



Introduction

In view of the pervasive problem of online gender-based violence on social media platforms, this research study sought to undertake a systematic analysis of misogynistic speech on Twitter directed at women in public-political life in India.

The sample of 20 women, selected through a purposive sampling methodology, included women involved in formal party politics as well as vocal political commentators on Twitter, such as journalists and political activists.

Mentions collected over a one-week period in late November 2020 from the public Twitter profiles of the selected women were annotated based on a set of guidelines developed through an inductive coding exercise. With a total of 19 mutually exclusive categories of hateful, abusive or problematic speech, any mention was classified upto a maximum of three categories to ensure appropriate capture of intersectionality of subject locations, and potential indeterminacy of category definitions.



Findings

The broadest finding is that all the women in our sample, regardless of whether they belong to opposition or ruling parties, whether perceived to be dissenters or sympathetic to the current dispensation, received some amount of abuse on the platform. None of the women in our sample was entirely spared. However, those who were perceived to be ideologically left-leaning, dissenters, and women from opposition parties received a disproportionate amount of abusive and hateful messages.

Muslim women and women political commentators who did not have formal party protection were at the receiving end of an inordinate amount of abuse. We also found that the abusive speech received by women in public-political life rarely had anything to do with their work or their stated political positions.

It invariably took the form of gendered attacks on their bodies or character. Much of the misogynistic speech we studied viewed women through culturally specific patriarchal gender tropes, stereotypes, and objectified representations. Another important finding relates to the most common kinds of gendered abusive speech on the platform. While we did certainly come across many abusive messages that were threats of violence, it was trolling in the nature of tongue-in-cheek jokes and remarks that were far more common. We found this 'fun' culture of vitriol and abuse to be rampant on the platform, through the sharing of misogynistic memes and word-play. We also found the prevalence of a kind of herd aggression where trolls banded together to reply to certain posts, exploiting the platform's affordances of anonymity and virality to hijack the public narrative.



Analysis

The wide gamut of abusive behaviours directed at women in public-political life revealed by our study points to the linkages between culturally specific forms of gendered regulation and ideological constructions of the nation. Much of the gendered violence that we observed was couched in terms of a muscular and exclusionary Hindu nationalism, reflecting male entitlement over women's sexual autonomy. We found that the ubiquity of misogynistic speech on social media points to the need to destabilise the concept of gendered violence and be attentive to the ways in which the affordances of these platforms produce new and unprecedented vulnerabilities for women.

As immensely powerful actors in the contemporary political economy, social media platforms play a structuring role in shaping new contexts for public action and communicative activity.

Platform architectures and protocols enable the creation of public communicative registers that routinise censure and abuse against 'erring' or 'transgressing' women, resulting in a gendered restructuring of public space. These networked dynamics of platform sociality, together with the utter impunity that perpetrators of majoritarian and gendered violence enjoy, enable extreme ideas to be translated into populist ones.



Legal-institutional Responses

From a regulatory perspective, the study contends that these circulation logics of social media lie at the heart of the issue of online misogynistic speech, both in terms of their harms and the kinds of legal action they should invite. Rather than centring around the irresolvable contradictions of free speech considerations, the regulatory debate must move instead towards an attention economy-focussed approach to regulating user-generated speech. Building on the growing critical consensus regarding platform complicity in fostering hostile and abusive communicative environments through profit-oriented content governance choices that incentivise violent and extreme online

behaviour, we argue for increased liability on platforms for online harms. We suggest that the way to think about the regulation of online misogynistic speech on social media is a move away from criminal, carceral, and retributive notions of justice, towards those based on a model of accountability that foregrounds the effective delivery of justice in ways that are responsive to the needs of the victim.

Therefore, there is a need to move past the individualistic victim-perpetrator binary of criminal law, and towards a model of accountability, which holds platforms responsible for the hostile and abusive online environments that they foster and profit from.

In calibrating such a legal response, we argue that an independent regulatory authority should be appointed for the oversight of platform governance, which should be empowered to take coercive enforcement action against platforms in case of non-compliance.

We lay emphasis on the central importance of regular and comprehensive transparency reporting, in order to be able to accurately diagnose and address a problem such as online gender-based violence.

We also highlight the importance of context specificity in content governance, and responsive grievance redressal by platforms.

Finally, we call out the need to establish a minimum level of agreement across stakeholders regarding what constitutes gender-based violence. This normative benchmarking exercise will help to evolve common regulatory standards and provide solid ground upon which to fight against the normalisation and banalisation of online misogynistic speech.

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