



Recognize, Resist, Remedy: Addressing Gender-Based Hate Speech in the Online Public Sphere

Participatory Action
Research on
Gender-Based
Hate Speech Online
with a Karnataka-Based
Youth Group

IT for Change
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Acknowledgments

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Participatory Action Research on Gender-Based Hate Speech Online with a Karnataka-Based Youth Group

Research Report

IT for Change, 2021

Executive summary

This report aims to contextualize a Participatory Action Research (PAR) exercise undertaken by [IT for Change](#) in collaboration with [Samvada Baduku](#), an organization that empowers young people to be part of, and lead, social change. The initiative was undertaken as a part of the project Recognize, Resist, Remedy, which focuses on combating sexist hate speech online through legal and policy interventions by working with various stakeholders. The PAR component of the project aimed to co-evolve a proof-of-concept of a viable intervention model for young people that can promote a new online culture of zero tolerance for sexist speech.

Working with 11 young people, the model sought to build awareness among the cohort about misogyny, and develop and implement strategies to counter it.

Through training sessions, discussions, surveys, and a participant-led digital media campaign against sexist hate speech, the PAR reaffirmed the many established insights about the intersectional nature of gender power structures in the digital publics. It also enabled the participating collective to develop a high degree of self awareness about the nature of sexist hate, build informed perspectives, assume leadership, and confidently claim online spaces through local language materials for deepening feminist political discourse. At the same time, it brought home the challenges in confronting patriarchal tropes about permissible discourse, the visceral pushbacks that neutralize counterspeech, the corporeal consequences of being silenced, and the presence of a lurking gender police in familiar and stranger networks online.

By the end of the study, the participants identified the need for systemic change, pointing to why a paradigm shift with respect to intimate interactions as well as institutional changes is necessary. They also began discovering their own political voice and laid claim to the digital publics, thereby enabling a meaningful contribution to locally responsive feminist leadership and activism.

Keywords: Misogyny, Sexism, Hate Speech, Social Media, Counterspeech, Youth Group, Feminism, Participatory Action Research, Intersectionality, Karnataka, Kannada

1. Rationale and context

The internet has offered myriad ways for connection, community, and solidarity. However, given the fluidity of offline-online spaces, gender hierarchies and power dynamics permeate the digital sphere. Outcomes for gender equality today hinge on understanding the manner in which social norms and rules are recast in the criss-crossing experiences of physical-virtual life.

Online misogyny constitutes a deeply denigrating form of gender-based violence, and poses serious and debilitating challenges in terms of policy and justice responses. Thus, recognizing and countering hate speech online has become an essential part of anti-oppression feminist politics today (Richardson-Self, 2018). The [#IAmHere advocacy movement](#) and the [No Hate Speech Youth Campaign](#), both operating across Europe, are some notable efforts directed towards eliminating hate speech and disinformation in cyberspace. In Karnataka, which is the context of this PAR, the [Hate Speech Beda](#) (No Hate Speech) movement initiated the [#RejectCommunalVirus](#) campaign to [counter Islamophobia in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic in India](#). However, such movements lack an explicit focus on gender and the detrimental impacts of online hate speech on the lives of women and their ability to participate in the online sphere freely and safely.

Hate against women, girls, and femininity itself, is born out of the long-standing patriarchal preoccupation with preserving a gender order that privileges men and places women under their firm control.

Hate against women, girls, and femininity itself, is born out of the long-standing patriarchal preoccupation with preserving a gender order that privileges men and places women under their firm control. Misogyny, then, is an expression of hostility towards women and femininity that perpetuates this sexist gender order (Illing & Manne, 2017). Consequently, misogyny is upheld and reinforced through social arrangements that penalize women who are perceived to be in violation of such an order.

This report aims to contextualize a Participatory Action Research (PAR) exercise undertaken by IT for Change in collaboration with Samvada Baduku, an organization that empowers young people to be part of, and lead, social change in Karnataka, India. The initiative was undertaken as a part of the project [Recognize, Resist, Remedy](#), which focuses on combating sexist hate speech online through legal and policy interventions and by working with various stakeholders.

As part of the PAR, IT for Change conducted workshops and training sessions to engage with the 11 participants, of whom six were women and five were men. These participants were members of

Samvada's youth programs and primarily came from marginalized socio-economic backgrounds.¹ The sessions sought to build awareness among the cohort to firstly, recognize expressions of sexist hate in cyberspace, secondly, create a space to reflect on misogyny, its social antecedents, and manifestations on social media platforms, and thirdly, reflect on the need for a shift towards an inclusive, safe, and empowering public space for all. The sessions also incorporated experiments in feminist counterspeech, which culminated in a Kannada-language digital media campaign.

The PAR assumes particular importance in a wider techno-social context that is rife with gender-based violence.

The PAR assumes particular importance in a wider techno-social context that is rife with gender-based violence. It attempted to engage closely with a group of young men and women, situating their experiences within a systemic frame of analysis, since understanding the systemic nature of oppression presupposes a process or journey of empowerment that allows reflections on deep-seated assumptions and values. Using an intersectional lens, it was able to unpack how gendered experiences of marginality and isolation are also intertwined with caste, class, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and other social markers.

Foregrounding the need for a culture of change, the exercise attempted to forge a feminist imagination of democracy in the pursuit of equality.

2. Objectives and research questions

This PAR was carried out with the twin objectives of understanding the ways in which young people in Karnataka encounter and react to misogyny in the online sphere while equipping them to recognize and explore if and how such sexist hate may be countered.

Specifically, the PAR set out to enable the cohort to:

1. Recognize and explore the nature of online sexism and misogyny, from an intersectional feminist perspective.
2. Create a space to reflect on sexism and misogyny and how gender identity is linked to other social identities such as class, caste, ethnicity, etc.
3. Explore strategies to reclaim the internet as a public-political space for hitherto marginalized women and girls.

1. Samvada's Youth Resource Center and Baduku College undertake courses in gender, sexuality and feminist ethics. See <http://samvadabaduku.org/> for more information.

The explorations initiated through training sessions with the participants attempted to answer some of the following questions:

1. Do participants recognize sexist speech in their daily interactions? What gives rise to sexist hate?
2. Is there a culture of sexist hate online? How does society at large view or respond to sexist hate?
3. How do digital media and platforms allow sexism to be 'programmed' into their design? How is sexism expressed through comments, GIFs, memes, videos, etc.?
4. What are the implications of sexist hate for a gender-just world?
5. How does online sexism manifest in different types of social relationships? Are certain contexts/platforms/online spaces harder to negotiate for women than others? How do men and women respond to sexist hate online?
6. What constitutes counterspeech against sexist hate? How can we anchor it within feminist ideals?

3. Methodology

Participatory Action Research is an approach to knowledge creation that involves participants and researchers working together to understand a specific problem; in this case, sexist hate speech online. The element of 'action' is emphasized through the objective of engaging with the problematic situation of online sexist hate through reflections on the phenomenon of digitality and social power, explorations of the self in relation to the other, and experimentation with feminist counterspeech online.

The project involved five components in its research design:

1. Planning and designing session modules around specific themes. These themes were discussed in weekly virtual sessions with the participants over eight sessions held between September 16, 2020 and December 16, 2020;
2. Facilitating the weekly learning modules with a view to contribute to a shared understanding of sexism, the digital space, and hate against women and girls;
3. Observing, participating in, and documenting the discussions with participants during each session;
4. Engaging in conversations on a WhatsApp group consisting of the participants and researchers; and
5. Reflecting and reporting on each session's findings.

Virtual interactive sessions were facilitated by the researchers through the video conferencing platforms BigBlueButton and Zoom. The sessions, using culturally-specific materials in local languages, incorporated assignments for the cohort, including poster-making, conducting a survey, and carrying out a digital media campaign to coincide with [#16DaysofActivism, the annual international UN Women campaign against gender-based violence](#). The PAR also used baseline and endline questionnaires (see [Appendix 2](#)) to assess shifts in the perspectives of the participants at different points of the exercise. These instruments were made available in Kannada and English languages.

Below is a brief description of the modules conducted during the sessions (see [Appendix 1](#) for a comprehensive breakdown of the modules):

1. **Modules 1 and 2** provided an introduction to gender, sexuality, gender roles, and the patriarchal social order, and investigated the participants' social media usage.
2. **Modules 3 and 4** explained the concept of cyberviolence against women and girls through sexist hate speech, and its implications for women's participation in the digital sphere.
3. **Module 5** formulated strategies of counterspeech founded on feminist ideals to address online sexist hate.
4. **Modules 6 and 7** developed the survey questionnaire for a participant-led survey and a Kannada-language digital media campaign.
5. **Module 8** concluded the PAR with a discussion on the participants' learnings.

The guiding principle behind the modules was to encourage critical reflection based on the lived experience of the participants.

4. Process and reflections

The baseline assessment indicated that the participants were active users of social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp. They had some exposure to gender-sensitization training due to their engagement with Samvada's activities. Nearly all participants considered themselves to be feminists. In the first session, it became apparent that discussions on gender were of much interest to the cohort. Researchers clarified that the PAR would foreground sexist hate speech online and focus on the group's engagement with social media spaces.

The results and reflections in this section are drawn from the session notes maintained by researchers, materials created by the cohort, and assessment tools administered during the process.

4.1 Recognizing sexist hate online

To gauge their initial awareness, the respondents were asked if they knew what hate speech was. Almost all of them believed that sexist hate exists on the internet. Of the participants, a few of the men reported having come across expressions of sexist hate in cyberspace, while almost all of the women said they have been subjected to sexist/misogynistic statements either directly or indirectly, in the past year. Although all participants recognized and identified sexism or misogyny targeted towards women, only a few reported that they believe such instances occur frequently.

This information resonated with the in-session discussions. The women's responses indicated that their engagement with social media was influenced by the social surveillance they experienced. Through debates and discussions, the group concluded that gender identity mediated one's engagement with social media. The surveillance experienced by the women also inhibited their self-expression. For instance, Taru (woman)² shared that she was apprehensive of sharing her photos on Facebook because she does not feel safe leaving a digital trace/footprint. The possibility that this information could be monitored by her conservative family and subsequently used to censure her movements determined what she chose to share on social media platforms. The fact that women are forced to self-govern and discipline their engagement online to avoid conflict or trouble was evident in these reflections. This is also substantiated by other research.³

I am apprehensive of sharing my photos on Facebook because I do not feel safe leaving a digital trace. There is a possibility that this information could be monitored by my conservative family and subsequently used to censure my movements.

- Taru
(name changed)

On social media, the concerns of the participating women were intrinsically different from the experiences and engagements of the participating men. Vyom (man) said that his interest in politics prompted him to follow pages of political parties, pages featuring political news, memes, etc. He was comfortable sharing photos of himself as well as manifestly political content on his account. His fellow participants, Rohit (man) and Vikas (man) agreed with this, asserting that their profiles were extensions of themselves and they should be allowed to express themselves without inhibition. The relative 'openness' of the participating men's social media engagement confirmed that ascribed gender identities determined participants' self-expression, and also that they did not seem to be subject to the heightened surveillance experienced by the participating women.

2. The names of the participants have been changed in this report to protect their identities.

3. See *Born Digital, Born Free? A Socio-Legal Study on Young Women's Experiences of Cyberviolence in South India*, available at <https://itforchange.net/born-digital-born-free-a-socio-legal-study-on-young-womens-experiences-of-cyberviolence-south-india> and *Righting Gender Wrongs: A Study of Law Enforcement Responses to Online Violence Against Women*, available at <https://itforchange.net/righting-gender-wrongs-a-study-of-law-enforcement-responses-to-online-violence-against-women>

The participating women stated that the PAR sessions were instrumental in laying out for them the concepts and frameworks to analyze and comprehend interactions on social media, helping them see a physical-virtual contiguity in misogynistic attitudes and rhetoric in cyberspace. They felt that the PAR helped them “make sense” of the world around them, and assign terms such as “misogyny” and “sexist hate” to specific instances of discrimination in their own lived experiences. According to them, the ability to recognize and “call out” such sexism was an important and powerful act of realization and resistance.

This PAR is instructive because I am now better able to comprehend the dynamics of social media and how it amplifies sexist hate, making it pervasive across online and offline worlds. There is a strong case for regulation and laws necessary to keep the internet safe for women and girls.

- Suhasini (name changed)

Suhasini (woman) said that the PAR was instructive because she is now better able to comprehend the dynamics of social media and how it amplifies sexist hate, making it pervasive across online and offline worlds. She believes that this pervasiveness of hateful rhetoric makes a strong case for regulation and laws necessary to keep the internet safe for women and girls. Through the course of the project, she was able to recognize that women are often attacked for behavior that tends to subvert or undermine patriarchal cultural norms.

4.2 Gender norms underlying sexism and misogyny

Women’s public participation remains a vital agenda of the feminist struggle across cultures. To be in the public space is to assert their personhood. When women engage in the online publics, the pushback is often violent.

The third session focused on understanding sexism as an extension of patriarchal ideology. An attempt was made to explicate the ‘patriarchal social order’ – the enforcement of rigid, cis-heteronormative binaries as well as the subordination and degradation of women's identity. Consequently, Rohit was able to see how women are attacked “for being women or failing to be women”. He observed that women are consistently associated with themes such as the kitchen, family, sex, etc. and these representations emerge as a means to sustain the subordination of women. Anu (woman) backed this sentiment by using examples of statements she had come across online that asked women to “go back to the kitchen”, gaslighting them into believing that “they know nothing” or that “they don’t belong in the public sphere”.

Another participating woman said that she was worried about the misappropriation of photos from platforms such as Instagram that are then used to create fake profiles or troll the women who appear in them. For this reason, she prefers maintaining a private profile on Instagram in which she can regulate her followers and avoid the “harassment” that comes with a public profile.

Women are attacked for both being women or failing to be women, and are consistently associated with themes such as the kitchen, family, sex, etc. These representations emerge as a means to sustain the subordination of women.

– Rohit (name changed)

Yes, women are asked to “go back to the kitchen”, and are gaslighted into believing that “they know nothing” or that “they don’t belong in the public sphere”.

– Anu (name changed)

Whilst discussing women’s participation in political debates on social media, almost all the participants were of the opinion that women find it difficult to freely express their political positions because they risk being subjected to abuse. Vyom said that while he followed many political pages owing to his interest in politics, he does not find many women participating in conversations on these pages. He added that this happens because of the threat of harassment. He noted that he has seen women who speak up often having to contend with misogyny.

All the participants agreed that women are harassed more than men for speaking out against sexism/ misogyny. Such discussions laid the ground to further explore ascribed gender roles in the patriarchal order. Participants were quick to recognize the objectification of women in cyberspace and offered examples of memes and pages with sexist content that they had come across.

4.3 How participants perceive and respond to sexist hate

The burden of negotiating the threat of violence is routinely placed on women, with diktats for good behavior. While these narratives rationalize male privilege, they also ensure women’s conformity to feminine performance. [Research](#) points out that suggestions to ‘keep safe’ are often patriarchal expectations calling on women to realign their own aspirations, and refashion their online presence as a strategy of self-defense and survival through gender-based hate speech.

Thus, unsurprisingly, self-imposed censorship was the initial response of women participants during the sessions, with most of them resorting to the refrain, “Why not be careful?”

When presented with various instances of misogyny – telling a woman posting on financial matters to go back to the kitchen, misusing images posted by women, subjecting women to inappropriate comments based on their physical appearance – all the respondents recognized such instances of sexist hate speech and agreed that such behaviors were offensive and wrong. Chitra (woman) pointed out that women should have an equal right to post photos on Instagram and share their joys with the world. The respondents’ own responses to similar situations ranged from ignoring commenters, unfollowing them and asking others to do the same, reporting abuse against such users, etc. Monica (woman) opined that it is easy to ignore sexist hate online, but ignoring such rhetoric does nothing to reduce the incidence and reach of offensive trolls and memes.



As the sessions progressed, the women started talking about the need to ‘deal with’ sexist hate instead of turning a blind eye to it, and even about eliminating it to allow equal space for women. Participants also reflected on the outcomes of their responses. Akshay (man) noted how his efforts to report online sexist hate to the cyber-cell (run by the local police) were not fruitful.

While not everyone was vocal about their opinions, there was a definite shift towards identifying a wider range of tactics – protesting, reporting, seeking allies, and naming and shaming.

4.4 Strategies to counter online sexist hate

Women activists and feminist organizations have increasingly mobilized around global to local campaigns to fight gender-based violence online. The group of participants in the PAR exercise were excited to draw inspiration from these actions and developed a campaign to generate awareness and engage local audiences.



Content created by the cohort for the digital media campaign. English translations clockwise, starting from top left:

1. A social media campaign against sexist hate speech. #EnoughSexistHate. Don't ask women to be careful... Make social media a safe space!
2. Sexist hate is normalized and trivialized as a joke. But sexist hate is a violation of human rights. It is a form of violence against girls and women and it aids in the continuation of gender inequality. We should fight hate speech together. We should protect human rights. #EnoughSexistHate.
3. Women's rights are human rights. Don't suppress women's voices, respect their opinion. #EnoughSexistHate.
4. Sexist hate speech incites violence against women. We should unite against this. Come forward to safeguard women's independence. #EnoughSexistHate.

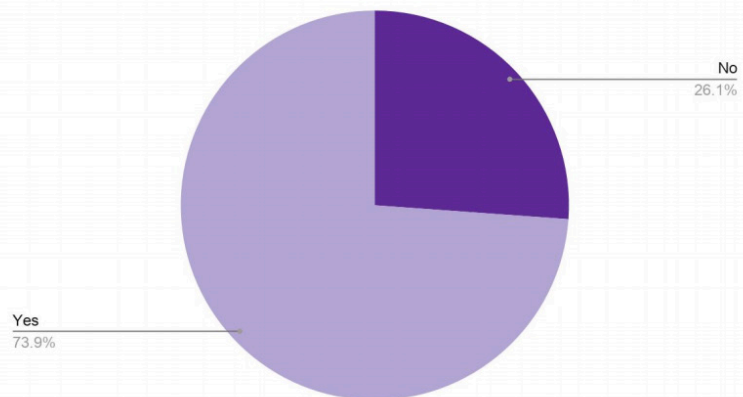
The Kannada-language digital media campaign followed the results of a survey that the participants undertook.⁴ The survey demonstrated the deep-seated misogyny among the respondents interviewed by the cohort. The participants wanted to destabilize the pervasive normalization of sexist hate evident in the survey and denounce it. They were keen to produce relatable content which would capture the attention of an audience of their peers, friends, and colleagues. They wanted to join the global community of gender equality advocates during UN Women's #16DaysOfActivism and do their bit for the women's movement. The participating women were particularly interested in deploying sarcasm and "making feminism fun". Dissemination of "witty memes", they believed, should be one of the elements of the digital media campaign. The participating men, on the other hand, were skeptical about the uptake of this campaign in their homosocial groups. According to them, while most men can recognize sexist hate, they seldom react owing to fear of exclusion and rebuke. Thus, they favored content in the nature of short video clips and posters, packed with slogans advocating equality.

4. The results of this survey and more insights from it can be found in [English here](#) and in [Kannada here](#).

A woman who expresses her opinion about politics, religion and society on social media is trolled a lot for speaking about such issues.

73% of the respondents think that women take trolling “too seriously” because they are “more sensitive”.

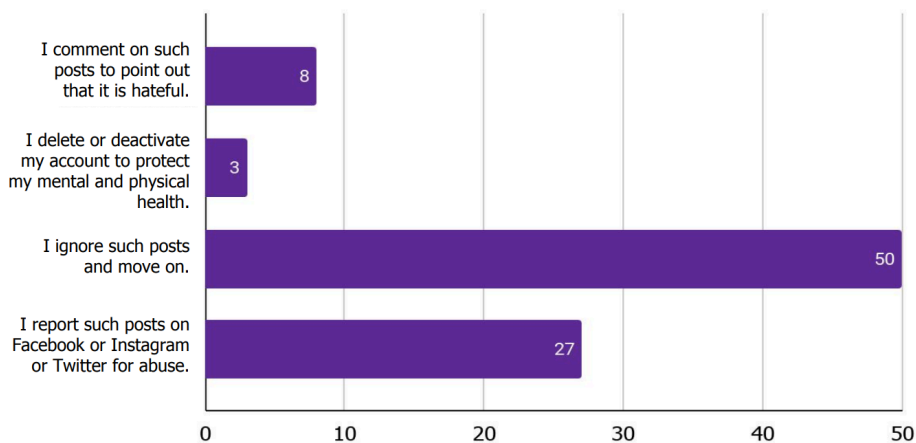
Do you think women are more sensitive and take trolling too seriously?



Some insights from the survey administered by the participants.

How do you respond when you see sexist hate online?

How do you respond when you see sexist hate online?



The cohort recognized that choosing an appropriate hashtag for the campaign was essential to establish its presence on social media. They hoped to pick a hashtag that could be “catchy” for a predominantly Kannada-speaking audience. #SaakuSexistHate⁵ (Enough Sexist Hate) was chosen following a long deliberation on multiple options, including #SexismBeda (No to Sexism) and #NillisiNindane (Stop the Abuse). The digital media campaign was carried out primarily in Kannada on Instagram and Facebook.

A short video clip created by one of the participating men for the #SaakuSexistHate campaign caught the attention of a member of a neighborhood right-wing group (known to the participant) who demanded that the content be taken down with immediate effect. The use of the word ‘sexist’ (containing reference to the term ‘sex’) and the explicit call to resist misogyny seemed to incite the group who perceived the campaign to be “disrespectful” of “Indian ethos”. What ensued was a radical reconstitution of the campaign itself, in light of the potent threat to the physical safety of the participant singled out by the right-wing group.

5. The Kannada term ‘saaku’ means ‘enough’.

The participants met with Samvada's team members to debate the course of action. A decision was taken to halt the campaign and reevaluate the approach. It was felt that removing any and all references to the word 'sex' would be the most prudent way forward. The cohort was encouraged to reconvene the campaign under the aegis of new hashtags – #EqualityBeku (Need Equality) and #NammaHakku (Our Right).

This redirection of the campaign from a radical resistance of sexist hate to a benign appeal for allies in equality was a watershed moment. In this abrupt, even if necessary, shift, the PAR process faced a sobering reminder of the ever-present threat of patriarchal displeasure and the careful maneuvering women must contend with, to lay any claim to the digital publics.



New content created by the participants for the redirected digital media campaign. English translations from left to right:

1. We are all for equality. Life with equality is our right. #OurRight.
2. Let us respect women's opinions and let's all stand for their protection. #OurRight.

However, participants also felt that the setback did not make the effort futile. Monica felt that the campaign helped her counter misogyny in her own intimate circles. One comment she received for her online post during the campaign dismissively suggested that trolls are a source of entertainment and should be treated as such, and that she and other women should "learn to take a joke" without dissecting them or categorizing them as hateful. Monica reported being infuriated by the comment and reflected on how such misplaced humor comes at the cost of women's personhood. She was glad for the engagement afforded by the campaign and hopes to take the conversation forward through social media posts.

5. Assessment of learning outcomes

The endline assessment (Appendix 2) of the PAR brought home interesting insights. Both the men and women found that the project helped clarify concepts such as sexism, misogyny, hate speech, counterspeech, among others. Some participants noted that the research had provided a novel approach to conversations around sexism and misogyny.

Anu submitted that it was the first time she had an opportunity to listen to men's perspectives on misogyny and how they saw themselves situated in relation to it. Anu also felt that the interaction had given her and other participating women the opportunity to co-learn with men in a mixed group setting not often available to them.



Vikas echoed Anu's sentiments. He added that the PAR has equipped him to identify expressions of misogyny around him, drawing attention to the normalization of the culture of hate against women and girls in the mainstream.

To Akshay, the project was personally significant because it aided in his own feminist education and that of his younger sister, with whom he discussed the project constantly.

Rohit was grateful for the various perspectives on intersectionality and vulnerability offered by the study, enabling him to be more sensitive about sexism. He now believes that sexist hate online is primarily motivated by a preoccupation with controlling women's bodies, and consequently, their expression. He remarked how his woman friends seldom countered misogynistic speech directed at them because they have internalized a sexist script that has rendered them voiceless. When asked if it is possible that women do not wish to speak up for fear of their own personal and physical safety, Rohit agreed that while it may be a possibility, it becomes all the more imperative for male allies to counter sexist hate by using their privilege to further the rights of women and girls. Rohit identified viral trolls as "organized activities" that cannot be countered through isolated, individual attempts at counterspeech.

Vyom and Vikas echoed Rohit's sentiments on counterspeech and wondered if men would be willing to risk losing friends for speaking up against sexist hate, since they would be seen as betraying their own gender.

Akshay believes that counterspeech falls short of restoring the rights of women and girls to cyberspace because it fails to recognize the risk inherent to engaging with sexist trolls. In his experience, approaching authorities in the cyber-cell is a “dead-end” as they seem ignorant to the threats posed by misogynistic speech and do not see it as a violation of the rights of women and girls.

Suhasini admitted that she used to find trolls entertaining and followed several pages with misogynistic content until recently. She identified the relentless trolling of Kannada actor Rashmika Mandanna as a turning point that compelled her to reflect on the rhetoric espoused by such trolls. The PAR, she said, had pushed her to report trolls for abuse on social media platforms, but she is nonetheless afraid to engage directly for fear of being trolled herself. Like many other fellow participants, Suhasini believes that counterspeech fails to account for the power asymmetry that prevents women and girls from speaking up for themselves.

Rohit also reflected that misogynistic speech should be classified as a category within hate speech. This would make attempts to counter sexism more sustainable through legal recognition.

6. Conclusions

The PAR, while reaffirming the many established insights about the intersectional nature of gender power structures in the digital publics, also enabled the participating collective to develop a high degree of self-awareness about the nature of sexist hate. Individuals in the group were also able build informed perspectives, assume leadership, and confidently claim online spaces through local language materials for deepening feminist political discourse.

The PAR, while reaffirming the many established insights about the intersectional nature of gender power structures in the digital publics, also enabled the participating collective to develop a high degree of self-awareness about the nature of sexist hate.

The cohort was already well-primed by their participation in Samvada’s activities, and came into the process ready for in-depth feminist engagement. Yet, the space was marked by the omnipresent dynamics of gender relations, with the men in the cohort always eager to speak, and women needing to be nudged, in the early sessions. That the social conditioning of men and women within patriarchal societies leaves men feeling more confident and entitled to claim the public discourse was evident even within the context of the cohort’s discussions. Posing questions directly to the participating women was an effective mechanism to get around their relative reticence in the group. Over time, the women managed to find comfort in the shared experiences of other women in the group, offering their opinions confidently and freely.

The PAR allowed the tacit fears and anxieties of the participating women and men – the internalization and naturalization of risk-averse gender scripts acquired through their socialization – to be identified and unpacked. It enabled the men and women in the cohort to cultivate greater sensitivity about the nature and extent of harm experienced by victims of trolls. The aforementioned bullying faced by one of the participating men during the digital media campaign was a first-hand experience of the volatile terrain of the digital publics. It brought home the challenges in confronting patriarchal tropes about permissible discourse, the visceral pushbacks that neutralize counterspeech, the corporeal consequences of being silenced, and the presence of a lurking gender police in familiar and stranger networks online.

In understanding and engaging with sexism and misogyny online, participants also identified the need for systemic change, pointing to why a paradigm shift with respect to intimate interactions as well as institutional changes is necessary.

In understanding and engaging with sexism and misogyny online, participants also identified the need for systemic change, pointing to why a paradigm shift with respect to intimate interactions as well as institutional changes is necessary. Encouragingly, the cohort's discovery of their own political voice and attempts to lay claim to the digital publics may be seen as a meaningful contribution to locally responsive feminist leadership and activism.

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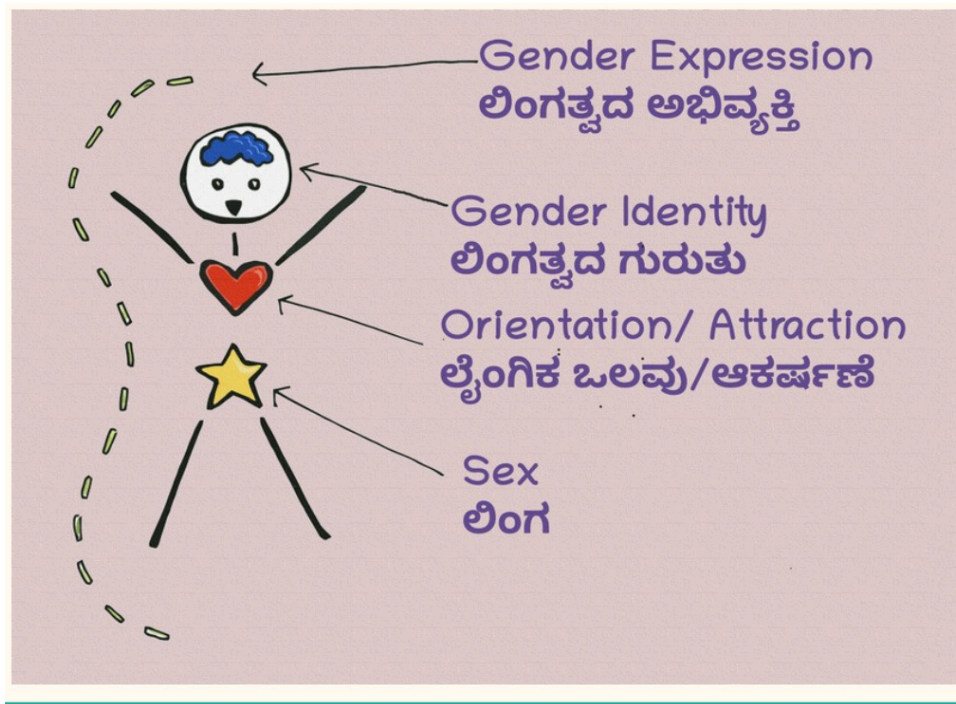
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Appendix 1: Session structures

Session 1: September 16, 2020

Overview: This session was a preliminary ice-breaker aimed at acquainting the participants with the project itself. They were briefed on the concept of hate speech and sexist hate and its manifestations online. This was followed by a discussion on the concept of a Participatory Action Research and the role played by the participants in this process. Due emphasis was given to a sense of horizontality, i.e. the facilitators and participants were expected to learn from each other. The session concluded with the administration of baseline assessments, with instruments being made available in both English and Kannada.



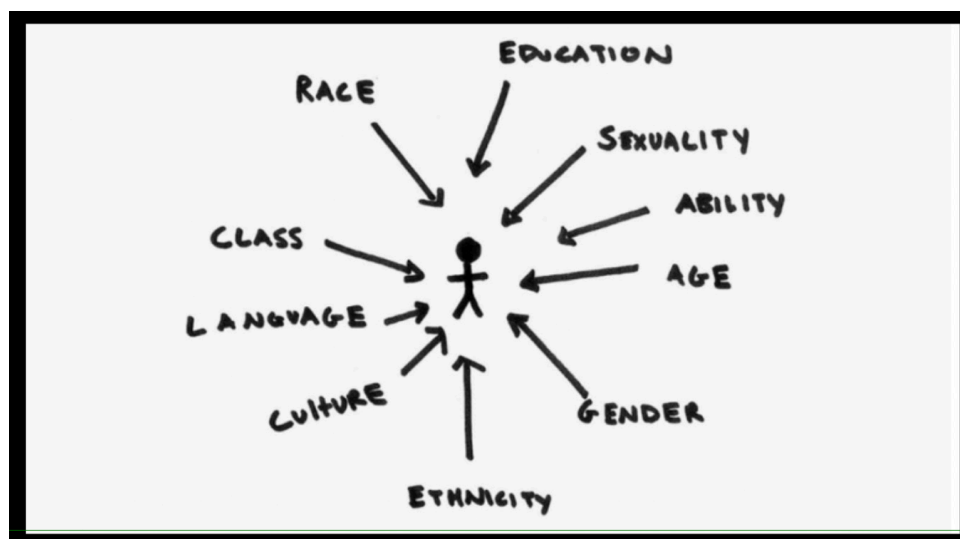
A slide explaining the difference between gender expression, gender identity and sex, presented during the first session.

Session 2: September 23, 2020

Overview: This session explored the participants' social media presence and usage. Facebook, Instagram, and WhatsApp emerged as the most commonly used platforms to manage professional/academic and personal commitments. The cohort admitted that the Covid-19 pandemic had increased their social media usage as they actively relied on the aforementioned platforms to connect with friends, family, and colleagues. The second half of the session focused on exploring gender roles and how their subversion by women triggers sexist hate. The consequent objectification of women, degradation of femininity and the women themselves were the broad themes discussed during this part of the session.

Session 3: September 30, 2020

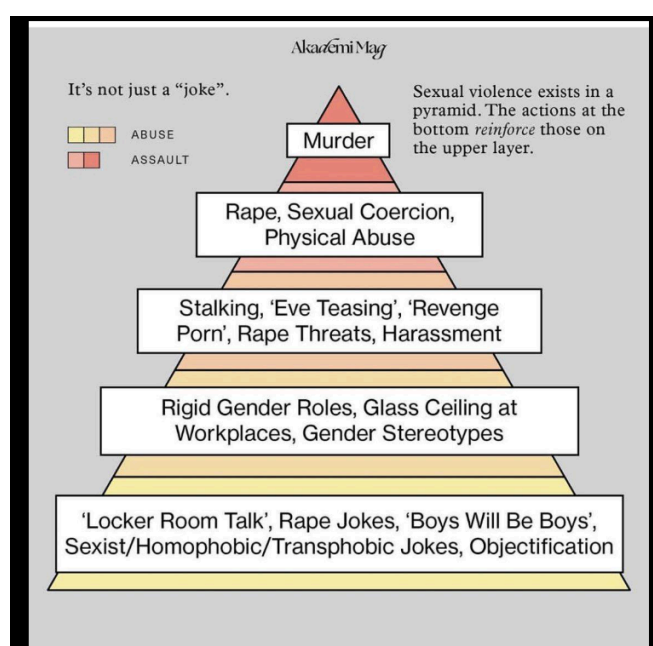
Overview: In this session, the participants were introduced to the conceptual framework of intersectionality, its implications for women's experiences of violence, and the types of sexual violence, of which sexist hate/misogyny is a subset.



The diagram used to explain intersectionality during the session.

Session 4: October 7, 2020

Overview: This session dealt with the nature and types of sexual violence, with a focus on sexist violence and hate online. The participants were quick to point out that women were the primary targets of troll pages. Further, women participants were particularly bothered by the prevalence of doxxing, slut-shaming, and victim-blaming that they commonly encountered on social media.



The pyramid of gender-based violence diagram used as a guide during the session.

Session 5: October 14, 2020

Overview: This session explored the dynamics of social media and how it amplifies sexist hate speech, and discussed remedies to hate speech with reference to counterspeech. Participants reflected on the instances of hate they had encountered online, sharing examples of homophobia, Islamophobia, and misogyny that they had noticed. This was followed by a conversation about the techno-design of social media platforms, which enables the amplification of sexist hate through virality, echo-chambers, outrage cycles, and systematic desensitization. Participants reflected on and shared examples of the audience reach afforded by social media, the relationship between hate speech online and the offline action it generates, and the implications for the safety of vulnerable person(s) or communities. The participants also recognized the silencing effect of misogynistic trolls, memes, and comments, which not only restrict women's participation in cyberspace, but also actively impinge on their freedom of expression.



A diagram used to explain different types of online abuse and the physical forms it can take.

Session 6: October 27, 2020

Overview: This session included recapitulation exercises in which participants revised the various terminologies, such as intersectionality, hate speech, counterspeech, etc., discussed over the course of the past five sessions. They used this knowledge to construct a survey instrument aimed at capturing public perceptions of online sexist hate. This survey contained a combination of multiple choice questions soliciting responses to women sharing their political opinions and personal photos on social media, as well as reflective statements which required respondents to share how they would respond to expressions of sexist hate online. Participants were tasked with interviewing six people (three men and three women) for this exercise, with a man and a woman each from the following age groups: 21 to 30, 31 to 40 and 41 to 55, over a period of two weeks. The survey aimed to elicit a small but

representative cross-sectional sample that would help the researchers and participants understand variations in perceptions of sexist hate online, across ages and genders. Participants' comprehension of sexist hate and cyberviolence against women and girls was also tested by employing hypothetical situations which represented the varied nature of abuse that women encounter online.

Session 7: November 20, 2020

Overview: The intervening period of nearly a month between the sixth and seventh session was spent deploying the survey developed by the participants, followed by an analysis of the responses by the researchers. This session aimed to design a Kannada-language digital media campaign against sexist hate which showcased the results of the exploratory survey deployed by the participants alongside formulating and implementing feminist counterspeech strategies against expressions of misogyny on the internet. Through the survey results, participants found that their respondents were likely to ignore sexist hate online and move on, suggesting that engaging with misogynistic trolls was a futile endeavor. However, the survey results unequivocally acknowledged that gender-based discrimination and attacks are an abiding reality of interactions in cyberspace. Participants noted that this portion of the results is an affirmation of pervasiveness of sexist hate in social media platforms, and that respondents were cognizant of this misogynistic discourse.

Session 8: December 29, 2020

Overview: An endline assessment to measure the changes in participants' perceptions towards sexist hate over the course of the study was administered before starting the session. Considering the limited number of participants in the study (11), it became necessary to supplement the findings of the endline survey with insights from focus groups discussions. To this end, the participants were divided into two groups, along binary gender lines: women and men. They were requested to reflect on their involvement in the study, with certain prompts provided by the facilitator to guide the discussions. The prompts diametrically related to their own views on sexist hate, personal attempts at engaging with or countering misogyny online, perceptions of their peers and families of their involvement in the study, participation in the Kannada-language digital media campaign against sexist hate, and their intention to continue engaging with the subject of sexist hate online, beyond the scope and duration of this PAR. The participating women unilaterally concluded that the study had been instrumental in equipping them with concepts and frameworks to analyze and comprehend interactions on social media, whilst acknowledging the contiguity/reproduction of misogynistic attitudes and rhetoric within cyberspace.

Appendix 2: Baseline and endline tools

Appendix 2.1: Baseline survey questions (for men)

1. Name: _____

2. Sex (mark only one option)

☐ Male

☐ Female

☐ Prefer not to say

3. Age: _____

Perceptions towards sexist hate speech

4. Do you know what hate speech is?

☐ Yes

☐ No

5. Do you think there is hate against women (also referred to as sexist hate or misogyny) on the internet?

☐ Yes

☐ No

6. A woman who regularly posts about financial matters on social media shares a post on Facebook giving tips about how to make money during the pandemic. A man comments on this post, telling her to shut up and go back to the kitchen. The woman then asks her followers to report the commentor's account and complain to Facebook. What do you think about her actions? (Pick one option)

☐ She did the right thing.

☐ She overreacted, it was only a joke.

☐ She should have ignored it. After all, this is common on the internet.

☐ There was nothing abusive in the comment, so she should have ignored it.

☐ She should have just blocked him if she was offended by it.

7. An 18-year-old girl regularly posts videos of herself dancing to popular Bollywood songs. An account takes one of her videos and posts it to a separate Instagram page, encouraging members to comment on the girl's physical appearance. Certain men in the group even go to the extent of describing the sexual acts they would like to engage in with the girl. If you were a follower of this page, what would you do? (Pick one option)

☐ I would simply ask people to stop.

- ☐ I would ask people to stop and unfollow the page.
- ☐ I would simply unfollow the page.
- ☐ I would report the group for abuse.
- ☐ I would join in and describe the sexual acts that I would like to engage in with the girl.

8. Do you consider yourself to be a feminist?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

9. Do men and women enjoy the same freedoms?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ Maybe

Sexism and Misogyny

Note about what we mean by 'sexism and misogyny': Sexism is prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women. Misogyny is about expressions (speech, action, etc.) intended to attack women who challenge the patriarchal social order. These two words (sexism and misogyny) are often used interchangeably.

10. In the past year, have you come across men who have said sexist/misogynistic things to a woman in your presence?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

11. How often does this happen?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Always

12. What was your response in that situation?

- ☐ I did not interfere.
- ☐ I stopped them.
- ☐ I wanted to stop them, but did not do it.

13. In the last one month, have you said sexist/misogynistic things to any woman online?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I may have said sexist/misogynistic things to a woman unknowingly.

14. In the last one month, have you come across people who have said sexist/misogynistic things to a woman online?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

15. How frequently do you observe that this happens?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Always

Think about the last time you came across sexist/misogynistic comments said to/about a woman.

16. How did you see such sexist/misogynistic speech? [tick all that apply]

- ☐ Someone I know shared it.
- ☐ Someone I know made the comment.
- ☐ A stranger shared it.
- ☐ I searched for it.
- ☐ It appeared in my recommendations to watch/read.

17. Where were such sexist/misogynistic things being said? [tick all that apply]

- ☐ Email
- ☐ SMS
- ☐ WhatsApp
- ☐ Comments section of a social media platform
- ☐ Facebook posts
- ☐ Instagram posts
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ TikTok
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ Tinder/any other dating apps
- ☐ Video gaming chats/audio
- ☐ Other

18. Why do you think sexist/misogynistic things were said to that woman? [tick all that apply]

- ☐ Because she made fun of someone's religion.
- ☐ Because she made fun of our country.
- ☐ Because she made fun of men.
- ☐ Because she is a woman.
- ☐ Because she has bad character.

19. The last time you saw a woman attacked on social media, what did you do?
- ☐ I joined in attacking her.
 - ☐ I shared the post with my friends privately.
 - ☐ I shared the post on my social media.
 - ☐ I shared the post with the woman it targeted.
 - ☐ I asked the person who posted the abusive content to delete it.
 - ☐ I reported the post to the website/app.
 - ☐ I helped the woman who was attacked in filing a police complaint.
20. The last time you reported something online, what happened?
- ☐ It was deleted from the social media platform.
 - ☐ Nothing happened, the sexist hate content remained on the platform.
 - ☐ I didn't check to find out what happened following my complaint.
21. How did reading the sexist/misogynistic speech make you feel?
- ☐ Satisfied
 - ☐ Angry
 - ☐ Ashamed
 - ☐ Hurt
 - ☐ Amused
 - ☐ Happy
 - ☐ Other

Appendix 2.2: Baseline survey questions (for women)

1. Name: _____
2. Sex (mark only one option)
- ☐ Male
 - ☐ Female
 - ☐ Prefer not to say
3. Age: _____

Perceptions towards sexist hate speech

4. Do you know what hate speech is?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No

5. Do you think there is hate against women (also referred to as sexist hate or misogyny) on the internet?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No

6. A woman who regularly posts about financial matters on social media shares a post on Facebook giving tips about how to make money during the pandemic. A man comments on this post, telling her to shut up and go back to the kitchen. The woman then asks her followers to report the commentor's account and complain to Facebook. What do you think about her actions? (Pick one option)
 - ☐ She did the right thing.
 - ☐ She overreacted, it was only a joke.
 - ☐ She should have ignored it. After all, this is common on the internet.
 - ☐ There was nothing abusive in the comment, so she should have ignored it.
 - ☐ She should have just blocked him if she was offended by it.

7. An 18-year-old girl regularly posts videos of herself dancing to popular Bollywood songs. An account takes one of her videos and posts it to a separate Instagram page, encouraging members to comment on the girl's physical appearance. Certain men in the group even go to the extent of describing the sexual acts they would like to engage in with the girl. If you were a follower of this page, what would you do? (Pick one option)
 - ☐ I would simply ask people to stop.
 - ☐ I would ask people to stop and unfollow the page.
 - ☐ I would simply unfollow the page.
 - ☐ I would report the group for abuse.
 - ☐ I would agree with the comments about the girl.

8. Do you consider yourself to be a feminist?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No

9. Do you enjoy the same freedoms as men?
 - ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No

Sexism and Misogyny

Note about what we mean by 'sexism' and 'misogyny': Sexism is prejudice, stereotyping, or discrimination, typically against women. Misogyny is about expressions (speech, action, etc.) intended to attack women who challenge the patriarchal social order. These two words (sexism and misogyny) are often used interchangeably.

10. In the past year, has anybody said sexist/misogynistic things to you?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

11. In the past year, has anyone said sexist/misogynistic things to another woman in your presence?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

12. How often does this happen?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Always

13. What was your response the last time a man said something sexist/misogynistic in your presence?

- ☐ I asked him to stop making those comments.
- ☐ I ignored it.
- ☐ I wanted to tell him to stop, but did not.

14. In the last month, have you said sexist/misogynistic things to a woman online?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No
- ☐ I may have said sexist/misogynistic things to a woman unknowingly.

15. In the last month, have you seen something sexist/misogynistic being said to you or another woman online?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

16. How frequently does this happen?

- ☐ Never
- ☐ Rarely
- ☐ Sometimes
- ☐ Often
- ☐ Always

Think about the last time you came across sexist/misogynistic comments said to/about a woman.

17. How did you see such sexist/misogynistic speech? [tick all that apply]

- ☐ Someone I know shared it.

- ☐ Someone I know made that comment.
- ☐ A stranger shared it.
- ☐ I searched for it.
- ☐ It appeared in my recommendations to watch/read.

18. Where were such sexist/misogynistic things being said? [tick all that apply]

- ☐ Email
- ☐ SMS
- ☐ WhatsApp
- ☐ Comments section of a social media platform
- ☐ Facebook posts
- ☐ Instagram posts
- ☐ Twitter
- ☐ TikTok
- ☐ Snapchat
- ☐ Tinder/any other dating apps
- ☐ Video gaming chats/audio
- ☐ Other

19. Why do you think sexist/misogynistic things were said to that woman? [tick all that apply]

- ☐ Because she made fun of someone's religion.
- ☐ Because she made fun of our country.
- ☐ Because she made fun of men.
- ☐ Because she is a woman.
- ☐ Because she has bad character.

20. The last time someone shared sexist memes, what did you do?

- ☐ I ignored it.
- ☐ I shared it with my friends privately.
- ☐ I shared the post on my social media.
- ☐ I shared the post with the woman it targeted.
- ☐ I asked the person who posted the abusive content to delete it.
- ☐ I reported the post to the website/app.
- ☐ I filed a police complaint.

21. The last time you reported something online, what happened?

- ☐ It was deleted from the social media platform.
- ☐ Nothing happened, the sexist hate content remained on the platform.
- ☐ I didn't check to find out what happened following my complaint.

22. How did reading the sexist/misogynistic speech make you feel?

- ☐ Satisfied
- ☐ Angry
- ☐ Ashamed
- ☐ Hurt
- ☐ Amused
- ☐ Other

Appendix 2.3: Endline survey questions

1. Name: _____

2. Sex (mark only one option)

- ☐ Male
- ☐ Female
- ☐ Prefer not to say

3. Age: _____

Perceptions towards sexist hate speech

4. Do you know what hate speech is?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

5. A woman shares a post on Facebook expressing distress at all the extra domestic work (cooking, cleaning, home-schooling, etc.) she has to perform during the Covid-19 lockdown. Her Facebook post is then converted into a meme with a caption that says, “Ideal woman and mother” and is shared widely across troll pages. Is this a form of sexist hate against that woman?

- ☐ No, this is not sexist hate. A woman should put her family first, always and take care of them.
- ☐ No, this is not sexist hate. Women should learn to take a joke.
- ☐ Yes, this is an expression of sexist hate. The burden of domestic labour should not fall on women alone.

6. An 18-year-old girl regularly posts videos of herself dancing to popular Bollywood songs. An account takes one of her videos and posts it to a separate Instagram page, encouraging members to comment on the girl’s physical appearance. Certain men in the group even go to the extent of describing the sexual acts they would like to engage in with the girl. If you were a follower of this page, what would you do?

- ☐ I would ask people to stop.
- ☐ I would ask people to stop and I would unfollow the page.

- ☐ I would simply unfollow the page.
 - ☐ I would report the group for abuse.
 - ☐ I would agree with the comments about the girl.
7. An Indian woman journalist belonging to the Muslim community is trolled on Twitter as a “jihadi” and “ISIS sex slave”. She reports the abusers but the posts are not deleted. How should the journalist respond?
- ☐ She has reported her abusers once already, so she should ignore and move on.
 - ☐ She should ask more people – friends, family, followers – to report the abusers. This would increase the likelihood of the posts being deleted.
 - ☐ She should approach the cyber cell and lodge a formal complaint with the police.
8. A Dalit woman puts up a Facebook status about the increase in sexual violence against Dalit women and girls, pointing out that the perpetrators/rapists are almost always upper caste men. Certain men belonging to an upper caste attack her for posting that status, saying that she is a dark and ugly Dalit who doesn’t even deserve to be raped. How should the woman respond to these men?
- ☐ Report them for sexual and caste-based harassment to the police.
 - ☐ Ignore the men, they are always making such comments and it’s only practical that the woman should move on.
 - ☐ Delete her status/account to protect her mental and physical safety.

Encounters with Sexist Hate

9. In the last three months, have you come across people who have said sexist/misogynistic things to any woman online?
- ☐ Yes
 - ☐ No
10. How frequently did you observe that this happens?
- ☐ Never
 - ☐ Rarely
 - ☐ Sometimes
 - ☐ Often
 - ☐ Always
11. What would your response be in such situations?
- ☐ I will not interfere because it does not concern me.
 - ☐ I will report the post for abuse.
 - ☐ I will comment on the post to say that it is misogynistic.
 - ☐ I will interfere at the risk of getting trolled.
 - ☐ I will not interfere because of the risk of getting trolled.

Sexist hate, social media, and counterspeech: Think about the last time you came across misogynistic content online.

12. How did you come across such a post? _____
13. Where did you find such misogynistic content? [tick all that apply]
- ☐ Email
 - ☐ SMS
 - ☐ WhatsApp
 - ☐ Comments section of a social media platform
 - ☐ Facebook posts
 - ☐ Instagram posts
 - ☐ Twitter
 - ☐ TikTok
 - ☐ Snapchat
 - ☐ Tinder/any other dating apps
 - ☐ Video gaming chats/audio
 - ☐ Other
14. Why do you think misogynistic things are said to women who express themselves online? [tick all that apply]
- ☐ Because they disrespect our culture.
 - ☐ Because they disrespect a religion.
 - ☐ Because they have a bad character.
 - ☐ Other
15. The last time you saw a woman attacked on social media, what did you do? _____
16. The last time you reported something online, what happened?
- ☐ It was deleted from the social media platform.
 - ☐ Nothing happened, the sexist hate content remained on the platform.
 - ☐ I didn't check to find out what happened following my complaint.
17. If you decided not to comment on a misogynistic post, why did you do so? _____
18. How did this incident – dealing with sexist/misogynistic speech – make you feel? _____
19. What is something you have learned about the digital sphere that you didn't know before this research? _____
20. What is the meaning of something going/becoming viral? _____

21. What is the role of troll pages in spreading sexist hate? _____
22. Why do you think you or others ignore expressions of sexist hate online and move on?

23. Does the hate you come across on social media impact people outside social media? How and why?

24. Do you know what counterspeech is? Please explain with an example. _____
25. Do you think women are harassed more than men for speaking out against sexism/misogyny?
☐ Yes
☐ No
26. In the last three months, were you harassed for speaking out against sexism/misogyny?
☐ Yes
☐ No
☐ Maybe
27. How did your friends/family/college authorities react to your speaking out against sexism/misogyny?
☐ They were supportive.
☐ They encouraged me to go to the police/court/college authorities.
☐ They confronted the harasser(s).
☐ They blamed me for the harassment.
☐ They took away my mobile phone, tablet, laptop, or desktop computer.
☐ They tried to stop me from engaging online.
☐ They were physically violent towards me.

