

Gendered discourse: Technology mediated violence and women students

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Abstract

Students' access to technology mediated communication gadgets are increasing day by day. Mobile phones, especially smart phones have become like regular attire for the student communities with inbuilt camera, memory spaces and online facilities on a single touch. Apart from entertainment, these gadgets are mainly used for communication purposes. It is essential to understand how these devices, have negotiated with the traditional gendered platforms either to evolve new ones or overcome the old ones. The nature of gendered discourse perpetuated via the platforms of technology based gadgets is yet another area to be explored especially within the student communities. Informal discussions, observations and sharing with women students show us that the traditional norms are reset by the new media gadgets. Especially in terms of abuse, monitoring of movement, harassment, stalking etc is being experienced by women students based on their gender. In this regard, the present research tries to find out the level of awareness on technology mediated violence against women students, its type and the level of prevalence. Further the study would try to identify the linkage between the nature of violence prevalent and its linkage between the social patriarchal norms of the society cross cutting into aspects of class, caste, language, religion and so on. It also tries to know the different intervention strategies these women students adopt to address the issues, by means of overcoming or within the gender frameworks. This study would help us identify what type of interventions the women students are more likely to take up at different levels – personal, family, social, institutional and legal. The study adopts a mixed method of survey and interview, both with rural and urban women students in Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu. The study could further help us identify the context of educational and policy level changes in this regard towards addressing both women and men students.

(Key words: Technology media violence, women students, gendered discourse)

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Introduction

Use of new media technologies by student communities is seen to increase day by day, owing their use of new media gadgets like smart phones, lap tops, tablets, video games and so on. Use of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) by younger generations has been both positive and negative. The positive aspects include development in terms of education, career, opportunities, information and entertainment. The negative aspects include the addiction and its related consequences faced by the younger generation. Mobile phones, especially smart phones have become like regular attire for the student communities with inbuilt camera, memory spaces and online facilities on a single touch. Apart from entertainment, these gadgets are mainly used for communication purposes. It is essential to understand how these devices, have negotiated with the traditional gendered platforms either to evolve new ones or overcome the old ones. The nature of gendered discourse perpetuated via the platforms of technology based gadgets is yet another area to be explored especially within the student communities. However, studies in this regard have shown that abuse takes place in terms of monitoring of movement, harassment, stalking, sexual abuse, threats, etc which are being experienced by women students based on their gender. In this regard, the present research tries to find out the level of awareness on technology mediated violence against women students, its type and the level of prevalence. Further the study tries to identify the linkage between the nature of violence prevalent and its linkage between the social patriarchal norms of the society cross cutting into aspects of class, caste, language, religion and so on. It also tries to know the different intervention strategies these women students adopt to address the issues, by means of overcoming or within the gender frameworks.

Students and ICTs

Studies have shown that the usage patterns of ICTs by students have been more promising when compared to the past years. ICTs have thrown open varied opportunities, unimaginable overcoming physical, geographical, language and technical barriers. In terms of entertainment, the ICTs have almost replaced the traditional media outlets and this had changed the entertainment, information and education platforms of the present generation. The data charges are constantly coming down and students make it affordable by compromising their other needs when it comes to data requirements. Given the scenario, students are found to use online media gadgets to a larger extent. This study considers not only internet based online media but also the offline ICT, like mobile phones without internet access.

Women and ICTs

Technology, over the years has been identified with the men and as men's arena. Any new technology, it is explored, utilized and studied mostly by men of a society when compared to women. It takes its time based on the socio cultural and political context of a society, to reach a woman. Women turn to be mere users and sometimes victims of such technologies. In the case of ICTs, right from its advent, women have been progressing in terms of its usage. Beyond digital divides based on gender, women in many countries are found to bridge the gender gaps in terms of ICTs usage. Yet, in countries like India, it is still a process, such that the participation of women is slowly taking momentum. Since, ICTs usage requires skills sets meant for their usage, the mere access of ICTs by women cannot be equated to usage.

Technology mediated violence against women

As use of technology is increasing in the society even though it is not used by many women, they have become targets of technology mediated violence. Violence, for the only reason of being born into a particular gender is gender based violence. This could be seen at its peak in cases of women, where women experience violence only for the reason of being a woman. Such gender based discrimination and violence had seeped into the ICTs with more power of escapism due to inadequate laws towards addressing the issue. Technology mediated violence against women is the new form of so called sophisticated way of abusing women with the help of technology. It is

mostly done by the so called educated people, thus questioning the basic context of education. When the internet is used in the process, such crimes are also known as cybercrimes which are perpetuated on both women and men. The vulnerability of women being victims of cyber crimes in terms of stalking, morphing, sexual abuse, verbal abuse, harassments, threats and blackmails, defamation etc are the prominent forms of technology mediated violence against women.

Cybercrime against women

Cyber-crime also known as computer crime can be defined as -Criminal activity directly related to the illegal use of computer and a network, for unauthorized access or theft of stored or on-line data that can be used for several criminal activities against a victim (Saini and Rao, 2012). Cybercrimes can be against human beings, governments, institutions, financial sectors and so on. As per the recent report of the National Crime Records Bureau in 2016, cyber crime in the year 2014-16 have increased from 9622 (2014) to 12317 (2016). Among the states Uttar Pradesh and Maharastra are in the first and second place respectively. Cybercrimes that are of insult to modesty of women are reported to be 376 cases in Maharastra with 144 cases of Sexual Exploitation being on the lead (NCRB, 2017).

The cyber crime dealt in this paper is the cyber crime specifically against women, which is gender based, committed for the only reason of being a women. Cybercrime against women is on at alarming stage and it may pose as a major threat to the security of a person as a whole (Jeet, 2012). The major forms of cybercrime against women are internet stalking, cyber bullying, morphing, defamation, email spoofing, harassments and so on. Internet stalking, is a crime of repeated pursuit utilizing electronic communications to do any or all of the following behaviours on two or more occasions: contacting someone after being asked to stop, annoying or tormenting someone, making unwanted sexual advances towards someone, and communicating threats of physical violence against someone (Wykes 2007). Cyber stalking can be used interchangeably with online harassment and online abuse (Muthukumaran, 2008). In Cyber Stalking, stalker access the victim's personal information like name, family background, telephone numbers and

daily routine of the victim and post them on the websites related to dating services with the name of victim (The Times of India, 2013). Globally, India is third behind China and Singapore in cyber bullying or called online bullying (Simhan). Morphing is editing an original photograph of a person as per the wish of the person editing. This is mostly a technology misused by people to morph photographs of women in sexually abusive nature and post them online so as to threaten and torture women.

Technology mediated violence against women students

Women students' usage of internet and technology is increasing day by day. At the same time they are silently targeted by technology mediated violence both by elderly adult men who very well know the consequences as well as adolescent boys who are partially aware of laws and systems of such illegal activities. In case of adult men, they do it specifically to harass students with the use of technology and threaten dire consequences if it was leaked out. Adolescent students are found to have no clue in dealing with such harassments and violence become silent victims of such acts. On the other hand adolescent or teenage men students indulge in such violence for reasons of pleasure, revenge on girl students, peer pressure and so on. Sometimes even these students are not aware of the consequences legally as well as the impact on the victims. Most of the cases are underreported due to several reasons, like fear from victims owing to their age, ignorance of law, lack of decision making, patriarchal attitudes in their surroundings at school, home and society, issue of reputation and mostly want to hide them fearing the future of the students, both victims and perpetrators. For this even the parents, teachers and institutional heads agree to compromise and overcome the issue.

Need and significance of the study

Under the above circumstances, nearly 90% of the urban and 60% of the rural college students do possess smart phones with data packages. Women students are also found to break the

gendered digital divide and access such gadgets. Thus it is essential to understand the nature of technology mediated crime on women students in the present day and the means of dealing them by the concerned persons. The safety and treatment of women students in using and while using the ICTs requires serious introspection with a gender lens. It is essential to understand and identify what type of technology mediated violence against women take place and who are the perpetrators? How do the women students face such violence? What are the interventions by the women students at different levels – personal, family, social, institutional and legal? The above questions could enable us towards policy recommendations from the women students' point of view in institutions of higher education. When understood even carefully, the ICTs can be turned into tools of empowerment overcoming all traditional barriers. In this regard this study would really throw more light on the plight of the women students and use of technology.

Methodology of the study

The study adopts a mixed method of in-depth interviews, focus groups discussions and observation methods, both with rural and urban women and men students in Tirunelveli, Tamilnadu. The samples are drawn from the college students from a women's college, co-educational college and an engineering college. Data was collected using questionnaires to understand their usage patterns of ICTs. Focus group discussions were held with women students as a group at different colleges and another group had both women and men students as a combined group. This enabled us to understand the deliberations when there were only women students in comparison to that of being in a combined group. The data is presented in the form of case studies to provide concise understanding of the different nuances of the gender based violence perpetuated via technology mediated gadgets.

Prominent case studies

Based on the above methods of data collection, only ten case studies are presented here for further analysis based on the cases. The facts narrated by the respondents by in-depth interviews are consolidated as cases below,

Case 1: A respondent stated the plight of her neighbor was ostracized by the family members for speaking to a friend over mobile phone. It was condemned by her family members stating that mobile phone conversations were meant for relationships with boys whom they are attracted towards. At one point of time she was stopped from the school the entire family blamed her for her 'fate'. Depressed over all this the girl had committed suicide, the family had stated that the death was due to stomach pain and completed all the final rituals.

Case 2: The respondent, stated that she herself received a fake call from a man stating that she had spent time with him in a nearby city and he had her 'topless' picture with him. The respondent was shocked, yet, being an educated and outspoken person, she initially stated she had not even been to the city stated by him. Still he would not disconnect, instead demand in a harsh voice she should speak to him, come out with him else he would show the picture and complain about her movements to her mother. The respondent had immediately handed over the phone to the mother; it was disconnected as soon as the mother strongly stated she knew her daughter well and that she could not be fooled by such phone calls or allegations.

Case 3: One of the respondent had an experience of her friend being abused by a known friend by fake id and on her intervention and advise the id was closed, this was also taken to the knowledge of the parents who accused the girl of 'inviting trouble'. Following this, the affected girl had been disturbed and had discussed all this with one of the family friend being an older male. He had listened to everything and knew well that the parents would be annoyed if they came to know of their daughter's further engagement with social media. So he had created a fake id in her name, posted all unwanted stuff in her name and threatened her that he would show her parents 'her misuse of social media' if she did not oblige to his will. Unable to face the continuous torture, the victim complained to her parents and at one stage the entire family shifted their home to another place. Their whereabouts are not known to the respondent so far.

Case 4: The respondents' hostel mate had a friend who was in an affair with a person abroad. The friend's boyfriend was meddling with her mobile phone during one of their meet and he had cleverly sent his girlfriends hostel mate's (the victim) photograph to his mobile phone. At one

stage when the girl in affair expressed her desire to break up with the man, he had created a fake facebook id of her friend with the photograph he had and posted unwanted things on them. The victim came to know this at one stage, by then the boyfriend of her hostel mate called her and insisted she convinced his girlfriend to continue the affair; else he would spread the fake id, thus spoiling the reputation of the victim. The victim, being innocent, had no clue why she was involved, how her photograph was got and why she was dragged into all this. Her marriage was due within a month during which she had terrible time pleading with the perpetrator explaining her plight. Later he had agreed to remove the id and had kept his promise.

Case 5: In a class of coeducation in a college, the students of the class had formed a WhatsApp group including all women and men students. This gave access to all phone numbers of the classmates. Initially it was smooth, later when there was a friction between the classmates on marks, relationships, attitudes, actions and so on; few of the women students were targeted. The phone numbers of the women students was given to men students of other departments and outside the institution. The women students had received harassing and unwanted calls that degraded them verbally. Sometimes such calls and the responses of the women students were recorded edited and tailored in an entirely different context to threaten them. This forced them to change number, come out of the group and keep themselves away from social media. The respondents who spoke insisted that social media was not meant for them and keeping away from it was good for girls.

Case 6: One of the respondents stated that her classmate had developed a relationship with a mobile friend and praised the man, seeing his photographs, single status, business background in his face book page. Initially it was messages like ‘how are you?’ ‘Are you willing to sms me?’ etc. The girl too found the person to be very ‘decent’ and continued her conversations. At one point of time she tried to get opinions of the person from her friends and soon discovered that he was the ex-lover of her own friend who was rejected stating that she would not fit into the caste and cultural background of his family due to the caste hierarchies.

Case 7: One of the respondents stated that based on her online presence at midnights, it was received differently by her own male friends. Being bored she would go online to listen to some music and at many instances her men friends who are online at that point of time questioned her presence online at midnight. When they were in turn questioned about their presence they withdrew as a result of not liking to be questioned. Time of online presence of women students is carefully monitored to form opinions of their ‘character.’

Case 8: A respondent stated that she was not much into online or social media. One day she had received a call from a stranger stating that he knew her very well and she had been on a relationship with him. The respondent was very shocked, scared and cried, had even pleaded her innocence and feared that if the matter was known to her parents she would be branded as a ‘bad girl’ and face dire consequences. As the person spoke her response had been only weeping and was forced not to hang up the call. Her mother noticing her daughter’s long conversation grabbed the phone from her and took stock of the situation, understanding the nature of the call had shouted at the perpetrator and hanged up the phone. Only then the respondent was relieved and says even now she is scared to have a phone of her own and thanks God for the understanding of her mother at that point of time.

Case 9: Being in family groups was indeed a threat to young women. One of respondent stated that her photos posted in the family groups was misused by her own distant relative man to create a fake id in her name and post unwanted things in her name. In this context she had been receiving threatening calls from the perpetrator asking her to oblige to his demands. She had even given money to him at times due to such continuous torture. At one point of time unable to handle the situation she had complained to the parents, the parents had called up the person and warned him. Only then all this had stopped.

Case 10: In another instance of family groups, one of the respondents photograph was morphed with that of a men relative in the group. This photograph was sent to her proposing her. When she insisted that her parents had already found someone and negotiations were on the way, the perpetrator was annoyed and threatened to post the morphed photographs in the groups to

damage her 'reputation'. This had disturbed the respondent very much and on sharing with her own brothers she had overcome the problem.

Inferences from the case studies

From the above case studies the following inferences are derived in this study by the researchers to understand level of awareness on technology mediated violence against women students, its type and the level of prevalence. The inferences also tries to identify the linkage between the nature of violence prevalent and its linkage between the social patriarchal norms of the society cross cutting into aspects of class, caste, language, religion and so on. It also tries to know the different intervention strategies these women students adopt to address the issues, by means of overcoming or within the gender frameworks.

- **Nature of technology mediated violence against women:** The study throws more light into the nature of technology mediated violence faced by women students in institutions of higher education. Women students are not even aware that incidents quoted by them are basic violations of their fundamental or human rights as women. They just cross it as another everyday life experience. Existence of cyber stalking, bullying, harassments, sexual exploitation, stalking etc is seen in most of the cases presented above. Unfortunately, many women students are not even aware that the problems they face or have faced is legally questionable and has legal remedies. Knowledge of IT act, cybercrimes, and women related laws etc are lacking and such ignorance makes them more vulnerable to crimes of above nature.
- **Everyday online participation controlled by patriarchal norms:** The study finds that education, even at undergraduate levels is not able to empower our young women in terms of understanding themselves, the society and means to face problems. Most of the respondents are found to be affected by the society's patriarchal norms even in online public spaces. Such that mere accesses, time of access, nature of access of women students are questioned, monitored and even serve as backgrounds to form opinions about them in the larger society.

As stated by one of the respondent, she never feels confident to own and handle a mobile phone.

- **Digital safety over financial constraints:** Irrespective of their expenditures or financial constraints towards online access, the respondents are found to even give up their minimum online usage, due to such violations and abuses they face online. Though income determines women's online usage as in previous studies, today, in case of women students they do not hesitate to spend for their data usage. The obvious thing that prevents from internet, especially social media usage is that women are made to feel that online spaces are not safe for them. This in turn fosters larger contexts of digital divide based on gender, where women are denied the opportunities of many benefits catered by online platforms in terms of their development or empowerment. Such instances further ensure the online spaces as men's public spheres.
- **Masculinity unquestioned:** Behaviors of educated young men, their attitudes towards women students are throwing many questions of education system at large. Masculinity, belief in men's power to control women in society has been found to be extended over from the society to the digital spheres. Technology is seen to be used as a tool by men to 'mishandle' or even 'control' women as per their perversions. The perpetrators, being educated men, are aware that they acts are illegal and against the law. In almost all cases they are found to be 'silenced' once they are encountered. This shows that women should be trained in handling such crimes at different levels including legal remedies.
- **Lack of technology oriented knowledge:** The study finds that there is a lack of technology oriented mediation among parents, teachers and students themselves. Many are found to lack knowledge on how to handle such online crimes, whom to complain, role of law enforcement officials and so on. Resistance and fear towards technology by many parents from the rural background makes them to conclude that even using a mobile phone by their daughters would be an hindrance in getting a 'prospective marriage proposals' for their daughters.

- **Technology in women development at stake:** Use of technology towards the development of women in terms of her empowerment is still far beyond the understanding of the educational institutions, families, and society and policy makers at large. Use of technology to participate in the online platforms for women, participate in the other related civil and political issues of relevance, participation in policy making or decision making, accessing information on opportunities at national and international levels, being content creators in terms of media usage are all still a distant dream. This also includes lack of knowledge of positive examples of women's online participation and presence. No forums discuss the technologies in positive light in terms of development of the students and empowerment.

Conclusion

Recognizing the alarming situation at institutions of education at different levels it is essential to bring in policy level changes to incorporate technology usage education, related laws and safety mechanisms. This is because users of technology mostly learn them when they are in school or colleges at an early age. Do's and Don'ts are essentially to be taken across to students, teachers, parents, law enforcement officials and all the concerned lot at a larger extent with a gender lens. This should create an understanding on personal rights or privacy, defamation, consequences of online records, and so on. Use of technology towards development of students, especially women overcoming all types of digital divide could really empower them to the next levels.

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