirrors, amplifiers, and mutators of deeply entrenched offline power structures. In the case of India, women’s virtues are often equated with silence and modesty, the internet has digitized traditional control and created new forms of control, surveillance, and punishment.

One insight that stands out is this: algorithmic misogyny in India does not occur in a vacuum — it collides violently with centuries of cultural conditioning that created a “digital patriarchy complex.” In many western countries, misogynistic trends often arise in fringe digital while in India, they align seamlessly with pre-existing societal norms, that makes it harder to recognize and even harder to recognize.

³⁵ Mansi Singh, *Freedom of Expression and Online Speech*, **8 Int’l J. Novel Rsch. & Dev.** (IJNRD) (July 2023), available at <https://www.ijnrd.org/papers/IJNRD2307083.pdf>.

The Indian manosphere is not just an import of Western incel or MRA communities rather, it feeds on **local narratives of male entitlement, honor, and religious morality**. Misogyny is often repackaged in the language of cultural pride or moral righteousness, which **gives hate speech a socially acceptable veneer**, and hence, the misogyny is not only moralised but also moralised and rewarded.

Through the course of this research, a particularly disturbing pattern has emerged that online abuse in India not just silences women, it disciplines them. Digital serves as a form of digital punishment for women who transgress perceived boundaries, either for speaking out, asserting sexuality, voicing their opinions, and even sometimes for merely existing in public online spaces. And most disturbingly, this punishment is not handed down by a single oppressor, but through a networked crowd, which is coordinated and anonymous. We can also term it as “digital panchayat” that delivers its verdict through likes, shares, memes, and coordinated trolling

A further insight lies in the **invisibility** of this abuse. Since it is masked under "humor," "jokes," or "satire," it escapes traditional definitions of violence. But such unseen or often ignored forms of abuse or violence against can have a serious impact on the mental health of the survivors, particularly young women and girls, that can be deep and lasting. Many are reinforcing existing inequalities in a country where women already struggle to claim physical public space by internalising the idea that harassment is the **cost of digital participation**.

Most importantly, this research has shown that online misogyny is not merely about women being attacked—it’s about a society that refuses to evolve which seeks validation through trolling, and humor becomes a tool for humiliation, and where tech platforms profit from outrage and polarization, we must ask a difficult question to ourselves: Are we raising a generation that is more connected, or a generation that is more corrupted?

Reforms Needed

While the Internet has become a mirror of our society’s inherent biases, now it has to become the space where those voices are dismantled and everyone’s opinions are heard and respected. This research has shown that online is not just an individual or behavioral issue—it’s a structural, cultural, and technological crisis.

The problem in India is worsened by the weak enforcement of digital rights, communalized abuse, and institutional indifference, which lead many women to self-censor and silence their voices online. Women and girls who are victims of technology-facilitated gender-based violence face long-term, severe psychological and social consequences, sometimes even fatal consequences.

Ms. Maria Noel Mingeirou, stated *“It’s not just about protecting girls. It’s about creating a world where boys and girls alike can grow up free from the toxic pressures of harmful gender expectations.”*³⁶ Addressing misogyny requires a shift in mindsets rather than a change of platforms.

Web Foundation highlights six guiding pillars to counter online gender-based violence:

- Regulation
- Public awareness
- Platform accountability
- Transparency in data
- Education of youth, and
- Multi-stakeholder collaborations³⁷.

Likewise, the UN Women Youth Toolkit provides a roadmap where online gender-based violence (OGBV) awareness can be integrated into schools and universities through digital ethics, media literacy, and consent education to build preventive awareness from a young age³⁸. The Team Lewis Foundation, in support of the HeForShe campaign, found that two-thirds of men believe it is important to challenge sexist behavior online, but many of them hesitate because they consider that it is not their place. This recognizes the need for boys and men to play a central role by challenging harmful gender norms and dismantling patriarchal practices and structures that undermine equality³⁹.

³⁶ UN Women, *UN Women Sounds the Alarm Over Online Misogyny* (June 2025), available at <https://www.un.org/en/delegate/un-women-sounds-alarm-over-online-misogyny>.

³⁷ Web Foundation, *Building Blocks for Online Gender-Based Violence Accountability*, WEBFOUNDATION.ORG (Sept. 22, 2022), <https://webfoundation.org/2022/09/building-blocks-for-ogbv-accountability/>

³⁸ UN Women Asia-Pacific, *30 for 2030 Youth Toolkit: A Youth Guide to End Online Gender-Based Violence*, UNWOMEN.ORG (2022), <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/partnerships/30-for-2030/toolkit-youth-guide-to-end-online-gender-based-violence>

³⁹ UN Women, *Explainer: How to Counter the Manosphere’s Toxic Influence*, UNWOMEN.ORG (Mar. 20, 2024), <https://www.unwomen.org/en/articles/explainer/how-to-counter-the-manospheres-toxic-influence>

One pressing concern is the proliferation of so-called “**shock content**” on platforms like Instagram Reels and TikTok⁴⁰. These videos—often disguised as humor—promote harassment and violence against women, desensitize viewers, and normalize abuse. Algorithms **that reward engagement over ethics** amplify such content; hence, a critical area of reform should be platform accountability. Tech companies must **prioritize dignity over virality** and invest in ethical AI design, moderation, and content reporting systems.

Governments and civil society must work collaboratively to build digital environments that are **secure, inclusive, and equitable**. This also includes adopting an **intersectional lens**, especially for those who face compounded abuse, such as **Dalit women, LGBTQ+ individuals**, and other marginalized communities.

India’s legal framework must evolve to reflect emerging harms. This includes explicitly defining and addressing:

- **Dogpiling-** (coordinated mass trolling), where a single target gets attacked by multiple users simultaneously⁴¹.
- **Cybersexism** – Online expression of sexist attitudes or abuse, including gender-based slurs, threats, and objectification⁴².
- **Revenge porn** – Sharing of non-consensual intimate or sexual content, typically to shame or retaliate against the subject⁴³.
- **AI-generated abuse** – Harmful content created using artificial intelligence, such as deepfake porn, fake threats, or misogynistic images.
- **Deepfakes** – These are AI-manipulated videos or images that falsely depict individuals, often used for defamation or sexual exploitation.
- **Gendered hate speech** – Online speech that targets individuals based on gender, including rape threats, sexist slurs, and misogynistic "jokes"⁴⁴.

India's outdated laws, like the Information Technology Act, 2000, must be modernized to deal with threats like deep fakes, AI-generated hate, and cross-border abuse, along with finding an

⁴⁰ Ritika Yadav, *Online Misogyny in India: A Gendered Perspective on Digital Hate*, 6 Int’l J. Soc. Sci. & Hum. Res. 228, 228–234 (2024), <https://www.socialsciencejournals.net/archives/2024/vol6issue2/PartE/6-2-61-410.pdf>

⁴¹ Nathan Chandler, *10 Forms of Online Harassment*, HOWSTUFFWORKS.COM (Sept. 30, 2020), <https://computer.howstuffworks.com/10-forms-online-harassment.htm>

⁴²Nuela Ada, *Cybersexism: Unveiling the Gender Bias in the Digital Space*, MEDIUM (Apr. 3, 2023), <https://medium.com/@nuelaada/cybersexism-unveiling-the-gender-bias-in-the-digital-space-eb4fd3df6050>

⁴³ Id at 32

⁴⁴ Id at 32

approach to balance the right to free expression vis-a-vis reasonable restrictions under Article 19(2).

A multi-stakeholder collaboration approach is the need of the hour—between platforms, governments, educators, civil society, and users—to make online safety for women more trustworthy and reliable. By recognizing online misogyny as a systemic crisis—and not just a fringe issue—we can create an internet where all voices are empowered, protected, and heard, regardless of gender.

