Intersectional Frames in Digitalisation Research

- **Revisiting a Study by IT for Change on Misogynistic Trolling Online**

SCIS/IDRC Intersectionality Project

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Outline

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1. A Background to Intersectionality in India
2. Overview of the Project
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Profitable Provocations

A Study of Abuse and Misogynistic Trolling on Twitter Directed at Indian Women in Public-political Life

JULY 2022

IT for Change

IDRC·CRDI

Canada

1. A Background to Intersectionality in India

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- The notion of multiple identities co-constructing marginalities is consistently discernible in historical accounts of India's socio-economic and political phenomena. Nevertheless, the mainstream Indian women's movement has been criticized for deploying the term 'women' as a homogenous category.

- From a Dalit feminist standpoint, scholarship has critiqued the masculinization of Dalit studies and the 'savarnization' (normalization of the dominant caste as the default category) of the "woman" (and feminist studies) [Sharmila Rege, 1998].

- Some scholars like Nivedita Menon see 'intersectionality' as a Western import. Others point to how awareness about contextual peculiarities can help reflexive analysis (Banerjee and Ghosh). Since identity may be a product of a contingent moment and context, an intersectional lens may yield categories that are both fixed and fluid. (Mary John)

1. A Background to Intersectionality in India

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- What is common among the different critiques of intersectionality in the Indian context is the concern about its non-contextual application - particularly, the slippage towards ahistorical or depoliticized analysis.

In the final analysis – the tool of intersectionality – as a heuristic to unpack social relations – may be seen to have emancipatory potential. It creates a wedge to spotlight the commonness in experiences of inequality, even as it uses differences in location to argue what must change.

2. Overview of the Project

Profitable Provocations: A Study of Abuse and Misogynistic Trolling on Twitter Directed at Indian Women in Public Political Life (July, 2022)

Background of the study:

- Growing awareness of the ways in which social media platforms have engineered a fundamental shift in the traditionally held notions of the public sphere.

- Mounting evidence that the harmful societal effects of the platformised public sphere have been disproportionately borne by women and marginalised groups.

Objectives of the study:

- A mixed-methods exploration of online hate - to understand the scale and incidence + the nature and recurrent patterns of abuse.

- To understand how the intersectional location of women in the political field affects the nature and amount of abuse they receive on Twitter.

- To propose a regulatory framework that is able to contend with the unprecedented challenges of viral hate in the online public sphere

2. Overview of the Project

Profitable Provocations: A Study of Abuse and Misogynistic Trolling on Twitter Directed at Indian Women in Public Political Life (July, 2022)

Findings:

- Pervasiveness of misogynistic speech
- Herd aggression, 'light-hearted' trolling
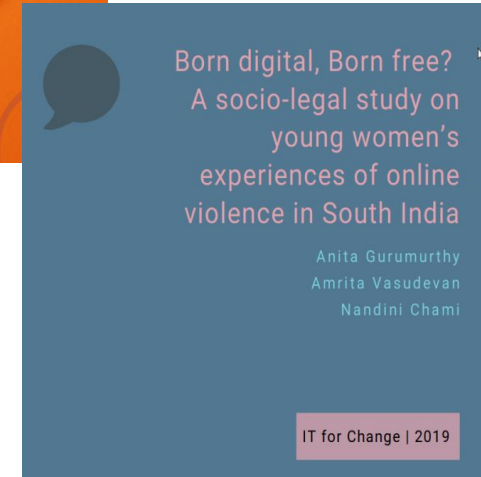- Intersectional violence, overarching subtext of brahminical patriarchy,

AND

Pervasiveness Of Misogynistic Speech

All women in our sample regardless of their political or ideological standpoints received some amount of abuse on the platform. No one was entirely spared.

Herd Aggression

Trolls tended to strategically target certain women and certain posts to exploit the affordances of virality and the algorithmic amplification of content.

"Light-hearted" Trolling

A majority of abusive messages directed at the women were of a supposedly milder variety of tongue-in-cheek jokes and remarks.

Intersectional Violence

Muslim women, political dissenters, and political commentators received an overwhelming majority of abusive messages.

The indelible role of platform architecture and protocols in routinizing abuse against women.

3. Application of Intersectionality in Research Design, Methodology, and Data Collection

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- Our research adopted an intersectional lens at every stage of the research - to analyse how multiple ideologies of oppression operate cumulatively and concurrently to produce a specific experience of subordination in the online public sphere.

- Our approach to (mis)recognition of the subjects of our research was intersectional from the get go. We used an 'intersectional recognition' (Townsend-Bell) frame and built on perspectives gained from our prior work.

- We consciously applied the methodological tenets of intersectional research as has been discussed in the literature –- *oppression*, *complexity*, *context*, and *comparison.* (Misra, J, Currington C.V and Green, M.V)

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

IT for Change
2021

Born digital, Born free?
A socio-legal study on young women's experiences of online violence in South India

Anita Gurumurthy
Amrita Vasudevan
Nandini Chami

IT for Change | 2019

3. Application of Intersectionality in Research Design, Methodology, and Data Collection

- Conducting intersectional research poses a significant methodological challenge - 'how to research and write about multiple forms of differentiation without essentializing these categories or fragmenting the research subject'?

- A 'lived-experience' approach can be an effective for doing intersectionality research (Banerjee and Ghosh, 2018) - allowing a focus on the subject's own knowledge of their being and becoming, and providing an openness to competing interpretations and illustrating the multi-dimensionality of hegemonic facts.

- Our Twitter study adopted a 'lived experience' approach - interpretations were based on the subjective experience of women (from multiple locations) not reduced/reducible to neat categories of gender, caste, religion, marital status, etc.

- Methodologically, therefore, we embraced the experiential location of the subjects as simultaneous, linked and contextual.

3.1. Intersectionality in Data Collection

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- First level sampling involved identification of women active in public-political life, including:
  - MPs/MLAs, politicians, political commentators,and journalists across the political and ideological spectrum.
  - Women politicians who did not have a Twitter handle, but mentions about whom are significant in the Twitter universe.

- We used caste identity, age, religion and geography as secondary sampling criteria.

- Further filtering was done using engagement rate of the concerned subject on Twitter - measured in terms of number of followers and number of tweets mentioning them.

- 'Mentions' directed at the women were collected from their public Twitter profiles for a period of one week between 26 November to 3 December 2021, which yielded 30,460 mentions of the women in sample.

20 Research Subjects

7 Women MP/MLAs

6 Women in Politics

4 Political Commentators

3 Political Figures with No Twitter Handle

3.2. Intersectionality in Annotation Process and Categorization

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- Through an inductive coding exercise, a total of 22 codes were defined to capture the nuances of hateful, abusive or problematic content.

- Codes included the following categories - sexualised slur, casteist slur, dehumanising insult, direct and indirect religious hate speech, religious stereotyping, casteist hate speech, delegitimising by othering

- Any specific mention was categorised under a maximum of three mutually exclusive codes - to account for the inherent indeterminacy of abusive speech, and the fact that abusive tweets often do not fall neatly into any one category, and may straddle multiple identity locations.

4. Application of Intersectionality in Data Analysis and Drawing Research Insights

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- A broad finding from our analysis of the Twitter mentions collected and annotated was that all women in the sample faced some amount of abuse on Twitter. But it was quite evident that the nature and amount of abuse these women faced varied significantly depending on their identity and social locations.

- Our theoretical frames were able to surface how differences in lived experience are a reflection of the social structures that shape the public sphere. Both social theory (Brahminical patriarchy) and political economy analysis (of digital capitalism in particular) enabled us to build nuanced inferences to capture complexity and contextuality.
    - Brahminical patriarchy is a social-institutional order in which women's subordinate status and control over their mobility, sexuality, choices, and desires is considered crucial to maintain the supremacy and purity of a caste-based socially stratified order.

- Our findings indicate that Brahminical patriarchy and behaviours of political and cultural regulation over women's body and conduct distinct to South Asian context translates into the online sphere and shapes the experience of women on these platforms.

4.1. Sociological and Political Economy Frames to Decode Lived Experience

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- We were able to show how majoritarian masculinities obtain in the contingent/specific structures of oppression created in the interplay of a post-colonial, caste society and platform sociality characterised by sexism, algorithmic oppression, and a capitalist impulse.

- Dimensions of the socio-historical context were apparent in:
    - Gendered attacks on bodies or character - invoking shame and dishonor to family
    - Sexual objectification
    - Casteist insinuations and dehumanising references and questioning the merit of Dalit women
    - Othering Muslim women through ideas of nation and honor (linked to the creation of two nations India and Pakistan at the end of British rule in the 1940s).

- We noted how the online public sphere characterized by speed, virality, and the constant streams of attention-seeking content enable a confluence of misogynistic and right-wing ideological discourses . The widespread spread of online misogyny is not a secondary phenomenon but a structural characteristic of contemporary political formations.

- We were able to demonstrate that the networked nature of platforms, combined with the impunity enjoyed by perpetrators of majoritarian and gendered violence, shift the boundaries of acceptable public speech.

5. Praxis of Intersectionality - Research Dissemination and Action

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The findings of this research study continue to inform our work on legal-institutional responses to online gender-based violence, social media governance and platform accountability.

- **Our inputs into legislative and policy-making at the national and global level**
  - We have used findings from this study to urge law-makers and technology firms to invest in capabilities to make content moderation and curation systems sensitive to regional cultural, linguistic and social contexts and peculiarities so as to make digital platforms a free and inclusive space for all women.

- **Judicial Resource Guide: A guide for judges in adjudicating cases of OGBV:**
  - We developed a judicial resource guide to aid judges and lawyers in adjudicating and litigating cases of technology-facilitated gender-based violence in a gender-sensitive and rights-based manner.
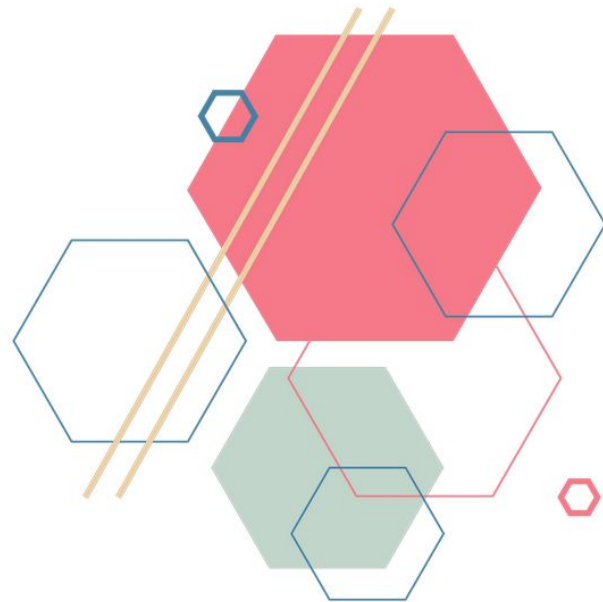
Forging a Survivor-Centric Approach to Online Gender-Based Violence: A Judicial Resource Guide

An interactive resource guide to aid judges and lawyers in gaining a holistic understanding of gendered cyberviolence & finding solutions within the law which are rights-based and survivor-focused.

Learn More →

https://projects.itforchange.net/online-violence-gender-and-law-guide/

6. Conclusion - Intersectionality and Digital Identity

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- Platforms play a central role in shaping and controlling individuals' online interactions, information sharing, and overall digital presence.

- The findings of our study underlines that to address online gender-based violence, it is crucial to adopt a politics of accountability and recognize the intersectional nature of violence.

- Understanding the influence of intersectional identity on digital experiences helps shed light on the complexities and power dynamics at play in the privatized online public sphere.

- It also underscores the need for inclusive design, equitable access to digital services and policies that safeguard digital rights

Thank you!