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TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK

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• *Does social media help or harm* •
Indian Women Human Rights Defenders?

ABSTRACT

Drawing on original interview data, this article analyses the impact of social media on Indian Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs). It argues that social media can help WHRDs to expand their advocacy, but can also leave them open to online threats, which can translate into offline risks. It also argues that WHRDs face threats due to their gender, as well as other factors, meaning that it is vital to consider this topic in both a gender-sensitive and intersectional way. Overall, this article concludes that social media both helps and harms WHRDs.

KEYWORDS

Women human rights defenders | Social media | Trolling | Risk | Intersectionality | India

1 • Introduction

Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) across the globe advocate for human rights through their activism. However, many WHRDs are at risk of threats and abuse due to their gender, as well as other factors. While social media can help WHRDs to speak out, it also opens them up to online threats, such as trolling, which can also lead to offline risks, namely physical harm or violence.

In 2019, the United Nations Human Rights Council stated: “[WHRDs] are often subjected to online harassment, violence and attacks, which include threats of sexual violence, verbal abuse, sexuality baiting, doxing... and public shaming... The online terror and slander to which women are subjected can also lead to physical assault”.²

This article explores the impact of social media on Indian WHRDs using data collected through interviews³ with five Defenders:

Defender A – founder of a Women, Peace and Security NGO in Chennai

Defender B – founder of an Anti-Violence Against Women and Girls NGO in Chennai

Defender C – independent women’s rights activist based in Chennai

Defender D – founder of an Anti-Violence Against Women and Girls NGO in Kanpur

Defender E – journalist and writer based in Mumbai

The data shows that WHRDs can use social media to expand, publicise and organise their activism. It also shows, however, that WHRDs are subjected to online threats motivated by misogyny and other intersecting forms of discrimination that can also lead to offline risks. Therefore, social media both helps and harms Indian WHRDs.

2 • What are the main benefits of social media for WHRDs?

The Defenders I interviewed all spoke about the benefits of using social media, namely that it helps them to connect with other WHRDs, publicise their work and organise grassroots activism.

2.1 - Connecting WHRDs

Social media helps WHRDs to connect and expand their networks. As Defender B told me, social media “allow[s] more and more women to come together”, which helps her to “connect with... [other WHRDs] across India very easily”. Defender D supported this, saying that social media has helped her NGO to “reach out to a much larger audience” and “share resources and information”. Similarly, Defender A said that her NGO has “found donors... [and] allies online”. Social media helps WHRDs to connect and find potential supporters, making it a useful tool.

Furthermore, as Defender D said, “there’s a sense of solidarity amongst women and... activists” on social media. Defender B’s experiences support this: “[I wrote] my own story as a survivor of different kinds of violence... Telling my story allowed me to heal beautifully”. Defender C told me that she recently used social media to defend a colleague who was being trolled, which shows the “sense of solidarity” that Defender D described. Social media can help WHRDs to build community and experience solidarity, although it can open them up to the possibility of being trolled similar to that suffered by Defender C’s colleague.

2.2 - Getting Publicity

Another benefit of social media is that it can help WHRDs to publicise their work and expand their advocacy. For instance, Defender C said that she can “get the attention of stakeholders [and] the media” through social media, particularly Facebook. Defender E also told me that “social media has played an important role in amplifying my voice... [and] plays a big role in getting publicity”, though she still thinks that social media is “a toxic space, as much as it amplifies your voice”.

2.3 - Facilitating Grassroots Activism

Social media can also help WHRDs to organise grassroots activism, which tends to be time-consuming and come at a high cost. Defender C, who is a member of several women’s rights organisations and forums, told me, “I’m juggling too many things... social media is a tool to support my... activities”. Defender D also said that social media has helped her NGO to “reach out to so many people, call for volunteers and have people join us in... campaign[s]”, which shows how social media can help in the recruitment and mobilisation of activists.

However, Defender A described social media as “an auxiliary mode of mobilisation” and said that it is grassroots activism that creates “real change”. Similarly, as Defender B said, “what you see on social media is... a tiny fraction of what’s happening on the ground” and is “just one more gust of wind in the sails of feminism in India”. Social media, therefore, helps to support grassroots activism, but should not be seen as a substitute for it.

3 • What are the main risks of social media for WHRDs?

While WHRDs can benefit from social media, they also face online threats and offline risks that tend to be gender-specific and intersectional by nature.

3.1 - Online Threats

Social media can open WHRDs up to threats and trolling. As Defender C argued, “if you want to threaten a woman, cyberspace is very convenient”. Similarly, Defender D told me that trolls can find “comfort in the fact that... they aren’t face-to-face”, while Defender

B said they are “emboldened by the fact that they have two computer screens between them”. These factors, combined with the fact that social media has “no checks and balances” (Defender E), mean that trolls can easily target WHRDs.

The abuse that Indian WHRDs face “reflects the general patriarchal society” (Defender C). For instance, Defender E told me she has faced “misogynistic hate” online, including death and rape threats. Her opponents have also used “deepfake”⁴ technology to edit her face onto a pornographic video in an effort to discredit her. Defender B described similar experiences: “I am trolled on a nearly daily basis... [and] receive death and rape threats”. As the experiences of Defenders E and B show, WHRDs face gender-specific trolling that can seek to intimidate them by threatening (or in the case of the “deepfake” video, removing) their sexual autonomy.

3.2 - Offline Risks

The online threats faced by WHRDs can also translate into offline risks. For instance, Gauri Lankesh, a journalist and vocal critic of Hindu nationalism, was shot outside her home in 2017. She has been described as “the most high-profile Indian journalist murdered in recent years”,⁵ which is a stark reminder of the risks WHRDs face every day. As Defender E said, there is “a very fine line that differentiates online and offline [threats]”. Similarly, Defender B told me: “I’ve had stalkers who I thought I shook off... but it turns out that they can access me even more easily [now]”. Using social media not only opens WHRDs up to online threats, but also to offline risks that can pose a threat to their physical safety.

4 • Different Experiences

Different WHRDs experience these threats and risks in different ways. In addition to misogyny, there are other forms of intersecting discrimination, such as Islamophobia, casteism and anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination, that shape the trolling they face.

For example, Defender E faces trolling not only because of her gender but also because of her religion and anti-Hindu nationalist stance. She told me, “[trolls] call me ‘Jihadi Jane’⁶ or... claim that everything I do is about jihad”, which is a very specific combination of misogyny and Islamophobia. She also said, “there are women in India who are critical of the government... but if a Muslim woman does that, it is seen as ‘how dare she speak up, how dare she question the government, how dare she impose her views on us?’”. As Defender E’s experiences show, we must acknowledge the different and intersecting forms of discrimination that different WHRDs face.

In addition to Islamophobia, Indian WHRDs can also face trolling due to casteism. For instance, Meena Kandasamy, a Dalit⁷ activist and author, was “threatened with acid attacks and televised gang rape”⁸ after tweeting about a beef-eating festival held in Hyderabad.

Another example is Kiruba Munusamy, an Indian Supreme Court lawyer and activist, who faces misogynistic and caste-based abuse online and said, “when you are a Dalit, a woman and dark in colour, many do not even come forward to raise their voices for you”.⁹

WHRDs can also face trolling due to their sexual orientation and gender identity. According to one report, “[activists] who wrote about LGBT issues said that they had experienced harassment from... groups that believe homosexuality undermines... Indian culture”.¹⁰ Delta’s #StrongestTogether campaign also highlighted the trolling LGBTQ+ Indians face. For instance, one woman revealed that she was told online that “bisexuals... would do it with anyone”, while another woman was told that “you just need to find a real man – you will stop liking women once you meet me” and a transgender woman was asked if she is “an ugly guy or [an] ugly girl”.¹¹

Any discussion of this topic must acknowledge that different WHRDs might face additional or different risks due to intersecting forms of discrimination. Therefore, the experiences of WHRDs cannot be generalised.

5 • How can WHRDs reconcile these benefits and risks?

Social media brings new benefits and risks to WHRDs, raising a very important question: how can WHRDs reconcile these opposing forces?

Defender B told me “when you’re working in the feminist space, every day is two steps forward, one step back... so you’re just really waiting for that forward step”. She also said, “if you’re passionate about something, you’ll make heavy personal sacrifices”. Defender D said that social media can “take a toll on you as an activist” but that “the rewards outweigh the risks”, which supports Alice Nah’s argument that “cultures of human rights practice tend to emphasise self-sacrifice”.¹²

All of the Defenders that I spoke with told me that it’s important for WHRDs to engage in active self-care. Defender D described social media as “exhausting and... non-stop”, while Defender B described it as “taking its toll”, which is why WHRDs must prioritise self-care. Defender A argued that, “as activists, we all have the right to set our limits online”, while Defender C said that staying safe online is important, “not only for... [WHRDs], but for all women”. For instance, Defender C told me that she has taken steps to strengthen her online privacy settings, while Defender E only reads Twitter responses from verified accounts.

Some of the Defenders I spoke to even said that they find being trolled satisfying. Defender D said, “I like to see [trolling] in a positive light... it means that I’m making a difference”, while Defender B described it as “an indicator... that you’re on the right track, that you’re making a change”. As Defender E said, “we all have our bad days, but sometimes you can ignore it knowing... you’ve managed to make an impact”.

However, a WHRD's willingness to engage with social media will depend on her experiences with it. Defender E told me that "many of my colleagues have left social media... some of us have the bandwidth to handle it, while others don't". While Defender B actively engages with her trolls, Defender E deliberately avoids them for the sake of her self-care, which shows how different WHRDs might set different limits.

Despite the risks associated with using social media, many WHRDs continue to use it, which is a testament to their dedication to defending human rights and proof of the complexity of the relationship between WHRDs and social media.

6 • Conclusion

To conclude, this article has explored Indian WHRDs' experiences on social media. It has argued that social media helps WHRDs to expand their activism, but also opens them up to both online threats and offline risks. These risks are gender-specific and shaped by other forms of discrimination that WHRDs might face (Islamophobia in the case of Defender E), showing the importance of taking a gender-sensitive and intersectional approach. Social media, therefore, both helps and harms WHRDs and, as Defender B said, can be described as "two steps forward, one step back".

NOTES

1 • Note to reader: Please be aware that this article contains explicit references to Violence Against Women and Girls, including stalking, sexual abuse, and rape, as well as references to Islamophobia, casteism and anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination.

2 • "Situation Of Women Human Rights Defenders - Report Of The Special Rapporteur On The Situation Of Human Rights Defenders," A/HRC/40/60, United Nations Human Rights Council, January 10, 2019, accessed June 23, 2020, https://ap.ohchr.org/documents/dpage_e.aspx?si=A/HRC/40/60.

3 • Data collection took the form of five semi-structured interviews, which allowed me to understand the Defenders' lived experiences. However, these experiences should not be seen as universal due to

the limitations, such as the fact that I was only able to conduct interviews in English. Defender A. Interview with A. M. Rae. March 14, 2019. WhatsApp; Defender B. Interview with A. M. Rae. March 16, 2019. Skype; Defender C. Interview with A. M. Rae. March 25, 2019. Skype; Defender D. Interview with A. M. Rae. April 4, 2019. Skype; and Defender E. Interview with A. M. Rae. April 15, 2019. WhatsApp.

4 • "Deepfake" software allows users to create fake (but convincing) photographs or videos.

5 • "Man Arrested For Indian Journalist Murder," BBC News, March 9, 2018, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-india-43345449>.

6 • "Jihadi Jane" is a derogatory comment which

tries to suggest Defender E is a terrorist or jihadist. It is a gendered and Islamophobic comment as neither a Hindu woman, nor a Muslim man, would be referred to as “Jihadi Jane”.

7 • Dalits are the lowest caste in Indian society and often face casteism and discrimination.

8 • Japleen Pasricha, “‘Violence’ Online In India: Cybercrimes Against Women & Minorities On Social Media.” *Feminism in India*, 2020, accessed June 23, 2020, https://feminisminindia.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/FII_cyberbullying_report_website.pdf.

9 • Mariya Salim. “Online Trolling Of Indian Women Is Only An Extension Of The Everyday Harassment

They Face.” *The Wire*, July 8, 2018, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://thewire.in/women/online-trolling-of-indian-women-is-only-an-extension-of-the-everyday-harassment-they-face>.

10 • *Ibid.*

11 • “#StrongestTogether,” YouTube video, 03:50, posted by Delta App, May 16, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jekNCM0zFao>.

12 • Alice M. Nah and H. Dwyer Smith, “Gender, Intersectionality, and Security.” Human Rights Defender Hub Policy Brief 6, Centre for Applied Human Rights, University of York, 2018, accessed June 23, 2020, <https://securityofdefendersproject.org/>.



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