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Dangers of Living in a Connected World: The Gendered Cyber Space and the Indian Tale

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Abstract: *Crimes against women form a crucial part of cybercrimes in India, and the online platform is now the new platform where women's dignity, privacy, and security are increasingly being challenged. Trolling, abusing, threatening, stalking, voyeurism, body-shaming, defaming, surveillance, revenge porn, and other forms of indecent representation of women are rampant in the cyber world. The promises of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) and laws against cybercrime generated hopes about gender neutrality of digital technology. This article interrogates the disembodied character, neutrality, and gender blindness of cyberspace. It highlights the more profound point of making women's bodies the target for commodification and their body parts subject to a virtual male gaze, thus, continually re-erecting a new-fangled gendering process through cyberspace in the zenith of globalization. The purpose, at the same time, is to debunk the myth of 'gender neutrality that digital technology is pure and neutral and hence free from any sexual and gendered implication, taking India as an example.*

Keywords: Cybercrimes, Digital technology, Globalization, Digitalization and Gendered cyberspace

Introduction

Yanisky-Ravid and Mittelman (2016), in one of their papers published in *Fordham Intellectual Property, Media, and Law Journal*, made a profound observation about the nature of cyberspace. They said that "The virtual sphere is theoretically blind to gender, age, race, disabilities, and country of origin; any user can create content without limitation on the number of websites, blogs, and Facebook accounts. Even the government cannot completely control or resist the content. With the rise of the Internet, a new sphere was created: beyond borders, beyond total governmental control, beyond regulations, and almost any limitation" (p. 385). In 2005, Thomas Friedman, in his *World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* made a statement of similar significance. Friedman said that "There has never been a time in history when human imagination wasn't important, but writing this book tells me that it has never been more important than now because *in a flat world*, so many of the tools of collaboration are becoming commodities available to everyone. There is one thing, though, that has not and can never be commoditized, and that is imagination—what content we dream of creating" (Friedman, 2005, pp. 608-9). Hence, "digital globalization, defined largely by flows of data and information, is a new form of globalization brings about relevant changes regarding how business is done across borders, the flow of economic benefits, and broadening participation. The growth of data and information related to digital globalization determines that global economic, financial, and social connections increase through digital platforms" (Schilirò, 2018). With ground-breaking developments in biotechnologies and digitalization, promises began to loom large that the so-called umbilical connection between technology and male prerogative has been finally disconnected. Apparently, new technologies accompany new mantras of change, and the cyber gurus avow that the digital futures would be very different, eliminating many inequalities, including gender inequalities. The promises of Information and Communication Technologies generated hopes and aspirations that they will truly empower women and transform gender relations (Kemp and Squires, 1998; Green and

Adam, 1999; Kirkup et al., 2000) premised on the virtuality of cyberspace and the Internet's capacity of ending the embodied basis of sex difference (Millar, 1998, Plant 1999). 'Digital technologies, based on the brain rather than brawn, on networks rather than hierarchy, herald a new relationship between women and machines' (Wajcman, 2009, pp.5-6). The height of this optimism is best represented by Donna Haraway's (1985), cyborg metaphor which asserted that technology is part of our identity and embodiment as 'we are all chimeras, theorized and fabricated hybrids of machine and organism; in short, we are cyborgs' (Haraway, 1991: pp.150). *Hence the virtual sphere is theoretically blind to gender, age, race, disabilities, and country of origin. Against this setting, this article interrogates the disembodied character, neutrality, and gender blindness of cyberspace. It highlights the more profound point of making women's bodies the object for commodification and their body parts subject to a virtual panopticon male gaze, thus, continually re-erecting a new-fangled gendering process through cyberspace in the pinnacle of neo-liberal globalization. The purpose of this article, at the same time, is to demystify the myth of 'gender neutrality' that digital technology is pure and neutral and hence free from any sexual and gendered implication, taking India as an archetypal example.*

Umbilical Cord between Digital Globalization and ICTs

In the entire sweep of human history, few issues could rival the amount of writing and diversified debate carried out in the name of globalization. Since the last decade of the previous century, hardly is there a sphere or even an aspect not affected by globalization. Simply put, globalization is defined primarily by reference to the developments in technology, communications, information processing, and so on that have made the world smaller and more interdependent in very many ways. It refers to a trend and process, namely, the growth of trans planetary connections between people involving reducing barriers to Transworld contacts. People become more able—physically, legally, socially, culturally, and psychologically—to engage with each other in one world. Speaking quantitatively, most manifestations of global connectivity have

reached unprecedented levels during the past four decades. Earlier periods did not know jet travel, intercontinental missiles, transworld migrants with transborder remittances, satellite communications, facsimiles, the Internet, interactive television, transborder production chains, intercontinental retailers, global credit cards. But never identified Internet as an inviting medium in the form of a marketplace for sexual partners and pornographic goods and services of every conceivable kind or anthropogenic ecological problems that encompass the planet as a whole. Hence, a reconfiguration of social space, such as globalization, is intimately linked to shifts in patterns of knowledge, production, governance, identity, social relations, and the ways that people relate to each other and also with nature. Along with an increasing interdependence, interpenetration, and intensification of relations among individuals, societies, or nation-states, it signifies the ascendancy of global capitalist market relations based primarily on Information and Communication Technologies (hereafter ICTs). ICTs comprise "a complex and heterogeneous set of goods, applications, and services used to produce, distribute process and transform information" (Marcelle, 2000, p. 5). Globalization involves significant shifts in wealth, employment, and populations in a complex set of processes that free corporate power from local and even national regulation and control. Supranational corporations and international banking institutions that is richer and larger than most countries, and organized crime syndicates that are richer than some countries, are no longer accountable to any national government. The time-space compression has occurred within territorial geography, whereas transworld simultaneity and instantaneity take social relations beyond territorial geography. The difference is qualitative; the change is structural. Following several decades of proliferating super territorial connections through cyberspace, global eco spaces, transworld governance arenas, and more territorialism have lost its monopoly hold. Accordingly, recent globalization has been closely connected with certain forms of reterritorialization as social space in today's world is both territorial and super territorial. The two qualities always intersect in contemporary social relations. Thus, every Internet user accesses cyberspace from a territorial location. Just about every

household on earth today encounters global products, global finance, and global communications in some direct or indirect way. No regional, national, provincial, local, or household conditions today exist in isolation from global circumstances. This multidimensionality brings greater complexity to geography and extends to culture, ecology, economics, politics, health and illness, sociology, and social psychology.

The ICT as Digital technologies, the supreme catalyst of globalization, spearhead the current stage of globalization. "Digital platforms change the economics of doing business across borders, bringing down the cost of international interactions and transactions. They create markets and user communities with global scale, providing businesses with a huge base of potential customers and effective ways to reach them" (McKinsey Global Institute (MGI), 2016). ICTs have contributed significantly to the development of the Integration of commerce and financial services. This relationship is best evident in the explosion of users-both buyers, and sellers on the Internet. "Each new customer on the Internet increases the value to sellers, and each new seller on the Internet increases its value to buyers. The Internet has created conditions for a rapid interoperable global communication platform, which together with the TCP/IP standard, graphic user interface and Personal Computers (PCs) and their clones can transmit huge, digitized information files globally" (Hajela, 2005, p.8). Emails and the World Wide Web to link and organize digitized information, significantly reduced price of personal computers, and cheaper internet access along with broad band facilities, have generated an astounding and ever-increasing proliferation of ICTs. But Broadband technology in developing countries is slow, resulting in the populations of these countries using mobile technology to access the Internet (Statista, 2018). But due to the availability of Internet services through mobile devices, Internet use has been consistently growing (Statista, 2018). Smartphones are becoming less expensive with more features, and mobile service providers provide more reliable Internet over less-expensive cellular networks. This is contributing to increased Internet penetration rates in many countries. 2016 was the

first year in which mobile device access made up most worldwide Internet usage (Statcounter, 2016). StatCounter Global Stats finds that mobile and tablet devices accounted for 51.3% of internet usage worldwide in October compared to 48.7% by desktop. As of September 2017, the global Internet penetration rate is estimated at 51% (Statista, 2018). And as of January 2021, there were 4.66 billion active internet users worldwide, which 59.5 percent of the global population is. Of this total, 92.6 percent (4.32 billion) accessed the Internet via mobile devices. In October 2023 these uses are Desktop vs Mobile vs Tablet Market Share Worldwide is Mobile 53.7%, Desktop 45.52% and Tablet 1.77% (Statista, 2023).

Table 1: Mobile and tablet internet usage exceeds desktop for first time worldwide

Increased traffic plus Google search rankings stress importance of mobile friendly websites. Its research arm, Stat Counter Global Stats finds that mobile and tablet devices accounted for 51.3% of internet usage worldwide in October compared to 48.7% by desktop.

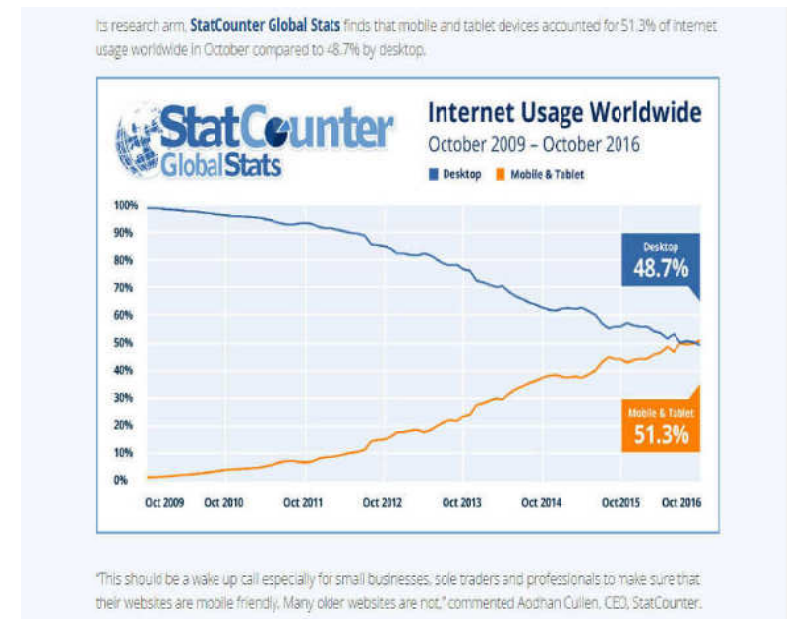
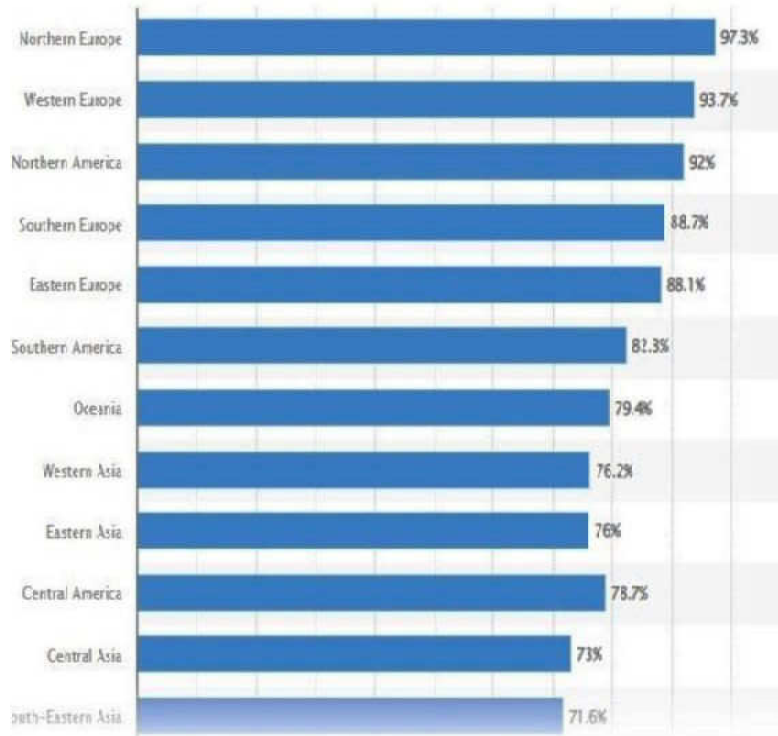


Table 2: Global internet penetration rate as of October 2023, by region



Internet is also a site of struggle and resistance where the oppositional activists and revolutionaries can look to its potential for assisting them in their effort and resistance. In 1995 the Zapatistas used computer networks to mobilize support for them throughout the world against the repressive action of the then Mexican government. One of the most eye-catching examples of the utilization of the Internet is the campaign against World Trade Organization (WTO) meeting in Seattle in December 1999 and subsequently in 2000-01 (Kellner, 2002). The extensive use of social media was a critical factor in the success of the anti-corruption movement in India in 2011. In August

2010, a non-profit organization called Janaagraha launched a website (www.ipaidabribe.com) where people are encouraged to share their encounters with corrupt officials (and honest officials) anonymously. Hence, the website provides a snapshot of bribe occurrences in a city and promises to use them to argue for improving governance systems and procedures, tightening law enforcement and regulation, and reducing the scope for corruption in obtaining services from the government. The most notable instance that demonstrated the frustration of Indian citizens with the widespread corruption was the anti-corruption movement led by activist Anna Hazare in April 2011. A hunger strike by Anna Hazare in New Delhi was followed by large-scale protests across the country against corruption. The movement was so strong and widespread that it secured Time magazine's top 10 world news stories in 2011. The extensive use of social media was arguably the single most significant factor in the success of the anti-corruption movement led by Anna Hazare. Though a relatively small proportion of Indian youth, especially in rural India, have personal computers with the Internet, almost all of them own cell phones home (Internet and Mobile Association of India (IMAI), October 2013). A significant proportion of these cell phones are equipped with Internet and social media applications, which made it easier for the organizers of the movement to mobilize youth who were frustrated with reading stories of corruption daily. The organizers and supporters of the campaign took advantage of the broad outreach of social media and used it extensively in organizing protests. In a way, ICTs became the main catalytic and potential for the rise of a public sphere by an ongoing negotiation between state and society. Does it mean that the Internet through ICTs allow for creating an alternate public sphere that facilitates communication, deliberation, and organization? Studies in this genre have emphasized the technical ability of the Net to reduce the costs of an organization. This involves reducing the friction of space by overcoming the need for a physical place to meet (Ayres 1999, p. 137, Klein 1999, p. 218) and reducing time costs by allowing for asynchronous communication to occur (Klein 1999, p. 218). In terms of the provision of information, Web sites function to provide information and act as information clearing houses

(Ayres 1999, p. 137). The capacity of the Net to organize is demonstrated by the presence of online protests and online drives. Online forums function as a space for discussion and re-education of citizens about participation in public affairs (Klein 1999, p. 214).

One of the most crucial advances of ICT-related factors driving globalization is the *Integration of markets and cyberspace*. This Integration renders geographic space and distance useless and outmoded for all sorts of collaborative activities in all spheres and walks of human lives. According to the MGI (2016), the capacity of small businesses to reach new markets supports economic growth everywhere which enabled even individuals to participate in the process of globalization directly using digital platforms in all aspects of life viz. finding work and showcasing their talents and building personal networks. Social media had some 900 million as their participants and 360 million used cross-border e-commerce. As mentioned before, Friedman gave a classic example in his award-winning book *The World Is Flat*, where 'Boeing, headquartered in the United States, take advantage of the know-how of Russian scientists and engineers in solving aerodynamic problems and developing new -aviation alloys just by setting up a design facility in Moscow which is connected by fibre-optic cable to the Boeing design centres in the United States to interact and collaborate around the clock with their United States counterparts. On the other side, the Russians outsourced the digitization of certain airplane component designs to Hindustan Aeronautics in Bangalore, India, which are then manufactured in Japan' (Friedman, 2005). Dell Computers offer another often quoted example: engineers in Texas and Taiwan Province of China design it, microprocessor comes from an Intel factory in the Philippines, Malaysia or China, and other components come from firms located in Germany, Japan, Republic of Korea, or the United Kingdom with final assembly taking place in Taiwan' (Hajela, 2005, p. 10).

The Mirage of an Egalitarian Internet: Gendered Cyberspace and the Indian Tale

In 2013, 1,203 cases of publication and transmission of obscene content online were reported, up from 589 in 2012, according to the NCRB (National Crime Records Bureau, India). As per Police Report other cybercrimes against women are also growing which include online stalking, morphing pictures and creating sexually explicit Facebook accounts of women, and up-loading sex videos without their consent. Pavan Duggal, a lawyer who specializes in cyber law and pornography says, 'A sizeable number of people now have a phone with a camera, but very few understand or pay any heed for laws' (Pawan, 2013). Paradoxically, many police officers do not deem it grave enough to even register a complaint and indubitably parents and the police blame the women/the victim. To begin with 'Why did she get close to a man in the first place? They ask. A lot of it goes unreported because there are issues of social honour and shame.' (Rama Lakshmi, August 14, 2014). Women are rarely to be found in the internal corporate structure of the globalizing economy, but every new technology that has been invented in the last two decades of globalization has been utilized to deliver sexual content; its capital and labour fused in women's body or body parts but invariably the profit went to the 'global' capitalist/capitalism. Strangely though, the massive literature on digitalized globalization suffers from two distinct types of biases or amnesia in whatever way one looks at it. The first one is that process of globalization is represented as gender-blind or gender-neutral. Saskia Sassen, in her book, *Globalization and Its Discontents* (1998) claimed that mainstream counts of globalization emphasize technical and abstract economic dynamics and proceed as if they were gender-neutral when they are not. These accounts operate according to what she termed a 'narrative of eviction', because they exclude a whole range of workers, firms, and sectors that do not fit the prevalent masculinized images of Globalization (Sassen, 1998, p. 82). Secondly, the literature on the impact of ICTs does not take into account the fact that this technology is saturated with masculinist rhetoric and a set of representations that are frequently

sexualized and often sexist. In short, on the one hand, accepting the fact that Internet is a contested terrain, denial of harm and silence exists. On the other, the commodification of body parts of women and the new technologies' impeccable ability for facilitating the sexual exploitation of women and children is ubiquitous.

How many times have we heard the erstwhile claim that: 'There is no race and no gender online, and the internet is a disembodied communication from where the bodily performativity has vanished?' *Online you can be anything or anyone you want to be.* Digital pioneers envisaged the prospect of life online as a way to transcend physical identities and marked bodies. An early promise of online interaction endeavoured to convince that gender, race, and age become insignificant in online exchange. Cyberspace will be a realm in which physical markers such as sex, race, age, body type, and size will eventually lose saliency as a basis for the evaluative categorization of self/other. 'At the very least, cyberspace will provide an opportunity to explore and invent alternate identities' (Kollock and Smith, 1999, p.11, Boyd, 2001). Jodi O'Brien (1998) sharply contests this view in her "Writing in the Body: Gender (Re) Production in Online Interaction."

O'Brien argues that gender is such a central feature for organizing interpersonal relations, persons go to great pains to reproduce gender in online interaction. "Are you male or female?" is such a commonly asked question that it was long ago abbreviated to "R U M or F?" Significantly, no such abbreviations are in widespread use for questions concerning age, height, weight, socio-economic status, etc. Gender is the one characteristic of our embodied lives that is a central feature in interaction throughout the Internet (O'Brien, 1998, 11). For example, one cannot register in Yahoo messenger without stating gender and occupation. (Boyd, 2001, p. 1). Some argue that the benefits offered by the free and unregulated exchange of ideas that characterize cyberspace far outweigh the harms facilitated by the Internet. This is known as cyberspace idealism- the view of cyberspace as a utopian realm of the mind where all can participate equally, free from social, historical, and physical restraints.

“The concept of the avatar, mostly conceived, is central to cyberspace idealism. The term is generally used to refer to users' virtual self-representation-from sophisticated graphics to simple pseudonyms in computer games, virtual reality systems, and chat rooms. An avatar also stands more generally for the unique mode of being that cyberspace allows. The structure of cyberspace facilitates a wall between a person's "real" identity and their virtual one. The term "avatar" is Sanskrit for "incarnation," and the religious resonance is telling. Cyberspace provides, according to this view, a powerful counter to the real world. In real life, individuals are constrained by physical limitations, with all the prejudice and division that engenders. In cyberspace, the only restriction is an individual's imagination and creativity” (Franks, 2011, pp. 225-6). The structure of cyberspace facilitates a wall between a person's "real" identity and their virtual one. In actuality, with the rise of the Internet, a new sphere was created: beyond borders, beyond total governmental control, beyond property limitation, beyond regulations, and almost any boundary (Mifsud Bonnici, 2008). In a nutshell, these early debates around the body-technology questions were polarized. Some people offered that cyberspace is a virtual space. What happens in that make-believe, performative space does not directly connect with who we are and how we live? In her book *Life on the Screen* (1995), Sherry Turkle was the first one to question this binary between the body and the digital self. Working closely with the first users of the online virtual reality worlds called Multiple User Dungeons, Turkle notes how being online started producing a different way of thinking about who we are and how we relate to the world around us. A contemporary of Sherry Turkle, Julian Dibbell, in his celebrated account of “A Rape in Cyberspace” describes a case study that corroborates many of the observations that Turkle posits. About nine years back, The UN Broadband Commission for Digital Development, in its 2015 report on *Cyberviolence against women and girls*, suggests cyber violence overwhelmingly targets women and girls because "physical" VAWG [violence against women and girls] and "cyber" VAWG feed into each other" (2015, p. 7). The following Table No. 3 represents a global survey by Plan International revealed that 60 percent of girls and

women had experienced harassment on social media platforms, and one-fifth of them have either quit or reduced their social media use. Gender-based violence, unfortunately, happens on most social platforms — Facebook (39 percent of girls/women polled were harassed), Instagram (23 percent), WhatsApp (14 percent), Snapchat (10 percent), Twitter (9 percent), and TikTok (6 percent).



Source: <https://yourstory.com/herstory/2020/10/crisis-internet-safety-women-social-media-cybercrime/amp>

Since the beginning, India has been one of the favored destinations of pedophile sex tourists from Europe and the United States (*The Indian Express*, 1997) because of India's relaxed laws and utterly incompetent law implementation machinery. Multinational tour operators, hotel companies, airlines, and travel agencies are set up for Goa, Kerala, and all over India through Internet. Observing that it would not be possible to block pornography Web sites on the Internet, an expert team appointed by Mumbai High Court has suggested, among other restrictions, the introduction of photo identity cards for users of cybercafes across the state (PTI, Feb.17, 2002). An American head of

an Indian Internet firm caught up in a scandal was released on bail as police interrogated the private school student who filmed the lewd clip with a cell phone camera. A Delhi High Court judge ordered the release of Avinash Bajaj, the head of the eBay owned Baazee.com, who faced charges that he allowed the sale of pornographic material on the Web site (LA Times, December 22, 2004). According to the Alexa Ranks or Google trends, Indians are either sex-starved or addicted netizens in the world. They are spending more time on porn sites. In India, Alexa rankings, No.1 adult blog "Debonair blog" is at 14th place (Alexa Ranking). On May 18, 2016, the then Indian Minister for Women and Child Development Maneka Gandhi stated that the online abuse and trolling of women in India should be treated the same way as violence in the real world. (Choudhury, "Online Attacks on Women to Be Treated as Violence: Maneka Gandhi to NDTV," NDTV, May 18, 2016). The next day, the Home Ministry announced that they plan to launch a portal named "Cyber Crime Prevention against Women and Children" (CCPWC) that will allow Indian women to post complaints about online harassment (May 19, 2016). Due to the public nature of online abuse, the reactions of friends, colleagues, and the media can exacerbate the trauma. At the same it is also true that proper education is needed for law enforcement agencies, and even for the victims and their communities, about the importance of prosecuting individuals who use social media as a tool to perpetuate violence against women and minorities (Statista, 2021). And on the top of it, *National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) of India did not maintain any separate record of Cyber-crimes against children and women.*

Cybercrimes against women are on the rise, and women have been drastically victimized in cyberspace. Some perpetrators try to defame women by sending obscene emails, stalking women by using chat rooms, websites and developing pornographic videos where women are depicted in compromising positions created without their consent, spoofing emails, 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 prospects. The revealing of personal information has made women more of a casualty of cybercrime. It is evident that the victimization of women is leading to cybercrime and vice versa (see Table 4)

Table 3: Selected forms of cyber sexual violence against women and girls

Cyberstalking:	Cyber stalking a way to use the Internet to stalk someone for online harassment and online abuse. A cyberstalker does not engage in a direct physical threat to a victim but follows the victim's online activity to gather information, make threats in different forms of verbal intimidation. The anonymity of online interaction reduces the chance of identification and makes it more difficult.
Cyber Pornography;	Cyber Pornography is the other threat to female netizens. This would include pornographic websites; pornographic magazines produced using computers, and the Internet.
Cyber Defamation:	Cyber defamation includes both libel and slander. It involves publishing defamatory information about the person on a website or circulating it among the victim's friends' circle or organization.

<p>Morphing:</p> <p>Online sexual abuse: distribution of sexually explicit and violent content, sexual harassment</p>	<p>Morphing is an activity to edit the original picture to misuse it purposefully. Preparators download women pictures from social media, WhatsApp, or some other resources and upload morphed photos on other websites such as social media sites, porn sites, or for registering themselves anonymously.</p>
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In India, data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) shows that reported cybercrimes against women have increased from 4,242 in 2017 to 6,030 in 2018. In January 2020, India recorded 560 million internet users – becoming the second largest internet user base. This number was expected to reach 600 million by 2021. There has also been a surge in these incidents during the corona virus-induced lockdown. The National Commission for Women received 100 cybercrime complaints in June, up from 54 in April and 37 and 21 in March and February, respectively (07-Oct-2020). In fact, at this rate of internet adoption, it is expected that most organisations would prefer to go digital for a flawless and efficient workflow. On the other hand, rapid digitalisation also means increased exposure to cyber threat. Dhanya Menon (December 22, 2016), India's first woman cybercrime investigator, emphasized that regardless of the number of followers, online abuse impacts everybody in the same way. 'But women are reluctant to take legal recourse due to the long-winding process and the unwelcome attitude of the law enforcement in these matters,' she adds. Vibha Setlur, Advocate and founder of law firm Legal Chap, says that while India does not have a specific statute addressing cyberbullying, victims can take legal recourse through provisions in the Indian Penal Code and the Information Technology Act 2000. "In cases of sextortion, revenge porn, and photo morphing, women feel very uncomfortable

to express to even their family, and going to the police and filing a complaint would involve sharing the content with police officers. Instead, many tend to stop using social media or even go completely off the Internet and suffer from depression. The fear of social stigma is extreme," adds Mumbai-based cybercrime lawyer Puneet Bhasin. (Quoted in Norzom, & Balakrishnan, October 8, 2020). However, experts share a divided view on what happens when a victim moves past the stigma and seeks help. Nanda Chougule, Founder of Bengaluru-based Cyber security firm Digisec360, has trained the cybercrime branch of Karnataka for nearly a year. During her time there, she noticed that the police force does not have the infrastructure or workforce to tackle all the cases registered. Hence, it ends up prioritizing issues with high financial stakes while the rest are largely ignored. Nanda Chougule Identifying itself as a '**security as a service platform**', she says, "being a service provider helped us understand our customer closely and conceptualise our product Cyber Essential platform, covering three tenets of people, process, and technology." Nanda believes cybersecurity in the current scenario mostly relies on educating and creating cyber awareness amongst individuals and teams and that cyber resilience is more critical now than ever before (quoted in Norzom, April 25, 2020). Dhanya Menon (Quoted in Norzom & Balakrishnan, October 8, 2020), on the other hand, says that most of the time, the police would not pay heed to complaints unless it involves sexual abuse. "With due investigation, perpetrators can be identified and arrested, but people have to reach out and complain. Cybercrimes against women are investigated very fast, especially in Maharashtra," says Puneet. For example, she says, a recent case involved a woman (a major) who complained of trolling and cyberstalking in July. "Within three days of filing an FIR, the culprit was arrested. His bail was rejected, and a charge sheet has been filed. The accountability rate is high – which also depends on your legal counsel and advocate – and the legal system is in favour of women," she affirms. But Dhanya clearly assert, that "even educators are not aware of the risks," herself the mother of a 16-year-old boy. "Then why do we give this atom bomb into our children's hands and expect them to behave

responsibly at an age that is potentially most vulnerable to risky behaviour?" (Quoted in Basu, December 22, 2016). In 2019, Maharashtra state in India had the highest number of cyberstalking and bullying incidents against women and children compared to the rest of the country, with nearly 409 cases registered with the authorities. Uttar Pradesh and Haryana followed with 65 cases. Overall, the country recorded approximately 777 points of such offenses that same year. This category of crime came under the purview of Section 354D of the Indian Penal Code. The year 2019 saw a significant jump in cybercrimes reported in India. That year, over 44.5 thousand cybercrime incidents were registered. Karnataka and Uttar Pradesh accounted for the highest share during the measured time. And, not surprisingly, Uttar Pradesh leads the way. The northern state of Uttar Pradesh had the highest number of cybercrimes compared to the rest of the country, with over six thousand cases registered with the authorities in 2018 alone. India's tech state, Karnataka, followed suit that year. A majority of these cases were registered under the IT Act with the motive to defraud or sexually exploit victims. (Cybercrimes reported in India 2012-2019).

The term "cyber violence" refers to using various digital devices – including the mobile phone – to insult, harass, humiliate, disseminate rumours, ostracize, or otherwise coerce an individual who cannot defend him or hear her or that is otherwise dominated. Instances of cyber violence present at least three characteristics: ease of anonymity, strong dissemination power, and difficulty to control (Blaya, 2015). Digital devices allow for robust dissemination of power: episodes of cyber violence can easily and rapidly reach many people in various networks. Whereas victims of "traditional" (face-to-face) bullying were likely to find a hell, either at home or with a trusted group of friends, cyberbullying allows no respite to its victims. They are theoretically vulnerable to violence 24 hours a day, with no guaranteed end in sight. In this context, a sole ill-intentioned message or picture disseminated without consent can generate repetitive and excessive harassment. It has to be remembered that cyberspace is not a separate, isolated, and delineated space. Social relationships and

episodes of violence transit between cyberspace and social "face-to-face" spaces, suggesting that cyberspace ought to be considered as a magnified version of face-to-face interactions. In this sense, it is worth reminding that most episodes of cyber violence involve peers, not ill-intentioned strangers (*stranger danger thesis*) (Blaya, 2015; Ringrose, 2010). How can cyberspace be radically different from social space, where atrocities of various kinds are inflicted on most women? *To understand gender interactions in cyberspace, one must consider the broader state of power relationships offline. Gender studies have undoubtedly shown gender relations to be unequal due to the prejudices caused to girls and women by the double standards applied to feminine sexuality and female bodies.* Despite successive women's movements during the 20th century, an essentialist approach to women and men (and to their bodies and sexualities) continues to dominate. This approach fosters an understanding of the sexes as binary and complementary: assigning different roles to individuals according to one of two (biological) sexes. These social roles and expectations are heteronormative since they encourage a strict correspondence between biological sex, gender identity and expression, and sexual attraction to individuals from the "other" sex (in a binary system) (Dayer, 2014). Accordingly, the predominantly patriarchal Indian society mostly blames women of India for offline crimes inflicted on them, and online victims are no exception. Halder & Jaishankar's (2011a) study shows instances where women victims' marriages were stopped due to their online victimization, and there is less legal protection to them compared to women in so-called Global North. 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" (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011a, p. 4). The victim shies away from the police in fear of defamation of her profile and her family's name, which gives the perpetrator miscreant(s) leverage for further abusing her. Taking advantage of this, he even starts blackmailing and threatening the victim. Out of fear of mainly being harassed by the police and losing the support of the family, women shun off the matter, which gives the culprit courage to repeat his wrongdoings, and the virtual world gives

him enough space to hide. According to data from the National Commission for Women, 54 cybercrime complaints were received online in April 2020 compared to 37 complaints received online in April 2019. The joint Director Indraveni K of Centre for Development of Advanced Computing [joint director Indraveni K omit] said that there was a significant increase in cybercrimes against women during the lockdown. Superintendent of Police (cybercrimes) GR Radhika said that NCRB data in 2018 revealed that women registered 6,030 cybercrimes. However, the power dynamics on the Internet are far from balanced. "In India, 71 crore people are using the Internet, out of which 25 crores are women. She said 80% of people fall prey to cybercrimes, and 63% don't know where to lodge complaints on cybercrimes. She also discussed the types of social media crimes like profile hacking, photo morphing, offers and shopping scams, and dating scams, link baiting, information theft, cyberbullying. (The Hindu, August 20, 2020).

Democracy watchdog 'Freedom House's Hyperlinkers project, which seeks to amplify the voices of marginalized communities in global digital rights discussions, surveyed 500 Indian internet users revealed the extent to which online violence affects everyday women and marginalized individuals. Of those 500, 97 percent identified themselves as women, and 3 percent as other, a category that encompasses transgender people. Nearly half of respondents were between ages 18 and 25, with another third between 25 and 35. Most respondents were from the major Indian cities of Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, Chennai, Hyderabad, and Kolkata. Fifty percent of respondents said they were educated to postgraduate level, and 32 percent to college level. Forty-eight percent were professionals, and thirty-five percent were students. Nearly 100 percent said they regularly use technological devices like mobile phones, computers, laptops, or tablets, and all of them use social media platforms, like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc. Among the 500 people surveyed, 58 percent reported having faced some online aggression in trolling, bullying, abuse, or harassment. Others said threats of violence against themselves and family members; doxing, the publication of private

information without consent, trolling by dozens of accounts at a time; and hacking'. People who wrote about LGBT issues said they experienced harassment from men's rights activists and traditional groups who believe homosexuality undermines their values and Indian culture. Sixty-one percent of those who reported abuse said it took the form of hateful speech, while fifty-six percent experienced derogatory comments about their gender or appearance. Rape and death threats were widespread. Thirty percent of respondents called the experience of being subject to abuse online highly upsetting as it affected their personal lives; fifteen percent said that online harassment had resulted in mental health issues like depression, stress, and insomnia. Twenty-eight percent reported that they had intentionally reduced their online presence after suffering online abuse. Disturbingly, 36 percent of respondents who experienced harassment online took no action. Counter measures as reported included blocking abusive accounts using features offered by various social media websites (77 percent) and reporting the behaviour to the relevant platform (58 percent). Yet many also said distrust of those platforms. "I didn't report [the harassment] to Facebook because their policies hardly find any [abusive behaviour] wrong." Over half (52 percent) of respondents wanted social media platforms to adopt stricter standards for content posted on their site and the ability to report and block abuse more quickly. The main findings are that online abuse is a severe issue in India, affecting more than half of survey respondents. Yet, women and other targets lack support and understanding to respond effectively. The fact that both the 2008 IT Act and the 2013 criminal law amendment address different aspects of online violence may contribute to confusion among both victims and law enforcement about recourse in cases of abuse (Pasricha, 2017).

Cyber stalking is one of the most popular forms of internet crime in the modern world, which can be defined as the repeated acts of harassment or threatening behaviour of the cyber criminal towards the victim by using the internet services. Stalking on the Internet happens when the perpetrator follows the victim continuously by leaving unwanted messages. The motivation of stalkers may be considered

less than four reasons, (i) sexual harassment, (ii) obsession for love, (iii) revenge and hate, (iv) ego and power trips. In 2001 Ritu Kohli Case was India's first case of cyber stalking, where Ms. Ritu Kohli complained to police against a person who was using her identity to chat over the Internet at the website mainly in Delhi channel for four consecutive days. Ms. Kohli further complained that the person was speaking on the Net, using her name and giving her address, and was talking obscene language. The same person was also deliberately giving her phone number to other chatters, encouraging them to call Ritu Kohli at odd hours. The calls created havoc in the personal life of the complainant.

Consequently, IP addresses were traced, and police investigated the entire matter and ultimately arrested the offender. A case was registered under section 509, of IPC and thereafter, he was released on bail. This is the first time when a case of cyber stalking was reported. But, unfortunately at that time, Cyber stalking was not covered by the existing cyber laws in India. It was covered only under the ambit of Section 72 of the IT Act that perpetrator can be booked remotely for breach of confidentiality and privacy "This case caused alarm to the Indian government, for the need to amend laws regarding the aforesaid crime and regarding the protection of victims under the same" (Sukrut Deo, 2013, p. 89).

When it is said that women in India are not safe, the immediate assumption is that they are in physical danger in public and private spaces. They face a great risk of violence, hate, and harassment even in spaces where they might not be physically present — such as the Internet — which has gained attention only in the last few years. In 2017, Amnesty International conducted a study on online violence against women, which showed that over 70% of women surveyed who had faced some abuse online changed how they used social media, and a third of them said they no longer post their opinions on some issues. As mentioned before, online violence against women is essentially an extension of the offline violence directed at women owing to their gender – it targets their sexuality, reduces them to sexual objects, and reinforces gender stereotypes.

Online violence often leads to women being silenced or self-censoring of their opinions because of fear of backlash. During the general elections in 2019, women politicians received, on average, 113 problematic or abusive tweets a day, including rape threats and badgering. The data were gathered by 1,912 decoders analysing 114,716 tweets directed at 95 women politicians. These numbers are from Twitter alone; if other online spaces and social media platforms were taken into account, the scale of the harassment would be seen to increase manifold. Alka Lamba, a Member of, Indian National Congress, said: "When you are on social media, you face trolls, threats, abuses, and challenges 100% of the time. Their purpose is to silence you. It makes you want to cry. They talk about your personal life, your looks, and your family" (Troll Patrol India, 2020, p.5). Indians for Amnesty International Trust, in collaboration with Amnesty International – International Secretariat, measured the scale and nature of online abuse faced by women politicians in India during the 2019 General Elections of India. They found that one in every seven tweets that mentioned women politicians in India was 'problematic' or 'abusive'; Indian women politicians experienced substantially higher abuse than their UK and USA counterparts; one in every five problematic or abusive tweets was sexist or misogynistic. Shazia Imi, Member, Bhartiya Janata Party, stated, "People should know what women in politics endure, what they have to put up with, and how unequal it becomes for them. It is such a tough battlefield, so to speak. Really, I do believe that Twitter is my workplace. But if my workplace were to be a battlefield, all the time, would I be able to contribute to the cause that I represent, easily and with fairness, if I am constantly being attacked for being a woman" (Troll Patrol India, 2020, p.7). In the recent past, Twitter has admitted that it has created an unsafe space for women by perpetuating harassment and abuse and is trying to improve its policies and reporting process over the years, but the findings suggest that these policies are not sufficient to address the toxicity that women face online. (Troll_Patrol_India_Findings_2020.). As a whole, the findings of the report, though, indicate a problem that runs deeper: an antipathy to the idea of women in power, holding positions in which they can effect

change. Online violence against women is essentially an extension of the offline violence directed at women owing to their gender – it targets their sexuality, reduces them to sexual objects, and reinforces gender stereotypes. Online violence often leads to women being silenced or self-censoring of their opinions because of fear of backlash especially where patriarchal ideas and biases are intensely rooted, like India. The ICTs through digitalization have given the sex and porn industry new means of exploiting, marketing, and delivering women and children as commodities, especially to male buyers. The growth and expansion of the sex industry is closely intertwined with new technology. In the early years, it followed new technological innovations, later it assisted the public adoption of new technology, and recently, the success of this technology, among other things, is dependent on the sex industry. The Internet as a communications medium would exist without the sex industry, but the Internet industry would not grow and expand at its present rate without the sex industry. According to 1998 Forrester research, the online porn business was worth \$10 billion (almost INR 69 crore) at the time. Of course, owning porn sites (or any websites, really) was a far more expensive proposition, and much has changed in the last 24 years. The pay-per-view model has been hit by the availability of free/pirated video content. Several free streaming players have entered the game, and there's no lack of talent as the lines between the sexy Instagram star and adult actor blur. Nevertheless, porn hasn't stopped being profitable. With an international market worth \$97 billion (INR 6.6 lakh crore), building a smutty website is sure to make it rain crisp, fresh green. Though the Internet industry does not like to admit how much the sex industry is supporting it, but the following few indicators are revealing: In the early days, the sex industry was among the top five groups buying state-of-the-art computer equipment (The Guardian, May 14, 1998). Sex industry businesses were the first to purchase and use expensive T3 phone lines that transmit compressed, high-resolution images (Chicago Sun-Times, June 24, 1997). One of the largest Internet companies in the world, Digex, whose largest customer is Microsoft Corporation, had a sex industry

site as its second-largest customer (Arizona Daily Star, February 14, 1998). One of the Web site designers who worked at a large sex industry Web site, described his work as a "dream job" because any new technology was available for the asking (Rose, 1997). In 1998, US\$1 billion was spent online on "adult content," 69 percent of the total Internet content sales (May 26, Moore). The online pornography industry generated \$12 billion in annual revenue—roughly equal to the annual revenue of ABC, NBC, and CBS combined. There are 420 million individual pornographic web pages in 2009, up from 14 million in 1998. Of the 50 most visited websites in India, five are of the NSFW variety. Ranking ahead of the likes of Instagram, Hotstar, IRCTC, Quora, Paytm, IMDb, and even the government's tax filing e-portal, these porn sites take up 20 percent of the list. And a single look at their earnings will make anyone want to venture into the adult entertainment business. While the sites ranked by traffic in India, note that their earnings are calculated globally. Cyber Pornography can more efficiently, destroy a person, fizzle their mind, evaporate their future, eliminate their potential or destroy society in pieces. The government directed Internet service providers to block 827 websites that host pornographic content following an order by the Uttarakhand High Court on October 9, 2018.

Despite the Indian government's crackdown on porn websites, global players have found a unique way to dodge the ban and are now back on across the country without any fear. In fact, porn sites back by tweaking their portal names. National Herald India reported on September 19, 2019, that two global porn portals – Red tube and Pornhub – are back in India, and one does not need any trick to bypass the ban to watch them. While Pornhub is available as pornhub.org, Red Tube can be accessed at redtube.net.org is primarily used by non-profit organizations while .net domain name extension represents "network" -- recommended and suitable for Internet, email, and networking service providers. Since the crackdown is on .com domain names, porn websites can easily be accessed on various screens without a virtual private network (VPN), alternative browsers,

proxies, and other methods to access the blocked websites. The corona virus pandemic has driven people into their homes. Still, some have found a way to beat the boredom with a choice pastime — watching porn, that too *desi* (Indian) **according to data collected by adult entertainment site xHamster**. "We see a daily traffic increase in India of between 10-20 percent as compared to last month," vice president of xHamster, Alex Hawkins, told *The Print* (**Mihindukulasuriya**, March 25, 2020). Pornhub, the world's biggest porn site that was visited over 42 billion times in 2019, has seen a rise in Indian visitors during the coronavirus pandemic lockdown, according to a CNBC report citing Pornhub data from March 17. The average time spent by Indians during each visit to a famous porn site called Pornhub (Jan 02, 2023).



Source: <https://www.mensxp.com/special-features/features/125925-average-time-spent-by-indians-on-pornhub-during-every-visit.html>

On February 7, 2012, three Karnataka ministers were captured on television poring over a phone screen, watching a woman in a dress

gyrating wildly. They lost their jobs for watching pornography in the precincts of the Legislative Assembly. The incident is a high-profile sample of absolute reality: porn is pervasive through the Internet across India, easily and freely available, not just for leery politicians but to children and adults in millions of ordinary homes. Google Trends shows the search volume index for the word 'porn' doubled in India between 2010 and 2012. With instant net connectivity and flexible payment options, online porn is increasingly affordable, accessible, and acceptable. Seven Indian cities are among the top 10 in the world on porn search, reports Google Trends, 2011. Recent trends finding by search engine Google showed that seven Indian cities were in the top 10 cities worldwide where the word 'sex' was searched most times. Lucknow and Kolkata were ranked number 2 and 3. 1 out of 5 mobile users in India wants adult content on his 3G-enabled phone, according to a 2011 IMRB Survey. Over 47 percent of students discuss porn every day, says a public school survey by Max Hospital in Delhi. Porn tops the list of cybercrimes in India, according to National Crime Records Bureau. Campus porn is a thriving subterranean culture here. Imagine a 'pocket' girlfriend or boyfriend who can strip, talk dirty, and make sexual noises. "There are some 'apps' that can be downloaded on smart phones," and App download data shows the popularity of sex-themed apps on smart phones, apart from the adults-only stores." With over 50 percent of all Internet users in the country accessing the web via mobile phones already, as estimated by TRAI, smart phones are the future of anytime-anywhere porn. In 2009 just 10% of men watched porn, but with more intelligent access and gadgets, it zoomed to 44 percent in 2012 (India Today 18 February 2012). Kolkata certainly is getting off the high horse. A city with the minor taste for pornography, going by India Today Sex Surveys, is also one of the top seekers of porn online, reports Google trends. The Indian XXX Chat says that desi (native) sex chat is going to provide the customer with one of a kind experience. There are the utmost exotic Indian girls who will be there to help you make the most of your viewing pleasure, and the web cams will allow you to be part of the action. One will get to decide on every single move the girls will make, and only the customer will have full control over what they

are doing. The Indian live chat is also offering to experience the free previews in order to make an informed (?) decision even before one will embark on private adventures. Ironically, even as Kerala — a State with creditable developmental indicators to be proud of protecting its trees as indeed national treasures, but the most precious national treasure children are being sexually abused, raped, killed, or pushed to their graves at an alarming rate. India is home to a fifth of the world's children and has the highest rate of child sexual assaults in the world. In 2017, the Kerala Police arrested 11 people, including one for running an online sex racket, while investigating a Facebook Paedophile page called "Kochu Sundarikal" (pretty little girls). Though "Kocchhu sundarikal" appeared like pictures posted on Facebook, in reality, it was a den of paedophiles. A note from the group administrator on the site sought to know: "What would you like to do with her (The Hindu, March 12, 2018.) Even with the official ban in place, according to Pornhub, India's average time spent on the website in 2018 has increased, and average Indian spent 8 minutes 23 seconds on the website (per session) and the surprising thing is that around 30% of Indian women browsed Pornhub in 2018 - as per the report. In fact, Pornhub's '2018 Year in Review' has revealed that *India ranks third among the countries with the most number of viewers visiting the leading pornographic website* (Business Today, December 17, 2018). "We stand on the third place behind USA and United Kingdom," the website reported. As per its annual review of how people around the world watch porn, Pornhub found that while the US added 11 seconds to their average time spent on watching porn, India at 9 minutes 30 seconds - recorded a higher average time with a one-minute increase in the duration of each visit. "More and more, we are finding that our users are opting for mobile devices like smart phones and tablets when they visit Pornhub," the website noted. Actually, over 63,992 new visitors land on the website every minute, watching on an average around 2.07 lakh videos, says the data. *In fact, between 2013 and 2017, India's porn traffic recorded the highest growth globally* (Business Today, December 17, 2018). A senior executive in India at an Internet industry body said. "Through our discussions with the various Internet Service Providers (ISPs), we have been able to

estimate that as much as 30-70% of the total browsing in the country is related to pornography. (Mint, August 05, 2015). Finally, India is among the top 10 Sextortion mail source countries. Researchers from the British cybersecurity firm Sophos traced the origin of millions of sextortion spam emails sent between September 2019 and February 2020 to conclude that India is among the top 10 sextortion mail source countries. Sextortion is a widely used form of spam attack where cybercriminals extort money by claiming to have the receiver's compromising pictures or evidence of their sexual activity. The attacker threatens to share such pieces of evidence with the receiver's friends and family unless they pay ransom money.

Conclusion

It is impossible to cover the tale of gendered cyberspace in India or anywhere because of its variety, purview, and pervasive presence. Therefore, this article presents only the tip of the iceberg. There is a shortage of intensive researches on India's cybercrimes. Most of the time, print media and some current issue-focused e-journals and newsletters report some cybercrimes.

Sociologically speaking, the Internet and digitalization are marred by pornographers, pirates, terrorists, hackers, lurkers in India. So, it is not at all surprising that with the Neo-liberal assortment of digitalized globalization, electronic buying and selling of sex in myriad forms have made the body, especially the female body as the significant marker of online activities, and India is keeping pace with the global trend. This implies, undeniably, that women's material body rather than being wiped away has reinforced its presence on the Internet as visibly noticeable and subjected to constant surveillance, of panoptican⁵ variety of body's performance by the buyers, the sellers, the middleman/distributors, and the traffickers. Thus, visualization of serious harm in the name of cyber customer's pleasure inflicted on children and women bodies through live videos are an integral part of global e-commerce in India. The alliance between globalization and digitalization has established it very adeptly that a new gendered reality is born with unfathomable potentialities to grow in gargantuan

terms thrashing all the formal equality and legal protection for women globally and in India. Really innovative digital visual cultures now accompany cyberspace and material space as comfortable bedfellows. The sex industry is established as one of the most, if not the most, profitable industries in this heyday of digitalized globalization. The global capital market of the sex industry through virtual reality and often subsequent follow-up in material reality is more significant than any other industry, and it is accessible by billions. No other commodity can surpass the promise of body and body parts as a commodity in the days of digitalized neo-liberalism. The Internet has expanded the global sex industry and has intensified the harm to the victims by naturalizing the globalized victimization and exploitation. We live in a global criminal economy where international tourism is closely linked with the worldwide porn and prostitution industry. The highest commodification of women's bodies is aided by digitization, e-commerce, and customization (Castells: 1999, vol.3, p.203). In a sense, the Internet allows the existence of virtual communities of criminals as partners of criminal networks of the material world. All these have created a discourse on internet regulation calling for intervention and censorship. But placed within the broader context of digitalized globalization, one is left wondering that structurally speaking, since "the nation-state under siege, and with national societies and economies already insecure from their intertwining with transnational networks of capital and people, the growing influence of global crime may induce a substantial retrenchment of democratic rights, values, and institutions" (Castells: 1999: vol.3, p.203). This article, thus, does not provide any regret or apology for showing the seamy sides of partnership of digitalization with globalization. Since tons of literature exists on the potentialities of constructive aspects of ICTs, it has been a conscious endeavour to emphasize that it is overdue that champions and proponents of Globalization and ICTs pay proper attention to this detrimental yet neglected facet. Suppose the majority of women are the new proletariat of the global economy (Tickner, 2004, p.16) one or the other way. Isn't it time to rethink everything about digitalization, globalization, and the brand of social

transformation and varieties of connectivity which we analyse only as progress?

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