Violence against Women in the Age of Social Media

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Social media, an online platform to express and share one’s thoughts or experiences, is attracting much attention as a representative new media strengthening real-time accessibility. It has become the primary means of communication these days. ‘Social media’ refers to the means of interactions among people in which they create, share, and exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Social media depend on mobile and web-based technologies to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, discuss, and modify user-generated content. Social media is a new phenomenon worldwide and is here to stay. Social media has enabled people to be connected in real time and is bringing out new facets of people interest, engagement and behaviour. The present paper is an attempt to analyze the misuses of social media for women. It has been shown that social media has become a significant outlet for violence against women. This is due to the anonymity that it provides. People are anonymous online, and they do not have to be held accountable for violence. They can get away with violent behaviour. Online violence and abuse denies women the right to express themselves equally, freely, and without fear. This is something we need to fight against; we cannot let this become the norm. We must work on both prevention and punishment.

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1. Introduction

Violence against women is a broad term covering all practices that humiliate women, impair their health and endanger their lives. The United Nation’s

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declaration on the elimination of violence against women (1993) in Fagbemi described violence against women thus: Any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life. Violence against women is increasing fast in the age of social media throughout the globe.

Social media is a great communication tool to help businesses connect with their customers all over the world. They are tools and technologies that enable people to communicate with people and can immediately see what’s on their minds. Social networks sites like ‘Facebook’ and ‘LinkedIn’ allow people to connect with other people of similar interests and background, while ‘YouTube’ and ‘Flickr’ are media sharing services that allow people to upload and share various media such as pictures and video. ‘Twitter’ is one of a microblogging services that focus on short updates that are pushed out to anyone subscribed to receive the updates. Online forums allow members to hold conversations by posting messages. Blog comments are similar to online forums except they are attached to blogs and usually the discussion centers around the topic of the blog post. These types of social media have become highly popular and most effective these days not only in US, Europe and other developed countries, but also in country like India.

2. **Aim of the Paper**

Social media is a double edged sword. Besides, the vast potential of social media in political mobilization and bringing awareness among the citizens, the role of social media in increasing violence and crime against women has become reality. The present paper aims to analyze the role of social media in fostering violence and crime against women. Secondary sources have been used in this paper.

3. **Social Media and Women**

Social media has become an integral part of modern society. Social media are tools and technologies that enable people to communicate with people and can immediately see what’s on their minds. Having a presence on blogs, forums and chat rooms with the customers company managers show that they care about the people who spend money on their products. That is why social media has also contributed to identifying various and creative business models such as social commerce, a new form of e-commerce, and to encouraging innovation of individuals and businesses.

Many social networking sites were created in the 1990s. Some examples include Six Degrees, BlackPlanet, Asian Avenue, and MoveOn. These are, or have been, online niche social sites where people can interact, including sites for public
policy advocacy and a social network based on a web of contacts model. From 1997 to 2001, a number of community tools began supporting various combinations of profiles and publicly articulated friends. Sites like MySpace and LinkedIn gained prominence in the early 2000s, and sites like Photobucket and Flickr facilitated online photo sharing. In 2000 social media received a great boost with the witnessing of many social networking sites springing up. In 2004, popular names like Facebook Harvard, Dogster and Mixi evolved. During 2005, big names like Yahoo!360, YouTube, cyword, and Black planet all emerged. YouTube came out in 2005, creating an entirely new way for people to communicate and share with each other across great distances. Today, there is a tremendous variety of social networking sites, and many of them can be linked to allow cross-posting. This creates an environment where users can reach the maximum number of people without sacrificing the intimacy of person-to-person communication.

Social media has evolved from a communication tool for exchanging messages and promoting the socialization of online society to a strategic instrument for sharing valuable information and creating profits. Now social media is exerting a strong influence even on offline society. According to Daniel Nations, social media is hard to define and is a two-way street that gives you the ability to communicate. Social Media can be called a strategy and an outlet for broadcasting, while Social Networking is a tool and a utility for connecting with others. Furthermore, Cohen reports that “the difference is not just semantics but in the features and functions put into these websites by their creators which dictates the way they are to be used.”

Social media is like a double-edged sword. The positive influence of social media is getting bigger, but at the same time, its side effects are also increasing, particularly among the youth. However, the negative effects of these social networking sites outweigh the positive ones. Mamta Singh and Kavita Garg have discussed the positive and negative impacts of social media. Social sites have caused some potential harm to society. The students become victims of social networks more often than anyone else. This is because of the reason that when they are studying or searching their course material online, they get attracted to these sites to kill the boredom in their study time, diverting their attention from their work. Other negative side effects of social networking website include reduced learning and research capabilities, reduction in their academic performance and concentration to study well, reduction in real human contact, reduction in their command over the language and their creative writing skills, time wastage, loss of motivation in students, etc. Moreover, the overuse of these sites on a daily basis has many negative effects on the physical and mental health of students making them lethargic and unmotivated to create contact with the people in person. They are also criticized for increasing violence and crime against women.

However, it is also argued that social media has positive effects such as allowing the democratization of the internet while also allowing individuals
to advertise themselves and form friendships. With social networks we are able to communicate our thoughts and perceptions over different topics with a large number of audiences, and raise our voice. The sharing feature available on the social networks makes our opinion about any topic reach huge number of people (even to those who are not on your friends list). We have the option to make groups with people who are like minded and share the related news with them and ask for their opinion or input about the topic. Simply, there are a number of options available for any one to communicate with others on these social networks.

Violence and crime against women are no exception so far the negative and positive effects of social media are concerned. In this light, we can analyze the role of social media in violence and crime against women. It is being recognized that for many women, the Internet is not a safe space. Although social media platforms in particular have become a critical space for women to express themselves and make their voices heard, they have also become spaces where women are easily targeted for expressing their views. Online violence and abuse denies women the right to express themselves equally, freely, and without fear.

Social media is also said to be useful in preventing violence and crime against women. Social media offers unprecedented opportunities to raise awareness around violence against women and girls, to help users stay safe, and to inspire people to engage in social activism. The power of social media networking as the new feedback system has been exploited by the organizations, individuals, activists, towards creating new strands of collective action in interrogating and resisting violence and redefining justice.

The vibrancy of social media in generating awareness on gender injustices has been well acknowledged in recent burst of online campaigning by the women’s organizations, human right groups or civil society associations. Community blogs, organizational reach to Facebook or Twitter have opened up a hitherto unseen virtual space of campaign against violence, pervasive in nature, that breaks the glass ceiling in the public deliberations on gender equality.

However, in this age of globalization, social media is considered a double edged sword and as such always hangs on our heads. On one hand, is the ability to freely express our thoughts and ideas on public platforms, maximizing their reach in an unimaginable way. On the other is the lurking danger of our information being misused, and our privacy and dignity being attacked. Crimes which involve use of the internet, social media and other forms of technology to “humiliate, control and threaten” women are on the rise. In recent years, criminals who invade and negatively use the opportunities offered by the internet and the World Wide Web, seem to be removing smiles off the faces of many women throughout the world, including India. Social media forms like Facebook, due to their high interactivity, are used to perpetuate violence against women.

Role of social media in violence against women is both negative as well as positive. On the one hand, critics of social media put forward the view that violence
and crime against women are accelerated through the use of social media. In fact, it is held that social media is a breeding ground for violence against women. On the other hand, it is also stressed by many social activists that social media offers unprecedented opportunities to raise awareness around violence against women and girls, to help users stay safe, and to inspire people to engage in social activism. As such, social media are considered as boon in preventing violence and crime against women. Let us discuss both these views briefly.

4. **How Social Media Fuels Violence against Women?**

Mobile devices and the internet can be powerful tools, but they can also be weapons for breeding ground for violence against women. It is in this context that the UN has issued a “wake-up call” about cyber violence against women. It says it can be just as damaging as physical abuse, especially as technology can now reach remote corners of the world. UN Women’s Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka says that, “Online violence has subverted the original positive promise of the internet’s freedoms and in too many circumstances has made it a chilling space that permits anonymous cruelty and facilitates harmful acts towards women and girls.”

With one in every three women a victim, the World Health Organization considers violence against women “a global health problem of epidemic proportion”, ranging from domestic abuse to street harassment, sex trafficking, rape and femicide. Social media has fuelled this pandemic, say experts. “The internet is available to everyone, and so is its violence. The perpetrators are no longer limited by geographic or physical boundaries,” says Baroness Patricia Scotland, former UK attorney general and founder of the Corporate Alliance against Domestic Violence.

Across websites and social media platforms, everyday sexist comments exist along a spectrum that also includes illicit sexual surveillance, “creepshots,” extortion, doxxing, stalking, malicious impersonation, threats, and rape videos and photographs throughout the globe. The explosive use of the Internet to conduct human trafficking also has a place on this spectrum, given that three-quarters of trafficked people are girls and women.

Violent online behaviour ranges from virtual harassment and public shaming to the desire to inflict physical harm—and the internet may then become a tool to turn virtual violence real. Violence against women in social media may take the following forms:

1. **Online harassment**: Online harassment may vary from abusive SMS messages to tracking movement through geolocation. Harassment through e-mails includes blackmailing, threatening, bullying, constant sending of love letters in anonymous names or regular sending of embarrassing mails to one’s mail box.

2. **Intimate partner violence**: Threats of disclosure of intimate communications or “revenge porn” are examples of such violence.
3. **Culturally justified violence**: Forwarding a sexist joke to starting a Facebook group that promotes rape is an example of such violence.

4. **Sexual assault**: Technology is used to lure women into situations that result in rape or other forms of physical violence.

5. **Cyber stalking**: Cyber stalking is the use of the Internet or other electronic means to stalk or harass a person. It involves invading the privacy by following a person’s movements.

6. **Cyber bullying**: Cyber bullying is the use of Information Communications Technology, particularly mobile phones and the Internet, deliberately to upset someone else. Cyber bullying is willful and repeated harm inflicted through the use of computers, cell phones or other electronic devices, by sending messages of an intimidating or threatening nature.

7. **Impersonation**: The use of technology to assume the identity of the victim or someone else in order to access private information, embarrass or shame the victim, contact the victim, or create fraudulent identity documents; e.g., sending offensive emails from victim’s email account; calling victim from unknown number to avoid call being blocked.

8. **Surveillance/Tracking**: The use of technology to stalk and monitor a victim’s activities and behaviours either in real-time or historically; e.g., GPS tracking via mobile phone; tracking keystrokes to recreate victim/survivor’s activities on computer.

9. **Harassment/Spamming**: The use of technology to continuously contact, annoy, threaten, and/or scare the victim. This is ongoing behaviour and not one isolated incident; e.g., persistent mobile calls/texts; filling up voicemail with messages so no one else can leave a message.

India is third on the list behind China and Singapore in the cases of cybercrime according to a report, highlighting the need to take actions and increase education about online behaviour. A number of studies demonstrate that increased use of social media is reportedly pushing up the number of prosecutions for offences against women. Women are subjected to violence or harassment on the social media and the Internet, face book, WhatsApp and twitter platforms were increasingly being misused to target women. While India is witnessing a steady increase in the number of cyber crimes, there is another worrying statistic that goes on to suggest that the nearly 13 per cent of the cases are targeted against outraging or blackmailing a woman.8

Cyber crime against women is on at alarming stage and it may pose as a major threat to the security of a person as a whole. The World Wide Web allows users to circulate content in the form of text, images, videos and sounds. The widespread circulation of such content is particularly harmful for women. In recent years, there have been numerous reports of women receiving unsolicited emails which often contains obscene and obnoxious language.
5. **Conclusion**

The violence women face in social media has in many ways left them feeling vulnerable, not empowered. Online violence against women, that is, violence directed at women by virtue of their gender, violates their human rights and is thus an impediment to the attainment of gender equality. India already has laws that can be used to deal with online abuse. What needs attention is a better implementation of the same. This implementation needs to be coupled with non-legal measures to address the structural inequalities which stem in part from patriarchal notions of morality, lying at the heart of the online abuse faced by women. A starting point to address this gender-based abuse on online platforms can be asking these platforms to start following their own guidelines on “abuse and hateful conduct”, which, as research has shown, are flouted by the platforms themselves.

National organizations such as the National Network to End Domestic Violence, have taken the lead in providing guidance and support to organizations in understanding and addressing safety issues that have and continue to develop with the role of digital communication in our work and lives. As social media campaigns are very important, it is recommended that organizations working in prevention of sexual violence adopt clear guidelines for staff in representing the organization in all media, specifically including social media. Safety guidelines should also include protocol for receiving and documenting disclosures made through social media, including as the result of social media campaigns.

**References**

7. Ibid., Note 1.