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Networking Voices against Violence: Online Activism and Transnational Feminism in Local-Global Contexts

By Sutanuka Banerjee¹, Lipika Kankaria²

Abstract

Contemporary feminism manifests itself in the form of blogs, hashtags, e-magazines, and digitally planned protests through online communities that address the prevailing concerns of feminists in the digital age. This feminist approach to digital activism aims to reclaim the power of technology which is inherently hegemonic and masculinist by creating alternate spaces and modes of protest. Transnational feminism is increasingly being shaped by online discourses and the new digital space enables social movements in shaping feminist solidarity and complex netizen identities. This paper adopts discourse analysis of online contents that question the prevalent patriarchal system in South Asia and thus situate it in the changing socio-cultural context globally. Popular hashtag movements in various countries such as #YesAllWomen, #notallmen, #MeToo, #SheInspiresMe, #WomenMarch4Change, #WhyLoiter, #IWillGoOut, #AuratMarch #GirlsAtDhabas, #SafeCityIndia #PinjraTod as well as other online forums which raise the voices of women against various forms of violence will be analysed with a view to uncover their multi-layered impact. These multifaceted discourses on gender-based violence have reached a wider audience across the world through social media, and academic webinars during the Covid-19 pandemic have also largely contributed to the debate. The resonance of these dialogues has transcended the local to the global level; a close study of the transnational character of these digital messages in social media aims to examine the strict demarcation between the public and the private, thus challenging the concept of gendered spaces. This paper employs a multidisciplinary approach to methodologically analyse the online resources and nature of activism in India and investigate its global relevance. Additionally, the paper will also explore how the online campaigns are establishing networks notwithstanding time and place, by interrogating and understanding the relationship between online activism and its significance in conceptualizing transnational feminism.

Keywords: Online activism, Hashtag, Transnational feminism, Local-global, Gender, South Asia

Introduction

With increasing use of internet tools, digital technology has emerged as a key instrument in creating a space for feminist activism. This space has been variously utilized by specific communities and groups for advocating several activities such as organising protests, creating

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dialogues, and expressing dissent. The internet has added a new dimension to new-age feminist activism, which acknowledges the diversity and underlying differences in women's movements. This is increasingly being articulated in women's forums that can be termed as transnational in the sense that it caters to the debates on gender equity and advocacy in both local and global contexts (Dingo, 2012; Hesford, 2010; Hesford & Schell, 2008; Queen, 2008). This approach has added newer perspectives to feminist movements around the world. Transnational feminism focuses on "the diverse experiences of women who live within, between, and at the margins or boundaries of nation-states around the globe" (Zerbe Enns et al., 2020). A critical analysis of this theory can lead to the unravelling of new insights in the history of women's movements and the politics of solidarity.

Morgan's (1984) *Sisterhood is Global* focussed on women's lived experiences of patriarchy and the potential for building collaboration amongst women around the globe. This perspective underlined the commonalities between women rather than their innate differences, and how the commonalities formed the foundation for building a connected global women's movement. Mohanty (1988, 1992, 2003) critiqued the "Universal sisterhood" for its promotion of an essentialist, homogenous view of women as a cross-culturally singular category with similar interests, likings, perspectives, goals, and experiences. "Third World" feminists in both the global north and the global south started questioning the Western conceptualizations of feminism and examined differences among women in respect of race, class, sexuality, nationality, and located these differences in complex systems of identity and knowledge production. These critiques have prompted the scope of research from intersectional perspective which focuses on how the multiplicity of women's identities (based on race, gender, nationality, class and sexuality) and their specific interests shape feminist discourse (Basu, 1995; Grewal and Kaplan 1994; Kaplan, et al. 1999; Mendoza, 2002; Narayan, 1997). The increasing body of research on the diversity of women's movements and the presence of diverse feminisms in contrast to a single global women's movement concentrated on building coalitions linked by issues rather than drawing on parallels of uniformity. Transnational feminism as highlighted before, questions hegemonic feminist imaginings based on the models of global sisterhood underlying the meaningful differences between women both locally and globally and how it shaped and reshaped feminist politics (Nadkarni, 2017).

To critically investigate the nuances around the worldwide campaigns and coalitions for women's active resistance, the concept of "global village" (introduced by Marshall McLuhan in 1964) can be useful in this context. By global village, McLuhan (1964) implied that the world was increasingly becoming a smaller place as technology has connected everyone across barriers and this idea can also be applied in the analysis of online activism. This has been brought about by the internet which can be viewed as "international" or transnational as it connects geo-political spaces and aids in the exchange of communication beyond and between countries and the citizens (Kramarae, 2014). This paper will theorize the effect of online activism which aims to connect and mobilize people through different strategies and examine the relevance of the movements in virtual spaces which have reverberations in real world. Additionally, the paper will also focus on the Indian hashtag activism while examining how the campaigns against violence and discrimination are establishing networks notwithstanding time and place. While employing discourse analysis, the paper adopts qualitative approach and explores local-global intersections to understand the ramifications of digital feminism in South Asia. It has taken into account secondary resources available on the internet (blogs, e-papers, articles, e-zines and so on) to scrutinize the multi-layered nuances of online feminist activism. Along with providing a global overview of recent feminist

online campaigns, it focuses on the Indian feminist activist discourse and contextualizes as well as situates it in the contemporary scenario.

Digital Revolutions and Online Activism

Feminist activism across the world has undergone a paradigm shift as feminist movements nowadays are rather mediated and *networked* instead of 1960s-era feminism which unfolded through activities of formal institutions (Clark-Parsons, 2018). Contemporary feminism manifests as blogs, hashtags, e-magazines, digitally planned protests, online communities and so on. Feminist solidarity and complex “netizen identities” (Chadha, 2017) are significant elements in understanding gender politics in online activism, spearheaded by the prevalence of media networks. Feminist social media feminism (Sebring, 2019) or cyberfeminism is variously understood as either a philosophy (Paterson, 1992) or a radical online pedagogy and digital rhetoric (Hocks, 2009; Torrens & Riley, 2009) that seeks to use internet and create online spaces with the aim to empower women.

Digital space as a location for transnational feminist intervention has witnessed a wave of feminist movements, which address various political issues— reproductive rights, verbal and non-verbal attacks, wage inequities, women’s autonomy over bodies, and the effectiveness of such protests is considerably significant. The commonality of women’s issues is a shared predicament yet it cannot bring women together physically due to geographical and cultural barriers. When these debates are transported to the online platform, they have a broader connection where the local gets transposed to the global. For example, movements like #WhyIMarch which was a global campaign to unite voices for women’s rights and other issues that started in the United States but with the help of internet spread to a number of countries. Further, in India #IWillGoOut proved to be a significant campaign for women to claim their agency and question patriarchal norms which have been discussed at length later in the paper.

Contemporary transnational feminist dialogues fundamentally include online feminist exchanges and mediations, writings, art and other productions. According to Kahn and Kellner (2004), a part of the Internet subculture comprises of personal and political blogging which also includes activism on social media platforms, such as Facebook, by connecting the real and virtual worlds. There were sporadic instances of women’s digital activism in India from a long time but the Nirbhaya case is a landmark incident in the sense that the brutal gangrape in 2012 in Delhi sparked outrage and the internet seemed to play a crucial role in connecting voices across nations (Losh, 2014). Jyoti Singh Pandey, who was given the pseudonym of ‘Nirbhaya,’ was a young student who was gangraped in a moving bus and later thrown off the bus in a pitiable condition with an iron rod inserted into her vagina. Immediately after the incident social media users resorted to online platform to express their concern as they were shocked by the brutality of the crime. It received international attention and gave rise to public furore as it generated discussions about violence against women and their limited access to safe spaces. Social media acted as a platform to exchange information which amplified the response of people across the nation as they planned events to protest and demand justice by catalysing social change. Hashtags were used by social media users to draw attention to this incident and highlighted the question of women’s safety in public spaces which eventually forced the government to amend laws for concrete action, and stringent punishments were introduced. In this light, it is crucial to situate gender-based violence in the broader context of transnational feminist activism that is being initiated through digital media.

Technology is instrumental in alleviating structural and physical barriers by uniting women for a cause but the economic structure of the society poses a major hindrance to the transnational networking of women due to digital divide. Studies have shown that economic inequality results in a huge gap leading to inaccessibility to internet (OECD, 2001). Although there is a presence of diverse voices online, it is important to question whether the digital space facilitates equal participation within the available limited resources. Usage of technology is based on internet penetration in remote areas and access to devices as well as literacy of women which restrict their involvement. The marginalized and the poorer section of women are the ones who are most likely to not have access to internet and therefore excluded from the purview of online activism. According to Mohan (2018), only 30 percent of the online users are women and further this percentage drops to 12 percent in rural areas. This class-based and region-based divide insinuate that those who have the resources and access to digital media can only vocalize their protest. The digital divide that echoes a separation between the information "haves" and "have-nots" has consequently led to a gender gap which becomes a growing concern especially if the power of technology is directly linked to voicing and exerting their agency.

New Media, Gender Question and Feminist Practices

Despite the limitations, internet has contributed to the democratization of feminist movements in the recent years by encouraging diversity and providing accessibility to the feminist struggle. The digital platform has forums and groups dedicated to particular issues which are enabling women to seek support, share and protest, thus, it has emerged as a site that redefines traditional notions of self, identity, and transnational feminism. New Media has become a significant propeller of transnational feminist activism. To define the term, it refers to any form of media ranging from blogs to podcasts that are delivered digitally. This implies that any internet-based communication disseminated through websites, emails, streaming platforms, online forums and so on can be considered new media (Siapera, 2017).

Digital feminism taking place in the online realm has gained popularity in the twenty-first century. In this connection, it can be highlighted that Fourth-wave feminism focusses on the use of internet tools, inclusivity and intersectional politics and takes into consideration the interlocking systems of power and how it disadvantages marginalised groups (Jain, 2020). It is increasingly contributing to scholarly discussions that involve a wide range of issues focusing on the connections between women's situated lives and changing dynamics of local-global interactions. Moreover, social media plays a pivotal role that allows people to engage in virtual communities that cannot be allocated strict geo-political locales.

The internet was initially conceptualized as a gender-neutral space as anonymity could be maintained while vocalizing any issue. However, it is no longer a neutral space as it is increasingly giving vent to opinions and expressions by people who are asserting their online identities (Cockburn, 1985; Wajcman, 1991). Citizens become netizens, who are able to voice concerns and initiate communicative action across an alternate medium. The existence of the virtual world has transformed the notions of the public and private domains by opening the window to a larger audience. In digital space, the idea of hashtag was initially conceptualized in 2007 on Twitter (Gannes, 2010) in order to facilitate the finding of information but it has grown in its scope that enables the users to specify context, emotion and meaning in their tweets while referring to a particular cause. The trend of hashtags has spread to other social media platforms as a means to draw attention to the trending topics, issues or news as well as to locate others who share the same views (Chen et al., 2018). The posts on any platform is targeted towards an imagined audience

who are expected to perceive and participate in the discussions propelled by the hashtags (Marwick & Boyd, 2011). With the use of new media as a location of imagined communities, mediated social spaces create a sense of “virtual cosmopolitanism” (McEwan & Sobré-Denton, 2011). The notion of virtual cosmopolitanism as the space for mobilizing digital media (such as Twitter, Facebook, online support groups) is located at the intersection of social context and technological opportunity (Gillan et al., 2008). Feminists have judiciously made use of this relatively new aspect of hashtag as a means of attracting women to a cause (Eagle, 2015; Loza, 2016) wherein they can create a domain in the public space to come together virtually. However, Dean (2009) postulates that online activism may be passive but the intimacy on the web space intensifies the emotions and feelings of solidarity.

A new term, *clicktivism*, is now being used when activists are resorting to online medium to galvanize protests and promote awareness. This highlights the potential that digital technology could play in the future of feminist activism by lending voice to protests against violence. To counter sexual harassment, Twitter and Facebook users are turning to the micro-blogging site by posting real life accounts of crimes and even organizing “slut-walks” and marches, mainly in metro cities. Social media also acts as a source of dissemination of information regarding marches or rallies. According to Carstensen (2014), social media has been able to “provide spaces for users to empower each other, to establish events and protests and mobilize for political action.” Hashtag feminism has offered a powerful medium for voicing support for various feminist concerns and by doing so it has redefined “the ways we view the active components of feminism in our present society” (Dixon, 2014). However, there exists another point of view which emphasizes that online feminism may seem to be liberating through participation in a small way which is likely to prevent feminists from engaging in more involved ways of activism (Lee & Heish, 2013). This line of argument has given rise to the concept of slactivism which refers to the limited and low-risk participation in any initiative wherein individuals “confine their outrage to the computer screen” (Bastos et al., 2015). There are other terms such as “hactivism” which have become a part of critical media research and literary parlance as the reactionary nature of hactivism makes it an important tool in the landscape of online protests.

Global Visibility of Women’s Issues and Online Activism in the South Asian Context

The varied forms of online activism have drawn global attention to women’s issues through a number of ways made possible by technological advancements. To analyse the nuances of feminist movements and transnational connections within digital space, the interface between activism, gender, and technology needs to be critically examined. Hashtag activism as a field has emerged rather recently in order to “raise awareness for social issues on social media” (Xiong et al, 2019). Participation in such movements by sharing personal accounts and traumatizing stories is the assertion of the self where the personal becomes political and women assemble for a cause under the aegis of a hashtag. Various hashtag campaigns such as #MeToo, #EverydaySexism, #UrgentAction4Women, #ThisIsNotConsent, #EndFGM (Female Genital Mutilation) (Kangere et. al, 2017) and so on have sparked Fourth wave feminist discourses around the globe, incorporating a range of practices that are enabled by Web 2.0 digital technologies (Munro, 2013). Similar campaigns like #OrangeTheWorld, #GenerationEquality are conceptualized to express solidarity against discrimination and violence and promote gender parity. This feeling of comradeship generated by the hashtag activism has connected women and they are more likely to partake in significant efforts offline (Lee & Heish, 2013).

#MeToo became a massive scale movement where women from various sections of the society came out with their experiences of sexual abuse and molestation. Although the movement was initiated by Tarana Burke in the year 2006 “to stand with women of colour who have gone through sexual abuse and harassment” (Dixit, 2021), the worldwide resurgence of #MeToo across social media in 2017 was attributed to Hollywood personality Alyssa Milano. It commenced as a response to Hollywood’s culture of sexual harassment but gradually grabbed global attention about the enormity of the problem for women across countries. This campaign has been successful in encouraging Indian women to uncover issues of violence, harassment and rape considering the intersection of power and politics. #MeToo movement in India garnered considerable attention largely due to the involvement of Bollywood celebrities and well-known personalities. A Google Trends visualization of hotspots for #MeToo search shows that there is a concentration of golden dots across India that reflects the interest of the readers and participants in a particular zone (Shrivastava et al., 2018). However, this predominantly digital movement indirectly excluded a large section of women from the ambit of the movement as the intersectional identities within and outside traditional feminisms excluded other marginally gendered bodies (Nanditha, 2021) and it has largely failed to discuss the lived experiences of sexual abuse of transwomen, Dalit women, LGBTQ and other marginalized communities. Even though there is some visibility of non-normative identities in online discourses like #loveforall and #pridemarch but it has failed to highlight the multi-layered forms of abuse and harassment confronted by these groups and communities.

The feminist activities on the online platform in India have been marked by the politics of inclusion and exclusion as the movement has been largely restricted to the elites, not proliferating amongst the working class and rural populations. Irrespective of that, #MeToo emerged as a movement which initiated conversations and opened doors to exchanges and debates concerning the ways to tackle the issues of sexual harassment and violence. A close analysis of the discourse of the tweets shows that they mostly reflect personal opinions of the celebrities and non-celebrities alike, although the celebrities receive far more visibility on such platforms. In her study, Nanditha (2021) found that these tweets generated recurrent words like “defamation”, “harassment”, “cases” and “allegations”, indicating that many of these public accusations do not always follow the legal proceedings or generate debates surrounding the controversial issues of power and gender in public space. This has also led to counter arguments as the voicing of such opinions produced differing discourses with trending hashtags such as #fake, #fakecases, #mentoo and so on that gives vent to negative sentiments and hostility towards the movement. Online activism related to sexual harassment triggered a host of accompanying hashtags. #LoSHA, a similar name and shame campaign, was initiated by Raya Sarkar, a Law graduate from India now residing in the US, who published a list of professors as sexual predators (John, 2021; Pain, 2020). The list crowd-sourced names and cases of sexual harassment of students by their professors and it generated huge controversy and polarised feminists across the country (Chadha, 2017).

The biggest campaign in India in 2012 was in response to the brutal gangrape and murder of Jyoti Singh Pandey in the national capital and it drove urban populace to take recourse to social media to give to their anger and anguish. It was the digital activism that convinced people to go for street demonstrations impelled by online protests. Text messages, WhatsApp, Facebook and Twitter hashtags such as #Nirbhaya, #StopThisShame were used in a large scale to demonstrate collective rage against the persistent problem of sexual abuse and assault (Kurian, 2019). In 2014, Twitter saw a new wave of posts under #YesAllWomen, a campaign aiming to draw attention to the pervasiveness of sexism, chauvinism and violence directed towards women (Barker-Plummer

& Barker-Plummer, 2017). This global hashtag became popular in India after the mass molestations that took place in Bangalore at New Year's Eve celebrations (De Bono, 2017) which encouraged Indian women to share their stories of sexual harassment. Indian feminists reclaimed that hashtag in response to #notallmen and asked users to post personal accounts of harassment and violence in Twitter, underscoring the reality that "yes, all women" have been subjected to sexual violence. #YesAllWomen created a transnational digital connection with reference to the Twitter campaign which documented women's experiences of everyday discrimination and sexism that generated widespread public outcry as disseminating awareness is the first step towards any social change. #KaunsiBadiBaatHai in 2019 in which UN Women partnered with TikTok, also highlighted the issue of gender-based violence (*FE Online*, 2019; Hu, 2019).

One of the most significant events that marked a new phase in Indian women's digital movement and online activism was the Pink Chaddi Campaign, which was initiated in February 2009 by a Facebook collective called "Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women" to demonstrate against the attacks in Mangalore by Hindu activists (Chattopadhyay, 2012). This was sparked by videos of young women being beaten up by men on the pretext that such activities were against the Hindu traditions and tainted the representation of ideal Hindu women. In response to this, the Facebook group called for a nationwide campaign to send pink underwear on Valentine's Day to the perpetrators as a mark of protest. The choice of pink underwear was symbolic of feminist freedom and sexualized consumerism. It aimed to question the appropriation of women's behaviour by patriarchal society through the act of showcasing intimate feminine underwear to bring the private to the public. The campaign got over-whelming response and it grabbed attention across the world as it was the first of its kind movement. Over the years, many such movements spearheaded by lawyers, students and organizations have taken over the digital space to fight against a monolithic idea of culture and all forms of violence.

In India, the reach of social media has played a pivotal role in uniting like-minded women for raising their voice and asserting their individuality. Around 2015, there was a spurt in hashtags relating to women's health, especially regarding taboo topics. A college student, Nikita Azad, started #HappytoBleed on Facebook to draw attention to the non-inclusion of women pilgrims aged 10 to 50 in Sabarimala temple, a very prominent Hindu shrine in India due to the belief that menstruating women might taint the holiness of the shrine (Varghese, 2015). It was aimed to empower women to take a stand against the social stigma surrounding menstruation and reclaim their autonomy over the bodies.

A large-scale movement over social media networks trended with #WhyIMarch in 2017 in a united response to the rising rhetoric of far-right populism (White, 2017). This globally synchronised protest also triggered discussions about gender equality and women's rights. The complex societal restrictions placed on women in the public arena led to initiatives like #WhyLoiter in India, which was aimed at encouraging women to reclaim streets and establish agency and independence (Phadke et al., 2011). By establishing their reasons for loitering, women propagated travel for leisure in an otherwise masculine space. The movement aimed at blurring the boundary between inner and outer spheres for women as they demanded equal right to public spaces, which is still mostly treated as a masculine privilege. The cyberspace, thus, was used to challenge prejudices and stereotypes and condemn street harassment as a pervasive form of oppression which hampers women's public presence and participation. #WhyLoiter in India and its counterpart #GirlsAtDhabas in Pakistan have been the pioneering movements that proliferated to the grassroots levels. #GirlsAtDhabas is a multi-city feminist initiative in Pakistan clinching the issues of safety and 'respectability' (Ansari, 2018). #Auratmarch in Pakistan on International

Women's Day stressed on the similar motto of harassment free public space for women and came to the limelight receiving widespread attention. Further, the issue of safety was highlighted in a countrywide march across India with the hashtag #Iwillgoout which sought to demand women's right to equitable access to public spaces, galvanized by the reports of mass molestation on the New Year's Eve and series of sexual assaults in Bangalore in the year 2017. In 2019, in India the hashtag #WomenMarch4Change aimed at giving women and other marginalized communities a collective voice. Thus, the diversity of expressions that populates digital media makes it a fertile area for intersectional feminism which is evident through the posts and subsequent mobilizations.

In keeping with the idea of reclaiming their bodies and spaces, hashtags such as, #SafeCityIndia, #BoardtheBus (Eagle, 2015, D'Silva, 2015) were introduced, which mostly focused on generating conversations about women's safety and their rights to mobility and safe public space. Furthermore, in this regard, #PinjraTod has received considerable attention as it was started by women college students who lived in hostels in Delhi and soon it spread to cities like Mumbai, Chennai and Thiruvananthapuram (Roy, 2016). It was aimed to unify women in claiming greater freedom for themselves and defy regressive and sexist rules, imposition of curfews and other restrictions in the garb of their safety. They also marched together to end moral policing and symbolically reclaim the night. There are other campaigns like #INeverAskForIt and #MeetToSleep which made an impact and caught headlines.

To propagate a space devoid of stigma, on International Women's Day (March 8), Twitter commenced #SheInspiresMe, the goal of which was to fashion a culture wherein women supported women, and empower female voices. UN Women Goodwill Ambassador Emma Watson, in the year 2014, welcomed men to support the movement for gender equality by participating in the HeForShe campaign. Since the campaign was launched, both men and women across the world used #HeForShe to profess commitment towards United Nations' goal for ending gender inequality by the year 2030. To encourage men and boys as supporters and agents of change in this effort to attain equality, HeForShe campaign was also launched in India. The impact of the national and local contexts is undeniable for the formulation of strategies for furthering women's rights and gender justice. MARD (Men Against Rape and Discrimination), launched in 2013 by Bollywood film director and actor Farhan Akhtar persuaded common public to consider men as allies in the struggle against gender inequality and raised awareness about gender based violence.

The space that internet has provided offers a platform for organized protests, not just in terms of hashtags but songs and offline performances as well. For example, "*Un Violador en tu camino*" ("The Rapist is You"), first performed in the port city of Valparaiso on November 20, 2019 was aimed at shifting the blame away from women who experience sexual violence (Abramovich, 2019). This protest song soon turned out to be the global anthem which became viral worldwide with the videos of flashmob performances, and it was replicated hundreds of times around the world in the space of a few weeks and translated in several languages in many countries including India, Bangladesh, Lebanon and so on (Hinsliff, 2020). This also highlights the transnational character of protest movements that intersects with multi-layered issues that netizens experience in the emerging social media platforms.

In the present situation, during Covid 19 pandemic, street protests became impossible and social movements had to reconsider their strategies and develop "online-only" formats (Haßler et al., 2021). There are reports about an increase in domestic violence in quarantine which is further reinstated by the rising statistics (Gupta & Stahl, 2020; Graham-Harrison et al., 2020; Grierson, 2020). Helen Lewis (2020), an author and journalist, has called the pandemic "a disaster for

feminism” as during the lockdown domestic violence cases have increased 20% globally (Ford, 2020) and resulted in a parallel pandemic (Puhr, 2020). It has attracted global attention and a considerable number of women reported incidents of violence which resulted in discussions about coping mechanisms (WHO, 2020). Freie Universität Berlin organized a couple of webinars and interesting roundtable series such as *Transnational feminist dialogues in times of corona crisis* involving women activists and academics from various places across the world. Women from different parts of the globe participated in it and these types of online conferences, discussions and lectures thereby created a virtual space to share, exchange and discuss multi-layered aspects of discrimination and privilege. In India, various institutions organised webinars involving experts who helped in commencing a series of critical dialogues about crucial issues. For instance, Dr. Vibhuti Patel, a feminist social scientist delivered lectures on gender equity and how Covid-19 affected women’s livelihood in the informal sector (Patel, 2020). Other scholars also shared their concerns and deliberated on this issue to combat the challenges posed by Covid-19 and Prof. Fawzia Afzal-Khan is notable among them (IWWAGE, 2020; Afzal-Khan, 2020).

Apart from the academic webinars in recent times, various non-governmental organizations have long been engaged in making contributions in creating awareness about gender-based discrimination and violence by utilizing digital media. For example, Breakthrough, started in Delhi in 2000, mentions on its website that it is working towards making “violence and discrimination against women and girls unacceptable” by using various strategies ranging from media and arts to music videos and animations. Other collectives, such as the Blank Noise Project, have used the online platform for feminist activism and intervention against street harassment in India and lack of access to public space. This project covered a wide array of activities such as blogging, workshops and strategizing to render public spaces as safe for millions of women who need to travel on a daily basis. Being an online effort, it advocated the use of new ICTs creatively to ascertain and resist sexual harassment, and at the same time recognizing that harassment is sometimes also perpetuated by technology. In this connection, mention may be made of another prominent organization, Digital Rights Foundation, a research-based advocacy NGO, run by the Pakistani Lawyer and Internet activist Nighat Dad, has contributed to women’s rights in digital spaces by using ICTs to support human rights, freedom of expression, democratic processes and digital governance.

Apart from these, varied activist efforts have also culminated in feminist e-zines and web pages which give voice to women’s issues. These emerging forums have changed the ways in which activism is being staged and individual opinions are brought to the forefront. Countercurrents.org started in 2001 is one of the first examples of cyber activism in India. From intersectional point of view it features articles from different sections of academic circle and activist network. In order to contribute to the ongoing conversation regarding global gender issues and add to transnational feminist discourses, many dedicated blogs and websites such as *Feminism in India* and *Women’s Web* have become popular medium of expression. The authors are from various walks of life, including academics, journalists, independent researchers and NGO workers. These platforms aim to amplify the collective voices to develop feminist consciousness as it encompasses personal narratives by women, providing a means for resistance and liberation, outside the system of hierarchies.

Online Misogyny and Safety Concerns

Although digital feminism has revolutionized the ways of protest in many sense, the United Nations’ Broadband Commission for Digital Development released a statement on “cyber

VAWG,” (Violence against Women and Girls) and commented that online harassment is a “problem of pandemic proportion” (Jane, 2017). Online bullying, trolling and harassment pervade the digital space and women are victimized on various accounts. It often blurs the contours between ‘real’ and ‘virtual’, with the after effects of online harassments peeping into women’s offline lives. In many instances, the activists in online media have faced threats of violence, and even rape and death. Often as victims of online bullying, women resort to and reclaim the power of social media by registering their protests with the screenshots of the conversation. On the other hand, digital misogyny in the form of hate speech, physical threats and obscene language have a deep impact on women, that results in self-censoring, assuming an anonymous identity or a pseudonym, or withdrawing from online domains altogether (Day, 2013). This could prove to be very triggering and distressing to an extent that they are often forced to contemplate about taking down their blogs, Twitter handles and social media profiles. Many were forced to retract from online platforms and refrain from engaging in any online feminist debate. The global campaign “Take Back the Tech”, begun in 2006, has been highlighting the question of violence against women perpetuated in the digital space. The campaign demands to take control of technology in the online and offline modes to advocate for ending violence against women.

Although online misogyny may be a new phenomenon, it resonates with patriarchal attempts to limit women’s public presence and stifle their voices, viewing them as inferior (Jain, 2020). The prevailing regulations have proven inadequate to cover the entire gamut of gendered violence. In order to render online spaces as a fruitful space for feminist activism, implications of such acts of violence need to be addressed. For this purpose, the cyberfeminists seek to use digital media judiciously to create online spaces that are safe and liberating (Rowe, 2008). They have tried to harness the potential of internet by taking the feminist thinking forward and creating new opportunities by offering several tips. The initiatives, awareness and other learning activities are promoted by individuals and organizations to support women’s equality and preventing the prevalence of gender stereotypes in the cyberspace (Breakthrough, 2015). Over the decades, women have developed various feminist ways of utilizing the social media to share stories, arrange meets, form coalitions and networks and so on. However, there is a need for more advanced forms of technology for creation of democratic spaces where activism and solidarity across countries can be promoted.

Conclusion

The potential of online spaces for global feminist networking offers an opportunity to be connected and be a part of the revolution, irrespective of geographical boundaries. It is a potent medium of heralding changes in the way feminist activism is propagated. While analysing the new media as building alternative spaces for opposition and resistance, the focus has been on how it de-territorializes location and permits alliances and intervention that cuts across identity and geographical demarcations. The local-global nature of these feminist movements encourage transnational exchanges while keeping in view the local contexts as intersectionality is a major factor of critical analysis. The adaptation and localization of the global feminist engagements in India has influenced and shaped ongoing activism online. Multiple modes of expression in the form of hashtags, blogs, tweets and sites have lent women a voice irrespective of the underlying socio-economic and cultural differences. Despite the limitations, the active online space serves for creating a conducive environment for feminist movement in the digital platform. There is also a blurring of traditional binaries as women and men are forming networks and calling for action against sexual violence by turning “hashtag” protests into movements on social media.

The online space, thus, provides a medium that can accommodate diverse modes of protest, ranging from performances to posting on social media and creating webpages that initiate discourses and conversations about various women's issues. It has helped in building a transnational network that augment activism from various social groups and seek justice against the patriarchal prejudices of the society. On the other hand, the digital divide becomes a significant factor which marginalizes women in terms of class, caste, sexuality and they are often held back from asserting their rights and voices. It is essential that feminist activism in online spaces becomes more diverse, inclusive, decentralised, and democratic. Although a digital divide exists as these movements are mostly restricted to the urban section of the society, this space may be used as a potential site for raising the issues of the marginalized groups who are unable to access the internet. An intersectional and transnational approach to digital activism would lead to further inquiry into socio-political frameworks aimed for collective emancipation.

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