

## Prevalence and Impact of Cyberstalking among Women and Children in Urban vs. Rural Areas

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### Abstract

Cyberstalking has emerged as a significant threat to online safety, particularly among women and children, affecting their psychological well-being, social interactions, and digital participation. This empirical study investigates the prevalence, psychological impact, awareness, and reporting of cyberstalking among urban and rural populations in Tamil Nadu, India. Using a cross-sectional survey design, data were collected from 300 respondents (150 urban, 150 rural) through a structured questionnaire covering demographic information, cyberstalking experiences, psychological impact, and awareness of cyber laws and safety practices. Analyses included descriptive statistics, t-tests, ANOVA, and Pearson correlation to examine relationships between digital literacy, gender, geographical location, and cyberstalking vulnerability. Findings reveal that urban respondents report higher prevalence and visibility of cyberstalking, whereas rural respondents face underreporting due to limited awareness, lower digital literacy, and social stigma. Females experience significantly higher psychological and social impacts than males, and digital literacy is negatively correlated with cyberstalking vulnerability, indicating a protective effect. The study emphasizes the need for policy interventions, school-based digital literacy programs, gender-sensitive awareness campaigns, and accessible reporting mechanisms to enhance online safety and reduce psychological harm for vulnerable populations. The findings provide important implications for law enforcement, educators, policymakers, and mental health professionals in designing targeted strategies to mitigate cyberstalking risks.

**Keywords:** Cyberstalking, Women, Children, Urban, Rural, Digital Literacy, Online Safety, Psychological Impact, Awareness, Reporting Mechanisms, India

### Introduction

The proliferation of digital technologies has profoundly transformed communication, education, and social interaction across the globe. However, with the rapid growth of internet accessibility and social networking platforms, there has been a parallel increase in cybercrimes, particularly those targeting vulnerable groups such as women and children. Among these,

cyberstalking—the repeated and unwanted pursuit or harassment of an individual through digital means—has emerged as a critical social and psychological threat (Al-Alosi & Woodlock, 2021). In the Indian context, the rising rate of cyberstalking reflects both the expansion of internet penetration and the inadequacy of cyber safety education, especially in rural and semi-urban areas (Kumar & Dey, 2022).

Cyberstalking involves persistent monitoring, sending threatening or obscene messages, spreading false information, or unauthorized access to personal data through digital devices. Unlike traditional stalking, cyberstalking transcends physical boundaries, enabling offenders to harass victims remotely, often under anonymity (Patel & Singh, 2023). Women and children are particularly vulnerable due to gender-based power imbalances, limited digital literacy, and the psychological manipulation employed by perpetrators. Studies have shown that victims frequently experience fear, anxiety, depression, social withdrawal, and diminished academic or occupational performance as a result of cyberstalking incidents (Shrivastava & Yadav, 2021).

The urban–rural digital divide in India further complicates this issue. Urban populations tend to have better access to cyber awareness programs, institutional support, and law enforcement resources, whereas rural communities often face challenges such as poor digital literacy, limited awareness of cyber laws, and cultural stigma associated with reporting cybercrimes (Nayak & Das, 2023). Consequently, while the prevalence of internet usage is expanding in rural India, cyberstalking incidents may remain underreported, and their impact underexplored. This contrast highlights the need for a comparative empirical examination to identify disparities in victimization patterns and coping mechanisms across geographical settings.

From a gender perspective, cyberstalking represents an extension of offline gender-based violence into the digital space. The anonymity and reach of the internet embolden perpetrators to engage in harassment without fear of social or legal repercussions (Bansal et al., 2022). Similarly, children and adolescents, who are frequent users of social networking sites, are exposed to risks such as grooming, threats, and emotional manipulation (Jain & Sharma, 2024). Their cognitive immaturity and dependence on digital entertainment make them easy targets for predatory behaviors. Consequently, both women and children constitute primary vulnerable groups requiring focused study and policy attention.

The Information Technology (IT) Act of 2000, along with its subsequent amendments, provides legal provisions against cyber harassment and stalking in India. However, empirical research suggests a significant gap between the existence of laws and their effective implementation, particularly in rural jurisdictions (Raj & Thomas, 2021). Law enforcement agencies often lack the technical expertise or sensitivity to handle cyberstalking complaints effectively, leading to victims' hesitation in seeking redress. Moreover, the psychological impact of cyberstalking—manifested through trauma, self-blame, or fear of social stigma—further discourages reporting (Sengupta & Roy, 2020).

Given this backdrop, the present study seeks to examine the prevalence and impact of cyberstalking among women and children in urban and rural areas, emphasizing the psychosocial dimensions and regional disparities. The study assumes that urban respondents, despite being more exposed to online spaces, may exhibit higher levels of awareness and reporting tendencies, whereas rural respondents might display lower awareness but higher unreported victimization. Through quantitative analysis, the study aims to identify the degree of exposure, psychological consequences, and the role of digital literacy in mitigating cyber risks.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to three key areas. First, it will provide empirical data on the comparative prevalence of cyberstalking across rural and urban settings, bridging a critical gap in existing literature. Second, it will enhance understanding of the psychological and social impacts of cyberstalking on women and children, particularly in underrepresented rural contexts. Third, it will inform policy recommendations for targeted awareness campaigns, gender-sensitive cyber safety education, and improved enforcement mechanisms. By integrating criminological, psychological, and socio-legal perspectives, this paper underscores the urgency of addressing cyberstalking as a multidimensional public safety issue.

In essence, the study reaffirms that cyberstalking is not merely a digital crime but a manifestation of deeper social inequalities and systemic vulnerabilities. Addressing it requires a comprehensive approach that encompasses education, technology regulation, and law enforcement coordination. Through a comparative analysis of urban and rural experiences, this research aims to shed light on both the commonalities and contextual differences shaping the phenomenon of cyberstalking in contemporary India.

## Review of Literature

The growing digital connectivity in India has expanded access to education, employment, and communication, but it has also intensified the risks of cybercrimes, particularly cyberstalking, which disproportionately affects women and children. Cyberstalking involves repeated and unwanted digital harassment through emails, messages, or social media, often resulting in severe emotional and psychological distress (Kataria, Patel, Jain, Sarvaiya, & Kalathiya, 2025). A cross-sectional study in Western India reported that nearly 41% of youth had experienced cyberstalking and 57% had faced cyberbullying, with females significantly more vulnerable than males. Similarly, LocalCircles (2024) revealed that eight out of ten urban Indian women are internet users, and a considerable proportion of them have encountered online harassment, trolling, or extortion attempts, demonstrating the prevalence of gendered cyber victimization in digital spaces. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau further indicate a sharp rise in cybercrime cases involving women and children, with many rural and semi-urban regions witnessing a fourfold increase between 2019 and 2024 (New Indian Express, 2025). Despite this alarming trend, few empirical studies have compared the prevalence of cyberstalking between urban and rural settings, leaving a critical research gap in understanding geographical variations in victimization and impact.

The psychological and social consequences of cyberstalking are profound. Victims often report anxiety, depression, fear, isolation, and loss of trust in online interactions. An international study by Dressing et al. (2022) highlighted that victims of known and unknown cyberstalkers suffered from stress-related disorders, sleep disturbances, and social withdrawal. In the Indian context, Kataria et al. (2025) found that nearly 67% of victims of cyberbullying and cyberstalking exhibited moderate to severe levels of depression, anxiety, and stress. Similarly, Pandian and Maraimalai (2024) demonstrated that cybercrime victims, particularly women, experienced decreased self-esteem, emotional exhaustion, and avoidance behaviour due to repeated online abuse. These studies collectively underscore that cyberstalking is not merely a digital offence but a public health concern with lasting psychological ramifications. Moreover, the impact tends to be more pronounced among women and adolescents, who are often emotionally and socially dependent on digital platforms for communication, education, and social validation.

Legal and institutional frameworks have evolved to address the menace of cyberstalking in India. The Information Technology Act of 2000 and Section 354D of the Indian Penal Code

criminalize stalking in digital environments. However, the implementation remains inadequate due to low awareness, poor digital literacy, and limited institutional support (Kaushik, Pundir, Sharma, & Dixit, 2025). Many victims hesitate to report incidents due to fear of social stigma or lack of confidence in law enforcement mechanisms (Rachna & Varshney, 2024). Law enforcement agencies in rural regions often face additional challenges, including technological constraints and lack of trained personnel to investigate cybercrimes effectively. Despite numerous government initiatives promoting digital safety, empirical studies have revealed that only a small fraction of the population, particularly in rural areas, are aware of cyber laws or digital reporting channels. This discrepancy highlights the critical role of awareness and education in reducing cyber victimization and ensuring justice for affected individuals.

The rural–urban digital divide plays a decisive role in shaping both the prevalence and the impact of cyberstalking. Urban areas benefit from better connectivity, literacy, and institutional awareness, enabling victims to recognize and report online harassment more readily. In contrast, rural communities often lack infrastructure, technical knowledge, and gender-inclusive access to smartphones and the internet (Shruthi, Ihita, & Chaudhari, 2021). A study on smartphone ownership and autonomy among rural youth revealed that access and control over mobile devices are mediated by gender and socio-economic status, limiting women’s ability to use privacy or security features effectively (Nayak & Das, 2023). This technological disparity not only restricts digital empowerment but also increases exposure to cyber risks without adequate protective mechanisms. Furthermore, underreporting is particularly acute in rural settings, where patriarchal social structures and fear of social ostracization deter victims from seeking help (IADIS, 2022). The New Indian Express (2025) reported that cybercrime incidents in rural and semi-urban areas have surged by over 400% in recent years, a trend attributed to rising internet penetration without corresponding cyber safety education. These findings suggest that while urban residents are more visible in cybercrime statistics, rural populations may face hidden victimization that remains largely undocumented.

The reviewed literature reveals several gaps that justify the present study. First, most existing studies focus on urban populations, leaving rural experiences underrepresented. Second, while research on women’s online victimization has expanded, empirical data on children and adolescents, particularly in rural contexts, remain limited. Third, there is inadequate understanding of the relationship between digital literacy, awareness of cyber laws, and reporting behaviour among victims. Fourth, previous studies have not sufficiently compared

the psychosocial outcomes of cyberstalking across different geographical locations in India. Finally, while legislative reforms exist, there is little empirical assessment of their effectiveness in rural regions. Addressing these gaps, the current study seeks to examine the prevalence and impact of cyberstalking among women and children across urban and rural areas, emphasizing psychological consequences, awareness levels, and barriers to reporting.

Overall, the literature consistently emphasizes that cyberstalking is a multidimensional issue requiring a comprehensive response that integrates legal enforcement, digital literacy, and psychosocial support. The reviewed studies provide a strong theoretical foundation for the present investigation, which aims to contribute empirical evidence to inform policy and intervention strategies. By adopting a comparative approach, this study intends to advance understanding of how socio-geographical factors influence cyberstalking experiences in contemporary India and to promote equitable digital safety frameworks for both urban and rural populations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The rapid expansion of digital technologies and internet access in India has transformed communication, education, and social interaction, yet it has simultaneously intensified the risks associated with online victimization. Among these, cyberstalking—the persistent and unwanted monitoring, harassment, or intimidation through digital means—has emerged as a grave social and psychological concern. Although cyberstalking affects individuals across demographics, women and children are particularly vulnerable due to gendered power dynamics, lower digital literacy, and limited awareness of cyber safety measures.

This gap in research raises critical questions about how geographical location influences exposure, awareness, and coping mechanisms among victims of cyberstalking. Urban victims may have better access to law enforcement, counselling, and online safety tools, while rural victims may face cultural stigmas, underreporting, and lack of institutional support. Furthermore, despite legislative provisions such as BNS and the Information Technology Act (2000), their practical enforcement and accessibility for rural and marginalized populations remain inconsistent.

Thus, the present study seeks to empirically investigate the prevalence and psychosocial impact of cyberstalking among women and children in urban and rural areas. It aims to understand the differences in victimization patterns, awareness levels, emotional consequences, and reporting

behaviours across these demographic groups. By bridging the knowledge gap between rural and urban digital victimization, this research endeavors to provide data-driven insights that can inform policy formulation, legal reforms, and targeted digital safety interventions in India.

### Objectives of the Study

1. To determine the extent and nature of cyberstalking experienced by women and children in both urban and rural areas.
2. To compare the psychological, emotional, and social impacts of cyberstalking among victims in the two geographical contexts.
3. To assess the awareness levels of cyber laws, digital safety practices, and reporting mechanisms among victims of cyberstalking.
4. To examine the relationship between digital literacy and vulnerability to cyberstalking.
5. To identify barriers to reporting cyberstalking incidents, especially in rural areas.
6. To suggest policy and intervention measures to enhance digital safety and victim support mechanisms.

### Hypotheses of the Study

1. **H<sub>1</sub>:** There is a significant difference in the prevalence of cyberstalking between women and children in urban and rural areas.
2. **H<sub>2</sub>:** The psychological impact of cyberstalking is significantly higher among rural victims compared to urban victims.
3. **H<sub>3</sub>:** Awareness of cyber laws and reporting mechanisms is significantly lower among rural respondents than among urban respondents.
4. **H<sub>4</sub>:** There is a significant relationship between digital literacy and the likelihood of experiencing cyberstalking.
5. **H<sub>5</sub>:** Gender has a significant influence on the type and severity of cyberstalking experienced by victims.

### Research Methodology

#### Research Design

This study adopts a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design to investigate the prevalence, impact, and awareness of cyberstalking among women and children in urban and rural areas. The design is appropriate for examining patterns, relationships, and differences across

demographic groups at a single point in time. A structured questionnaire was used as the primary data collection instrument to obtain standardized responses from participants.

### Population and Sample

The population for this study comprises women and children aged 12 years and above residing in selected urban and rural areas of Tamil Nadu, India.

A purposive stratified sampling technique was used to ensure representation across key strata:

- **Location:** Urban and Rural
- **Gender:** Female and Male (to include children and adolescents)
- **Age Groups:** 12–17, 18–25, 26–40, 41+

A total of 300 respondents were surveyed, with an equal distribution between urban (150) and rural (150) areas to allow comparative analysis.

### Data Collection Instrument

A structured questionnaire was developed based on a literature review and previous studies on cyberstalking (Kataria et al., 2025; Pandian & Maraimalai, 2024). The questionnaire consists of two sections:

#### 1. Section A: Demographic Information

This section includes items on age, gender, education level, occupation, and location type to classify respondents.

#### 2. Section B: Cyberstalking Experience and Impact

This section includes 40 items measuring cyberstalking experiences, emotional and psychological impact, awareness of cyber laws, digital literacy, and reporting behavior. A five-point Likert scale was used for responses: Strongly Disagree (1), Disagree (2), Neutral (3), Agree (4), Strongly Agree (5).

The questionnaire was validated by subject experts and pilot-tested with 30 respondents to ensure clarity, relevance, and reliability. Cronbach's alpha for internal consistency was found to be 0.88, indicating high reliability.

### Data Collection Procedure

- **Ethical Considerations:** Written informed consent was obtained from adult participants, while assent was obtained from children along with parental consent. Confidentiality and anonymity of responses were strictly maintained.

- **Administration:** The survey was administered both online and in-person, depending on the respondents' access to digital devices and connectivity. Field researchers were trained to assist rural participants in understanding the questions without influencing responses.
- **Duration:** Data collection was conducted over 15 weeks.

## Data Analysis

The collected data were coded and analyzed using SPSS Version 26. The following statistical techniques were employed:

1. **Descriptive Statistics:** Frequency, percentage, mean, and standard deviation were used to summarize demographic data and prevalence of cyberstalking.
2. **Inferential Statistics:**
  - **Independent Samples t-test:** To compare urban vs rural differences in cyberstalking experiences and psychological impact.
  - **Chi-square Test:** To examine associations between categorical variables (e.g., gender and victimization).
  - **Pearson Correlation:** To explore the relationship between digital literacy and cyberstalking vulnerability.
  - **ANOVA:** To assess differences in impact across age groups and education levels.

A significance level of  $p < 0.05$  was considered statistically significant for all tests.

## Findings of the Study

### Demographic Profile of Respondents

The demographic characteristics of respondents are presented in **Table 1**.

**Table 1: Demographic Profile of Respondents (N = 300)**

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Age	Under 12	25	8.3
	12–17	70	23.3
	18–25	90	30

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
<b>Gender</b>	26–40	80	26.7
	41+	35	11.7
	Female	180	60
	Male	115	38.3
	Other	5	1.7
<b>Education Level</b>	Primary	20	6.7
	Secondary	75	25
	Higher Secondary	60	20
	Undergraduate	90	30
	Postgraduate and above	55	18.3
<b>Location</b>	Urban	150	50
	Rural	150	50
<b>Occupation / Role</b>	Student	130	43.3
	Homemaker	40	13.3
	Working Professional	100	33.3
	Unemployed	25	8.3
	Other	5	1.7

### Interpretation:

The demographic analysis of the study reveals that the majority of respondents are females (60%), indicating that women are more likely to engage with the survey, possibly due to higher perceived vulnerability or awareness of cyberstalking issues. The largest age group represented is 18–25 years (30%), which corresponds to young adults who are frequent users of digital platforms and social media, making them potentially more exposed to online risks.

Regarding education and occupation, a significant proportion of respondents are students (43.3%), followed by working professionals, homemakers, and others, which reflects a mix of engagement with online activities across different life roles. The sample is equally distributed across urban and rural areas, ensuring a balanced representation for comparative analysis. This

urban-rural stratification allows for the examination of differences in cyberstalking prevalence, awareness, and impact based on geographical and technological access disparities.

Overall, the demographic characteristics provide a comprehensive perspective on the population most affected by cyberstalking, highlighting gender, age, educational background, and location as key variables influencing vulnerability, awareness, and coping strategies. This distribution strengthens the reliability of findings and facilitates meaningful comparisons between urban and rural experiences of cyberstalking among women and children.

### Prevalence of Cyberstalking

The prevalence of cyberstalking was analyzed based on responses to **Section B (items 1–10)**.

**Table 2: Cyberstalking Experiences Among Respondents**

Statement	Urban Mean (SD)	Rural Mean (SD)	Interpretation
Received repeated unwanted messages	3.85 (1.12)	3.12 (1.08)	Higher in urban areas
Contacted by blocked person	3.60 (1.15)	3.05 (1.10)	Higher in urban areas
False or harmful info posted online	3.45 (1.20)	2.80 (1.15)	Higher in urban areas
Photos/info shared without consent	3.50 (1.18)	2.95 (1.12)	Higher in urban areas
Feeling watched/tracked	3.20 (1.15)	2.75 (1.10)	Higher in urban areas

### Interpretation:

The analysis indicates that urban respondents report higher exposure to cyberstalking compared to their rural counterparts. This trend can be attributed to greater internet access, higher engagement on social media platforms, and more frequent use of digital communication tools among urban populations. Urban individuals, particularly young adults, are more active online, increasing their exposure to potential cyberstalking incidents such as unwanted messages, harassment from blocked contacts, and non-consensual sharing of personal information.

In contrast, rural respondents report lower exposure, which may not necessarily reflect lower victimization. Many rural individuals experience cyberstalking but tend to underreport incidents due to limited awareness of cyber laws, fear of social stigma, and restricted access to reporting mechanisms or legal support. Additionally, infrastructural limitations, such as slower internet connectivity and fewer digital devices, may reduce online activity, resulting in fewer observable incidents, but not necessarily less vulnerability.

Overall, these findings highlight a dual pattern: urban populations face more visible and reportable cyberstalking incidents, while rural populations face hidden or underreported victimization, emphasizing the need for targeted awareness campaigns, digital literacy programs, and accessible reporting mechanisms across both settings.

### Psychological and Social Impact of Cyberstalking

Items 11–20 measure the emotional and psychological impact of cyberstalking.

**Table 3: Psychological and Social Impact**

Impact Statement	Urban Mean (SD)	Rural Mean (SD)	Interpretation
Felt anxious/fearful	3.75 (1.10)	3.20 (1.12)	Higher in urban areas
Affected ability to study/work	3.60 (1.12)	3.05 (1.10)	Higher in urban areas
Avoided going online/social media	3.50 (1.18)	3.00 (1.15)	Higher in urban areas
Loss of trust in online communication	3.45 (1.15)	2.95 (1.12)	Higher in urban areas
Sleep disturbances	3.25 (1.12)	2.80 (1.10)	Higher in urban areas

### Interpretation:

The study reveals that both urban and rural respondents experience significant negative psychological consequences as a result of cyberstalking. Common effects reported include heightened anxiety, persistent fear, stress, reduced concentration, disrupted sleep, and decreased participation in online activities. These psychological impacts indicate that

cyberstalking extends beyond digital harassment, affecting victims' emotional well-being, social interactions, and daily functioning.

Urban respondents report slightly higher psychological impacts than rural respondents. This may be linked to greater exposure to digital platforms, higher engagement in social media, and increased awareness of potential online threats. Urban victims are more likely to recognize and acknowledge the harassment, which can amplify stress and anxiety. In contrast, rural respondents, while also affected, may report lower perceived impact due to limited awareness of cyberstalking risks or normalization of harassment behaviors in online environments.

Overall, the findings highlight that cyberstalking is a psychologically distressing phenomenon across geographical contexts, emphasizing the need for preventive measures, mental health support, and awareness programs tailored to both urban and rural populations.

**Table 4: Awareness and Reporting Behavior**

Statement	Urban Mean (SD)	Rural Mean (SD)	Interpretation
Know what cyberstalking means	4.20 (0.95)	3.10 (1.12)	Higher awareness in urban
Taught how to stay safe online	4.05 (1.00)	3.00 (1.15)	Higher in urban
Aware of laws/policies	3.95 (1.02)	2.85 (1.10)	Higher in urban
Know how to report an incident	3.85 (1.05)	2.75 (1.08)	Higher in urban
Confidence in support from authorities	3.70 (1.10)	2.65 (1.12)	Higher in urban

#### **Interpretation:**

The analysis shows that urban respondents exhibit higher awareness of cyber laws, online safety practices, and reporting mechanisms compared to rural respondents. Urban participants are more likely to know about legal provisions such as IT Act guidelines, understand how to protect their digital privacy, and utilize formal channels to report cyberstalking incidents. This heightened awareness is likely due to greater exposure to digital literacy programs, access to online resources, and interaction with institutions that promote cyber safety.

In contrast, rural respondents are less informed, reflecting a clear digital literacy and resource gap. Limited access to high-speed internet, fewer educational initiatives on cyber safety, and reduced engagement with formal reporting structures contribute to lower awareness. As a

result, rural victims may underreport incidents, fail to recognize cyberstalking behaviors, or lack knowledge of legal recourse, which exacerbates vulnerability.

These findings underscore the critical need for targeted interventions in rural areas, including awareness campaigns, training programs, and improved access to reporting mechanisms, to bridge the urban-rural digital divide and enhance protection against cyberstalking.

### Inferential Analysis

**Table-5 Independent Samples t-Test: Urban vs Rural Cyberstalking Prevalence**

Group	N	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value
Urban	150	3.52	1.11	5.28	0.000*
Rural	150	3.03	1.09		

### Interpretation:

The analysis indicates that the prevalence of cyberstalking is significantly higher in urban areas compared to rural areas ( $p < 0.05$ ). This statistically significant difference can be attributed to greater internet access, higher engagement on social media platforms, and frequent use of digital communication tools among urban populations. Urban individuals are more likely to encounter offences such as repeated unwanted messages, harassment from blocked contacts, and non-consensual sharing of personal information, which are classified under relevant IT Act provisions (BNS framework).

In contrast, rural respondents report lower prevalence, which may reflect underreporting rather than lower victimization. Factors such as limited awareness of cyberstalking laws, restricted digital literacy, fear of social stigma, and lack of accessible reporting mechanisms contribute to this discrepancy. While rural individuals may face similar harassment, these incidents often go unrecognized or unreported, highlighting the need for targeted awareness campaigns and improved access to legal recourse.

Overall, the findings emphasize that urban residents are more visibly affected by cyberstalking, while rural populations face hidden or underreported victimization, necessitating policy interventions and digital literacy programs to reduce the urban-rural disparity in cyberstalking exposure and reporting.

**Table- 6 Pearson Correlation: Digital Literacy vs Cyberstalking Vulnerability**

Variable	R	p-value
Digital Literacy	-0.42	0.001*

**Interpretation:**

The study found a significant negative correlation between digital literacy and cyberstalking vulnerability, indicating that respondents with higher levels of digital literacy are less likely to experience cyberstalking. This suggests that individuals who are knowledgeable about online safety practices, privacy settings, and secure communication tools are better equipped to identify, prevent, and respond to cyber harassment.

Conversely, respondents with lower digital literacy are more susceptible to cyberstalking incidents, such as unwanted messages, impersonation, or non-consensual sharing of personal information, often due to a lack of awareness about protective measures and reporting mechanisms. This relationship highlights the protective role of digital literacy in reducing exposure to cyber offences classified under Section 354D IPC and relevant IT Act provisions (BNS framework).

Overall, these findings underscore the importance of implementing digital literacy programs, particularly in rural areas and among vulnerable populations, as a preventive strategy to mitigate cyberstalking risk and enhance online safety.

**Table7 Gender Differences in Cyberstalking Impact**

Gender	N	Mean Impact	t-value	p-value
Female	180	3.65	4.10	0.000*
Male	115	3.15		

**Interpretation:**

The analysis indicates that females report significantly higher psychological and social impacts due to cyberstalking than males ( $p < 0.05$ ). Female respondents experienced more pronounced effects, including anxiety, fear, and sleep disturbances, social withdrawal, reduced online

participation, and lower self-esteem. This heightened impact may be linked to gender-specific vulnerabilities, as women are often targeted more frequently in cyber harassment incidents, including repeated unwanted messages, stalking, and non-consensual sharing of personal information.

In contrast, male respondents report lower levels of psychological and social impact, which may reflect differences in exposure, coping mechanisms, or social support systems. The findings underscore the need for gender-sensitive preventive strategies, including awareness programs, counseling services, and legal support, to mitigate the disproportionate psychological and social consequences faced by female victims of cyberstalking.

### **Recommendations & Suggestions**

- Implement targeted cyber safety campaigns in rural areas to raise awareness of cyberstalking risks, reporting mechanisms, and legal provisions.
- Strengthen the enforcement of Section 354D IPC and IT Act provisions, ensuring victims can file complaints without fear or discrimination.
- Encourage collaboration between schools, NGOs, and law enforcement to educate children, adolescents, and parents about cyber safety.
- Introduce cyber safety curricula in schools, including modules on recognizing cyberstalking, digital privacy, and coping strategies.
- Conduct workshops and seminars for students and teachers to promote online ethical behavior and awareness of digital laws.
- Provide counseling support for students affected by cyber harassment or psychological distress
- Foster open communication between children and parents regarding online experiences to identify early signs of cyberstalking.
- Encourage responsible internet use and supervision of children's digital activities.
- Develop community support groups in rural areas to reduce stigma and encourage reporting of cyber harassment
- Establish dedicated cybercrime cells in rural districts to ensure accessible support for victims.
- Train personnel in handling cyberstalking complaints sensitively and efficiently.

- Promote online reporting portals and helplines to facilitate anonymous and secure reporting
- Conduct longitudinal studies to explore the long-term psychological effects of cyberstalking on women and children.
- Examine intervention effectiveness for awareness campaigns, digital literacy programs, and legal reforms.
- Explore cyberstalking among other vulnerable groups, such as differently-abled individuals, to broaden understanding and preventive strategies.

## Conclusion

The study demonstrates that cyberstalking is a serious social and psychological concern affecting women and children across both urban and rural areas. Urban populations experience more visible cyber victimization due to higher internet usage, frequent engagement on social media, and greater awareness of online threats, whereas rural populations face unique challenges such as underreporting, limited access to safety resources, and lower digital literacy. The findings highlight that gender, digital literacy, and geographical location are significant determinants of vulnerability to cyberstalking and its psychological consequences. Females report higher levels of psychological distress and social impact compared to males, and individuals with greater digital literacy are less likely to experience cyber harassment. The study underscores the urban-rural disparity in both exposure and awareness, emphasizing the need for comprehensive interventions, including digital literacy programs, legal awareness campaigns, accessible reporting mechanisms, and psychological support services. Strengthening these measures can reduce vulnerability, mitigate emotional and social harm, and create safer online environments for women and children. The findings further stress the importance of gender-sensitive policies, school-based cyber safety education, and community engagement to foster a culture of prevention, vigilance, and empowerment in digital spaces.

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