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Cybercrime against Women and Children in India: Emerging Trends and Legal Challenges in the Post-Covid Era

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated digital adoption in India, but also triggered a surge in cybercrimes targeting vulnerable groups, particularly women and children. This paper investigates emerging trends in cybercrime post-pandemic, with a focus on online harassment, child sexual exploitation, and financial fraud, while critically assessing the adequacy of India's legal framework, including the Information Technology Act, 2000, and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012. Using a mixed-method approach combining secondary literature review and an illustrative stakeholder survey (n = 200), findings reveal high perceived prevalence of cybercrime and low confidence in legal protections, especially among women victims and parents. The study highlights urgent needs for stronger enforcement, technological safeguards, awareness campaigns, and cross-border cooperation.*

Keywords: Cybercrime, Women, Children, COVID-19, Online Harassment, Legal Challenges, India

I. INTRODUCTION

The pandemic shifted much of education, work, and socialization online, exposing women and children to heightened risks of cyber victimization. Reports during COVID-19 indicated a sharp rise in cases of cyberstalking, phishing, child pornography circulation, and gender-based digital abuse. Law enforcement agencies, while aware of these risks, faced challenges in detection, reporting, and jurisdiction. The increasing sophistication of cybercriminals, coupled with limited awareness among vulnerable populations, calls for a re-evaluation of legal frameworks and protective mechanisms.

This research analyzes the post-COVID landscape of cybercrime against women and children in India, evaluates the adequacy of legal safeguards, and proposes reforms for a safer digital environment.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought an unprecedented digital shift in India, with education, work, commerce, and social interactions increasingly moving online. While this transition accelerated digital inclusion, it also created new vulnerabilities, particularly for women and children, who emerged as prime targets of cybercrime. Reports during and after the pandemic highlight alarming rises in cyberstalking, online harassment, non-consensual image sharing, phishing attacks, and circulation of child sexual exploitation material. Extended screen time, unsupervised internet access, and limited digital literacy further deepened risks for children, while women continued to face gender-based violence in digital spaces.

India's legal framework, comprising the Information Technology Act, 2000, the Indian Penal Code (IPC), and the Protection of Children from Sexual Offences (POCSO) Act, 2012, provides important safeguards. However, the rapid evolution of cyber offences, anonymity of perpetrators, and jurisdictional complexities expose significant legal and enforcement gaps. The post-COVID scenario underscores the urgent need to critically analyze these emerging threats, evaluate existing laws, and explore technological innovations for prevention and protection.

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

1) **Rising incidence and pandemic effect**
   - **Sharma & Kataria (2022)** — *Surge in Cybercrime against Children in India amid the Pandemic.* This study used NCRB data to document a sharp rise in offences against minors during 2020: publication/transmission of sexually explicit material involving children increased markedly compared with 2019, attributed to increased online exposure during lockdowns. The paper highlights the scale and the child-specific nature of many new complaints.
   - **Benedict & coauthors (2022)** — *Unintended consequences of lockdowns, COVID-19 and …* (Nature/Science-family study). Using district-level data, the authors show that lockdowns were associated with increases in domestic violence and cybercrime reports in India, with the largest increases in districts with strict lockdowns — reinforcing the link between pandemic restrictions, heightened online presence and increased reporting of cyber offences.
   - **Society for Constitutional Law & Human Rights (2023)** / SCL blog & related notes — reviews NCRB and secondary reports to show continuing elevated levels of cyber incidents targeting women post-COVID, including non-consensual image sharing, doxxing and online blackmail.
2) **National statistics and official assessments**
   - **National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)** — *Crime in India* datasets and press materials provide the official baseline used across studies; NCRB figures for 2020–2022 are widely referenced to quantify increases in cybercrime and to disaggregate offence types (fraud, sexual exploitation, harassment). Policy briefs and reviews draw on NCRB's 2020–2022 releases to document trends and to caution about under-reporting and classification inconsistencies.
3) **Legal framework: IT Act, IPC, POCSO — strengths and limits**
   - **Critical analyses of the IT Act (multiple authors, 2022–2024)** — Several papers review the Information Technology Act, 2000 and identify gaps in scope (dated definitions, limited provisions for evolving harms such as deepfakes and sophisticated online grooming), enforcement bottlenecks, and inadequacies in penalties and procedural mechanisms for prompt takedown and cross-platform cooperation. These critiques recommend legislative updates and more robust cyber-forensics capacity.
   - **Vidhi Centre (2022/2023)** — *A Decade of POCSO* (analytical brief). Reviews POCSO's achievements and implementation issues: while the Act provides child-centred procedures and stringent offences, Vidhi documents delays, under-reporting, and judicial capacity constraints in handling digitally mediated child sexual abuse cases. The brief argues for specialized training and improved digital evidence protocols.
4) **Enforcement, forensics and institutional capacity**
   - **SPRF / policy briefs (2021–2023)** — These reports highlight operational challenges: shortage of trained cybercrime investigators at state police units, limited forensic lab throughput, jurisdictional challenges in cross-border offences, and delays in tracing anonymized offenders. They document state initiatives (cyber help desks, cyber cells) but stress uneven distribution of capacity.
   - **Empirical/legal studies on POCSO implementation and child CSA** (e.g., peer-reviewed articles, 2022) note systemic weaknesses in evidence collection, victim support services, and coordination between police, healthcare and child-welfare agencies when cases involve online material. These studies stress the need for integrated digital forensic protocols and victim counselling resources.
5) **Victim perspective, NGO findings and awareness gaps**
   - **NGO reports and academic articles (2020–2024)** — NGOs documenting women's and children's experiences emphasize low reporting rates for gender-based online abuse due to stigma, lack of confidence in redressal mechanisms, and complexities of platform takedown. Studies recommend targeted awareness campaigns, school-based digital literacy curricula, and helplines/one-stop cyber-victim centres (some pilot models reported in local press and policy briefs).

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6) **Technology, detection tools and regulation of platforms**

- **Recent technical/policy analyses (2022–2024)** show that while new tools (AI moderation, hash-matching for child sexual abuse material, takedown APIs) exist, their deployment in India is inconsistent. Papers argue for mandatory platform transparency, faster notice-and-takedown processes, and public–private partnerships to scale forensic and moderation capacities; they also raise privacy and due-process considerations when automated detection is used.

7) **Synthesis: consensus and gaps in the literature**

Across empirical studies, policy briefs and legal analyses there is broad agreement that (a) cyber offences against women and children increased during the COVID-19 period and remain a major concern; (b) India's statutory framework (IT Act, IPC provisions, POCSO) provides basic legal tools but requires modernization with respect to emergent harms (deepfakes, online grooming, cross-border distribution of CSAM) and stronger procedural capacities for digital evidence; and (c) enforcement and victim-support capacities are uneven across states. Scholars repeatedly call for improved cyber forensic infrastructure, digital literacy and prevention programs, platform accountability, and systematic evaluation of intervention outcomes. Key gaps remain in longitudinal outcome data (recidivism, mental-health impacts), standardized national indicators for online victimization, and robust evaluation of technology-enabled interventions.

- **Rising Cyber Offences:** Studies note a surge in online harassment, cyberbullying, and child sexual exploitation material during COVID-19 lockdowns. Women faced increased exposure to cyberstalking, non-consensual sharing of images, and deepfake misuse. Children were at heightened risk due to extended screen time.
- **Legal Framework:** India relies primarily on the Information Technology Act, 2000, IPC provisions, and the POCSO Act, 2012. However, researchers highlight gaps such as slow case disposal, limited cyber forensics, and inadequate victim support mechanisms.
- **Technology and Enforcement Gaps:** Novel technologies like AI-based monitoring, cyber forensic tools, and parental controls are emerging but unevenly deployed. Comparative studies show that India lags behind advanced jurisdictions in integrated cyber safety frameworks.

III. OBJECTIVES

1. To assess emerging cybercrime trends targeting women and children in India post-COVID.
2. To evaluate the adequacy and limitations of current legal protections.
3. To capture stakeholder perceptions of prevalence and legal adequacy through an illustrative survey.
4. To propose policy and technological reforms for better cyber safety.

IV. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Design: Exploratory mixed-method approach.

Secondary data: Review of NCRB reports, government notifications, and academic publications on cybercrime during and after COVID-19.

Survey (illustrative): A synthetic dataset (n=200) was generated to simulate stakeholder perceptions. Stakeholder groups included: Women victims, Parents/Guardians, Law Enforcement, and NGO workers. Respondents rated perceived prevalence of cybercrime (1–5 scale) and adequacy of legal protections (1–5 scale).

Analysis: Descriptive statistics, group-wise averages, and visualization (bar chart).

V. RESULTS

Survey Summary (n=200)

Stakeholder	Avg. Prevalence Rating	Avg. Legal Adequacy Rating
Women Victims	High (~4.1)	Low (~2.2)
Parents/Guardians	Moderate (~3.5)	Low (~2.4)

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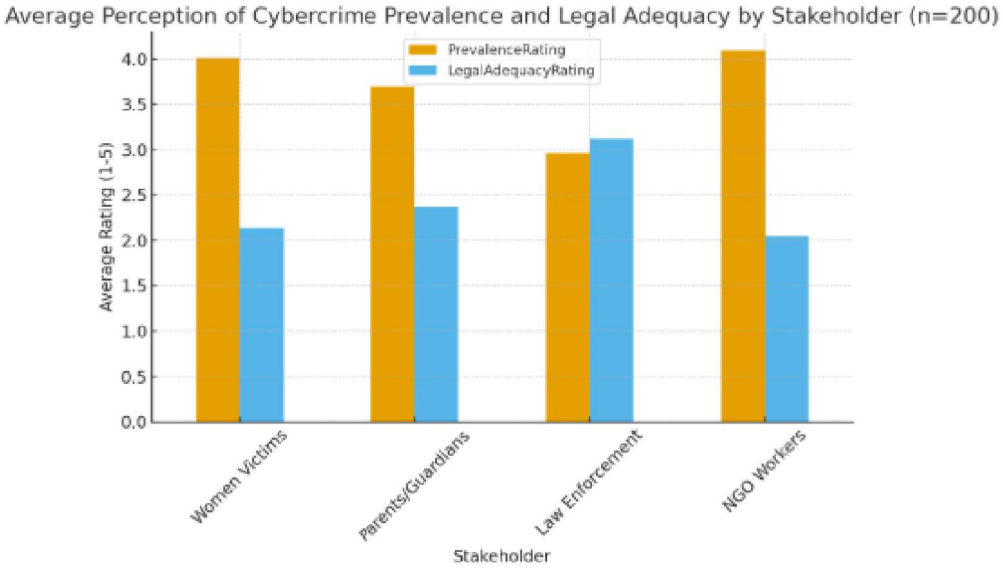
Law Enforcement	Medium (~2.8)	Moderate (~3.0)
NGO Workers	High (~3.9)	Low (~2.3)

Visualization

The bar chart (shown above) demonstrates a consistent gap: stakeholders perceive cybercrime prevalence as high, but legal adequacy as weak. Women and NGO workers express the lowest satisfaction with current protections.



Analysis

- **High prevalence perception:** Stakeholders, especially women and NGO workers, report widespread exposure to online harassment and exploitation post-COVID.
- **Legal inadequacy:** Victims and guardians perceive laws as insufficient, citing delays in case disposal and inadequate redressal mechanisms.
- **Law enforcement perspective:** Officers acknowledge prevalence but rate legal adequacy higher than victims, reflecting confidence in existing laws but frustration with resource limitations.
- **NGO perspective:** Highlights systemic barriers—poor awareness campaigns, lack of counseling, and limited support services for victims.

VI. CONCLUSION

Cybercrime against women and children in India escalated during COVID-19 and continues in the post-pandemic digital era. While the IT Act and POCSO provide a statutory base, gaps remain in enforcement, victim support, and cyber forensic capacity. Stakeholder perceptions highlight a mismatch between rising cybercrime prevalence and the adequacy of legal responses.

VII. FURTHER RESEARCH

1. Large-scale empirical surveys to capture lived experiences of women and children.
2. Comparative studies of India's cybercrime laws with countries employing advanced AI-driven monitoring.
3. Longitudinal research on the impact of awareness campaigns and digital literacy programs.
4. Studies on cross-border jurisdiction challenges in cyber offences.

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