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## The Digital Frontier: Empowering Feminist Activism and Scholarship in India amidst Online Harassment

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### Abstract

*Digital platforms have revolutionized feminist activism and scholarship, offering unique opportunities for advocacy, community building, and education. This research investigates the critical role of digital platforms in supporting feminist scholars and activists in India, while also addressing the significant challenges of online harassment. The objectives of this paper are three fold: firstly, to explore the importance of digital platforms for feminist activism and scholarship in India, secondly, to examine the prevalence and impact of online harassment on feminist activists and thirdly, to identify strategies for coping with and mitigating online harassment to enhance resilience among activists. The study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on existing literature, detailed case studies, and secondary data from reputable online sources. The research includes an extensive review of scholarly articles, reports, and surveys, alongside analyses of prominent case studies of Indian feminist activists who have experienced online harassment.*

### Keywords

Digital feminism, Online harassment, Gender inequality, Feminist activism, India, Cyberbullying, Resilience, Social media.

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## **The Digital Frontier: Empowering Feminist Activism and Scholarship in India amidst Online Harassment**

### **1. Introduction**

The digital age has ushered new avenues for feminist activism, providing powerful tools for advocacy, mobilization, and education. Digital platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube have revolutionized the way feminist scholars and activists operate, offering unprecedented opportunities to reach a global audience, build supportive communities, and amplify marginalized voices. These platforms have democratized access to information, allowing activists to disseminate their messages widely without the need for traditional media gatekeepers.

Online spaces have become critical arenas for feminist discourse, enabling rapid mobilization around urgent issues and fostering global solidarity. Hashtags like #MeToo, #TimesUp, and #YesAllWomen have united millions of voices worldwide, highlighting the pervasive nature of gender-based violence and discrimination. These digital movements have not only raised awareness but also led to tangible changes in policies and societal attitudes. The ability to organize protests, petitions, and awareness campaigns quickly and efficiently is a significant advantage of digital platforms, making them indispensable tools for modern feminist activism.

Furthermore, digital platforms serve as rich repositories of educational resources. Feminist scholars can share articles, videos, webinars, and other materials that educate the public about gender issues. This widespread dissemination of knowledge helps to challenge stereotypes, debunk myths, and promote a more informed and equitable society. The inclusive nature of these platforms fosters a more comprehensive and intersectional feminist movement, ensuring that the voices of marginalized groups, such as women of color and LGBTQ+ individuals, are heard and valued.

However, the same platforms that facilitate feminist discourse also expose activists to significant risks, including online harassment. The anonymity provided by the internet can embolden individuals to

engage in abusive behavior that they would not exhibit in face-to-face interactions. Feminist activists, in particular, are often targeted due to their outspoken views and efforts to challenge deeply ingrained patriarchal norms. This harassment includes threats of physical and sexual violence, which can lead to severe psychological effects such as anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The prevalence of online harassment poses substantial challenges for feminist activists. The constant barrage of abuse can create a hostile environment, leading to self-censorship or withdrawal from public discourse. This silencing effect undermines the very purpose of online activism, as it prevents important voices from being heard and hinders the spread of feminist ideas. Legal frameworks and social media platform policies are often inadequate in addressing online harassment, leaving activists vulnerable and without sufficient recourse.

This paper investigates the prevalence and impact of online harassment faced by feminist activists on social media platforms. It examines the psychological and emotional toll of such harassment and explores the strategies and support systems that activists employ to cope and build resilience. By synthesizing qualitative data, case studies, and a comprehensive literature review, this research aims to provide a thorough understanding of the dual-edged nature of digital platforms for feminist activism. It offers insights into the challenges faced by activists and potential solutions for ensuring that digital spaces remain safe and empowering for those fighting for gender equality.

## **2. Objectives**

1. To explore the importance of digital platforms for feminist activism and scholarship in India.
2. To examine the prevalence and impact of online harassment on feminist activists.
3. To identify strategies for coping with and mitigating online harassment to enhance resilience among activists.

## **3. Methodology**

This study employs a qualitative approach, drawing on existing literature, detailed case studies, and secondary data from reputable

online sources. The research includes an extensive review of scholarly articles, reports, and surveys, alongside analyses of prominent case studies of Indian feminist activists who have experienced online harassment. Keywords such as "online harassment", "cyberbullying", "feminist activism", and "coping strategies" were used to gather relevant data.

#### **4. Review of Literature**

The review of literature focuses on the prevalence and effects of online harassment on feminist activists in India, examining cultural, societal, and legal aspects, as well as psychological impacts and coping mechanisms. This review is divided into following three parts:

##### **4.1 Effects of Online Harassment**

Banerjee (2020) provides an overview of gendered online harassment in India, highlighting the unique challenges faced by women and feminist activists. Banerjee argues that cultural and societal norms significantly contribute to the prevalence of such harassment. Vishwanath (2017) offers statistical data on the prevalence of online harassment in India, noting that women activists are particularly vulnerable to severe forms of online abuse. This study underscores the systemic nature of the problem and its deep roots in societal attitudes toward gender.

Basu (2016) explores the impact of the digital divide on feminist activism in India, emphasizing how limited access to technology exacerbates the challenges faced by activists. Basu highlights that despite these challenges, digital platforms remain crucial for spreading feminist ideas and mobilizing support. Ghosh (2019) examines the legal frameworks in India addressing online harassment, highlighting gaps and suggesting improvements to better protect activists. This study reveals the inadequacies of current laws and the need for comprehensive legal reforms to safeguard online spaces.

Chakravarty (2021) discusses the prevalence and types of online harassment faced by women in India, with a focus on feminist activists. Chakravarty's work highlights the intersection of gender and digital abuse, providing insights into the unique vulnerabilities of women activists. Sahni and Vashishtha (2018) analyze the psychological effects of online harassment on women in India, emphasizing the mental health challenges faced by activists. Their study shows that

online harassment can lead to significant emotional distress, affecting activists' well-being and their ability to continue their work.

Rao (2019) explores how social media platforms facilitate gendered abuse and the inadequacies in their response mechanisms. Rao argues that platforms need to take greater responsibility for moderating content and protecting users from harassment. Patel (2020) examines the strategies used by feminist activists in India to cope with online harassment and their effectiveness. Patel identifies various coping mechanisms, including seeking support from peers and using digital security tools, but also highlights the need for more robust institutional support.

Sen (2021) discusses how online harassment affects the broader feminist movement in India, including its impact on activism and advocacy. Sen points out that sustained harassment can demoralize activists and fragment movements, making it harder to achieve their goals. Roy (2018) analyzes the role of civil society organizations in supporting victims of online harassment and advocating for policy changes. Roy's work underscores the importance of collective action and community support in combating online abuse.

#### **4.2 Case Studies of Online Harassment**

Journalist and activist Gauri Lankesh was a vocal critic of right-wing extremism and patriarchal structures in India. She faced extensive online harassment, including threats of violence, which culminated in her assassination in 2017 (The Hindu, 2017). Singer and activist Chinmayi Sripaada has been a prominent voice in the #MeToo movement in India. She has faced severe online harassment, including threats and character assassination, for her advocacy against sexual harassment (Indian Express, 2018).

Student activist Gurmehar Kaur faced a massive online trolling campaign after her peaceful protest against campus violence went viral. She received death threats and rape threats, which led to her withdrawing from the public campaign (BBC News, 2017). Actress and activist Swara Bhaskar has faced continuous online harassment due to her outspoken feminist views and criticism of the government. She has been targeted with sexist and violent threats (Hindustan Times, 2020).

Investigative journalist Rana Ayyub, known for her critical reporting on religious and political issues, has faced severe online harassment, including doxxing and death threats (The Wire, 2018).

Feminist activist Kavita Krishna has been targeted with online abuse for her activism and criticism of patriarchal practices. She has received threats of rape and violence (Firstpost, 2017).

Journalist Sagarika Ghose has faced extensive online trolling and abuse for her feminist views and critiques of political leaders (Outlook India, 2016). Poet and activist Aranya Johar has used social media to speak out against gender discrimination and violence. She has faced online harassment, including threats and derogatory comments (Times of India, 2019).

Singer and activist Sona Mohapatra has been a vocal critic of misogyny in the music industry. She has faced online harassment and threats for her outspoken views (HuffPost India, 2019). Trisha Shetty, founder of the NGO SheSays, has faced online abuse for her work in advocating for gender equality and fighting against sexual violence (Quartz India, 2018).

### **4.3 Psychological Analysis of Online Harassers**

Understanding the psychological profile and motivations of online harassers targeting feminist activists is crucial for developing effective interventions. Research suggests that online harassers often exhibit certain psychological traits and motivations, which are summarized below:

**Anonymity and Disinhibition:** The anonymity provided by the internet reduces the social consequences of abusive behavior, leading to a phenomenon known as the "online disinhibition effect" (Suler, 2004). This anonymity allows individuals to engage in behavior they would not exhibit in face-to-face interactions. **Hostility and Aggression:** Online harassers often display high levels of hostility and aggression. A study by Buckels, Trapnell, and Paulhus (2014) found that individuals who engage in online trolling score higher on measures of psychopathy, sadism, and Machiavellianism.

**Gender Norms and Patriarchy:** In the context of India, deeply ingrained patriarchal norms and gender biases contribute to the targeting of feminist activists. Harassers often feel threatened by women challenging traditional gender roles and use harassment as a means to reinforce these norms (Banerjee, 2020). **Perceived Threat to Identity:** Feminist activism is perceived as a threat to the social and cultural identities of some individuals, leading them to react defensively and aggressively. This is particularly pronounced in societies with rigid gender norms (Vishwanath, 2017).

Group Dynamics and Mob Behavior: Online harassment often involves group dynamics, where individuals participate in coordinated attacks as part of a larger mob. This behavior is reinforced by groupthink and the desire for social approval within the group (Phillips, 2015). Sense of Power and Control: Engaging in online harassment can provide harassers with a sense of power and control, especially if they perceive themselves as otherwise powerless or marginalized in their offline lives (Citron, 2014).

## 5. Analysis

The analysis synthesizes the data collected from literature and case studies to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue. Key findings include:

- ▶ **Prevalence** : A significant proportion of feminist activists in India report experiencing online harassment, with threats of physical and sexual violence being the most common forms. According to Vishwanath (2017), 63% of women activists in India have experienced online harassment.
- ▶ **Psychological Impact** : Online harassment has severe psychological effects, including anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Many activists report feeling unsafe and considering withdrawing from online activism. Banerjee (2020) found that 70% of harassment victims reported significant emotional or psychological distress.
- ▶ **Coping Strategies** : Activists employ various strategies to cope with online harassment, including blocking or reporting harassers, seeking support from friends and family, and using digital security measures. However, the effectiveness of these strategies varies, and many activists feel that more institutional support is needed.

## 6. Discussions and Inferences

Several insights emerge from the above analysis. These are summarized as under:

- ▶ **Platform Accountability** : Social media platforms must take greater responsibility for moderating content and protecting users from harassment. Improved reporting mechanisms and stricter enforcement of anti-harassment policies are essential. Ghosh (2019) suggests that legal reforms are necessary to hold platforms accountable for enabling abusive behavior.

- ▶ **Legal Protections** : Existing legal frameworks in India are often inadequate in addressing online harassment. Advocacy for stronger legal protections and more effective law enforcement responses is crucial. Ghosh (2019) highlights the need for laws that specifically address online harassment and cyberstalking.
- ▶ **Support Networks** : Building robust support networks, both online and offline, can help activists cope with the psychological toll of harassment. Peer support groups, mental health resources, and professional counseling can provide essential support. Basu (2016) emphasizes the importance of solidarity and collective action among activists to combat online harassment.
- ▶ **Public Awareness** : Raising public awareness about the prevalence and impact of online harassment can foster a more supportive and informed community. Educational campaigns and media coverage can play a significant role in changing societal attitudes. Banerjee (2020) suggests that increasing awareness of the issue can lead to greater empathy and support for victims.

## 7. Conclusion

Digital platforms have become indispensable tools for feminist scholars and activists in India, offering unparalleled opportunities for advocacy, community building, and education. However, these platforms also expose them to significant risks, primarily in the form of online bullying and harassment. These challenges create substantial hurdles, affecting the mental health of activists, leading to self-censorship, and undermining the efficacy of feminist movements. Addressing these issues requires a multifaceted approach, including stronger legal protections, better platform policies, and robust support networks to ensure that digital spaces remain safe and empowering for those fighting for gender equality.

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