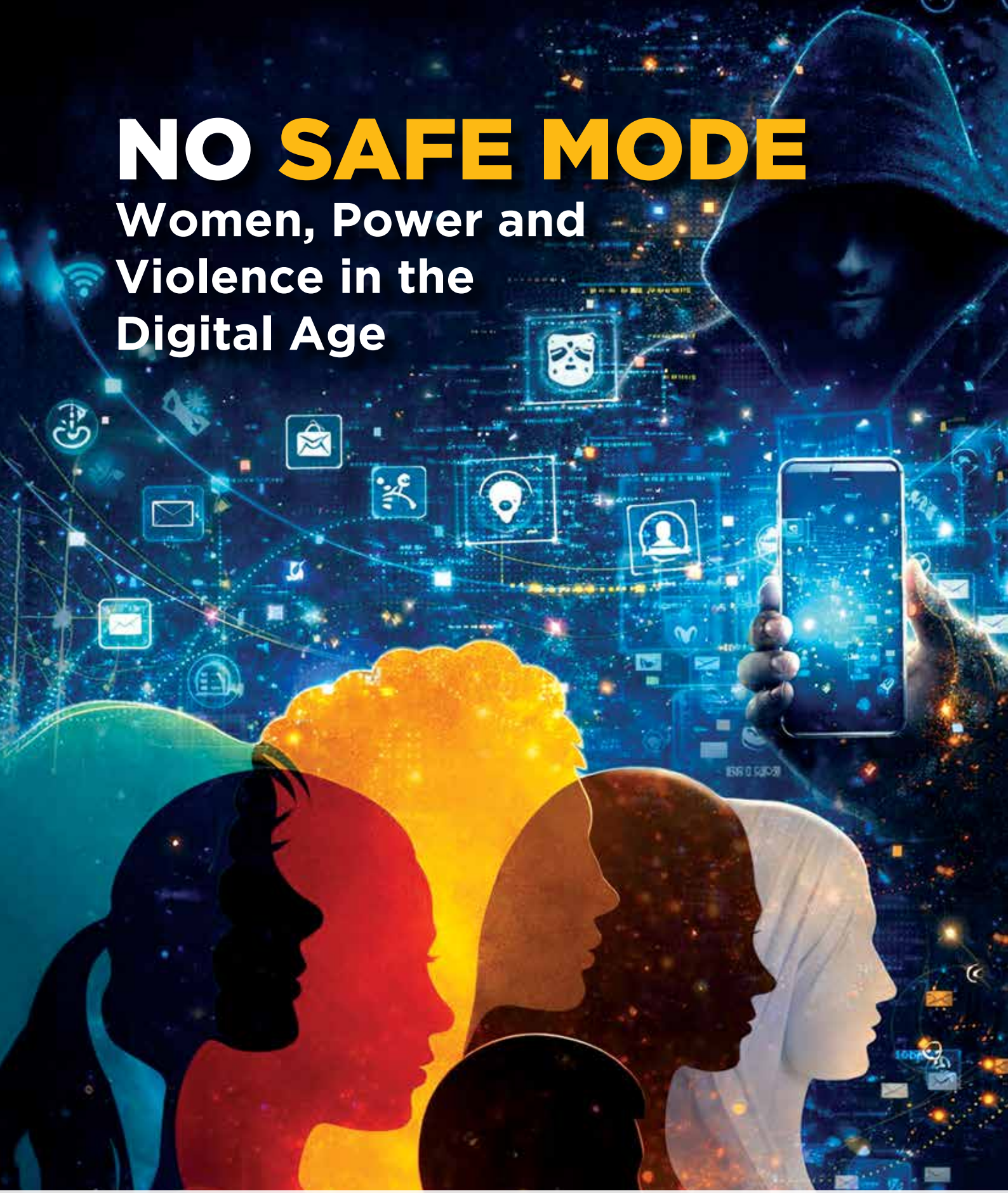
NO SAFE MODE

Women, Power and Violence in the Digital Age



laadli

Celebrate Her Life

An Initiative by Population First

A Compilation of Laadli Fellowship Articles: 2025

Supported by

UNFPA

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Foreword

If the internet were as democratic, safe and empowering as its slogans promised, this fellowship would have been unnecessary. But since the digital world has quietly become one of the most efficient factories of gendered violence ever built, it fits perfectly with the UN's 16 Days of Activism theme: UNiTE to End Digital Violence Against All Women and Girls. Online abuse today is faster than justice, wider than community support, and more persistent than any street-level harassment. It never clocks out, never tires, and rarely faces accountability. In that sense, this fellowship does not merely echo the UN theme; it lives inside it. The reporting collected here shows how digital violence is not a side effect of technology, but one of its most well-organised outcomes.

What our reporters discovered is both horrifying and darkly predictable. As Ambika Sharma and Kavita Swami show in their stories on cyberbullying, harassment has become the background noise of women's online lives. Asmita Dave captures how fear is so deeply internalised that women censor themselves even before logging in. Think twice. Speak softly. Post less. Apologise often. This is not caution; it is conditioning. Digital spaces have mastered the art of silencing without bans and policing without laws, pushing women into shrinking their presence voluntarily.

When silence alone is not enough, technology adds spectacle. Aiswarya Parija's reporting on AI misuse and deepfakes reads like dystopian fiction, except the damage is painfully real. Abdul Muqeet shows how a single image can be transformed into lifelong sexual defamation within minutes. No physical proximity, no confrontation, no evidence required. Violence has gone contactless, scalable and permanent. The screen has replaced the street, and the harm travels faster than any survivor can outrun.

Digital violence also functions as political strategy. As Akshita Prasad documents in her examination of Hindutva-led online abuse, and as Abdul Muqeet shows in cases targeting Dalit and Muslim women, the internet has become a highly efficient tool for disciplining dissent. These attacks are not spontaneous anger; they are organised performances of power. Less debate, more digital intimidation. Less disagreement, more erasure. The aim is simple: make speaking expensive, exhausting and dangerous.

For women who already occupy public space, the punishment is sharper. Journalists, activists, artists and celebrities are turned into warning signs. As Asmita Dave and Abdul Muqeet show, threats are carefully designed to suppress leadership and ambition. Visibility becomes a risk factor. Authority becomes a liability. Courage is met with cruelty. Digital violence here is not about offence; it is about control.

Even the much-celebrated digital economy reveals its own version of injustice. Abdul Muqeet, Ambika Sharma and Aashika Shivangi Singh expose how platforms thrive on women's invisible and insecure labour. Underpaid, overworked and emotionally depleted, women keep the digital world functioning while being denied safety, dignity and stability. It is exploitation with a modern logo: innovation for corporations, precarity for women.

And for those who live at the intersections of caste, sexuality, class and gender, the harm becomes layered and relentless. Queer communities face outing and erasure. Dalit women endure caste violence that never fades from memory because it never disappears from the internet. AI systems quietly reproduce society's prejudices and automate discrimination. Add to this the psychological cost—anxiety, burnout, hypervigilance, isolation—and it becomes clear that digital violence is not just online harm; it is a full-body, full-life experience.

Taken together, these stories show why the call to 'UNiTE to End Digital Violence Against All Women and Girls' is not symbolic but urgent. Digital violence today is structural, gendered and political. It punishes women for being visible, vocal, ambitious and alive. This fellowship – which was in many ways our response to what has repeatedly been flagged as 'one of the fastest-growing threats' to women and girls today - stands as both documentation and resistance: a reminder that naming this violence is the first step towards dismantling a digital world that has grown far too comfortable with making women pay the price for simply existing online.

Yogesh Pawar
Programme Director
Population First

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Introduction

Imagine believing that a country's biggest challenge isn't the *number* of people, but how it *values* half of them. That's the powerful idea that sparked **Population First**.

Back in 2002, the legendary Bobby Sista—a true trailblazer in Indian advertising—decided to turn this belief into action. She saw how media and stories shape our world, and she wondered: what if we used that power not to sell products, but to build a fairer, healthier society? So, she founded Population First as an NGO with a clear mission: to empower women, champion gender equality, and tackle health issues by first changing minds.

You see, the problems we often hear about—child marriage, maternal mortality, worryingly skewed sex ratios—aren't just numbers on a chart. Population First recognized they are symptoms of something deeper: a society that, consciously or not, undervalues daughters. The real issue is a gendered mindset that makes discrimination seem normal and violence permissible.

So, how do you change a mindset? You start a conversation the whole country can hear.

That's where **Laadli** comes in—our beloved, flagship campaign for the girl child, born in 2005. "Laadli" means "cherished daughter," and that's exactly the feeling we wanted to cultivate. The 2001 Census had just shown us the heartbreaking reality of declining sex ratios. We knew laws were important, but laws alone can't change hearts. We had to address the quiet, everyday bias that tells a girl she is less.

We realized that if the stories and ads we see every day are steeped in stereotypes, our small messages of equality would get drowned out. We had to meet the culture where it lived: in the media.

That's why, in 2007, we started the **Laadli Media and Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity**. This wasn't just about giving out trophies; it was the launch of a full-hearted advocacy movement to partner with the very storytellers who shape our perceptions.

Our Laadli Media Advocacy works in three, heartfelt ways:

1. **We equip and inspire.** We roll up our sleeves with journalists, scriptwriters, and ad creators. Through workshops and unconventional training (we love using theatre!), we help them see their own power to tell stories that are fair, inclusive, and truly human.
2. **We build a chorus, not a solo.** Change doesn›t happen alone. We actively seek out allies—influential voices, major media houses, creative agencies—and bring them into the fold. Together, we create a supportive ecosystem where gender-sensitive work is celebrated and amplified.
3. **We celebrate the champions.** Shine a light, and others will follow. Our awards are a giant «thank you» to the brave, creative professionals who are already getting it right. By honoring them, we show everyone what's possible.

And the beautiful thing? This ripple effect has spread. Because of persistent, friendly advocacy, you'll now find categories for gender sensitivity in big industry awards like the Abbys and the Screen Writers Association Awards. The conversation is going mainstream.

At its heart, Population First and Laadli are about a simple, radical idea: that when we cherish our daughters and challenge old biases, we don't just uplift women—we heal our entire community. And we're inviting everyone, especially our storytellers, to help write that new story.

Overview of the Fellowship for 2025

For the 2025 edition of the Laadli Media Fellowship, we received 37 applications. After a thorough review, 15 talented individuals from nine states were selected. The 30 stories, which examined Technology-Enabled Gender-Based Violence and its intersectional dimensions, came from Gujarat, Uttar Pradesh, Kerala, Rajasthan, Tamil Nadu, Telangana, Delhi, Maharashtra, and Odisha.

The stories reflected a diverse mix of perspectives, emerging from urban and rural areas as well as mofussil interiors, and addressed issues across the gender spectrum.

The stories were published in six languages across a wide range of newsrooms, including *NavGujarat Samay, TwoCircles.net, Youth Ki Awaaz, The Mooknayak, The New Indian Express, Dainik Bhaskar, Feminism in India (Hindi), Feminism in India, The Hindu, SheThePeople.TV, Keraleeyam, Odisha Patrika, ETV Bharat,* and *The Wire Urdu*.

The work of 12 fellows was published on digital portals (24 stories), while six stories by three fellows were published in newspapers. Of these, four stories were published across both platforms—digital portals and newspapers.

The language-wise break-up of the fellows awarded is as follows:

English – 8

English & Hindi - 2

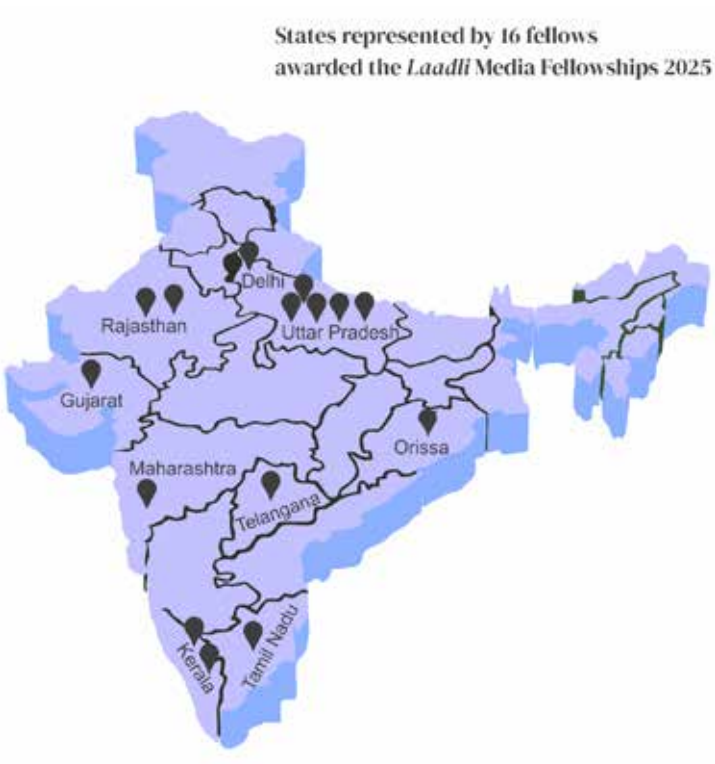
Hindi – 1

Odia – 1

Malayalam – 1

Gujarati -1

Urdu - 1



I. Cyberbullying, Trolling & Everyday Online Harassment

What began as a revolutionary space of liberation—a digital town square where women and girls could finally express themselves freely, forge connections, and claim their voice in the public sphere—is undergoing a sinister transformation. This arena of potential is steadily, systematically, being turned into a site of surveillance, intimidation, and erasure.

A pervasive, toxic normalization has taken hold. Lewd comments, coordinated stalking, violent threats, and orchestrated character assassination are no longer shocking exceptions; they are the grim, routine background noise of many women's online experiences. This constant ambient abuse has engineered a fundamental shift: fear is now a built-in feature of women's digital lives.

The consequences are deeply personal and professionally stifling. Every post is pre-weighed for potential backlash. Every photo is debated before it's even shared, scrutinized through the lens of anticipated harassment. Opinions are softened, qualifications are over-added, and truths are often swallowed whole. A brutal calculus emerges: the price of visibility is harassment; the cost of speaking is humiliation.

Faced with this relentless hostility, the choice forced upon many women is a tragic one: silence over safety, withdrawal over risk, invisibility over attack. The very tools designed for curating one's experience—blocking, muting, reporting, deleting—are no longer mere preferences. They have become daily, exhausting acts of digital survival.

It is critical to name this accurately. This is not mere "trolling" or harmless rough-and-tumble debate. This is a systematic form of gendered social control. Its function is clear: to police the boundaries of public discourse, to punish female presence and audibility, and to gradually push women out of digital public spaces. The goal is to shrink their fundamental right—to exist, to speak, and to be seen online without fear.

This silent, forced exodus impoverishes our collective dialogue, diminishes our culture, and reinforces archaic patterns of suppression in a new domain. Protecting the digital frontier as a space for all is not just a matter of platform policy, but of upholding basic democratic participation and human dignity in the 21st century.

This note serves as both a recognition of this reality and a call to consciously reject this normalized hostility. It urges us to acknowledge the chilling effect, to support those targeted, and to insist that digital spaces must be realms of expression, not erasure.

II. AI, Deepfakes & Technology-Enabled Sexual Violence

The very technologies we once celebrated as the pinnacle of human creativity—designed to illuminate, to empower, and to expand what is possible—have been brutally turned against us, repurposed from tools of liberation into engines of erasure and abuse. In the shadow of this profound betrayal, artificial intelligence and deepfake capabilities now carve out a terrifying new frontier of sexual violence, a digital realm where a woman's body, her face, and her dignity can be effortlessly stolen, reconstructed, and weaponized without her ever knowing. With chilling precision and in mere seconds, a cherished

photograph can be stripped of its truth and twisted into pornography, used as blackmail, or circulated as a sentence of public and psychological ruin.

This violation does not fade. Unlike physical acts, which remain bound to time and place, digital harm metastasizes endlessly, replicating across servers and screens, haunting survivors long after the original violation. These fabricated images do not merely misrepresent; they manufacture shame, seed unfounded suspicion, and compel a paralysing silence. Careers fracture under the weight of lies, relationships splinter from whispered doubts, and women are pushed into isolation—forced to choose between visibility and safety, participation and protection, voice and survival.

This is sexual violence without touch, a crime committed from any distance, a trauma with no borders. Its speed is instantaneous, its reach infinite, and its psychological architecture meticulously crafted to devastate. In its borderless, scalable, and ruthlessly efficient form, it stands as one of the most dangerous and insidious expressions of gendered violence in the digital era—a clear assault not only on individual lives, but on the very idea of truth, autonomy, and the right to exist in the world without being digitally unmade.

III. Political, Ideological & Intersectional Digital Violence

The digital sphere, once hailed as a great equalizer for civic discourse, has been weaponized into a ruthless political tool—one designed not merely to intimidate women, but to systematically erase them from the public, democratic arena. For women who dare to speak on issues of politics, rights, or justice, their entry into the conversation is met with a calculated storm of abuse. This violence is deeply gendered and viciously sexualized, but it is also precisely sharpened by the fault lines of caste, religion, and identity, transforming online platforms into personalized theaters of persecution. A Dalit woman journalist is bombarded with casteist slurs meant to reinforce social hierarchy; a Muslim woman activist is targeted with orchestrated communal hatred; a queer woman's voice is drowned out by threats of forced exposure; and any dissenting voice is branded "anti-national" in campaigns that conflate critique with treason.

These are not random, spontaneous outbursts of anger. They are organized, often state-aligned or politically backed campaigns, engineered with the cold precision of a political strategy. Their objective is clear: to discipline, to discredit, and ultimately, to silence. By turning a woman's very identity—her caste, her faith, her sexuality—into the primary site of assault, digital platforms pervert the promise of connection into an engine of isolation. The brutal, echoing message is this: true power belongs to men, and the public square, digital or physical, is not yours to claim.

This orchestrated erasure functions as a form of crowd-sourced patriarchy, leveraging the scale of the internet to enforce old-world exclusions. It inflicts a psychological toll so severe that it forces women into self-censorship or complete withdrawal, effectively purging diverse perspectives from democratic dialogue. The result is a chilling contraction of the public sphere itself, a space diminished and made less representative by the very violence that claims to defend tradition or national pride. In this way, digital violence against women is more than a social ill; it is a direct attack on the pluralistic foundations of democracy itself.

IV. Digital Violence Against Women in Public Life: Journalists, Activists, Artists & Celebrities

For women who dare to be visible—who step into the light of public life to lead, to create, or to challenge—the digital world has transformed from a platform into a punishing battlefield. Whether they are journalists exposing corruption, activists demanding justice, artists voicing dissent, or celebrities asserting their autonomy, their presence is met not with debate, but with a deluge of sexualized threats, graphic abuse, and orchestrated intimidation. This is not mere noise; it is a relentless campaign designed to remind them, in the most violent terms imaginable, of a "place" they are supposed to occupy—one of silence and subordination.

The weapons in this campaign are chillingly specific: rape threats, death threats, coordinated character assassination, and the malicious exposure of private details, known as doxxing. These are not spontaneous or random acts of online cruelty. They are calculated, strategic instruments of silencing. Their purpose is stark and brutally efficient: to exhaust their resolve, to shatter their sense of safety, and ultimately, to frighten them into retreat. Each vicious comment, each flooded inbox, each leaked address serves as a grim warning: that leadership carries a price, that using your voice invites violence, and that visibility itself is an act that will be punished.

In this inverted reality, the very digital platforms built for connection and expression become tools to police ambition and crush courage. They are weaponized to turn public women—who should be celebrated as role models—into perpetual targets. This is how patriarchal power is enforced and reclaimed in the digital age: not through the merit of ideas or the rigor of respectful disagreement, but through the strategic deployment of terror. It is a systematic effort not just to criticize, but to erase women from positions of influence, authority, and meaningful change, ensuring that the public square remains, in essence, a guarded space.

V. Digital Labour, Platform Exploitation & Economic Violence

The digital economy, celebrated for its disruptive innovation and borderless opportunity, operates under a profound and troubling irony. Beneath the glossy narrative of flexibility and empowerment, it is quietly replicating ancient patterns of exploitation—patterns that extract their heaviest toll from women. In the sprawling, often unseen infrastructure of the connected world, from the gig work that delivers our food to the content moderation that curates our social media feeds, women's labour forms a critical but devalued foundation. This work is frequently piecemeal, algorithmically surveilled, and psychologically taxing. It is labour defined by its invisibility: underpaid, emotionally exhausting, and rendered disposable by design.

Within this system, the traditional anchors of stable employment vanish. There is no lasting security, no collective bargaining, no dignified recognition of effort, and little institutional protection from the dual spectres of harassment and profound burnout. Even domains historically associated with women's expertise—the realms of creative expression, community management, and emotional care—are seamlessly commodified,

stripped of their intrinsic value and fed into platforms as mere data points. Yet, for all their indispensable contribution, the women performing this work remain profoundly replaceable and systematically unheard.

This is economic violence, repackaged for the digital age. Here, technology acts as both the mechanism and the mask: it orchestrates profound inequality while speaking the sleek language of innovation and autonomy. The platforms that generate immense wealth from this model do so by externalizing its true costs onto their workforce, denying the very individuals who sustain the system the basic rights, fair recognition, and fundamental safety they deserve. In the end, what is hailed as progress reveals itself as another, more efficient architecture for extraction—one that expertly harvests the labour of women while ensuring real power and ownership remain firmly, and predictably, out of their reach.

VI. Marginalised Identities, Mental Health & Structural Digital Harm

The reality of digital violence for those navigating the overlapping identities of gender, caste, sexuality, and class must be understood as structural, not episodic. For queer and trans persons, the threat of forced outing, doxxing, and sexualised abuse is a persistent assault that transcends online spaces, directly endangering their safety, reputations, and very survival. Similarly, Dalit and Adivasi women are subjected to targeted campaigns of casteist vitriol—a digital re-inscription of centuries of social humiliation, now rendered permanent and shareable across new platforms.

The architecture of the digital world itself often serves to codify and magnify these historical injustices. Artificial intelligence systems, trained on data rife with historical and social biases, do not merely reflect prejudice—they automate it, embedding systemic discrimination into processes of profiling, content moderation, and access. This creates a hostile and alienating digital ecosystem, one that was never designed with the safety and dignity of the most marginalised in mind.

The cumulative effect of this structural hostility is a profound and unrelenting psychological burden. It manifests as sustained anxiety, forced isolation, a state of constant hypervigilance, deep depression, and a corrosive erosion of self-worth. The harm does not remain confined to the screen; it permeates into physical spaces, infiltrating homes, impacting mental and physical health, and reshaping daily existence.

To frame this reality as mere "online conflict" is a profound mischaracterisation. It is, in truth, a layered and sophisticated system of social control and exclusion—one that deepens pre-existing societal inequalities. In this system, the most marginalised are made to carry the heaviest emotional and mental burden of technologies that were ostensibly built to connect, but which too often serve to isolate, punish, and erase.

About Author

Aarushee Shukla is a PhD scholar, feminist economist, and data storyteller with over six years of experience working at the intersection of gender, education, and livelihoods. She is committed to translating grassroots experiences into evidence-based policy and amplifying marginalized voices.

This was truly a transformative experience and a serendipitous one! I had been holding on to these stories for quite some time, and the Laadli Media fellowship provided a perfect opportunity to share them with the world. I have helped bring peripheral voices to the center, and I entrust the readers to engage with them.

Aashika Shivangi Singh is a Mathura-based independent journalist covering gender, caste, and culture. Her work has appeared in national and international publications. She is a Laadli Media Award recipient and a two-time Laadli Media Fellow, and is also an artist and poet.

The Laadli Media Fellowship has been a truly transforming journey for me. It pushed me to look closely at the silences surrounding gender-based violence and the many intersectionalities each story holds. It taught me how journalism gains its real strength when it carries unheard voices and foregrounds 'real' issues. This fellowship has shaped me deeply both as a writer and as a reader.

Abdul Muqeet is a Delhi-based journalist with over three years of experience reporting in Urdu, Hindi, and English. Currently with United News of India (UNI), he covers social, political, and cultural issues. He is a recipient of the Laadli Media Award (14th edition), Exchange4Media 40 Under 40 (first edition), and is an NFI Fellow and Laadli Media Fellowship 2025 Fellow.

I had the opportunity to work as a Laadli Fellow during a deeply enriching phase of my professional journey. The fellowship allowed me to engage closely with grassroots issues, sharpen my research and reporting skills and understand the lived realities of marginalized communities, particularly women and children.

Through fieldwork, documentation and interaction with diverse stakeholders, I gained valuable insights into gender justice, social accountability and ethical storytelling.

The Laadli Fellowship strengthened my commitment to responsible journalism and inclusive narratives, encouraging me to amplify unheard voices with sensitivity, accuracy and purpose.

Aiswarya Parija is a journalist with 10 years of experience reporting on human rights, development, and gender issues. She has consistently amplified marginalized voices and currently works as a Communication and Media Coordinator.

Working during the Laadli Media Fellowship was a strong learning experience for me. It helped me report on digital violence with empathy and clarity. I learned the importance of listening to survivors and questioning power. Through reporting, interactions with experts, and peer learning, I gained deeper insights into gender, technology, and rights. The fellowship also strengthened my research, storytelling, and ethical decision-making skills. Overall, it shaped my growth as a responsible journalist, and it is a huge honor to be part of this fellowship.

Akshita Prasad is a journalist covering politics, law, policy, gender, women's health, and culture, with a focus on structural inequalities and marginalised communities. Her work has appeared in national publications, and she received a Jury Appreciation Citation at the Laadli Media and Advertising Awards for Gender Sensitivity 2025.

My time as a Laadli Media Fellow was unparalleled. It was not only an opportunity to solidify my commitment to gender-sensitive reporting, but also a chance to explore the intricacies of ground reporting and produce some of my best work. From the mentorship provided to the solidarity offered by the cohort, the fellowship provided not only an opportunity to learn and challenge myself, but also the privilege of working under and alongside journalists whose commitment to gender-sensitive reporting and fact-based journalism remains steadfast despite the changing landscape of the industry.

Ambika Sharma is a freelance writer working at the intersection of gender, economics, mathematics, and media. She has contributed to independent digital platforms and currently serves as Website Head at the Women in Economics Initiative (WiE), shaping narratives on inclusivity and diversity in economics.

My Laadli Media Fellowship experience was enriching and transformative as a writer. It provided me a valuable space to engage with the issues relating to gender, media and digital spaces meaningfully and allowed me to develop relevance, clarity and depth in my writing. It also strengthened my commitment towards gender-sensitive and responsible storytelling.

Through the research,mentorship and editorial support, I learnt about different styles and approaches towards various narratives and lived experiences which have influenced society in broader contexts. For me, the fellowship was not just an opportunity to showcase my work and skills but also a learning experience where I got to learn about new aspects of social narratives and it shaped the way I think,write and engage with stories of equality,representation and experiences.

Anisha A. Mendez is a Kerala-based journalist from a coastal fishing community. Her work focuses on marginalized groups, especially coastal communities, addressing environmental justice, gender equality, and social exclusion. She is a recipient of the 14th Laadli Media and Advertising Award (2024), the Laadli Media Fellowship (2024 & 2025), and the Smitu Kothari Fellowship 2025 for Young Writers.

In the era of social media, gender-based violence is increasingly being normalised, with popular digital culture often amplifying its intensity. Through this fellowship, I have had the opportunity to critically introspect how social media platforms enable and perpetuate the bullying of women and queer communities. My research has revealed the deeply toxic, misogynistic, and queerphobic nature of many online spaces. I am grateful to Laadli for selecting me for this fellowship for the second time and for providing a platform to address gender-based violence that continues to persist often invisibly within society.

Ashna Butani is a journalist with The Hindu, covering education, health, and gender in Delhi and across North India. Previously with The Indian Express and The Quint, she received recognition at the Laadli Media Awards 2025 for her story on transgender shelter homes.

While working on my stories for the Laadli Media Fellowship, I closely observed how existing patriarchal structures adapt to technology, whether it is in the form of banned sex determination, finding a digital work around, or digital gender-based crimes going unreported due to systemic failures in addressing them.

These observations, which were guided by the Laadli team, have given me a new approach for my stories: looking at how oppressive systems adapt to changing times, only to exacerbate existing inequalities, while centering the voices of those who are impacted by it.

I hope to continue using this approach in my work in the future.

Asmita Dave is a senior journalist with over 13 years of experience, currently working as Senior Sub Editor at NavGujarat Samay. She has previously worked with BBC News Gujarati, IANS, and Divya Bhaskar, and has received the Gujarat Media Club Award and the Laadli Media Award (2017–18). She was also a UN Women fellow on the Beti Bachao Beti Padhao theme and has brief experience in PR.

Thank you for the opportunity. Working for the fellowship was like a reality check for me. In general we believe that celebrities or known people do not get affected by the trolling or threats, especially journalists and activists who are familiar with such situations. But I realised they also get affected and they also face threatening situations for their families while working for these stories.

Diya Maria George is a Chennai-based journalist covering culture, gender, LGBTQIA+ issues, public health, food, and social justice. She has received Special Jury Appreciation at the Laadli Media Awards for gender-sensitive reporting.

Thank you once again for this opportunity. It was a privilege to work on stories around gender, particularly within my own field of journalism. While researching these stories, I had to engage closely with difficult and often disturbing accounts of abuse, survival, and resilience, as well as the uneven access to support systems, especially for women and gender-diverse individuals. The process was challenging, but it also deepened my understanding of how journalism can document harm responsibly while centering dignity and lived experience.

A fellowship like Laadli plays an important role in encouraging and sustaining young journalists to pursue gender-sensitive reporting with care and rigour. I hope to continue contributing more stories that align with these values in the future.

Geetha Sunil Pillai is a seasoned journalist with 28 years of experience, leading The Mooknayak's editorial team from Udaipur. She focuses on stories of gender equality, caste discrimination, and social justice, amplifying marginalized voices with empathy and impact.

"Being selected for the Laadli Fellowship 2025 was a profound honor, especially under the theme 'UNiTE to End Digital Violence Against All Women and Girls.' It opened my eyes to how pervasive yet dismissed threats like rape, abuse, and doxxing have become in our digital world. Through this fellowship, I've collaborated with journalists, influencers, researchers and activists, particularly emerging female voices to unearth stories from India's hidden corners, igniting vital conversations and empowering us to fight back with truth and tenacity. Thank You Laadli for the wonderful opportunity."

Kavita Swami is a Rajasthan-based journalist reporting on gender, youth, culture, and social development, with a focus on women-centric and community voices. Currently with Dainik Bhaskar, she has worked across multiple editions and has experience in election research and data-driven reporting. She is a recipient of the 5th Laadli Media & Advertising Awards 2025 (Regional) and a UNFPA UNiTE Fellow on Ending Digital Violence Against Women and Girls.

During my Laadli Media Fellowship, I worked on stories around digital violence against women and I realised it's rarely 'just a message' or 'just online'. For many women, it becomes constant anxiety: being watched, followed, threatened, and made to feel unsafe even in normal daily life. Listening to their experiences closely helped me understand the issue from their point of view, and it changed the way I report more responsibly, more sensitively, and with more truth.

Dr Musheera Ashraf is a media academic and journalist with a strong grounding in journalism and mass communication. Her work and teaching interests centre on women, health, media ethics, human rights, and the representation of marginalised communities. With experience in both classroom instruction and media practice, she brings a research-oriented yet field-based approach to journalism education.

Working as a Laadli Media Fellow deepened my understanding of how gender, poverty, and power shape digital access in India. Reporting on marginalised women, I witnessed how smartphones, often celebrated as tools of empowerment, remain largely inaccessible or controlled by male family members. Women usually relied on borrowed or shared phones for essential tasks, such as education and accessing welfare, which limited their autonomy and confidence.

These stories revealed that digital exclusion is not merely about connectivity, but about ownership, agency, and social norms. The fellowship sharpened my perspective as a journalist, pushing me to look beyond policy claims and foreground lived realities where technology reflects existing inequalities rather than dissolving them.

Varsha Torgalkar is Pune based freelance journalist. She covers gender, environment, rural economy, technology and travel for many national and international publications. She is recipient of RedInk Award, IPI- ICRC award, and two times Laadli award for gender reporting.

It was an insightful experience to work with the Laadli team on two stories on Digital Violence theme under the fellowship. Pooja and Yogesh sir were always available to guide me through all hiccups I had during the investigation, writing and publishing process. Besides, the theme of the fellowship was relevant to everybody.

I am also grateful to the Mooknayak team for publishing the stories as I was struggling to find publication as a freelancer.

Priti Kharwar is currently working as a Staff Writer at Feminism in India. She holds a postgraduate degree in Psychology from Banaras Hindu University. Her areas of interest include feminism, gender, and women's issues. She enjoys reading, writing, and traveling.

The Laadli Fellowship provided financial support and recognition for my work, offering an opportunity to continue focused reporting on gender and social justice. I am proud to be a Laadli Fellow.

I.

Cyberbullying, Trolling & Everyday Online Harassment

What begins as a space of expression and connection for women and girls is steadily turning into a site of surveillance, intimidation and erasure. Routine abuse in the form of lewd comments, stalking, threats and character assassination has become so normalised online that fear is now built into women's digital lives. Every post is weighed, every photo debated, every opinion softened or swallowed. The price of visibility is harassment; the cost of speaking is humiliation. Faced with relentless hostility, many women choose silence over safety, withdrawal over risk, and invisibility over attack. Blocking, muting and deleting accounts have become acts of survival, not choice. This is not harmless "trolling" but a systematic form of gendered control, pushing women out of digital public spaces and shrinking their right to exist, speak and be seen without fear.

- *From Presence To Silence: How Cyberbullying Affects Girls In India — Ambika Sharma*
- *Stalked, doxxed': Internet turning into nightmare for Delhi women — Ashna Bhutani*
- *Survey on Digital Violence – 55% young women reduced posting, 70% women choose to block — Kavita Swami*
- *'Digital Trials' on Social Media: Women Targeted with Abuse and Online Violence — Kavita Swami*

1

From Presence To Silence: How Cyberbullying Affects Girls In India

Ambika Sharma | youthkiawaaz.com | 10th December 2025

**Names of the Interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.*

Covid-19 pandemic was one of the most transformative periods where all schools and offices went online and people started working from home in India. This time period had a huge impact on school students and corporate professionals as they had to navigate new online features and technologies to use in virtual classes and meetings. While, at first glance, the online spaces seemed to be safe for learning and collaboration, they quickly turned into platforms for cyberbullying where muting participants, removing them from calls intentionally. Sending angry reactions or derogatory messages became normalized, disrupting individual's mental, emotional and physical well-being in the most unexpected and gendered forms. Educational institutions and workplaces weren't equipped to recognize or deal with these emerging forms of digital gendered violence.

Virtual Classrooms Becoming Center of Gendered Violence:

For many young women and girls in India, the internet hasn't brought freedom of expression but instead, it has new forms of fear and terror. As classrooms have shifted to virtual spaces and relationships and friendships have moved to Instagram chats and WhatsApp class groups, young women have entered a phase where their identity, reputation and safety is shaped by digital spaces and the invisible digital gender-based violence influences their ability to voice out their opinions and their present and future lives.

Sheetal, a 17-year old girl has experienced it firsthand when some unknown virtual IDs barged into one of her virtual classes and started making derogatory, sexual comments which were targeted at the female students. As she remembers, "We were all on mute and those boys kept laughing and making comments both on chat and screens. The teacher said nothing to them. It was a complete humiliating moment for all girls, especially for me."* It shows that space meant for learning new things and developing healthy friendships became a center for degradation and humiliation for the girls and how these academic arenas can become averse and ignorant of young women's plight in online classrooms.

Gendered cyberbullying and digital violence aren't limited to only virtual classrooms. It extends further to school WhatsApp groups and Instagram pages where girls face online harassment in form of lewd remarks passed on virtual chat, circulating morphed images of girls without consent and creating several fake accounts to stalk or message girls. According to a data released by National Crime Record Bureau, cyberbullying cases of women saw a 36% rise from 542 cases to 739 cases, which reveals how prevalent cyberbullying is and the scale to which women and girls have to face every day through indecent comments and online harassment on social media and virtual messaging platforms.

As Mona, a 16-year-old girl recalls, "I remember that a WhatsApp group was created by teachers for class links and assignment purposes. One day, I had posted a query, asking for a joining link for one of my online classes. Instead of getting the link, all I got was a rampage of horrifying messages such as "Send a picture first?", "Why are you so desperate?", "Do you want attention from boys?" along with morphed photos of mine, inappropriate emojis and memes. It was extremely humiliating, embarrassing and I was completely shaken to the core by it. Ironically, nobody even stopped this."* This shows how society has normalized gendered cyberbullying and digital violence in online spaces. These student-created groups have become places where girls' expression is silenced, and their photos are sent out without consent. The actions of culprits are put off as little "pranks" or "jokes" while girls are often told to "take it lightly" or "be careful the next time" to avoid attention towards the issue.

Instead of holding perpetrators accountable, girls are pushed into self-censoring by muting themselves on virtual platforms, locking or removing social media accounts and withdrawing from online participation in chats and conversations. What might appear to many is a tiny teenage thing but in reality, it is a form of extreme digital gender-based violence which is compounded by ignorance and silence.

The Impact: Silence and Shrinking Digital Lives:

The effects of gendered digital violence go beyond one-time or temporary humiliation. For many girls and women, fear and terror become a constant part of their virtual lives. Class participation decreases as they withdraw from conversations, mute themselves and avoid responding to chat messages. Friendships and bonds become strained as they start asking themselves whom they trust or talk to and aversion to social interactions becomes normal.

*"The moment I posted something online on Instagram, I felt like everyone was judging me intentionally or planning to pass some offensive comments intentionally on me.Now,I have completely stopped posting everything due to this fear of being bullied by someone." says Sheetal**

Self-regulation through censorship has become common and more of a defense coping-mechanism which comes at the price of confidence and ability to express oneself freely. Girls have started erasing their online presence, aspects of their individual personality in order to avoid getting harassed or bullied through derogatory comments online.

Academic performance is also impacted as emotional stress and fear take dominance in one's mind and hinders one's ability to perform and concentrate properly on their studies. Over time, these memories and experiences might shape social participation, career choices and comfort with navigating digital spaces which have now become essential and a part of one's academic and professional life.

Building Inclusive and Safer Online Spaces:

Reducing cyberbullying levels and preventing digital gendered violence requires taking multiple measures:

Schools, colleges and institutions must treat cyberbullying as a serious and gendered issue. Anti-bullying policies should include cyberbullying, online stalking and offensive comments as part of bullying and digital violence. Teachers and faculty staff should be trained to recognize warning signs such as withdrawal from class participation or extreme stress and anxiety in students.

Families should move away from policing girls' chats and device usage to encouraging and supporting them towards taking action. They should document these incidents, report to cybercell authorities and educate boys and girls about bullying,consent,boundaries and respect.

Social Media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp and other virtual learning apps like Canvas, MS Teams should create protective policies against cyberbullying and regulate platforms in such a way that girls and women can navigate these platforms freely and safely.

Communities must be formed that conduct awareness sessions and workshops regarding cyberbullying and digital gender violence and support women and girls by standing with them and supporting them towards taking actions through documenting and reporting incidents.

Students must be taught that putting offensive online messages, comments or sharing images without consent is unacceptable and it is a criminal offence according to laws in India. Also, encouraging transparency, support and accountability among peers and students is key towards breaking cycles of normalized gendered cyberbullying and digital violence

The Bottomline:

In brief, virtual classrooms have shaped how girls and women navigate all kinds of comments and remarks they receive while attending classes and outside classes, on online social groups. Despite the cyberbullying faced by girls and women, they continue to still navigate these spaces by fighting against the cyberbullying being a form of digital violence through reporting the harassment, supporting their peers in their actions and keeping their confidence and online presence up and high. Institutions must implement the anti-digital violence policies and laws, platforms should regulate their spaces and create safer environments, and society must acknowledge the scale of digital gender violence and must work together towards ending gendered cyberbullying and digital violence against girls and women.

- Ambika Sharma is a Laadli Media Fellow. The opinions and views expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse the views.

Link - https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2025/12/from-presence-to-silence-how-cyberbullying-affects-girls-in-india/

2

‘Stalked, doxxed’: Internet turning into nightmare for Delhi women

Ashna Butani | The Hindu | 2nd December 2025

Every time she looked at her incessantly buzzing phone, Nafisa (name changed), 23, a college student in Delhi, found either a graphic rape threat, an Islamophobic slur, or hundreds of missed calls from unknown numbers. It was before her examination in 2023 and since all her documents were linked to the same phone number, she could not do away with it. “They said they knew where I live. I even stopped going out to the balcony,” she recalled. Two years on, she added, “I don’t ever want to go back to Delhi.”

The phone calls and text messages started after she said something that “some men did not like” on her Instagram handle, a screenshot of which was shared widely along with her phone number and photos. “There were groups of men which would specifically target Muslim women, and I became their prey. They circulated my phone number and photos with captions like ‘call her for a good time’. I received 800-1,000 calls a day,” she said.

Still reeling from the trauma, Ms. Nafisa is not alone in her struggle. From cyber stalking, doxxing (circulating private information), morphed images to rape threats and slurs, women in Delhi, particularly those from marginalised communities, said that the Internet is becoming a scarier place each day.

The concerning trend, however, is not reflected in national data.

The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data released recently for 2023 recorded only 36 cyber crimes against women, of which 28 were linked to publishing or transmission of sexually explicit material, and eight were in the category of other women-centric cyber crimes including blackmail, defamation, morphing and fake profiles.

Few cases reported

For the same year, Delhi surpassed all other metropolitan cities in terms of overall crimes against women, with 13,366 cases. The second on the list was Mumbai with 6,025 crimes recorded against women. Among the metropolitan cities, Delhi led in almost all categories of crimes against women – from dowry deaths, rape, and kidnapping to abduction of women. The comparatively lower incidence of cyber crime, especially when the police say that they are constantly receiving such complaints, shows that the problem is not reflected in its entirety.

According to the police, this is primarily because many women do not want to take the complaint forward after an incriminating post has been taken down. Conversations with

victims, however, reveal a mix of mistrust in the system, insensitive comments from officers, as well as fear and shame attached to cyber crimes, which often prevent them from going ahead with the complaints.

Vinit Kumar, Deputy commissioner of Police, Intelligence Fusion & Strategic Operations, which works on cyber crimes, said the department receives complaints every day. "We regularly receive complaints of artificial intelligence-related morphing and deepfakes, as well as abuses and harassment of women online. On our portal, women have the option of reporting it anonymously, following which, we take such content down within 36 hours. Since they are mostly anonymous complaints, we cannot go ahead and file FIRs."

Another police officer said there would be hundreds of complaints every year in every district, but not many go ahead with an FIR, adding that the numbers will increase in the coming years as they are working towards spreading awareness. Across university campuses, such as Jamia Millia Islamia and Delhi University, the police and the universities have been conducting cyber safety drives.

In some cases, the crime isn't limited to online harassment. Last month, a student from South Asian University (SAU) was assaulted by four men on campus, according to her police complaint. The incident began with an email with a morphed photo of her. Threatened that the photos would be shared with the entire campus, she agreed to meet him and that is when the physical assault took place, she said in her complaint.

An increasing number of such incidents led a group of NGOs, feminist and queer groups to choose technology-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) as the theme for an annual gathering on November 25, which took place at PVR Anupam Market in Saket. Lora K. Prabhu, managing director, Centre for Equity and Inclusion, the organiser of the event, said, "We chose this theme because it is critical to discuss it. Even as organisations working in the sector, we are still not clear on what counts as TFGBV." What is clear, she adds, is the fact that such cases are on the rise.

"What happens in the outside world, is only reflected online. We also need to look at the fact that for many women who have never expressed themselves, social media becomes a safe space to do so, which is a good thing. But this is what makes them so vulnerable," she added.

'Attacked because of my identity'

When a 26-year-old bisexual woman in Delhi was non-consensually added to a sex chat on Facebook, she did not know what to do about it. She said, "I stayed on the chat because the ID was of a woman, and I was afraid that if I left, they would reveal my sexual identity to my family..." She later realised that it was a man, or a group of men pretending to be a woman. Now, she is afraid of checking her inbox altogether.

Another queer Dalit woman, aged 25, said that her being opinionated online, invites daily casteist slurs and hate. "I go online because I love memes. But every time I say something, I get hate because of my identity. There was one time when a person started abusing my

parents and using slurs for them too. When I complained to the police, I was told, 'Don't interact with such men."

In Nafisa's case, physically exhausted from the calls, at a time when her examinations were approaching, going to the police itself was a challenge. Hazy on the details, she said, "I don't remember much of it. I did not get a copy of the FIR, but the police did help in other ways. They informed the university, and after the administration got involved, the calls eventually stopped."

But that was not the only reason why the calls stopped. She added that a friend got added to a group chat to keep an eye on what the men were saying, "Eventually, they said that I do not belong to their religion, and am already going to hell, so they should move on to someone else..."

While the police ensure that the photos or videos are taken down, the low number of recorded cyber crimes also means that the culprits remain scot-free, moving on to their next victim.

The author is a Laadli Media Fellow. The opinions expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA does not necessarily endorse these views.

Link: https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/stalked-doxxed-internet-turning-into-nightmare-for-delhi-women/article70346992.ece

3

Survey on Digital Violence - 55% young women reduced posting, 70% women choose to block

(Translated from Hindi)

Kavita Swami | Dainik Bhaskar | 15th December 2025

On November 25, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women was observed. Speeches were delivered on platforms, and awareness programs on protection from cyber fraud were conducted in schools and colleges. But the question remains whether the government and the system are equally serious about the everyday violence women face in the digital world. The data from a survey conducted on college-going young women shows that the digital space is rapidly becoming uncomfortable and frightening for women.

In this survey conducted on more than 100 undergraduate and postgraduate students, 75.7 percent of the participants were in the 18 to 21 age group. Apart from this, 9.5 percent were aged 21 to 25, 8 percent were between 25 to 30, and 6.8 percent were above 30 years of age. This is the same age when youth are most active on social media.

Social media is considered a platform for women to express themselves, make friends, and build an identity. But the reality is that this very platform is gradually becoming a cause of fear, discomfort, and silence for many young women.

54% women faced friend requests

When women were asked about their experience of creating their first account on Instagram, Facebook, or Telegram, 43.2 percent of young women described it as positive. For them, social media was a new medium for friendship, information, and self-expression.

However, this experience was not the same for everyone. 29 percent found it “okay,” 16.2 percent felt fear and discomfort right from the beginning, while 10.8 percent found it difficult to even understand the medium.

The survey clearly revealed that the initial positive experience changed over time. About 40 percent of women said that messages from strangers troubled them. 54 percent received friend requests without any reason. 22.5 percent had to endure unwanted calls and messages, while 17.5 percent were contacted through fake accounts. Many young women also acknowledged incidents such as obscene and vulgar messages, repeated insistence on conversation, and pressure to meet.

These problems had a direct impact on women's social media activity. In the survey, 55 percent of women admitted that they reduced posting and sharing photos. For many young women, social media is no longer a platform to speak openly, but has become a space of cautious silence.

Blocking seen as the easiest option, 30 percent asked for mobile numbers

More serious forms of digital violence also came to light. Photos or videos of 15 percent of women were saved or shared without their consent. Fake profiles were created using the names and photos of 20 percent. 23 percent reported attempts to hack their accounts. More than 30 percent of women were asked for their mobile numbers. 16 percent received obscene photos and videos. 10 percent were threatened by their own acquaintances with the misuse of photos, chats, or screenshots.

The most important point is that nearly 70 percent of women who face harassment choose the option of reporting and blocking instead of approaching family members, friends, or cyber police. Blocking gives them immediate relief, but it does not eliminate the problem from its roots. This survey shows that women's journey on social media begins with enthusiasm and gradually reaches fear and limitations. There is a need for an environment where women do not have to remain silent to keep themselves safe, and where the digital world can truly become equal and secure. On this issue, women do not speak much openly, but instead choose the option of blocking online.

Link: https://www.bhaskar.com/local/rajasthan/nagaur/news/55-of-young-women-reduced-their-posting-70-of-women-block-136671099.html?_branch_match_id=1547107952457149203&utm_campaign=136671099&utm_medium=sharing&_branch_referrer=H4sIAAAAAAAAA8soKSkottLXT0nMzMvM1kvKSCzOTizSS87P1Q8wD-Cy2MHXONotMsq8rSk1LLSrKzEuPTyrKLy9OLbJ1zijKz00FAHaFCjpAAAAA

4 ‘Digital Trials’ on Social Media: Women Targeted with Abuse and Online Violence *(Translated from Hindi)*

Kavita Swami, Dainik Bhaskar, 15th December 2025

What is the relationship status, with whom a photo is posted, how one danced, or what one said—women influencers and celebrities are judged on every post. Abusive language, questions on character, and personal attacks in their comment sections are no longer exceptions but have become routine. From Elli AvrRam to Shobhita Dhulipala, Dhanashree, Shreya Kalra, Natasha, and Apoorva Makhija, many women have openly stated that they face online violence on a daily basis. On Instagram, Twitter, and YouTube, the “comment section” is, on one hand, a platform of power for women, and on the other hand, it has become their deepest wound. Dress, relationships, body, dance videos, captions, and even friendships—everything is targeted. This is not just “trolling,” but digital gender violence.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), 70 to 75 percent of victims in cases of cyber stalking and online harassment are women. Meanwhile, according to a survey by The Economist Intelligence Unit, 85 percent of women worldwide have faced online violence in some form.

Judgment on Everything from Relationship Status to Dress

In July, actress Elli AvrRam was heavily trolled during the promotion of a song with YouTuber Ashish Chanchlani. Based on a single post, social media users began speculating that the two were dating. Some people posted hateful comments using disgusting and objectionable terms such as “body count.”

Months later, reacting to the trolling, Elli said that earlier she did not even know the meaning of the term “body count.” When her Gen-Z friends explained its meaning, she realized that the term is used to judge and humiliate women.

Need for New Rules to Deal with Trolling and Hate Comments

In India, several legal provisions exist to deal with digital violence against women. Under Section 354D of the Indian Penal Code, cyber stalking is considered a crime, which includes online पीछा करना (following), repeatedly sending messages, or harassing someone through digital means. Similarly, Section 509 treats words, gestures, or comments that insult the modesty of a woman as a punishable offence. In addition, under Section 66E of the

Information Technology Act, violation of a woman's privacy—such as sharing her private photos or videos without consent—comes under the category of a criminal offence.

Section 67 of the IT Act provides for strict action against the online circulation of obscene, objectionable, or sexually explicit content. However, in view of the increasing online violence in the digital age, there is a clear need to amend and strengthen these laws. Experts believe that existing provisions often fail to fully cover trolling, character assassination, abuse, and organized online attacks on social media. It is necessary to add clear definitions, fixed timelines for swift action, accountability of social media platforms, and stricter punishment for repeat offenders. Until Indian laws are updated to treat digital violence as a serious social crime, online spaces cannot become fully safe for women. Although various legal provisions exist in India to address digital violence against women, they need to be made more stringent so that everyone can feel safe on online platforms.

From Dance Videos to Divorce, Judgment Everywhere

Recently, influencer Shreya Kalra also faced trolling when vulgar comments were posted on her dance video with a friend at a concert. The situation became such that she had to delete the video from her account.

In several high-profile divorce cases over the past two years as well, women were primarily targeted. The divorces of Natasha–Hardik, Dhanashree–Yuzvendra, and Naga Chaitanya–Samantha are examples. From whether alimony was taken or not, to whom they would marry next—women were constantly trolled on every aspect. Dhanashree was targeted over the issue of alimony, and even months after the divorce, hateful comments continued on her posts. After the divorce of Samantha and Naga Chaitanya, when Naga married Shobhita Dhulipala, Shobhita too faced trolling.

Some of Samantha's fans continuously posted judgmental comments on Shobhita's posts. Such examples keep emerging, where in every situation, women alone are put in the dock. These situations are becoming increasingly common.

Link: https://dainik.bhaskar.com/fA3YjO8H4Yb6

II

AI, Deepfakes & Technology-Enabled Sexual Violence

What was built to innovate and empower is now being weaponised to violate and destroy. Artificial intelligence and deepfake technologies have opened a terrifying new front in sexual violence, where a woman's body, identity and dignity can be digitally manufactured, manipulated and circulated without her consent. In seconds, an ordinary photograph can be turned into pornography, blackmail, social death. Unlike physical violence, this harm spreads endlessly, across screens and servers, haunting survivors long after the act itself. Deepfakes do not just fabricate images; they fabricate shame, suspicion and silence. They fracture careers, isolate families, and push women into fear-driven withdrawal from public and professional life. This is sexual violence without touch, crime without proximity, trauma without borders, and its speed and scale make it one of the most dangerous forms of gendered violence in the digital age.

- *AI misuse turns digital space into a new threat for women* — Aiswarya Parija
- *Caught in the cyber cobweb: How TN women are fighting the deepfake battle* — Diya Maria George
- *Trolls, Threats and Deepfakes: The New War in the Digital World* — Abdul Muqeet

5

AI misuse turns digital space into a new threat for women

(Translated from Odia)

Aiswarya Parija | Odisha Patrika | 17th December 2025

In the digital age, everything is available at our fingertips. While this has made everyday life easier, it has also increased risks. Women have become increasingly unsafe in the digital world. Today's technology sometimes acts as a tool of empowerment, and at other times becomes a medium of exploitation. Women are facing cyber threats, digital stalking, social media trolling, and misuse of personal data. Deepfakes, in particular, have now emerged as a major cause of concern.

In the digital era, threats against women ranging from sexual exploitation, human trafficking, and child marriage have now extended into the virtual world. Every day, reports of girls and women being exploited or trolled on digital media are coming to light. From remote villages to big cities, fear of online violence has gripped women everywhere.

AI-Generated Fake Photos Shattered Pooja's Dreams

One such real-life story is that of Pooja (name changed) from Dharamgarh in Kalahandi district. After completing her engineering degree, Pooja dreamed of leaving her village to earn a livelihood in Mumbai. However, the digital world poisoned her life.

Working tirelessly day and night to establish herself as a successful engineer, Pooja was well-versed in digital technology. One morning, when she opened her phone, she saw numerous messages from unknown numbers some obscene, some abusive. Using a photo she had earlier posted on social media, someone had cut out her face and edited it onto an obscene image. The photo was completely fake.

Yet, it spread rapidly on WhatsApp and Instagram. From her own phone number, the fake image was automatically forwarded to her friends, relatives, family members, and colleagues. Everyone was shocked. Before she could even understand what was happening, darkness engulfed Pooja's life.

Pooja recounts with a choked voice: "My fake nude photo spread across my office. Colleagues whispered behind my back. I could feel how everyone looked at me differently. Male colleagues even made obscene gestures. I no longer had the courage or patience to go to the office, and I had to quit my job. At times, I even felt like ending my life. Even today, I feel ashamed to face my friends, let alone

my family. It felt like my life had ended there. How could I make my parents, office, and neighbours believe that someone had created such photos of me using AI? Those images

were edited using AI tools easily available on the internet. I was completely shattered mentally and couldn't gather the courage to return home from Mumbai for nearly two years. After struggling for some time, I filed a complaint at the Mumbai Cyber Police Station. I had to change my social media accounts and phone number. Recently, I have returned home and am trying to rebuild my mental health."

Like Pooja, many women in Odisha who face digital violence do not hesitate to end their lives due to social fear and lack of awareness.

An Old Form of Violence in a New Avatar

Digital violence against women is not new. However, AI has made it easier and more dangerous. Earlier, photo morphing or editing required technical expertise. Now, with AI apps, realistic fake images can be created within minutes. Technology has simplified crime. Cybercrime against women has now become a new trend - creating fake IDs, misusing women's photos, cyber threats, and online stalking have become major challenges.

Odisha at the Forefront of Online Violence

According to National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) data, Odisha ranks first in the country in cases of online violence. As per the NCRB report, in 2023, Odisha reported 761 cybercrime cases targeting women. In 2022, the number stood at 542 cases. While in other forms of violence victims often know the accused, identifying perpetrators in online abuse is far more difficult. In 2024, a total of 30,943 crimes against women were reported in Odisha (including digital and non- digital).

From AI-generated deepfake images and videos to voice-cloning scams, technology is being misused for defamation, blackmail, and violation of women's dignity. The impact is particularly severe in rural and tribal areas due to lack of digital awareness and limited access to legal support. Although complaints to cybercrime cells are increasing, existing laws and institutional capacity are insufficient to address AI-driven abuse.

Thousands of complaints are being filed through the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal and helpline number 1930. There is an urgent need for awareness campaigns on deepfakes and AI misuse. Currently, Odisha has 14 cyber police stations, and the state government has initiated steps to open 20 more to curb rising cybercrime against women. Additionally, 16 awareness chariots have been deployed in rural areas to spread public awareness.

Women Must Use Digital Media with Rights, Not Fear *(Pritichhanda Dhal, Social Activist)*

While digital media has become a powerful tool for empowerment, it has also turned into a new space of violence against women. From my experience as a women's rights activist, online trolling, abusive comments, AI-generated obscene photos, and threats severely

damage women's mental well-being. Women who raise their voices online are attacked over their clothing, character, and personal lives. Though this violence may not be visible, its impact is deep.

Many women stop expressing their opinions out of fear. The same patriarchal mindset that exists in society has entered the digital world. Laws alone are not enough; digital literacy, sensitivity, and responsibility are essential. Families, educational institutions, and media platforms must all play a role.

Awareness within ourselves is crucial. If such incidents occur, we must respond firmly. We can prevent them through legal means as well. Recently, following court directives, many defamatory videos have been deleted. Women must become alert and empowered. Women should use digital media with rights, not fear. This is the first step toward building an equal and safe digital society.

Link: https://odishapatrika.com/misuse-of-ai-tool-concern-for-women-safety-and-privacy-ncrb-odisha-kalahandi/

6 Caught in the cyber cobweb: How TN women are fighting the deepfake battle

Diya Maria George | The new Indian Express | 11th December 2025

A Tamil Nadu entrepreneur's battle against AI deepfakes reveals how technology has turned women's dignity into downloadable content and why the fight for justice has only just begun

August 21, 2025, started like any other day for Rajathi Kamalakannan until a familiar face popped up on her phone while scrolling. An AI-generated morphed picture of hers with her contact details was circulated on Facebook. "I was shocked," says Rajathi, who operates a food business, Raji's Kitchen in Dindigul, and runs a popular YouTube channel, RK Family Vlogs. When she checked this profile, it had 16K followers. "Photos of several other women were misused similarly," says the 35-year-old.

What followed was a nightmare that consumed three months of Rajathi's life. "I received more than a hundred calls from old friends, distant relatives, all enquiring about it. Many blamed me for having an 'indecent' photo on Facebook. Having to respond to each one of them was really painful," she says.

Rajathi was determined to fight the case. She filed a complaint against Facebook, seeking the removal of the AI-generated image. In an email, Facebook refused to take action. The response read, "We'll remove photos and videos reported through this channel if it infringes or violates your privacy. Unfortunately, based on the information you provided, we were unable to determine how the reported content infringes or violates your privacy. We recommend reaching out to the owner of this content to resolve this issue (sic)."

The email infuriated Rajathi. Along with her husband, she went to the Dindigul cybercrime office and filed a complaint on August 25. She recounts at least 10 visits to the police station, even on her husband's birthday, giving statements and signing documents. The accused was eventually arrested on November 14, but Rajathi is yet to get full closure. "I couldn't work for a week due to the fear of being shamed," she says. But the larger question that she pondered was why was she targeted.

On the other hand, her business continued, and the popularity of the YouTube channel rose. Her online presence remained essential to her livelihood, even as it made her prone to abuse. "Such people get involved in crime since they think no one will complain," she says, asserting, "You [perpetrator] hid your face while doing this. I will not hide mine while seeking justice."

There is growing awareness around such crimes against women across Tamil Nadu, who realise that their faces from cooking videos, travel photos, business profiles, and even passport-size images are being weaponised by strangers. While some of them find the courage to speak out, many remain silent due to a wide range of social factors.

Systemic issue

Tamil Nadu recorded 1.75 lakh reported cybercrimes last year alone, with financial scams exceeding ₹1,600 crore, according to retired director general of police (DGP) C Sylendra Babu. The sheer scale of the loss reveals how the tentacles of crime have found new ways to evade police action despite the presence of cybercrime police stations in each of the 38 districts.

"If you put together crimes like chain snatching, motorcycle theft, robbery, murder for gain, these cannot cross ₹100 crore. But in cybercrime, money is lost just like that. A small percentage of these are women paying money due to harassment. With an overwhelming number of complaints, we can't cope," he states. He also observes that a vast majority of women never come forward. "They change their number or block the caller, but the damage is already done. They live in perpetual fear of 'who will receive the photo or video next?'"

The methods have evolved beyond photo-morphing. The retired DGP describes a new pattern where criminals target women with "fake romantic or professional contacts", then use AI to create explicit content when the women refuse to engage. They access the victim's contact lists and send sample images to relatives, demanding anywhere from ₹10 lakh-₹20 lakh from women earning ₹30,000-₹40,000 monthly. "Women silently pay, but how long can they keep paying?" he asks.

Such crimes have links across the world, and it makes the job difficult for the police. "Gangs operating from Laos, Vietnam, the Philippines, and Thailand lure women through apps disguised as dating platforms. Indian scam hubs operate from Jamtara in Jharkhand, Mathura in UP, and Neem at the Rajasthan-UP-MP border," Sylendra Babu notes. "It's a new generation of organised crime with no borders."

Easy access

Priyanshu Ratnakar, a security researcher who has been tracking AI-generated abuse, believes that the tools for carrying out such crimes have become more accessible. "Some widely available open-source image models that come with safeguards can be easily bypassed," he says. Girithar Ram Ravindran, a cybersecurity specialist, seconds the opinion. "Most of these suspects do not have a strong technical background. If access becomes difficult, they will give up," he says.

Comparing the models available, Priyanshu is shocked by the manner in which Chinese models manipulate images. "The shadows, skin texture, background details, everything is convincing. The people in the images don't even exist in real life," he states.

While the technology is getting better, the infrastructure for abuse online is already laid out. “You have click farms, fake followers and bots run from China. With one click, they can send you 1,000 likes; with one phone, they can manage 10,000 profiles. Now imagine this infrastructure combined with powerful AI models,” he explains.

On Reddit, Priyanshu even found numerous forums dedicated to AI-generated explicit content, including deepfakes of celebrities being sold commercially. “Some people in India are already producing non-consensual content and selling it,” he says. The crisis has gone to an extent where high-profile celebrities like actor Rashmika Mandanna and dancer Anita Ratnam had to move court to protect their digital identity.

Battles beyond deepfakes

AI-generated images represent only one facet of a broader crisis of image-based abuse. Swetha Shankar, executive director of programmes at the International Foundation for Crime Prevention & Victim Care (PCVC), works with survivors of various forms of digital violence and sees patterns that extend far beyond deepfakes. “A lot of abuse happens when intimate pictures shared during a relationship are used against the person after a breakup,” Swetha says.

PCVC works with the cyber cell and uses a resource called Stop NCII (Stop Non-Consensual Intimate Image sharing), a website that partners with large platforms like Meta and even Pornhub. “When someone uploads an image there, the site creates a digital ID for it. If anyone tries to upload the same image anywhere else, it automatically gets flagged. We help survivors create this digital ID so they can track and prevent their images from being re-uploaded.”

The fear extends beyond the immediate violation. “A lot of survivors are terrified that their parents or husbands will come to know. For married women whose ex-boyfriends are threatening them, there is fear that their marriages will end. Younger women who have moved away for work, are petrified that the police will involve their parents. They worry that if families find out, their mobility and freedom will be cut off, they may be taken back home, forced to marry, and even have their phones taken away,” she says, adding “They constantly check messages because they’re scared something might be leaked. It affects them very deeply.”

Police responses can compound the problem. “Even when a woman is above 18, the police say things like, ‘Call your parents’, ‘Are you married?’ This makes women even more worried that approaching the police will lead to further control,” she adds.

For minors, the situation is even more complex. “It’s hard for them to say they’re in an abusive relationship when being in a relationship itself is a taboo,” Swetha says.

The pattern of abuse is also consistent. “In many of the cases we work with, intimate images are used to blackmail individuals. There is a lot of assault, and the person feels helpless because they are scared the images will be leaked. It gets held over them repeatedly,” Swetha adds.

Never-ending trauma

Priyanshu shares the story of a minor girl whose Instagram account was hijacked by a gang. “They demanded ₹50,000, and when she couldn’t pay, the man forced her to send a nude video. Once she sent it, he leaked it anyway, then asked for more money,” he says, adding that the case exposes the relationship between financial blackmail and sexual exploitation.

For content creators and entrepreneurs, the threat creates a chilling effect. Many are afraid to maintain the online presence their livelihoods require.

Once the content spreads, tracking it becomes nearly impossible. Girithar describes how metadata, the digital fingerprints attached to photos, gets erased when images are shared. “When sent through WhatsApp or shared multiple times, metadata gets stripped away. Once it spreads through thousands of groups, connecting the dots becomes very hard,” he says.

Priyanshu adds that investigators rely on open-source intelligence tools to track where the content first appeared, but many platforms lack robust traceability. “People download leaked or generated videos from one platform, then re-upload them across many others. For each view and engagement, they get paid. That’s their business model.”

For women like Rajathi, the intensity of the crisis has a huge impact. Girithar warns, “Keep accounts private unless necessary. But even from a private account, photos give enough data for criminals to create fake images or videos.” Priyanshu is more practical about the reality: “Once you post anything online, you lose control over it. It’s your image, but if someone downloads and shares it, you can’t really do much.”

The courage to fight

The Facebook profile that violated Rajathi’s privacy remains active, with its last post dated November, and is still accessible despite her repeated complaints and the accused’s arrest. Meta’s own Oversight Board has noted that the platform often fails to remove AI-generated explicit images unless cases receive significant media attention, leaving ordinary victims to hunt down and report every instance themselves.

Having gone through the ordeal, Rajathi says women should not suffer in silence, and points out how screenshots, URLs, and other evidence of such abuse could help their case. She also sought faster police action. “Response time shouldn’t be too late. Women need supportive and swift systems so that they don’t lose courage halfway,” she says.

Priyanshu suggests large-scale awareness campaigns. “Every household seems to have at least one creator or influencer now. We need the media, lawmakers and police to join together for nationwide education, in schools, colleges, and communities.”

While Sylendra Babu believes social media poses a threat to privacy, and that laws alone cannot help prevent these crimes, Swetha notes that gender-based violence has always adapted to whatever tools are available. “Long before AI, controlling devices was already a part of domestic violence, monitoring phones, knowing passwords, controlling mobility,

and isolating women. Technology is just another tool. The deeper issue is how we view women and how we normalise abuse. We often elevate the idea of 'family' over the safety and well-being of women."

The legal labyrinth

Current laws provide some recourse but lack teeth, specifically for AI-generated abuse. Sylendra Babu suggested that a separate clause for AI-enabled offences can be added to the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita due to the gaps in the existing laws. Priyanshu demands that authorities constitute a specific, standalone offence. "From here, it will only get worse if we don't," he says.

The IT Act 2000 contains relevant sections, particularly Section 67 with subsections for sexually explicit content and child protection, with potential punishments of 5-7 years. But Girithar notes these provisions were written before AI: "These open-source models must have stricter guardrails or should be banned."

Updated IT rules from 2021-22 require large platforms to appoint officers responsible for handling takedown requests under the Indian law. Priyanshu says suc2cess stories remain exceptions, as most survivors have a difficult and uncertain path to justice.'

If you or someone you know is affected by deepfake abuse, file a complaint at the National Cyber Crime Reporting Portal (cybercrime.gov.in) or call 1930. Tamil Nadu has cybercrime police stations in all 38 districts.

The author is a Laadli Media Fellow. The opinions and views expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse the views.

Link: https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2025/Dec/11/caught-in-the-cyber-cobweb-how-tn-women-are-fighting-the-deepfake

7

Trolls, Threats and Deepfakes: The New War in the Digital World

(Translated from Urdu)

Abdul Muqeet | ETVBharat.com | 11th December 2025

In today's digital age, silencing a woman rarely requires force. Her voice is suppressed instead sometimes through threats, ridicule, and often through attacks designed to remind her that speaking the truth comes with a price. What was once a space for expression has now turned into a volatile battleground for female journalists, social activists, and women in politics. On social media, every word feels like a risk, every opinion triggers a storm, and every truth becomes a reason to fear for one's reputation, safety, or life.

The platforms that once amplified women's voices have slowly transformed into arenas where they must defend themselves daily. Here, disagreement is no longer about ideas, it's about intimidation. Dissent is met not with counter arguments, but with abuse.

Amisha's Rajani Battle with Truth and Fear

Amisha, a young investigative journalist in Hyderabad (Times of India), once imagined her career in simple, idealistic terms, to write the truth. But she soon learned that truth-telling in the digital world carries emotional and psychological costs far beyond criticism.

"After one of my reports, someone wrote to me, 'I will shut your tongue forever,'" she recalls. "That day, I felt fear for the first time. But the next morning, I went to the office and began working on a new story. What did I have to lose?"

For Amisha, the most brutal part of this fight unfolds online. Trolling is no longer disagreement,it is a psychological assault. Abuse directed at women isn't a debate; it's a weapon. Politics or ideology are merely excuses. The message beneath the threats is consistent: "Your place is where we say it is."

Whenever she reports on powerful groups or corruption, arguments are replaced with intimidation. "After every report, I feel a new storm coming," she says. "People don't discuss the news. They discuss my character, my clothes, my family. I was told, 'Quit journalism, or you will regret it.' But this fight isn't just mine; it belongs to every reporter like me."

Yet Amisha keeps going. "I am afraid, yes," she admits. "But if I stop writing, the people who fear the truth will win. The messages I receive from women telling me not to stop,those keep me going. Our voices together are stronger than their threats."

Fatima: When Criticism Turns Personal

In Delhi, freelance journalist Fatima discovered early in her career that even ordinary stories can provoke extraordinary backlash.

"I expected disagreement," she says. "What I didn't expect was people attacking my character instead of my work."

After one of her reports, her family began receiving phone calls: "Control your daughter; she talks too much."

"These people aren't worried about society," Fatima explains. "They are afraid of women speaking the truth."

The dangers, she notes, extend far beyond what appears online. "We talk about viral trolling, abuse, dirty memes," she says. "But what about the threats that come by phone? The man who stops his cycle near you? The stares that follow you in the market? These are things most women cannot even speak about."

Social Activists Under Attack

Khalida Parveen popularly known as Khalida Bajia. A 65-year-old social worker from Hyderabad, has spent her life empowering women through her NGO, Ummat Society. Neither age nor personal loss has slowed her down. But activism comes with risks.

"Once we organised a rally," she recalls. "That night, my number was leaked. Hundreds of messages followed threats to kidnap me, to harm my family. I was afraid, but I did not stop. What do we have left except our voices?"

The attacks are not merely meant to silence, they are meant to isolate women, to make them question their presence in public life.

Politics: A Harsher Battlefield

For women in politics, the digital battlefield can be even harsher.

Advocate Asma Sheikh, president of the women's wing of Maharashtra AIMIM, says that whenever she speaks against a bill or government decision, the backlash turns deeply personal.

"People don't attack my views.they attack my clothes, my upbringing," she says. "Respect is used as a weapon against women."

Asma recounts how opponents Photoshopped images of her father and circulated them, and her brother received calls telling him to "make your sister stay at home."

"The goal is not to challenge my argument," she explains. "It is to destroy my identity."

Even institutions fail women. "When we go to file a complaint," she says, "we are asked, *Why did you say this?* As though the crime is our voice."

Nazia Hassan, Deputy Mayor of Darbhanga, Bihar, has similar experiences.

"I objected to a policy. Within minutes, a trend was started against me," she says. "My marriage, my family everything was targeted. People said women should not enter politics."

She pauses before adding softly, "I don't mind disagreement. I mind that people attack me instead of responding to what I said. These attacks are not just against women. they are against women's freedom."

Deepfakes: The New Weapon of Digital Terror

One of the most terrifying threats women face today is the rise of deepfakes videos manipulated to insert a woman's face, voice, or body into fabricated scenes.

Saadia Sheikh, a student activist at Maulana Azad National Urdu University, calls deepfakes "digital terrorism."

"A deepfake destroys a woman psychologically," she says. "I know cases where women stopped leaving their homes, quit their jobs, withdrew from society. A false video can ruin an entire life."

Technology has empowered the world but it has also empowered bigotry.

Inside Newsrooms: Gendered Restrictions

Newsrooms, too, are not always safe.

"Editors tell women not to take up tough stories because people will attack them," Fatima reveals. "Before reporting, we have to account for our gender."

Her final words capture the essence of this story:

"We are afraid, yes. But we will not stop. If we stop, the truth will remain the property of the powerful."

The Rising Voices

Women's voices today are targeted, yes. They are wounded. They often speak from behind walls of fear. Yet they continue to speak quietly, persistently, and courageously. And this persistence is reshaping the digital landscape.

Their voices echo across a society where women's freedom is still treated as a threat. But the truth is equally undeniable. women are speaking louder than ever. They are afraid, but they refuse to step back.

This is a war between truth and power, freedom and fear, women and the prejudices of society. And it is not a war women will lose.

The voices suppressed today will spark the change of tomorrow.

And when women speak, the world will have no choice but to listen.

- Abdul Muqeet is a journalist based in Delhi. He prepared this report under the Laadli Media Fellowship Programme. The views expressed are the author's own. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse these views.

Link: https://www.etvbharat.com/ur/opinion/trolls-threats-and-deepfakes-the-new-war-in-the-digital-world-urn25121103988

III

Political, Ideological & Intersectional Digital Violence

Digital violence has become a powerful political weapon, designed not just to intimidate, but to erase women from public and democratic life. Women who speak on politics, rights or justice are met with coordinated abuse that is deeply gendered, viciously sexualised and sharpened by caste, religion and identity. Dalit women are attacked with caste slurs, Muslim women with communal hatred, queer women with threats of exposure, and dissenting voices with the label of "anti-national." These are not spontaneous outbursts but organised campaigns to discipline, discredit and silence. The message is brutal and clear: power belongs to men, and public space is not yours. By turning identity into a site of assault, digital platforms are being used to shrink women's political participation, fracture solidarities and push marginalised voices back into fear and invisibility.

- *Beyond Digital Violence: How Online Hindutva Abuse Silences And Sidelines Women From Political Participation — Akshita Prasad*
- *How Unrestricted Digital Access Shapes Gender Perceptions Among Boys And Young Men — Akshita Prasad*
- *Weaponized Identity: Mapping Coordinated Digital Assaults on Women Dissenters at the Intersection of Caste, Faith and Politics — Geetha Sunil Pillai*
- *Cyber Harassment: Why Young Women from Small Towns Are Quitting Politics in India — Varsha Torgalkar*

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Beyond Digital Violence: How Online Hindutva Abuse Silences And Sidelines Women From Political Participation

Akshita Prasad | Feminisminindia.com | 12th December 2025

It is important to confront the issue of Hindutva misogyny and online abuse that stifles women's participation in public and political life.

'*Being vocal about political viewpoints seems like a luxury in a society where only individuals of a certain background are considered worthy of voicing their opinions. If you're a woman or a minority and try to state a political opinion on a public platform, you face nothing but criticism and threats*,' Kristeen Gomes, 24, a Delhi-based psychologist, told *FII*.

Online spaces and social media are increasingly the site of public discourse and an integral avenue for political participation. However, when we consider gendered barriers to such participation, we must confront the issue of Hindutva misogyny and online abuse that stifles women's participation in public and political life by making it a dangerous, harrowing ordeal.

Any woman who is politically active, publicly outspoken, or defies gendered expectations online has some experience with the relentless trolling and harassment of the Hindutva online machinery. Threats of sexual violence and death, slurs and name-calling, body shaming, non-consensual sharing of women's pictures, sexualisation and objectification, and doxxing are all, unfortunately, quotidian experiences for Indian women on the internet.

However, the nature and extent of the political abuse women receive online is not merely determined by their political opinions or opposition to far-right politics; it is often inextricably tied to gender, and the intensity of such abuse is predicated on the social identities of the targets.

Beyond digital violence: a new form of political exclusion and sidelining

While the occurrence of such harassment is now common knowledge, we must start viewing it as more than just a form of digital violence and see it for what it really is – a means to keep women out of public and political life. This is done by dangling the prospect of large-scale harassment campaigns and threats before them, and forcing them to censor themselves, reduce their visibility online, and withdraw from political discourse for the sake of their safety and wellbeing.

Such abuse is not perpetrated by fringe elements alone. It is a well-oiled machine of far-right public figures and commentators, massive Hindutva troll accounts, emerging sock-puppet accounts, and additional fake accounts with few followers that do the grunt

work.

Abhijit Iyer-Mitra's tweet against Newslaundry journalists.
Image Credit: Dhanya Rajendran/X

A tweet by the troll account Hindutva Knight, attacking a woman for her negative tweet about the film *Dhurandhar*

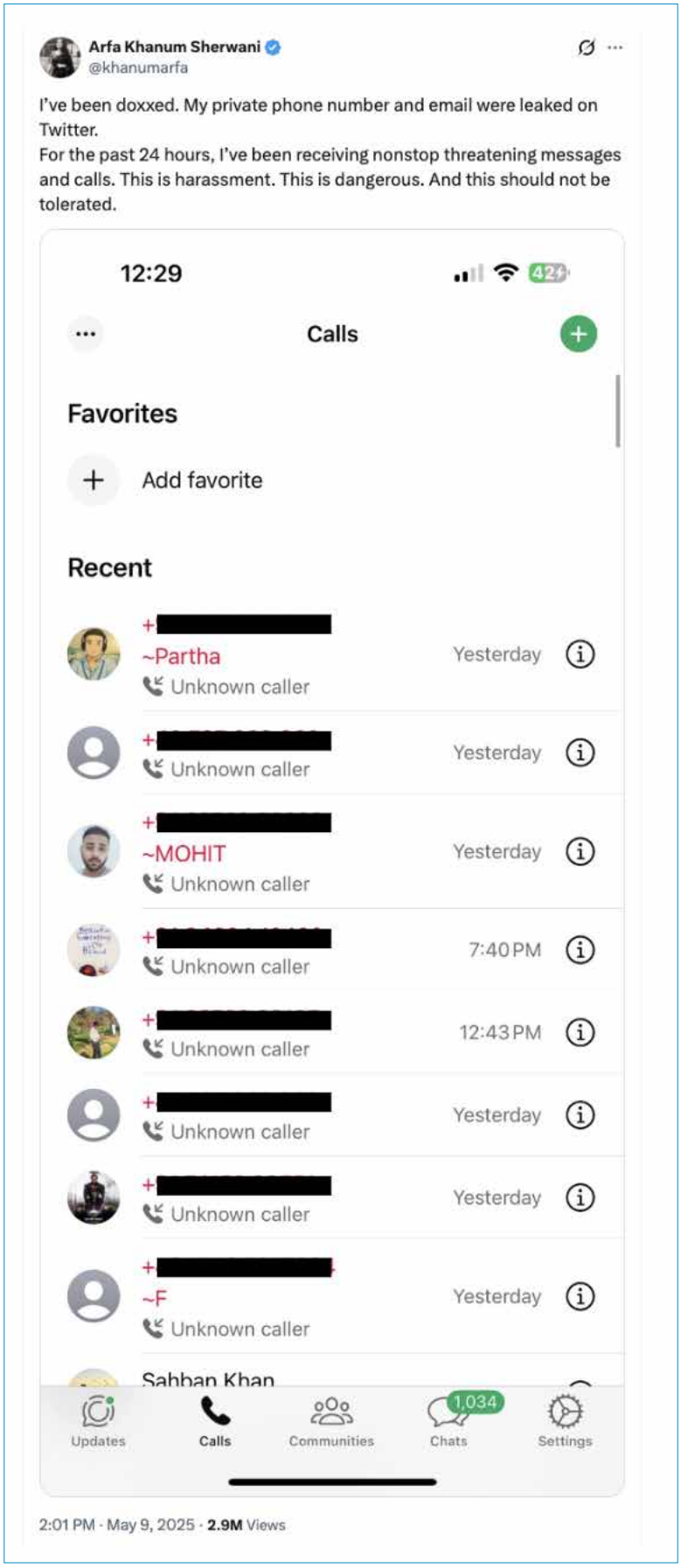
The attacks against women carried out by these accounts are not limited to threats of bodily harm, sexual harassment, misogynistic abuse, slurs, or image-based abuse, either. They often doxx women, harass their friends and families, and contact their employers and attempt to have them fired.

Shaviya Sharma vs Squint Neon is a 2024 case where an X (formerly Twitter) user made a critical remark about Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath. Following this, she was doxxed by an infamous Hindutva troll account, Squint Neon (run by the same person who operates Hindutva Knight, as per ***AltNews***).

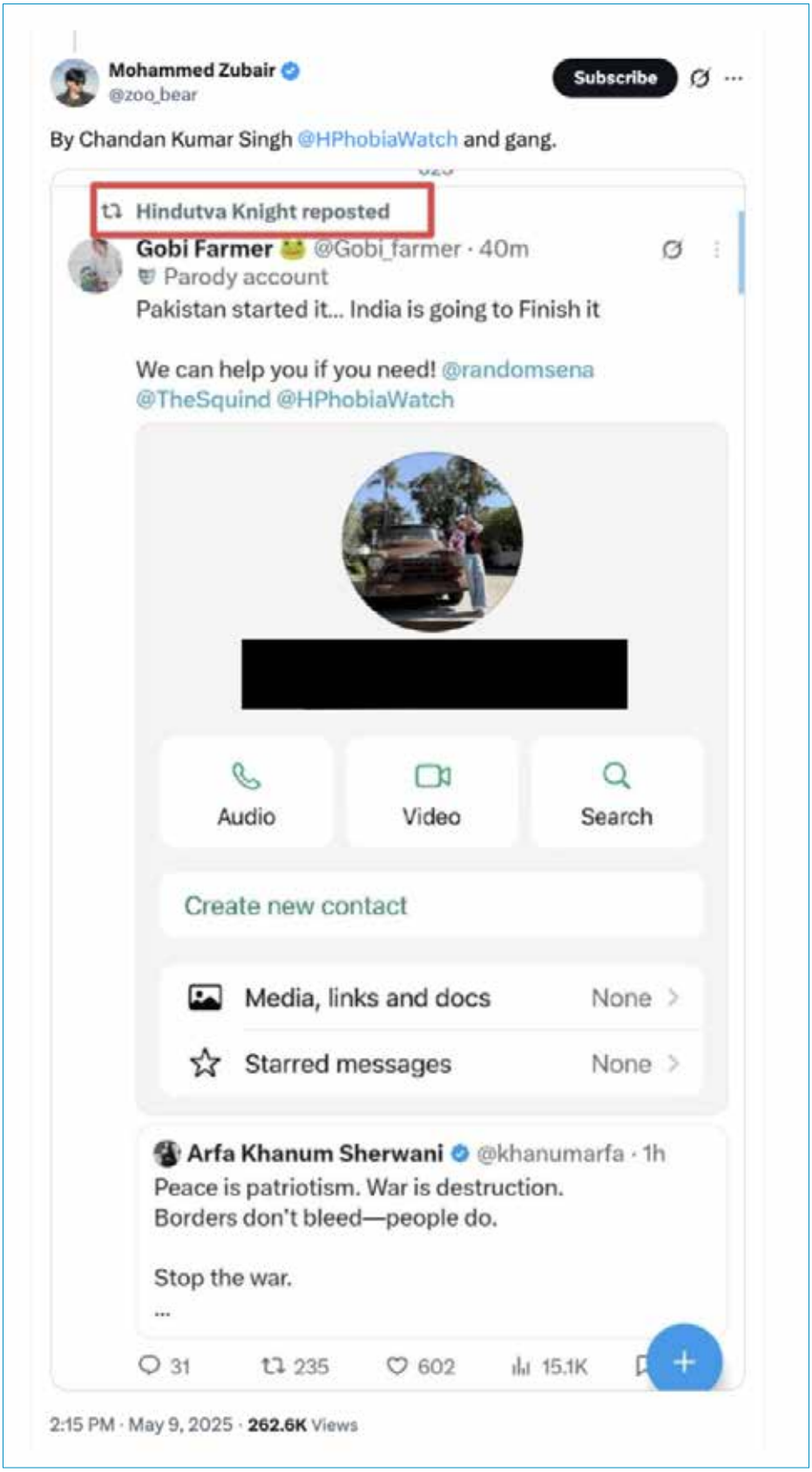
As per court documents, Shaviya Sharma's photographs and professional identity were revealed, and an email was sent to her employer. While the court ruled that the offence didn't constitute doxxing (as the information shared was in the public domain), it ordered X to take down the tweets consisting of Sharma's personal information.

However, these attacks are most common against Muslim women, especially those who are highly visible in the public eye and take a firm anti-Hindutva stance. In 2024, journalist Rana Ayyub was doxxed by the X account, Hindutva Knight, a notorious troll account with a history of relentlessly harassing anti-Hindutva figures, journalists, and activists. Earlier the same year, *The Wire* journalist Arfa Khanum Sherwani was doxxed, and the tweet revealing her phone number was retweeted and amplified by Hindutva Knight.

Rana Ayyub's tweet containing a screenshot of Hindutva Knight revealing her phone number online



Arfa Khanum Sherwani's tweets revealing she was doxxed



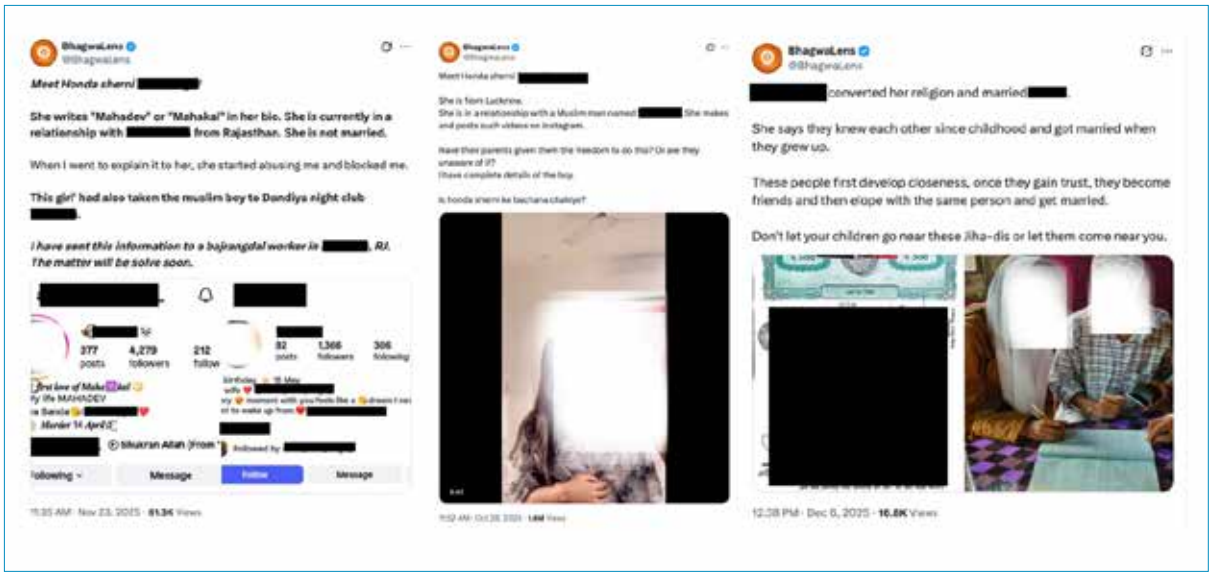
Mohammed Zubair's (*AltNews*) tweet responding to Sherwani, revealing Hindutva Knight had retweeted the tweet which doxxed her

The silencing intended from such abuse isn't just limited to social media. Writers, journalists, and activists are forced to self-censor because of Hindutva online abuse and the offline consequences of tactics like doxxing and the weaponisation of the legal system against them. Speaking of the prospect of Hindutva online harassment turning into offline violence, Harshi, a writer, tells *FII*, '*Most of what I write, I try to make less political. Which is extremely difficult. You may not think of your own safety too much, but you have to think about the safety of those connected to you.*'

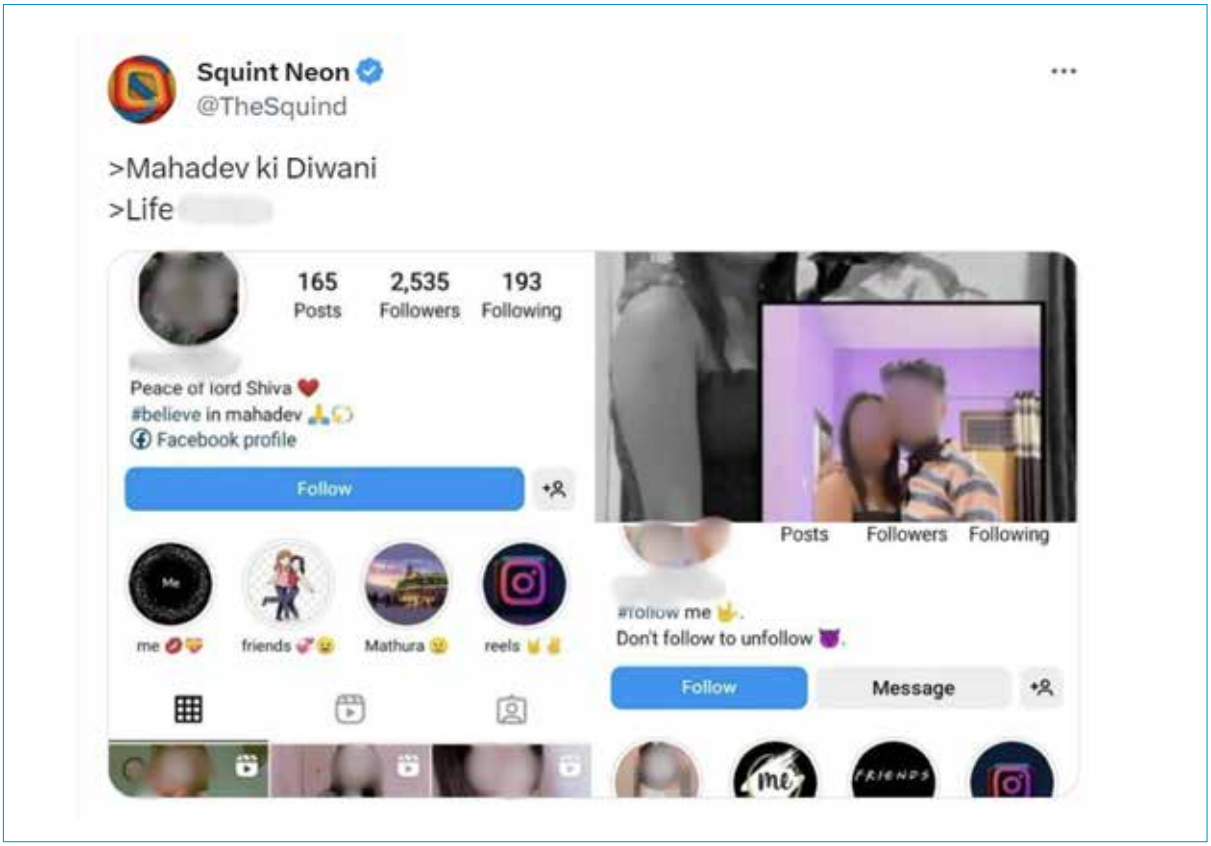
Such doxxing and legal harassment aren't isolated instances, either. There are entire Hindutva accounts dedicated to doxxing women in interfaith relationships and weaponising the legal system against prominent women online.

BhagwaLens is an account dedicated to finding details about interfaith couples from their social media accounts (often Instagram) and amplifying them. This account also claims to contact the families of these women and notifies local Hindutva outfits of such interfaith relationships.

In its X bio, the account solicits messages with information regarding '*actionable cases*'. Squint Neon has also engaged in harassing interfaith couples in the past. Whereas the account, **Hindu IT Cell**, threatens anti-Hindutva and anti-establishment individuals with legal consequences. This is not merely an X account; they are a registered organisation under the Indian Trusts Act.



Hindutva account BhagwaLens' tweets doxxing women for being in interfaith relationships



Hindutva account Squint Neon's tweet doxxing a young couple for being in an interfaith relationship. Image Credit: *AltNews*

Hindutva account Hindu IT Cell threatening journalist Rana Ayyub with legal consequences

In her 2016 book, *I Am A Troll*, journalist Swati Chaturvedi noted how several troll accounts, including those that engage in misogynistic abuse against women, were followed by Narendra Modi. As per ***AltNews***, as of February 2024, Squint Neon's (@thesquind) X account was followed by BJP leader Kapil Mishra, BJP national spokesperson Shehzad Poonawalla, and the spokesperson of the BJP, New Delhi, Tajinder Bagga.

It's now well-documented that these trolls aren't isolated, fringe elements of the larger Hindutva ecosystem; **they are integral to it**. They are the cogs in the machine that keep the Hindutva operation running smoothly, essential to swaying and shaping public opinion, silencing critics, and threatening dissenters into submission. And the abuses they carry out are carried out with impunity in an authoritarian state's shadow. They are the informal enforcers of an authoritarian regime, and women pay the price.

Targeting, silencing, and deterring women

Dr Ruchika Sharma is a historian of medieval Indian history. She also creates videos online, which are aimed at busting popular myths surrounding Indian history. Dr Ruchika routinely debunks many false Hindutva claims, making her a target of routine online abuse. Asked what her experience with Hindutva online harassment has been, she tells *FII*, '*The harassment is relentless. I have experienced everything from misogynistic abuse and sexualised comments to people taking my pictures from Instagram and posting them to Twitter – trying to slut-shame and body-shame me. I have also received death threats, rape threats, and have had slurs used against me.*'

She further added, '*There is also complete disregard for the fact that I have expertise in History. They'll take my pictures from Instagram and say, "You don't look like a historian" or "Your videos are only good enough to watch on mute". Because I have been getting Hindutva hate for a while now, most of this no longer registers. It's par for the course.*'

Abusive tweets directed at Dr Ruchika Sharma

However, while some women like Dr Ruchika continue to remain politically involved and vocal despite the abuse they face, Hindutva harassment of highly visible women like her sends a message to all other women that a political voice and visibility online bring with

them a world of risk. An intended consequence of such political harassment in digital spaces is to deter other women.

Madhavi Sharma, 26, a Pune-based student, describes herself as politically aware and as someone who is interested in tracking political developments across the country. She told *FII*, '*I do post political opinions on Instagram sometimes because only my followers can see them. I have heard harassment on Twitter is really bad, so I don't share my political views on that platform. Everything you say will be called anti-national on Twitter. I am also afraid of being doxxed; it may or may not happen, but it is best to just stay away*.'

A **report** by Equality Now and Breakthrough India titled *Experiencing Technology-facilitated Gender-based Violence in India: Survivor Narratives and Legal Responses*, which surveyed several women in India, found that many survivors of **technology-facilitated gender-based violence** (TFGBV) disengaged from online spaces entirely after facing online abuse. Women from marginalised communities, on the other hand, noted how navigating digital spaces came with the prospect of facing systemic abuse for them.

While this report didn't specifically look at Hindutva online abuse, such harassment also operates along similar lines. Kristeen Gomes told *FII*, '*Being a woman, the prospect of online harassment becoming offline is very real. Everyone has seen enough news articles about those who have experienced this firsthand, and how online expressions can and will lead to offline harassment. We have seen this happen to influencers, actors, and the wealthy and connected. If those who have the resources to fight against these abuses are afraid, the impact such harassment will have on regular middle-class people is horrifying*.'

The admin of Team Saath, a Twitter page dedicated to standing up to abuse and harassment, told *FII*, '*These attacks on women are not just trolling, they are a reflection of a deeper anxiety about women who refuse to conform. The Hindutva groups and their supporters who blatantly display their misogynistic views online try to shrink women back into silence by using shame, slurs, and threats as tools. We have stood with many women who faced this violence simply for daring to speak. Their courage exposes a truth – the backlash is strongest where women's voices are making the greatest impact.*'

Masculinity, misogyny, and the far-right

Dr Ruchika told *FII*, '*A lot of Hindutva hate has nothing to do with politics. Some of them hate me because I am a woman and on this platform. Political differences are an excuse; at the heart of Hindutva hate towards women like me is misogyny. Misogyny is the primary driver, and political differences are only an addition, something used to justify the misogyny and engage in it with impunity. They want to silence me as a woman, more than as an anti-establishment political ideologue.*'

During the course of our conversation, Dr Ruchika told us that the abuse she faces isn't just predicated on the fact that she's a woman, but the kind of woman she is – outspoken, opinionated, and visible. And this is a pattern with Hindutva abuse, where women's refusal to perform patriarchal femininity and adhere to gendered expectations draws more ire than their political beliefs.

To understand why Hindutva online harassment is worse against women, Hindutva's political philosophy must be understood beyond its Islamophobia. Hindu supremacy and Islamophobia are undoubtedly central to Hindutva politics; however, the ideology's relationship with masculinity and patriarchy must also be analysed.

Hindutva's relationship with masculinity is dichotomous. It glorifies hypermasculinity and positions it as a virtue for Hindu men, while vilifying masculinity in groups it has *othered*, especially in Muslim men. Hindu masculinity is considered essential to achieving Hindutva political goals; on the other hand, the masculinity of the Muslim man is cast as a threat to the Hindu man, Hindu woman, and the Hindu *rashtra*. Women, however, are expected to perform femininity, respectability, and gender roles in line with patriarchal prescriptions.

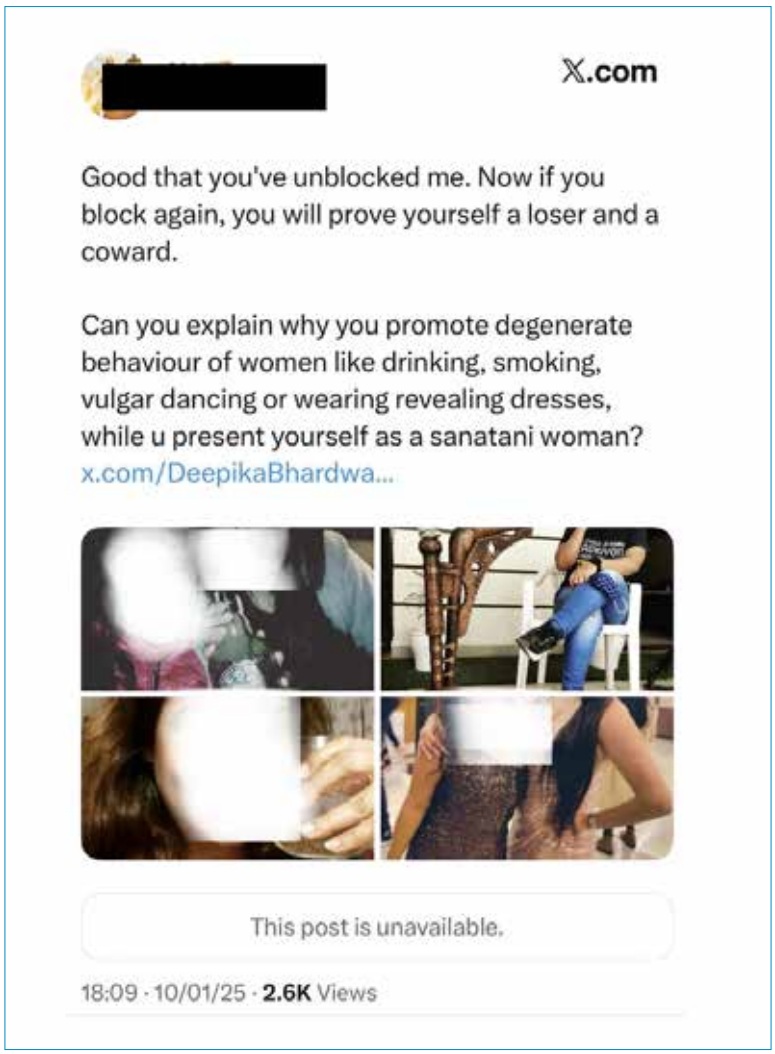
In *The Logic of Masculinist Protection: Reflections on the Current Security State*, Iris Marion Young articulates how, in patriarchal settings, a '*masculine protector*' forces women and children into the role of the protected, putting them in a subordinate position, where obedience is expected of them in exchange for protection, and they must externalise their autonomy to the protector. Likewise, a paternalistic approach in politics and government risks casting citizens in the role of the protected and the subordinate.

Patriarchal frameworks are deeply enmeshed with Hindutva politics. In the Hindutva imagination, straight, cisgender, upper-caste, Hindu men are the '*masculine protectors*', in the political sphere and the socio-cultural ambit as well. A circular relationship exists, where this notion both draws on existing patriarchal frameworks and, in turn, reinforces and strengthens them. In this set-up, women are subordinate to the masculine protector, politically and socially, and they are expected to operate within rigid patriarchal structures.

All far-right ideologies espouse patriarchal and traditionalist worldviews. At the heart of political conservatism lies social conservatism and a desire to concentrate power in the hands of a few. Rigid gender roles and unflinching gender expectations are often par for the course for far-right ideologies, as are misogyny and other forms of bigotry. From abortion bans in the United States to the Taliban denying education to girls in Afghanistan, socio-political conservatism always manifests as control, subordination, and sidelining of women and girls, albeit to varying extents. And Hindutva is no exception.

This is not to say that Hindutva decries all political participation by women. Hindutva outfits often have dedicated women's wings, and this is often positioned as a reflection of women's socio-political empowerment under Hindutva aegis. These outfits allow women some political visibility, but only so long as they adhere to patriarchal norms.

Women's wings of Hindutva outfits might encourage women's political participation, but they don't seek to position them alongside men, only subordinate to them. Their political efforts are only supposed to supplement those of men. In camps for girls organised by the **Durga Vahini**, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad's women's wing, girls are not taught to be political agents or develop a political voice; their roles are confined by gendered **patriarchal prescriptions**. These women's wings teach women and girls to be **good mothers and wives** in order to supplement the political aspirations of Hindutva men and the *Rashtra*.



A Hindutva and MRA account attacking MRA activist Deepika Narayan Bharadwaj

However, if they deviate from prescribed norms of respectability, they are attacked as well. Dr Ruchika speaks of cases where women who are Hindutva proponents have also been doxxed by Hindutva accounts, saying, '*I have seen instances where women who are vocally Hindutva have minor interactions with Muslim men online, and Hindutva accounts will doxx her, circulate her number, or call her parents.*'

Women from marginalised communities are disproportionately targeted

Casteism is also inextricably tied to Hindutva. While Hindutva often speaks of 'Hindu unity', this proposed united Hindu front is still hierarchical in nature and seeks to maintain caste distinctions and hierarchies. Hindutva's idea of 'Hindu unity' is structured vertically, not horizontally, and caste-based exclusion and exploitation are written into it. While Hindutva situationally exploits marginalised caste identities for its political gain, it seeks to continue their social and political sidelining.

However, Hindutva online abuse against the women of minority religions, especially Muslim women, hardly needs mentioning. A report titled *Behind The Pixels: Social Silencing and Isolation of Indian Muslims in the Online Public* by Bebaak Collective, an association of

grassroots activists and women's groups, found that Muslim women were **limiting their social media presence** due to online abuse. The report further noted that the online abuse targeted at Muslims in India is often gendered in nature.

The study by Equality Now and Breakthrough India also found that in cases where targets of TFGBV belonged to marginalised communities, they faced additional targeting due to their gender and caste identities. Speaking of her ambivalence regarding being politically vocal online, Gomes said, '*Growing up in a country that calls itself secular, but has minimal representation of people who share my religious identity, also plays a big role in not feeling confident to state my views on a public platform. As a minority, the fear of being threatened for having a vocal online presence does contribute to having a more cynical approach to being heard and seen on social media*.'

Under today's Hindutva, the arbiter of everyone's political visibility and public access is the right-wing, straight, cis, upper-caste, Hindu man. The only way to enjoy one's freedom of speech and expression and right to political participation, and remain safe while doing so, is to negotiate with the far-right and see how many concessions they are willing to grant. Madhavi noted, '*You can say anything on the internet, and you'll be targeted, as long as you're not a Hindu man. Anyone whom the patriarchy doesn't deem fit to be heard is a target.*'

Hindutva online abuse should be understood as a category of technology-facilitated political violence and not as just another manifestation of online harassment, given the fact that the weight of the state machinery is behind it. These are systematic attempts to silence and sideline women and must be viewed as such.

A crucial part of increasing women's public and political participation today is ensuring safe spaces online, where they don't face abuse as a tactic to politically silence them and bully them into patriarchal submission. However, under an authoritarian regime that feeds these trolls and actively benefits from their violence, the problem of Hindutva online violence against women will only grow exponentially.

Gomes asked a pertinent question during our conversation: '*Many people have only the internet to express themselves politically, and online harassment from Hindutva groups, or anyone else, encroaches upon these spaces of expression – then what is the point of freedom of speech and expression?*'

This article has been published under the Laadli Media Fellowship 2025. The opinions and views expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse the views.

Link: https://feminisminindia.com/2025/12/12/beyond-digital-violence-how-online-hindutva-abuse-silences-and-sidelines-women-from-political-participation/

9

How Unrestricted Digital Access Shapes Gender Perceptions Among Boys And Young Men

Akshita Prasad | Feminisminindia.com | 5th December 2025

The influence the manosphere has on impressionable young boys is often underdiscussed and lost in the overblown panic over screen times and moralistic handwringing over pornography.

Trigger Warning: Mentions of sexual violence, child sexual abuse, and domestic violence

Asked if she thinks the boys around her respect women, Aaira, a 15-year-old student from Hyderabad, says, '*Maybe the women in their families, but not other women or girls. They don't respect their friends or classmates.*'

Children have increasing access to the internet and to a variety of online spaces. Often, this access comes with little parental monitoring or regulation. However, the impact of such unsupervised internet use on the gender perceptions of boys and young men needs to be urgently acknowledged and addressed. We do not only face the prospect of a generation of boys internalising violent misogyny and patriarchal rhetoric, but we also face the prospect of failing a generation of women and girls who are going to be the recipients of the prejudice and violence that stems from this.

How do digital spaces shape ideas about gender?

Indian society and culture are deeply patriarchal. Children grow up witnessing rigid gender roles and various manifestations of everyday misogyny. Further, they are also conditioned and socialised from a young age to adhere to patriarchal gender expectations and perform gender. When social media and digital spaces introduce children to more misogyny, it reinforces patriarchal and misogynistic notions and legitimises them in their minds.

Speaking to *FII*, Nitya Sethi, a Hyderabad-based psychologist, said, '*Children develop gender schemas (cognitive frameworks on what it means to be male or female) through observation, modelling, and reinforcement from their immediate environment. However, by serving as a hypersalient socialising agent, the internet has upset this environment.*'

She further added, '*The digital environment narrows a child's exposure to varied ideas. Unlike a physical playground, where social feedback is varied, internet platforms can bombard a developing brain with inflexible, polarised gender stereotypes. And gender is then perceived as a strict, performative hierarchy rather than a spectrum or a collection of individual characteristics.*'

Alma Kunjumon, a Delhi-based counselling psychologist, further explained, '*I have increasingly encountered students, particularly boys, who echo patriarchal and misogynistic ideas they have absorbed online. These attitudes often emerge subtly at first: dismissive tones toward female teachers, refusal to follow instructions from women in authority positions, or laughing off sexist jokes as "normal".*'

The manosphere: the gateway to misogyny for young boys

Dev*, 16, estimates that 80 to 95 per cent of the boys his age know of Andrew Tate or have consumed his content, calling the British-American influencer '*very popular*' among Indian youth. He recalls the first time he came across Tate's content at 14 or 15, it was shown to him by the algorithm while browsing Instagram.

The manosphere is perhaps the singular greatest threat when it comes to introducing and reinforcing misogyny for boys and young men. The manosphere consists of online communities, websites, and forums that take a staunchly anti-feminist position, promoting toxic and hypermasculine ideals and perpetuating misogyny.

Men's rights activists (MRAs) and incels (involuntary celibates) are a few of the numerous subgroups that exist within the larger manosphere ecosystem. Popular misogynistic influencers, such as Andrew Tate and Jordan Peterson, are also fixtures of the manosphere.

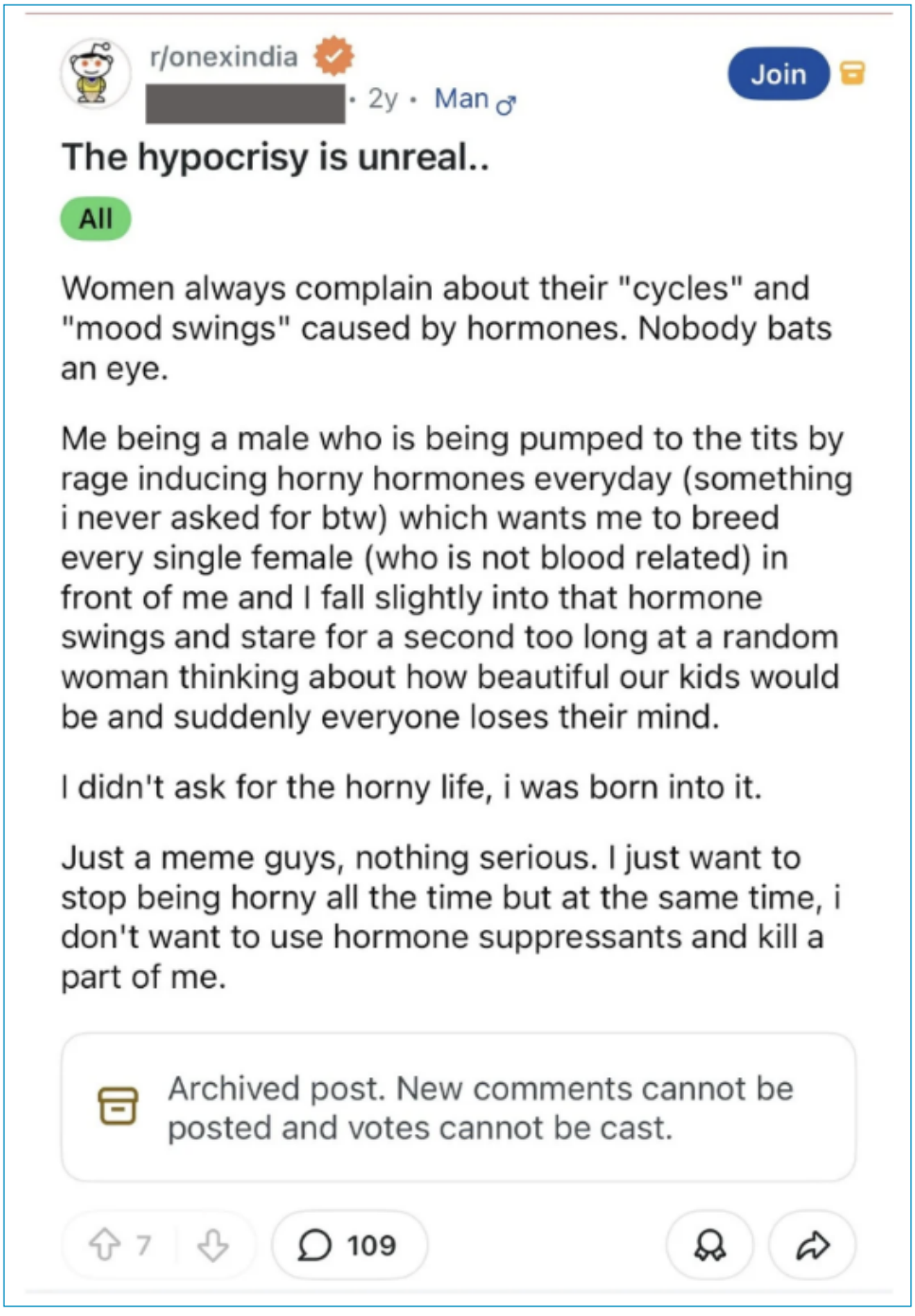
Andrew, an 18-year-old student, tells me, '*I am a part of the better side of it* [the manosphere]*, which focuses on mental health, fostering healthy relationships, and financial advice. I vehemently reject the misogynistic parts of it.*' However, he further adds, '*I don't believe that women are in a lower stratum than men, but I have this sense of superiority that as a male, I have to be better than women. I know it's wrong, but this notion was developed over my teenage years and because of social conditioning (especially from films).*'

When I asked him what role the internet played in him holding these beliefs today, he said, '*Digital spaces such as X and Reddit sometimes exposed me to male chauvinistic posts or posts related to 'sigma male mindset' which did amplify these ideas. I was introduced to the term "sigma male" through the internet (Instagram and YouTube), which glorified Patrick Bateman* [the protagonist of the 2000 Hollywood film *American Psycho*] *as a model for masculinity.*'

The influence the manosphere has on impressionable young boys is often underdiscussed and lost in the overblown panic over screen times and moralistic handwringing over pornography. However, the potential for harm that the manosphere holds is mammoth. Nasreena, a Bangalore-based school counsellor, told *FII*, '*I have seen several boys who are influenced by misogynistic online figures like Andrew Tate. Their language, attitudes toward women, and ideas about masculinity often reflect the content they consume on these platforms.*'

YouTube, Instagram, X (formerly Twitter), and Reddit can all serve as major gateways for interactions with the manosphere. On YouTube, content by manosphere influencers like Tate and Peterson is easy to access, as is content from other misogynistic creators. 'Dating advice' given out by creators like Sarthak Goel and Dev Tyagi promotes toxic and hyper-masculine ideas to 'attract women'.

While these YouTube creators promote hypermasculinity for women's attention, on the flip side, Reddit often hosts young men who embody toxic masculinity and whose hostility towards women is palpable. Even subreddits that appear seemingly benign at first glance, such as r/onexindia and r/indianmemer, can be violently misogynistic. X (formerly Twitter) is also home to such intense misogyny, where women are routinely sexualised, objectified, shamed, and dehumanised.



Posts from r/onexindia and r/indianmemer subreddits

Posts from r/onexindia and r/indianmemer subreddits

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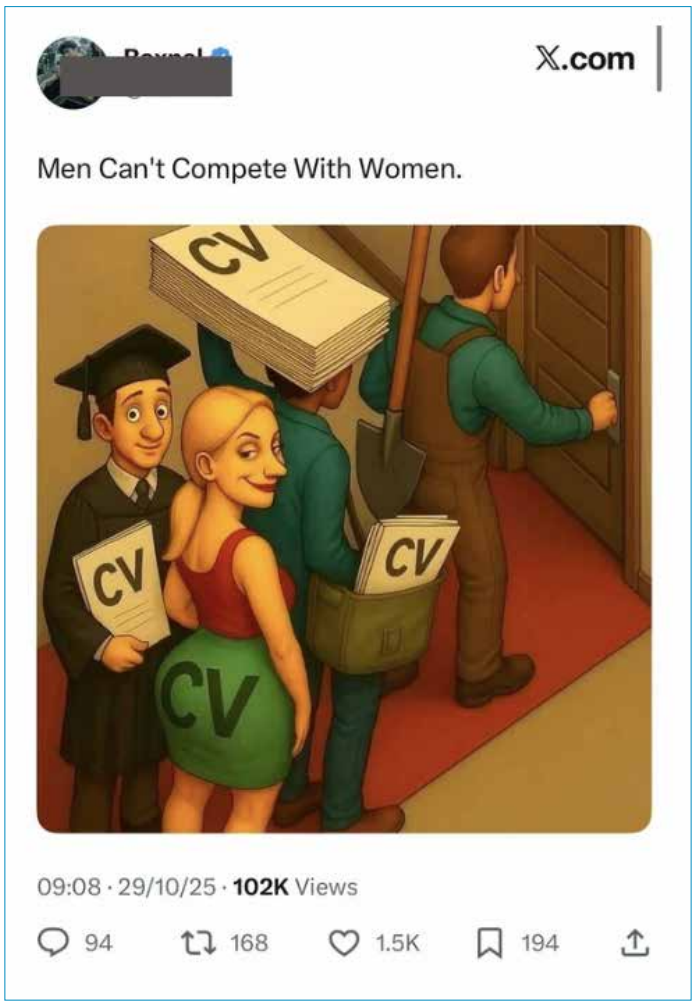
It's not so much that the manosphere and these digital spaces are the first introduction to misogyny for children, but this content reinforces the misogyny which surrounds them, and which they grow up witnessing. Highlighting one such instance, Kunjumon says, '*One instance that stands out involved a student who openly challenged every directive given by his female teachers, stating that "women don't know better". During counselling, he admitted that at home, female family members were treated as subordinate to men, and the digital content he consumed reinforced the same worldview. For him, online influencers who trivialised women's voices became a source of validation, normalising behaviours he saw both online and offline.*'

Misogynistic tweets from X



Misogynistic tweets from X

Misogynistic tweets from X

Talking to *FII*, Pari Sharma, a college student, said of such online misogyny, '*Now you have these Instagram reels that say things like "my girlfriend or wife should only be mine" or that "women in relationships shouldn't have any men around them". These boys then expect that their partners should not interact with anyone.* 'She further adds, '*I have known of boys who watched Andrew Tate's content and changed; they think they are the dominant partner in the relationship*.' When asked how the proliferation of this content makes her feel as a young woman, Sharma said, '*It makes me angry*.'

Violent misogyny is inescapable online

When considering what constitutes 'violent misogyny' on the internet, pornography likely comes to mind. However, the issue runs a lot deeper. The debate regarding whether consumption of pornography leads to an increase in sexual violence has long been had. Research into this, however, has often been inconclusive, and experts are often split in their opinion.

However, pornography in itself is not the issue. A bulk of the pornography that exists in the mainstream is often violent and objectifies women. While consumption of violent pornography may or may not have an impact on criminality, it's not a stretch of the imagination that it can affect how boys and young men view women. Women in these videos are often objectified and demeaned, and sexual acts are often done 'to' them, rather than 'with' them.

However, the consumption of violent videos depicting real-life sexual violence, which is often available online and marketed as run-of-the-mill pornography, is where the problem lies. In 2016, ***Al Jazeera*** **reported** that in Uttar Pradesh's Meerut, videos of real instances of sexual violence were available for sale for amounts ranging from INR 20 to 200. It further noted that once these videos were publicly available on the market, they spread to other parts of the country through the internet.

In 2018, the ***BBC*** spoke to boys and young men in a Patna village, which was the site of a sexual assault, the recording of which was widely circulated online via WhatsApp. A 16-year-old boy admitted to the reporters that he had watched over 25 videos of sexual assault and rape, which were shared by his friends. Another boy told the publication, '*Most boys in my class watch these videos together or sometimes by themselves. It feels fine because everyone does it.*'

Although it is essential to understand that this does not establish a causal relationship between viewing pornography and committing sexual violence. What it does instead is set a template for impressionable kids in which sexual violence and disregard for consent are normalised, especially in the absence of any sex education or education regarding consent.

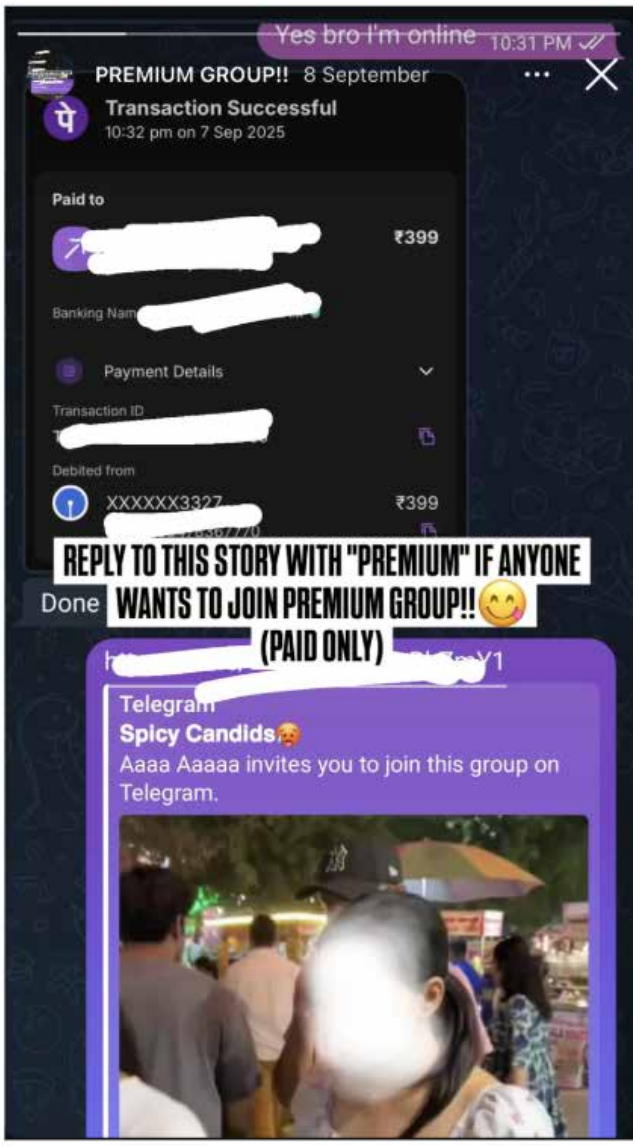
However, violent content on the internet is not limited to pornography; it's present everywhere. There are entire X accounts dedicated to talking about women in violent, dehumanising ways; Instagram reels that joke about domestic violence; and online spaces where violence against women is played off as banter.

Screenshots from X and Instagram featuring content glorifying domestic violence

Screenshots from X and Instagram featuring content glorifying domestic violence

In 2019, news broke of the **'bois locker room'**. An Instagram group whose members were teenage boys from Delhi schools. In this group, they shared pictures and videos of women and girls without their consent, spoke of them in dehumanising ways, and even discussed ways to gangrape women and girls.

Further, there are numerous Instagram pages, such as @hiddenclips_family and @candidclipszone, that share sexualised, non-consensual pictures of women to a massive viewing of thousands of followers. These pictures, often clicked by men, of women in their families, are sent to these pages to be featured. Some of these accounts also sell 'premium subscriptions'.



'Premium subscriptions' sold by these Instagram accounts

I messaged two such accounts, @hiddenclips_family (42,000 followers) and @candidz_ferrari (29,000 followers), on Instagram from a dummy account, asking if these accounts would feature non-consensually shot videos of women. Both agreed to do so. Suspecting @hiddenclips_family of featuring media of minors in the past, I further asked if the account would be willing to post non-consensually shot videos of a 16-year-old minor, upon which the person behind the account said '*let me see*', essentially asking to see non-consensual material involving a minor.

The prospect of real-life bullying and violence

However, can the misogynistic beliefs that are shaped online translate into real-life harassment and violence? Kunjumon believes it can. She says, '*Misogynistic beliefs rarely remain theoretical; they often translate into behaviours that compromise the emotional and physical safety of female students.*'

Aaira recounts a recent experience of online bullying by her peers. She tells *FII*, '*A picture I had posted online was recreated and shared online, publicly, alongside my original photo, where my face was visible. I was speechless. We were close friends.*' Speaking of other instances of bullying she's witnessed, Aaira says that the targets of 'planned' bullying attempts in her class are always girls.

However, Gayatri Devi, the vice principal of a private school, tells of more extreme instances: '*There have been cases where boys have unzipped their trousers in class and flashed classmates, talked about their genitals, talked about girls' or women's bodies in inappropriate ways, or attempted to inappropriately touch others.*'

Asked if she has seen things of this nature before in her 20-year career, she says, '*Before the pandemic, we would come across minor issues. Nothing that would qualify as sexual harassment. There might have been a few such cases, but I have personally never come across anything like that before. However, these days, every other day, right from Grade IV to Grade X, we come across things of this nature.*'

When asked if she thinks misogynistic attitudes among young boys might translate to real-life violence, Gayatri Devi said, '*It's 100 per cent a risk. Children cannot be monitored completely, no matter what measures we take. I'll give you an example. There was a 10-year-old student who would make his 5-year-old sister sit in his lap during the bus ride to and from school, and he was touching her inappropriately. It's not about what happens within the school premises alone. The girl in this case was his sister; the parents would have left the children alone at home. And this behaviour can certainly extend towards other children as well.*'

Sethi notes, '*We are seeing a "bleed-over" effect, where online hostility manifests as real-world harassment, driven by a desire for peer validation within these toxic digital subcultures.*'

The way forward

However, one thing was clear from my conversations with parents and educators – they seemed to overestimate the risks pornography posed and underestimate the risks associated with the larger manosphere ecosystem. To mitigate digital risks, parents and educators must first be well-versed in the types of digital threats that exist and their nature and extent.

Arpitha G, the principal of Sadhu Vaswani International School in Hyderabad, told *FII*, '*Children know of various apps that parents are perhaps not aware of. Most parents are aware of WhatsApp and check their child's activity on the app, but children have numerous other ways and means.*'

There are knowledge gaps among parents and educators that serve as a barrier in addressing the role online spaces play in informing misogynistic attitudes. Parents also seem to believe that their upbringing would inoculate their kids against online misogyny. However, Sethi says, '*It is erroneous to assume that 'well-behaved' or high-functioning children are immune. Radicalisation exploits psychosocial vulnerabilities, not necessarily behavioural history*.'

Not just parent, but child literacy regarding online risks is critical as well. Nasreena recommends increased digital literacy for children, awareness programmes for parents, training teachers to identify concerning online influences, school-based counselling support, and open conversations about gender and respect.

Arpitha G also highlights the importance of creating healthy boundaries, rather than rigid, inviolable rules. She says, '*This is the digital era, parents should create norms around internet use, but shouldn't lay down strict rules. That will not work with teenagers*.'

She also emphasises the importance of parents adopting healthy digital and phone use habits themselves because children will emulate what they see in their immediate environment. Furthermore noting the importance of not rewarding children with digital gadgets and accessories, as this may unintentionally encourage excessive screen dependency.

Age verification to access some online content can also go a long way, as it can protect children from viewing violent and explicit sexual imagery, and especially shield them from sexual violence and CSA material. However, allied issues regarding data collection, processing, and disposal must be addressed by robust policy frameworks.

Most educators I spoke with for this article felt strongly that children should not have access to personal devices like cellphones until they are nearing adulthood. Shared devices, especially desktops, allow for greater transparency and parental guidance in navigating the digital realm.

Comprehensive sex education in schools with an emphasis on consent and gendered dynamics is also essential. Moralistic panic over pornography consumption should make way for discourse surrounding healthy exploration of sexuality and addressing violent and non-consensual pornography. It is also critical to encourage open conversations and understanding regarding sex and sexuality, which will help children understand these themes beyond pornography's male, objectifying gaze, where consent is often absent.

Ultimately, addressing and challenging deeply entrenched socio-cultural misogyny will yield the largest gains. While this may be a tall order and a slow, gradual process, it is one worth committing to. Homes are often the first places where young children view and internalise misogyny. Then, to raise a generation of boys who don't espouse violently misogynistic beliefs regarding women, we must first ensure that they don't witness it in their own homes.

Fostering channels of open, healthy, and regular conversations regarding gender and respect is critical to addressing and remedying the misogyny that boys and young men

learn online. Affirming this, Kunjumon states, '*Silence leaves space for online influencers to fill the gaps.*'

**The names of some minors have been changed in this article to protect their privacy.*

Author's Note: The minors quoted in this article were interviewed with their parents' consent. Parents were allowed to view the quotes before publication, and parental approval was sought and received. Some names of minors haven't been changed because parents allowed the use of their child's name; however, no surnames or additional identifying information have been used to protect their privacy.

The exchange with the Instagram accounts featuring non-consensual images was had using a dummy account that did not impersonate any real person. No images or videos in any form were shared with these accounts.

This article has been published under the Laadli Media Fellowship 2025. The opinions and views expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse the views.

Link: https://feminisminindia.com/2025/12/05/how-unrestricted-digital-access-shapes-gender-perceptions-among-boys-and-young-men/

10

Weaponized Identity: Mapping Coordinated Digital Assaults on Women Dissenters at the Intersection of Caste, Faith and Politics

Geetha Sunil Pillai | TheMooknayak.com | 4th December 2025

An investigation into the resilience of India's women dissenters, documenting their fight against weaponized hate campaigns rooted in caste, faith, and gender.

Women are targeted with abuse online not just for their opinions - but also for various identities such as religion, caste, profession and marital status. Graphic- Asif Nisar/ The Mooknayak

New Delhi- For the women at the heart of this story, logging on to social media is not about sharing memes or connecting with friends. It is an act of courage. It is stepping onto a digital battlefield where their gender, their caste, their faith and their political affiliations are twisted into weapons and used against them in brutal, organized campaigns.

This report is an investigation into a specific and alarming pattern of violence in India's digital public square. It documents how coordinated online attacks are waged not just

against women who dissent, but specifically against women whose identities make them doubly or triply vulnerable: Dalit feminists, Muslim journalists, Christian activists, and other minority women in the public eye.

The infamous “Bulli Bai” and “Sulli Deals” apps--where photos of Muslim women were uploaded (2021- 2022) for a simulated auction, were a global scandal. But they were not a one-time event. They were the most shocking public display of a daily, grinding reality. This is a story of how online hate is engineered, how it follows a playbook, and how it aims to do one thing: silence critical voices by attacking the very core of who they are.

A Digital Nation, A Divided Reality

India’s journey to becoming a digital giant is a landmark tale of policy and proliferation. The trajectory is well-charted: beginning with economic liberalization in 1991, followed by the National Telecom Policy of 1994, spectrum auctions, and the entry of major telecom players. This infrastructure boom made India the world’s second-largest internet population, with over 73% of access happening via mobile phones by 2020. Social media platforms, particularly Twitter, saw explosive growth. Twitter India alone reported a staggering 74% year-on-year increase in daily active users in the last quarter of 2020.

According to Simon Kemp’s Digital 2025 report, India stands as an undisputed digital Goliath. With a population of 1.46 billion, the country now boasts 806 million internet users, a penetration rate of 55.3%—powered by a staggering 1.12 billion cellular connections. The social media landscape is equally colossal, with 491 million active users engaging across platforms, meaning one in every three Indians is connected.

Meta’s dominance is clear, with Instagram leading at 414 million users and Facebook following closely with 384 million. However, the data reveals a crucial, contrasting trend for the platform most associated with public discourse: X (formerly Twitter). With just 24.1 million users (1.7% of the population), X’s reach in India is not only niche but is actively contracting, having decreased by 7.7% over the past year.

The horrific "Bulli Bai" and "Sulli Deals" apps, which "auctioned" Muslim women, were not isolated events. They were shocking examples of a much larger, everyday reality.AI generated image

For women, this digital awakening held immense promise. Academics and researchers framed it as a potential great equalizer—a space that could erode social boundaries and provide "empowering tools" to express themselves freely, moving away from repressive offline gender norms. It was seen as a new frontier for "freedom, choice and independence," particularly for discussing issues like gender-based violence.

However, data and lived experience now paint a starkly different picture. The platform that promised liberation has become, in the words of a landmark 2020 Amnesty International India report, a 'battlefield'. That report, which used crowdsourced data and data science to analyze abuse against women politicians during the 2019 General Elections, found the volume of hateful and abusive content to be "extraordinarily high."

The 76-page report, *Troll Patrol India: Exposing Online Abuse Faced by Women Politicians in India*, analysed more than 114,000 tweets sent to 95 women politicians in the three months during and after last year's general elections in India.

The research found that women are targeted with abuse online not just for their opinions - but also for various identities, such as gender, religion, caste, and marital status.

Shazia Ilmi from the Bharatiya Janata Party said: "*More women should be entering politics. But the price that I pay is too much for what I choose to do. The price includes being trolled incessantly, being the victim of online harassment, having a lot of remarks passed about what I look like, my marital status, why I have or don't have children, etc. - all the filthiest things you can think of. If they don't like my strong opinions, they do not remark on my work but call me a 'whore' in every language that is used in India.*"

A July 2019 survey titled '*Spotlight on online habits of young Indian women*', conducted by Verizon Media, claimed that 40 percent of Indian women fear irrelevant comments being trolled and followed.

In a July 2025 research work titled, "Cyberstalking, Cyberbullying and Online Trolling: An Insightful Study", Sushilkumar M. Parmar, an Assistant Professor at Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda reveals there were 19.9 per cent of tweets that are relating to sexism or misogyny, while 14.6 per cent of tweets were concerning to ethnic or religious slurs. For women, online trolling is the extension of routine domestic harassment. Amnesty International had conducted a survey in year 2017 wherein it is reported that 70 percent of female internet users were compelled to change the way of using the internet due to online violence.

Similarly, 1/3rd of them restrict themselves to post any comment on the digital platforms. In this line, Cyber Crime Cell and the Ministry of Women and Child Development have been putting in so much efforts to prevent such type of harassment.

Besides, according to the Cyberbullying Statistics, Facts and Trends - 2023, India, Brazil and the USA are the top three countries where the incidents of maximum online harassment

and trolling are being reported. The survey of Norton conducted by Symantec revealed that out of 10, eight Indians experience online harassment.

In their article, “Indian female Twitter influencers’ perceptions of trolls” authors Varsha Pillai and Munmun Ghosh elaborate how women journalists have been among the main targets of trolls in India and have been facing massive online abuse and trolling due to reporting any political issue, a socio-cultural event, or national or international occurrences.

In 2021, Kotwal founded The Mooknayak with a mission to bring Dalit, Adivasi, backward class, and minority issues into the national conversation. The Mooknayak

If endurance has a face, it’s Meena Kotwal’s. Kotwal, the founder of The Mooknayak, a Dalit-led news platform launched in 2021 to amplify marginalized voices, has faced relentless online trolling and threats for her bold critiques of caste discrimination, including her advocacy for reservations and intersectional feminism.

In December 2021, she ignited widespread backlash by uploading a video burning pages of the Manusmriti, a Hindu text symbolizing caste hierarchies, while calling out caste bias in Indian newsrooms; the clip went viral, drawing a flood of death threats, rape threats, and casteist slurs from Hindutva-linked accounts, forcing her to publicly warn that such groups would be responsible for any harm to her.

The abuse extended to smear campaigns that slashed her platform’s funding radically, yet Kotwal persists, using her reporting on affirmative action and gender-caste intersections to challenge systemic inequities, even as trolls continue targeting her for “anti-Hindu” activism.

Muslim journalist and author Rana Ayyub has faced relentless, graphic death and rape threats online, prompting intervention from United Nations human rights experts.

For Muslim women like journalists Rana Ayyub and Arfa Khanum Sherwani, the digital onslaught is communal, labeling them "jihadi" or "anti-national".

In 2018, Rana Ayyub became a doxing victim after receiving rape and death threats online; the matter attained international attention when five UN special rapporteurs called upon India to protect Ayyub from the 'online hate campaign'. Most recently, Ayyub received death threats in early November, including demands to write a column glorifying the assassins of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, with warnings of violence against her and her father.

The threats originated from a Canadian phone number and were delivered via WhatsApp messages, voice notes, and video calls. Ayyub, a Washington Post columnist known for her reporting on communal violence and minority rights, filed a complaint with Navi Mumbai police, but authorities initially registered only a non-cognizable offense, declining to file a First Information Report (FIR).

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), along with nine other organizations including Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the International Press Institute (IPI), and the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF), issued an open letter on November 19 urging Navi Mumbai Police Commissioner to investigate and provide immediate protection. "Authorities must take immediate steps to guarantee the safety of Ayyub and her family," CPJ stated, noting the threats as part of a pattern of coordinated online abuse and legal harassment she has faced for years.

In the shocking Sulli Deals app scandal of July 2021, Muslim women's photos were "auctioned" online like objects, full of hate and misogyny. Just six months later, in January 2022, the similar Bulli Bai app repeated the horror, listing New Delhi journalist Arfa Khanum Sherwani's image for sale with cruel slurs targeting her outspoken criticism of

hate crimes. A colleague sent her the link, but Arfa, who had bravely covered the first auction, couldn't open it. "I'm a journalist, I wrote about the July one. But I couldn't find the strength to look. I had work and didn't want to get mentally shaken," she said, revealing the deep fear it caused. The app also targeted actress Shabana Azmi, turning personal attacks into a wide campaign to scare and silence bold Muslim women in India.

Priyanka Bharti, a Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) spokesperson and Dalit activist from Bihar, has documented routine online trolling, including the derogatory terms "Bhimti" and " Neelchatti" – a slur combining B.R. Ambedkar's name with a menstrual insult – used to demean her caste and gender. Following RJD's performance in the November 2025 Bihar assembly elections, Bharti faced a surge in abuse on X (formerly Twitter), with threads compiling clips of her TV debates labeled "Gems of Loudmouth Priyanka Bharti – Bhimti Priyanka Bharti." One viral thread, posted November 15, accused her outspoken commentary of costing the party votes, garnering over 2,000 likes and shares.

Bharti, who gained attention for tearing pages of the Manusmriti during a 2024 TV debate – an act that led to an FIR later rejected by an Aligarh court in September 2025 – has described the harassment as extending beyond political disagreement to personal attacks on her Dalit identity.

British journalist and author Laurie Penny said that "gender trolling is sexual harassment".

Author and activist Shalin Maria Lawrence faces casteist abuse coded as "Blue Sangi," body-shaming, and image-based harassment for her activism on caste and gender.The Mooknayak

“They have code names for me- Blue Sangi & Blue Elephant”

Shalin Maria Lawrence is a Dalit Christian activist and author from Chennai. Her work focuses on caste and gender justice. Online, she is a target. “A normal day two years back would start with an anxiety attack as soon as I get up and look at my phone,” she says.

For Shalin, the abuse is not generic misogyny. It is precise. Trolls have created casteist code names for her: “Blue Sangi” and “Blue Elephant.” They attack her for speaking English, for wearing lipstick, for succeeding. “Also over the ten years of abuse and trolls what I have seen is that upper caste and OBC women don’t get much trolls or such shaming like how i get . I am treated different because I openly talk Dalit politics and Dalit feminism . Even OBC women have abused me for talking intersectionality . And then when I say the say thing like a Dalit man online ,the Dalit man never gets body shamed or character assassinated but I do get”, she stresses.

“Not just trolls; organized swarms from DMK and VCK handles. They body-shame my curves, mock my divorce at 23, call me ‘Blue Sangi’ – code for my ‘impure’ Christian-Dalit blood,” she adds further. Its a clear pattern . Being a Dalit women is the main reason of the volume of attacks on me and the cruel nature of it”, she explains.

In March 2023, the Network of Women in Media, India (NWMI) condemned “continuous and ongoing harassment” against her on X and Facebook, triggered by her writings on caste and gender in Tamil publications. Lawrence reported rape threats, cyberstalking, and morphed images sent to her husband’s professional email, as detailed in a 2023 Federal report. But the online hatred hadnt stopped a bit. “Recently DMK guys morphed my picture into a soft porn movie pic and they spread it that its me . I want to kill them for this. I really wish I could”, she spoke with much pain in her voice.

The trolling affected her personal life badly. “ Parents get very worried whenever I write or speak on issues . Since political parties are involved . They even call us up . So they get scared . Fearing the privacy of my kid . I have to think so badly even to post a family picture . And when people meet me they go “Oh you get trolled so often” and chuckle . Its like they are enjoying my dehumanization . Even when I go to a function where I am guest,” she explains.

Perhaps one of the most painful aspects for activists like Shalin is the abandonment they feel from presumed allies. “The lack of support I get from other Dalit or feminist groups is very, very painful,” she shares, noting some believe she “asked for it” by being vocal. This isolation, documented in research as a common experience, leaves women to fight coordinated networks alone, exacerbating the trauma.

However, the digital bitterness has transformed her. Shalin says, “It has made me a strong person . And I started studying the pattern , I have worked with academicians on it and finding a way to stop it systematically . I even took a class on the same at the Marquette University’s Diederich college of communication ,Milwaukee,Wisconsin during my recent trip to the US. Also I am one of the very few people in India who has taken this as a serious campaign, to put an end to online violence , so it has become my mission.”

Meharaz notes that coordinated trolling aims to "humiliate outspoken minority women and assert control over our presence in public discourse."The Mooknayak

Meharaz, in her late 20's, is a law student at the University of Delhi, with a strong interest in public policy, real-time politics, and social issues. Meharaz exposes the engineered online terror faced by minority and Dalit women activists. "As minority and Dalit women activists, we have repeatedly faced coordinated online harassment that targets our gender, religious identity, and political positions in order to portray us as 'anti-national' or morally corrupt," she states.

The Bulli Bai and Sulli Deals incidents laid bare the cruelty, with anonymous right-wing groups "auctioning" Muslim women activists to humiliate outspoken minorities and dominate public discourse. "Even beyond that moment, we continue to experience doxxing attempts, synchronised troll floods, stolen images circulated with obscene commentary, and relentless religious slurs that aim to silence women who challenge dominant narratives." Caste discussions provoke fiercer retaliation: minority women are silenced on "Sanatan issues," overlooking caste's hold on subcontinental Abrahamic religions, while Dalit women suffer casteist and misogynistic assaults from dominant-caste and OBC men to undermine their credibility.

Meharaz details the calculated nature of the abuse: "The harassment we face shows clear signs of organisation and coordination. Troll accounts often use identical language, hashtags, and accusations within minutes of one another, indicating pre-planned messaging amplified through networks of anonymous or bot-like handles." These strikes align precisely with advocacy on caste oppression, hate crimes, or constitutional rights, mobilizing against women upending inequality. "This constant hostility erodes our sense of safety and creates an environment where we feel monitored and targeted for every public statement." It breeds caution: restrained online activity, timed posts, and withheld voices amid threats of surge.

Platforms exacerbate the inequity, Meharaz asserts: "Across major digital platforms, we have consistently observed that our legitimate political speech, especially when it addresses caste, communal violence, or gender justice—is subjected to disproportionate scrutiny, downranking, or shadow suppression." Minority posts are deemed "sensitive" and curtailed, yet slurs like "anti-national," "jihadi," "immoral," or caste-based remain despite reports. Instagram buries rights content under sexist or communal virality; Facebook's harassment groups persist unabated. "This unequal enforcement deepens the harm, creating a digital environment where hate speech thrives freely while women's counter-speech is stifled."

The ripple effects are devastating: “The digital assaults we face significantly affect our activism, mental health, and relationships. Constant harassment drains emotional energy, forcing women activists to spend time defending themselves instead of focusing on community work or policy advocacy.” Anxiety and vigilance invade daily life, taxing families amid surveillance gaps, literacy divides, and caste patriarchy that vilifies women’s input. “For minority and Dalit women, the intersection of gender, caste, and religion compounds both online vulnerability and offline marginalisation, making digital violence not just personal but structural.”

So how does she keeps herself safe? Meharaz shares her strategy. “To protect ourselves, we rely on collective resilience and strategic self-preservation—blocking and muting coordinated troll armies, forming solidarity networks among women activists, avoiding the sharing of sensitive personal information, using safer digital alternatives, and pursuing legal action when threats become severe.”

But piecemeal fixes fall short. “We urgently need platforms to recognise identity-based digital harassment as a serious threat, remove coordinated troll networks proactively, and stop penalising the counter-speech of women from minority and Dalit communities.” From policymakers: fortified digital rights, platform enforcement, and safeguards for caste, gender, and minority advocates. “Only then can the digital space become a safer environment where our voices can exist without fear.”

Independent journalist Cynthia Stephen has documented how algorithmic suppression has drastically reduced the visibility of her social justice content, a form of silent censorship.The Mooknayak

Karnataka-based independent journalist and social policy researcher Cynthia Stephen has been somewhat luckier than her peers, spared the direct onslaught of online bullying or body-shaming. Yet, she grapples with a subtler form of suppression: algorithmic shadow-banning that throttles her reach.

“I have not stopped or been intimidated into silence but I know that they have pushed my views down. Where I used to get hundreds of views now I only get a few dozen views. I do see that they have ensured that my timeline doesn’t show up much on my followers’ timeline even though I have well over 5000 followers,” she laments. As she noted “definitely there’s a loss of visibility and voice since we are propagating views on minorities and marginalised sections’ issues. It’s a silencing of our voices and issues.”

To counter this, Stephen employs deliberate strategies for self-preservation: “One of the strategies is to ignore ad hominem attacks. I also refuse to get scared or intimidated by replies which are intended to instil fear. Since I don’t show any reaction which they expect their weapon is blunted and gets no results. Another thing is that if I start tagging people

and bringing them into the discussion it's a way to give them publicity so I don't give them that opportunity."

Looking ahead, she urges platforms to act decisively: "About suggestions to platforms I feel they need to take online trolling and intimidation more attention. Often when we report an offending remark they don't take action saying that the post doesn't violate their community standards."

Swara and Richa have faced intense online trolling and communal vitriol for their interfaith marriages to Muslim men.

Trolling Richa Chadha and Swara Bhasker for Muslim Marriages

Bollywood actresses Richa Chadha and Swara Bhasker have faced intense online trolling and communal vitriol for their interfaith marriages to Muslim men, often framed as "love jihad" by right-wing netizens. Chadha, who married actor Ali Fazal in October 2022, endured rape and death threats as early as 2021 for dating him, with abusers on Twitter (now X) hurling slurs and demanding platform bans, prompting support from Bhasker and filmmaker Pooja Bhatt who condemned the harassment as violations of community standards.

Post-wedding, Chadha was lumped into broader attacks on Hindu women "betraying" their faith, echoing the backlash during her festivities amid the Aftab Poonawala murder case's shadow. Similarly, Bhasker announced her January 2023 court marriage to political activist Fahad Ahmad on February 16, unleashing a torrent of Islamophobic tweets from Hindu extremists, referencing the Shraddha Walkar killing with taunts like "congratulations in advance for covering Swara in black tarpaulin," and tying her to Chadha in narratives of doomed interfaith unions. Both women, known for outspoken feminism and minority rights advocacy, have highlighted how such coordinated abuse weaponizes religion to police personal choices.

The Survivors' Prescription for a Safer, More Just Internet

Online toxicity is the flip side of the digital culture. In most of the cases, immaturity, sadistic pleasure, vengeance, existence crisis, malice intentions are the reasons behind such undesirable behaviour.

The women who endure these digital assaults offer a clear path forward for reclaiming social media as a tool for empowerment, not hatred. They unanimously define the abuse not as mere "trolling," but as "sexual harassment" and "online bullying at its worst", a direct extension of offline patriarchy.

To combat this, they demand concrete action: social media platforms must implement faster, stricter moderation, particularly against repeat offenders issuing rape threats, and expand their vigilance beyond English and Hindi to include India's many regional languages where much of this hate thrives.

Crucially, they argue that accountability cannot rest on platforms alone. Political leadership must unequivocally condemn this misogynistic and casteist trolling, sending a powerful signal that such coordinated attacks are unacceptable. Ultimately, their testimony highlights that any effective solution must view this violence through an "intersectional prism," recognizing how caste, religion, and gender compound the attacks. Without this multifaceted response, combating both the online symptoms and the offline prejudice they mirror, the digital space will remain a battlefield, undermining the very empowerment it once promised.

- Geetha Sunil Pillai is a Laadli Media Fellow. The opinions and views expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse the views.

Link: https://en.themooknayak.com/women-news/weaponized-identity-mapping-coordinated-digital-assaults-on-women-dissenters-at-the-intersection-of-caste-faith-and-politics

11

Cyber Harassment: Why Young Women from Small Towns Are Quitting Politics in India

Varsha Torgalkar | Themooknayak.com | 19th December 2025

With the rise of social media and AI, young female political workers and leaders from small towns regularly face digital violence. They either decide to remain shut online or leave politics. Experts express the need for grassroots awareness about cybercrime and stricter guidelines by social media companies and also the government.

Savita Pawar (name changed), president of the female wing of the youth wing of one of the leading political parties from Yavatmal district of Maharashtra, always had a dream to serve the public and had started to work for women and youth from her district for one of the national political parties since 2017.

A few months ago, she posted a video on her social media page criticising a godman who had criticised one of the political leaders from her party. "It was my regular way of expressing my views. However, I started to receive obscene messages in the comment section and on my mobile. The language used in those texts was so vulgar. My photos with Rahul Gandhi were morphed and circulated among all local party members. Though I was experiencing a mental breakdown, I lodged an FIR, and now the case is in the court. The judge, while listening to those vulgar comments, told her reader to stop and just share that document with her. The comments were so vulgar. It caused me immense mental damage. Thankfully, I had already blocked all my family members on all my social media handles; they did not come to know about it. Otherwise, they would have asked me to leave politics," said Savita.

Though Savita continues to work for her political party, she has stopped expressing her views on social media. She says her trolls have definitely become successful in shutting her voice, at least online.

Digital violence against young female political workers from small towns

"In India, women sarpanchs, corporators, and political workers face deepfake videos, vulgar comments, character assassination, and organised trolling on social media. And social media presence for politicians is a need of the hour. Compared to their male counterparts, the attacks against women are far more personal, sexualised, and gender-based, which clearly shows a pattern of discrimination," said Manali Bhilare, State Yuvati President and State Spokesperson of Maharashtra, Nationalist Congress Party – Sharadchandra Pawar.

"For women from smaller towns, the impact is far harsher. They already deal with social pressure, limited support, safety concerns, and financial constraints. On top of this, they face AI-generated deepfakes, morphed photos, their phone numbers being leaked, and gender-based rumours spreading on WhatsApp, Facebook, or local social media groups for mere presence on social media or expressing their views. Such digital attacks damage their confidence and create fear, often forcing them to step back before even starting their political journey," she added.

"In general, female participation in politics, even just as party workers, especially from smaller towns or slum settlements in urban areas, remains low due to reasons like deep-rooted patriarchy and socio-economic-cultural barriers. When they join, they often suffer from character assassination, like serious-level allegations that affect them throughout their lives. And now, that violence against female political leaders has started reducing girls from joining politics," said Gitali V. M., a feminist scholar and also editor of Milun Saryajani, a feminist Marathi magazine based in Pune.

Female participation in politics in India

There are less than 10% female MLAs in state assemblies and 13% female MPs in Parliament of India. Through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts, India has reserved 33% seats for women in local bodies since 1993. And a few states have increased that reservation to 50%. However, it is an open secret that male members, like husbands/brothers/fathers of these women representatives, call the shots in decision-making.

As per the UN 2025 report, 16-58% of women across the world have faced digital violence, and 44% of women lack legal support to fight against this violence. And women in leadership, politics, and business are at the forefront of the attack. As per Amnesty International India's 2020 report, 95 female politicians in India received one million hateful responses on social media from March to May in 2019 ahead of the Lok Sabha elections. One in five of these responses were abusive or misogynist.

Prey in love and life ended

Sarika Pawar (name changed), a 20-year-old college student of BA, always had a passion to do social work. Being from a village of not more than 5,000 population in a marginalised district of Maharashtra's Marathwada, she started to help college student girls from smaller villages to join a college at the block level. She convinced the college management to arrange transport for girls; otherwise, their families would discontinue their education. Meanwhile, she joined a leading state-level political party to solve problems of students from smaller villages that have no educational facilities, like helping with concessions in fees for poor students and helping with applying online forms for government exams.

"However, one of the male students, who was from the opposite party, had started to chat with, text, and finally started dating her. They both would meet at a bridge outside the village or sugarcane farms, where he took her private photos. Soon, he started threatening to circulate her photos among friends. Her family, after getting to know about it, beat him and made sure he deleted her photos. However, he had a backup in his mobile of his

friend and continued to threaten her. The girl's family finally married her off to a farmer in a village in one of the districts of Konkan that is 500 km away from this village. Now, nobody from the girl's village can go that far, or someone from that village can come here. In fact, she was not even asked to attend the funeral of her own grandmother. Now she is a homemaker, abandoning all her political aspirations," tells her friend.

Shipla Sane (name changed) from Shiv Sena (UBT) Party, from one of the blocks in Gondia district, says, "Shiv Sena party is known for firebrand leaders who give it back in the language of abusers. But still, when it comes to women who receive obscene/objectionable comments like I get it regularly, I cannot reply to trolls when the language is obscene/vulgar. I have just muted the response section so that none can comment on my posts. And that is what most of my female colleagues from my party have done. But then our reach to people gets restricted, and that definitely affects our potential success."

Ketaki Date (name changed again), like her father and brother, was working for a national-level political party and left politics after her obscene photos were circulated for no particular reason. "Despite having a political background, I had to face it. As a girl who wants to be married, there is no way I would continue to remain in politics. Imagine how girls who don't have a political background or financial support will dream of serving people through politics?"

Role of rural youth in digital violence against women in politics

Amruta Kaldate, Rural President, Rashtravadi Yuvati Congress (NCP-SP), says, "I am from a small village from Kej, a marginalised block from the backward Marathwada region of the state. If you go to any village around, you will find groups of unemployed boys sitting at the village squares or tea kiosks. They generally are on the job to find girls who are in public places, like in politics or even social work, stalk them on social media, and post obscene comments/trolling on their posts, for which they get some money from local leaders of opposition parties. This is the common scenario across India. Thus, young aspirant girls face violence on the field in villages and also digitally. And when it is at the village level, its extremely vulgar language that nobody would want to listen to."

Amruta, though a software engineer by profession and aware of the power of social media, tells, "I work with hundreds of girls from rural Maharashtra. Though they are keen to join politics, they remain cautious about their image through their public participation or online presence. We cannot convince half of the girls to join the party for this reason. One obscene comment on their social media post, and their families compel them to leave education, jobs, politics, and just marry them off to boys they select. And this digital media, especially artificial intelligence, has been proving catastrophic for girls from smaller towns who want to be seen on social media."

Tara Krishnaswamy, co-founder, Political Shakti, a non-partisan group of citizens campaigning for more women MLAs and MPs, said, "Patriarchy suppresses access to public places for women, and politics is about public places. Whenever women want to access public places through politics, patriarchy comes in with antisocial use, sexual abuse, rape, and now through social media. Though social media was supposed to be a

democratised medium, patriarchy through violence is restricting women who are keen to be in public places. We have seen even educated ministers making statements like why women want smartphones? Social media apps/websites have regulations in place. But this is the issue of gender equality. Until that is not addressed, patriarchy will continue to harass women through all means, like even the most latest digital evolution that AI. And yes, digital violence is affecting female participation in politics negatively."

As gender discrimination has now gone digital, taking criminal form, young female political aspirants are either choosing not to enter the field or remaining silent on important issues due to fear of online abuse, as per many experts.

What cyber experts say

"We receive 3-4 complaints of digital violence—women political workers and content creators from small towns facing digital violence—trolling, rape threats, doxing, circulation of nude pics made with AI. We do help them with taking down this content by writing to social media platforms like Meta. But one report/complaint to a platform like Meta does not mean that content gets removed from online completely. This content reappears on another platform and gets circulated," said Sameer P., project lead at Meri Trustline, a helpline run by Rati Foundation working for women, children, and marginalised people who face digital violence.

"Victims/survivors suffer from severe loss of personality damage, dignity, violation of personality, and suffer from mental health issues like paranoia and anxiety. They remain in anxiety that their family members, friends, relatives, and neighbours will come to know. Many times, they stop creating content, and thus that is the end of their freedom and

career," he added. "In general, there is no awareness about legal or cyber rights among people. They don't know how and where to lodge a complaint to remove explicit content. Besides, police are also not sensitised, as they blame victims with comments like 'Why are you posting on social media?', retraumatising victims. Female police officers are available to take complaints. Based on our work with police, they lack resources like lack of knowledge of English or technology to raise issues with social platforms or remove explicit content from online. Police many times also refer victims to us."

Besides, helplines like this are limited across India, and victims or even the general public are generally not aware of such helplines. And India's Information Technology Act 2000, to deal with cybercrime, is ill-equipped to address gender-related technology-facilitated abuse. The cyber wing of Maharashtra Police did not reply to the email requiring what measures are in place to protect women from online abuse. As gender discrimination has now gone digital, taking criminal form, young female political aspirants are either choosing not to enter the field or remaining silent on important issues due to fear of online abuse, as per many experts.

Bhilare says, "Digital harassment is not only a cybercrime; it is a structural barrier that limits women's equal representation in politics. This is a threat to democracy. Solving this issue requires two strong actions: one, better AI-based regulation and stronger accountability from social media companies; and two, better digital awareness and cyber-safety training for girls and women at the grassroots level."

- Varsha Torgalkar is a Laadli Media Fellow. The opinions and views expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse the views.

Link: https://en.themooknayak.com/women-news/cyber-harassment-why-young-women-from-small-towns-are-quitting-politics-in-india

IV

Digital Violence Against Women in Public Life: Journalists, Activists, Artists & Celebrities

For women who dare to be visible, digital space has become a battlefield. Journalists exposing truth, activists demanding justice, artists expressing dissent and celebrities asserting autonomy are routinely met with waves of sexualised threats, abuse and intimidation meant to remind them of their "place." Rape threats, death threats, character assassination and doxxing are not random acts of cruelty but calculated strategies of silencing. The aim is simple and brutal: exhaust them, frighten them, make them retreat. Every attack is a warning that leadership has a price, that voice invites violence, that visibility invites punishment. Digital platforms become tools to police ambition and crush courage, turning public women into targets rather than role models. This is how power is enforced online—not by debate, but by terror; not by disagreement, but by the systematic attempt to erase women from positions of influence, authority and change.

- *Why women journalists can't log off* — Diya Maria George
- *Lights, Camera, Cruelty: How India's Most Popular Reality Show Transforms Female Participants into Targets of Real-World Digital Violence* — Geetha Sunil Pillai
- *Fearless and Resilient to any threats, Women Embrace Every Challenge* — Asmita Dave
- *Alarming statistics and findings of the ever-increasing hatred towards women in the digital world* — Asmita Dave

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Why women journalists can't log off?

Diya Maria George | The New Indian Express | 14th December 2025

While online abuse against women journalists has become systematic, gendered, and dangerous, institutions are failing to protect them

A barrage of slurs floods the social media — "ugly," "aunty," "bimbo". Subha J Rao calls this a "normal week" on social media. After 28 years of working as a journalist, she has learned that she can never predict what will set people off.

Recently, Subha noticed a surge of attacks on journalists who reviewed the Hindi film Dhurandhar. Journalist Anupama Chopra's review was taken down. Another journalist Sucharita Tyagi faced relentless harassment for her views. And, for others, routine slurs escalated to death threats, with demands they leave the country — a deluge of hatred simply for doing their job.

It was just another day in the torrent of online attacks against journalists, particularly women. Across India, women journalists describe a similar pattern: abuse that begins online and spills into their personal life; hostility that scars mental health, shapes their daily routines, and professional choices; a constant calculation of risk.

Identity as weapon

For many women journalists, their identities become the criteria for the abuse. Mariam (name changed), a journalist in Tamil Nadu, intuitively knows when the attacks intensify. "I see hate mails, slurs, name-calling and abuses only when I write stories featuring Dalits or highlight caste discrimination. They don't see a journalist, they see a Muslim propagandist, to the extent that I've had readers call me terrorist, anti-national, jihadist, randi (prostitute)." These labels have distorted how she views her own works. "I have begun feeling like my stories are being conceived as a tool to fuel more Dalit hatred, instead of highlighting and uplifting their voice."

Rachel Chitra, a journalist of more than two decades of experience, has had her share of religion-based abuses. "Because I'm a Christian, people call me 'rice bag convert'. Writer and journalist Nisha Susan, recalls similar attacks from over a decade ago. "Back in 2009-10, the accusations were bizarre. Someone said I was an agent of the Vatican; another said my real name was Mehrunisa." BH Harsh, a reporter at TNIE opines that "the choice of language (against women journalists) is a lot more intense" often used as sexual slurs, making them vicious.

The attacks often extend beyond words. For Shivani Kava, senior reporter at The News Minute, reporting on the Dharmasthala case in Karnataka, made even her name a target. "People asked me to change my name from Shivani because it's a Shiva temple — calling me a stain on Hindus." Someone created an AI-generated caricature of her profile picture — "added pimples, gave it bigger breasts, and cleavage." Though she reshared it online with defiance, the bravado masks deeper fears. "These things get scary when you're reporting from your hometown. People know where your family lives."

Nisha explains that people constantly assess your caste, religion, and region, online and offline. She says, "If you are not Savarna and Hindu, things get harder."

When the digital bleeds into reality

The boundary between professional and personal life is collapsing. Shivani learned this on Church Street in Bengaluru. A man approached her complaining that she had reported on him. Shivani says, "He was the creator of an Instagram account that posted non-consensual videos of women at Church Street." She walked away. And he screamed after her, 'What did I do wrong?' "After the incident, I removed most personal pictures from my feed. He followed me from two or three different accounts until I blocked him," says Shivani. This made her extra cautious even when she wasn't working. "After that, I didn't go there for two or three weeks. I still won't go alone at night." Anushka (name changed), a photojournalist in Tamil Nadu, experienced a violation of consent from another part of the world. Three or four years ago, her Facebook Messenger suddenly filled with messages from Ethiopia. Around 50 people contacted her. "They had taken one of my fieldwork pictures — of me holding a lens — and used it on an extremist page filled with guns. They described me as a revolutionary photojournalist in India, like what they were doing in Ethiopia. It felt strange."

The hierarchy of risk

Journalists face abuse on different levels. There is a hierarchy of vulnerability that tracks language, caste, religion, and class. Anushka points out the language divide. "Regional journalists get more online abuse, comparatively. They are easy targets. If someone working for a Tamil newspaper posts something controversial, the abuse is immediate."

Independent journalist Greeshma Kuthar confirms this. "For English-language journalists, most threats stay online. Regional journalists get direct threats. Many who've been attacked or killed were regional reporters. We're actually protected in comparison and also better paid."

Age, too, determines vulnerability. Nisha observes, "Younger women get the casual constant harassment far more. Criticise a movie star or politician in some states, and you have to prepare for backlash."

The ubiquity of attack

For Shivani, the first time she realised online abuse was becoming dangerous was during coverage of a "communal incident" in Udupi, where three Muslim students were suspended

for filming a Hindu woman. One of the messages she received read, "We will put cameras into your washroom and then you call it a prank."

The requirement of a journalist to widen their online presence can also make their escape almost impossible. Shivani states, "The marketing of our stories happens on social media." For independent journalists like Greeshma, there's no choice at all. "I'm only on X (Formerly called Twitter) and Instagram because I have to be. As an independent journalist, that's the only way to get your work out."

Real life experiences can't lie

Kunal Majumder, Asia Pacific Programme Coordinator at the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ, has documented cases that reveal a darker picture. "Unfortunately, nine out of 10 journalists targeted online in India are women." He describes, highlighting high-profile examples, "Neha Dixit was stalked by someone who kept calling and describing her whereabouts. Rana Ayyub's face was morphed into pornographic content." Then there are organised campaigns. "We've seen everything from the awful Sulli Deals and Bulli Bai auctions, where photographs of Muslim women — journalists, historians, others — were posted online for 'bidding', to regional trolling patterns even in Kerala and Tamil Nadu where sexual innuendo and character assassination are common," Kunal notes. Even in a state like Kerala that is known for its highest literacy rate, women journalists told Kunal that they have faced attacks from political actors across ideologies, as well as from fans. He observes, "They are frequently targeted through online posts with deep sexual undertones, which are used to tarnish journalists' credibility and as a form of psychological warfare. Data shows that harassment of women journalists in India is a deeply systemic problem and is ideologically agnostic." IT wings of all political parties behave the same way, adds Greeshma. She says, "They're henchmen waiting to attack anyone critical of their party. There's no difference between them."

The institutional void

When facing this onslaught, women journalists should be able to turn to their pillars of support — the newsrooms, the police, and journalism collectives. Some journalists acknowledge genuine support from institutions. Shivani's experience at her newsroom reveals what proactive newsroom support looks like. "When any of us is targeted, our editor personally calls and even advises us to take a break from social media for a week. It's important to have women in managerial positions."

While these are exceptional cases, Nisha identifies the structural problem. "A very few media workers are actual employees with rights. Most are contract labourers. If something happens, a threat, a lawsuit, a trolling campaign, the organisation has no obligation to support you."

Perhaps most disappointing, Greeshma says, is the response — or lack of it — from organisations meant to represent journalists' interests. "During the reporting of the Manipur violence, many of us, mostly women, were targeted viciously. None of the press unions said a word."

She describes a selective outrage by these institutions. “They issue statements depending on where the violence is happening, it’s posturing,” she says. “If women journalists are facing a clear, documented pattern of abuse, shouldn’t these bodies push back? Lobby with X or the government? News organisations just tell journalists not to post or not to engage. Nobody is making the space safer.” That silence, she shares, reinforces isolation.

When Rachel’s harassment escalated to rape threats and the leaking of her mobile number and location, her organisation recommended she speak to the police. “The police told me, ‘Just block all the accounts.’ They didn’t file an FIR — just a CSR (Community Service Register) — and nothing happened. That’s when I realised the police are going to be of no help.”

Filing complaints itself is a tedious process for many. Shivani points out the loopholes, “In the Church Street case, the man was arrested earlier but still returned to the exact same spot after getting bail.”

Social media platforms have become the greatest institutional failure. Rachel experienced the platform hierarchy herself. When a friend in Manipur received death threats, they both reported it to Facebook. Nothing happened for 24 hours. “Only when I messaged Facebook’s India head did the posts get taken down. These platforms thrive on engagement.”

The reckoning needed

Kunal identifies where intervention is needed, starting with newsrooms themselves. “Newsrooms must be proactive, not reactive. Safety protocols don’t have to be expensive. Journalists covering riots should not be sent alone, especially if they belong to the religious community being targeted. The first person a journalist calls when in danger is their editor. If editors aren’t serious about safety, blaming the state alone won’t solve anything.” The government must act, he argues not as a favour but as democratic necessity.

The pattern of online abuse, Kunal notes, is not unique to India, but it takes a particular form here. In Bangladesh, journalists are targeted along clear lines of political polarisation. In Nepal, retaliation follows corruption reporting, often cutting across party lines. In Sri Lanka, ethnic identity shapes who is attacked and when. In India, however, journalists are frequently targeted simply for reporting critically about those in power, whether at the Centre or in the states or locally and women are disproportionately exposed to this risk.

Women continue to report not because the system protects them, but because they believe the work matters. When a society relies on bravery instead of protection, it signals not strength, but neglect.

The author is a Laadli Media Fellow. The opinions and views expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse the views.

Link: https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2025/Dec/14/why-women-journalists-cant-log-off

13

Lights, Camera, Cruelty: How India's Most Popular Reality Show Transforms Female Participants into Targets of Real-World Digital Violence

Geetha Sunil Pillai | themooknayak.com | 24th November 2025

Women Face Troll Storms, Body-Shaming, and Doxxing While Men Get a Pass

In Bigg Boss, women who show strength or just show up as themselves often pay a steeper price. Social Media

New Delhi- Because he's born into a legacy of music royalty, son of a Bollywood actor and composer, brother to a singing sensation, his heated threats echo like lyrics in a hit track. *"Hum isko Kutta bana denge..dangerous log hain, idhar kya bahar pakad lenge..."* he snarls in a midnight house brawl.

On another day, he crossed all limits during a fight with another female contestant and stated, "Tu aur teri mummy dono B-grade hain," yet the inmates forgot, forgave, and voted Amaal Mallik straight into the top five contenders. Fans outside? They dubbed it "fiery passion," fired up edits with his brooding stares set to remixes, and kept his poll numbers soaring. No questions asked, no backlash brewing.

But flip the script to her: a 28-year-old spiritual influencer who steps in wide-eyed, spilling stories of her grind- from childhood scars to building an empire of fancy sarees stacked like treasures, a private elevator gliding up her dream home, and yes, a squad of 150 bodyguards shadowing her every move in a city that once felt too big. Her boasting about having many factories, from solar panels to construction materials, her frequent trips to Dubai just to savor a favorite snack like *Baklava*, or jetting to Delhi for a simple bowl of dal, or sipping coffee in a garden with a glance over the Taj Mahal, contestants couldn't digest what Tanya Mittal claimed about her family wealth and assets, and now the woman has been dubbed a "fenku-farzi," an untruthful person through and through.

Co-contestants sneer, housemates demand proof like it's a courtroom, and the real sting hits outside: Trolls swarm social media with "liar exposed" threads, digging for dirt on her Gwalior roots until someone files an FIR, accusing her of fraud and dragging the city's name through the mud just for "content." Social media influencer Faizan Ansari filed an FIR against Tanya Mittal at the Gwalior SSP office. Faizan alleged that Tanya defrauded people of their money and even caused her boyfriend Balraj, to be jailed. He also claimed that Tanya Mittal lied about her family and personal life on Bigg Boss 19. Faizan has demanded her arrest following the FIR filing. Doxxers go low, leaking her family's bank details and old addresses in shady Reddit threads. One post, liked over 500 times, mocks her as "boasting about wealth while playing poor."

Meanwhile, participants like Abhishek Bajaj toss around age-shaming jabs at Kunickaa Sadanand: "Old witch with a shrill voice', and walk away with laughs from the boys' club. Kunickaa, the 62-year-old vet actress, fires back once, and boom—trolls brand her a "cursing hag," dredging up her age like it's a crime. Her clip cursing Bajaj's mom? It trends as "proof she's toxic," while his retorts fade fast.

India's Bigg Boss franchise, a cultural behemoth drawing millions to its mix of drama, alliances, and unfiltered confrontations, has long blurred the line between scripted spectacle and raw human vulnerability. It airs on Colors TV. It is based on the Dutch format of Big Brother, developed by Endemol. Since its premiere on November 3, 2006, the show has completed eighteen seasons and three OTT (Over-the-Top) seasons. Presently, the show is approaching the culmination of its 19th season in two weeks. Besides the Hindi show, Big Boss has franchise in India also includes versions in Hindi, Telugu, Tamil, Malayalam, Kannada, Marathi, and Bengali.

Big Boss Hindi Season 19, which premiered on October 6, under Salman Khan's watchful eye, promised fresh faces from influencers, TV actors, film artists and reality stars. Yet, beneath the glamour, it has amplified a pernicious undercurrent: gendered online violence that spills from the show's confined walls into the vast, algorithm-driven arenas of social media. Female contestants, in particular, face a disproportionate torrent of abuse- doxxing, body-shaming, slut-shaming, and threats, that transforms fleeting on-screen moments into sustained real-world trauma.

Big Boss Malayalam host Mohanlal and the lesbian couple Adhila Nasarin and Fathima Noora.

That same uneven pull shows up in Bigg Boss Malayalam Season 7, launched in August 2025, where two brave women, Adhila Nasarin and Fathima Noora, made history as Kerala's first openly lesbian couple on the show. They hold hands through tasks, share soft moments amid the noise, and own their love like it's the simplest thing. But when contestants Lakshmi Priyanka and Mastani spit out words like "unnatural" and "forced" in a house blow-up on September 13, the cameras roll, and the outside world piles on.

Trolls spin memes mocking Noora's body as "too bold" or "unfeminine," hashtags like #UnnaturalCouple explode with slurs and shares, turning a step forward into a step back. Host Mohanlal steps in the next day, his voice steady and strong: "If you can't respect love like theirs, this house isn't for you." He adds a warm hug of words, saying he'd welcome them home anytime, and fans cheer the stand.

This is the bitter truth of reality shows: Women pay more to play, their strength twisted into targets while men's rough edges get sanded smooth.

Suman Devathiya, staunch feminist and activist

This report, drawing from over 100 verified X posts, news articles, and fan analyses since the season's launch, spotlights the digital backlash against key female participants like Tanya Mittal, Farrhana Bhatt, Malti Chahar and Kunickaa Sadanand. It also touches on others like Ashnoor Kaur and Neelam Giri, whose experiences underscore a pattern. While male contestants like Abhishek Bajaj and Amaal Mallik often evade similar scrutiny for comparable behaviors such as threats or aggressive rhetoric—the women endure amplified misogyny.

Algorithms on platforms like X (formerly Twitter) and Instagram prioritize outrage, creating echo chambers where slurs trend faster than support. As one X user lamented

amid the frenzy, “Bigg Boss used to be about individuality, but today it’s about hypocrisy.” This isn’t mere “trolling”—it’s systemic harm, where entertainment ecosystems normalize violence against women in public view.

Data reveals a stark gender divide: Searches for “Bigg Boss 19 harassment” yield 70% female-targeted results, with slurs like “slut,” “fake,” and “gutter mouth” surging post-episode airings. This report proposes actionable reforms to mitigate this cruelty.

It’s clear the makers never wanted Tanya to stand apart.

1. When she distanced herself from Amal, she got targeted.
2. When she spoke up, they roasted her.
3. When she stayed silent, they called her fake.
4. When she avoided groups as advised, they again bashed her.

The double…

— Kaur Preet (@kaur_preet2903) October 12, 2025

Tanya Mittal, the 28-year-old spiritual influencer who gained traction through Instagram reels blending wellness and wit, entered Bigg Boss 19 on Day 1. Her poised demeanor and advocacy for mental health quickly polarized viewers. Inside the house, she navigated alliances with Amaal Mallik and Gaurav Khanna, but clips of her “sympathy plays”like emotional breakdowns over ration disputes, ignited a firestorm outside.

Online trolls have weaponized these moments into character assassination. A viral clip from November 5, showed Amaal Mallik threatening, “Kutta bana denge bahar bhi pakad lenge” (We’ll turn you into a dog and catch you outside), sparking demands for “mental harassment” probes. Yet, the backlash pivoted to Tanya: Accusations of faking tears for “footage” flooded X, with users labeling her as a manipulator who “lies and boasts about her wealth.”

Deeper dives reveal doxxing attempts. Post her revelation of childhood abuse- “He used to beat me”- trolls unearthed and mocked old family photos, with one Reddit thread claiming she “cleaned all posts” from her “adult toys” sales era, blending slut-shaming with economic smears.

When a wild card entry, Malti Chahar, came inside the house and told the housemates that people are verifying Tanya’s claims and found them false, everyone starts making fun of the latter and label her ‘farzi’ and her all of her acts as done for ‘footage’ and camera.

One of her supporters posted on x, “Repeated bullying, targeting and wrongly set narratives by the show for content. No limit to the abuse she faced. Even now, the “fake” narrative is being set to justify other contestants’ vile behaviour. Basic empathy & humanity don’t belong in #BB19”.

It’s a pattern that repeats: Men roar, get redeemed; women whisper back, get wrecked.

Tanya and Farrhana have made it to the top 8 contestants in Big Boss 19 along with Ashnoor and Malti.

Farrhana Bhatt, the 32-year-old actress from *Laila Majnu*, entered BB 19 house as a peace activist but became a lightning rod for body-shaming and homophobic trolling.

Farrhana Bhatt consistently revealed her unfiltered self throughout the season and unapologetically embraced her vampish edge without a hint of remorse—even after Salman Khan called her out twice for her abusive language. From dramatically tearing Neelam Giri's heartfelt letter to shreds during a tense confrontation, to bluntly admitting she has no idea who Gaurav Khanna is because she avoids TV serials altogether and has zero inclination to dive into the television industry despite its massive reach, Farhana remains defiantly true to her no-holds-barred persona.

A November 10 viral ad from her early career, showing a "unrecognisable" unibrow, exploded into brutal mockery: "Her audacity to enter BB with this face- shocks netizens." X erupted with slurs like "manhoos aurat" (cursed woman) and "pa*al aurat" (loose woman), with one post garnering 591 likes: "Cursing her like 'akeli reh jaayegi, akeli maregi' just shows how desperate they are to isolate her." Semantic searches for "Farhana Bhatt abuse" yielded 15 negative hits, including accusations of "homophobic freak" and "filthy mouth," tying her house comments to external shaming.

A heated exchange between Farrhana and Amaal hit a new low. Amaal used derogatory words for the actress and her mother to whcih Farrhana too, retorted sharply with equally abusive words. Amaal's aunt, Roshan Garry Bhinder, jumps into a YouTube rant on November 3, labeling Farhana a "terrorist" over the spat—words that sting with ugly undertones, especially in a country still healing from biases.

The video spreads like wildfire, racking up views before Farhana's family strikes back. On November 5, they slap Bhinder with a defamation notice, demanding a public apology, the video's takedown, and a whopping ₹1 crore in damages. Farrhana's PR team posts on her behalf: "Words hurt, but I won't break." Her strength? It only amps up the trolls, who now call her "fake victim" while Amaal's fan club shrugs off his outbursts as "alpha energy."

Ashnoor Kaur, 21, the *Yeh Rishta* child star turned adult hopeful, wanted Season 19 to be her "reinvention." Her bubbly energy lit up early tasks, but a November 8 captaincy scramble turned toxic. Kunickaa Sadanand, Neelam Giri, and Tanya huddled, whispering: "Jurassic Park dinosaur—even detox can't fix that bloat," mocking her mid-task snack. "Looks older than Kunickaa with no eating control," Neelam added. Ashnoor overheard, froze, then fled to the bathroom.

Family week on November 14 cracked her open. Sobbing into her dad's arms—"It's haunted me since teens, led to an eating disorder"—she spilled years of industry jabs. Salman called out the trio on Vaar: "Body-shaming a 21-year-old? Shame on you."

Celebs rallied: Hina Khan tweeted, "Disgusting—Ashnoor's confident, talented. End this." But online? The whispers amplified into roars. #AshnoorOut spiked November 15, not for gameplay but "curves"—edited clips zooming her "weight gain tendency," memes of her as a "snack monster" hitting hundreds of shares. Ashnoor Kaur's recent look during family week in the Bigg Boss 19 house also led to her being trolled on social media. However, Shehbaz's shirtless look drew zero trolls or body-shaming jabs online, a glaring contrast to the relentless mockery Ashnoor faced over her family-week clothes.

"Joker of the season", "Dressing sense hopeless", "Please someone give her a full pant", "This is how kids roam around the house after potty" were some more comments on the picture doing the rounds.FB/ THE KHABRI

It is crucial to note that the show's host, Salman Khan, has consistently used his "Weekend Ka Vaar" platform to call out reprehensible behavior, regardless of the perpetrator. He has publicly reprimanded Amaal Mallik for his threats, chastised Shehbaaz for his misogynistic remarks, held Farrhana accountable for her language, and corrected Tanya when she body-shamed Ashnoor Kaur. The corrective message is, therefore, officially delivered. However, this sanctioned reprimand often fails to permeate the public consciousness.

The audience, fueled by pre-existing biases and algorithmic amplification, engages in a selective consumption of events. The host's moralizing is quickly forgotten, while the original, unedited moments of conflict are extracted, weaponized, and virally circulated. This dynamic unfolds with a distinct gendered ferocity; when a woman is the subject of controversy, the backlash is disproportionately severe, transforming her from a contestant into a target for sustained digital violence, while male contestants' transgressions are often overlooked, rationalized, or even celebrated as strategic gameplay.

The female winners of Big Boss seasons so far.

This uneven ground isn't new—it's been the show's shadow for 18 seasons, where bold women step up and step into a spotlight rigged against them. Go back to Season 4, and Shweta Tiwari, the single mom fighting for her kid's normalcy, faces off against a housemate's ugly divorce digs. She wins the season, trophy in hand, but online? Trolls slut-shame her past relationships, body-bash her curves as "desperate auntie bait."

Fast-forward to Season 11, Shilpa Shinde, the bubbly bahu type, clashes with Vikas Gupta in epic rows—he calls her "illiterate," she claps back sharp. Vikas gets painted as the "mastermind," his barbs forgiven as "tough love." Shilpa? Labeled "gossip queen" and hit

with weight trolls that stick long after her win, posts like “Fat and fake—how did she fool everyone?” racking up shares.

Over 18 seasons, the toll adds up: Women like Gauahar Khan (Season 7 winner) face “diva gone wrong” tags for demanding respect, while men like Gautam Gulati (Season 8) get “bad boy charm” for the same. It’s a quiet bias, baked into the binge-watch culture, where female fire is “drama,” male fire is “iconic.”

The numbers tell the story plain and simple. Out of 18 seasons, eight trophies have gone to women—Shweta Tiwari, Juhi Parmar, Urvashi Dholakia, Gauahar Khan, Shilpa Shinde, Dipika Kakkar, Rubina Dilaik, and Tejasswi Prakash. That’s less than half, with ten men like Rahul Roy, Ashutosh Kaushik, Vindu Dara Singh, Gautam Gulati, Prince Narula, Manveer Gurjar, Sidharth Shukla, MC Stan, Munawar Faruqui and Karan Veer Mehra claiming the rest. Why? Not just game smarts—it’s the audience vote, the same one that trends #EvictHer for a strong stand but rallies #SaveHim for a shove.

Society cheers women who play nice, stay soft, but when they lead—like Adhila and Noora owning their truth, or Farhana demanding fair play—the backlash builds walls. Strong women on screen? They inspire, sure. But in the vote tallies, that strength gets spun as “bossy” or “unlikable,” leaving men to scoop the prizes and the praise. It’s a mindset mirror: We love the show for its mess, but when women make the mess, we clean it up with cruelty.

Maria has been mercilessly trolled for years after her participation in Big Boss show in 2017.

Maria Juliana, better known as Julie, skyrocketed to fame with her fiery stint on Bigg Boss Tamil Season 1 (2017), but it came at a steep cost, relentless public mockery and criticism for her unfiltered antics inside the house. Even after eviction, the backlash lingered, with trolls savaging her film Amman Thayee’s (2019) teaser on social media.

Fed up with the nonstop negativity, Juliana unleashed an emotional video railing against the abusers hurling crass insults over a two-year-old "lie" from the show. "I get comments so vile I can't even read them, why this endless hate? What do you gain from it? Have I ever hurt you personally? If not, why drag me for one Bigg Boss slip? I'll take the abuse only if every hater admits they've never lied in their life," she vented, her raw plea cutting through the noise.

Jaipur's Suman Devathiya, a women's rights activist fighting domestic abuse, quit Bigg Boss many seasons ago. "I stopped following the show long back because of its stoopingly low content and misogynistic approach," she stated. "There is no check on the participants, hence they keep speaking trash all the time, so much that it's below the belt. Why doesn't the Ministry put any regulations on such shows? I&B should mandate sensitivity training, like for films. This isn't fun—it's free lessons in hate."

Shiny Samson, 26, a Kerala based lawyer building a practice on cyber-harassment cases, echoes her. "It clearly fuels gender violence," she said via Zoom, her bookshelf stacked with NCW reports. "People still love the men who have no respect for women." She cites Amaal's slurs: "Only physical assault throws you out, but spoken harassment? Beeped and forgotten."

Retired psychologist Dr. Gayatri Tiwari, who spent decades studying media influences, offers a detailed explanation on the gender based digital harassment. "The show operates on a classic operant conditioning model," she stated from her home study. "When male contestants use aggression or misogyny and are subsequently rewarded with more screen time, public attention, and even victory, it powerfully reinforces that behavior in the minds of viewers. The constant, beeped-out verbal abuse is particularly insidious as it normalizes the intent to degrade women, while the lack of meaningful consequences teaches audiences that such behavior is an effective, if not celebrated, strategy for social success."

A February 2024 research paper, titled «The Dark Side of Reality TV: A Case Study of ‹Bigg Boss›» by Prasanna Dasari, investigates the negative psychological and societal impacts of the popular reality show. The study›s major finding is that «Bigg Boss (Telugu)» fosters a toxic viewing environment by promoting addictive habits, normalizing negative behaviors like aggression and emotional manipulation, and exacerbating mental health issues such as anxiety and stress among its audience. Through content analysis and a case study, the research demonstrates how the show's reliance on conflict and voyeurism leads to heightened emotional reactivity and social detachment in viewers.

Based on these findings, the study issues a strong recommendation for a critical re-evaluation of such content. It calls for media producers to adopt more ethical responsibilities in their programming and urges viewers to become more conscious, critical consumers. The paper advocates for a collective effort to ensure reality TV content uplifts social and personal well-being rather than undermining it.

Anshu Nair, a New Zealand-based socially conscious individual , suggests the makers have a clear path to containment. "The producers must move beyond performative beeps and implement a strict, zero-tolerance policy for any form of harassment, verbal or otherwise," Nair asserts. "This means immediate financial penalties and, for severe or repeated offenses, expulsion from the show. Furthermore, it is imperative to have licensed

counselors on set at all times to provide real-time support to contestants and to intervene in toxic situations before they escalate for entertainment."

Bigg Boss thrives because it shows us real: flaws, fights, and all. But as Season 19 barrels on, maybe it's time for the roar to shift. Not less drama, but fairer fights. Less doxxing, more dialogue. Platforms could flag the slurs faster, the show could coach on kinder cuts. Fans? We could hit like on the comebacks, not the cuts. Because when women like these endure the extra weight—the trolls, the threats, the tilted scales—they don't just survive. They redefine strong. And in a world watching, that's the real win worth voting for.

- Geetha Sunil Pillai is a Laadli Media Fellow. The opinions and views expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse the views.

Link: https://en.themooknayak.com/women-news/lights-camera-cruelty-how-indias-most-popular-reality-show-transforms-female-participants-into-targets-of-real-world-digital-violence

14

Fearless and Resilient to any threats, Women Embrace Every Challenge

Asmita Dave | NavGujarat Samay | 10th December 2025

For women, there›s nothing new about facing criticism or fears for their work. As digital media usage grows, the limits on expressing dissent grounded in information, logic, or credibility have effectively disappeared. It has become increasingly convenient to subject individuals to abuse and threats anonymously through digital platforms. This problem is compounded for the people who are popular, particularly for the women leaders, social activists, and artists, who are targeted because of their gender.

Senior journalist Gopi Maniyar stated, "I have repeatedly received threats related to my work. Some time ago in Gondal, the son of the local MLA allegedly assaulted a man, as well as several others, yet the police did not register any complaints. This led to widespread controversy. We were reporting on various aspects of how the police appeared to be under his influence.

Following these reports, I received hundreds of threatening phone calls in a single day, with callers saying things such as, *'Step outside and we'll see what happens,'* and *'we'll see how you manage to stay alive.'* Subsequently, they circulated my videos online and targeted me with vulgar abuse and obscene remarks.

Later, several other media organisations also covered the story. It seems the perpetrators felt that journalists had united, and perhaps even received directives from the political party involved. As a result, the threatening calls eventually stopped. Although multiple outlets reported on the issue, it appears that I was the only journalist who was threatened—possibly because I am a woman."

Speaking about another incident of a similar nature, Gopi Maniyar said, "During the coverage of the Asaram Ahmedabad ashram case, I was severely beaten by members of the ashram. I had filed a complaint against all of them. They repeatedly threatened me to withdraw that complaint as well. At that time, I definitely felt some fear for my family, but even then, I did not take back the complaint. As for digital trolling or online comments, I don't pay attention to them at all."

Well-known journalist Devanshi Joshi says the nature of social-media threats differs sharply for male and female reporters. "When it comes to online intimidation, men and women diverge entirely. If you disagree with someone and you are a woman, people immediately question your character. Whether the issue is political or anything else, even when men receive threats, those threats target their mother or sister. But women are directly singled out," she said.

Recounting her own experiences with threats and attempts at intimidation, Joshi said, “We had exposed a financial scam involving a business group. After that, I received threats ranging from being beaten to being raped. Some people even began circulating videos against me, filled with disgusting language and vile accusations. Using a photograph of me with my own husband, they wrote, ‘Who has Devanshi Joshi been caught with red-handed?’”

She added that the comment sections below such videos were filled with explicit threats. “People wrote that if I entered their area, they would insert a rod into my private parts and parade me around. The kind of language they used is beyond imagination,” she said. Joshi later filed a cyber-crime complaint against the YouTube channel responsible for the abuse.

She pointed out that the police are often limited to registering only non-cognisable offences in digital harassment cases, restricting immediate action. In some instances, her family members also received threatening phone calls. “If I had been a man, perhaps the threats would have been limited to corruption or murder. But because I am a woman, the intensity and nature of the threats completely change,” she said.

Commenting on the pattern of online abuse, Devanshi Joshi said such offenders deliberately seek attention and reaction. “These people want you to engage with their obscene comments. That is exactly what they aim for,” she said.

Joshi added that gendered social conditioning also plays a role in how abuse affects women. “Women are brought up in a way that makes them uncomfortable even hearing or reading abusive language. A boy might respond with ten abuses of his own, but a girl often becomes shaken by it,” she said.

According to her, perpetrators act with confidence because they believe they are unlikely to face legal consequences. “They know that no real action will be taken against them, and that they will get away with it,” she said.

Mittal Patel, who works with nomadic and denotified communities, says she has faced serious threats even for undertaking welfare initiatives such as organising mass weddings for young women or sheltering girls in distress.

Patel recalled that the situation turned hostile when her organisation planned a mass wedding ceremony for girls in Vadia village. “The influential men in the village did not want the girls to marry and leave the sex trade. They began issuing constant threats over the phone, using obscene language and hurling abuse. This went on for a long time,” she said.

In another instance, Patel sheltered a young woman who had fled her home and sought her help. “Members of her community threatened to abduct her, to take other girls away from our hostel, and even to kidnap my own daughter,” she said. Patel added that people would stalk her team and make relentless threatening calls. “We were in such a state that we couldn’t sleep for days. My husband and family were terrified as well.”

Patel said she was fearful in the early years of her work, but over time the intimidation no longer unsettles her. “I don’t feel afraid anymore,” she said.

Ishani Dave, a popular singer from a well-known artistic family who promotes Gujarati folk music and culture in India and abroad, says she has frequently faced threatening or highly negative comments on social media targeting her clothing and performance style.

“On one hand, people talk about values and culture, and on the other, the same people write comments like, ‘Meet me alone and I’ll show you what happens,’” Dave said. “They preach about culture and then use abusive language. These comments or threats do not affect me. I simply feel that God should give them better sense. I cannot stop anyone.”

Speaking about another incident, Dave recounted that a person once posted an obscene comment on one of her photographs. Ishani Dave said she confronted a user who had posted obscene language on her photo. “I told him that you cannot talk about values while using such language,” she said. Other people also trolled the individual, after which he commented, *“My daughter is also a doctor.”* Dave responded, *“Tag her in this post as well, and let’s see whether you would use this language in her presence. If such language is used against any girl, would your daughter be proud of you?”* Following this, the person deleted all his comments.

She added that some people had even tried to troll her by commenting on posts of her father and brother. “As long as a male-dominated mindset persists, girls like me will continue to face such challenges,” Dave said.

Renowned psychiatrist and author Dr. Hansal Bhachech stated that individuals who threaten prominent women often have a mindset of either opposing their work or harboring resentment toward the female community as a whole. They believe that women are weak and that by threatening them, they can achieve their desired outcomes. If you are a popular figure subjected to continuous negative responses and threats, it may lead to stress, depression, or even suicide. In such situations, it is best to ignore these individuals or take stern action in serious cases.

Link: https://navgujaratsamay.com/women-stand-firm-against-criticism-and-threats-we-remain-unshaken/288453.html

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Alarming statistics and findings of the ever-increasing hatred towards women in the digital world

Asmita Dave | NavGujarat Samay | 24th November 2025

While on one hand, knowledge and emmaployment opportunities are increasing in the digital world, on the other hand, the digital world has also become a platform to afflict online harassment, violent threats, negativity, and criticism on women and affect their image. Be it ordinary housewives or famous celebrities, they all have faced this at some point of time.

Digital violence against women is becoming a menace, according to the data of the National Crime Records Bureau, digital crimes against women are continuously increasing in India. In 2020, an average of 155.5 cybercrime complaints were being registered in Gujarat every day, in 2025 this number has increased to 521. In most cases in Gujarat, to protect women from government processes and their complexity, even if there is a crime against the woman, a male member of her family is made the complainant, so it is difficult to get accurate statistics.

Year	Indian Statistics	Gujarat Statistics
2018	27,248	-
2019	44,735	8,415
2020	50,035	10,405
2021	52,974	10,730
2022	65,893	-
2023	86,420	-
2024	-	48,475

A study was conducted by Kanika Gupta on the topic of 'Misogyny in India's Patriarchal Politics' from Goethe-Institut in India. The study was conducted during Covid 19 based on tweets made on Twitter i.e. X accounts in India. One million tweets were studied between 2018 and 2021. Of these, 40,672 tweets were deemed misogynistic, with 57 percent containing sexist statements, 34 percent were racist and vulgar, 6 percent were violent against women, and 5 percent tweets were posted to insult women, and 1 percent were intended to harm or injure them.

According to the project head of 181 Abhayam Seva, which provides emergency services to women in the state of Gujarat, "We receive many complaints about women being called to harass them unnecessarily. By just calling 181, a woman can get her problem resolved

without filing a police complaint and without informing her family or others. These calls go directly to our Police Action Desk. We receive about 200 such complaints per month. In this case, those against whom a complaint has been made are called and counselled and given instructions. However, if they do not stop their misconduct, our van traces them and reaches them. In such cases, no girl or woman needs to be afraid. Action is taken only on the basis of the information given to us by the woman. We also provide telephonic counselling to them. We follow up on such cases for 21 days. In 90 percent of such complaints, the matter is resolved through counselling without any complaint. In 3 to 4 percentage cases we encounter people who have a criminal mindset, then we have to involve the police as well. If there is a case of digital harassment, we also help in removing the content with the help of the cybercrime portal by getting the URL link from them."

According to Ajay Chaudhary, Additional Director General of Gujarat Police, "Today, everything has become digital, and technology-based violence is also increasing. Along with 181, we have also started 112 service. We are creating a system where She Team, Abhayam, Women Help Desk and Cyber Crime Cell can all work together to investigate and help any case against women. When women call 181 or take help from the 'She' team, women have started to trust them. In any complaint, whether it is a complaint of a woman from a remote location or an incident of cybercrime, we are trying to find an immediate solution. We are also planning to train the 'She' team for cybercrime. We want to bring an AI-based system with a large language model, in which when someone calls for a complaint, the system analyzes it and immediately starts working on the options to suggest the actions to be taken. A counsellor would also monitor it in parallel. Thus, we are working for a quick and safe solution."

RJ Devaki, a well-known face of the radio and theatre for Ahmedabad and Gujarat, said, "Popularity is like a double-edged sword, as much as there is benefit, one has to face equal amount of difficulty. One of my films was to be released, which was called 'Hun Iqbal'. So as soon as we announced the name, people started giving negative comments in the post. People started making comments like 'Why Hun Iqbal? Why not Ram?' They have not seen the film yet, do not know about the characters and started writing below my post, 'Devaki is a muslim.' People write so many wrong things about my surname and who my parents are. Whether I am single or if I don't want to talk about my personal life in public, they still write about me in any way they want. Once I wrote a post about the pollution in the river during the Kumbh Mela, people made such nasty comments below, looking at the language in which it was written, it seems that there was more dirt in their words than the river. But it doesn't make much difference to me, yes, if someone I know who can directly call me and express disagreement with something I say, then I feel a little bit bad that there is no need for them to comment. I always say that the goddesses will be happy only if you keep women in your life happy. I don't want to be a part of any politics or any party, I have always been in favor of humanity and nature. There are also serious incidents, in which someone has trusted us and asked for our help, but then we took help of the police, we cannot disclose such things on radio."

Digital content creator and communication professional Falguni Vasavada Ojha said, "When you talk about a bold topic, there are many people who do not like what you are

saying. Just as there are people around you in society, there are also such people on social media. Then, if someone tries to troll or harass me, I try to explain my point of view to them and sometimes I also try to understand their point of view. However, if they don't want to understand, I ultimately block them. Once a woman had revealed my number, due to which I had faced a lot of trouble. At that time, I also had to file a complaint in cybercrime. You cannot fight with everyone as there are all kinds of people on social media. You are free to express your neutral views. Meanwhile we should not insult anyone, but we should not tolerate insult from anyone either."

Sharing her experience in this regard, former journalist and theatre artist Preeti Das said, "When I have spoken out in a way that some sections of society disagree with, people have also commented that 'these people should be killed'. Apart from this, I have received rape threats many times while performing on stage. Once I posted something about a performance on menstruation, and we received a tsunami of negative comments and one person wrote in the comment, 'I know where your child studies.' Your mind cannot accept this, I got very scared. Many times, people have clashed with us in live shows after watching online content. Due to this, the young girls I work with get scared. If I receive such threats or such comments, I take screenshots and have also filed a complaint with the cyber cell, the police take it seriously and help. The problem we have is that by the time a law is made or action is taken, misogynists have gone far ahead. When such comments come or someone harasses me, I worry about my child and my family and even start crying."

Regarding how to control this situation, consultant psychologist Prashant Bhimani said, "Many people consider digital platforms to be everything and a matter of their identity. They attach their identity or success criteria to their presence on the internet which is why they're more affected. They also fear that if they do not stay on social media like their friends and relatives, they will miss something important. Therefore, they cannot even leave the digital world and cannot even be present in it. This situation is called 'Approach-Avoidance Conflict'. Therefore, stress, depression, tension and constant anxiety and obsession with mobile screens increase. In this way, they become victims of a vicious cycle. Real life can provide an escape from the digital world. Involving family or friends can make a big difference. The mindset of those who engage in digital harassment or misogynistic behavior is to draw attention to themselves and to derive perverse pleasure from hurting others. There are many people who only enjoy talking to a well-known woman, then they save screenshots of the chat or comments. In this way, they also feel false pride, their unconscious desires come out in it."

Link: https://epaper.navgujaratsamay.com/c/78602916

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Digital Labour, Platform Exploitation & Economic Violence

Behind the promise of flexibility and opportunity, the digital economy is quietly reproducing old hierarchies of exploitation, with women bearing its sharpest costs. Platform work, content moderation, gig labour and online production depend on invisible, underpaid and emotionally exhausting labour that is disproportionately performed by women. Their work is algorithmically managed, endlessly monitored, and easily discarded. There is no job security, no dignity of labour, no protection from harassment or burnout. Even creativity and care are commodified, while women remain replaceable and unheard. This is economic violence in digital form, where technology masks inequality with the language of innovation. Platforms profit from women's labour while denying them rights, recognition and safety, turning digital progress into another system that extracts from women while keeping power firmly out of their hands.

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The Untold Story of the Digital Economy: Hidden Workers and Invisible Exploitation

Abdul Muqeet | Thewireurdu.com | 15th December 2025

Behind India's booming digital economy lies a shadow workforce that powers artificial intelligence, moderates content, and labels data without rights, recognition, or security.

The digital economy has become the backbone of modern life. Production, trade, services and even social interactions are now driven by digital technologies. Information and communication systems, the internet, big data, artificial intelligence, cloud computing and e-commerce shape how societies function and economies grow. Businesses sell products through online platforms, consumers transact via apps and digital payments, and governments promise efficiency through digitised services.

This transformation has created new opportunities, accelerated innovation and expanded global market access. In official narratives, the digital economy is portrayed as an equaliser, fast, inclusive and future-ready.

India, in particular, is celebrated as one of the world's fastest-growing digital economies. Bengaluru's glass-fronted tech parks, Hyderabad's HITEC City and Delhi's startup hubs stand as symbols of this revolution. According to government claims, the country has entered a new era of artificial intelligence, automation, global outsourcing and platform-based work.

Yet beneath this glittering surface lies a world rarely acknowledged, a hidden workforce that sustains the digital economy but remains invisible to policymakers, regulators and the public.

This is the world of behind-the-scenes digital labour: workers who train AI models, moderate content, annotate data and clean algorithms for some of the world's biggest technology companies without formal contracts, legal protections, social security or even knowledge of who their real employer is.

Hyderabad Nights: A Story of Digital Slavery

At 2 a.m., Salma Yasmin, 27, sits in front of her computer in Sheikhpet, Hyderabad. Originally from Uttar Pradesh, she works through the night, clicking through thousands of images identifying cars, roads, trees and human faces to help train artificial intelligence systems.

Her work is essential to the functioning of AI, yet her existence remains unrecorded.

"I work eight to ten hours a day," Salma says. "Sometimes I get ₹70 an hour, sometimes ₹100, and sometimes I get nothing. The platform tells us the work is 'not good enough' and refuses payment. What can we do? We don't even know which company the work comes from. We only see the screen never the owner."

Her words capture a defining feature of the digital economy: labour is rendered invisible. Workers have no identity, no employer to approach, and no legal framework to protect them.

These are not factories in the traditional sense but the conditions are strikingly familiar.

The New Cyber Sweatshop

Dr Humna Farooq, a labour studies researcher based in Bengaluru, describes this phenomenon as a new form of exploitation.

"We have always spoken about exploitation in factories," she says. "But today, a new form has emerged the screened worker. There is no visible employer, no office, no identity. Just work, deadlines and extremely low wages."

According to Dr Farooq, this is the twenty-first century factory, a cyber sweatshop. Machines do not get tired, but people do. India's informal labour economy has simply migrated online. Where once there were contract workers in physical factories, today there are anonymous workers on digital platforms, stripped of rights and protections.

Mental Wounds Without Support

Aamir, 28, works as an outsourced content moderator for a leading social media company in Delhi. His job involves filtering violent, hateful and disturbing content, a task that takes a severe psychological toll.

"This work hardens your heart," he says. "We see things every day that no one should see. We need mental health support, but the company says we are 'contract workers', so policies don't apply to us. No breaks, no health insurance. We are human, but we are treated like robots."

The digital economy demands emotional labour but offers no safety net. Mental health damage, burnout and trauma are absorbed silently by workers who lack the power to demand accountability.

Women and Digital Domesticity

For many women, particularly in rural and semi-urban India, digital gig work is marketed as empowerment work-from-home flexibility, financial independence and autonomy.

The reality is far more complex.

"Everyone says working from home is easy," says Meera Devi, 32, from Ranchi. "But housework never ends, and digital work goes on every day. The pay is low, but you cannot quit."

She adds, “Women believe this work gives them freedom, but it’s a new prison. We are neither free from domestic labour nor from digital pressure. Platforms pay women less because they know we are always available.”

Digital platforms exploit existing gender inequalities, turning unpaid domestic labour into an extension of low-paid digital work.

Jobs Without Employment

Platforms like Amazon Mechanical Turk, Clickworker, UHRS and RemoteTasks connect Indian workers to global companies. Yet these arrangements exist outside formal employment structures.

“This isn’t even a job,” says trade union leader Ravindra Pathak. “Workers do everything companies demand, but they are not legally employed. No leave, no bonus, no union, no legal protection. This is digital colonialism power lies abroad, labour belongs to our youth.”

He notes that if even a fraction of these workers stopped working simultaneously, global AI systems would grind to a halt. Yet platforms often do not know where workers are located or who performs their tasks.

The Numbers Tell the Story

Field studies conducted in Bengaluru, Hyderabad and Delhi paint a stark picture:

- Average monthly income: ₹12,000–15,000
- %60 of workers have no contract
- %75 lack any form of social security
- %90 do not know the identity of the company they work for

Women are disproportionately affected, occupying the most insecure and lowest-paid roles. Indian workers play a critical role in AI training, data annotation, transcription and moderation yet receive no credit, recognition or long-term security.

Back Office of Artificial Intelligence?

The government celebrates Digital India as a job creator. But the jobs being created are informal, insecure and poorly regulated.

This raises urgent questions. Is this development or exploitation? Has India become the back office of global artificial intelligence? Are technological advancements being built at human cost?

Salma Yasmin’s words linger long after the screen goes dark.

“We are part of Digital India,” she says, “but it’s as if we don’t exist. Our labour is not recognised, our names are not recorded. Without us, the system cannot run for even a day. Still, we remain invisible.”

The towering edifice of India's digital revolution stands on the shoulders of workers the world does not see. Until their labour is acknowledged, protected and valued, the promise of a truly inclusive digital future will remain unfulfilled.

- Abdul Muqeet is a journalist based in Delhi. He produced this report under the Ladli Media Fellowship Programme. The views and opinions expressed are those of the author. Ladli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse the views expressed.

Link: https://thewireurdu.com/111703/digital-economy-behind-the-scenes-workers-exploitation/

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The Meme-Fication Of Women's Labour Legitimizes Gender Based Violence

Aashika Shivangi Singh | Youthkiawaaz.com | 10th December 2025

According to India's Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2023–24, the female labour force participation rate stands at 41.7%. This figure represents only those women who receive some form of wage for their work. When it comes to unpaid labour, there is hardly any dataset that can fully capture the extent of women's contribution. However, the Time Use Survey provides some insight: women spend 16.4% of their total daily time on unpaid domestic work, whereas men spend only 1.7% on the same. And it doesn't end there. Beyond domestic chores, women in India spend 137 minutes every day on caregiving activities such as taking care of children and the elderly while men spend just 75 minutes.

Even if we look beyond these numbers and observe our surroundings, we find that women are constantly engaged in some form of labour whether at home, at the workplace, or in public spaces. Yet despite this, women's work often becomes a subject of mockery and ridicule. Common remarks like "Housework isn't real work," or "Women at the office do nothing except gossip!" reflect the everyday dismissal and belittling of their labour.

When the internet entered our lives two or three decades ago, it seemed like it would expand our access to information and make things easier. But in recent years, the patterns of how we use the internet have changed significantly. The space that was once free from societal social structures and rigid norms is now not only replicating those very structures but also generating new kinds of risks.

At the beginning of this article, I discussed how women engage in both paid and unpaid labour on a massive scale, yet continue to face taunts and demeaning jokes. The same pattern is now visible on the internet that is more widespread, more repetitive, and more collective. Women and their work are increasingly turned into a form of entertainment and the consequences of this extend from mental health impacts to gender-based violence, technological abuse, and the strengthening of oppressive structures of patriarchy, caste, and class.

Online Meme Culture Reduces Women to Stereotypes

Social media memefies women's labour in a way that their everyday work, essential tasks needed for survival, gets reduced to objects of humour and consumption. Viral memes like the "Indian Mom Starter Pack," featuring a rolling pin, clothes, a broom, and a yelling emoji, turn an entire day's unpaid labour of a mother into a joke about "overreacting." Memes such

as “Wife doing Online Shopping vs. Shocked Husband” mock women’s financial decisions, despite the fact that managing household budgets often falls entirely on them. Images like “Suffering Husband” casually ignore the reality of domestic violence faced by women. The “Expectation vs. Reality” trend frames cooking as an inescapable responsibility of women; you may have seen videos where a voice says, “Even after watching the paneer recipe, she will still cook lauki,” placing the burden solely on the woman of the house.

Going further, many memes depict a “talkative girlfriend/wife” and then present violent or aggressive sexual behaviour as a way to “shut her up,” ending the clip with dramatic music to make it seem comic or heroic. Across all these formats, women’s labour, their voices, and their boundaries are turned into punchlines. Their decisions, desires, work, compulsions, and even their illnesses are repackaged as entertainment.

Feminist writer Simone de Beauvoir argues that the very idea of “woman” is a male-created concept. A woman is always positioned as the “Other” because the man is the “seer”: he is the subject, and the woman is the object and this, she writes, is what it means to be a woman. On social media, this very idea is becoming stronger, giving rigid gender stereotypes and patriarchy even more space to flourish. Here, women are viewed and portrayed as objects, and are treated like objects too. Men continue to assert dominance by setting “boundaries” for women this time through memes. These memes signal that if women do not behave in a certain prescribed way, they will be mocked. For example, Ruchika Rathore, the partner of well-known YouTuber Nischay Malhan (popularly known as Triggered Insaan), was trolled repeatedly because of her appearance. Women participating in Indian politics are even bigger targets. From Neha Singh Rathore to journalists like Meena Kotwal and Rana Ayyub, thousands of women face vulgar content made about them on a daily basis. Even in the memefication of women, women are not treated as one homogeneous group. Their sexuality, caste, class, race, and religion shape the intensity and form of their online harassment. Dalit poet Aleena, who has a powerful voice on Instagram, is trolled because of her caste and skin colour. Trans woman Ella D’Verma is targeted because she does not fit into the dominant, narrow imagination of what a “woman” should look like.

Digital Misogyny and the Mental Health Crisis Among Women

Violence against women through memes on social media does not remain confined to these platforms alone. The reactions generated here lead to psychological distress in real life as well. According to an article published in Oxford Academic, online harassment results in stress, anxiety, depression, and reduced productivity. In many cases, it can also damage professional reputation and pose risks to individuals’ careers.

A female YouTuber from Mathura district, Madhu (name changed), recently started posting dance videos. She says, “I reached two thousand subscribers in three months, and I genuinely enjoy dancing. But a few weeks ago, vulgar comments started appearing in my comment section so filthy that I cannot even mention them. They felt like stains on my character. I even cried. I’ve stopped posting videos for a few days and am currently taking therapy to feel better again.”

Meanwhile, Mona (name changed), a Class 12 student who expresses herself by posting her photos on Instagram, shares her experience. She says that one day, out of nowhere, a boy sent her a photo of his private part in her message inbox, along with a meme that read "The cure to every pain." Seeing this, she was shocked and immediately deactivated her account.

These experiences indicate how social media has become an unsafe space for women, and how similar restrictions apply to their presence here as in the offline world. Whether they want to express themselves, make their own choices visible, or simply mark their presence online, the path remains difficult and full of obstacles for them.

The Politics of Laughter and the Fear it Instills in Women

In online spaces, the "politics of laughter" is a power structure that uses humor to control, shame, and intimidate women. Scholars of laughter studies argue that humor is not always neutral; it often becomes a tool for sustaining unequal power relations, where the one who makes others laugh is positioned as powerful, and the one who is laughed at is diminished. On digital platforms, this politics becomes even sharper through memes, comment threads, and trolling, women are mocked, and their voices, bodies, opinions, and labour are turned into punchlines. When women articulate their views, dismissive statements like "Don't be so serious, it was just a joke" invalidate their lived experiences, something Sara Ahmed describes as "The cultural politics of emotion", where emotions are used to silence marginalized groups.

Humor becomes a shield that normalizes violence, gaslighting, and ridicule against women. As a result, online laughter is not merely entertainment; it becomes a political tool that creates fear and insecurity, making the digital space oppressive for women.

Link: https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2025/12/the-meme-fication-of-womens-labour-legitimizes-gender-based-violence/

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Invisible, Exploited And Women's Reality In India's Digital Workforce

Ambika Sharma | Youthkiawaaz.com | 15th December 2025

**Names of the Interviewees have been changed to protect their identities.*

Over the last few decades, the future of work and the corporate industry has completely changed in a drastic manner, from offline corporate offices to digital workspaces. In India, women's workforce participation has increased, especially with them taking part in the gig economy, professional digital roles, online internships and freelancing forums.

While these spaces might offer freedom, flexibility to work and foster a sense of independence and empowerment for women, they often come at the price of being paid less, harassed virtually, gendered biases and facing invisibility at workplaces.

Women are often viewed as a group of people who are "*flexible to work with*", "*easy to manage*" or "*fortunate to get growth opportunities"* at virtual work platforms, which makes them more prone to digital labour exploitation. Along with this, online workplace harassment, hierarchical biases and algorithmic abuse, being forms of digital gendered violence, can impact women's careers, mental health negatively and could make virtual workspaces unsafe and precarious to navigate for young working women.

Invisible Digital Labour and Gender Exploitation:

Across the country of India, the gig workers and freelancers have contributed significantly towards the creation and establishment of the digital economy, but they still remain invisible or ignored in terms of fair pay, proper recognition and job security and stability. According to an article by Women Entrepreneur's Review, in 2022, Indian Women earned only 81 per cent of what their male counterparts earned, with an average income of $22 /hour for women and $27/hour for men in the digital and gig economy, showing the systemic and gendered undervaluation of women's work. Many women have reported being given low-skilled or low-profile tasks to do at work, and their contributions going unnoticed or uncredited in this sector.

Shriya*, a 20-year-old freelance writer, says, "Clients which I get through Upwork and Fiverr, the platforms where I do freelance work, often assume that I will agree upon lower pay just because I am "starting out' or "easy to work with" though I possess the skills and competencies to do the freelance writing work. I am always negotiating and struggling to get fair pay and most of them refuse to pay fairly primarily due to their gendered mindsets and perceptions."

Professional work done through remote platforms also functions similarly in terms of safety and compensation. Women working as professionals or interns digitally at several organisations face digital workplace harassment in virtual meetings or large messaging platforms through being sent inappropriate and coercive requests or being excessively monitored under the pretext of "flexibility" and "essential performance".

Pooja*, a 27 year old remote professional, remembers, " My senior manager kept asking me to work late hours and talk to him personally over calls and one-to-one meeting because I was "easy and flexible to work" .When I refused and resisted, I was given threats about downgrading my performance report at end of year. It felt extremely isolating and I couldn't even talk or discuss about this openly with anyone and eventually, I left the organization."

These real-life experiences reveal that digital labour exploitation and invisibility are deeply intertwined with gendered violence as it comes in forms of undervaluation, underrecognition of women's contribution, constant digital harassment, invisibility at work and coercive expectations across the workplace environments in the freelance, gig and remote professional sectors.

The Effects on Women's Careers and Lives:

The after-effects of facing and going through the digitalised gender labour exploitation are extreme and multi-layered in nature. Economically, it is often seen that women are paid less than their male counterparts and their work is often undervalued, which could lead to limitations in career growth, ability to save more money for themselves and their family and become more financially independent and stable.

Alongside, the social factors such as gendered mindsets and rigid work expectations, combined with factors like invisibility, are tagged as "easy to manage" and constant harassment can lead to low self-esteem, stress, anxiety and self-doubt about one's abilities to work effectively.

Megha*, a social media intern, puts out, " Due to fear of being ignored or judged or mocked immensely by my colleagues, I have stopped sharing my ideas in virtual meetings and team messaging groups. Now, it has become extremely complicated and tiring that I have to keep justifying the significance of my presence in the company and proving my capabilities to work in the organization."

Also, my friend Anika*, a freelancer, explains, "It is not really about being paid less or overworked, it is more about having mindset issues. People often view women as a group of people who are more 'adjusting', 'flexible' and easier to work with. I feel that this perception is deeply rooted within the gendered societal mindset, and this makes it easier for them to undervalue women's work and violate both personal and professional boundaries. Unless we change this mindset or perception, women will keep facing exploitation and invisibility in digital spaces.

In the gig economy, the invisibility of labour and the efforts put in by women at work can often result in burnout as women juggle many freelance projects or essential gig work, domestic duties, and underpaid work, while facing several questions about timeliness and

the quality of their task completion. This often creates systematic gender inequality and limits women from participating altogether in digital job and labour markets.

Moreover, the digital gender harassment being faced through trolling, inappropriate messages being sent and hierarchical gender discrimination on digital team groups violates the standard procedures set for women in workplaces and often creates an unsafe work environment. The mindset of women being viewed as "adjustable" or "flexible" normalises the digital exploitation and blurs the boundary between growth opportunity and virtual gender abuse.

These experiences affect the confidence level, professional goals and willingness to pursue a career in the digital world in a negative way and leave working women professionals ignored and underrepresented in the virtual economy.

Creating Safer Digital Workplaces:

Addressing the issue of gendered digital labour exploitation and invisibility requires necessary policy and systemic measures at the grassroot levels:

Fair Pay and Recognition: Freelance and gig platforms and organisations must ensure that there is equal and fair pay or compensation for equal work, provide visibility and credibility for essential contributions and keep the payment structure for work transparent for all genders.

Policy and Reporting Methods: There must be clear anti-harassment policies and safe reporting channels for employees at digital platforms and workplaces, this can be done through establishing a "Platform of Platforms", a set of policies that outline workplace culture and regulation for platforms and organizations. Also, these reporting channels must be accessible and responsive to complaints being sent regarding virtual workplace harassment or exploitation.

Community and Support Networks: Creating freelance, gig work and digital professional communities and networks for women in virtual labour can help women connect across various arenas, providing peer and legal support, women's empowerment and advocacy for and amongst each other.

Conclusion:

Virtual Economy holds immense power to change careers of working women for the better, but unacknowledged and ignored gender digital exploitation and invisibility have threatened to undermine this ability. By acknowledging the workplace challenges faced by women in freelance, gig and remote professional roles and working towards ending digital gender violence faced by women at digital workspaces can help in creating more equitable and safer digital workplaces.

Also, empowering women in digital labour, creating intersectional and dynamic policies, and supportive community groups can turn digital workspaces from areas of gendered digital labour exploitation and violence to platforms of encouragement and emancipation.

Lastly, recognising digital labour exploitation and invisibility as a form of gendered digital violence is essential to ensure the safety, equity and dignity for women at work in the digital economy.

- Ambika Sharma is a Laadli Media Fellow. The opinions and views expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse the views. Featured image from Canva's royalty-free image gallery, for representational purposes.

Link - https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2025/12/invisible-and-exploited-women-in-indias-digital-workforce/

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WhatsApp Gives Livelihood and Takes It Away Too Digital World Becomes a Risk for Rural Women

(Translated from Odia)

Aiswarya Parija | Odisha Patrika | 20th December 2025

The entire world is now in digital mode. For rural women in Odisha, the mobile phone has become a lifeline. While the digital world has at times emerged as a source of livelihood for women, at other times it has turned into a source of fear. From running small businesses through WhatsApp to accessing government schemes online, digital platforms have created new opportunities. However, along with these opportunities, digital harassment, fraud, blackmail, and online abuse have made many women feel unsafe.

In rural areas of districts such as Kendrapada, Mayurbhanj, Ganjam, Nuapada, and Koraput, women especially members of Self-Help Groups (SHGs) are using smartphones to earn their livelihoods. However, limited digital literacy, a male-dominated social structure, and weak reporting mechanisms have turned the digital world into a risky space for them.

WhatsApp Business Becomes a Cause of Anxiety

Sunita (name changed), a member of a Self-Help Group from a coastal area of Kendrapada district, started selling pickles and homemade food items through digital media. Using WhatsApp for business created opportunities for her and showed her a path to progress. But after a short period, she began receiving repeated calls from unknown numbers. Inappropriate messages and video calls late at night followed. Eventually, she stopped posting photos of her products.

Instead of approaching the cyber police, her family forced her to shut down her account. Fear of social stigma compelled her to withdraw from online business altogether, cutting off her source of income.

Sunita is not alone. Like her, many rural women are increasingly using digital tools and are becoming victims of online harassment, cybercrime, misinformation, and financial fraud. What was once a tool of empowerment has now turned into a complex digital trap. This growing risk is particularly concerning for rural women who are newly introduced to digital platforms. Many women use messaging apps like WhatsApp as their first online experience, without proper privacy settings or awareness.

Digital Literacy Focus Misses Safety Concerns

Although there is growing emphasis on rural digital literacy, training often focuses only on technical skills such as sending payments or messages. Little attention is given to how women should handle fake calls from unknown numbers, threatening messages, or gender-based online abuse. This lack of training has created fear among women regarding internet usage.

WhatsApp: From Digital Tool to Trap

Among rural women in Odisha, WhatsApp is the most widely used digital platform. SHG members, Anganwadi workers, ASHA workers, and Panchayat representatives regularly use it to share updates on schemes, meetings, and payments. However, the platform has also become a medium for cyber harassment and fraud.

Messageslike: *"Do you want to earn money from home? Can you earn ₹15,000–₹20,000 per month by working just 2–3 hours a day on your mobile? Interested housewives and women should immediately contact this WhatsApp number."*

Women seeking work from home fall into these traps. By contacting unknown numbers, they get caught by cyber fraudsters and lose money.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, WhatsApp became disastrous for Rojalin (name changed) from Cuttack district, who was searching for income opportunities. Hoping to work from home, she messaged a number she received on WhatsApp. Shortly afterward, she received an OTP. Within moments of sharing it, ₹40,000 was withdrawn from her account. Before she could understand what happened, she had become a victim of cyber fraud.

The money she had saved for household expenses and her children's education was gone, plunging her life into darkness. Out of fear of her family and the police process, she remained silent and did not file a complaint. Rozalin says that day was the last time she used WhatsApp. Since then, she has not even communicated with friends on the platform. Like her, many women refrain from reporting cybercrimes due to fear, humiliation, and lack of awareness.

Data Reveals the Extent of the Problem

According to data, cyber fraudsters misuse WhatsApp more than any other social media platform. As per the Union Ministry of Home Affairs, during the first three months of 2024, a total of **43,797 complaints** related to cyber fraud were filed against WhatsApp alone. Telegram followed with **22,680 complaints**, and Instagram with **19,800 complaints**.

The 2023–24 MHA annual report also states that cybercriminals increasingly use Google service platforms to commit crimes.

Odisha continues to face a significant gender-based digital divide. According to the state's Vision-2036 document, only **25% of women** use the internet, compared to **51% of men**.

Awareness Can Reduce Digital Victimization **(Prashant Kumar Sahu, Cyber Expert)**

Whether it is WhatsApp or any other app, it must be used with awareness and caution. Not enabling two-step verification makes WhatsApp accounts vulnerable to hacking. At

present, many links related to the Subhadra Yojana—under which women receive financial assistance—are circulating on digital platforms. In hopes of receiving money, women click on these links and fall prey to cyber fraud.

Similarly, scams promising work-from-home opportunities are common. Therefore, everyone must remain alert. One should not trust unknown numbers or individuals and must use digital platforms cautiously. Since everything—from children's education to livelihood—is now dependent on the internet, we must move forward with the times but stay vigilant at every step.

Women should not panic over fake calls or messages but manage them with awareness. Victims should immediately report incidents on the **National Cyber Crime Portal** (Helpline **1930** or **cybercrime.gov.in**).

Link: https://odishapatrika.com/how-rural-women-face-digital-media-whats-up/

20

The Violence of Failed Aspirations: A First-Generation Learner in India's Digital Classroom

Aarushee Shukla | Themooknayak.com | 26th December 2025

The screen on Tara's phone blurred, the audio dissolved into a static, and the lecture froze mid-sentence. Not because the professor had paused but because the internet did. However, the lecture, somewhere hundreds of kilometers away, continued without her. She anxiously waited, refreshing her screen and moving closer to the window in the hope of a stronger signal. By the time the connection returned, the lecture was over. For Tara, a first-generation learner from the family of tea garden workers in West Bengal, the event was not an exception but rather an everyday happenstance.

Digital education is celebrated as a powerful equalizer for being a flexible, scalable, and democratic medium. Its underlying principle is reaching the "last mile" by bringing access to the best classrooms in the country from anywhere. But on the ground, we can see that digital classrooms are an echo of the hollow promises of expanded opportunity.

Tara grew up in a small village in West Bengal. She, together with her mother, worked as laborers in the vast tea gardens owned by big companies. She poignantly shares that her community has been earning their livelihood through contractual labor since colonial times. They work from 7 AM in the morning until 3 PM in the afternoon and earn meager wages, only enough to sustain themselves. This vicious cycle of poverty became the driving force for Tara to obtain an education and break it. She pursued her bachelor's from a local college and soon enough realized that she lacked the skills required of a graduate to secure stable employment. To make up for that, she started volunteering with a local organization while also working on the tea garden. She spent her mornings at the tea garden doing the physically demanding work and in the evenings and nights engaged with the volunteering activities while also preparing for the entrance examination of the top social sciences institute in the country. After two years of rigorous work, she cleared the entrance exam for the course. And unlike other success stories, in this one the protagonist does not move 'onward and upward' or live happily ever after. While the act of clearing the exam in itself was a violent rupture for her community to celebrate, it did not survive the digital turn.

Online classes assume a set of invisible preconditions of uninterrupted electricity, access to personal digital devices, affordable high-speed internet connectivity, fluency in English, familiarity with digital platforms, and a room to oneself. However, Tara had none of these.

Tara had grown up in a predominantly Nepali-speaking community; hence, lectures in English felt like a shock to her. Upon reaching out to professors, she was asked to participate in a peer buddy program for language assistance. However, that program was irregular and inconsistent. Tara's village had recurring power cuts, and the internet data was expensive and unreliable. She attended the classes on a shared mobile phone, struggled to download readings, and recorded lectures that buffered endlessly. When she mustered courage and again reached out to professors, she was advised to move somewhere else for better connectivity. This solution presumed resources that she did not have. Although highly inconvenient, she did decide, against her family's wishes, to move 10 km away to a relative's place for better connectivity. However, she could barely sustain herself for 2 weeks, after which she had to return. She started taking loans from friends and relatives to fund her education, bought a secondhand laptop, and paid the mounting bills. The class activities and group assignments used to take place at night, and another limitation was that electricity was not available beyond 9 PM in her village. Her family advised her to leave the course and return back to the field, but she was persistent in her efforts. Her university finally took cognizance of her struggles and managed to send a laptop, but that alone cannot solve all the problems, can it? Eventually overwhelmed by debt, digital unfamiliarity, and institutional apathy, Tara deferred her studies. I reconnected with her after two years to ask her about her studies and if she went back to completing her course, and she shared that she tried but exceeded the timeline and was refused re-enrollment.

What Tara was struggling the most with was not the absence of efforts or aspiration but what scholars call "conversion capacity," which is the ability to turn access into meaningful outcomes. Globally, Tara's experience is far from isolated. UNESCO's *Global Education Monitoring Gender Report* warns that digitalization, without attention to inequality, risks reproducing and deepening existing hierarchies. UNICEF estimates that adolescent girls and young women in low- and middle-income countries are significantly less likely than boys to have access to the internet or digital skills training. The World Bank has documented how difficulties in accessing remote learning during the pandemic increased disengagement and dropout risks, particularly among marginalized students. In India, surveys of higher education students during the pandemic show stark disparities. Female students, rural learners, and first-generation college-goers were more likely to report inability to cope with online learning due to internet costs, device-sharing, and lack of digital literacy support. These are not minor inconveniences. They are structural barriers.

Yet the policy response often collapses "access' into checkboxes: providing digital devices, tokenist bridge programs to build educational capital, or moving classes online. What is not spoken of is the labor of learning itself: the time, skills, languages, and institutional support to successfully navigate digital education. Access without enablement is a violent practice. Building aspiration is not an individual trait; rather, it is a social capacity, as Arjun Appadurai argues, which is shaped by resources, recognition, and navigational maps. Tara had cultivated this capacity painstakingly by imagining a future beyond the tea garden

through education, but education, instead of liberating, became a mirror reflecting her place in the hierarchy.

As universities continue to digitize, the question is no longer whether technology can expand education, but for whom. What happens when aspiration is cultivated, encouraged, celebrated, and then quietly abandoned at the altar of bandwidth? And how many futures are we willing to lose before we call this what it is: not a glitch, but a form of structural violence?

Link: https://en.themooknayak.com/women-news/the-violence-of-failed-aspirations-a-first-generation-learner-in-indias-digital-classroom

VI

Marginalised Identities, Mental Health & Structural Digital Harm

For those who live at the intersections of gender, caste, sexuality and class, digital violence is not episodic; it is structural. Queer and trans persons face outing, doxxing and sexualised abuse that threatens not just reputation but safety and survival. Dalit and Adivasi women encounter caste slurs that revive centuries of humiliation in a new, permanent digital form. AI systems, trained on biased data, replicate and magnify these hierarchies, turning discrimination into automated decision-making. The result is a relentless psychological toll: anxiety, isolation, hypervigilance, depression and a shrinking sense of self-worth. Digital harm does not end with the screen; it enters homes, bodies and minds. What is framed as "online conflict" is, in reality, a layered system of exclusion that deepens existing inequalities and leaves the most marginalised carrying the heaviest emotional and mental burden of a technology that was never built with their safety in mind.

- *Deconstructing Digital Freedom: How Female Influencers Negotiate Aspirations In Digital Platforms* — Aarushee Shukla
- *How Online Misogyny Targets Women Who Talk About Sex* — Aashika Shivangi Singh
- *Bigg Boss and the Spread of Queerphobia into Cyberspaces* — Anisha Mendez
- *Beauty vloggers and beauty bullying in cyberspace* — Anisha Mendez
- *Wanted sons, unwanted daughters* — Ashna Bhutani
- *Out of Reach: The Quiet Ways India's Digital Push Leaves Rural Women Behind* — Musheera Ashraf
- *The Smartphone She Can't Own: How Digital Access Remains a Distant Dream for India's Marginalised Women* — Musheera Ashraf
- *How Safe Is the Digital World for the Queer Community?* — Priti Kharwar
- *AI's caste, class and gender bias is fueling digital violence* — Priti Kharwar
- *Societal Acceptance Can be Panacea for LGBTQ Members to Not Get Prey Through Dating Apps* — Varsha Torgalkar

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Deconstructing Digital Freedom: How Female Influencers Negotiate Aspirations In Digital Platforms

Aarushee Shukla | Shethepeople.tv | 29th December 2025

Divya (name changed), a young, 24-year-old content creator on Instagram, aspires to be a dancer and an actor. She is building her audience on Instagram by regularly posting her dance videos and acting gigs. On some days she feels she can conquer the world, while on others she wants to become invisible. Nine hundred posts to date, but every post feels like it is the first time, with the same anxiety, dodging judgemental gazes in public places, unfamiliar eyeballs following her everywhere she goes. While she is proud of the brand she is building for herself, on some days she wonders, at what cost?

Social media platforms, especially Instagram, have emerged as aspirational sites that are characterized by new opportunities. It expands creative freedom and transforms skills into livelihood, beyond the constraints of conventional workspace. But once we let go of our rose-tinted glasses, this illusion of expanded opportunities breaks. This online presence and recognition comes at a cost, and the same platform that rewards women for free expression punishes them for autonomy. Trolling escalates into threats, moral policing is masked as unsolicited concern, and private messages turn invasive.

Women creators have to negotiate and make patriarchal bargains. For many creators, this negotiation begins much earlier than online trolling. It also plays out within families and intimate circles. **Tanshul (@tanshull)**, a digital creator with a closely connected community, recalls being exposed to uncomfortable attention at a young age without any guidance on digital safety. *"Visibility invites scrutiny,"* she says. For her, continuing to post became a quiet act of resistance. *"In the process, it healed a part of me,"* she shares. She adds, *"I plan my content the way people plan risk, factoring in every foreseeable and unforeseeable threat to my safety, mental health, and privacy."* Other ways to negotiate these challenges are by disabling comments, using less assertive captions, avoiding specific clothing and dance forms, and maintaining two accounts: a private one and a public one. For some creators, the shift becomes even more substantial: from an expressive personal space to a more neutral one, since neutral feels safer.

This continuous self-monitoring encompasses emotional and cognitive labor; however, it is rarely acknowledged as such. **Angel Tyagi (@angelindubai),** a Dubai-based lifestyle creator with over 234K+ followers, challenges the idea that women benefit from visibility. "People think being a woman online gives you an advantage," she says. Visibility is often mistaken for privilege, while the costs of sustaining it remain invisible. The act of ensuring a safe and conducive space, which is essentially the role of social institutions and

government at large, is made into a personal endeavor. In such a scenario, safety becomes something that women must actively produce for themselves.

Online space, which is touted as a liberatory, non-judgmental space, one that is mushrooming with opportunities, comes with its own biases and structural constraints. For women creators, gendered violence in digital spaces steadily shrinks that space, and thus the capacity to aspire becomes unevenly distributed. While a woman creator may harbor aspirations, her social capacity to do so is shaped by what really feels possible, navigable, and permissible. **Kavya (@kk.create)**, a prominent storyteller on Instagram and YouTube with over 3.5 million followers, describes how normalized abuse shapes everyday life online. *"Ek galti ho jaaye toh log itni gaaliyan de denge,"* ("One *small mistake, and people will hurl abuses"),* she says. *"Aur phir sunne ko milta hai ki internet par aaye ho toh yeh sab toh sunna hi padega."* (*Then I'm told 'you chose to be on the internet, so you have to listen to all this.").* Sharing her experience of a particular week, she described how the fear became overwhelming. *"Every notification gave me anxiety. Every post made me wonder what fresh hell awaited in the comments,"* she shares. The fear was not just online; it followed her offline too. *"Darr laga"* ("I was scared"), she admits, *"lekin haar nahi maani"* ("but I didn't give up"). Her experience captures how the anticipation of fear alone makes aspiration feel like a gamble. What once felt like a pathway to independence and reclamation of one's identity becomes lined with warning signs.

Digital violence is structural, feeding on the underlying patriarchal structures. It forces women to trade online presence and recognition for safety, and this leaves women consistently adapting their dreams to avoid harm, which is violence in itself. **Sameeksha (@sameekshamittal),** a dance coach and creator with a loyal follower base, reflects on how platforms reshape creativity itself. *"Artists were never meant to create consistently,"* she says. *"We were eccentric, erratic, and wild."* Yet algorithms demand regular output, forcing creators to become machines to stay visible. This pressure, she argues, is deeply tied to capitalism. The fight is no longer just for expression but for survival within a system that rewards conformity. Violence here is not about physical threat but rather about curtailed freedom.

Despite dwindling hope to aspire without fetters, women continue to reclaim space: both physical and online. They want the spaces to embrace collective accountability and build a digital culture where everyone is enabled to aspire and achieve. Walking the tightrope of expression and exposure, women in digital spaces remind us that denial of digital freedom is not a minor inconvenience but a form of violence, one that quietly determines who can aspire and who cannot.

- Aarushee Shukla is a Laadli Media Fellow. The opinions and views expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse the views.

Link: https://www.shethepeople.tv/author-spotlight/guest-contributions/female-creators-aspirations-and-digital-violence-10955054

22

How Online Misogyny Targets Women Who Talk About Sex

Aashika Shivangi Singh | Youthkiawaaz.com | 10th December 2025

On 14 November, the condom company Durex shared a post on Instagram that said, "Don't let your inner child out... unless planned." I found the post humorous so I commented with three laughing emojis. Many others had also done the same. But what happened after that completely shocked me. Accounts with male names started liking my comment and suddenly my private account began receiving a large number of follow requests from men. Eventually, I went back to the Durex post, deleted my comment and the follow requests stopped.

I had an equal right to comment on that post, but the way only men's follow requests started pouring in made it very clear that they must have assumed that a girl who can comment and laugh on such a post would also show interest in them. Whereas commenting on other types of posts or videos had never triggered such a flood of follow requests from men on my account. This incident made me realize the kind of difficulties women who talk about sexuality, sexual pleasure, or sex education on social media must go through every day. But why does it bother people so much when any woman creates or shares content related to sex? The internet is supposed to be a space where everyone is free to express themselves, so why are there invisible barriers placed specifically in the paths of women?

The politics of labeling sex talk as 'cultural' to silence it

In Indian society, the politics of keeping information related to sex "secret" in the name of "culture" and "values" is, in fact, a powerful tool to maintain existing power structures. In Foucault's words, "Those in power shape knowledge about the world and ourselves, creating an accepted 'truth'. Truth decides what behaviour is permissible, and who has authority to espouse the truth and to administer the remedy." In a male-dominated society, silence is imposed on discussions about sex, and speaking about it is associated with 'shamelessness', because it is simply not socially acceptable. This silence not only restricts women's sexual autonomy but also renders their experiences, desires, and vulnerabilities insignificant.

Numerous South Asian studies show that when sex education is dismissed as a "Western influence," women are unable to understand their boundaries, rights, and methods of ensuring their own safety. As a result, harassment, marital rape, abuse, non-consensual relationships, and digital sexual violence become normalized because women cannot even articulate what wrong is happening to them. Gayatri Spivak's theory of "epistemic violence" explains that when the voices and experiences of a group are deliberately pushed into silence, the violence is not merely physical, it is repeated at the level of knowledge and

understanding as well. Consequently, the cultural pressure to not talk about sex creates conditions in which women are unable to openly communicate about their safety, consent, and pleasure-related needs, or speak about sexual health issues. And it is women who ultimately bear the consequences of this imposed silence.

A study published by the Guttmacher Institute shows that every year in India there are 47 million pregnancies, and 45% of them are unintended (meaning they occur too early or are not desired at all). It is also estimated that 14 million women of reproductive age in India do not receive the necessary treatment for one of the four major, treatable sexually transmitted infections. What is noteworthy in both these facts is that women often lack information about their own bodies and about sexual education. In such a situation, the internet and social media become tools that deliver sexual education to the new generation of women. Here, those who talk about this education, most of whom are women doctors or content creators, are making women and men aware of their sexual health.

Women who talk about sex education on social media face trolling

A considerable amount of information on sexual education, erotic pleasure, consent, sexual illnesses, etc., is currently being shared on social media by women doctors, storytellers, and creators. But they also face online trolling, doxxing and threats. Seema Anand, a sex educator and storyteller, talks about physical pleasure and consent on social media. From her photos and videos, it is also evident that she answers people's questions related to sexual misinformation, taboos, and myths, which clearly shows that people are learning from her. Yet, her comment section remains filled with derogatory remarks about her age and sexuality. In many of her videos, she has shown how men send her sexually frustrated messages and emails. On Instagram, Seema shared a post where she mentioned that she had uploaded content discussing extreme sexual violence, but later removed it because it was affecting her physically as well, she kept crying every time she saw it.

This year, when Dr. Tanaya Narendra (popularly known as Dr. Cuterus) said on a show by the media outlet The Lallantop that "The bacteria found in curd are the same as the ones found in the vagina," a storm of memes and videos erupted on Instagram targeting her, without trying to understand the scientific perspective behind her statement. Many women also became targets.

Radhika (name changed), an undergraduate Hindi student at the University of Delhi, shared her experience and said that when The Lallantop video went viral, even some of her male friends texted her in her DMs saying, "Do you know you have curd bacteria 'there'?" Radhika says, "These kinds of questions made me angry, but they also revealed the truth about the men around me. However, I have no hesitation in admitting that creators like Dr. Cuterus helped me understand my body. It is because of her HPV vaccine campaign that I got my vaccination last month."

Dr. Mitali, known online as Dr. Uterus also creates content on sex education, reproduction, and women's health. Recently, she posted a video using a bottle and a syringe to explain how having unprotected sex increases the chances of pregnancy. I noticed that several male content creators were making so-called "funny" videos out of her educational content, and

their comment sections were filled with laughter and praise. In contrast, Dr. Mitali's own comment section was flooded with remarks like "Show it practically," "Are you in the mood to get pregnant?" and similar statements.

Online policing of women's desires

According to a World Health Organization study, one in three women has experienced some form of violence in her lifetime, and despite the relatively new and expanding phenomenon of internet connectivity, it is estimated that one in ten women has faced some form of cyber violence since the age of 15.

Jyoti Goyal, a lawyer by profession and the founder of the feminist group 'TOLI', has been writing on the internet for almost five to six years. For the last one or two years, she has been writing outspokenly especially on Facebook about issues such as sexual violence, consent, masculinity, and rape. She shares, "When I wrote on these issues, the responses from men made me feel judged. They dismissed the facts I wrote by saying that no other women were saying these things, and that it was only my opinion. On the other hand, women's responses were positive; they appreciated and supported my views."

It can be clearly seen in online spaces that women listen to topics considered taboo with far more sensitivity, whereas men often shift into "denial mode" and respond with insensitivity and aggression. This harassment has real, damaging consequences for mental health, social participation, and freedom of expression. Research linking online sexual harassment to psychological distress shows increased anxiety, depression, loneliness, and low self-esteem among victims especially young women and adolescents. As a result, many women stop participating in these spaces or reduce their online presence, which effectively restricts their visibility and their ability to express themselves in digital public spheres. This hostile environment becomes an obstacle for sex educators, activists, and feminists, who use digital platforms to spread awareness about consent, health, and gender equality, making their educational work significantly harder.

Link: https://www.youthkiawaaz.com/2025/12/online-misogyny-targets-women-who-talk-about-sex

23

Bigg Boss and the Spread of Queerphobia into Cyberspaces

(Translated from Malayalam)

Anisha A Mendez | Keraleeyam | 14th December 2025

"I will take them into my house. "

This mass dialogue of the superstar of Malayalam cinema was received with great applause, including on social media. However, this was not a movie dialogue; it was spoken by Mohanlal, who also hosts the show, in an episode of the seventh season of Bigg Boss Malayalam, the number one reality show in Malayalam (August-November 2025). It was Mohanlal's response to questioning the insult of fellow contestant Vedha Lakshmi to lesbian partners Aadila Nasrin and Noora Fatima in Season-7, calling them 'unfit to be brought into the house'. The promo video released before the episode was telecast went viral on social media. Malayalis were eagerly waiting to watch the episode. Malayalis were proud to see Mohanlal say that he would not only scold Lakshmi but also bring Aadila and Noora into his house. After the episode was telecast, Mohanlal's progressive attitude was praised in the visual and social media. Adila and Noora received a lot of support. Even the national media wrote reports about it and praised the change that Bigg Boss is bringing to Malayalis.

Meanwhile, a section of queer haters also became active in cyberspace, praising Lakshmi's courage in saying that she was not interested in normalizing the LGBTQIA+ community despite Mohanlal's scolding. Although queer individuals can never be accepted, opinions were also raised that Lakshmi's statement was inhumane. When the Bigg Boss Malayalam show was telecast, most of the queer-hating social media sites turned in favor of Adilak and Noora. Gradually, they began to be called "poombatakal". However, the two, who were among the last seven contestants, were eliminated without reaching the final.

After Adila and Noora were evicted after spending more than 95 days in the Big Boss house. Comments and cyberattacks were made claiming they were not fit to be in the Bigg Boss house, as Lakshmi had said. The reason for this dislike among the Malayali audience was the rift in the friendship between Adila and Noora and Anumol, the winner of Bigg Boss Malayalam season seven and a fellow contestant with considerable audience support, on the last day. However, the

queer hate speech made by a contestant named Lakshmi was used across social media to criticize the personal dislike. By using a hateful remark made by someone about their sexuality to criticize the character of individuals, the queerphobia hidden in the public consciousness of Malayalis came to light. In this context,this article examines queerphobia and cyberattacks in cyberspace, drawing on Bigg Boss Malayalam, the number one reality show in Kerala.

Bigg Boss Malayalam Show

'Bigg Boss' is the Indian version of the reality show 'Big Brother', which was broadcast in Denmark in 1999. The Big Brother show has been broadcast in many languages around the world. The idea of the show is to have people from different sectors of society live in a place with no connection to the outside world for 100 days, without any means of communication. Bigg Boss was first launched in India in Hindi in 2006. This program received huge audience support because famous people from different fields came to compete in the Bigg Boss show. The Bigg Boss Malayalam season started in 2018. So far, seven seasons have been completed.

Bigg Boss and queer contestants

Actress and trans woman Anjali Ameer competed in the first season of Bigg Boss Malayalam. Anjali, who entered as a wildcard, quit the show due to health issues. Although there were contestants who later supported the queer community, there were no members from the community until the fourth season. The promotional video for the fourth season itself hints that there will be queer contestants. In the promo, which came with the tagline "Now things will get colorful", a young man and a young woman are seen saying that they want to marry a girl, and Mohanlal says that different people make this world colorful and give life. In season four, which started in March 2022, there were two lesbian contestants, as mentioned in the promo video. American citizen and English trainer Aparna Mulberry, and fitness coach Jasmine M. Moosa. A contestant named Ashwin Vijay, a magician, even came out as gay on the show.

The purpose of including people from the community in this way is to increase the ratings of the show, says Sajith M.S., a researcher at Kerala University and a Bigg Boss viewer. "The main stance of the show makers is to bring LGBTQIA+ community representation in all languages, and

the reason for bringing Adila-Noora to the show is to show how lesbian couples love, how they solve their problems, conflict management, and things in relationships. Because in every episode, both of them would be aired. The aim of this show, like all corporate shows, is to exploit the audience's interest in seeing how their lives are."

In season 5, Nadira Mehreen, a trans woman contestant, received huge audience support and walked out of the Bigg Boss house just before the finale after accepting the money box task. In the same season, Anjus Rosh, a contestant, had openly spoken about her five-year relationship with a girl while participating in the show. In the sixth season, celebrity makeup artist Janmani Das, a trans woman, and Mr. Gay World runner-up Abhishek Jayadeep also participated. In the same season, Resamin, a contestant from the commoners, had said that he had a 'crush' on a female co-contestant. However, Resamin did not reveal his identity on the show or afterward.

Contestants of the seventh season of 2025, Adila Nasrin and Noora Fatima, are the first lesbian couple of the season so far. They were allowed to live together by the High Court based on the Supreme Court verdict following Adila Nasrin's habeas corpus petition in the Kerala High Court in 2022, alleging that her partner was forcibly taken away by her relatives.

"I believe that any show is for commercial purposes, and that is what everyone does. There is no doubt that they will put all the necessary resources into it. However, I believe that

even if they have business goals, there will still be a positive for the queer community. The show has helped us understand that they are human beings just like us when we see them on screen," commented teacher and writer Anu Pappachan.

There have been contestants who have supported the queer community (LGBTQIA+ allies) in many seasons. A contestant worth mentioning is Riyaz Salim. During a task assigned by Bigg Boss, he explained to a fellow contestant what LGBTQIA+ means by breaking down the meaning of each word in the acronym. The media reported that the episode became an educational event about the queer community among the family audience. The episode was also widely accepted on social media.

However, the Bigg Boss show often features people from the queer community who are framed in a certain way, says queer person and political observer Nazima Nasrin. "They present queer bodies that don't feel alien to the public. I remember, in the beginning, the show made anti-trans community remarks. They present people who can sensationalize things, who can be absorbed by the public consciousness in various ways, or who have identities that are affected by language and class."

Cyberbullying and the queer community

As the seasons progressed, the representation of queer contestants on the show increased. Similarly, there were discussions between contestants within the show about sexual minorities. On the one hand, this led to numerous discussions on social media. Some media outlets and their audiences hope that such interventions will bring about significant change in society. But on the other hand, the queer contestants in the Bigg Boss seasons have to face a lot of cyberattacks on social media and digital spaces.

Ashwin Vijay, who was eliminated from season four soon after revealing his identity, had said in interviews that he faced a lot of cyberbullying after he left the show for revealing his identity. Jasmine M. Musa, who was also in the same season, had spoken on the show about her earlier attraction to fellow contestant Aparna. The cyber world saw it through the eyes of morality.

Sajith believes that the cyberattacks they face after the show are proof of the anti-queer sentiment that exists in our society. "Even those who win the love of the audience inside the show have to face a lot of cyberattacks when they come out after the show. One reason for this is the visibility they gain through the show. Many people liked Nadira Mehar in season five. However, Nadira faced more cyberattacks after she left the show. That is, the love she got from the audience inside the show is mostly the love of the family audience. After the show, the family audience does not necessarily follow her on social media. Only a very small section of the Bigg Boss audience follows her even after the show. Since it is a program that airs on television, they only have the support of the audience who do not use smartphones. They might not even vote for these contestants. After Nadira came out of the show, society could not accept such a person; the more visibility she gained, the more cyberattacks she faced. When she comes on the show, she gets a lot

of visibility. So, she has to endure all the queer phobias in society with the recognition she gets. "It's becoming a shouting match."

Even now, comments calling her by her pre-trans woman name can be seen under posts related to Nadira. Anjus Joshi from the same season came on the show in a tomboy look.

After she confessed her love for a woman, she was called many names on digital platforms and questioned about her interactions with fellow female contestants. Celebrity makeup artist Janmani was also bullied for her language, behavior, and appearance. Queerphobia in cyberspace finds solace in naming her photos and videos after a Malayalam actor. Although Rezmin, who is also a physical education teacher, has not come out, she has faced hateful comments for her style of dress and behavior, and for saying that she liked a fellow female contestant.

Naseema believes that queer people need to critically examine the values reflected in this show. "As a queer person, I have some very critical questions for the queer people who participate in this. That is, in a show that not only provides a very visible platform to discuss our issues but also reinforces very aggressive and anti-human ideas, do we need to bring our identities and bodies to capitalize on them? Do we need to expose our private lives like that? That's a question that every queer person needs to ask themselves individually. I'm not saying it's right or wrong for them to participate. I think that the queer community needs to critically think about this."

Jasmine M. Musa did not appear to be acting or speaking in accordance with the stereotypical images of women in Kerala society, as evidenced by her dress or behavior. This, along with her identity, increased the depth of cyberbullying against her. Another thing is that Jasmine quit the show in protest against the fact that the most popular Dr. Robin Radhakrishnan of that season was not expelled from the show for harassing a fellow contestant, which increased the level of cyberbullying against Jasmine. Riyaz Saleem of the same season was a person who openly identified as a feminist and spoke out for the queer community. Riyaz received huge public support and made it to the finals. However, despite Riyaz claiming to be an Ally, he faced moral questions about his identity. When Riyaz started using gender neutral clothes and makeup outside the show, the cyber world started brutally attacking Riyaz, which is still continuing.

The additional burden of queer people

There were cyberattacks against Adilak and Noora, who were very popular. The bullying was that Noora was in Adila's trap, that Adila was a lesbian, that Noora was bisexual, and that they would break up by the end of the show. With a fight with a fellow contestant named Anumol, the cyberattacks reached the point where 'their parents did not let them into the house because of their character'. Queer contestants are often judged more on cyberspace than other contestants because of their character.

"If a man or woman goes and shows negative behavior on the show, it doesn't mean that all men and women are like this, but when a community member comes, there is an additional responsibility. There is also a responsibility that they represent their entire community. No one is ready to forgive when a negative person comes. You have to comply with many more things than other contestants; you have to stand out a little better, and you have to prove that you represent a larger community. Since Jasmine M. Moosa and Janmani expressed negativity on the show itself, it turned into hostility towards the community, and it became perceived that these kinds of people belonged to the community. The issue Adila-Noora had with Anumol affected their voting. Both of them left without even reaching the final five. It even came to the conclusion that there was a reason why their parents abandoned them. Look at how queer phobia works in society," Sajith points out.

But teacher Anu Pappachan believes that although a section of people in cyberspace behaves with hatred, there is a slight change in the people's perception of the queer community. "There are always two sides in cyberspace. We always see a fight between the majority and the minority. Even when a large majority is slut-shaming Adila and Noora, even our ordinary housewives say that we should embrace them. I have seen a conviction from many quarters on social media, even from those who are unfamiliar with progressive ideas, that these individuals should be treated as human beings. I have also seen posts where unexpected people invite them to their homes, saying they would open their homes to them and describe them as if they were children. These ordinary people are not from the usual progressive spaces."

Mass men and trad women (*Kulasthree*)

All the contestants on the Bigg Boss show face cyberbullying in various forms. However, if you pay attention to the contestants who have received significant audience support, including online, since the first season of Bigg Boss, you can understand the regressive mindset behind the bullying.

Two women have won the seven seasons, and the male contestants who have displayed very misogynistic and authoritarian behavior on the show in every season receive huge public support. Fan armies for them become active when the seasons begin. Their shouts at their fellow contestants go viral as reels accompanied by 'mass music'. Bullying against female contestants is much more common than that against men. However, contestants who uphold traditional family values and regressive ideas and satisfy warped notions of women often receive huge public support in cyberspace. They are adopted by the audience as their own children in their homes. There are discussions, questions, and speculations about the identity of individuals who dress and behave in a gender-neutral manner, transcending the male-female binaries, on social media related to the show. Such things are often used to bully them.

Nazima says she is not surprised by the support contestants with regressive ideas receive in cyberspaces. "In order to make this show controversial, they bring in people from different walks of life, people who are queer, or people who put forward ideas that are not generally accepted. When we bring together people who discuss reactionary issues, we believe it will pave the way for democratic debates. But who does this show always make the winner? The one who follows the most outdated conservatism in this society is the winner. A toxic, masculine, patriarchal man is the winner most of the time. In very rare cases, like this last season, a woman is the winner. Even when they say that, regardless of their gender, the winner is a cis heterosexual family woman who follows all these toxic values. We must understand that they win because public sentiment is on their side. That is why cyber acceptance is there."

Sajith says that it is sad that even Mohanlal, the host of this show, had to face cyberbullying. "When he said that he would take Adila and Noora into his house, everyone stood by Mohanlal. However, Mohanlal faced numerous cyberattacks. There was a reel insulting Mohanlal over this statement, and there were even videos on Twitter and other platforms making fun of the relationship between Mohanlal and his friend and producer Antony Perumbavoor," Sajith told Kerala.

"Unlike other languages, Malayali audiences are very sensitive. They are not mature enough to watch this show. That's why Malayali audiences have zero tolerance for contestants who come, and they insult them very cruelly. They believe they can disclose anything about their private lives. That's why the level of cyberattacks that the contestants will receive will be very high," Sajith added.

Queer representation and a shift in mindset

Since the fourth season (2022), a narrative has emerged that the presence of queer contestants on Bigg Boss has led to a significant shift in society's attitude towards sexual minorities. That argument has gained strength with the seventh season.

"When a superstar like Mohanlal makes a progressive statement, he gets a lot of support, and in that sense, Lal's statement has certainly resonated well with the majority of people on social media. Lal's statement is in a way that shows that homosexuality should not be viewed in a different way and that it is a human process. Even Mohanlal saying so is a reflection of a changed society. Even though this show is an industry, at least some change is happening. If one percent of it is aligned with humanity, then it should be supported." Anu Pappachan commented. Sajith also shared a similar sentiment, "This show has helped a great deal to get visibility for the queer people. It has also helped change the perception of society, at least to some extent. At the same time, queer people will have to face all the problems part of the existing society.

However, Naseema points out that visibility does not necessarily represent a change. "Change is a comprehensive thing. A social change has been underway since the policy change. Many people have fought for that change. In Kerala itself, Kerala's Queer Pride is 10-15 years old. First generation activists have said that when the first Queer Pride was held, people beat and chased them away. It is part of our history. Change happens through multiple layers. Besides, the queer community in Kerala has not come to visibility because of Bigg Boss, has it? Be it Bigg Boss, literary festivals, or discussions, where does the feeling that queer people are needed in such spaces come from? That feeling stems from the resistance that has occurred on many levels so far. How can we completely give the credit to the Bigg Boss show?"

In 2023, members of the LGBTQIA+ community in Kerala protested in front of the secretariat against the increasing attacks against them on social media and submitted a petition to Chief Minister Pinarayi Vijayan demanding immediate action. In January 2024, the Kerala High Court ordered an investigation into the organization Yes, which was spreading queerphobia through social media. The court also directed the government to intervene in cyberattacks against members of the LGBTQIA+ community.

Malayalis have started waiting for the eighth season. Host Mohanlal had hinted that there would be an eighth season in the finale of the previous season. There may be queer contestants in the upcoming season as well. But they will have to compete not only with their fellow contestants inside the Bigg Boss house, but also with inhuman cybercriminals who unleash brutal queerphobia and attacks in cyberspace.

Link: https://www.keraleeyammasika.com/bigg-boss-malayalam-season-seven-show-adhila-noora-mohanlal-queerphobia-cyber-space-bullying-gender-issues/

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Beauty vloggers and beauty bullying in cyberspace

(Translated from Malayalam)

Anisha A Mendez | Keraleeyam | 16th December 2025

"I use filters to edit out my acne before posting photos on social media. I have a lot of insecurity. When I see people with clear skin, I feel like I want to be like that." These are the words of 20- year-old Aishwarya, a native of Kollam. By 'clear skin', Aishwarya means skin that is free of blemishes and shines like a mirror. But the fact is that not everyone's skin is like that. However, beauty vloggers claim that all skin can be transformed in a similar manner. The 'standards' these vloggers create about beauty have a huge impact on their followers. Those who fall outside those beauty standards face a lot of stigma and bullying.

Who are beauty influencers?

We used to see movie stars, models, and magazine models in advertisements related to the beauty industry. However, the rapid growth of social media platforms like YouTube and Instagram has given rise to a new category: 'beauty vloggers'. Their content is about beauty, fashion, and skincare. They earn income from YouTube based on the number of views their videos get. As part of such content, they often introduce beauty products and makeup items to their followers. They earn income from the companies that manufacture the products they introduce.

These beauty vloggers are the ones who inform people about new products coming to the market today. They can also earn money through affiliate marketing. Content creators provide links to purchase the products they promote, along with the products themselves. Followers who buy through these links get a discount on the price. When customers buy through this link, the content creator gets a percentage of the sale.

Beauty Influencers in Kerala

Initially, beauty influencers in Kerala used to post content on social media, sharing small beauty tips and home-based skin care. The growth of social media and influencer marketing has led to an increase in the number of beauty vloggers. There are influencers in Kerala who promote products of even international brands. They are now big celebrities. They have played a role in spreading knowledge about skin and hair care, makeup, fashion, and styling to the community. They often

post content on changes, new trends, and products in this field. Most of the beauty vloggers in Kerala are housewives and young women. Some of them have passed certified courses

in beauty cosmetics. If we examine the number of followers and comments, we can see that the people of Kerala trust them greatly when it comes to beauty cosmetics.

A study conducted among college students in Ernakulam district found that 45 percent of them consider fashion and beauty vloggers as a trustworthy source. 31 percent said they trust influencers' product reviews. 32 percent said influencers' recommendations are very influential. 41 percent said they have a significant influence on their choices.

Beauty Vlogging and Stereotypical Beauty Models

The concept of beauty has always been associated with celebrities. The concept of beauty was largely defined by movie stars and models. But today, beauty influencers mainly define beauty. They are the ones who decide what concept of beauty we should embrace, what products we should buy, and even how we should look at ourselves. Since they come from different walks of life, it is natural for people to feel closer to them. It helps create a sense that they are one among them. Another thing is that the communication possibilities on social media make influencers more approachable. However, this leads to various problems alongside its advantages.

The content created by beauty influencers for product promotions and revenue often becomes beauty standards in digital spaces. A study conducted among students aged 13 to 25 in Thiruvalla taluk, published in the World Journal of Biology, Pharmacy, and Health Sciences (2025), found that 73 percent (365) of the 500 participants experienced body image dissatisfaction. 56 percent of them admired social media influencers/models in terms of appearance.

"The reason influencers seem more acceptable to us is that they are real people, not actresses, as we see in advertisements. We trust them because they are like us. However, influencer marketing has evolved to resemble traditional marketing. What people want is quick fixes", says Aleena, a poet and artist.

Many of the celebrated beauty vloggers in Kerala primarily focus on content related to skin, hair, and complexion. The content will start by introducing a problem they are facing related to any of these. Then they will say that the problem was very difficult for them and that it disappeared after using this product. For their followers, the influencers will seem very credible when they claim to have achieved results.

"They will bring up an issue related to our skin or hair. And then it seems like they will launch a lot of products for that. Many brands will launch numerous products based on this. Influencers will promote it. After a while, they will bring up the next issue", pointed out Aneesha Mohan, a teacher, actor, and freelance model.

"Rosemary water was trending at one point. Korean skin was also trending. How can Indian skin be like Korean skin?" asks Aneesha.

Beauty vloggers, as Aneesha said, incorporate various trend cultures into their content. They range from morning skin care routine, night skin care, summer skin care, hair care routine, and get ready with me. Skin care products range from face wash and moisturizer

to face scrub, sunscreen, face mask, and face serum. There are even eight-step skin care methods. For this, various types of products should be used. Skin cycling is a current trend. Another is hair care. Vloggers introduce products ranging from shampoo and conditioner to make hair smooth and shiny, to hair masks and hair serums to solve dandruff, hair loss, and hair growth.

The skin is the largest organ in the body. Therefore, it is essential to protect it like any other organ in the body. However, each person's skin, hair, and body are very different. Thus, many of the general recommendations of influenza experts may not be equally helpful for everyone.

"Every now and then, they inject new products like this and promote them. People don't even think about seeing a dermatologist. When I was in eighth grade, I went to the hospital to show my skin problem. That's when I learned that there is a lab to do skin testing. Just like a blood test, they take skin samples and test them, identifying the problem and providing a solution. How many people know this even today?" Aneesha asks.

"We are looking for an easy way out. No hassle of going to the hospital, no consulting fees, easy approach. Everything is like that now. They are setting unrealistic standards. The product they are promoting may work for them. But it may not work for everyone. They are making fun of normal things that we all have. For example, stretch marks occur when our body gains and loses weight. It is very normal. If we ask a dermatologist, they will say that it cannot be avoided, but we can reduce it to a certain extent. However, influencers claim that using this product will cause it to completely disappear. It is cheating people. And it makes people feel that stretch marks are bad and that if they have them, something is missing", Dr. Rayna Roy of Aster Medicity told Keraleeyam.

We can see such beauty metrics in the words they use in their content. The title of one of the most popular videos by one of the celebrated beauty vloggers in Kerala is '7-day face whitening challenge'. It has been viewed by 2.9 million people. In this, a comparison is made using an old photo and a photo taken seven days later. Another video of theirs promotes a Japanese skin whitening cream. It also has a method to achieve permanently pink lips in seven days. Often, all my skin care journey videos are racist. In these videos, they present the dark color in the previous photo, and then the skin is white after taking care of it. They are saying without saying that the dark color should be changed.

There are vloggers who promote gummies that are consumed internally. Many people promote different brands of the same product continuously. That too, the promotion is in the form of saying that they have changed after using them for a few days. Visiting special clinics and receiving skin and hair treatments is also becoming a promotional content strategy. They set beauty standards through expert procedures, such as glutathione treatment, microblading, and fillers. Not only that, they promote these treatments and present them as making a difference in their lives. However, some of them again promote new products and claim that these products were the reason for their change. They create various standards of beauty beyond the health of the skin, hair, and body. They constantly remind us that we should use all these to bring our bodies to those ideals.

“I have done a procedure like this, I have done Botox, I have taken fillers, so I am beautiful. This is the beauty standard that is set, and we are forced to buy and use it without knowing it. But there are reasons for every change that occurs in our body. Such skin problems can be a sign that the body shows as part of hormonal issues and metabolic issues. These products consider skin and hair as external. Everything that shows on the outside of our skin has a metabolic cause. They do not treat that either. We are always looking for the easy way out. We are falling into a trap and becoming victims. We are falling into the standards set by beauty companies.” Dr. Rayna Roy points out.

Recent incidents in Kerala also highlight the dangers associated with this. In March 2025, when Sreenanda, a native of Kannur, died at the age of 18, her body weight was only 25 kilograms. Sreenanda had an eating disorder called ‘anorexia nervosa’, which was seen only in European countries. Sreenanda followed a ‘water diet’ of drinking only water that she saw on YouTube. Sreenanda relied on the extreme water diet, which some YouTubers said, for a health condition that required physical and mental medical help!. In September 2023, a 14-year-old girl in Malappuram contracted a kidney disease called membranous nephropathy (MN) after using a whitening cream bought from online. Subsequent investigations revealed that eight individuals who used the same cream had contracted the same disease.

Beauty bullying and cyberspace

The standards set by beauty vloggers not only affect women’s self-confidence in cyberspace but also contribute to bullying against women.

Beauty bullying is the type of bullying that takes place in cyberspace based on conservative beauty concepts. The comments and trolls that those who do not fit into the normative beauty concepts, or do not want to follow such trends, face in cyberspace are all part of beauty bullying. It often affects women more. Studies show that it can lead to complex conditions ranging from low self esteem to social anxiety, depression, and anorexia nervosa.

“Beauty influencers often use filters. About 90 percent of people use filters. People have forgotten what normal skin is supposed to look like. I feel like I’m lying when I use a filter. So when I make videos without a filter, people think I have a problem. I’ve gotten a lot of comments saying that I’m malnourished, my diet isn’t right, and my face is high in cortisol. It’s incredibly smooth, no pores, no blemishes, no hyperpigmentation… that’s what people think a face should look like”, says Aleena about the comments she has received.

“Last year, I shared a photo on social media. It was a photo that revealed my armpit. A post is circulating on X that defames me, along with photos of many other people. I complained about it. But I did not get a response. I sent the complaint to the cyber cell via email. I called twice and did not get a response, and it did not affect me much, so I left it.” Aneesha shared her experience of filing a legal complaint.

“I am a doctor and work night shifts. So, I always have an under-eye bag with me. When I posted a photo, someone I know personally messaged me, making fun of it”, said Dr. Rayna Roy, who shared her experience.

“I face a lot of bullying on social media. The first problem is that I discuss caste and topics that are uncomfortable. They see me as someone who should not have a place in public. When it all comes down to it, people get triggered when they see me. If I had talked about my shortcomings on social media, like coming from a poor family, and behaved on social media in a way that they think of me, I wouldn’t have faced so much bullying. We are challenging all that. The caste society cannot accept the fact that we are educated and we are trying for a better life. Then if we talk about it on social media, the caste people will definitely get triggered. Then they will respond to us violently. Naturally, I will face cyberbullying. I understand that I am doing the right thing.” Aleena’s response was full of confidence.

Architect and social media ‘psoriasis advocate’ Aishwarya Sasi says that despite facing hateful comments, social media is inclusive.

“The responses I get to my Instagram page, videos, and photos are proof of that. I believe that there is a space for everyone on social media. The majority of the space is taken by those who fit the conventional beauty standard. However, I feel that there is a space for everyone.”

But Aleena believes that inclusivity has decreased in cyberspace. “Because the world has shifted a little more to the right-wing mode. In 2016, when the ‘black lives matters’ movement was at its peak, when the queer movements were at their peak, when the body positivity movement was at its peak, we also had a little more space on social media. But now everything has changed. It has shifted to the right wing. The skinny body is back. The skinny type of clothing is back. The low waist is back. The influence of the black lives matters movement has decreased. Now, white femininity is taking center stage. Therefore, it will also be reflected here. I feel like people are now going back to traditional, conventional beauty standards. It’s in a kind of reverse mode now. It seems to be cyclical. Ten years later, this body positivity and these ideas might resurface. But now, the inclusion has decreased.”

Aneesha says that since she started responding, she has received fewer bullying comments. “A few days ago, someone made a very bad comment even about my father. I replied to him personally and deleted the comment. There were two or three comments under the photo of my partner and me. We both have different skin tones. The comments were based on that. Maybe because I am responding now, I have received fewer such bad comments.” Aneesha also pointed out that women face such experiences more often.

Former Kerala Chief Secretary Sharada Muraleedharan recently spoke openly about the beauty bullying she faced in the name of color. Such cyberbullying is also common on social media against actresses who are not considered beauty icons by society. While National Award winners Aparna Balamurali and Nithya Menon have faced cyberbullying over their body weight, Nimisha Sajayan has been bullied over her body colour. Writer and cancer survivor Nisha Jose K Mani had reacted to the cyberbullying she faced over her body weight. In cyberspace, even the age of women can be a factor in bullying. Often, the trend of teasing women over the age of 30 is widely seen in the comments.

The first bill in the country to criminalize body shaming under the ambit of ragging was introduced in Kerala. This includes body shaming in cyberspace. As part of the increase in beauty vlogging, there has also been an increase in the sale of beauty products in the state. In the first and second phases of 'Operation Soundarya', launched by the government under the leadership of the State Drugs Control Department to eliminate fake beauty products from the market, various cosmetic products worth over Rs. 7 lakh were seized, and cases were registered against 33 establishments. These products, which were manufactured and distributed without adequate licenses or compliance with the standards prescribed by the Cosmetics Rules 2020, were found to contain mercury in excess of the permissible levels. Only if such interventions are continued by the government will inclusive cyberspaces and healthy beauty care habits be possible.

Link: https://www.keraleeyammasika.com/beauty-bullying-beauty-vloggers-influencers-unrealistic-beauty-standards-racism-social-media-inclusion-cyber-bullying-against-women-makeup-beauty-products/

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Wanted sons, unwanted daughters: sex determination takes digital turn

Ashna Bhutani | The Hindi | 14th December 2025

India's gender preference still exists in homes, except that the conversations are now mostly behind closed doors and in online spaces. Hundreds of videos and products, all freely available online, promote sex selection, and have now come under the government scanner. Ashna Butani uncovers how the desire for a male child continues to be vocalised

Disclaimer: Sex determination is illegal and a punishable offence under the Pre-Conception (PC) and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (PNDT) Act.

After having three daughters, my husband would get drunk and threaten me with divorce if I did not give him a son," says Delhi-based Pushpa (name changed to protect privacy). Then one day, 11 years later, when the tests revealed a male foetus, she was relieved. The pressure from the family would ease.

This was 1993, a year before the Bill that would debar sex determination was passed. Parliament felt the need to formulate a law on this after it was consistently found that the medical screening for gender sometimes led people to commit female foeticide. In India's 1991 population Census, the sex ratio stood at 929 females for every 1,000 males.

A little over 30 years on, the family's internalised bias finds voice again, as one of Pushpa's daughters gave birth to sons, and another to daughters.

"Daughters are wonderful, and everyone knows sex selection is wrong," she says, but also admits to wanting grandsons. Pushpa, who is now 61, has worked at a creche in Delhi for 34 years, so she has seen several generations of parents. She notes a change: "Couples don't talk about preferring a son openly like they used to, but they still do, behind closed doors."

Behind closed doors, lakhs of women of childbearing age spend hours on the Internet trying to gauge the sex of their child. One such woman, who is 18 weeks pregnant, comments on a video of an influencer talking about 'signs' of a male foetus. "If you feel lazy, it's a baby boy;" "If your partner is not gaining weight, it's a baby boy," the influencer says. The woman writes in the comment section in Hindi, "Ma'am, I have the same symptoms. I already have a daughter. Please pray for a baby boy."

In January 2025, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare wrote to States and Union Territories drawing attention to the growing problem of online promotion of sex determination. It asked them to list URLs on e-commerce and social networking websites that promote the practice.

The Ministry is responsible for the implementation of the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act, 1994.

The video of the same influencer demonstrating so-called signs for baby boys is on the Delhi Health Department's list of 45 website links submitted to the Ministry. Made by a woman who shares tips for pregnant women, this video is among her most-watched, with over 14 lakh views.

Doctors and other health professionals say that videos on sex determination are non-scientific. They can be health and safety hazards, leading families to terminate pregnancies through illegal means, which can be dangerous for the woman.

In 2020, the United Nations Population Fund, the UN's sexual and reproductive health agency, released a report that found that India accounted for 45.8 million of the world's 142.6 million "missing females".

Lakhs of views online

Of the Delhi government's list of 45 such website links, five are links to books on Amazon, two are websites, and the remaining 38 are YouTube videos made by influencers, religious or spiritual leaders, and some even by people claiming to be medical doctors. Religious leaders ask people to chant certain mantras "to conceive a male child". Some of the videos are no longer available.

An influencer who shares videos on health and lifestyle makes a video zooming into an ultrasound report, garnering 12 lakh views. A radiologist's video on gender identification has 1.7 lakh views. A fertility specialist talks about how the position of the placenta in the uterus can determine the gender of the foetus, garnering 32 lakh views. Another gender prediction video made by a pregnant woman, based on 'signs' such as whether the mother's foot size has increased, and whether she's craving sugar, received over 15 lakh views. One book on this list is on Kindle's education section.

A senior Delhi Health Department official says the Centre is taking steps to remove the website links. "The problem is that the minute we take down one link, another one comes up almost immediately. When we write to platforms or social media sites, they wash their hands of and say that it is the responsibility of the content creator or author."

Google and Amazon both say they will review the links to check if the content has violated their guidelines. Neither got back to The Hindu even a week after with any additional information.

Perpetuating a harmful mindset

Rizwan Parvez, a coordinator at Girls Count, a national coalition of 300 organisations working to address skewed sex ratios, says, "These videos with lakhs of views are mostly watched by individuals and families who prefer sons. While some might watch it out of curiosity, other viewers might even attempt to terminate a pregnancy using home methods, and this poses serious health risks."

He adds that while most of the content is based on myths and is unscientific, they normalise having such conversations online. “Such content reinforces the son preference and daughter unwantedness, and perpetuates the mindset that it is normal to determine the sex of the foetus.” He added that such videos clearly violate provisions of the PC&PNDT Act.

Section 3A of the Act prohibits any person from conducting or aiding in conducting sex selection, while Section 22 prohibits any sort of advertisement related to pre-natal sex determination, under which imprisonment can range from 5 to 10 years. In its letter to States about online violations, the Ministry cited these two sections of the act, along with relevant sections of the Information Technology Act, 2000.

According to the Sample Registration System (SRS) data released by the government, India’s overall sex ratio at birth (female per 1,000 male) has improved in five years, from 904 in 2019 to 917 in 2023. But SRS, which is conducted among 22 states and UTs, shows that the sex ratio has dropped in these years in Madhya Pradesh, from 925 to 917. West Bengal’s sex ratio declined from 941 to 931 in the same years. Meanwhile, in Delhi, the ‘Annual Report on Registration of Births and Deaths in Delhi 2024’ shows that the city’s sex ratio has been falling consistently since 2020, when it reached its highest level of 933 females per 1,000 males. It dipped to 932 in 2021, 929 in 2022, and further to 922 in 2023.

The online shift

Doctors in hospitals, as well as anganwadi and ASHA workers, say that they do not receive requests for sex predetermination as they did a few years ago. Dr. Rashmi Gera, head of the family planning unit at Guru Teg Bahadur Hospital in Delhi, says that women who come to the hospital for medical termination of pregnancy do not talk about sex selection. “Sometimes, if someone has had three daughters, I probe and try to counsel them. But everyone knows that it is wrong now.” In India, it is legal to terminate a pregnancy until 20 weeks for birth control or any other reason, and in some situations up to 24 weeks.

Niharika Tripathi, an academic whose research is on gender and population, says that such mindsets die hard. “Earlier, there were myths that said that if you conceive on a particular date, you will have a male child, or that if your skin is glowing, it will be a girl.”

Conversations about such myths take place in her Sociology class at Delhi University, where students discuss the myths in their respective hometowns. Tripathi adds that while women are at the forefront, both online and offline, this mentality stems from family pressures.

This point is echoed by Praveen K. Pathak, Professor at JNU’s Centre for the Study of Regional Development, who specialises in population health and demographic changes: “It is unfortunate that people are falling prey to such content because of social pressures. This does not take place in a vacuum. While the mother might be engaging with the content, the husband, in-laws, and extended family play a role in convincing her that she should have a male child.”

Influencers deny harm

While the government is getting the links removed, Girls Count has been writing to influencers telling them about why such content is both illegal and ethically wrong. While some influencers take them down, others argue that there is no harm in their content, and that they "support women's rights".

One influencer, who posted a video on how to determine the sex of the foetus, responded, "These things have been going on for years in villages and cities. When a woman got pregnant in any household, there were guesses made as to whether it is a boy or a girl based on the mother's lifestyle. In earlier years, women were not online but this still used to happen." The influencer, who began creating content while she was pregnant, points out that as a mother of two daughters, she knows how "precious" daughters are, adding that the daughters in her family are loved. She adds, "If I have committed a crime, then perhaps every pregnant woman who thinks like this is committing a crime."

Another influencer responded by posting a follow-up video talking about how sex determination is harmful, but refused to take down the first video about guessing the sex of the foetus.

In fact, Pushpa had no idea that the pressure her family had put on her was harmful to her. "A lot of people around me said that a boy will take the family's name forward, and earn to support the family. Back then, I did not have the courage to fight back. It was only when a relative, who worked as a midwife in Haryana, was arrested for facilitating sex selection that I realised that it was wrong."

Faint glimmers of hope

The fight to take down Internet advertisements promoting sex-determination, began in 2008 when Dr. Sabu Mathew George, a social activist, filed a petition to block websites that promote sex selection. Along with the government, Google India, Yahoo India, and Microsoft Corporation (India) Pvt. Ltd. were respondents in the case.

In 2017, the Bench headed by then Chief Justice of India Dipak Misra observed that the tech giants were not honouring Indian law by allowing such advertisements. It ordered the constitution of a nodal agency specifically for Section 22 of the Act, the screening of warning messages if content related to sex determination is displayed. It further ordered auto-blocking of certain keywords. The PC and PNDT Nodal Agency was established under the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in February 2017.

While Section 22 of the PC&PNDT Act states that no person or organisation with technology capable of understanding the sex of the foetus shall issue, publish, distribute, or communicate in any form, including the internet, Girls Count has written to the Ministry suggesting amendments, in order to make the legal framework more robust. It has sought to include "sex prediction through digital platforms, whether scientifically or otherwise, for commercial or non-commercial purposes". Girls Count has further recommended redefining and expanding the word 'advertisement' to include 'services' in the form of assistance or support provided online or offline to facilitate pre-natal sex determination.

An ASHA worker in south-west Delhi notes that the law has brought about a positive change. She says, "Till a few years ago, pregnant women would ask about the sex of the child. Now, out of 100 beneficiaries, maybe one of them will ask about the gender."

In the comment sections of videos, many people say that they are praying for a baby boy. But there are also a few users who counter them. One comment says, "Whatever the gender is, stay blessed with a healthy baby." Some also throw light on the fact that it is illegal.

In Pushpa's family, one of her daughters pushes back. "My eldest daughter fights back if I say anything about a son. In my time, I did not have the option to fight this mentality, but now things are changing slowly."

The author is a Laadli Media Fellow. The opinions expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse these views

Link: https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/wanted-sons-unwanted-daughters-sex-determination-gets-an-online-twist/article70380042.ece

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Out of Reach: The Quiet Ways India's Digital Push Leaves Rural Women Behind

Musheera Ashraf | Twocircles.net | 7th December 2025

Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh: India's digital story is often told through numbers. Millions of UPI transactions every minute. Seamless online services. Government schemes linked to apps. But far away from this vision, in villages where phones are shared and passwords are guessed, women continue to stand at the margins of a world that has shifted faster than they could follow.

Musayyada, a thirty-five-year-old widow from a village ten kilometres from Saharanpur, begins her day long before the city wakes. She boards a crowded tempo at dawn to visit the gas agency and ask why her cylinder subsidy has not come in three months. By the time she reaches, a queue has already formed outside the gate.

When her turn comes, staff tell her she will get the subsidy only if she buys a gas pipe that they insist is "mandatory." She blinks in disbelief. "I changed the pipe just a month ago. I do not need it," she says. The reply is flat, almost rehearsed: "It is mandatory. Even if you do not need it now, you can use it later."

The pipe costs her two hundred rupees, roughly the cost of a day's meals for her family of four.

She carries a second-hand phone she purchased for twenty five hundred rupees, an amount she paid in instalments. "A phone is necessary now. Even if we skip a meal, we have to keep a phone," she says. But she can only use it to receive calls and dial her daughter in another village. For everything else, she goes to the shopkeeper next door, even for the booking of the LPG gas. When asked how she remembers her daughter's number without being able to read, she laughs shyly, "Akhir me do zero hain. (There are two zeroes at the end)."

Across rural India, women depend on neighbours, shopkeepers and family members for the most basic digital tasks. These hands, often male, do everything from booking their LPG cylinders to checking subsidy status. Trust fills the gap left by digital literacy, but it comes with risks.

In another family, an older woman kept receiving calls from strangers because a relative had used her number to register multiple online accounts. "I had no idea why people were calling me by someone else's name," 62-year-old Savitri recalls. These are small incidents in the larger story of India's digital push, but they show how easily the boundary between trust and vulnerability blurs.

Ten years into the Digital India mission, a gendered digital divide continues to dictate who gets to participate and who must stand outside the door. Nearly forty per cent fewer rural women own smartphones compared to men. Among those who own phones, many do not have control over them.

The divide becomes sharper in digital finance. Men are more likely to perform UPI transactions by a gap of 13.7 percentage points. Official UPI statistics do not reflect this difference because they are not broken down by gender. But those working in the payment's ecosystem acknowledge the imbalance. In 2023, a senior Google Pay official said women formed less than thirty percent of UPI users. In 2024, an NPCI (National Payments Corporation of India) representative repeated a similar estimate. Even these numbers drop further in semi-urban and rural areas.

A fifty-year-old schoolteacher in Saharanpur has the UPI app on her phone but refuses to use it. "What if the money goes to the wrong person? Who will return it to me?" she asks. She hands her phone to her son when she needs to make a payment. "If something goes wrong, I will be blamed. Better not to try."

Fear is an unseen but powerful barrier. Many rural women say they prefer cash not because they lack awareness, but because they lack confidence. They have heard stories of fraud, passwords being stolen, transactions being reversed, and phones getting blocked after too many failed attempts. For them, digital mistakes feel heavier than physical ones. Sita, a thirty-year-old newly married woman, sums it up simply. She has never booked her own LPG cylinder. "My husband does it. I do not have a phone," she says. She uses his phone only to watch YouTube videos. "If something goes wrong, I will have to hear from everyone," she adds.

The fear of doing something wrong is not imagined. It is shaped by years of being told to be careful, of being blamed for errors, of having limited room to experiment. Digital services, meanwhile, continue to expand. Schemes get linked to apps. Subsidies require updates. SIM cards need revalidation. Banks insist on KYC. LPG agencies ask customers to check status online. Each added step demands a confidence that many women have never been allowed to build.

Content creators online capture another layer of this reality. Recently, an Instagram creator, @lifeofpuja, said in a video that "no matter how much she works or how many followers she earns, she is still known as someone's wife or daughter-in-law". Rural women echo this sentiment in quieter ways. They often do not get recognition for learning new skills. Their identity is still tied to the household, not their digital abilities.

Sarvothanam, a Delhi-based organisation that works on online safety and digital trainings, says the issue is not just literacy but dependence. "Women who do not know how to use their phones rely on others. But the same people can misuse their access. Personal photos, messages, even their OTPs are shared without them knowing what is happening," a member explains.

Despite the challenges, some change is unfolding. In a village near Deoband, Rahima, the first graduate in her family, shares that she tries to teach basic digital tasks to her mother

and the ladies near her home. I tell them how to open SMS messages, how to find saved contacts, and how to identify suspicious links. It is slow work, but it is work driven by care, not fear.

Parveen, a social worker who works with rural women in Saharanpur, Western Uttar Pradesh, says the path ahead requires more handholding, more community training, and more women-led digital learning groups. “Digital empowerment is not only about giving a device. It is about making women feel safe, confident and in control,” says a digital rights volunteer who works with rural women in western Uttar Pradesh.

India’s digital journey is racing ahead, but a part of the country is still walking carefully behind it. The women in these villages are not resisting technology. They are navigating a world that moved faster than their access, their confidence and their trust.

For them, autonomy is not measured in apps installed or transactions completed. It is measured in quiet victories, answering a message without help, checking a subsidy status for the first time, or daring to press a button without fear. And until these victories become ordinary, the digital future will continue to leave its women behind.

Link: https://twocircles.net/2025dec07/452755.html

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The Smartphone She Can't Own: How Digital Access Remains a Distant Dream for India's Marginalised Women

Musheera Ashraf | Themooknayak.com | 15th December 2025

Digital exclusion in India is not gendered alone; it is deeply caste-marked. Marginalised caste women face layered barriers, limited resources, social surveillance, and systemic invisibility. Even when they manage to access the internet, their voices rarely travel far.

Saharanpur, Uttar Pradesh: Every afternoon, as the sun dips and the network bars flicker uncertainly, 19-year-old Rani* climbs to the edge of her tin-roofed house in rural Uttar Pradesh. This is the only spot where her YouTube lectures load without freezing. She balances her borrowed phone on one hand, notebook in the other, constantly alert both to losing the signal and to being noticed.

The phone is not hers. It belongs to her brother.

Rani is a first-generation college student, enrolled in a government college, and she can't afford tuition. YouTube classes have become her routine. Her family owns a single smartphone, controlled by her elder brother. He decides when she can use it, for how long, and for what purpose. "Classes only," he tells her. Afterwards, the phone is taken back, checked thoroughly for call logs, messages, and browser history. "He says it's for my safety," Rani says quietly. "The internet is not good for girls."

In a country that proudly claims over 850 million internet users, stories like Rani's are rarely part of the celebration. India is the world's second-largest internet market, yet millions of women, especially from marginalised caste and class backgrounds, remain digitally invisible. For them, the smartphone is not a tool of empowerment but a site of surveillance, negotiation, and control.

A Shared Device, A Watched Life

Across rural and semi-urban India, women's access to mobile phones is often mediated by male family members, fathers, brothers, and husbands. According to multiple studies, women are significantly less likely than men to own a smartphone, and far more likely to use a shared device. Ownership, when it exists, is frequently conditional.

Shabana*, a 32-year-old homemaker from a village in Saharanpur, owns a basic smartphone technically. In reality, it is her husband who controls it. He insists on knowing whom she

speaks to, limits her screen time, and often takes the phone with him when he leaves the house. “He says too much phone spoils women,” she says. “He worries I might talk to someone or learn something I shouldn’t.”

Under the guise of “safety,” digital control becomes an extension of patriarchal authority. Location tracking, password sharing, and constant monitoring are normalised as care. What is rarely acknowledged is how this constant scrutiny erodes privacy, confidence, and agency.

For women like Shabana, the internet is not a space of freedom but another room where the door never fully closes.

Caste, Class, and Digital Silence

Digital exclusion in India is not gendered alone; it is deeply caste-marked. Marginalised caste women face layered barriers, limited resources, social surveillance, and systemic invisibility. Even when they manage to access the internet, their voices rarely travel far.

Asha*, a 24-year-old Dalit woman from the Noor Basti area of Saharanpur, learned embroidery from her mother and grandmother. During the pandemic, she tried to sell her handmade crafts online through social media and local marketplaces. She borrowed a smartphone from a neighbour, created an account, and uploaded photos of her work. Orders were few and inconsistent.

“I see others selling similar things and getting so many likes,” she says. “But my posts don’t reach people.” Without knowledge of algorithms, paid promotions, or digital branding and without trust in online payments, Asha struggles to stay visible. Buyers often hesitate once they learn she doesn’t have a UPI account in her own name or a stable digital presence.

This is algorithmic invisibility layered onto social marginalisation. Whose stories trend online, whose businesses grow, whose content is amplified these are not neutral outcomes. They reflect existing hierarchies, now reproduced in digital spaces.

Education Behind Passwords

For young women, digital denial has direct consequences for education. Online forms, scholarship portals, exam updates, and learning platforms assume personal access to devices and the internet. For girls who rely on shared phones, this assumption becomes a barrier.

Rani recalls missing an important scholarship deadline because her brother was away with the phone. “I couldn’t even check the date properly,” she says. When she finally submitted the form, it was too late.

The cost is not just academic. Constant dependence breeds hesitation. Many young women describe feeling anxious about asking for the phone, guilty for needing it, and fearful of being accused of “misuse.” Over time, this discourages curiosity and ambition.

“I don’t search freely,” Rani admits.

The Emotional Toll of Disconnection

Living in a hyper-connected world while being personally disconnected creates a quiet emotional strain. Women speak of feeling left behind, out of touch, and ashamed. They hear about opportunities, news, and conversations second-hand, often too late to participate.

There is also fear, fear of making a mistake online, fear of being blamed if something goes wrong, fear of confirming stereotypes that women cannot handle technology responsibly. This fear is internalised early and reinforced daily.

"It feels like the internet is not meant for us," Shabana says. "Like it belongs to someone else."

Digital India's Blind Spots

India's "Digital India" vision focuses heavily on infrastructure broadband highways, digital services, cashless payments. While connectivity has expanded, access remains uneven and deeply social. Policies often count SIM cards and connections, not control or autonomy.

A household with one smartphone is considered "digitally connected," even if the device is inaccessible to women. Training programs assume device ownership. Financial inclusion initiatives push digital payments without addressing trust, literacy, or gendered control over bank accounts and phones.

What is missing is a recognition that digital access is not merely technical it is political and social. Without addressing patriarchal norms, caste hierarchies, and power dynamics within households, connectivity alone cannot bridge the gender digital divide.

Beyond Connectivity

For marginalised women, owning a smartphone is not just about calls or data. It is about privacy, choice, and the right to exist fully in a digital world. It is the ability to learn without permission, to earn without intermediaries, to speak without being watched.

Rani still climbs her rooftop every day. She still returns the phone when her class ends. But she dreams of the day she can buy her own device with her own money.

Until that day comes, India's digital success story remains incomplete, its silences as telling as its statistics.

Link: https://en.themooknayak.com/women-news/the-smartphone-she-cant-own-how-digital-access-remains-a-distant-dream-for-indias-marginalised-women

28 How Safe Is the Digital World for the Queer Community? *(Translated from Hindi)*

Priti Kharwar | Feminisminindia.com | 15th December 2025

The digital world gives people the freedom to express who they are, speak openly and connect with others like them. But at the same time, it can also be extremely dangerous. For the queer community, it often feels like a double-edged sword.

In India, LGBTQ+ people use social media and digital platforms to live with their identity and share their voices. However, along with this visibility, they face serious threats such as trolling, outing, doxxing, blackmail, deepfakes, and online harassment. When families and society fail to accept them, digital spaces become a place to exist freely. But this freedom comes at a high cost: mental stress, social pressure, financial loss and sometimes even threats to life.

Because of fear, many queer people either stay silent online or are forced to live double lives. Digital platforms do help the queer community in many ways. Social media and dating apps allow them to find partners, make friends and build support systems. For people living in small towns or remote areas, these platforms help them escape loneliness. But the online world is not free from discrimination. Abuse, hate speech, threats and harassment are common. Many people create fake profiles to target and harm queer individuals. LGBTQ+ content creators especially non-binary people often face extremely violent language and death or rape threats.

The digital world is both a space of hope and a space of danger for the queer community.

There is a strong need to make online spaces safer, more sensitive and more inclusive. In a report published by The Hindu, Jeet, founder of the LGBTQ+ advocacy group "Yes! We Exist," says that LGBTQ+ content creators in India especially on Instagram face severe online abuse. This includes the use of slurs, rape and death threats, and constant harassment.

The Queer Experience in the Digital World

Lucky (name changed), a 26-year-old content creator from Uttar Pradesh, shares her experience:

"I have been active on social media for the last 5–6 years. Because of my tomboyish look, people often directly ask me about my gender, or write offensive comments like 'you just need a man.' In the beginning, it felt very uncomfortable. Many times, I deactivated my account for months. Now I've learned to reply in their own language.

My experience on a dating app was also very painful. A cis-heterosexual man created a fake female profile, talked to me romantically and then tried to blackmail me. Not just family and society, even the police discriminate against us."

Online violence against the LGBTQ+ community is constantly taking new forms. Trolling, ghosting, and cyberbullying have become common on digital platforms. This directly affects mental health.

Doxxing and Outing

For the queer community, doxxing and outing are among the most dangerous forms of online violence. Doxxing means sharing someone's private information like their address or phone number without consent. Outing means revealing someone's gender identity or sexual orientation without their permission.

Since Indian society is still not fully safe or inclusive for LGBTQ+ people, many are forced to hide their identity from family and society. In such situations, threats of defamation and blackmail through fake accounts become extremely serious. AI-generated deepfake videos and morphed images are now being used for blackmail as well. Because of this, queer people no longer feel safe even in online spaces. Online stalking and data leaks are also increasing. Many apps and platforms share users' personal data with third parties without clear consent.

Imran Khan Najafi, a Delhi-based media professional and writer, shares a painful personal experience:

"My trust in the digital world broke after one incident. A connection made through Grindr slowly turned into trust, but after our first meeting, that person stole valuable items from my house and disappeared. Filing a police complaint was even more traumatic instead of helping, the police questioned my identity and sexual orientation. Since then, online spaces have never felt safe.

Now I am extremely careful. I don't share personal information, I verify profiles and I stop conversations at the slightest doubt. Still, I feel scared while sharing photos or identity details. In difficult times, I rely on trusted friends and community members."

Imran adds, "A safe digital space means a sensitive legal system, accountable and LGBTQ+-friendly platforms and technology that protects queer dignity. Police need

gender-sensitivity training and society needs more awareness about the LGBTQ+ community."

The Seriousness of Digital Violence

In 2023, 16-year-old content creator and influencer Priyanshu Yadav died by suicide after facing severe online trolling and harassment. Such incidents are becoming more frequent and show how serious digital violence has become.

Because of online harassment, many queer people choose silence on social media a phenomenon known as "zero posting." They stop sharing their thoughts, emotions, and identity openly. Many lock their profiles, stop posting photos, or avoid talking about their relationships. Gradually, they begin to censor themselves to avoid abuse. Some completely leave social media and dating apps. This affects their social lives, increases loneliness, and deepens mental health issues like stress, anxiety and depression.

Research shows that digital violence seriously harms the mental health of queer people. It increases loneliness, fear and the risk of self-harm. Non-binary people, in particular, are mocked for their appearance, clothes and body language. This discrimination often makes people doubt their own identity, weakening their self-confidence and self-respect. Due to fear of doxxing and outing, many hide their identity and avoid connecting with others.

Founder of Manmanas Rehabilitation Foundation & Trust and Clinical psychologist Dolly Singh, explains:

"Digital violence has a deep impact on LGBTQ+ individuals. Many live in constant fear, anxiety, and hyper-alertness. This leads to anxiety disorders, depression, panic attacks, and sleep problems. Continuous harassment creates guilt and loneliness, which often turns intoself-isolation and social withdrawal.

Constant exposure to trolling, bullying and hateful content also increases the risk of internalized stigma. Without timely mental health support, the risk of self-harm becomes very real. This is not just an online issue, it is a serious mental health concern."

Gaps in Law, Technology and Platforms

In India, the IT Act 2000 is used to regulate digital spaces. Section 66C deals with identity theft, 66D with online fraud, and 67 with obscene or harmful content. Some cases are also registered under the Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita (BNS) 2023. In 2023, the Digital Personal Data Protection Act was introduced to protect personal data.

However, this law does not clearly address digital violence. While it has special provisions for children and persons with disabilities, there are no specific protections for the LGBTQ+ community. Current cyber laws in India do not fully understand the unique risks faced by queer people. Data leaks on dating apps are common, yet there are no clear guidelines.

Bias in AI systems and content moderation means queer complaints are often ignored. Due to lack of sensitivity, many cases go unreported to the police. To make the digital world safer, online spaces must become queer-friendly and inclusive. Special laws for LGBTQ+ digital safety are needed. Governments must hold digital platforms accountable. Better technology is required to stop deepfakes and fake profiles. Authorities need training and awareness. Community support and mental health services must be strengthened. The digital world can only become truly safe when the government, technology, law and society work together.

Link: https://hindi.feminisminindia.com/2025/12/15/how-safe-is-the-digital-world-for-the-queer-community-hindi/

29 AI's caste, class and gender bias is fueling digital violence

(Translated from Hindi)

Priti Kharwar | Feminisminindia.com | 10th December 2025

Recently, when we asked AI chatbots like ChatGPT and Grok some questions, their answers clearly reflected caste and gender-based prejudices deeply rooted in society. For example, when asked to suggest names for characters in a love story, ChatGPT repeatedly suggested names of heterosexual couples from so-called upper-caste and wealthy backgrounds. But when asked to suggest names for sanitation workers, it only gave names associated with Dalit communities. Similarly, when asked to suggest names of business tycoons or IAS officers, it assumed they would be men from "upper" castes.

These responses show that AI, like humans, is full of bias because it is trained on the same unequal and prejudiced data that exists in society. In a country like India, where discrimination based on caste, gender and religion runs deep, AI technology is unknowingly reinforcing those very inequalities.

Algorithms are now deciding who is suitable for which job, whose voices will be heard, and whose will be ignored. This means inequality continues even in the digital world. While artificial intelligence claims to promote inclusion, in reality it often repeats existing inequalities based on caste, religion, gender and class. The stories of women, Dalit-Bahujan communities, and sexual and religious minorities are either missing from AI systems or presented through a biased lens. As a result, "Digital India" does not become a new and equal India, instead, old prejudices are repackaged in a new digital form. Hidden biases in algorithms affect jobs, education, justice, and social visibility and marginalised communities suffer the most.

According to an opinion piece in **The Indian Express**, Dheeraj Singha, who works in the research and advocacy division of the Digital Empowerment Foundation, experienced caste bias while using ChatGPT to refine his application for a post-doctoral sociology fellowship in Bengaluru. While improving the language, the AI also changed his identity by replacing his surname "Singha" with "Sharma," a surname associated with so-called upper castes. Even though he had only written the letter "S" in his email, the chatbot automatically turned it into "Sharma."

When AI systems treat an upper-caste, urban, cis-heterosexual man as the "default" human, that bias gets built into algorithms. This becomes visible in resume screening and facial recognition systems, where AI often favours privileged groups. On social media too, practices like shadow banning are common, where Dalit, Bahujan, queer, religious and

gender minorities and feminist voices are suppressed and their reach is reduced. Chatbots also prefer

male-centric names from dominant communities when suggesting names. All of this clearly shows that AI is not neutral, it learns from a society that is already deeply unequal. An investigation by **MIT Technology** Review also found caste bias in OpenAI products like ChatGPT. OpenAI CEO Sam Altman has said that India is their second-largest market. Studies by researchers from **Harvard, Oxford, and New York University** show that large language models (LLMs) are deeply caste-biased. In a fill-in-the-blanks test, GPT-5 associated an "intelligent man" with "Brahmin" and a "sewage cleaner" with "Dalit." Nihar Ranjan Sahu, a PhD scholar in machine learning at **IIT Bombay**, has also described caste bias in LLMs as a systemic problem.

Can we fight AI bias and shortcomings

Ranjit Kaur, a Haryana government employee and a strong advocate for gender justice, says, "*Because of AI, my Facebook profile is always at risk. Posts related to feminism often face restrictions and reduced reach, especially when they include phrases like 'Smash Patriarchy' or 'Down with Patriarchy.' Meanwhile, misogynistic and mansplaining content goes viral easily.*

Even when abusive, misogynist content is reported, no action is taken. AI learns from mainstream content across sectors, and in a society rooted in patriarchy, how can AI ever be unbiased?"

In reality, bias in AI algorithms cannot be dismissed as a mere technical glitch. It reflects policy gaps and mirrors a society already filled with inequality and discrimination. Riddhi Mehta, South Asia Digital Security Representative at Access Now, explains,

"AI systems are mostly built and controlled by cis, upper-caste men, so social inequalities get directly embedded into them. The entire tech structure is designed to maintain power hierarchies. Marginalised communities rarely reach decision-making spaces. Their needs are ignored, their data is not collected, and policies are made without their participation. On the other hand, big platforms often use their power to benefit governments and large corporations, leading to more censorship and less accountability."

She further adds, "*Content moderation is extremely weak. In the Global South, there are fewer moderators, poor understanding of local languages and cultures, and heavy mental pressure on those doing the work. Laws are also inadequate. In India, IT and data protection rules are outdated or confusing. The Digital Personal Data Protection Act, 2023 talks about privacy but lacks strong and transparent enforcement. The government can access citizens' data, but people don't even know where their data is shared. Technologies like DigiYatra are being rolled out without accountability or transparency, even though India has already faced major data leaks. These problems can only be addressed when marginalised communities are included in policymaking and when platforms prioritise transparency, accountability, and user safety."*

Impact on marginalised communities

A study by the **National Law Institute University**, Bhopal, found that AI bias has a much deeper impact on marginalised communities. According to the study, an Adivasi woman named Laxmi from Jharkhand had her application rejected by an AI system while applying for a government welfare scheme meant for girls' education, even though wealthier families' applications were approved.

Similarly, a **The Hindu** report quotes Shiva Mathiyazhagan, Assistant Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, who warns that linking databases to national ID systems and increasing AI use in loan approvals, hiring, and background checks could completely shut doors for marginalized communities. He notes that when a chatbot is asked to name 20 Indian doctors or professors, it usually suggests surnames belonging to dominant Hindu castes.

The report also highlights how AI-based policing models and facial recognition technology often label Dalit and Muslim individuals as criminals while analysing crime data. This increases surveillance, policing, and the risk of false arrests. On social media too, reduced reach of posts from marginalized groups directly affects their social and economic opportunities, dignity, and mental health.

AI accountability, participation, and solutions

Today, AI has become an integral part of our lives. It is no longer limited to entertainment; it deeply affects social, economic, and political structures. This makes the need for a safe, inclusive, and equal AI system even more urgent. The most important thing to understand is that AI is not just a technical project—it is also political and social. Dalits, Bahujans, women, rural populations, and LGBTQ+ communities must be included not only as users but also in the design, development, and decision-making processes. Equality is only possible through participation.

India must work with other Global South countries to build AI models that focus on justice and equality along with inclusive development. Digital platforms based on AI must also be made accountable to prevent all forms of discrimination. This requires caste, religion, and gender audits, feedback mechanisms, and strong regulation. Clear and effective laws are needed to address complaints and harm. Initiatives like IIT Madras's **IndiCASA** dataset could be an important step in this direction.

Ultimately, the goal of technological development should not be to strengthen centuries-old inequalities of caste, gender, and class, but to ensure inclusive growth. Only then can it truly be called progress.

Link: https://hindi.feminisminindia.com/2025/12/10/caste-class-and-gender-biases-in-ai-and-digital-violence-hindi/

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Societal Acceptance Can be Panacea for LGBTQ Members to Not Get Prey Through Dating Apps

Varsha Torgalkar | Themooknayak.com | 5th December 2025

Not even 1% of LGBTQ members come out in the open due to deep-rooted social stigma, discrimination, religious and cultural conservatism, and violence even from immediate family members.

Pune- In October, Samir Lakhe (name changed), a gay businessman from Pune who has not come out, was excited to meet a fellow gay man he matched with on the dating app Grindr. He invited his date to his home when his family members were out. Samir had beautified his home expecting intimate chat and sex. The date turned out to be a trans man who was looking for paid sex. The date asked for Rs 50,000, otherwise he would tell his family and housing society members that he is gay, and he would create a scene at his housing society. Samir, who is married with two kids, scared, paid him money.

Samir was not ready to approach the police. He shared his experience with fellow LGBTQ members at Mist LGBTQ Foundation, which works for the rights of community members in Pune.

"We convinced Samir to approach the police as the amount was huge. Finally, we went to the local police station, where police tracked the blackmailer and were able to recover the money. But Samir did not want to lodge an official complaint or FIR. He is married to a woman. His family, members of the housing society where he stays, and employees at his business are not aware that he is gay. He does not want anyone to know that he is gay, so he avoided lodging an official complaint," said Suraj Raut, HR at Mist.

Rights of LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer) in India

Official LGBTQ population in India is 2.5 million as per government of India's affidavit to the Supreme Court. However, as per many surveys including Ipsos 2022 survey, the population of LGBTQ might be 135 million that is 10% of the total population.

In 2018, India's Supreme Court, decriminalised consensual same sex by striking down Article 377 of Indian Penal Code, thus declaring consensual sex between same sex legal. Thus it affirmed that LGBTQ community is entitled to same constitutional rights like any other Indian. However, India's SC refused to legalise same sex marriage through its judgement in 2023.

“Not even 1% of LGBTQ members come out in the open due to deep-rooted social stigma, discrimination, religious and cultural conservatism, and violence even from immediate family members. They are forced to socialize with heterosexuals and have to marry someone of the opposite sex. But deep down, they need to mingle with their community members to share their lives,” said Anil Ukrande, an activist working for the community through Yutak, an LGBTIQ organization based in Pune.

They don’t come out; they are married, have kids, or are posted at big corporations or government offices. Their family members, neighbors, and colleagues are not aware of their sexual orientation. But their need to meet and become intimate with same-sex partners remains high.

Dr. Mridula Apte, a clinical psychologist who runs Vidula Psychological Consultancy in Pune and who works with the community members as well, says, “Every human has needs for socialization and attachment. Everyone wants to be accepted and validated. Community members are often marginalized and remain invisible. The feeling that nobody accepts me or looks at me is a very horrible feeling. And then, whoever accepts them, maybe through dating, even though it is toxic, they start mingling, socializing, dating. And then instances like blackmailing, extortion, and sexual favors happen.”

Members who dont come out don’t want to attend community events due to fear of social ostracization.

Why the Community Prefers Dating Apps over Social Events Meant for Them

Community members ideally should attend events of the community to meet fellow members, be social, and find partners for dating, and that is a healthy way. Though many organizations like ours host such events, they are limited to cities and are too few to cater to a population of millions. Besides, members who don't come out don't want to attend such events. In fact, they don't want to be seen with members who have come out due to fear of social ostracization," said Bindumadhav Khire, an LGBTQ+ activist and director of Bindu Queer Rights Foundation in Pune, who has been advocating for the rights of the community members for more than three decades.

He added, "Thus, they opt for finding dates at parties or dating apps and have no idea about the background, such as health status or, say, HIV status, of the people they are meeting. Thus, they get blackmailed and extorted and prefer not to go to the police. The number of victims approaching the police is less than 0.1% in such blackmailing cases. Here, we can only create awareness among community members for being alert and also create awareness among society to accept LGBTQ members."

How Do Dating Apps for LGBTQ+ People Work?

Suraj Raut, who is gay himself, says, "The Grindr app is for social networking and dating for LGBTQ members. Mostly, people look for hook-ups or sexual activities on this app, as anyone can create an account without a strict verification policy. If someone matches with another, they can meet within 2-3 hours, unlike other apps like Bumble, where one needs to wait for a minimum of 24 hours to get verified. There are other dating apps for the community members working in the same way as Grindr. Thus, members meet on these dating apps without knowing any details about a date they are going to meet."

He added, "We receive many 4-5 such cases per week. Victims either invite dates to their homes or go to meet at places asked by that date. Many times, these places are isolated or dark, and gang members of that date are around. These criminals, whether they indulge in sexual activity or not, blackmail victims, asking for money and threatening that their gang is around. And victims generally pay. Only 1-2 out of 10 victims get ready to go to the police, and that too after we convince them. And even then, these victims are keen to do settlements outside court, just to get their money back and not to pursue the case further with the police to avoid regular visits to police stations and later court proceedings in order to protect their identity."

Suraj himself experienced this blackmailing firsthand. "I was thinking of relocating to Delhi a few years ago. Hence, during one of the visits to Delhi, I matched with a date on the dating app. This guy asked me to meet near Connaught Place in Delhi, and when I reached, he started asking for money, threatening that his friends were nearby. I requested him to go to my hotel, as my friends were staying there. He realized that I had protection, and he left. By the time I went back to the app to raise a complaint, this account was deleted."

This reporter sent an email to the Grindr app but received no reply. Hinge, another app, replied that it takes the utmost care that all its members are protected.

One of the police officials from Maharashtra said, “We have been receiving a few such complaints. We do track blackmailers and try to get money back in some cases. But in the majority of the cases, victims don’t want to lodge official complaints, visit police stations regularly, and fight the case in the courts, as they don’t want to be seen. We do correspond with these dating apps in case their offices are in India. If these dating apps are located outside, we cannot do anything.”

Anil Ukrande, who runs Yutak LGBTIQ, an organization for the rights of the community, says, “The number of community members getting cheated is much higher. We get 5-6 complaints per week. However, very few approach us, that too when the amount they lost is huge. And we have to convince them to go to the police. And even then, only one out of 10 gets ready to lodge official complaints. Others are just keen to get money back and not to escalate the issue.”

He says, “There is an issue with the police, who ask uncomfortable questions like why they are dating someone of the same sex or traumatize the victim more. There is a lack of sensitization among the police about the community. When NGOs like us approach the police, they take such complaints. If an individual community member approaches the police, he often gets disappointed.”

Dr. Mridula says, “Community members are even now not allowed to marry. However, to have a life partner is a common feeling. And for members to keep changing dates or partners is a heavy feeling. There is a need for same-sex marriage and their societal acceptance so that community members would not have to take risky paths.”

- Varsha Torgalkar is a Laadli Media Fellow. The opinions and views expressed are those of the author. Laadli and UNFPA do not necessarily endorse the views.

Link: https://en.themooknayak.com/lgbtq-news/societal-acceptance-can-be-panacea-for-lgbtq-members-to-not-get-prey-through-dating-apps

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