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Sextortion and Digital Blackmail Among College Girls

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Abstract

This research paper examines the growing issue of sextortion and digital blackmail experienced by college-going women in India, using secondary data sources such as National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) reports, government cybercrime records, academic research papers, media case reports, and NGO documentation. The study highlights patterns of online exploitation, methods adopted by offenders, psychological and social consequences for victims, and barriers that prevent women from reporting these crimes. The findings indicate that patriarchal values, digital illiteracy, and fear of social stigma are major contributing factors. The study recommends awareness programs, legal literacy, and supportive institutional mechanisms to ensure safer online spaces for young women.

Keywords: Sextortion, cybercrime, patriarchal values, social stigma

1. Introduction

The digital transformation of India's social and educational landscape has opened new avenues for communication, learning, and empowerment. However, this rapid expansion of online spaces has also created new dimensions of vulnerability, particularly for young women. One such emerging threat is sextortion, a form of digital coercion in which perpetrators exploit personal or sexualized content to demand sexual favors, money, or continued submission. Closely related is digital blackmail, involving threats to share private information or images unless specific demands are met. These crimes represent not only technological abuse but also a continuation of patriarchal power structures adapted to the digital era. Among the most vulnerable groups are college-going women, who constitute a large portion of India's active online population yet often lack awareness of cyber safety and legal recourse mechanisms.

Recent years have witnessed a worrying rise in cybercrimes targeting women in India. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2023), incidents of cybercrimes against women increased by 24.4% between 2019 and 2022, with the most common categories being cyberstalking, morphing, and publication or transmission of obscene material. Although the NCRB does not categorize sextortion separately, it is typically recorded under "transmission of sexually explicit content" or "criminal intimidation through digital means." The Cyber Peace Foundation (2023) notes that over 60% of complaints filed by female students through its helpline involved

threats to leak intimate images or videos. This trend highlights that sextortion and digital blackmail are not isolated digital offenses but systemic gendered phenomena intertwined with broader social inequalities.

The vulnerability of college-aged women to sextortion is shaped by several intersecting factors. Firstly, the expansion of affordable mobile internet and smartphones has increased online visibility among youth, particularly women aged 18–25, who form a significant proportion of India's internet user base (Statista, 2024). Secondly, digital literacy gaps persist: while more young women use social media, fewer possess adequate knowledge about data privacy, online consent, or digital footprint management (UNICEF, 2020). Thirdly, patriarchal social structures continue to stigmatize female sexuality and moral conduct, leading to self-censorship and fear of reputational harm. Consequently, when sextortion occurs, many victims remain silent due to fear of social ostracization or disbelief from law enforcement (Sultana, 2022).

Globally, sextortion has been recognized as a growing form of online gender-based violence. The World Bank (2020) defines it as the abuse of power for sexual benefit, often through the misuse of digital communication channels. In developing nations, where social taboos around sexuality remain entrenched, the crime often goes unreported or is misclassified under general cyber offences (Kshetri, 2019). In India, the issue is compounded by cultural constraints, slow legal response mechanisms, and insufficient institutional sensitivity toward victims. The Internet Freedom Foundation (2022) observes that despite the existence of reporting platforms such as the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal, the lack of confidentiality and empathetic handling by authorities often deters victims from seeking redress.

The problem also carries deep psychological and social implications. Victims of sextortion often endure long-lasting trauma, anxiety, and depression. In many cases, the emotional consequences extend to academic disruption and withdrawal from social interaction (Reddy & Gupta, 2021). Social judgment and victim-blaming are prevalent, reflecting how patriarchal societies internalize control over female sexuality even in digital contexts. As Sultana (2022) emphasizes, online sexual coercion is not simply a technical issue but a manifestation of cultural power imbalance. Understanding this phenomenon, therefore, requires a dual lens. i.e., technological and sociological, to capture the dynamics of digital victimization within the broader framework of gender inequality.

Given this context, the present study aims to analyze sextortion and digital blackmail among college-going women in India using secondary data sources such as NCRB crime statistics, NGO and media reports, and academic literature. The objective is to identify key patterns, offender strategies, and the multifaceted consequences of these crimes, while also exploring institutional barriers to justice. By synthesizing existing research and empirical data, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon, highlight the socio-cultural roots of underreporting, and propose effective awareness and prevention strategies. The central argument of this paper is that sextortion is not merely an online infraction but an extension of systemic gender oppression, amplified by digital technology and sustained by silence.

Addressing this issue requires a multidisciplinary response involving legal reform, educational interventions, and community-based awareness. Educational institutions, particularly universities, play a vital role in shaping safer digital environments through gender-sensitive policies and cyber ethics education. Equally important is the development of empathetic law enforcement and counseling frameworks that protect victims' dignity and confidentiality. Through its review of secondary data, this study emphasizes that preventing sextortion and digital blackmail is as much about transforming social attitudes as it is about improving technological safety. It calls for a paradigm shift from reactive punishment to proactive empowerment of women in digital spaces.

2. Review of Literature

The phenomenon of sextortion and digital blackmail has attracted growing academic attention in recent years, particularly as digital connectivity deepens and gendered power relations adapt to virtual spaces. The literature spans multiple domains like criminology, gender studies, psychology, and information technology, reflecting the complex nature of these crimes. This section reviews scholarly and institutional studies that collectively illuminate the patterns, prevalence, and implications of sextortion and digital blackmail against women, with particular attention to the Indian context.

2.1 Conceptualizing Sextortion and Digital Blackmail

The concept of sextortion was first articulated in criminological literature as the use of coercive threats involving sexual imagery or behavior for personal gain (Bates, 2017). It encompasses a spectrum of coercive behaviors where perpetrators exploit intimate digital content or fabricated sexualized media to extort victims. According to Klonick (2019), sextortion differs from traditional blackmail in that it exploits not only financial but also emotional and sexual vulnerabilities. The World Bank (2020) defines sextortion as “the abuse of power to obtain sexual benefits, often facilitated through technology,” marking it as both a corruption and gender-based violence issue.

In contrast, digital blackmail typically involves threats to disseminate private data or images for monetary or reputational leverage (Hinduja & Patchin, 2020). The overlap between these two forms of exploitation underscores the blurring of sexual and financial coercion in digital environments. Scholars such as McGlynn et al. (2021) argue that both are manifestations of “technology-facilitated sexual violence” (TFSV), a broader term that captures the continuum of online abuse affecting women globally.

2.2 Global Perspectives on Sextortion and Gendered Cyber Violence

Globally, the rise of sextortion reflects broader trends in online gender-based violence (OGBV). Henry and Powell (2018) observed that as digital platforms proliferate, patriarchal norms are rearticulated through new mediums, reinforcing control over women's sexual expression. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2021) noted that sextortion cases often remain invisible in national crime records because they fall between categories of sexual harassment and cybercrime. Studies from the United Kingdom (McGlynn et al., 2021), United States (Citron & Franks, 2019), and Philippines (Tandoc et al., 2020) reveal similar trends: young women, particularly students and early-career professionals, are the most targeted demographic.

A meta-analysis by Durham and Byers (2022) concluded that over 70% of victims of online sexual coercion experience long-term psychological harm, including post-traumatic stress and social withdrawal. The authors highlight that shame and self-blame are common, as victims internalize societal judgments regarding sexual propriety. This aligns with UN Women's (2020) observation that patriarchal cultural scripts emphasizing female chastity and modesty exacerbate trauma and hinder disclosure.

While global studies emphasize the universality of sextortion, cultural context profoundly shapes its manifestation and reporting. In conservative societies such as India, Pakistan, and Indonesia, digital sexual exploitation carries not only personal but also familial and community repercussions (Kshetri, 2019). The threat of social stigma operates as a coercive tool itself, often stronger than the digital evidence of the crime.

2.3 The Indian Context: Prevalence and Patterns

In India, cybercrimes against women have escalated rapidly with the expansion of internet access. According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2023), 10,730 cases of cybercrimes targeting women were reported in 2022, a 24.4% increase from 2019. Among these, “publication or transmission of sexually explicit content” accounted for nearly 28% of all offences. Although sextortion is not yet a distinct legal category, it is embedded within broader classifications such as criminal intimidation, obscenity, and identity theft. The Cyber Peace Foundation (2023) reports that nearly 63% of female cybercrime complainants aged 18–25 experienced some form of sexual coercion online. Similarly, Internet Freedom Foundation (2022) identified a rising number of “revenge porn” and sextortion cases in which perpetrators demanded money or further sexual content under threat of exposure. Case analyses suggest that perpetrators frequently use fake profiles, social engineering, and emotional manipulation to gain victims’ trust before coercion. A study by Rao and Menon (2021) analyzing police records from Delhi and Bangalore revealed that 42% of sextortion victims were college students who had shared private content with online acquaintances. In most cases, victims refrained from formal complaints due to fear of victim-blaming or reputational harm. These findings align with Bhattacharya and Basu (2020), who argued that Indian society’s emphasis on female virtue reinforces silence among victims of sexualized crimes, whether online or offline.

2.4 Sociocultural Dimensions and the Role of Patriarchy

Multiple scholars highlight how sextortion in India must be understood through the lens of patriarchal control and moral policing. According to Sultana (2022), sextortion reasserts male dominance in digital spaces, mirroring offline gender hierarchies. The threat of “shame” functions as a weapon; perpetrators exploit not only digital images but also social taboos surrounding female sexuality. Kumari and Sharma (2021) observed that while men are also targeted, women face harsher consequences due to gendered double standards.

The social repercussions are amplified by family and community reactions. In many Indian households, victims of digital sexual coercion are accused of “inviting trouble” rather than receiving support (Reddy & Gupta, 2021). Consequently, victims often endure isolation, withdrawal from education, and, in severe cases, self-harm. UNICEF (2020) identified “cultural

silence” as one of the primary reasons why only a fraction of cyber harassment cases reach the formal justice system.

Further, Basu and Dutta (2023) note that patriarchal policing of women’s online behavior like monitoring dress, photos, and friendships creates environments of surveillance and fear. This moral scrutiny paradoxically discourages women from reporting abuse, as doing so could reinforce stereotypes of impropriety. Hence, sextortion in India operates at the intersection of digital vulnerability and gendered cultural control.

2.5 Psychological Consequences and Victim Behavior

Empirical studies underscore the deep psychological toll of sextortion. Reddy and Gupta (2021) conducted qualitative interviews with 35 female university students who experienced online blackmail, finding that 68% suffered from clinical symptoms of anxiety and depression. Victims described persistent fear of exposure, sleep disturbances, and mistrust in online interactions. The study concluded that the trauma of sextortion is compounded by anticipatory anxiety, the fear of potential future leaks, even after the threat ends. Chatterjee (2022) expanded on this by arguing that digital sexual coercion constitutes a form of “psychological imprisonment.” Unlike physical assault, sextortion’s threats are intangible yet omnipresent, forcing victims into silence. This is echoed in Joshi (2021), who found that the absence of clear legal recognition of sextortion leads victims to perceive law enforcement as unsympathetic, further entrenching feelings of helplessness. These findings resonate with Bates (2017), who proposed a “continuum of technology-facilitated abuse,” wherein online threats create psychological harm equivalent to physical violence. Such perspectives have broadened the discourse beyond mere criminality to include trauma-informed approaches emphasizing recovery and empowerment.

2.6 Institutional and Legal Responses

Legal frameworks addressing sextortion remain fragmented globally. In India, relevant provisions are distributed across the Information Technology Act, 2000 (Sections 66E, 67, 67A) and the Indian Penal Code, 1860 (Sections 354C, 354D, and 509). While these laws criminalize voyeurism, stalking, and transmission of obscene material, none explicitly address coercion through intimate imagery. Joshi (2021) and Bhandari (2022) both advocate for a distinct legislative recognition of sextortion, arguing that existing laws focus on content dissemination rather than the coercive process itself. The launch of the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal (cybercrime.gov.in) in 2019 marked a significant step toward accessible redress mechanisms. However, studies show low utilization rates among women due to procedural complexity and fear of exposure (Internet Freedom Foundation, 2022). Training law enforcement personnel in gender sensitivity and cyber forensics remains inconsistent across states. The National Commission for Women (2023) has since emphasized digital awareness campaigns and victim counseling cells, yet their coverage is still limited to metropolitan regions. In comparison with countries like the Philippines and the United Kingdom have established targeted legislation such as the Anti-Photo and Video Voyeurism Act (2010) and Voyeurism Offenses Act (2015), respectively. Scholars suggest that similar specialized statutes in India could ensure clarity in prosecution and victim protection (McGlynn et al., 2021).

2.7 Research Gaps Identified

A synthesis of the reviewed literature reveals several research gaps. First, the absence of disaggregated data on sextortion within NCRB reports obscures the full scale of the problem. Second, limited empirical research focuses specifically on college-going women, despite their high online engagement. Third, existing studies seldom integrate psychological, sociocultural, and technological analyses into a single framework. Finally, there is insufficient evaluation of preventive education programs aimed at digital safety and consent awareness among youth.

Addressing these gaps requires interdisciplinary approaches combining criminology, gender studies, and digital literacy research. Moreover, partnerships between universities, NGOs, and law enforcement agencies could generate more accurate data and effective interventions.

The reviewed literature establishes sextortion and digital blackmail as pervasive, underreported, and gendered phenomena rooted in structural inequalities. The convergence of patriarchal norms, inadequate digital literacy, and insufficient legal frameworks perpetuates women's vulnerability online. While awareness of the issue is growing, significant barriers to justice and rehabilitation persist. The next section of this study builds upon these insights by analyzing secondary data sources to uncover prevalent patterns and implications of sextortion targeting college women in India.

3. Objectives of the Study

Sextortion and digital blackmail among college-going women in India represent an emergent intersection of technology, gender, and social vulnerability. The current research is grounded in the recognition that the digital realm, while enabling education and expression, has simultaneously amplified risks of sexual coercion and emotional exploitation. Drawing from secondary data, this study seeks to provide an integrated understanding of the problem that extends beyond crime statistics, situating it within cultural, psychological, and institutional contexts.

The specific objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To examine the prevalence and patterns of sextortion and digital blackmail targeting college-going women in India based on secondary data, including official crime statistics and documented case studies.
2. To identify the primary methods and digital platforms employed by offenders in perpetrating acts of sextortion and coercive online exploitation.
3. To analyze the psychological, social, and academic consequences of these offences on victims, emphasizing the long-term mental health and social stigma associated with online sexual coercion.
4. To investigate the barriers that prevent women from reporting sextortion and blackmail, including societal stigma, victim-blaming attitudes, lack of legal literacy, and institutional insensitivity.
5. To review the existing legal and institutional frameworks governing cybercrime and gender-based violence in India, assessing their adequacy in addressing sextortion-specific cases.

6. To propose preventive, educational, and policy-based recommendations to foster safer online spaces for college women through awareness, digital literacy, and institutional accountability.

These objectives are interconnected. While the first two focus on descriptive and analytical aspects, mapping the scale and mechanisms of the problem, the latter four emphasize interpretation and intervention, aiming to connect statistical evidence with sociocultural realities. The study thereby attempts to bridge the gap between data-driven and human-centered understandings of online sexual coercion.

By combining insights from crime statistics, media case reports, and scholarly research, this investigation contributes to a growing body of feminist cybercrime literature that recognizes digital sexual exploitation as both a criminal and a socio-psychological issue. The objectives align with Sustainable Development Goal 5 (Gender Equality) and Goal 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions), emphasizing the role of institutional reform in addressing gender-based violence in digital spaces (United Nations, 2020).

4. Methodology

This study employs a qualitative secondary data analysis design, integrating diverse sources such as national crime databases, NGO documentation, academic studies, and media investigations. Given the sensitive and underreported nature of sextortion, secondary data allows for triangulation of multiple credible sources to ensure reliability and contextual depth. The approach emphasizes interpretive analysis rather than numerical generalization, focusing on thematic patterns, contextual narratives, and institutional responses reflected in existing literature and records.

4.1 Data Sources

The study draws on five major categories of secondary data:

1. **Official Crime Data:**

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB)'s Crime in India reports (2019–2023) provide the quantitative foundation. While sextortion is not separately classified, relevant categories such as “publication or transmission of obscene material,” “cyberstalking,” “morphing,” and “criminal intimidation through digital means” are examined as proxies for identifying sextortion trends.

2. **Governmental and Institutional Reports:**

Data from the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA), National Commission for Women (NCW), and National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal (cybercrime.gov.in) were reviewed for information on complaint patterns, policy initiatives, and reporting challenges.

3. **Academic Literature:**

Peer-reviewed research articles (2019–2024) from journals such as the Asian Journal of Criminology, Indian Journal of Gender Studies, and Gender & Society provide conceptual and empirical insights into digital gender-based violence.

4. NGO and Civil Society Documentation:

Reports from organizations such as the Cyber Peace Foundation (2021–2023), Internet Freedom Foundation (2022), and Centre for Internet and Society (2020) contribute case-based evidence and analysis of public awareness and legal literacy gaps.

5. Media Reports and Case Narratives:

Investigative journalism sources (e.g., The Hindu, Hindustan Times, Indian Express) were reviewed for real-world examples illustrating offender tactics and institutional responses.

4.2 Analytical Framework

The study follows a thematic content analysis (TCA) framework. According to Braun and Clarke (2019), thematic analysis is a flexible method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data. Applying TCA to secondary sources, this research categorizes findings into six thematic domains:

- Nature and modus operandi of sextortion and digital blackmail.
- Victim demographics and vulnerability factors (age, digital literacy, socio-economic background).
- Psychological and social consequences of online coercion.
- Institutional response and barriers to reporting.
- Legal framework effectiveness.
- Preventive and awareness mechanisms.

Each theme is cross-verified using multiple data types (e.g., NCRB reports, NGO findings, scholarly analysis) to minimize biasness and enhance validity.

4.3 Scope and Limitations

The scope of this study is national, focusing on India's higher education demographic, particularly women aged 18–25. The research does not include primary field data or first-hand victim interviews, as it focuses on interpretive analysis of existing records.

Limitations:

- **Data categorization:** NCRB and police reports often group sextortion within broader cybercrime categories, limiting precision in estimating prevalence.
- **Reporting bias:** Underreporting due to social stigma means that secondary data likely underrepresents the true scale of the issue.
- **Temporal scope:** Although data from 2019–2023 are used, rapid technological changes and evolving offender tactics may outpace published statistics.
- **Cultural heterogeneity:** The experiences of urban and rural college women differ significantly, but available data may not sufficiently capture these nuances.

Despite these constraints, secondary data remain valuable for identifying patterns, evaluating institutional responses, and framing future primary research agendas.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Although the study does not involve direct human participation, ethical integrity is maintained by ensuring that all referenced sources are publicly available and properly cited. Care is taken to avoid

sensationalism or victim-blaming language. Moreover, the discussion emphasizes systemic and preventive dimensions rather than individual responsibility, in line with feminist and human rights-oriented research ethics (*UN Women, 2020*).

4.5 Data Interpretation Approach

Data interpretation proceeds in three stages:

1. **Descriptive Analysis:** Summarizing statistical and documentary data on cybercrimes against women (e.g., NCRB trends).
2. **Contextual Interpretation:** Relating findings to sociocultural norms, including patriarchal control, stigma, and digital illiteracy.
3. **Critical Synthesis:** Integrating insights from multiple sources to identify systemic gaps and formulate actionable recommendations.

This multi-level analysis ensures that sextortion and digital blackmail are not treated as isolated digital offenses but as indicators of deeper gender inequalities and institutional shortcomings in India's digital governance ecosystem.

4.6 Rationale for Methodological Choice

The choice of secondary qualitative analysis aligns with precedents in cybercrime and gender research. Studies such as Henry and Powell (2018) and Kshetri (2019) highlight the methodological challenges of collecting primary data on sexualized cyber offenses due to privacy concerns and victim reluctance. Thus, synthesizing existing data is an ethically responsible and academically rigorous alternative that allows for broader contextual insights. Furthermore, the triangulation of official data, academic literature, and NGO documentation enhances both reliability and depth of understanding.

4.7 Expected Contribution

Methodologically, this research contributes by systematizing fragmented sources into a unified analytical framework that connects data-driven trends with sociocultural interpretation. Substantively, it enriches the discourse on digital gender-based violence in India by foregrounding the experiences and vulnerabilities of college-going women, a group often underrepresented in cybercrime statistics but highly exposed to digital risks. The findings aim to inform policymakers, educators, and advocacy organizations about the need for gender-sensitive, victim-centered cyber safety measures.

5. Patterns and Modes of Sextortion

Understanding the specific patterns and modes of operation in sextortion and digital blackmail cases is essential for formulating preventive, legal, and educational interventions. Secondary data sources from national databases, NGOs, and academic studies reveal consistent behavioral and technological patterns among offenders, as well as identifiable vulnerabilities among victims, particularly college-going women. This section analyzes these emerging trends, drawing on data between 2019 and 2023 to map the evolving nature of sextortion in India.

5.1 Overview of Digital Sextortion Patterns in India

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2023), India recorded 10,730 cases of cybercrimes against women in 2022, marking a 24.4% increase since 2019. Among these, 28%

were related to “publication or transmission of sexually explicit material” (Section 67A, IT Act) and 18% to “cyberstalking and bullying of women.” Although sextortion is not a discrete statistical category, cross-analysis with NGO datasets suggests a significant overlap between these categories and cases involving sexual coercion online.

The Cyber Peace Foundation (CPF, 2023) documented that approximately 63% of female cybercrime complaints received through its helplines and online portals involved threats to release intimate images or videos. Of these, over half originated on social media platforms especially Instagram (41%), Facebook (23%), and WhatsApp (19%). In a 2022 CPF survey covering 6,000 college students across eight Indian cities, 17% of female respondents reported having been threatened or blackmailed with personal or intimate content, yet only 9% filed an official complaint.

These statistics underscore the scale of underreporting and reveal a broader social pattern: sextortion thrives in a context where privacy violations are normalized and victims anticipate judgment rather than support.

5.2 Offender Strategies and Methods

The modus operandi of sextortionists typically follows a cyclical process involving four phases: (1) approach and grooming, (2) acquisition of private material, (3) coercion or extortion, and (4) exploitation or exposure.

1. Approach and Grooming:

Perpetrators often use fake or impersonated social media accounts to initiate communication. Sharma and Das (2021) observed that offenders frequently impersonate peers, romantic interests, or talent scouts to gain victims’ trust. Some cases involve “catfishing,” where perpetrators create elaborate false identities, including photos and professional profiles, to build credibility.

2. Acquisition of Private Content:

After establishing rapport, offenders manipulate victims into sharing private images or engaging in video calls, which they record without consent. In other cases, hackers obtain intimate data through compromised cloud storage, phishing, or malware-infected links (Kshetri, 2019). The National Cyber Security Coordinator’s Office (NCSC, 2022) reported a 35% increase in phishing attempts aimed at retrieving personal media files from students’ devices.

3. Coercion and Extortion:

Once the content is acquired, offenders threaten to release it publicly unless victims comply with demands often sexual or financial. Bhattacharya and Basu (2020) found that sextortion demands in India frequently involve requests for continued communication, sexual favors, or nude photos, rather than direct financial payment, suggesting psychological dominance as a primary motivator.

4. Exploitation or Exposure:

In cases where victims refuse to comply, perpetrators may disseminate the content online or through personal contacts, maximizing humiliation. The Internet Freedom Foundation

(IFF, 2022) found that 28% of reported sextortion cases involved actual content dissemination on pornographic or file-sharing sites, creating long-term reputational harm. This structured progression illustrates that sextortion is less about technology itself and more about psychological manipulation enabled by technology. The offender's control depends on social stigma and the victim's fear of exposure rather than physical violence.

5.3 Digital Platforms and Technological Tools

Sextortion incidents predominantly occur on social networking and messaging platforms due to their accessibility and anonymity. According to the Cyber Peace Foundation (2023), Instagram remains the most common medium, largely because of its visual orientation and popularity among college students. Offenders exploit features such as “vanish mode,” direct messaging, and temporary stories to initiate private communication.

Emerging technologies have also altered sextortion methods:

- Deepfake pornography synthetic sexual imagery created using artificial intelligence, is increasingly used to fabricate compromising visuals. Rathi and Kaushik (2023) warn that AI-driven impersonation may soon become a major weapon of digital coercion, as even technologically literate victims struggle to refute fabricated evidence.
- Screen recording tools and hidden camera applications are frequently used during video calls. Cyber Dost (MHA initiative, 2022) reported a rise in cases where offenders secretly recorded conversations on platforms such as Zoom or Google Meet.
- Cloud storage breaches (Google Drive, iCloud, etc.) allow offenders to access sensitive files through weak passwords or phishing. According to NASSCOM (2021), 23% of Indian users experienced some form of cloud account compromise between 2019 and 2021.

These findings illustrate that sextortion tactics are evolving with technological innovation. While law enforcement often focuses on content takedowns, prevention must now include digital literacy on account security, privacy settings, and responsible online sharing.

5.4 Victim Demographics and Risk Factors

College-going women represent a particularly vulnerable demographic for several reasons. First, their high social media activity exposes them to unsolicited interactions. Second, the transitional stage of identity exploration during college years may lead to greater openness in online communication. Third, limited digital literacy and lack of awareness about privacy laws compound vulnerability. The National Commission for Women (NCW, 2023) reported that 44% of digital harassment complaints received from female students involved cases of sextortion or blackmail. Victims often belonged to urban middle-class families, reflecting high internet penetration but also conservative social attitudes toward female sexuality. Sultana (2022) argues that this paradox, freedom of digital expression within restrictive moral environments creates a “double jeopardy,” where women's online presence becomes both liberating and perilous.

Another notable risk factor is digital illiteracy. The Internet and Mobile Association of India (IAMAI, 2022) found that while 67% of women aged 18–24 access social media daily, only 32% were aware of privacy features such as two-factor authentication or content-reporting tools. This gap between usage and literacy forms the technical foundation of victim vulnerability.

5.5 Case Patterns and Illustrative Incidents

Several documented cases illustrate recurring sextortion patterns. In a 2022 case reported in The Hindustan Times (Delhi), a university student was coerced into sending money after an acquaintance threatened to leak private screenshots of video calls. The investigation revealed that the perpetrator was part of a larger organized ring operating across multiple states. Similarly, a Cyber Peace Foundation report (2021) described incidents in Pune and Lucknow where offenders created fake profiles using stolen photos from women's social media accounts, later demanding payment to remove fabricated explicit posts. Media and NGO analyses also highlight the international dimension of sextortion. Interpol (2022) noted an increase in transnational blackmail networks, where offenders based abroad target Indian victims through social media. Such cases complicate law enforcement due to jurisdictional barriers and inadequate digital evidence collection.

5.6 Gendered Nature of Coercion

While sextortion can affect individuals of any gender, research consistently indicates that women are disproportionately targeted, and the consequences for them are far more severe. Rao and Menon (2021) found that female victims experience not only personal distress but also family-based repercussions, including surveillance and moral policing. Conversely, male victims were more likely to treat incidents as financial scams rather than moral violations. This asymmetry underscores the gendered dimension of digital coercion where women's sexual reputations carry social value that offenders weaponize for control. Sultana (2022) argues that sextortion represents "digital patriarchy in action," a technological extension of offline gender power relations. Offenders rely on the fear of public shame, transforming privacy invasion into a tool of social domination. Hence, the pattern of sextortion reflects not merely technological opportunity but enduring cultural hierarchies.

5.7 Summary of Findings

Secondary data reveal that sextortion among college-going women in India follows identifiable and evolving patterns characterized by:

- Targeted grooming via social media and messaging apps.
- Psychological coercion leveraging fear of shame rather than physical force.
- Technological exploitation involving deepfakes, phishing, and account hacking.
- Gender-specific consequences rooted in patriarchal cultural expectations.
- Severe underreporting, with only a fraction of cases reaching law enforcement.

The convergence of these factors demonstrates that sextortion is not merely an individual or technological problem but a structural manifestation of digital gender inequality. Understanding these patterns is critical to developing interventions that are both technically informed and socially sensitive.

Psychological and Social Consequences of Sextortion among College-Going Women

Sextortion and digital blackmail inflict harm that extends far beyond the online event itself. Recent studies and national data show that women in late adolescence and early adulthood especially those in college experience multilayered trauma after digital sexual coercion. The consequences cluster

around three overlapping dimensions: psychological distress, social stigma, and educational disruption.

Psychological distress

Victims typically report high levels of anxiety, shame, and intrusive thoughts. A qualitative analysis by Henry, Flynn, and Powell (2020) found that most female survivors of image-based sexual abuse experience symptoms consistent with post-traumatic stress disorder. In Indian contexts, Sharma and Das (2021) observed similar effects: persistent fear of being recognized online, avoidance of social media, and hyper-vigilance about personal privacy. The National Commission for Women (2023) noted that about 61 % of women who contacted its cyber-cell helpline after sextortion reported insomnia, panic attacks, or loss of academic focus.

Digital permanence intensifies trauma. Because online material can be endlessly copied, victims perceive the threat as “ongoing,” producing what Citron and Franks (2019) call perpetual victimization. This sense of continual exposure differentiates sextortion trauma from many offline crimes.

Social stigma and relational fallout

Social responses amplify psychological pain. Many victims avoid disclosure due to fear of reputational damage within families and communities (Bhattacharya & Basu, 2020). In patriarchal social systems, women’s morality is often equated with family honor, so exposure even when coerced, can result in isolation or punitive control by relatives. Sultana (2022) describes this as a “*secondary victimization loop*,” where the initial coercion is compounded by community shaming. A 2022 *Cyber Peace Foundation* survey found that only one in ten college-aged victims reported cases to the police, while 46 % confided only in close friends due to fear of moral judgment.

Academic and career impact

The academic fallout of sextortion is less discussed but significant. Students who experience online coercion frequently withdraw from group activities, skip classes, or transfer institutions to avoid gossip (NCW, 2023). Loss of concentration, social withdrawal, and depressive symptoms correlate strongly with lower academic performance. Rao and Menon (2021) argue that sextortion acts as an “invisible dropout factor” for women in higher education, particularly when colleges lack gender-sensitive counseling or cyber-support cells.

Coping and resilience

Despite severe challenges, some survivors demonstrate adaptive resilience. NGO case studies (Cyber Peace Foundation, 2023) show that victims who receive timely psychosocial counseling and peer support recover more rapidly. Community-based digital-literacy workshops organized by Digital Empowerment Foundation have also improved help-seeking behaviors among young women. These findings suggest that collective empathy and institutional backing mitigate trauma more effectively than punitive approaches alone.

Intersectional factors

Socio-economic background and digital literacy mediate both risk and recovery. Urban, English-speaking students often access legal remedies and therapy faster than rural or lower-income women (NCRB, 2023). The intersection of gender, class, and technology thus shapes not only

exposure to sextortion but also post-trauma trajectories. Intersectional analysis by Rathi and Kaushik (2023) highlights that marginalized groups face dual discrimination online victimization and offline disbelief.

Secondary evidence converges on three conclusions:

1. Sextortion produces enduring psychological trauma akin to chronic anxiety and PTSD.
2. Patriarchal stigma transforms victims into social offenders in public perception, deterring reporting.
3. Lack of institutional mental-health infrastructure within universities prolongs the impact.

Addressing these effects requires multi-layered intervention: campus-based counseling, survivor-centered legal processes, and cultural sensitization to dismantle shame narratives. The psychological dimension must be treated as integral to cyber-crime prevention, not an afterthought.

Barriers to Reporting and Institutional Response

Sextortion remains one of the least-reported cybercrimes in India. Even as the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB, 2023) logged over ten thousand cases of cyber-harassment against women, analysts agree that actual incidence is far higher. The reporting gap stems from a mix of structural, cultural, and procedural obstacles that discourage victims especially college-aged women, from seeking formal redress.

Cultural and social stigma

Victim silence is largely driven by patriarchal notions of honor. In Cyber Peace Foundation's (2023) campus survey, 58 % of women who experienced digital coercion cited fear of "family shame" as the main reason for non-reporting. Disclosure is frequently perceived as moral failure rather than criminal victimization. Sultana (2022) notes that reputational anxiety within conservative communities transforms sextortion from a private violation into a potential social exile. This stigma operates across class lines, though it is particularly acute in smaller towns where community surveillance is strong.

Lack of legal literacy and procedural clarity

Many victims are uncertain about what constitutes a punishable offense. Rao and Menon (2021) found that fewer than one-third of surveyed students could identify relevant provisions under the Information Technology Act (2000) or Indian Penal Code (1860) that cover sexual extortion or digital intimidation. Confusion arises because sextortion is not explicitly codified; cases are registered under sections addressing obscenity (67, 67A) or criminal intimidation (503, 506). Ambiguous terminology leads police to dismiss complaints as "personal matters," reinforcing victim distrust.

Institutional insensitivity

Secondary analyses show persistent gender bias among frontline officers. National Commission for Women (NCW, 2022) audit visits to state cyber-cells found that 42 % lacked trained female investigators. Victims often encounter skepticism or intrusive questioning, which Bhattacharya and Basu (2020) describe as secondary victimization. College grievance cells exhibit similar inertia: few maintain dedicated online-safety units or partnerships with law enforcement. This institutional vacuum perpetuates the perception that reporting yields little benefit.

Technical and procedural obstacles

Digital evidence handling also deters complaints. Victims are commonly asked to surrender phones or social-media accounts for forensic review, a process viewed as invasive. Moreover, the *Cyber Crime Reporting Portal* (cybercrime.gov.in) requires detailed information, URL links, screenshots that victims may fear could resurface publicly. Kshetri (2019) emphasizes that these procedural hurdles unintentionally privilege technologically confident users, excluding many young women who already suffer digital literacy gaps.

Limited psychological and legal support

Few Indian universities provide integrated counseling and legal-aid frameworks. According to Rao and Menon (2021), only 27 % of surveyed institutions offered formal channels for students to report online sexual harassment. The absence of trauma-informed counseling forces victims either to remain silent or to rely on informal peer networks. NGOs such as Cyber Peace Foundation and Digital Empowerment Foundation attempt to fill this gap through helplines and workshops, yet coverage remains uneven.

Recent institutional responses

Despite shortcomings, incremental progress is visible. The Ministry of Home Affairs launched the “Cyber Dost” initiative (2022) to disseminate awareness messages and operate a 24-hour helpline. Several state police departments, notably Maharashtra and Kerala, have established dedicated cyber-cells staffed by women officers. The NCW’s 2023 report records a 31 % rise in complaints received through its online portal, an indication of growing trust when victim-friendly mechanisms are visible. Universities such as Delhi University and IIT-Madras have begun incorporating digital-ethics modules into orientation programs. However, Rathi and Kaushik (2023) caution that reactive measures still dominate; proactive prevention and clear legal recognition of sextortion remain pending. Secondary data thus reveal a dual challenge: cultural silence and institutional fragmentation. Victims navigate an ecosystem where moral scrutiny outweighs empathy, while procedural ambiguity undermines confidence in justice systems. Bridging this divide demands:

1. Codifying sextortion as a distinct offense under cyber-law.
 2. Training gender-sensitive digital-forensics units in every state.
 3. Embedding legal-literacy and mental-health support within universities.
- Without these, underreporting will continue to obscure the true extent of digital sexual coercion.

Legal Framework and Policy Gaps in Addressing Sextortion

India’s legal response to sextortion and digital blackmail operates within a fragmented system that draws on provisions of the Information Technology Act, 2000 (IT Act) and the Indian Penal Code (IPC). Although these laws provide partial protection against digital sexual coercion, there remains no explicit recognition of sextortion as a standalone offense. The gap between technological realities and legal articulation continues to undermine justice for victims, especially women in higher education institutions who encounter online coercion in subtle and context-specific ways.

5.1 Information Technology Act, 2000

The IT Act remains India’s foundational cybercrime legislation. The most relevant sections include:

- **Section 66E** - Punishes violation of privacy through capturing, publishing, or transmitting images of a person’s private areas without consent (punishable by up to three years imprisonment).
- **Section 67 and 67A** - Address publishing or transmitting obscene or sexually explicit material in electronic form. Section 67A specifically covers “material containing sexually explicit acts,” often applied in sextortion cases involving image dissemination or threat thereof.
- **Section 72** - Penalizes breach of confidentiality and privacy by individuals who access or disclose personal data without authorization.

While these provisions provide recourse, their language focuses on content transmission, not coercion. Sextortion where the threat itself is the harm does not require actual publication of material. As Rao and Menon (2021) argue, this legal gap leaves victims vulnerable when extortion succeeds before exposure occurs. The IT Act’s reactive framework thus fails to capture the psychological and emotional exploitation at the core of sextortion.

5.2 Indian Penal Code (IPC) Provisions

Several IPC sections indirectly address sextortion-related behaviors:

- **Section 354C (Voyeurism)** - Covers capturing or disseminating images of women engaged in private acts without consent.
- **Section 354D (Stalking)** - Includes repeated online contact or monitoring of a woman’s activities.
- **Section 503 and 506** - Define and punish criminal intimidation, including threats to harm reputation or person.
- **Section 509** - Penalizes words, gestures, or acts intended to insult a woman’s modesty.

Courts often combine these IPC provisions with IT Act sections to prosecute digital sexual extortion. However, Bhattacharya and Basu (2020) note that the reliance on “insult to modesty” (Section 509) perpetuates patriarchal notions of female virtue rather than recognizing sexual autonomy and consent. Moreover, prosecution rates remain low; NCRB (2023) data show that out of 10,730 cybercrimes against women, only about 16 % led to charges being filed, and conviction rates were below 10 %.

5.3 Lack of Explicit Definition and Legal Recognition

Unlike financial extortion or physical sexual assault, sextortion lies in a hybrid legal space. The absence of statutory definition leads to inconsistent handling by law enforcement. Cyber Peace Foundation (2023) reports that police frequently misclassify sextortion complaints as “obscenity” or “defamation,” reducing their seriousness. In contrast, jurisdictions such as the United States and Philippines explicitly recognize sextortion within anti-corruption or anti-cybercrime laws. The U.S. FBI Sextortion Initiative (2022) classifies it as a form of sexual exploitation, while the

Philippines Cybercrime Prevention Act (2012) criminalizes online sexual coercion under Article 355A. These frameworks offer India comparative models for reform.

5.4 Policy Initiatives and Institutional Efforts

Despite legal ambiguity, several government and civil initiatives attempt to address digital gender violence. The National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal (2019) allows online complaints under “Women/Child Related Crime,” streamlining registration and digital evidence submission. The NCW’s Digital Safety Campaign (2022) partners with social media companies to improve reporting transparency. However, these remain awareness-oriented rather than legislative reforms. The Justice Verma Committee Report (2013) a cornerstone of gender law reform after the Delhi Nirbhaya case recommended recognition of non-physical forms of sexual exploitation, but sextortion was not then part of digital discourse. A decade later, Rathi and Kaushik (2023) argue that emerging AI threats, such as deepfakes and synthetic pornography, require proactive codification under both IT and penal law.

5.5 Gaps in Enforcement and Jurisdiction

A significant barrier lies in jurisdictional complexity. Sextortion networks often operate across borders, using anonymized accounts and encrypted messaging. Indian law enforcement agencies lack cross-border data access agreements with major platforms like Meta or Telegram, delaying investigations. Kshetri (2019) observes that delays of even days in content takedown can cause irreparable reputational harm. Moreover, state-level cyber-cells are unevenly resourced; NCRB (2023) indicates that only 15 of 28 states maintain specialized forensic cyber units trained in gender-sensitive handling.

5.6 Toward Legal Reform

Legal scholars advocate the creation of a distinct statutory category for sextortion, modeled after international conventions such as the Council of Europe’s Budapest Convention on Cybercrime (2001). India is a signatory but has yet to integrate coercive sexual extortion clauses into domestic law. A proposed reform pathway involves:

1. Amending the IT Act to explicitly criminalize threats involving sexual imagery, regardless of dissemination.
2. Creating standardized protocols for digital evidence handling and cross-platform cooperation.
3. Establishing university cyber ombuds offices empowered to mediate and escalate sextortion complaints confidentially.
4. Incorporating restorative and victim-centric approaches, emphasizing counselling and rehabilitation alongside prosecution.

India’s current legal framework provides fragmented protection against sextortion, addressing its symptoms but not its core. The absence of a direct legal definition, procedural inconsistencies, and inadequate digital forensic capacity collectively limit justice outcomes. International comparisons suggest that explicit recognition, victim-centered mechanisms, and gender-sensitive enforcement can significantly enhance both deterrence and survivor confidence. A holistic reform of the IT Act

and IPC is therefore imperative for ensuring that digital spaces are equitable, secure, and accountable.

6.1 Awareness and Digital-Literacy Campaigns

Research consistently shows that prevention begins with awareness. Surveys by the Cyber Peace Foundation (2023) and National Commission for Women (2022) reveal that fewer than half of female college students had attended any digital-safety session. Effective awareness programs should integrate:

1. Comprehensive digital-citizenship curricula embedded in undergraduate orientation to cover privacy settings, consent in image sharing, and early warning signs of manipulation.
2. Peer-led digital-safety clubs, modeled on the UNESCO Campus Ambassador Programme (2022), which trains students to mentor peers in safe online conduct.
3. Periodic cyber-safety audits by university IT departments to detect vulnerabilities in campus networks and student forums.

According to Bhattacharya and Basu (2020), sustained, dialogue-based education has greater long-term impact than fear-based messaging. The goal should be empowerment, not moral policing.

6.2 Strengthening Institutional Mechanisms

Universities serve as the primary support ecosystem for college women and must therefore be the first line of defense. Rao and Menon (2021) recommend that every higher-education institution establish a Cyber-Safety and Grievance Cell operating parallel to the Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) under the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Act, 2013. Such cells should:

- Provide confidential online reporting portals with options for anonymous submissions.
- Maintain memoranda of understanding with local cyber-police units to ensure rapid action.
- Employ trained digital-forensics staff and counsellors versed in trauma-informed practices.

The University Grants Commission (UGC) could formalize these requirements through revised accreditation criteria, linking compliance to funding incentives.

6.3 Legal-Literacy and Victim-Support Infrastructure

Because legal illiteracy remains a central barrier (see Section 5), campuses should host legal-aid clinics offering workshops on rights under the IT Act and IPC, in collaboration with the National Legal Services Authority (NALSA). Rathi and Kaushik (2023) emphasize that accessible legal support must coincide with psychological rehabilitation. Counseling services, peer-support groups, and safe spaces should be institutionalized, particularly for survivors who face social ostracism. Universities such as Delhi University and TISS Mumbai have piloted hybrid models combining mental-health therapy with legal assistance; their replication across states could normalize help-seeking.

6.4 Technology-Based Safeguards

Technological interventions can complement social measures. Recommendations include:

- Two-factor authentication and privacy-by-default settings in campus e-learning platforms.
- Deployment of AI-driven image-tracking tools to identify non-consensual circulation of intimate content.

- Partnership with social-media companies for fast-track takedown protocols under a standardized memorandum with the Ministry of Home Affairs.

Kshetri (2019) notes that such tools are most effective when embedded within a national early-warning framework that links universities, police cyber-cells, and service providers in real time.

6.5 Community and NGO Engagement

Grass-roots organizations play a pivotal preventive role. NGOs such as the Digital Empowerment Foundation (2022), Safecity, and Red Dot Foundation conduct workshops that demystify online exploitation and equip young women with digital self-defense techniques. Collaborations between NGOs and district administrations have produced localized helplines such as Kerala's Mitra 181, which provide multilingual assistance. These models show that community-embedded programs can mitigate fear of stigma by normalizing conversations about digital consent.

6.6 Media Responsibility and Public Narrative

The mass media's framing of sextortion influences societal attitudes. Studies by Sultana (2022) show that sensationalist coverage often blames victims and trivializes coercion. Media-ethics councils should adopt gender-sensitive reporting guidelines, emphasizing perpetrators' culpability and anonymizing victims. Positive storytelling highlighting successful prosecutions and survivor resilience can counteract silence and encourage reporting.

6.7 Policy Integration and National Coordination

A coherent national response requires coordination among ministries. Policy analysts recommend that the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD), Ministry of Education, and Ministry of Home Affairs co-create a National Digital-Safety Strategy for Women (NDSSW). The NDSSW could consolidate existing helplines, establish centralized victim-support databases, and track enforcement outcomes. Additionally, India's participation in the Global Partnership on AI (2021) could facilitate adoption of ethical AI norms that prevent algorithmic abuse such as deepfake extortion.

6.8 Monitoring and Evaluation

Preventive frameworks must include measurable indicators. Suggested metrics include:

- Number of institutions with functioning cyber-grievance cells.
- Average response time from complaint to action.
- Frequency of digital-safety workshops.
- Victim satisfaction surveys and repeat-offense rates. Regular publication of these indicators by the NCRB would ensure transparency and allow evidence-based policy adjustments.

7. Conclusion and Future Directions

The phenomenon of sextortion and digital blackmail against college-going women in India reveals the complex intersection of patriarchy, digital vulnerability, and institutional inadequacy. Drawing upon secondary data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), National Commission for Women (NCW), academic studies, and NGO reports, this study highlights that sextortion is not merely a technological crime but a deeply gendered act rooted in power asymmetries and societal

norms. The research underscores that fear of shame, limited legal literacy, and lack of supportive mechanisms collectively silence many victims, allowing the cycle of exploitation to continue.

7.1 Summary of Key Findings

The analysis indicates that underreporting remains the most significant challenge. NCRB statistics reveal that cybercrimes against women, including online blackmail, rose by over 50 % between 2019 and 2023, yet conviction rates remain below 10 %. The disparity between prevalence and prosecution suggests both procedural and attitudinal barriers. Cultural stigma discourages women from reporting due to fear of reputational harm or social ostracism, especially within conservative families and smaller communities (Sultana, 2022).

The legal framework, while extensive, remains fragmented. Existing statutes under the Information Technology Act (2000) and Indian Penal Code (1860) address components such as obscenity, privacy, and intimidation, but fail to capture the coercive essence of sextortion. Victims often face inconsistent police handling, re-traumatization during investigation, and minimal institutional support (Bhattacharya & Basu, 2020; Rao & Menon, 2021). The lack of an explicit definition of sextortion in Indian law perpetuates ambiguity, leading to misclassification and weak prosecution.

The psychological and social repercussions are profound and multi-dimensional. Victims experience depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress, compounded by community shaming and internalized guilt (Cyber Peace Foundation, 2023). The academic consequences are equally severe, with many victims withdrawing from university life or changing institutions due to harassment. These findings illustrate that sextortion is not merely a violation of digital privacy as it disrupts the educational and emotional trajectories of young women.

7.2 Policy and Practice Implications

The persistence of sextortion and digital blackmail among Indian college women underscores the need for prevention strategies that combine legal, educational, psychosocial, and technological dimensions. Because the problem is rooted as much in social hierarchies as in technology, prevention must extend beyond punitive law enforcement to encompass capacity building, digital ethics, community resilience, awareness, institutional accountability, technological vigilance, and social transformation. While legislative reform addresses deterrence, effective prevention demands sustained community engagement and digital empowerment. Creating digitally literate and gender-sensitive environments within universities can not only help curb cyber-exploitation but also contribute to broader gender equity in India's digital future.

Addressing sextortion requires coordinated action across multiple levels:

1. **Legal Reform:** The creation of a distinct statutory offense recognizing sextortion as a hybrid crime of sexual coercion and digital extortion is essential. Amending the IT Act and IPC to include coercive threats involving intimate imagery, irrespective of dissemination, would close critical loopholes. India can draw inspiration from the Philippines Cybercrime Prevention Act (2012) and U.S. FBI Sextortion Initiative (2022), both of which recognize and penalize non-physical digital sexual exploitation.

2. **Institutional Accountability:** Colleges must operationalize cyber-grievance cells with clear mandates, trained investigators, and trauma-informed counselors. The University Grants Commission (UGC) can incentivize compliance by linking accreditation with adherence to digital-safety standards. Annual campus audits, as suggested by Rao and Menon (2021), could ensure transparency and responsiveness.
3. **Community and Technological Interventions:** The role of NGOs such as Digital Empowerment Foundation (2022) and Safecity demonstrates that community partnerships can complement institutional gaps. Integration of AI-based tools to trace non-consensual imagery and secure collaboration with social-media companies for rapid takedown requests would strengthen the technical layer of protection (Kshetri, 2019).
4. **Psychological and Social Support:** Legal mechanisms alone are insufficient. A comprehensive response requires on-campus counseling, peer-support groups, and victim-centered rehabilitation programs. Victims need not only justice but also emotional recovery and reintegration into academic and social life.

7.3 Research Implications and Future Directions

The current study, based on secondary data, reveals several directions for future research. Primary fieldwork with survivors, law enforcement officers, and university administrators could yield nuanced insights into reporting behaviors and institutional responsiveness. Quantitative modeling could further examine correlations between digital literacy, socioeconomic background, and vulnerability to sextortion. Additionally, longitudinal studies could explore the long-term psychological impacts and the effectiveness of intervention programs. Emerging technologies such as deepfakes and AI-generated imagery introduce new forms of digital sexual coercion, necessitating continual scholarly attention. Rathi and Kaushik (2023) emphasize that these technologies amplify gendered harm by eroding the distinction between real and synthetic violation. Future research should therefore examine the interplay between technology design, algorithmic ethics, and gender justice.

7.4 Toward a Culture of Digital Empathy

Ultimately we can say that combating sextortion requires more than punitive laws, it demands a cultural shift toward digital empathy and accountability. Educational institutions, media, and families must jointly cultivate a discourse that views victims not as moral transgressors but as individuals entitled to dignity and justice. Promoting open conversations about consent, online behavior, and gender sensitivity can transform digital spaces into safer environments for all users. Sextortion epitomizes the dark underside of digital connectivity, a manifestation of patriarchal control through technological means. However, it also presents an opportunity to reimagine gender justice in the digital age. Through sustained legal reform, institutional commitment, and community-driven awareness, India can move toward a future where women's online participation is free from coercion, fear, and silence. Only by bridging the gap between technology and empathy can digital empowerment truly become synonymous with women's empowerment.

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