



# Breaking Boundaries: Advancing Gender and Technology Research to Combat Sextortion

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## Abstract

*This editorial calls for research into technology-facilitated abuses that push the epistemic and ontological boundaries of gender and technology in IS research. Specifically, it focuses on sextortion in the digital age—a pressing societal challenge that undermines gender equality—analyzing how technology both enables and holds the potential to mitigate this form of corruption. Addressing sextortion and other forms of gender-based exploitation requires rethinking how digital technologies are conceptualized, designed, and implemented. This editorial urges scholars to move beyond critique and explore innovative frameworks that prioritize inclusivity, social justice, and participatory design.*

**Keywords:** Gender; Sextortion; Information Technology; Abuse; Corruption; Gender Equity; Gender-Based Exploitation, Design Justice; Participatory Design

## Introduction

The purpose of information systems (IS) research—its legitimacy and justification—has been the subject of much discussion over an extended period of time. More than two decades ago, Dennis (2001) argued that the IS field contributes to society in two significant ways, through knowledge exploration and knowledge exploitation. Both are essential, but the latter is particularly important in shaping praxis, thereby confirming the societal relevance of our research. That theme was echoed by others (e.g., DeSanctis, 2003) who proposed that researchers should extend the boundaries of the IS field in order to approach research questions of societal relevance, a call that has been magnified by the United Nations' identification of significant societal challenges that merit urgent attention, articulated as Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015). Many of these goals, such as “gender equality,” are fundamentally interconnected with other goals that underpin social stability (e.g., “peace, justice, and strong institutions”), and consequently research on these issues is not just interesting, but important (Tihanyi, 2020).

Therefore, accelerating gender equity both in and through technology is a social justice issue (Joshi & Deng, 2024). IS researchers with their history and varied focus on the intersection of gender and technology (e.g., Gefen & Straub, 1997, Venkatesh, 2000; Trauth et al., 2016; Trauth & Connolly, 2021; Joshi, 2022; Trauth & Quesenberry, 2023) offer a valuable perspective for exploring how these goals can be achieved. However, a more intentional, deliberate, and systematic study of the interplay of

gender and technology is needed to understand both the emancipatory potential and subjugation realities of technology in marginalizing or empowering individuals and societies (Trauth et al., 2018; Joshi et al., 2024; Joshi & Deng, 2024). In doing so, we advance the epistemic and ontological boundaries of gender and technology in IS research, fostering diverse knowledge systems that embrace multiple ways of knowing and establishing new intellectual traditions to amplify emerging technologies' emancipatory potential and attenuate their subjugation tendencies.

To this end, this editorial examines a unique societal challenge that hinders the goal of gender equality, that of sextortion in the digital age, analyzing how technology has both facilitated and contains the potential to mitigate this form of corruption. It also explores the role of digital tools in empowering marginalized communities and calls for targeted research and policy solutions that prioritize gender-sensitive technologies and the empowerment of those most vulnerable to abuse.

### **Understanding Sextortion: Mechanisms, Impact, and Socio-Structural Contexts**

Sextortion, technological-facilitated abuses, is an underexplored form of corruption in which individuals in positions of authority exploit their power to extort sexual favors in exchange for services, protections, or rights that should be guaranteed. Unlike traditional forms of corruption driven by financial gain, sextortion weaponizes sexual coercion, disproportionately affecting women and marginalized groups who are more vulnerable to systemic exploitation. These groups often depend on the very institutions that exploit them, where refusal can result in the denial of critical services. This dynamic, compounded by patriarchal norms, economic insecurity, and inadequate legal protections, further entrenches cycles of exploitation and systemic abuse (Feigenblatt, 2020).

In recent years, the rise of digital transformation has added new complexities to sextortion. Technological platforms, while holding the potential for empowerment, have also provided new avenues for abuse. For instance, social media, messaging apps, and online service platforms have made it easier for perpetrators to coerce, manipulate, or blackmail victims, often blurring the lines between professional and private interactions. These platforms can facilitate continuous access to victims, making it harder for traditional oversight mechanisms to detect or prevent such exploitation.

The consequences to the victim are severe, both physically and psychologically. The socio-economic impact is equally profound. In the workplace, victims

experience career disruptions, reduced job satisfaction, and lower incomes, particularly in male-dominated sectors (Stahl, 2021). Educational settings are also heavily affected, with female students often coerced into providing sexual favors for academic advancement, perpetuating inequalities in educational attainment and career opportunities (Fadipe & Bakenne, 2020). This form of corruption also erodes trust in public institutions. In Latin America, 71 percent of the population perceives sextortion as occurring occasionally, with one in five individuals reporting direct experiences. In South Africa, 84 percent of victims seeking government employment or promotions were women (Feigenblatt, 2020). Sextortion flourishes within deeply entrenched social, economic, and political inequalities, where power asymmetries favor those in authority and disenfranchise vulnerable populations (Kolbe, 2015). Without tackling these structural dynamics, policy solutions will remain superficial and ineffective (Forattini, 2021).

### **Technology's Role in Addressing Sextortion**

Digital platforms have the potential to revolutionize the fight against sextortion and other forms of gender-based exploitation by offering innovative ways to empower marginalized communities. When designed with inclusivity in mind, these platforms can facilitate real-time reporting, create secure spaces for dialogue, and provide mechanisms for holding perpetrators accountable. They can bypass traditional barriers to justice, bridging gaps in accessibility caused by geography, socio-economic status, or systemic inefficiencies. At their best, digital platforms not only connect victims to services but actively transform how vulnerable populations engage with social and legal systems.

Several successful examples illustrate how technology has been harnessed to combat sextortion. Platforms like Safecity, which uses crowdsourcing to collect reports of sexual harassment, enable individuals to anonymously share their experiences. Similarly, iProbono, a global legal platform, connects victims of exploitation with legal support services, demonstrating how technology can challenge entrenched power structures and democratize access to justice for marginalized groups. These platforms build networks of solidarity and support, fostering trust through encryption, anonymity, and strong data protection measures.

GovTech, which focuses on using technology to enhance government service delivery and transparency, offers promising avenues to address sextortion and improve public trust. By digitizing

services such as legal aid, identity verification, and social assistance, governments can reduce opportunities for interpersonal corruption, including sextortion, by minimizing face-to-face interactions where abuses of power commonly occur. Digital platforms allow for more transparent and accountable processes, ensuring that services are delivered equitably and without coercion. Furthermore, GovTech can integrate technologies like AI and blockchain to improve the tracking of service delivery, making it easier to detect patterns of misconduct, hold officials accountable, and streamline reporting mechanisms for citizens.

Blockchain, for instance, can ensure the immutability of public records and prevent tampering with essential service documentation such as identity cards, permits, and legal documents, which are often leveraged by corrupt officials to exploit victims. The use of GovTech can also facilitate anonymous reporting mechanisms for sextortion, allowing victims to securely submit complaints that are automatically verified and routed to the appropriate oversight bodies. This technology can bridge critical gaps in government oversight by enhancing inter-agency collaboration and ensuring that complaints are addressed swiftly and transparently.

AI also presents a powerful tool for identifying and responding to sextortion. By analyzing large datasets, AI can detect patterns of abuse, flagging potentially coercive behaviors on digital platforms, and automating the identification of suspicious language or interaction patterns indicative of sextortion. This would allow service providers and authorities to intervene earlier and more accurately. Additionally, AI systems can streamline reporting processes by assessing the severity of cases, prioritizing the most vulnerable victims, and identifying broader trends, providing a more data-driven and responsive approach to intervention.

## **The Challenges That Remain**

However, despite the potential of digital technologies to address sextortion, this potential is often unrealized. Instead of empowering the most vulnerable, technology is frequently shaped by the social, economic, and cultural systems that reinforce existing inequalities. Without inclusive and participatory design, digital platforms risk replicating and intensifying the very power asymmetries they are meant to disrupt. In cases of sextortion—where gendered exploitation is at the core—these platforms may overlook the specific vulnerabilities of marginalized users, leaving them more susceptible to exploitation.

The anonymity and global reach of these digital platforms, including others such as social media, have

created new avenues for exploitation. Individuals in positions of power—such as judges, prosecutors, or educators—can leverage these tools to solicit sexual favors from victims, often women or marginalized individuals, in exchange for protections, academic opportunities, or legal services. This constant digital access allows perpetrators to manipulate or harass victims outside of traditional oversight mechanisms, blurring the boundaries between professional and personal interactions. This erosion of accountability makes it even more challenging to identify and intervene in cases of abuse, allowing sextortion to persist in new, less visible forms.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the conditions for sextortion as society became increasingly reliant on digital platforms for work, education, and essential services. With isolation and limited access to in-person interactions, perpetrators took advantage of these new vulnerabilities, targeting marginalized individuals who were already disadvantaged by the shift to digital communication. The absence of traditional safeguards allowed employers, educators, and public officials to coerce victims into providing other forms of sexual extortion in exchange for job security, academic success, or access to necessary services. Moreover, the pandemic revealed the fragility of digital infrastructure, with many platforms ill-equipped to protect users from exploitation. Insufficient reporting systems and a lack of digital literacy highlighted the urgent need for more robust, inclusive technological solutions to prevent and combat sextortion.

Regarding the promises of GovTech, these systems have the potential to either entrench bureaucratic patriarchy or transform state-citizen interactions, depending on how they are designed and implemented. In many countries, marginalized women face significant barriers to accessing digital tools and often lack the tech literacy necessary to fully benefit from services intended to empower them. Biased algorithms in GovTech systems can exacerbate these challenges, favoring users with straightforward claims while neglecting more complex cases, reinforcing systemic inequities. For example, a typical business license application may be processed without issue, but women entrepreneurs from marginalized communities may face delays or rejections due to the algorithm's inability to handle non-standard cases, leaving those most in need even more vulnerable.

Digital identity systems, while designed to enhance access to public services, can inadvertently institutionalize the biases already present in traditional bureaucracies. Women from rural or low-income backgrounds may lack the necessary documents or digital literacy required to navigate these systems, effectively excluding them from essential services. In such cases, these digital systems simply replicate

existing barriers under the guise of efficiency, failing to address the underlying inequalities that marginalized groups face.

Data privacy and surveillance concerns add significant complexity to addressing sextortion, as both public and private platforms collect sensitive information that can expose marginalized groups to further exploitation. Without adequate oversight, insufficient data protection measures—such as weak encryption or poor access controls—can lead to privacy violations, allowing corrupt officials or unauthorized parties to misuse this data. Strengthening ethical standards and implementing robust data protection frameworks, including encryption, anonymization, and strict access management, are critical to preventing these platforms from becoming tools of exploitation. These safeguards must be designed to address the unique vulnerabilities of marginalized groups, ensuring data privacy serves as protection rather than an additional risk.

AI and automation offer valuable tools for addressing sextortion but pose critical challenges if not designed with inclusivity and transparency. These systems depend on the quality of the data they are trained on; when datasets fail to represent women and marginalized groups, AI may overlook or misinterpret key patterns of abuse. This can lead to biased outcomes that further marginalize vulnerable communities. The “black box” nature of AI (Von Eschenbach, 2021) complicates oversight, making it difficult to scrutinize or challenge system outputs, especially when these reinforce social inequalities. To avoid perpetuating harm, AI systems must prioritize fairness, accountability, and diverse data inclusion, ensuring clear avenues for effective oversight.

When properly implemented, these digital tools can serve as more than intermediaries; they can act as agents of change. By fostering secure access to justice, empowering victims, and transforming how marginalized populations interact with both governmental and legal institutions, technological innovations can play a crucial role in addressing sextortion. However, for these innovations to be truly impactful, they must move beyond technical solutions and engage deeply with the structural inequalities that perpetuate abuse. Future technological developments must prioritize equity, long-term trust-building, and participatory design, ensuring that vulnerable communities are not only included but actively empowered in the fight against sextortion.

### **Call for Research: Advancing Digital Solutions for Gender Equity**

In a global climate where diversity and equity face growing resistance—with political and tech industry leaders openly criticizing inclusion efforts—developing

gender-sensitive technologies is becoming increasingly difficult. To fully harness digital technology's potential for empowerment, there must be a shift away from profit-driven approaches that prioritize scalability and monetization over user well-being. Instead, frameworks rooted in inclusion, social justice, and participatory design are essential for bridging the gap between theoretical ideals and practical application.

To effectively address sextortion and other forms of gender-based exploitation, it is imperative to reconsider how digital technologies are conceptualized, designed, and deployed. This editorial calls for scholarly inquiry that moves beyond critique and toward the exploration of innovative frameworks that emphasize inclusivity, social justice, and participatory design. The current landscape, dominated by individualistic and profit-driven models, falls short in tackling the structural inequalities that disproportionately affect women and marginalized groups. A transformative shift in digital development is essential to create technologies that genuinely empower these populations.

Advancing understanding of socially relevant issues is consistent with the history of IS research. We therefore invite researchers and practitioners to contribute to this critical conversation by submitting studies that rigorously analyze these technological challenges and propose actionable solutions. Such research should focus on fostering systems that not only mitigate harm but also actively dismantle entrenched power imbalances. By prioritizing the voices and needs of those most affected, future scholarship can play a pivotal role in shaping digital platforms that serve as catalysts for gender equity and systemic change.

Specifically, we encourage IS scholars to engage with and support the dedicated track on IT, Social Justice, and Marginalized Contexts at the Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences 2024 (HICSS-57) that would allow the IS community to attract, promote, and grow research on marginalized contexts systematically and deliberately. The editorial (Joshi & Deng, 2024) published earlier this year presents a brief overview of the ten mini-tracks accepted as part of this special HICSS-57 track. Among the ten mini-tracks, the Gender and Technology mini-track (Joshi et al., 2024) focuses on research on gender and technology. This mini-track seeks to attract research that conceptualizes, theorizes, and operationalizes human and non-human interactions to understand how gender shapes the technology milieu but also seeks to reveal interventions that can help attenuate gender inequities and imbalance. Gender-based exploitation, such as sextortion, found in the context of technology is both particularly stubborn and opaque. Its stubbornness is amplified partly due to the

hegemonic masculinity deeply ingrained in the technology space, whereas its opaqueness is forever growing due to the inscrutability of AI-enabled technologies. Despite these forces of disempowerment, the emancipatory potential of designing and building a more just society has never been greater. IS scholars must seize this moment and engage in scholarship to drive a technological future that is free of bias and abuse.

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