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#MeToo: a political issue in India's digital presence

Research Objectives

Dr. Pallavi Guha examines the role of media platforms in anti-rape and sexual harassment activism in India.

Detail

Bio
Dr. Pallavi Guha is a journalism researcher, educator, and author of '*Hear #MeToo in India: News, Social Media, and Anti-Rape and Sexual Harassment Activism*', published by Rutgers University Press. Dr. Guha's research includes anti-rape and sexual harassment activism on mass and social media platforms, gender roles in the electoral campaign, and social media. She has recently contributed to the White House Gender Policy Council as a research stakeholder and shared recommendations on responsive and responsible technology to combat sexual violence.

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Collaborators
Dr. Guha would like to thank all the research participants for their time.

Competing interest statement
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Personal Response

In practical terms, how do we go about improving the reporting of sexual violence by mainstream media?

❞ Reporting of sexual violence by mainstream media can be improved by being intentional about covering sexual assaults in marginalized locations and populations and seeking news and information from grassroots activists who support survivors of sexual assault. Survivors and their family members don't always have the resources to reach out to journalists directly.

Lack of digital access for women in rural areas makes rural and marginalized women vulnerable to rape and sexual assault. There is no doubt that social media empowers victims and survivors to know about others and share their experiences. But it also puts some victims in precarious positions. And this is where journalists and newsrooms come in to investigate and share news of rape and sexual violence. Survivors and activists from rural India still consider journalists and news media as platforms of justice, and grassroots advocates fill in the gap between journalists and survivors of sexual violence. ❞

#MeToo

A political issue in India's digital presence

#MeToo and #MeTooIndia, which exploded on social media in 2017 and 2018 respectively, drove an increase in online activism related to sexual violence, harassment, assault, and rape. Despite this and the significant numbers of women voters and political candidates, violence against women still fails to feature as a political campaign issue in India. Dr. Pallavi Guha, a researcher and author of 'Hear #MeToo in India: News, Social Media, and Anti-Rape and Sexual Harrassment Activism,' has been investigating this issue through the lens of interdependent agenda-building. She argues that in digitally growing countries such as India, activists, journalists, and policymakers should focus on both mainstream media and social media platforms to investigate, share, and make sexual harassment and assault an issue that political campaigns have to focus on.

The power of social media has connected the world and impacted everyone in one form or another. Once used only to connect friends and family, social media platforms have now evolved to have far-reaching influence in every facet of life – professional, economic, educational, advocacy, political, and more. India, with a population of more than 1.4 billion people, is a growing target market for social media platforms. As of 2020, the country had 518 million social media users; this is estimated to top 1 billion by 2025. Since 2014, political campaigns in India have increasingly used social media platforms to connect with the electorate, with Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, and YouTube, among others, reaching millions of potential voters.

Social media platforms are also used for social and political advocacy. Since 2014, Dr. Pallavi Guha has been examining the role of media platforms in anti-rape and sexual harassment activism as a workplace and political issue in India. She developed the concept of interdependent agenda-building that emphasizes interdependent associations between social media networks and mainstream mass media in terms of building public agendas in digitally emerging spaces. Essentially, social media and traditional news outlets must work together. As grassroots activists report social issues through social media channels, mainstream media outlets need to investigate and share these issues. This would encourage political parties to integrate issues such as sexual harassment and assault into their campaigns.

SEXUAL ASSAULT NARRATIVES IN POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS

Guha's work has shown that political campaigns only pivot to sexual assault when the narrative promotes scandal, revenge, and the honor of women. Policy-related campaigning relevant to sexual assault is rare. For example, while 'shock-and-horror' provides rich campaign rhetoric, socio-political-historical reasons for inequalities in justice for victims receive little attention.

This situation continues, even after transnational movements such as #MeToo and #MeTooIndia became prominent in 2018. Despite coming shortly after the second wave of #MeTooIndia in 2018, which included more than 35,000 tweets and 60,646 Facebook posts in just seven months, the Indian parliamentary

elections of 2019 and assembly elections of 2020 did not see sexual violence as an important campaign issue. In fact, violence against women was even less of an issue than it was in the 2014 elections, when it came to the forefront following the infamous 2012 gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh, 22, on a bus in Delhi.

Guha identified several reasons for this lack of engagement:

1. Political parties are wary of drawing attention to the problematic behaviors of their candidates. During the 2019 elections, 21 candidates were accused of sexual harassment and/or rape, despite being part of the election process. When they become known, such incidents are used almost exclusively against the individual candidates, but not to examine broader issues or implications.
2. Sexual assault and harassment have received negligible consideration in elections despite a large number of women voters; even in 2014, following the rape and murder of Jyoti Singh, the issue was framed as one of safety and the protection of women and not as a women's rights and empowerment issue.
3. Social media campaigns must be supported by offline activities and news media for widespread support and impact on policymaking which is the focus of interdependent agenda-building concept.
4. While the volumes of news reports and social media posts around #MeTooIndia and sexual assault increased in 2018 and 2019, the depth of analysis and broader implications did not. For some survivors, this has resulted in less engagement with social media. One activist, Divya (name has been changed), described to Guha how, following sexual harassment and assault at the non-profit where she

worked, she became disillusioned with the world of online activism. Engaging in #MeTooIndia led to an information overload and constant reminders of her trauma.
5. Sexual assaults in privileged (usually urban) communities are much more likely to gain media and political traction than those suffered by poorer, lower-caste, marginalized, and/or rural populations, owing to long-held socio-political divides that have extended into the digital world. Urban elites have the skills and resources to access the digital world and harness its power; disenfranchised groups do not have the same levels of access.
6. There is a lack of female role models in positions of power, including in political offices, due to a limited number of women being provided tickets to run for public office. Not only does this make the political environment more threatening to women reporting sexual assault, but it also impacts on sexual assault policymaking or the lack thereof. Unlike in the U.S., women candidates and policymakers did not embrace the #MetooIndia movement and sexual harassment in their campaigns. Moreover, when some women candidates did, they did not receive fair and objective coverage by either traditional media or the algorithms that govern the visibility of social media posts.

INTERDEPENDENT AGENDA-BUILDING FOR POLICYMAKING

The lack of substantive progress after #MetooIndia has been disappointing to survivors, journalists, activists, and much of the wider public. After her sexual harasser was acquitted, Tanushree Dutta, a Bollywood actress, declared herself exhausted by her fight against systematic corruption, oppression, and bullying. Women with little or no public

profile, especially those from marginalized communities, have even less recourse.

As Guha describes in her book, *Hear #MeToo in India: News, Social Media, and Anti-Rape and Sexual Harassment Activism*, there is selective outrage by both social media and news media, in which some sexual assault victims receive more focus than others. Moreover, in some cases the platforms become weapons of further repression. Guha reports that, for marginalized communities, sharing on social media platforms could lead to issues of societal discrimination.

To provide a robust theoretical and practical basis for addressing these issues, Guha focuses on sexual violence and the media through the lens of interdependent agenda-building. She argues that instead of operating independently, social media networks and mainstream mass media should build an interdependent agenda, enabling them to reach the public and policymakers.

An essential pillar of interdependent agenda-building is that social media and traditional news outlets must work together. For instance: the *Times of India* publishes, on average, less than

one story about rape or sexual assault per day, while official statistics show that almost 90 rapes occur every day in India. In another example, social media and activist groups reported the sexual harassment of 15 women at the 2017 New Year's Eve celebration in Bangalore. Then, four days after the assaults, mainstream media began to report the story in detail. As a result, the police started an investigation that ended with the arrest of the perpetrators. In 2015, when an American tourist took to Twitter to report her sexual harassment in Mumbai, mainstream media quickly reported her case and swift action was taken against the perpetrators. Had she not been a foreign tourist, such interdependent action between social media and mainstream media would have been unlikely.

Another component is the location of sexual assaults, with the majority of those that gain prominence in the media associated with urban settings and upper-class women. This is partly because urban/upper-class women tend to have greater access to media platforms (i.e., more likely to have internet connectivity, to be literate, to be aware of online social movements, etc.) and live/work within social ecosystems that recognize sexual assault as a crime. In rural communities in India, not only do women lack access to media platforms, but traditional newsrooms are based in urban settings, so their focus is much less due to limited audience interest.

However, the already fraught progress of harnessing social media as a tool for social activism is increasingly threatened by certain aspects of the social media environment, such as misinformation and the control of content by algorithms. Algorithms tend to promote urban-based assaults, further disenfranchising marginalized communities. Wide-scale activism is, in large part, superficial, with individuals piling upon a cause only to lose interest as the hype fades and a new cause takes center stage. Perhaps more disturbingly, technology-facilitated sexual harassment and violence are driving women away from online spaces, where they are subject to trolling,

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violent rhetoric, and sexualist imagery. Finally, when mainstream journalists do turn to social media to search for stories related to sexual harassment and violence, tracing those involved is often challenging due to the issues of verifying information.

Guha concludes that there is no doubt that social media empowers sexual assault victims and survivors to share their experiences. However, it also puts them in a precarious position owing to societal and cultural factors. Moreover, the digital divide means that not everyone can share their harassment or assault on social media platforms. To plug this gap in digitally growing countries such as India, journalists and newsrooms need to better investigate, share, and propel sexual harassment and assault as an issue that political campaigns cannot ignore.

#METOO

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