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Intersectional Frames in Digitalisation Research: Revisiting a Study by IT for Change About Misogynistic Trolling Online

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About the authors:

Anita Gurumurthy is a founding member and executive director of IT for Change where she leads research and advocacy on data and AI governance, platform regulation, and feminist frameworks on digital justice. She serves as an advisor and expert on various bodies, including the United Nations Secretary-General's 10-Member Group in support of the Technology Facilitation Mechanism, and the Paris Peace Forum's working group on algorithmic governance. Email: anita@itforchange.net .

Merrin Muhammed Ashraf is a research assistant at IT for Change and contributes to its research and advocacy efforts on technology-facilitated gender-based violence, social media governance, content regulation, and information integrity. She is a lawyer by training. Email: merrin@itforchange.net

Malavika Rajkumar is a project associate at IT for Change and her main areas of research include platform accountability, social media regulatory governance, women's rights, gender-based violence, and information design. She has been a speaker at multiple forums including the Internet Governance Forum 2022 in Ethiopia, the Asia Pacific Digital Rights Forum. She is a lawyer by training. Email: malavika@itforchange.net

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Executive summary

Digital spaces, while holding the potential to challenge gender norms, also reflect and reinforce existing social hierarchies based on gender, race, caste and other identities. Online gender-based violence (OGBV) is a tragic testimony to the patriarchal nature of digital society. Recognizing this challenge, IT for Change undertook a study titled Profitable Provocations: A Study of Abuse and Misogynistic Trolling on Twitter Directed at Indian Women in Public-political Life (Twitter study) between 2021 and 2022. The study focused on abusive and misogynistic trolling on Twitter directed at twenty Indian women in public-political life. It uncovered how the abuse predominantly comprised gendered attacks on their bodies or character, highlighting the situated experience of each of the twenty women, based on their social identity and location.

An important background to the study is the fact that Indian society is inherently hierarchical, with gender divisions amplified by caste, religion, and race creating unique vulnerabilities for women. The digital environment further intensifies these challenges, simultaneously offering women a platform for resistance, yet making them targets for widespread online harassment. IT for Change's previous work on OGBV shows that the online experience of women is significantly shaped by their intersectional social locations and that we are bound by the architectures of the Internet in much the same way as we are constrained by the offline world, its norms and rules. Therefore, any inquiry into the online experience of Indian women will be of little value if it does not account for the unique ways in which their social locations are transposed onto platform environments.

This case study report unpacks the application of an intersectional frame at different stages of our research for the Twitter study. After a brief introduction to the Twitter study, its objectives and the research design, the report delves into the concept of intersectionality in the Indian context, emphasising its relevance for various social justice movements. Many scholars have debated the contours and usefulness of intersectionality for feminism in India. Despite some misgivings about intersectionality as a framing concept, there is greater recognition today that a contextual and critical application of the notion can help in advancing a transformative social agenda and foster solidarity among marginalised groups.

The report describes how intersectionality was applied in framing the research design and methodology of the Twitter study. The researchers aimed to explore how various dimensions of difference, such as gender, caste, class, ethnicity, and religion, intersect to shape the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds online. The research involved data collection and annotation using a set of codes to categorise different types of abusive and problematic speech through an intersectional lens. The study unravelled the nuanced ways in which online misogyny manifests, showing how it disproportionately affects Dalit and Muslim women, women who were perceived to be ideologically left-leaning, dissenters, and women from opposition parties.

Intersectionality provided us with a useful framework to understand how the complexity of social inequalities and interconnecting power relations in which the women in the sample are embedded interact with the architecture of social media platforms. The nature of trolling and abuse that women in public-political life face on Twitter arises in the interplay of majoritarian violence in India and the algorithmic propensity of social media platforms. The study emphasised the intertwining of gender, caste and religious identities in the abusive nature of the online content. The understanding of these intersecting oppressions, including of the privately controlled algorithmic environment, is pivotal in combating online abuse and supporting marginalised women effectively.

This report explains how intersectionality was practiced in disseminating the findings of the Twitter study in accordance with the politics of accountability that the praxis of intersectionality demands. The findings of this study informed and will continue to inform IT for Change's policy recommendations in national and international legislative and policy processes. The findings also enabled the development of a judicial resource guide to promote a gender-sensitive and rights-based approach to adjudication of cases of online gender-based violence.

The adoption of an intersectional frame in the study allowed us to parse how digitality shapes and perpetuates traditional structures of oppression and what then may be useful to empower those on the margins. Understanding the influence of intersectionality on digital experiences helps shed light on the complexities and power dynamics at play in the online public sphere, highlighting the importance of recognising and addressing the biases and discrimination that individuals from marginalised groups encounter online. The report notes the need for inclusive design, equitable access to digital services, and policies that safeguard privacy and digital rights for all in an emerging digital world where identity is codetermined by online spaces.

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Acronyms

MLA   Member of the legislative assembly

MP   Member of parliament

OGBV   Online gender based violence

IDRC   International Development Research Centre

Introduction

The ubiquity of online gender-based violence (OGBV) poses a serious challenge to the promised emancipatory potential of the internet. Even though the fluidity of digital space allows for the destabilisation of established gender norms, it is becoming increasingly evident that the hierarchies of gender which are also intertwined with identities of race, caste and other social locations are far from erased. Instead, the digitally mediated-public sphere creates affordances to entrench and magnify social hierarchies and norms. Hence, any productive intervention to engage in the potential of the online public sphere to advance a transformative social justice agenda needs to grapple with the multiple identities shaping the lived reality of marginal subjects, and the complex forms of oppression perpetuated through social hierarchies.

Indian society is traditionally hierarchical and patriarchal, and gender divisions intersect with the long-standing fissures and traditions or practices related to caste, religion, race and so on to produce unique forms of vulnerability and disadvantages for Indian women. Despite the increase in education, employment and political participation of women, the influence of patriarchal social mores limit the autonomy of women in their personal and professional lives. The Internet becomes an explosive ingredient in this mix, as it simultaneously creates opportunities for women's subversion and resistance to the status quo, and the mob-led castigation of "defiant" women (Gurumurthy et al., 2019b).

IT for Change's Research on Social Media and Gender

IT for Change's research efforts on OGBV, since 2017, which involved participatory action research with youth, large scale surveys and focus group discussions with young Indian women, including survivors of online violence, suggest that digital space is not a singular story of liberation and positive transformation. (Gurumurthy et al., 2019a; Gurumurthy et al., 2019b; IT for Change, 2021). On the contrary, our work finds sexual harassment of women pervasive in the online space. Also, digital interaction normalises sexualised assertions of male power over women's bodies. Acts of sexual harassment range from explicit forms of sexual violence (such as circulation of a woman's photo, morphed, online; sending women unsolicited, sexually explicit messages and pictures; non-consensual circulation of intimate images; sextortion and so on) to acts that have undertones of sexual violence (such as cyberstalking, doxing and impersonation of social media profiles).

Equally worrying is identity-based trolling or bullying (involving demeaning statements or comments) based on physical characteristics or social identity markers (such as caste, sexual orientation, religion and gender) and physical characteristics (such as weight, body shape and skin colour). Our research indicates that women from marginal social locations face particularly heinous forms of gender trolling that belittle their social identity. For instance, misogynistic vitriol faced by Dalit women is also caste-ist (Gurumurthy et al., 2019b: 9).

Further, insights from qualitative inquiry show how women who are active in the public domain are subject to mass attacks by cyber-trolls and are often silenced through sexualised attacks. This shows that while digital spaces are no doubt opening up opportunities for women's voices and political expression, women seeking to find a public-political identity through social media find it an uphill climb. Further, the sheer volume of sexist and misogynistic content available online suggests that, unlike acts of sexual harassment, gender trolling is ignored and trivialised (Gurumurthy et al., 2019).

The trolls thrive in the disinhibition or lack of restraint arising from, inter alia, anonymity, invisibility and asynchronous communication (Gurumurthy et al., 2018). These subject positions result in fluidity, fracturing the body from its humanness and normalising violence against women in new ways. The online behaviour of trolls brings into stark light how "the patriarchy in digital space constructs and produces a hierarchy of gendered bodies – valuing and devaluing, valorising and demonising women, depending on their particular social locations and their assertions of public-political identity" (Gurumurthy et al., 2019b: 32). Identity online is not merely a function of individual agency. It is co-constructed by particular interventions – patriarchal, statist and market based – of actors dominating the internet. We are bound by the architectures of the Internet much the same way as we are constrained by the offline world and its norms and rules.

What our work tells us therefore is that any inquiry on the online experience of Indian women will be of little value if it does not account for the multitude of social locations that they belong to, including social media platforms that reconfigure and reify power hierarchies.

The Twitter study (2021 to 2022)

It is from this starting point that IT for Change conceptualised and undertook the research study Profitable Provocations: A Study of Abuse and Misogynistic Trolling on Twitter Directed at Indian Women in Public-political Life (Twitter study) between 2021-2022. Given 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 study forms part of IT for Change's continuing research efforts to generate informed insights on online-gender based violence in India and its impact on the survivors, unravelling the nature of cyber-violence and evaluating the effectiveness of prevailing legal-institutional response mechanisms.

A study of abusive and misogynistic trolling targeting women assumes significance as the backdrop to the rise of right-wing populism and the simultaneous and interconnected rise of toxic-masculinist technocultures in India. The widespread prevalence of online misogyny in India is not a secondary phenomenon, but a structural characteristic of contemporary political formations. Misogynistic and right-wing ideologies often intersect, and the online public sphere – characterised by speed, virality and constant streams of attention-seeking content – co-shapes and enables these discourses.

Set in this context, our Twitter study aimed to generate insights on and evidence of the sheer scale and ubiquity of viral misogynistic trolling on Twitter, the harmful consequences of which are not always readily apparent. Drawing from the findings of our previous research efforts, it was clear to us from the outset that the experience of trolling would differ for each woman in our sample, depending on their intersecting social locations. We wanted to capture the differential impacts of trolling on women and how the affordances of social media platforms shape these experiences. Hence, an intersectional frame was integral to our research, and was employed in the selection of the sample as well as in the collection and annotation of tweet mentions, development of annotation guidelines, data analysis and formulation of key research findings. Our study highlights how women who occupy public-political spaces are subjected to online abuse and harassment, which is often directed at their gender, caste, religion and political affiliation. It points to the need for an intersectional approach to address the issue of online abuse and harassment, underscoring the imperative of accounting for the social structure – the historical and contingent nature of social power – that encapsulates the locations of and relationship between the victim and the perpetrator of such abuse.

The findings of the Twitter study informed IT for Change's policy recommendations in national and international forums and paved the way for the development of a judicial resource guide. These actions, deriving from the research, are aligned with the demands of an intersectional feminist practice, fostering a gender-sensitive and rights-based approach in legislative and policy-making processes – and taking knowledge into the realpolitik of institutional change.

Analysis of intersectionality in the Twitter study

This report unpacks the Twitter study to document the process used to apply an intersectional lens at various stages of the research. The overview section provides a brief introduction to the Twitter study, its objectives, the research design and how we critically engaged with and embraced an intersectional frame in our research. This is followed by a discussion of the concept of intersectionality in the Indian context, tracing its origins and examining its relevance and critiques within feminist movements. The next section, on the application of intersectionality in research design, describes how intersectionality was applied in framing the research and methodology of the study. A similar discussion is presented on data analysis, elaborating our findings. We then explain, in our concluding section, how we translate our knowledge-based endeavour into a praxis of intersectionality politics.

Overview of the Twitter Study

There is a growing awareness of how social media platforms have engineered a fundamental shift in traditionally held notions of the public sphere. With their massive user base across the globe, social media platforms today constitute a vital site for public communication and discourse as a public arena where

fundamental freedoms such as the right to free speech are exercised and curtailed. The normalisation of violence against women in the online public sphere is a pressing issue that demands our urgent attention.

To combat the normalisation of such pervasive forms of gender-based violence, IT for Change undertook a systematic study of misogynistic speech on Twitter directed at twenty women in public-political life. The study, titled A Study of Abuse and Misogynistic Trolling on Twitter Directed at Indian Women in Public-political Life, was undertaken as part of Recognise, Resist, Remedy,[1] a project supported by the IDRC (International Development Research Centre), Canada and proposed as a comparative study with InternetLab[2] to investigate the pervasiveness of online gender-based violence in India and Brazil, with IT for Change conducting the research for the study's Indian segment.

Online violence against women happens in a variety of forms such as stalking, non-consensual distribution of intimate images, doxing, morphing and so on. While these forms of violence are pernicious, what is often ignored and trivialised and receives less attention is the immense volume of violence seemingly of a milder variety, often referred to as trolling. Though widely regarded as a less serious form of hostile or violent conduct, trolling derives its toxicity and potency precisely from its sheer volume and frequency, rather than only its substantive content. Therefore, in our study, we adopted a grounded starting point that foregrounds the everyday acts of online trolling to emphasise the contextual materiality of online violence, as it routinely occurs in the online public sphere. A central claim that we put forward is that, to grasp the magnitude of the problem of online gender-based violence, there is a need to destabilise the notion of violence as an interruption, an aberration or a deviation from the norm. Our study aimed to form an understanding of online violence as an ongoing and continuous process, rather than a state of exception. To realise this, the study had the following objectives:

- To investigate and capture the scale, incidence and nature of hateful and problematic speech and recurrent patterns of abuse on Twitter directed against Indian women in public-political life.
- To understand the intersectional location of women in the political field and how it affects the nature and amount of abuse they receive on Twitter.
- By bringing to light these forms of abuse that run rampant on social media platforms, to propose a regulatory framework that can contend with the unprecedented challenges of viral hate in the online public sphere.

We decided to conduct our study by collecting and analysing the Tweet mentions against twenty Indian women active in public-political life. These twenty women, selected through purposive sampling, were located

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[1] *Recognize, Resist, Remedy: Addressing Gender-Based Hate Speech in the Online Public Sphere,* IT for Change, https://itforchange.net/online-gender-based-hate-speech-women-girls-recognise-resist-remedy

[2] Internet Lab, https://internetlab.org.br/en/

across the ideological spectrum, and occupied different caste, age, religious and geographical locations in India. These women belonged to the following categories:

- **Women MPs/MLAs (members of parliament/members of the legislative assembly):** Women who currently hold political office as members of the legislature at either the central or state level.

- **Women in politics:** Women who were formally involved in electoral party politics but are not currently in office.

- **Political commentators:** Women who are not necessarily affiliated with any political party but are active contributors to public-political discourse online.

- **Women with no Twitter handle:** Women MPs or MLAs and women politicians as defined under the first and second categories, but without a Twitter account. The mentions directed at or referring to these women were collected by entering their names into the platform's search query.

Mentions against the selected women were collected over a week in late November 2020 from their public Twitter profiles and they were annotated based on a set of guidelines developed through an inductive coding exercise. With a total of nineteen mutually exclusive categories of hateful, abusive or problematic speech, each mention was classified in up to three categories to ensure appropriate capture of the intersectionality of subject locations and potential indeterminacy of category definitions. A study of Tweet mentions was expected to provide salient qualitative insights into the presence of discernible patterns of hate and abuse and to point towards potential directions for urgent remedial action and legal- institutional responses.

Informed by our previous research and advocacy work on OGBV, and continuing engagement with stakeholders (Gurumurthy et al., 2019a; Gurumurthy et al., 2019b; IT for Change, 2019a; IT for Change, 2021), we were cognisant of the fact that the online experience of Indian women is not homogenous, but crucially shaped by their social locations such as gender, caste, class, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation and the myriad diverse identities found in Indian society. Therefore, an intersectional lens was consciously adopted at all stages of research –selecting samples, data collection, data annotation and analysis. We were also conscious of applying the concept of intersectionality in a contextual manner suitable to the unique circumstances of Indian society, with its historical divisions and hierarchies along gender, caste, religious, class and ethnic lines. We were also mindful of the fraught debate within feminist circles in India about the usefulness and relevance of intersectionality for understanding the problems of Indian women. These debates provided us with rich material to integrate an intersectional lens in our research without falling into the pitfall of essentialising identity categories or fragmenting research subjects. Our study involved a deep recognition of the oppression, complexity, context and comparison produced by intersecting social inequalities. These are four of the six methodological tenets of intersectional research identified by Misra et al. (2020). An explanation of these methodological tenets and how they are reflected in different stages of our research will be elaborated in the following sections. But before that, we provide a detailed background to the intersectionality

debate in India, particularly about the feminist movement to set up the context of the discussion on how we integrated intersectionality in research focused on the digital space.

A Background to Intersectionality in India

First theorised in 1989 by Kimberle Crenshaw, the roots of the term "intersectionality" go back to the practices emanating from oppression and discrimination faced by black women in the nineteenth century (Crenshaw, 1989). By drawing attention to the various ways women of colour are often discriminated against as a result of intersecting gender and race discrimination, Crenshaw observed:

> Black women sometimes experience discrimination in ways similar to white women's experiences; sometimes they share very similar experiences with Black men. Yet often they experience double discrimination - the combined effects of practices which discriminate on the basis of race, and on the basis of sex. And sometimes, they experience discrimination as Black women – not the sum of race and sex discrimination, but as Black women. (Crenshaw, 1989: 149)

The term intersectionality explores the complex and cumulative ways in which the effects of multiple forms of discrimination combine, overlap or intersect (Council of Europe, n.d.). Such an exploration is important, as where multiple identities converge, intervention strategies based solely on the experience of women who belong to one set of identity categories will be of limited help to women who because of, say, their race and class face different obstacles (Crenshaw, 1991).

In the Indian context, the concept of intersectionality has been used over the years by feminist, anti-caste, disability rights and queer rights scholars, activists and organisations to understand and address the unique experiences of women in different intersectional social locations (EPW, n.d.). Though the term and the conceptual framework of intersectionality have only recently been imported into Indian academia, scholarship and activism, the notion of multiple identities co-constructing marginalities has been consistently discernible on the socioeconomic and political canvas of India. In the nineteenth century, the rise of Brahminism[3] in India led to caste as well as gender discrimination, a finding which was brought to the forefront by Jyotirao Phule, a nineteenth century social reformer (Deshpande, 2002). Phule argued that child marriage, enforced widowhood and the sati system were three specific ways in which this discrimination manifested. However, while debating dual marginalisation, Phule viewed caste and gender more as parallel categories of marginalities that shaped one's socio-economic reality. Periyar, a key proponent of the Self Respect

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[3] Brahminism, is an ancient Indian religious tradition that emerged from the earlier Vedic religion. It emphasized the rites performed by, and the status of, the Brahmin or priestly class. According to BR. Ambedkar, the characteristics of Brahminism are: (1) It established the right of the Brahmin to rule and commit regicide; (2) It made the Bramhins a class of privileged persons; (3) It converted the Varna into caste; (4) It brought about a conflict and anti-social feeling between the different castes; (5) It degraded the Shudras and the women; (6) It forged the system of graded inequality; and (7) It made legal and rigid the social system which was conventional and flexible (Ambedkar, 2013).

Movement in India, argued that the Brahminical order created dual marginalities for the castes lower in the Brahminical hierarchy (Dalits) and women (Geetha, 1998). In line with both Phule and Periyar, Ambedkar, the lead architect of India's constitution and a vocal critic of the caste system, recognised the marginalised position that Dalits[4] and women hold in a Brahminical society. In his work "Who Were the Shudras', he showed how excluding women and Dalits from Hindu rituals such as the Upanayana[5] provided a legitimation for them to be prevented from owning property as well, with material consequences in their lives (Ambedkar, 1948). Ambedkar also recognised that caste and gender identities were not only parallel but also intersectional systems, as is evident in his critique of endogamy and his advocacy for inter-caste marriage (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2018).

The non-Brahmin movements in Tamil Nadu from the early 1900s, and the rise of Dalit literary and autobiographical movements in Maharashtra during the 1960s, also demonstrated the intricate interplay among caste, gender and class, and how they collectively influence the lived experiences of marginalised communities (Parameswara, 2016; Velayudhan, 2018). For instance, prominent Dalit women writers such as Kalyani Thakur or Chandalini (Bengali), Bama (Tamilian) and Urmila Pawar (Marathi) did not use the term intersectionality, but their understanding of marginal subjectivities is intersectional, built through lived experiences situated at the a complex intersection of caste, class and gender.[6] In post-independence India, the connections between and differences in women's experiences varied across conjunctures and gave rise to specific solidarities. Women have come together and have forged communities, singularly or variously, as Muslim, Dalit, indigenous, queer, farmer, and so on (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2018).

Despite this rich history of intersectional thinking, since independence, the mainstream women's movement in India has for a long time focused its energies narrowly on gender and patriarchy without engaging with differences stemming from intersecting social identities such as caste, ethnicity, religion, class, sexuality,

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[4] Dalits are the worst victims of India's hierarchical caste society, which stratifies the population into "ranked hereditary, endogamous, and occupational groups separate from each other by the idea of purity and pollution". (Teltumbde, 2020; 1). Occupying the lowest rank in the hierarchical order, Dalits have historically faced exclusion, segregation, humiliation and violence in all aspects of life. According to the International Dalit Solidarity Network, Dalit means "broken people" and is the name the "untouchables" of India have chosen for themselves to signify a growing movement of empowerment, assertion and challenging an oppressive system and the oppressors. (IDSN, n.d) In legal and constitutional terms, Dalits are known in India as scheduled castes.

[5] Upanayana is a Hindu rite of passage ritual primarily for boys, marking their rebirth into the world of the Vedas and their readiness to learn the tradition. The ritual involved wearing of a sacred thread around the chest. Many medieval Indian texts restricted upanayana to the upper three of the four varnas (castes) of society - brahmins, kshatriyas and vaishyas. Shudras – those in the lower rung – were not entitled to the ritual. According to Ambedkar, "as a result of the hatred towards the Shudras the Brahmins refused to invest the Shudras with the sacred thread. Owing to the loss of the sacred thread the Shudras became socially degraded, fell below the rank of the Vaishyas and came to form the fourth Varna" (Ambedkar, 1948).

[6] Kalyani Thakur, also known as Kalyani Charal, is a Bengali Dalit feminist poet and writer who has published seven books on her own. She added "Charal" (for Chandal) to her name to assert her Dalit identity. Bama is a Tamil Dalit feminist writer who is known for her autobiographical work *Karukku*. Urmila Pawar is a Marathi Dalit feminist writer who has written several books, including *Aaydan* and *Savitribai Phule: Ek Jivani*.

disability and so on within the community of Indian women (Nair, 2020).This approach can be seen in the work of prominent feminists such as Nivedita Menon, who argued that

> "There are not pre-existing women - who may be Hindu or Muslim, upper-caste or Dalit, white or black - rather there are 'people' who may respond to different kinds of political challenges as 'Dalit' or 'Muslim' or as 'women'. The success of feminism lies precisely in its capacity to motivate 'people' to affirm themselves as feminists in different kinds of contexts. (Menon, 2015)

Thus, while the mainstream feminist movement worked on issues ranging from domestic violence to Dalit and tribal issues, to communal conflict, it largely proceeded "on a presumption that gender lines can be drawn up sharply in a patriarchal society and within these parameters sexual assault and domestic violence affect women equally across class, culture and religious barriers" (Agnes, 1994). For example, the feminist movement's engagement with the case of Bhanwari Devi, who was gang-raped by some upper caste men in her village for trying to stop a child marriage as an employee of a government programme, and the case of custodial rape of Mathura, a young tribal woman, did not involve a revisionist politics centred around the issues of the most marginalised women (Rege, 2000). Without directly addressing the nature of intersectional harm involved in the sexual assault in these cases, the feminist undertaking of these cases "marks the persistent sidelining of caste/ethnicity as a gender issue" (Atrey, 2019).

The mainstream feminist movement of India faced its first serious challenge from Dalit feminists who critiqued the "masculinisation of the Dalit as well as the savarnisation[7] of the woman" (and women/feminist studies) (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2018). They pointed out that " a thoroughgoing analysis of the material basis of patriarchy, requires that the differential access to and control over labour, sexuality, and reproduction by castes, classes and communities be brought to the centre" (Rege, 2000). Caste and tribal identity intersect with gender to produce unique sites of discrimination and violence. Women landing at these intersections face multiple discriminations – on account of their caste/tribal identity, on account of their gender identity, and cumulatively on account of both these identities (Deshpande, 2021; Roy, 2017). They are worst hit in terms of material indicators as well as autonomy and mobility indicators (Deshpande, 2021). This unique discrimination position should alert us to viewing acts of discrimination and violence against women as being on a single axis of identity such as caste/tribe or gender. Therefore, Dalit Bahujan and other minority activists called for reframing the feminist discourse in terms of power imbalances between *savarna* and Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi feminists, thus bringing out the invisible caste question within feminist movements and compelling the participants to engage with it (Roy, 2017). Since then, multiple marginalised groups in India have echoed the need for an intersectional approach to understand and address the unique experiences of women at

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[7] Savarnisation here refers to the invisibilisation of women's caste identity in the feminist discourse and a default reference to the dominant savarna caste woman in the feminist discourse.

different intersectional social locations, including Dalit women, Muslim women, tribal women and disabled women (Agnes, 2022; EPW n.d.; Kannabiran & Kannabiran, 1991; Pradeep, 2014).

Critique of intersectionality and counter-responses In Indian scholarship

Intersectionality theory and praxis have been critiqued quite vociferously, so much so that intersectionality critiques have become "something of their own genre" (May, 2015). The three main challenges raised against intersectionality are: "intersectionality's emphasis on social and cultural over material and structural inequalities; its overreliance on identity categories; and the infinite regress problem" (Atrey, 2019). These challenges have mostly been met successfully by defenders of intersectionality, who stress its potential as a framework "to illuminate the dynamic of sameness and difference in patterns of group disadvantage based on multiple identities understood as a whole, and in their full and relevant context, with the purpose of redressing and transforming them" (Atrey, 2019: 77).

Intersectionality has been successful as a "traveling " theory (Lutz, et al., 2011) and this may be attributed to the fact that intersectionality and intersectionality-like thinking were widely present and omnipotent in some or the other form, even before the term itself gained traction (Atrey, 2019; 22). As mentioned before, an inherently intersectional understanding of different categories was seen in early scholarly writings, thinking and movements in India, especially in Dalit feminist discourse. Women were not seen as a monolithic category, rather, their gendered identity was seen to be shaped by other categories such as caste, religion, creed, nation and region (Atrey, 2019). Many similarities can be found in the "language and explanations of the respective positions of disadvantage of black women and Dalit women", revealing "their common conceptual foundations" (Atrey, 2019; 64). However, despite this early recognition of the notion of multiple identities co-constructing marginalities, the adoption of Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality in Indian academia was not welcomed by all. Many scholars have debated the contours and usefulness of intersectionality for feminism in India. Prominent among them is Nivedita Menon, who bluntly rejected the relevance and application of Crenshaw's intersectionality framework in India, at least for the feminist movement.

Menon views intersectionality as an example of imperialism of categories displacing non-Western/Southern understandings (Menon, 2015). Menon argues that the concept has become depoliticised owing to the uncritical push by international funding agencies, and does not add much to our understanding of feminist problems in India where "the presumed subject of feminist politics has been destabilised most notably by the politics of caste, religious community identity and sexuality" (Menon, 2015; 38). Menon also echoes the fear of many that intersectionality can fracture resistance to capitalism, and that it solidifies identity boundaries instead of opening them up. In other words, she argues that intersectionality reinforces interlocking structures of oppression when in reality the borders of different identity categories are fragile. Depending on the context, the salience of identity boundaries will vary, requiring ossified categories to be tentatively destabilised by the

other. Menon even goes on to say that not all identities of a person may be relevant at all times for them – "Rather than a black woman being both black and a woman, she may at times only be black, and at others, only woman ...the intersection itself is an empty place" (Menon, 2015: 43).

As much discussed as Menon's rejection of intersectionality is Mary John's response to her critique. John (2015) submits that the greatest achievement of intersectionality is to illuminate the intersectional subject; in other words, the intersection is not "an empty space" as Menon argues, but is a space constituted by simultaneous operation of structures of oppression (John, 2015). Therefore, the experiences of a black woman or, for that matter, a Dalit woman are not grasped if we view them as a combination of woman and black or woman and Dalit. This is because such additive frameworks only consider the experience of white/upper caste women and black/Dalit men. Intersectionality has value as it helps to demonstrate that because of the simultaneous operation of structures of oppression, the experiences of black women or Dalit women are qualitatively different as "their experience prove to be more than, or other than, the sum of various parts that are thought to constitute it" (John, 2015; 77).

Further, John rejects Menon's argument about intersectionality's redundancy in Indian feminist thinking. She argues that the fact that multiple identities of women were recognised in India does not imply that they were addressed or engaged with, as "it is a matter of historical record that women's organisations were unable to sustain their early efforts towards a more inclusive politics" (John, 2015: 74). John also critiques Menon's argument of one identity destabilising the other. She argues that a particular identity or axis may itself be the product of and shaped by various structures of oppression and discourses that advance them which, "depending on the moment and the context., may yield categories that are both fixed and fluid" (John, 2015: 75).

Lastly, John is critical of Menon's stand that intersectionality is an example of imperialism of categories. While John agrees that "given our colonial and postcolonial histories, our intellectual spaces are cluttered with false universalisms", she points out that we have been equally "trapped by false particularisms, and even false rejections of the universal" (John, 2015: 75). She points to how Dalit feminists in India frequently find inspiration in the history of black women, which may mean that "some dimension of the intersectionality problem might speak to them', and hence it "would surely be odd to reject this out of hand" (John, 2015; 75). Hence, she argues, rejecting the relevance of intersectionality in Indian context constitutes a false rejection.

A major concern about the adoption of intersectionality in the Indian context is its non-contextual application, leading to an ahistorical or depoliticised analysis; a point that Nivedita Menon also underlines (Menon, 2015). It is true that different social divisions —race, caste, class, gender and so on.— are always historically and contextually specific. But as Banerjee and Ghosh (2018) argue, rather than out-of-hand rejection, the awareness of contextual peculiarities should urge us towards a more reflexive use of the intersectionality

framework, as it has the potential to address and analyse specific empirical contexts. As John rightly points out, intersectionality provides us with the tool to accurately state the problem (John, 2015).

By employing intersectionality and simultaneously considering the context, we can uncover the unique experiences of various marginalised groups. Instead of reinforcing identity boundaries, intersectionality offers a perspective to "analyse how different forms of power and dominance mutually reinforce each other" (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2018: 8). This approach reveals both the differences and similarities in the experiences of marginalisation among different groups, leading to a mutual recognition of their specific experiences of oppression and a search for common interests. Consequently, this fosters the potential for dialogue and solidarity among diverse marginalised groups. Therefore, intersectionality serves as a powerful tool for social change.

It emerges that the tool of intersectionality – as a heuristic to unpack social relations – seems 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. It is this transformative potential of intersectionality that makes it an appropriate framework for examining the nature of online hate and recurring patterns of abuse targeting women in public-political life who belong to multiple identity categories.

Application of Intersectionality to the Research Design

We adopted an intersectional lens to study the nature and pattern of misogynist trolling and abuse on Twitter to enrich our understanding of the experience of women from diverse backgrounds by considering "how an array of socially constructed dimensions of difference intersect to shape each person's experiences and actions" (Misra et al., 2020: 9). This decision is informed by what Townsend-Bell termed intersectional recognition: "a general acknowledgement at the organisational level of the need to analyse the impact and role of difference, and an awareness of the imperative to perform said analyses" (Townsend-Bell, 2009: 2).

An intersectional recognition, specifically with respect to this project, came from the organisation's previous work on online gender-based violence, which involved participatory action research (PAR), focus group discussions, and interviews with women, youth groups, and other relevant stakeholders. Our participatory action research with a youth group based in Karnataka (a state in India) on online gender-based hate speech provided many insights into the intersectional nature of gender power structures in the digital public. The PAR exercise was able to unpack how gendered experiences of marginality and isolation are also intertwined with and other social markers (IT for Change, 2021).

In another project, titled Born Digital, Born Free?: A Socio-Legal Study on Young Women's Experiences of Cyber Violence in South India, a study was undertaken in the southern Indian states of Karnataka, Tamil Nadu and Kerala about young women's experience of cyber-violence (IT for Change, 2019a). The study adopted a mixed

methods approach – a self-administered, anonymised survey among 881 college-going women; fourteen focus group discussions with young women and young men in colleges across the six locations; 44 key-informant interviews with a range of stakeholders across all three states, including law enforcement officials of varying ranks, family court lawyers, legal researchers on the issue of cyber-violence, women's rights and Dalit rights activists, transgender activists, feminist researchers, journalists, counsellors associated with gender-based violence helplines and crisis support centres, and women survivors willing to discuss their struggles for access to justice; and a literature review examining legal, institutional, cultural and technological dimensions of gender-based cyber-violence. This study revealed that the online experience of young women was qualitatively different depending upon their caste, community, minority religious identity and sexual orientation (Gurumurthy, et al., 2019b). Further, it was noticed that women active in public political life such as activists, politicians and journalists were trolled incessantly, often in the form of a concerted action by multiple handles.

Apart from these projects, our intersectional recognition was informed by literature about the different structures of inequality, power and oppression in Indian society that shape the social, economic, cultural and political life of women and their experiences, both offline and online.

In light of this awareness of how structures and systems, and the categories of difference that result from them, overlap in inextricable ways in the lived experience of social groups and individuals (Townsend-Bell, 2009), we consciously adopted an intersectional lens at every stage of the research – in the research methodology and design and during data collection and the annotation process. The aim was to analyse how multiple ideologies of oppression operate cumulatively and concurrently to produce a specific experience of subordination in the online public sphere. In doing so, we were able to emphasise four methodological tenets of intersectional research identified by Misra, Currington and Green: oppression, complexity, context, and comparison (Misra, et al., 2020). These tenets are briefly explained below:

Oppression

The hierarchical power relations in a given society give rise to a matrix of domination which reflects oppression (Hill, 2000; Townsend-Bell, 2009). Recognition of this oppression and power is crucial to understand, in its full complexity, how the experience of women online is shaped and circumscribed by their caste, religious, and community identity.

Complexity

Complexity entails a recognition that gender, caste, religion, community and other identities are mutually constituted, impacting each other, and impossible to untangle (Misra et al., 2020). This recognition transformed our research process by urging us to eschew an additive approach to understand the relative advantages and disadvantages that different categories of women experience online.

Context

This tenet informs us to be conscious of the socio-historical context and the social phenomena under consideration, in examining the relative advantages and disadvantages that different categories of women experience online. In other words, our study was attuned to the socio-cultural and political context of the country as we realised that the socially constructed dimensions of difference are neither fixed nor unchanging and therefore the experiences it produces for the individuals affected will also be contextual. Our study was situated in the context of the rise of majoritarian politics and Hindu majoritarianism in India.

Comparison

This methodological tenet meant that we consciously attempted a comparison of the experiences of different categories of women who differ in terms of their caste, religion, occupation and political ideology.

However, conducting intersectional research poses a significant methodological challenge and an essential question: "How to research and write about multiple forms of differentiation without essentialising these categories or fragmenting the research subject" (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2018: 8). One effective way to overcome this challenge, as Banerjee and Ghosh (2018) recommend, is to adopt a lived experience approach. Lived experience is the experience of being a subject, and mapping the fractured nature of the everyday life of the subject, it allows for an openness to competing interpretations and illustrates the multi-dimensionality of hegemonic facts (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2018).

In our study, we adopted a lived experience approach by mapping, for one week, the mentions directed at the public Twitter profiles of the women in the sample to understand the nature and pattern of abuse directed against them. We decided that this approach would be the best for us to appreciate the subjectivity of the lived digital experience of these women, which cannot be separated into neat categories of gender on the one hand and caste on the other. Rather, they are "simultaneous, linked and contextual" (Banerjee & Ghosh, 2018; 9).

In the following paragraphs, we explain how the data collection and annotation of mapped tweets were done, and how intersectionality guided these processes.

Intersectionality in Data Collection

Using a purposive sampling method, we selected a sample of twenty women who were active in public-political life in India. This included members of parliament (MP), members of the Legislative Assembly (MLA), politicians, political commentators, journalists and activists, across the political and ideological spectrum. The first level selection of women was done by scanning the official list of women MPs in the country, by observing Twitter trends and narratives, and by media reports of online hate against prominent women. We also included those women MPs/MLAs and women politicians who did not have a Twitter handle, as we noticed from our Twitter trend analysis that, even though they were not on Twitter, their names appeared in tweets.

In the second level of selection, we used caste identity, age, religion and geography as secondary sampling criteria. We decided to include these identity categories based on our insights from previous work and also available literature about intersectional differences that inform the lived experience of women in digital spaces in India (IT for Change, 2019a; IT for Change, 2021).

Caste identity was considered a relevant identity for our study as the vice of casteism is deep-rooted in India (Chakravarti, 1993). Notably, the misogyny in the Indian online public sphere is also characterised by the widespread prevalence of caste-based or directed hate (Kain et al., 2021). Religious identity, considered to be the historical fault line in the relationship between Muslims and the majority Hindus, runs deep in the country. Anti-Muslim rhetoric and violence have been steeply on the rise over the past decade and have reached a fever pitch since the widespread adoption of social media in India (Apoorvanand, 2021). This often translates into hate and online abuse against Muslim women. A disturbing example of this is the Bulli Bai-Sulli deals episode, wherein hundreds of Muslim women were listed for "auction" in applications hosted on Github, with their photographs doctored and sourced without their permission (Salim, 2022).

Age was considered to be a criterion as it has been observed that younger women are more capable of manoeuvring in spaces such as social media, and are more aware of safety and privacy settings as compared to older women. Finally, geography was considered to include the experience of women in all major regions of India - north, south, west and east, as far as possible, but only to the extent that the language capability of the researchers permitted, owing to India's linguistic diversity.

The above-listed criteria do not exhaustively capture the diversity of Indian women engaged in public-political life. Practical considerations such as time and resource constraints and the proficiency of the team in different Indian languages were determining factors for this omission. Yet, the data collected yielded salient insights into the intersectional nature of violence faced by women online. As Townsend-Bell (2009) points out, the exclusion of certain categories of difference is not a limitation as long as the research is done in an intersectional framework.

After applying the above two-tier filtering criteria, further filtering was done using the engagement rate of the concerned woman on Twitter. The engagement rate was measured in terms of number of followers and number of tweets mentioning them. A high engagement rate on the platform was deemed an important criterion as it would provide a densely populated dataset that could be used to draw sustainable and robust inferences, and not merely propose speculative hypotheses.

After the selection of the sample, mentions directed at the women were collected from their public Twitter profiles for a period of one week from 26 November to 3 December 2022, which yielded 30 460 mentions of the women in the sample. The choice of this week was not motivated by any specific reason. Some of the most intensely debated issues on the platform at the time – that is, towards the end of November 2020 – were the

then ongoing farmers' protests in India, the untimely death of Bollywood actor, Sushant Singh Rajput, Assembly elections in the state of West Bengal, and the enactment of anti-conversion laws in various states.

We were cognisant that a duration of one week does not lend itself to understanding the growth and evolution of public-political discourse on social media platforms, which is an ongoing process. We were also aware of the fact that, given the constant churn of political content, and how virality dictates engagement on Twitter, these divisive issues may have dwarfed any other political debates that may have arisen at the time. However, since online discourses are characterised by speed and ephemerality, a study conducted in a short frame of time that privileges episodic flashpoints could provide us vital insights into the morphology of societal relations and social power (Pal & Gonawela, 2017).

Intersectionality in the annotation process and categorisation

Once the tweets were mapped for the selected time frame, we developed a set of annotation guidelines to separate the hateful, abusive and problematic tweets from the rest, and classify these into mutually exclusive categories of hateful or abusive speech. Through an inductive coding exercise, a total of 22 codes were defined for annotation to capture the nuances of hateful, abusive or problematic content. These codes along with their explanation are shown below in Table 1:

Table 1: Codes defined for annotation

S. No	Terminology	Definition
1.	Derailing	Justifying female abuse, rejecting male privilege, attempting to disrupt the conversation to redirect the subject's opinions/ views/perspectives to male-cantered opinions/views/perspectives.
2.	Generic abuse	Using nasty/malevolent language to attack the subject because she is a woman
3.	Sexualised slur	Using a pejorative such as slut, whore, presstitute (a term used to attack women journalists)
4.	Sexist slur	Using a pejorative such as bitch, feminazi, witch, *daayan* (witch in Hindi)
5.	Casteist slur	Using a casteist slur such as *chamar, bhangi, kameeni* (these are derogatory terms used to refer to historically oppressed caste communities)
6.	Dehumanising insult	Comparing women to non-human beings
7.	Exercising dominance	Asserting the superiority of men over women to naturalise gender

		inequality
8.	Over-familiarity	Disrespecting the subject's personal boundaries, demonstrating creepiness
9.	Stereotyping	Using a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or notion of a woman/womanhood
10.	Sexual harassment	Making sexual advances at or asking for sexual favours from the subject, inflicting harassment of a sexual nature
11.	Sexual objectification	Bullying based on physical characteristics such as skin colour, weight, body shape, and looks; judging a woman's physical attractiveness based on patriarchal standards
12.	Asexual objectification	Referring to the subject as an inanimate object
13.	Intimidation	Replying with the intent of instigating fear
14.	Threats of violence	Replying with an intent to physically assert power over the subject through threats of violence
15.	Direct religious hate speech	Expressing hate towards the subject based on her religion
16.	Religious stereotyping	Expressing hateful generalisation about the religion of the subject
17.	Indirect religious hate speech	Attacking the subject perceived to be sympathetic to a minority religion
18.	Casteist hate speech	Expressing hate towards the subject based on their caste
19.	Delegitimising by othering	Delegitimising criticism on the basis of a narrow definition of nationality; asserting an exclusive claim over a national/regional identity
20.	Neutral	Text is neither abusive nor problematic
21.	Other	Tweets that could not be easily categorised
22.	Non-targeted abuse	Generic abusive statement not targeted at an identifiable individual

The annotation guidelines were used as a reference manual by three annotators who appraised and coded each of the mentions into the categories which defined the different kinds of hateful, abusive and problematic speech. Disagreements about the classification of a particular mention were resolved through discussion among the coders. In cases where a consensus could still not be reached, a fourth research team member was asked to categorise the mention and resolve the disagreement. We annotated mentions in English, Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Punjabi, Kannada and Gujarati, and a few in Tamil and Urdu.

It was decided that any specific mention could be categorised under a maximum of three mutually exclusive codes. This was done to account for the indeterminacy of the annotation guidelines and the fact that abusive tweets often do not fall neatly into any one category and may straddle multiple identity locations. For example, a tweet could simultaneously be "religious hate speech', "sexualised slur', "threat of violence" or "exercise of dominance". This was done to capture, as far as possible, the intersectional nature of abuse that a woman faced.

Application of Intersectionality to Data Analysis And Research Insights

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. However, it was quite evident that the nature and amount of abuse these women faced varied significantly depending on their identities and social locations.

Intersectionality provided us with a useful framework to understand how the complexity of social inequalities and interconnecting power relations in which the women in the sample were embedded might interact with the architecture of social media platforms and how it influenced the nature of trolling and abuse they faced on Twitter.

Platform populism and majoritarian masculinities

There is a clear prevalence of majoritarian violence in contemporary India, which can be attributed to a sense of sanction and permissiveness given to trolls by leaders to engage in acts of violence and abuse within a crowd. Research from our Twitter study indicates that individuals targeted by this violence on Twitter included political dissenters, Muslim women, and opposition party members. Social media platforms play a significant role in shaping modern politics and are partly responsible for the growing communal disharmony, religious intolerance and suppression of dissent in India. They actively shape the domain of politics rather than merely facilitating online engagement. The rise of right-wing populism and toxic masculinist technocultures are not coincidental but interconnected developments that contribute to the formation of new political subjectivities.

The unique distribution dynamics of platform sociality are crucial in considering how the law can address online misogynistic speech. The networked nature of platforms, combined with the impunity enjoyed by

perpetrators of majoritarian and gendered violence, allows radical ideas to morph into populist ones, shifting the boundaries of acceptable public speech. Misogynistic speech online has been normalised and exploited by right-wing political actors in India, with elected representatives often endorsing abusive behaviour. The visible protection and immunity afforded to those who engage in abuse against women creates an environment where such behaviour is encouraged. By incentivising and normalising gendered violence, social media platforms have fundamentally transformed the landscape of politics, facilitating a hegemonic populism rooted in regressive and misogynistic values. Discriminatory treatment of women in the online public sphere has become commonplace and trivialised.

Online manifestation of Brahminical patriarchy: abusive and oppressive behaviour

We analysed the data by locating women within a complex "matrix of domination" – that is, "the overall organisation of hierarchical power relations in a given society including structural practices and policies; disciplinary processes that rely on bureaucratic hierarchies and surveillance; hegemonic ideologies; and the interpersonal, discriminatory practices of everyday lived experiences" (Collins, 2000). In the caste-ridden society of India, this matrix of domination is constituted by a distinct type of patriarchy called Brahminical patriarchy (Chakravarti, 1993).

Brahminical patriarchy is a social-institutional order in which women's subordinate status and control over their mobility, sexuality, choices, and desires are considered crucial to maintain the supremacy and purity of a caste-based socially stratified order (Chakravarti, 1993). This gender and caste subordination is enforced through a set of norms, rules and practices, critical among which is caste endogamy. Apart from caste endogamy, another way of preserving the purity of the clan is through tropes of "honour", "shame" and "respectability" of the women. In other words, women are considered not only to be flag bearers for the household and its social standing but also as repositories of community pride (Chakravarti, 1993).

Even outside the caste hierarchy, this imposition of shame, honour and community values on women's bodies and conduct is very prevalent in the South Asian context. They are not seen as individuals in their own right, but rather as subjects of male authority and control - their bodies become sites where contestations of family, community, and national honour frequently play out (Gurumurthy & Dasarathy, 2022).

Keeping this matrix of domination in mind helped us understand the nuances and underlying subtext of the online abuses faced by women in the sample. Abusive speech directed against women in our sample rarely engaged with their political position or work. Rather, it invariably took the form of gendered attacks on their bodies or character. Their credentials and achievements were questioned, and they were accused of bringing shame or dishonour to their husbands, fathers or families through their words and actions. Many of the abusive tweets that we annotated contained some mention of the words "shame," "shameless," "honour," "*laanat,*" or *"sharm"* (the last two words mean "shame" in Hindi). Another pattern we found was that

perpetrators sought to put women in their rightful place in the domestic sphere by raking up their private lives in public view.

A common form of abuse was sexual objectification and making unwanted references to a woman's body and appearance as a way of retorting to her speech, instead of engaging with the substance of her argument. This comes from the position of viewing women solely as the objects of male desire, reducing them to their bodies, and thereby perpetuating their subordinate status. We also found patterns of trolling that sought to police women's sexuality and sexual expression. While some women were desexualised, called "sex-deprived" and referred to as aunty, *chachi* (aunt in Hindi) or *pishi* (aunt in Bengali), others were shamed for any kind of sexual expression. There were also frequent insinuations that politics is no place for women and that they should stick to things they are good at.

The logic of Brahminical patriarchy is also used to perpetuate othering against communities such as Muslims by dishonouring their women. We found this sort of othering and hyper-nationalistic rhetoric targeted most often at Muslim women, who were seen to represent an imminent threat to the moral purity of the nation.

Our findings indicate that political and cultural regulation of women's bodies and conduct by men in a distinct South Asian framework of Brahminical patriarchy translates into the online sphere and shapes the experience of women on these platforms.

Intersecting oppressions: Caste-based and Islamophobic hate against women

The research team recognised and acknowledged very early on that in the Indian context, gender, caste, religion and class should not be viewed as separate systems of inequality; rather, they are interlinked and mutually constituted, and each dimension of oppression contributes to the identity of an individual. This recognition helped us understand and explain the disproportionate amount of abuse and hate that Dalit and Muslim women, particularly those from opposition parties and political dissidents, faced compared to other women.

Caste-based hate

We found that while Brahminical notions of purity and honour were invoked to attack all women, the abusive mentions that targeted women from marginalised caste groups in our sample took on a distinctly different hue. We found that caste became a crucial axis of social power in structuring the nature of online misogyny.

For instance, utterances that could potentially be categorised as "exercising dominance" or "over-familiarity"**,** when directed at a Dalit woman, can also carry the connotations of caste-based discrimination. Online trolls also tend to tag together and abuse Dalit women politicians and anti-caste activists. A complex minefield confronts politically active Dalit women on Twitter –something that they have to navigate every day merely to participate in social-political life or to simply get their work done.

The abuse directed at the Dalit women in our sample took a range of forms. Casteist stereotyping and insinuations of casteism were more common than direct casteist attacks. One common and familiar stereotype was to call into question the merit of the women in our sample through the use of words such as *aukaat* (loosely translates to status/ability), *ghotalebaaz* (scamster), duplicate certificate *wali,* uneducated and *chor* (thief). Allegations of corruption were also levelled disproportionately against Dalit women politicians, by questioning professional integrity. We also found multiple instances of dehumanising insults directed at Dalit women politicians. They were called *suar* (pig), which not only carries casteist connotations of uncleanness and untouchability but also ties in with notions of traditional caste-based occupations, suggesting that the women in question can only belong in these "filthy" and inhumane occupations.

While the study of Twitter mentions does provide insight into the lived experience of Dalit women online, uncovering caste-based attacks was not always easy. Caste-based domination on social media platforms is often based on insinuation, rather than direct attacks. Further, the process of classifying specific mentions as problematic or abusive according to annotation guidelines may not have always captured the full analytical depth of these intersections. This is because the meaning of a word is shaped by the broader discourse and context in which it is used. An annotation schema on a platform like Twitter, even when developed by human coders, may not fully capture the social meaning and underlying values of words, especially when it comes to deeply ingrained hierarchies like sexism and casteism. Social media platforms such as Twitter play a significant role in structuring attitudes and shaping the context in which meaning is understood. These platforms alter the conditions of social interaction and meaning-making. Recognising these dynamics is crucial for both legal and platform responses to combat abusive content.

Anti-Muslim hate

The sheer volume of abusive and hateful mentions directed at politically prominent Muslim women on Twitter provides a glimpse into the thriving online ecosystem of Islamophobic propaganda. This needs to be seen in the context of majoritarian ideologies that have normalised diatribe against Muslims both offline and online (Apoorvanand, 2021; Soundararajan et al., 2019).

We found that abuse against Muslim women broadly falls into two categories: The first is the use of hyper-nationalistic and othering speech that attacks Muslim women based on a narrow definition of nationality or by asserting an exclusive claim over national identity. A second category of mentions either expressed stereotypical, hateful, and propaganda-informed generalisations about Islam, or exhibited hate towards the woman based on her religion. Muslim women were also subjected to sexually objectifying comments.

Our findings indicate that a Muslim woman's experience of misogyny is not simply the sum of sexism and religious discrimination. Instead, it lies in the specific ways in which these factors are fundamentally constitutive of subjecthood and social identity along with other factors and identities. For example, Muslim women from our sample who also happen to be dissenters or outspoken critics of the ruling dispensation

received abuse for being a dissenter and Muslim, but these were not the only determining factors. Similarly, Muslim politicians in our sample received more comments about their appearance than their Hindu counterparts.

Praxis of Intersectionality - Research Dissemination And Action

Along with intersectional recognition, the praxis of intersectionality requires a politics of accountability (Soundararajan, et al., 2019). According to Townsend-Bell, "a politics of accountability places emphasis on analysis of asymmetric power relations, and a commitment to their elimination" (Townsend-Bell, 2009: 3). It is this commitment to ending relations of dominance that makes intersectional praxis different from other forms of interventions, such as attempts at diversity or inclusion (Townsend-Bell, 2009). Intersectional praxis with politics of accountability can be practiced at various stages of the research, including in the research dissemination phase. Townsend-Bell (2009) outlines several ways in which a politics of accountability can be implemented in the research dissemination stage: (i) making the research results and knowledge produced accessible and usable, beyond academic publications; (ii) assessing the different people and organisations on whom the research might have an impact, such as local governments, social services, neighbourhoods, and schools; (iii) developing policy solutions, building campaigns, organising, and doing movement building and advocacy (Townsend-Bell, 2009).

Our study on misogynistic and abusive trolling against Indian women in public-political life on Twitter yielded many crucial findings about the nature and pattern of online abuse against women and how intersectional social locations shaped different online experiences for different women. It also showed how the perpetrators of online violence made use of social media platform architecture and protocols to amplify hateful messages directed at the targeted women and how these platforms fail woefully to adequately respond to instances of online hate and abuse. The findings of the study also helped us to identify some of the lacunae in the extant legal institutional framework with regard to online violence against women.

These findings crucially inform our ongoing and upcoming work on legal-institutional responses to online gender-based violence, social media governance and platform accountability. We have used the research findings from this study in our ongoing advocacy and policy recommendations to counter online hate and violence, especially gender-based violence. We discuss how we have used these findings in two ongoing initiatives below.

Our inputs into legislative and policy-making at the national and global level

In a country as culturally and linguistically diverse as India, studies have indicated that the measures taken by social media platforms in terms of content moderation and content curation tools to combat OGBV often fail to account for unique vulnerabilities or abuses faced by women falling on the intersection of multiple

disadvantaged social locations (Díaz and Hecht-Felella, 2021). Human and AI moderators of platforms are often ill-equipped to detect and remove abusive messages in regional languages and locally specific casteist or religious slurs (Kain, et al., 2021). Despite the various measures taken by platforms to combat gender-based abuse, there remains a notable gap in addressing the experiences of women situated at the intersection of multiple marginalised identities. For instance, an Indian study on online caste-hate speech found that the content filtering tools of social media platforms are not caste-sensitive and hence have often failed to remove caste-based hate speech in India (Kain, et al., 2021).

Our Twitter study confirmed these findings, as we found that in many cases, the platform failed to remove abusive and hateful messages, especially those involving regional language and containing local references and terminologies. Further, the finding from our study, that the circulation logic of social media lies at the heart of the issue of online misogynistic speech, calls for a rethink of dominant approaches to the regulation of social media which view these platforms as mere neutral conduits of speech. Our study also observed a pattern of herd aggression among perpetrators of online hate, who exploit the algorithmic affordances for the virality and anonymity that the platforms offer to amplify hate and disinformation. This points to a dangerous user pattern that the platforms should be alert to in order to protect the rights and safety of their users, especially women users.

As part of our advocacy work, IT for Change regularly makes inputs into legislative and policy-making processes at national and global levels on several matters, including countering online gender-based violence, content regulation and platform accountability. In our comments on these documents, the findings of the Twitter study were highlighted to urge lawmakers, policy-makers and technology companies to invest in training local human moderators who are equipped with the requisite cultural competence to be able to identify these forms of trolling and augment proactive monitoring tools. To ensure that the digital platforms recognise and address the intersectional nature of violence that women face on their platforms, we also recommended involvement, active participation and periodic consultation with women, members of marginalised groups, human rights experts and other stakeholders in framing the platforms' community guidelines and grievance redressal mechanism, and in designing content moderations tools. (IT for Change, 2019b; IT for Change, 2020; IT for Change, 2022; IT for Change, 2023a; IT for Change, 2023b; IT for Change, 2023c; IT for Change, 2023d.)

The findings of this study also informed one of our major recommendations in these submissions: to develop a strong accountability regime for digital platforms to hold them liable for enabling or facilitating harms, including online gender-based violence, disinformation, hate speech and incitement to violence, and for any systematic or deliberate failure to take steps to prevent or mitigate the harm, despite actual knowledge of it.

The findings from the Twitter study will continue to inform our inputs to make evidence-based policy recommendations and to point out blind spots in the regulatory approach towards social media governance to counter online hate and violence, especially gender-based violence. These blind spots in institutional

processes are deeply intertwined with intersectionality, reflecting the complex interplay of various social identities and experiences in relation to institutional politics.

Judicial resource guide: A guide for judges in adjudicating cases of OGBV

We are currently developing a resource guide to aid judges and lawyers in adjudicating and litigating cases of online gender-based violence in a gender-sensitive and rights-based manner. It has been observed that the courts, especially at the lower levels of the judiciary, often do not recognise the intersectional nature of violence that a woman suffers, whether offline or online. For instance, in the case *P. Saravanakumar v/s State rep.by its Inspector of Police, Cyber Cell, Central Crime Branch, Egmore, Chennai & Another*,[8] the complainant and her mother were subjected to gender trolling, criminal intimidation and hate speech on Twitter. They were insulted both on the grounds of their gender and their caste. But the police charged the accused only under Section 506 of the IPC, 1860, Section 68 of the Information Technology Act, 2000, and Section 4 of Tamil Nadu Prohibition of Women Harassment Act, 1998. The caste dimension of the crime was unaddressed, despite India having a specific law, the Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, that penalises intimidation, threats and insults against a member of the Scheduled Caste or Scheduled tribe. The Court also overlooked the caste dimension of the online attack and did not allude to the Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989.

A step forward in recognising intersectionality in Indian jurisprudence was taken by the Supreme Court of India in the case *Patan Jamal Vali* v. *State of Andhra Pradesh*[9]. This was a case concerning the rape of a visually challenged girl belonging to the Scheduled Caste. In Para 12 of the judgment, Justice D.Y. Chandrachud observed that it is "imperative to use an intersectional lens to evaluate how multiple sources of oppression operate cumulatively to produce a specific experience of subordination for a blind Scheduled Caste woman"[10]. Despite this recognition by the highest court of the importance of adopting an intersectional lens in adjudicating cases of gender-based violence, it is yet to be recognised and applied by other courts, especially the trial courts of the country as seen in the *Saravakumar* case discussed above.

Therefore, in the resource guide, we have dedicated a whole module to intersectionality to introduce the concept and sensitise the judges to the importance of viewing a survivor's experience through an intersectional lens – identifying the multiple forces of oppression that co-constituted her/their experience. This would enable them to apply the appropriate laws and invoke all available remedies under the law that the survivor is entitled to. In writing this module, we have drawn examples from the findings of the Twitter

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[8] *P. Saravanakumar v. State rep.by its Inspector of Police, Cyber Cell, Central Crime Branch, Egmore, Chennai & Another,* Crl.O.P.No.232 of 2013. Madras High Court, Aug 5, 2019.

[9] *Patan Jamal Vali v. State of Andhra Pradesh,* LL 2021 SC 231

[10] *Patan Jamal Vali v. State of Andhra Pradesh,* LL 2021 SC 231, at para 12

study to impress upon the judges and lawyers that the experience of online hate is qualitatively different for different women depending on their multiple and intersecting social locations and identities.

Conclusion - Intersectionality and Digital Identity

In the era of AI and Large Language Models (LLMs), locutionary speech acts and utterances online have become critical to social discourse.

Power circulates in this online space through the digital infrastructures: the data it carries, the effects it generates, the knowledge it legitimises, the values it embodies, the contests it contains and the bodies that it encompasses. To engage politically via the internet is to enter into a communicative environment that is structured by a small number of very large corporate actors such as Google or Meta. In this environment, algorithms nudge every aspect of online interactions. The algorithmic architectures of the platform economy are geared towards a virality that actively promotes simplistic and ephemeral communication flows.

The concept of digital identity (Dahlgren, 2018) becomes particularly significant because private companies and platforms play a central role in shaping and controlling individuals' online interactions, information sharing and overall digital presence. These companies often collect and analyse vast amounts of personal data, which can be used for targeted advertising, profiling and making decisions that impact individuals' access to services and opportunities.

While the internet and social media can reduce barriers to participation for women, we see through our work that there are still significant gender differences in online political involvement and participation, and an accentuated exclusion that some women are condemned to more than others (IT for Change, 2023). Through our study we saw how the disproportionate and often strategic targeting of women politicians and activists has direct implications for the democratic process. It can discourage them from running for office, push women out of politics, or lead them to disengage from online political discourse in ways that harm their political effectiveness.

It is pertinent to note here that an intersectional frame plays a crucial role and allows us to parse how digitality shapes and perpetuates traditional structures of oppression and what then may be useful to empower the margins. Understanding the influence of intersectional identity on digital experiences helps shed light on the complexities and power dynamics at play in the privatised online public sphere. It highlights the importance of recognising and addressing biases and discrimination that individuals from marginalised groups may encounter online, as members of differently located social groups. It also underscores the need for inclusive design, equitable access to digital services and policies that safeguard digital rights – not limited to identity and recognition in the social media marketplace, but extending to a systemic overhaul of the political economic aspects of the platform economy.

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