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Reclaiming expression

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Social media companies generate huge profits from our expression and interaction, including those of feminists and LGBTIQ individuals or organisations. Feminists and LGBTIQ persons, in varying degrees of contribution and effort, intervene in sexist, misogynist and heteronormative discourse online by engaging in Twitter conversations, producing counter-narratives on YouTube, sharing an article on abortion rights, etc. To some extent, these efforts have resulted in robust online conversations and networks of like-minded people. However, the authors and advocates of these contents are also often devalued and face harassment, trolls and threats on social media platforms and other digital communications channel.

These incidents of online harassment share the same logic of offline gender-based violence (GBV) like cat calling, sexual harassment, etc. They are seen by the male perpetrators as a form of punishment, as a consequence of transgression and behaving outside of socially determined binary gender roles, of going against the social expectations and accepted norms of some men. The violence inflicted is never merely physical but motivated by a power structure that seeks to control and silence women and LGBTIQ persons, and to keep these voices outside the social media (perceived) public sphere.

However, instances of gendered harassment and violence online have also prompted more women, queers and allies, in all their diversity, to speak up, to exchange stories, to show support and solidarity, and to resist the trivialisation and normalisation of online GBV. The following are initiatives and efforts in our collective resistance and in reclaiming our expression online:

Building solidarity

Sharing stories is a form of feminist activism because it creates a network of experiences between women and acts as a storytelling process that others can learn from if they so choose.

Consciousness raising, thus, provides an alternative to the dominant public sphere.

Digital technology has enabled the continuation of such consciousness-raising spaces into online spaces. Most of the respondents [of in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted with 13 respondents from India] explain that sharing narratives of personal experience is an important feminist practice in online spaces, especially on social media. Archana talks about how the inbox of their page “Being Feminist” often receives messages from users around the world who request the administrators to share their stories on the page. She explains that such narratives also prompt important discussions on gendered violence and acts of resistance.

Meera talks about how online spaces, especially blogs or Twitter, afford people the option of anonymity. This allows them to talk about issues that might be considered sensitive, or even dangerous, in face-to-face conversation and facilitates the sharing of personal narratives without censure or judgment. The ability to control information about one’s self, by revealing certain aspects while withholding others, also allows for radical acts of identity construction.

> Extracted from: Sujatha Subramanian, “From the Streets to the Web: Looking at Feminist Activism on Social Media”, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. L, No. 17, 2015. https://www.genderit.org/sites/default/files/from_the_streets_to_the_web_1.pdf

Rejecting victimhood

In 2018, the Dalit-Bahujan women in Kerala, India led a speak-out movement, mainly through Facebook, to narrativise the experiences of sexual harassment that these women face.

The campaign began as one involving revelations on Facebook about sexual harassment incidents that happened in progressive circles and activist spaces. Dalit-Bahujan women came out to speak using various methods such as detailed Facebook statuses, live video and so on, and they shared detailed narrations and evidence about the instances of molestation along with the identity of the predators. Mainstream media further covered this movement and this received a lot of attention amongst the politically sensitive public. This moment of revelation on social media was termed as a second #MeToo campaign; however, it was different from that. The Indian academic #MeToo campaign revealed the names of predators and subsequently the details of the incident in public, while not revealing the identity of the survivors.

One of the important aspects of this campaign is that these women assert themselves as survivors because victimisation is a normalised thing under due process. Generally, in India, women suffering from sexual harassment face long-term trauma since justice is normally delayed, or never provided in the case of Dalit-Bahujan women. These women expressed that the brief and momentary support they received from social media was quite relevant, and also functioned as a relief to overcome the stressful time that followed the act of revelation. It can be read as a form of social justice provided by a sensitive public through Facebook, though it is relative.

> Extracted from: Praveena Thaali, "Rejecting victimhood: The online speak-out campaign in Kerala against harassment", *GenderIT.org*, 9 October 2018. https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/rejecting-victimhood-online-speak-out-campaign-kerala-against-harassment

Take Back The Tech!

Take Back the Tech! is a collaborative campaign to reclaim information and communication technologies (ICTs) to end violence against women (VAW). The campaign calls on all ICT users – especially women and girls – to take control of technology and strategically use any ICT platform at hand (mobile phones, instant messengers, blogs, websites, digital cameras, email, podcasts and more) for activism against gender-based violence.

Take Back the Tech! accompanies the 16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence (25 November-10 December each year) with daily actions that explore different aspects of violence against women and ICT tools.

"Map it. End it. Demand change." was the core of the Take Back the Tech! campaign for 2011. Take Back the Tech! used Ushahidi to map forms of violence against women, to name, point out, show as related, and denounce – and in that way changed the mapped territory into one that respects the rights of women and children. To map violence the platform receives information sent online, through cellular phone text messages or videos from smartphones.

> Extracted from: Margarita Salas, "Women's freedom of expression in the internet", *Critically Absent: Women's rights in internet governance*, APC, 2015.

https://www.genderit.org/node/3548

Alerta Machitroll

The Alerta Machitroll project is a campaign led by a Colombian-based organisation, Fundación Karisma, to identify sexist expression by self-proclaimed macho defenders identifiable as trolls, labelled as machitrolls (macho+troll). The campaign has classified trolling into different categories: Incurable Machitroll (Machitroll Incurable), Recoverable Machitroll (Machitroll Rescatable) or Machitroll Alert (Alerta Machitroll). This initiative seeks to tackle gender-based online by articulating the idea of macho and trolling with humour as a way of communicating and promoting awareness.

Source: IFEX, “Campaign snapshot of Alerta Machitroll: Using humour to tackle gender violence online”, 9 November 2018. https://ifex.org/campaign-snapshot-of-alerta-machitroll-using-humour-to-tackle-gender-violence-online/

Reflection questions

1. Based on your observation, what values do feminist and LGBTIQ people bring to the discourse on online (public) spaces?
2. Do you think current responses by government, private corporations and policy makers on online gender-based violence (GBV) arbitrarily shut down freedom of opinion and expression? Why do you say so?
3. What strategies and approaches have worked for you during an incident of online GBV? Why do they work (or not work)? What more is needed to ensure that everyone has equal access to the right to freedom of expression?

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