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Synthetic Identities, Real Consequences: Deepfakes, Gendered Representation and Digital Violence

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Abstract

The expansion of generative artificial intelligence has altered an old cultural problem: who has the authority to represent another person's body? Deepfake technologies make this question especially urgent because they can produce convincing images, videos and audio in which a real person's likeness is attached to events that never occurred. When such technologies are used to construct sexualised images of women without consent, the result is not simply misinformation. It is a form of gendered representational violence. This paper examines sexually abusive deepfakes through feminist approaches to visuality, surveillance, embodiment and narrative. It argues that the deepfake should be understood as an extension of image-based sexual abuse, but also as a distinct form of violence because fabrication itself becomes the instrument of harm. The paper brings Judith Butler's account of gendered performativity, Michel Foucault's discussion of surveillance, Laura Mulvey's theory of the gaze and Danielle Keats Citron's concept of sexual privacy into conversation with contemporary scholarship on technology-facilitated gender violence. It also considers the Indian legal context and the difficulties created by the speed and reproducibility of synthetic media. Rather than treating the problem as a narrow question of whether an image is authentic, the paper proposes a framework centred on consent, control over digital identity, platform responsibility, forensic capacity and narrative agency. It concludes that the humanitarian response to deepfake abuse must recognise the continuity between online representation and lived social consequences.

Keywords- *Deepfakes, gender-based violence, artificial intelligence, image-based abuse, feminist visual culture, sexual privacy, digital identity, technology-facilitated violence, narrative agency, generative AI*

Introduction

The history of representation is also a history of power. A photograph, a film, a literary description or a social-media post does more than record a person: it places that person within a particular field of meaning. Who is allowed to look, who is made visible, who controls the image and who is believed when an image is contested are questions that have occupied feminist cultural criticism for decades. Generative artificial intelligence gives these questions a new urgency. A face can now be detached from its original setting and placed into a scene that never happened; a voice can be reproduced; an apparently documentary video can be manufactured. The resulting image may be fictitious, yet the social consequences attached to it can be very real. This paper focuses specifically on sexualised deepfakes directed at women. The subject belongs naturally to current debates on gender violence because the harm is produced through the intersection of technology and existing gender relations. The conference theme of Gender Violence and Humanitarian Discourse places artificial intelligence, media representation, digital forensics, cybersecurity, and literature and narratives of resistance within the same intellectual field. That combination is important. Deepfakes cannot be understood adequately either as a purely technical malfunction or as a conventional cybercrime. They are simultaneously technological artefacts, visual texts, instruments of harassment and mechanisms through which social meanings about women's bodies are produced and circulated.

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The paper uses an interdisciplinary textual and theoretical approach. It reads contemporary deepfake abuse alongside feminist theories of representation and surveillance and considers the implications of the Indian legal framework. The argument is not that artificial intelligence has invented gendered violence. Rather, AI changes the conditions under which an older form of power can operate. The technology makes fabrication cheap, rapid and reproducible, while the cultural meanings attached to women's sexuality can make the consequences of a fabricated image unusually severe. The central proposition is therefore that a sexual deepfake should be understood as representational violence. The important injury is not limited to the falsity of the image. It lies in the unauthorised production of a sexual meaning and its attachment to an identifiable person. This shifts the discussion from the narrow opposition between 'real' and 'fake' towards questions of consent, agency, privacy and narrative control.

1. From Image-Based Abuse to Deepfake Abuse

Technology-facilitated sexual violence predates generative AI. The non-consensual circulation of intimate photographs, cyberstalking, sexual harassment, threats and sextortion have already demonstrated that digital communication can extend sexual violence beyond a physical encounter. Nicola Henry and Anastasia Powell's work on technology-facilitated sexual violence is useful here because it treats digital technologies as part of the environment in which sexual and gendered harms are produced rather than as neutral channels through which pre-existing violence simply travels.

Deepfakes alter one important condition of image-based abuse: an original intimate photograph is no longer necessary. In a conventional case of non-consensual intimate-image distribution, the photograph may have been created consensually but shared without permission. With a deepfake, the perpetrator can begin with an ordinary photograph and construct an intimate scene around it. The victim may therefore have had no involvement in the production of the sexual image whatsoever.

This difference matters for feminist theories of consent. Posting a photograph online is not consent to every subsequent use of that photograph. Consent to being photographed is not consent to publication in every context, and consent to publication is certainly not consent to sexual transformation. Generative AI makes this distinction visible because the technology separates the original act of image-making from the later production of meaning.

The public availability of a woman's face therefore cannot be treated as a public surrender of her body. The problem is not solved by advising women simply to become less visible online. Such a response would place the burden of prevention on potential victims and would reproduce an older social demand that women restrict their public presence in order to avoid male violence. A more adequate response asks why technological systems permit an individual's likeness to be transformed into sexually abusive material in the first place.

2. The Body, Surveillance and Technological Power

Michel Foucault's discussion of surveillance offers a useful starting point for thinking about the digital body. Modern power, in Foucault's account, is not exercised only through visible force. It also works through observation, classification and the possibility of being watched. Digital platforms intensify this condition because individuals constantly create and circulate traces of themselves: photographs, videos, voice recordings, locations and personal statements. Visibility becomes ordinary, but it also becomes a source of vulnerability.

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Deepfake technology adds another stage to this process. Surveillance no longer ends with looking. The captured image can become material for computational transformation. A face can be extracted from one context and made to perform within another. What begins as visibility can therefore become appropriation.

The distinction between the physical body and its digital representation becomes increasingly unstable. A fabricated image does not touch the body in the conventional physical sense, yet it can affect employment, education, relationships, family life and public reputation. The digital representation consequently participates in the social life of the person it depicts.

Judith Butler's work on gender performativity helps illuminate a related problem. Gender is repeatedly produced through socially recognisable acts and signs. A deepfake can manufacture such an act and attach it to an existing identity. The technology therefore does something more than imitate a face: it manufactures a performance and attributes that performance to a person who did not perform it. The victim is made to appear as the author of an action she never undertook.

3. From the Male Gaze to the Algorithmic Gaze

Laura Mulvey's account of the male gaze remains relevant to contemporary digital visual culture because it directs attention to the unequal organisation of looking. In the classical formulation, woman is positioned as image while man occupies the position of the viewing subject. Social media complicates this arrangement because users can simultaneously be viewers, performers and producers. Nevertheless, the unequal sexualisation of bodies remains visible.

Generative AI adds an algorithmic dimension to this history of looking. The system does not merely observe the image. It can classify facial features, reproduce them and place them into a newly generated scene. The gaze becomes productive: it does not only see the body but helps manufacture a new version of the body for consumption.

This is why the language of sexual privacy is more useful than an understanding of privacy as simple secrecy. Danielle Keats Citron's work on sexual privacy draws attention to a person's interest in controlling the disclosure and circulation of intimate aspects of identity. A woman need not have kept her face private in order to possess an interest in controlling its sexual representation. The privacy at stake can concern the context, meaning and use of the image rather than its original visibility.

The deepfake thus exposes an important contradiction in digital culture. Individuals are encouraged to cultivate an online presence, yet the same visibility can make their identities available for forms of manipulation over which they have little immediate control. Telling women to disappear from digital spaces may reduce exposure in particular cases, but it does not address the underlying architecture of the problem.

4. When a False Image Produces a Real Harm

Deepfakes also unsettle the relationship between images and evidence. Photographs have never been perfectly objective records, but their apparent immediacy has historically given them evidentiary authority. Synthetic media makes that authority more difficult to sustain. Yet the most serious problem is not simply that viewers may believe a false image. Even an image that is eventually exposed as fabricated can leave a lasting social trace.

The victim may be placed in the uncomfortable position of having to prove that something did not happen. This reverses the ordinary logic of evidence. Instead of the person making the allegation having to establish

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the authenticity of the claim, the targeted woman may find herself explaining why the visual evidence against her is false. In contexts where women's sexuality is closely connected with family honour and moral judgement, the burden can be particularly severe.

The distinction between virtual and real harm therefore becomes inadequate. A fabricated sexual image can trigger real conversations, real accusations and real decisions by employers, relatives, institutions or strangers. Its consequences do not depend entirely on whether the image survives forensic examination. The image can alter the social conditions in which the person must live.

This is also why deepfake abuse should be connected to the broader problem of silencing. If women begin to avoid social media, public speaking, professional networking or online activism because they fear sexualised manipulation, the consequence extends beyond an individual victim. The digital public sphere itself becomes less equally accessible.

5. Deepfakes as Narrative Violence

A deepfake is an image, but it is also a story. It tells an audience that a particular person performed a particular act. The fabricated event acquires meaning because it is attached to a recognisable identity. For this reason, the concept of narrative violence helps explain what is at stake.

Narrative violence occurs when an individual loses control over the story through which her identity is understood and another actor supplies a competing account with greater visibility or circulation. Feminist literary and cultural studies have long examined the consequences of allowing others to speak for women. Deepfakes add a technological mechanism to this problem: the competing narrative can now be rendered visually convincing and distributed almost instantaneously.

The issue is particularly significant for women whose social credibility is already mediated through gendered expectations. A fabricated sexual image does not arrive in a cultural vacuum. It enters existing assumptions about female sexuality, morality and respectability. The same fabricated representation may therefore be interpreted differently depending on the social position of the woman depicted.

The idea of narrative violence also helps explain why content removal, although important, cannot be the entire remedy. Removing an image may reduce further circulation, but it cannot automatically restore trust, professional opportunities or a person's willingness to participate publicly. A humanitarian response must therefore include mechanisms through which survivors can regain narrative agency.

6. The Indian Legal Context

India's existing legal framework provides several possible routes for responding to different elements of deepfake abuse. The Information Technology Act, 2000 contains provisions concerning identity theft, cheating by personation, violation of privacy and the electronic transmission of obscene or sexually explicit material. Depending on the facts, these provisions may intersect with deepfake-related conduct.

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023, which replaced the earlier Indian Penal Code framework from 1 July 2024, also contains offences that may become relevant in particular cases, including provisions concerning voyeurism, intimidation and defamation. The legal character of a deepfake case cannot, however, be determined simply from the label 'deepfake'. The relevant offence depends on what was created, how it was circulated, what intention can be established and what harm resulted.

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The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 adds a different dimension by establishing a framework for processing digital personal data. Its relevance should not be overstated: data protection law, criminal law and intermediary regulation address different problems. Together, however, they illustrate why synthetic sexual abuse requires a coordinated approach rather than reliance on a single statute.

The deeper difficulty is one of institutional speed. Synthetic content can be generated and copied very quickly, whereas legal remedies, investigations and judicial processes ordinarily take longer. A regulatory response must therefore combine substantive law with effective reporting, evidence preservation, forensic capacity and platform-level intervention.

7. Digital Forensics and the Burden of Proof

The conference's inclusion of digital forensics and cybersecurity among its sub-themes is particularly significant for deepfake research. The investigation of synthetic media can involve file histories, metadata, account information, transmission patterns and technical analysis. Repeated downloading and recompression can complicate this work, while detection systems themselves can produce false positives or false negatives.

The technical uncertainty creates an ethical problem when the victim is expected to establish the falsity of the material. A survivor should not have to become a forensic specialist before receiving institutional protection. Investigative agencies and platforms need the capacity to preserve evidence and examine suspected manipulation without requiring survivors to repeatedly expose themselves to the abusive material.

A survivor-centred forensic model should therefore include rapid evidence preservation, secure handling of intimate material, minimal repeated viewing, clear chains of custody and access to trained personnel. Forensic accuracy and survivor dignity should be treated as complementary rather than competing objectives.

8. Platform Responsibility and the Ethics of Removal

Deepfake abuse cannot be separated from the architecture of the platforms on which it circulates. The speed of sharing, recommendation and re-uploading can turn a single fabricated image into a distributed problem. This is one reason that platform responsibility cannot be reduced to responding after a victim has individually reported every copy.

A meaningful response requires accessible reporting systems, rapid removal of non-consensual sexual content, measures against re-uploading, appropriate evidence preservation, transparency about moderation and clear routes for escalation. UN Women has emphasised the need for coordinated responses across governments, technology companies, civil society and justice institutions in addressing technology-facilitated violence against women.

International regulation also illustrates the growing emphasis on transparency around synthetic media. The European Union's AI Act includes obligations concerning the disclosure of certain AI-generated or manipulated content. Transparency does not itself prevent abuse, but it reflects an important principle: viewers should not be required to treat synthetic media as though it were ordinary documentary evidence.

At the same time, platform governance should avoid turning automated detection into an unquestioned solution. Detection tools operate under technical and contextual limitations. Human review, clear appeal procedures and survivor-centred design remain necessary, particularly in cases involving sexuality and reputation.

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9. The Unequal Distribution of Digital Risk

The category 'women' does not describe a uniform digital experience. Age, class, caste, disability, profession, sexuality, geography and public visibility can shape both exposure to technology-facilitated violence and access to remedies. A public figure may have institutional support and media visibility, while a student or working woman in a smaller city may have limited access to specialist legal or forensic assistance.

Digital inequality therefore concerns not only access to devices and connectivity. It also concerns access to remedy. A legal right has limited practical value if the person affected does not know where to report the abuse, cannot preserve evidence safely or cannot obtain institutional assistance.

Digital literacy programmes should consequently include more than basic technical skills. They should address consent, privacy, image manipulation, reporting mechanisms, evidence preservation and responsible digital citizenship. Such education should be available in accessible language and should not place the responsibility for preventing violence entirely upon women.

10. Rethinking Consent in the Age of Generative AI

Generative AI requires a more precise vocabulary of consent. At least three stages should be distinguished: consent to creation, consent to publication and consent to transformation. A person may agree to be photographed and may even agree to public publication without agreeing to any later manipulation of the image.

This distinction becomes particularly important when an ordinary photograph is transformed into sexualised material. The original image may be entirely non-sexual, yet the manipulated version can acquire an intimate meaning. The technology therefore creates a new gap between the consent given at the time of the original photograph and the use subsequently made of the image.

Public visibility should not be interpreted as unlimited consent. Clothing, profession, celebrity, previous photographs or social-media activity cannot reasonably be treated as blanket permission for sexual fabrication. The ethical principle should remain straightforward: the creation of a sexual representation of an identifiable person is a distinct act requiring its own consideration of consent and harm.

11. Resistance, Voice and Digital Agency

A discussion of gender violence should not reduce survivors to passive figures. Feminist scholarship has repeatedly shown the importance of voice and self-representation. The same principle applies to digital violence. Survivors can challenge abusive narratives through legal action, public testimony, educational work, collective organising, digital storytelling and support networks.

The conference's emphasis on literature, language and narratives of resistance offers a productive way to think about this dimension. If a deepfake is a fabricated narrative imposed upon a person, resistance can involve reclaiming the ability to narrate oneself. This does not mean that every survivor should be expected to speak publicly. Agency also includes the right to remain private, to seek confidential assistance and to decide how much of one's experience should be disclosed.

The objective of a humanitarian response should therefore be broader than deletion. Removal can interrupt circulation; justice and support must address the social consequences of the abuse. Digital safety ultimately includes the capacity to return to public and professional life without being permanently defined by the material created against one's consent.

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12. Towards a Gender-Responsive Ethics of AI

The deepfake problem demonstrates why AI ethics cannot be entirely gender-neutral. Technologies are developed and deployed within societies that already contain unequal relations of power. If safety testing does not adequately consider gendered abuse, if design teams lack diverse perspectives, or if platform incentives prioritise circulation over safety, existing inequalities can be reproduced through new technical systems.

A gender-responsive approach should therefore combine several principles: impact assessment before deployment; safeguards against non-consensual sexual transformation; provenance and traceability mechanisms where technically appropriate; rapid and accessible reporting; protection of evidence; independent scrutiny of platform safety practices; and sustained digital education.

The objective is not to eliminate synthetic media. Generative technologies have legitimate creative and communicative uses. The objective is to prevent the freedom to generate content from becoming a freedom to appropriate another person's identity for sexual humiliation. Innovation and accountability should therefore be treated as connected rather than opposing values.

Conclusion

Deepfakes change the politics of representation because they allow an image of a real person to be detached from an actual event and attached to an invented one. In cases of sexualised abuse, this capacity intensifies a much older pattern of gendered control over women's visibility and sexuality. The technological mechanism is new; the underlying struggle over who has the authority to represent the female body is not.

Foucault helps explain the relationship between visibility and surveillance; Butler clarifies how identity is produced through recognisable performances; Mulvey reveals the gendered organisation of looking; and Citron's work on sexual privacy helps articulate why control over intimate representation matters even when the original photograph was public. Read together, these perspectives show why deepfake abuse belongs within cultural and feminist analysis as much as within cybersecurity discourse.

The most useful question, therefore, is not simply whether a deepfake is real or fake. It is what happens when a fabricated representation is attached to a real person's identity and circulated within a social world that may treat the representation as meaningful. The harm lies in the loss of control over representation, the possibility of social consequences and the silencing that may follow.

India's legal framework provides several relevant provisions, but the problem requires more than statutory language. Effective responses will depend on institutional capacity, digital forensics, platform accountability, accessible reporting and survivor-centred support. At the cultural level, there is an equally important task: challenging the assumption that a woman's visibility makes her body available for interpretation and appropriation.

The digital body is connected to the lived body. A fabricated image can therefore have consequences that are neither virtual nor imaginary. Gender justice in the age of generative AI requires protecting the right to control one's likeness, one's intimate representation and, ultimately, the story through which one's identity is known.

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