



Review Article

Millennium women: Sexual challenges in the digital era

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Abstract

Contemporary life is rapidly becoming digitalized. Technology has percolated all spheres of human existence, blurring the dichotomy between online and off-line. Social structures and discriminations already existing in everyday lives have also spilled online. Hate, abuse, misogyny has encroached online spaces aiming to demean, hurt, and humiliate women and are a serious threat to the right of free speech. In this article, we look at how digital platforms and paradoxically helpful in generating awareness and improving participation via social media with more and more women sharing their experiences via #Testimonials (# MeToo, #NotOkay, #raped never reported, etc) and survivor selfies that go viral and generate public outcry that mobilizes socio-cultural and socio-political changes that strives to decrease the age-old gender divide.

Introduction

Digital technologies including smartphones, social networking sites, video hosting sites, online multiplayer gaming, clouds/dropbox services, blogs, wearables with activity tracking, etc have dramatically changed contemporary lifestyle and communication (Powell, 2017; Lupton, 2014).

They have a profound impact on all spheres of human behavior and existence. It has

changed the ways we communicate, form relationships, and access information (Lupton, 2014).

The government of India recognizes the need to empower Indian citizens digitally and increase digital literacy, launched the 'Digital India' campaign in 2015 which aims to increase connectivity, participation, and improved access to public services.

Digital technologies provide new forms of social connectivity for constructing self-identities outside traditional institutions (family, work, or school), create personal space with definite boundaries as well as develop their social and professional lives to gain acceptance and recognition globally

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(Oksman, 2004). Technology has become embedded in daily lives, permeating every nook and cranny increasingly blurring the dichotomies of online and offline (Jamaludin, 2011). The rapidly developing information and communication technology have brought significant economic, political, and social changes so much so that 'Life is Digital' is not a hyperbolic claim (Lupton, 2014).

Society and technology are shaped mutually by human behavior and interactions. Previously owing to the digital divide, poor access, and digital illiteracy, the internet was considered largely a masculine domain, developed for, and use by men (Levmore and Nussbaum, 2010). Due to increased awareness, affordable smart phones and data-plans, women and other marginalized groups (LGBTQ, people with disabilities, etc) are increasingly using the 'Net' to share ideas, express opinions, and create niche online presence (Green et al, 2015). With the globalization of digital communication, abuse, and harassment too has become global (Henry and Powell, 2014; Powell, 2017; Bartlett et al, 2014). Women are disproportionately high recipients of these 'E-Bile' followed by people of alternate sexuality and few men (Jane, 2014). Ninety percent of the slanderous comments, real or doctored images, and porn video content showcases verbal or physical aggression against women (Mc Glynn, 2017).

Online sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is a well defined and familiar term. It is a form of sex discrimination involving unwanted/unwelcome sexual advances, requests for sexual favor, and other conduct of verbal or physical nature that causes another person to feel offended, humiliated, fearful, or intimidated.

It comes online when it is perpetrated with the aid of digital technology like on internet sites, such as chat rooms, public forums,

social media, and online dating sites, or through private communications via mobile phone or email, including verbal and/or written comments and requests, and/ or graphic images (Sethi & Ghatak, 2018).

Dimensions of Cyber Sexual Harassment (Powell, 2017) are identified as:

1. **Gender-based harassment:** It may be verbal, visual, and textual. These are unsolicited comments or abusive remarks and pile on threats directed at victims because of their gender invoking graphic imageries of rape, violence, and abuse to stimulate fear and other negative emotions. Women, mainly college-aged girls, are ridiculed online for their sexuality and objectified (Wajcman, 2000; Hardaker, 2016). Men receive the hate for their ideas and actions, the comments generally make fun of their perceived sexuality and diminish their manliness. Most LGBTQ people are attacked because of their sexuality doesn't conform to heterosexual society rules and they are accused of being sex offenders and sexually deviant. Sexual and Hate comments falsely accusing the victim of having STDs, mental illnesses, etc flood the message boards and blog (Hardaker, 2010).
2. **Unwanted sexual attention and experiences:** Perpetrators convey sexual messages by objectifying and reducing victims to be their sex organs (often described as diseased) existing solely for the pleasure of others (Hardaker, 2010). Inappropriate comments on intimate lives and subjects, unsolicited images and videos blatantly hinting sex-related activities either online or offline (Baumgartner et al, 2010; Sarkeesian, 2012). Using camera-enabled smart phones to take photographs and videos of unsuspecting victims to share online.

Victim's contact information, social security numbers, medical conditions, and their availability for sex are advertised online rendering them vulnerable to violence by strangers beside the perpetrators (doxxing) (Henry and Powell 2016; Eckert, 2020).

3. **Sexual coercion and sextortion:**

Perpetrators pressurize victims to share nude photographs and videos then extort money with threats of sharing them with family and public, damaging reputation, employability, and increasingly exposed to sexual assault by strangers. Many people (mainly women) are victims of revenge porn by their rejected ex-partners. Fake online advertisement soliciting sex and lies about the victim's violent and masochistic sexual preferences populate the net created by often known people, ex-boyfriends, ex-husbands, coworkers, etc. Nude photos and videos, doctored images appear on dedicated porn sites in case of non cooperation (Englander, 2015; Powell 2017, 122). Several predators coerce and groom children online to produce child pornography (Beech et al, 2008).

4. **Cyberstalking:** Malicious stalkers are using sophisticated technologies to keep tabs on their victims, hacking into personal devices, cars, homes, and offices. Threatening anonymous emails and messages to victims and employers full of lies, accusing victims of misdeeds and offenses (Spitzberg, 2002; Borrajo et al, 2015; Craven et al, 2006; Fraser et al, 2010).

What is common in all is they seek to insult, humiliate, and silence victims and diminish their online participation (Powell and Henry 2016; Brody and Vangelisti, 2017). Despite the victim's efforts to remove from one site, these fester and return online like the head of Medusa in some other sites. The net provides longevity to the hate, as comments and abuse

can be retrieved online long after the victim has curtailed and censored their online activities.

The proliferation of cyber sexual harassment

India has 560 million (January 2020) active internet users and has become the leading country with 260 million people using Face book, 34 million users on Twitter, and video sharing platform Tiktok was downloaded by 466 million Indians by November 2019. Almost 400 million Indian smartphone users are on Whats App or its local language counterpart (Tech Crunch, Reuters).

Statistics show that the numbers are still increasing, with more people connecting online. Higher educated people are using more internet. Men and women differ in their internet use (Bimber, 2000), with men voraciously consuming information and women gravitating towards communication. Men are more likely to use the internet for recreation and women are rapidly catching up (Statistics Research Department, 2020).

Due to the lack of digital literacy, many are unaware of their digital rights. For them, cyberspace is a disembodied and abstract virtual space that is very different from real lives, full of fun and games (Powell 2017; Benedickt 1991).

While this may be true in some cases, the internet has its own darker aspects. Sociologists argue that rigid gender roles and stereotypes experienced during face to face communications can be changed via digital means (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Cooper, Delmonico, & Burg, 2000) but physically existing and culturally sanctioned power structures, inequalities, and domination have spilled online.

Easy accessibility, freedom, anonymity, and lack of accountability has led to increased discrimination and sexism online (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak, 2012). Inappropriate behavior has become acceptable and

naturalized in the Wild West of the Internet (Franeck 2009). Unlike contact or place-based offenses, online abuse can be perpetrated by a person occupying a different time zone with miles of distance between them and the victims (Powell 2017).

Criminals, predators, stalkers also have become ubiquitous, lurking in innocuous online spaces, and targeting unsuspecting audience (Borrajio et al, 2015; Ybarra and Mitchell, 2008). This means the technology-facilitated sexual harms perpetrated by them are undeniably substantial. The prevalence of on-line hostility is on the rise, getting uglier and filthier with time and increasingly gendered. Internet trash talk, graphic threats of rape and violence, unsolicited requisitions and pornographic images, revenge porn videos and photographs have filled online platforms (Jane, 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017; Barak, 2015).

Online misogyny, rape culture, and revenge pornography

In her series of papers, Emma A. Jane states the 'online hyperbolic Vitriol' has become a normalized, commonsensical way to communicate online. It is commonly expected by anyone who is online voluntarily and voices opinions. Gender wars are at their peak. Hegemonic masculinity is threatened by the women occupying the supposedly male spaces (Ballard and Welch, 2017); Fox and Tang 2014). It has its roots in the age-old cultural tradition that women are inferior to men. Their ideas, needs, wishes are subject to the whims of men and their existence is limited to domestic spheres, and those who overstep need to be put back into appropriate places. Men have actively created several toxic online spaces where they ridicule, abuse, and humiliate women for participating in online activities and discussions (Banet Wieser and Miltner, 2016). Men infiltrate into online forums for only women or any neutral online forums and start posting immature and inappropriate comments which are described as 'Virtual Manspreading' (Jane,

2017; Stortz 2016). Rape apologists post graphic rape and death threats (Young, 2005; Young and Whitty, 2010).

As with rape, domestic violence, and workplace sexual harassment (Mc Donald, 2016), gendered cyber-harassment is frequently trivialized as not being a big deal, mocked and sheltered by stereotypes and rape myths. The responsibility is shifted to the victim, claiming that they were attention who resand asked for it, enjoyed it, and bought victimization upon herself (Loney Howes, 2015). It is widely believed that violence is committed only by sexually deviant men and women exaggerate or make up the claims to cover their indiscretions and misdeeds (Ging and Siapera, 2018). These myths absolve perpetrators because it was online, and they didn't mean to do any harm (Lonsway et al, 2008; Dodge, 2016). Many commentators gang up on the victim thus escalating the abuse (Palermo et al, 2019).

These activities are often under reported due to shame, lack of technical expertise, unresponsive law enforcement causing the victim to stew alone. According to Citron 2014, these offenses are usually legally intractable due to their personal and idiosyncratic nature (Citron and Franks, 2014; Citron, 2014).

Sexting defined as sending sexually explicit pictures, videos, or text messages electronically has become normative behavior as foreplay for future sexual activities (Dir et al, 2013; Drouin et al, 2013; 2017; Mc Daniel, 2015; Klettke et al, 2014). While it's enjoyable consensually, it can quickly become ugly for people who assume or misperceive consent or interest in future face to face sexual interaction and can potentially lead to unwanted sexual experiences (Choi et al, 2016; Reyns et al, 2013). Sexting and sexual violence are closely related. Many women feel coerced to sext by partners who resort to manipulation and blackmail (revenge pornography) to exact

cooperation (Walker and Sleath 2017; Bartow, 2009). One study by Brodie found that participants of sexting (especially men) are more impulsive and more likely to endorse sexual violence (Brodie et al, 2019; Florimbio et al, 2019).

Psychological impacts of online hate

Human beings are vicariously used to enjoy violence and conflict in movies, television and simulated computer games, the net with their relative anonymity and impunity help users to exercise aggression online against real human beings. Vitriolic words and graphic threats have become a form of digital sadism (Sest and March, 2017) where incivility and crude remarks are a competitive game among perpetrators. They derive pleasure and gratification from the discomfort and distress of the victims (Megarry, 2014). Trollers relish the back-and-forth mockery and boast about their ability to create the most evocative venom, break taboos and elicit emotional responses from targets. This hate aims to exclude women from the production and consumption of tools, platforms, and services of digital infrastructure.

Constant remarks and threats cause the victims to experience long term emotional/ psychological trauma, symptoms of panic, anxiety, and depression, sexual problems, and attachment dysfunction primarily relationship anxiety and avoidance (Ross et al, 2019). Women report significantly low self-esteem and loss of self-confidence. For some the reactions from families and support groups based on the existing cultural myths, make it difficult to cope with the experience. There is also a constant fear of the safety of self and family (Lindsey et al, 2016).

Females facing subordination and exclusion online, tend to withdraw from online platforms or change the ways of online interaction often at the cost of their

profession. This has been termed 'Economic Vandalism' by E. A. Jane (Jane 2018). Many women report restricting online post expressing opinions, using male pseudonyms, playing male characters in games, avoiding controversial forums, and engaging the trollers to diminish the hate speech. To decrease the digital gender divide, many schools and organizations now provide sexual harassment awareness training to their members. Research indicates that such training decreases the acceptance of rape myths.

Fighting 'Fire with Fire'

Digital technologies paradoxically also provide ways to combat abuse and hate by enabling vigilantism, activism, and justice (Trottier, 2019; Fileborn, 2014). Confidential and anonymous reporting of sexual assault has empowered victims to alert authorities and take action against their assaulters. Several victims of online sexual harassment are using the technology to publicly call out the perpetrators (DIY Justice Online or Digilantism), documenting evidence captured in their smart phones and sharing their experiences as searchable # testimonials with supportive online peer community, some are resorting to making public art, blogs and websites filled with images received by them over the years (Vitis and Gilmour, 2017). Social media sites have become a forum for hashtags activism where victims- survivors, activists, advocates, etc can discuss their experiences, challenge the prevalent mindset, debate, and reframe policies. With this # going viral with multiple sharing and likes, these are also a bridge to gain the attention of the mainstream media and political groups and pressurize necessary changes in policies and laws (Henry and Powell, 2016) for faster justice (Jane Dobson, 2016).

Cyber laws in India

It has become imperative to teach women especially young girls to identify acts of

sexual harry in their nascent stage and keep evidence via screen shots and printouts that can help investigators to trace perpetrators. It's the first instinct to ignore and delete the materials but these only encourage abusers (Sethi and Ghatak, 2018). Not reacting or responding to these seems to be the first response of the victims followed by blocking and reporting abuse in the sites that are obliged to disable them within 36hours under IT rules 2011. Cybercrimes have no jurisdiction as these crimes are committed without any barriers of boundaries. So, this can be reported in any city irrespective of where the crime was committed. Police cyber cells have been established especially for Internet-related criminal activities. For those who don't wish to approach police can lodge complaints at National Commission for Women, who take it up with the police and in case of serious offenses can set up and inquiry to probe the issues. The IT Amendment Act, 2008 has established a National nodal agency called Indian Computer Emergency Response Team (CERT-IN) responsible for computer security threats that have issued guidelines on procedures, prevention, reporting, and response to cyber sexual harassment and abuse incidents. Online grievance redressal can be done using emails, filling up incident reporting forms, telephones, fax, and letters addressed to the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology.

Some of the cyber laws about sexual harassment under Indian Judiciary are:

1. Section 354A of the IPC: Under this law, people posting obscene comments on SNS are liable for punishment up to one-year imprisonment with/without fine. Unwelcome physical contact, explicit sexual overtures, showing pornography against the will and demanding sexual favors are punishable with imprisonment up to 3 years with or without fine.
2. Section 354C of the IPC: Punishment for voyeurism is described in this act with up to 3 years of imprisonment in case of the first offense and up to 7 years play in second offense. It especially describes private acts when unsuspecting women are watched, or their images/videos captured. It also includes the dissemination of consensual image to 3rd party (revenge porn). It is a criminal offense under both the IT act and IPC
3. Section 354D of the IPC: This section describes Stalking. Any man who follows a woman attempts interaction despite clear disinterest by a woman and monitors her activities via digital/electronic communications (except for detection /prevention of suspected criminal activities, reasonable under circumstances) is punishable up to three years and up to five years in subsequent offenses along with monetary fine.
4. Section 499 of the IPC: This section has provisions for Defamation. Any spoken or written word, signs, visual representation, the publication (obscene remarks, photos, or videos on social media) concerning any person that intends harm the public reputation of such person may be imprisoned for up to 2 years with or without fine or both.
5. Section 503 of the IPC: This section deals with criminal intimidation. Threats of injury to person, reputation, or property with the intent to cause alarm is punishable with a jail term of up to 2 years. Threats of grievous hurt are punishable for up to seven years.
6. Section 507 of the IPC: Any person committing the offense of criminal intimidation using anonymous communications is liable for punishment for upto two years.

7. Section 509 of the IPC: Any sexual words, sounds, gestures, exhibits (photos or videos) posted on SNS intruding upon privacy and modesty is punishable for up to 3 years with fine.
8. Section 66E and 67A of the IT Act: Publishing sexual images in print or digitally that violates the privacy of an individual is penalized with imprisonment up to 3 years and fine up to 2 lakhs under 66 E and seven years imprisonment and fines up to 10 lakhs in 67A
9. Section 67 of the IT Act: Publishing obscene material online.
10. Section 67B: Publishing Child pornography, Online Sexual Grooming of children is penalized with imprisonment from 5 to 7 years and fine up to 10 lakhs.
11. Section 292 of the IPC: Any book, paper, pamphlet, drawing, painting, or representation deemed lascivious and obscene digitally falls under this provision.

Conclusion

Online communities and social media have empowered victim-survivors, advocates, activists, etc, and enabled widespread support for feminist activism. Woman's testimonials have long served as a form of activism and justice-seeking but the online formats have enabled reclaiming several previously silent voices, increased participation, generate awareness about gender mis recognition, validation of their experiences from global network and vindication for their sufferings. These have been recognized socially and politically, necessitating measures for reporting and action against perpetrators (Powell and Henry, 2018). Laws have been modified to encompass the changing scenarios and people have been sensitized to this fundamental yet 'new' discrimination. Thus,

this widespread uproar is not merely Slacktivism (Rotman, 2011) but an all-powerful tool for activism and seeking both informal and formal justice (Powell and Henry, 2015) against the age-old gender wars, to bring forth significant sociocultural and sociopolitical changes in the modern times.

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