

Cyber Bullying and Gender Inequity in Digital Spaces

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“With great power comes great responsibilities”

When we discuss about Social media platforms, the above dialogue from the Spiderman trilogy is most relevant. Nowadays social media can turn simple ideas and concepts into infectious ideas that are impossible to get out of your head. The world has changed forever as the result of a single tweet, highlighting the power of social media. However, there are downsides to this. Most notable is Cyberbullying.

However, bullying has been a deep rooted problem since the beginning of civilization. The form of bullying hasn't changed over those years. It is always the powerful ones who prey upon the weak, but it has been altered with the rise of technology. Technology is a double-edged sword, where the users are continuously balancing between the risks and opportunities it offers. Unlike any other generation in the history of humankind, we have the availability to be connected 24/7 and communicate independent of time or location. It's a bit of a paradox. What's supposed to connect people and make them more "social," disconnects them from real people - and connects them to real virtual people. On one side, the Internet has made the world a much smaller place full of opportunities; on the other side, it has exposed vulnerable people to a deep dark world of web and bullying while sitting safely in the vicinity of their homes. This shift from face-to-face communication to online communication has created many unique and potentially harmful dynamics for social relationships.

Social media can help people access information, connect with family and friends, and provide a means of communication for those who feel isolated or disconnected in the offline world. However, social media can also provide a platform for unfortunate interactions with others, such as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is the umbrella term for all forms of online abuse and mistreatment demonstrated through mentions of mean comments, negative rumours, persistent poking, sending sexually suggestive messages, putting indecent pictures of the person online amongst other things. Victims of cyberbullying are bullying from the

moment they wake up and check their phone, or laptop to the time they go to bed and shut of their devices. Ruairi Quinn, TD, said, “Things were bad enough when bullying was confined to the playground, but now it can follow you home in your pocket.”

India has over 500 million internet users and is estimated to reach over 800 million by 2022. Being the second-largest populous country in the world, and one that is steadily gaining more access to the internet - the increase in the number of digital users is understandable. Teens, pre-teens, and young adults have been reported to constitute the largest demographic of social media users in our country. But most netizens are unaware of dangers that are looming about the digital world until they are a victim of it. Due to increasing access to technology, cheaper internet plans, and politicians vehemently pursuing and pushing the dream of “Digital India,” the risk of cyberbullying is alarming and its assessment and prevention become even more urgent. Research conducted by Symantec, the American software company, reveals that nearly 8 out of 10 individuals are subject to the different types of cyber bullying in India. Out of these around 63% faced online abuses and insults, and 59% were subject to false rumors and gossips for degrading their image. The same study ranks India as the country facing the highest cyber bullying in the Asia Pacific region, more than Australia and Japan.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) in its crime database for the year 2017 has for the first time included cyber stalking and cyber bullying of women under the cyber crimes against women. 555 cases of cyber stalking and cyber bullying of women have been registered across India in the year 2017, with Maharashtra registering the most number of cases — 301 — among the states. Andhra Pradesh, with 48 cases, is at second position and 27 cases were reported from Telangana and Haryana each, putting them at third position. Over, a total of 4,242 incidents of cyber crimes against women were recorded in India in 2017. Brunel University and Goldsmiths, University of London found that men were more likely than women to use Facebook with antisocial motives. Dataveillance and other forms of mass surveillance create insecurities that many women don't know of or recognize. It's no surprise then that more women as opposed to men are the targets of such trolling. This can have a devastating effect for many women across the country as well as the world. The result of cyberbullying experience, long or short term could also result in anxiety, depression, and

fear which can cause strained relationships, extreme embarrassment, drug use and has even led to suicide.

Most people consider the internet as a platform which provides them anonymity and use it to victimize others. It's extremely easy to hide your identity on the internet and express your feelings without the fear of being caught. Whether celebrities, politicians or regular citizens, online trolls target everyone equally. Barkha Dut is one of the most trolled Indian women on the internet and is constantly abused and harassed for her comments on social media platforms. Sona Mohapatra, a well-known singer was also trolled online for criticising Bollywood actor Salman Khan's comments on "feeling like a raped woman" during the shooting of his film, *Sultan*. Trolls did not even spare Anushka Sharma, Bollywood actress for being accountable for Virat Kohli's bad performance on the cricket field. One of the most well known victim is Anushka Sharma who was termed as (and still is!) "unlucky" for husband, Kohli's cricketing career. Every time the cricketer failed to rise to the expectations of cricket fans, Anushka Sharma would get openly harassed, belittled, made memes on and blatantly blamed. What's interesting is that the cricketer's victories were his, but his failures were a result of his wife.

Women are bullied more than men online, which clearly reflects the social mindsets and prejudices still existing in India. Social media is a place where offline gender hierarchies are increasingly reproduced, and where women and other marginalized genders face disproportionate abuse. Control of women's sexuality lies at the heart of social morality, family values and community honour. Girls are controlled not only by just parents, but community leaders who ban phones, brothers who are tasked with keeping tabs on their sisters' phone, and hidden boyfriends- who secretly give their girlfriends phones and then monitor and surveil them via the phones. Women are trapped in a cycle of silence, scared that if anything happens to them online, they will be blamed for it, married off and their education stopped. Girls and women lose their rights to education, work and mobility if intimate images of them start circulating online, often without their knowledge or consent. They are pulled out of schools and colleges and stopped from working. Tech-enabled violence often combines with offline violence, amplifying harm. What women consider unwanted harassment, men sees as 'innocent fun': calls from unknown numbers proposing marriage, continuous love messages and requests for pictures. Families discourage filling formal complaints,

seeing the ‘case’ as a cause for shame. Even police officers consider it ‘immodest’ and ‘shameful’ for women to be vocal online. They blame women for mass attacks they face online. Vocal women are condemned as ‘a disgrace to the family’, and the solution proposed to online abuse is self-censorship.

The time has come for us to take online violence and abuse against women seriously. Even though violence in most of the cases takes place on WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter etc., the onus of staying safe in digital spaces is often on users. Does this mean that these online platforms are not accountable to their users? What role do mobile service providers have to play in this? While we don’t want digital platforms to control speech, what we do want is empathy, responsiveness, transparency and accountability. We must collectively hold social media platforms accountable for enforcing their own community standards. Information about existing mechanisms of reporting and recourse to justice have to be made more accessible and they have to be duly implemented. Digital rights are an integral aspect of human rights, but laws and policies are often based on ‘protection’ rather than on affirming rights. We don’t need laws and policies based on morality; we need laws that recognize the concrete harms that people experience on a daily basis. We need policies that affirm consent. We need policies that recognize hate speech and deal with it, while upholding free speech and expression, including sexual expression. Anna Maria Chavez said, “Unless and until our society recognizes cyber bullying for what it is, the suffering of thousands of silent victims will continue.”

As online spaces are increasingly becoming hostile towards women, it is not an overstatement to say that the need of the hour is to tackle the gendered aspect of this abuse and uphold the rights of women in India. Social media platforms are not fundamentally dangerous – they are pleasurable. Social media platforms are channels for friendships and relationships and romance and fun; they bring us joy, pleasure, freedom and mobility. We need to do what it takes to ensure that women, girls, and marginalized genders can inhabit digital spaces freely – and fearlessly. That everyone is free to be mobile.

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