Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence

Why in news?

As internet access has become a basic human need, sexual violence facilitated using technology is an issue that requires immediate attention.

What is Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence (TFSV)?

- It is a *digital violence* committed and amplified through the use of information and communications, technologies or digital spaces against a person based on gender.
- **Forms**
  - Sextortion - blackmail by threatening to publish sexual information, photos or videos
  - Image-based abuse -sharing intimate photos without consent, morphing
  - Doxing -publishing private personal information
  - Cyberbullying, online gender and sexual harassment
  - Cyberstalking, online grooming for sexual assault
  - Hacking, hate speech, online impersonation
  - Using technology to locate survivors of abuse in order to inflict further violence
  - Digital flashing, rape threats etc.,

Picture of TFSV
• As per a research, online abuse *disproportionately affected young women.* • Out of 400 students surveyed from 111 Indian higher education institutions (HEIs), it is found around *60% of women* experienced some form of TFSV compared to only *8% of men*. • A global study by *Economist Intelligence Unit* found that 38% of women have had personal experiences of online violence, and 85% of women who spend time online have witnessed digital violence against other women.

What are the causes of TFSV?

- **Internet penetration**- According to Statista, the internet penetration in India is 48.7% in 2022 from just 4% in 2007.
- **Safety concerns-** Online platforms will steal the information from the mobile phone without one's knowledge.
- **COVID-19 induced lockdown-** The pandemic induced lockdown increased the rate of online abuse as there was no social interaction.
- **Lack of awareness-** Many people who use internet are not aware of the online abuse and its impact.
- **Lack of reporting-** It is witnessed due to fear of reporting and the stigmatisation associated with it.
- **Targeting the weak-** Children, young women, LGBTQI+ are the most vulnerable.

What are the effects of TFSV?

- **Psychological issues-** It leads to anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, suicidal thoughts etc.,
- **Impact on studies-** It will lead to loss of academic or career prospects, social isolation, lack of concentration to focus on studies.
- **Disempowerment-** It leads to self-censoring, reduced public participation due to safety and privacy concerns.
- **Economic impacts**- The work productivity is reduced and this has impact on the worker participation rate in the economy.
- **Magnifies existing social inequalities-** As per research, it is found that only 22% of women surveyed felt safe online compared to 73% of men.

Steps Taken to Mitigate Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence
• **Information Technology Act, 2000-** Its objective is to create an enabling environment for effective use of the internet along with reporting the cybercrime in India. • **Cybercrime cell-** One can file complaint directly in the police station of the city where the crime has taken place. • **Internal Complaint Committee-** Employers are required to constitute an ICC at each workplace with 10 or more employees to receive and address complaints of sexual harassment. • It is constituted under *Protection of Women from Sexual Harassment Act 2013 (POSH Act)* which is based on *Vishaka guidelines* provided by the judiciary in 1997. • **SHe-Box-** It is an effort to provide a *single window access* to every woman, irrespective of her work status, whether working in organised or unorganised, private or public sector. • It facilitates the registration of complaint related to sexual harassment, provided under POSH Act 2013.

What are the challenges associated with TFSV?

- **Poor law enforcement -** Foreign social media companies like Meta don't adhere to Indian context laws.
    - Meta's safety moderation algorithm is limited to only American English it doesn't cover the abusive content in Indian languages.
- **Lack of institutional support**-Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs) is a legally mandated mechanism to investigate incidents of sexual harassment, but many institutions struggle to form, train, and manage these committees.
- **Under-reporting-** Students reported low awareness and utilisation of ICCs in their academic institutions.
    - Of the students surveyed, 44% were unsure whether they could report online sexual harassment to their college at all.

How to tackle TFSV?

- **Proper law enforcement-** With the upcoming Digital India Act 2023, India should strengthen its regulations and make the social media companies accountable for TFSV.
- **Crucial intervention point-** Students should be made aware institutional support mechanisms like ICCs to report the incidents related to TFSV.
- **Gender sensitisation programs-** Conduct regular workshops, safety training,

facilitated discussions, and designating student organisations to lead education and to empower their community.

- **Focus on survivor's need-** It is not just gender but too many factors like caste, religion, and ethnicity also widens the TFSV, hence address this discrimination present in the society.
- **Open discussions-** This should be done without shaming or blaming survivors.
- **Awareness-** UNFPA empower survivors and advocates for increased accountability and regulation through interactive feature *"The Virtual Is Real and Bodyright Campaign*".

References

1. The Hindu| Technology-facilitated online abuse
2. UNFPA| Tech facilitated Gender based violence
3. Statista| Internet Penetration
4. UNICEF| Online abuse

