THE IMPACT OF NEW MEDIA ON WOMEN RIGHTS, WITH PARTICULAR REFERENCE TO INDIA.

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Abstract

The last few decades have seen an exponential growth in the use of digital or new media. Every day new users are joining social media platforms and accessing the knowledge and information on devices. These new media platforms have led to an increase in awareness and participation among citizens. This paper seeks to examine the role played by New Media in the Human Rights of Women.

To what extent can media play a role in creating awareness on issues of women's rights? What are the positive and negative aspects of this media explosion? These are some of the questions which are sought to be answered in the paper.

Key words: New Media, Women Rights, Hashtag Activism.

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Introduction : **Human Rights of Women and the Media**

In the recent past, advances in information and communication technology have resulted in unifying the world and these developments have impacted public policy, private attitudes and behaviour. The media can play a vital role in the empowerment of women.

Though the number of women who work in the media has increased, very few women are in the top positions where they can take decisions or influence content and policy towards portrayal of women's issues. Gender-based stereotyping still continues in all forms of media. The consumer driven patterns of media reinforce women's traditional roles and inappropriately target women. The media also contribute to the creation violent, negative and sexually exploitative content about women which leads to negatively impacting women's participation in society as equal partners to men with inherent dignity.

How are women's rights impacted by media?

One of the most powerful influences on the position of women in society is the media. The media subtly influences our minds through messages of the images of women, substantiate and perpetrate stereotypical notions of what is the position and place of women in society. Women are underrepresented in the media and thus through implication men are accepted as the role model for success. The relationships between men and women are also often portrayed in a patriarchal manner which results in emphasising the traditional roles of women and in normalising violence against women. Media can distort the reality through underrepresenting women or by reinforcing sexual stereotypes which help in reinforcing the patriarchal social order. Therefore, the importance of media in promoting and protecting women's rights cannot be overemphasised.

UN Conventions on Women and Media
CEDAW

The United Nations (UN) Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) is the most comprehensive treaty on the rights of women. It condemns any form of discrimination against women and reaffirms the importance of guaranteeing equal political, economic, social, cultural and civil rights to women and men.

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The Beijing Platform for Action

The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) recognised that the media had the "potential to make a greater contribution to the advancement of women".

The 2015 Sustainable Development Goals has also included the role enhancing the use of enabling technologies particularly ICT to promote women's empowerment. [Goal 5. Achieve Gender Equality and empower all women and girls. http://indicators.report/goals/goal-5/]

Definitions of New Media

New Media are forms of media that are used on and through computers such as (though not limited to) websites, mobile apps, multimedia and games. New Media is often contrasted to old media such as radio, print and television though nowadays this classification is being challenged as the so called old media might also provide interactive content(Williamson,2009). New Media is mainly in digital format and uses different technology from the old. New media is not just different from old media with regard to technology but also how it is produced, used and owned. Some of the most popular examples of new media are the ubiquitous Wikipedia and You Tube and social networks such as Facebook, and Twitter.

The rapid growth of social networking websites, and mobile technologies have increased the number of participants worldwide (Barassi, 2012). In Media theory the earlier informative websites come under Web1.0 and the new blogs, wikis and podcasts represent Web2.

In 2019 it is estimated that there will be 258.27 million social network users in india. The most popular networks being You ube and Facebook followed by Whatsapp. (http://www.statista.com.statistics/278407/number-of-social-network-users-in-india/)

Women's Rights and New Media

Democratisation of content

Thomas Friedman in his book the world is flat discusses how the improvements in communication technologies has led to the flattening of social hierarchies. (Friedman, 2005). New media has led to democratisation of content as the access to media and content is not limited by the forms of ownership and regulations as in old media. New media, especially social networks such as Facebook and Twitter have led to increasing participation by the layperson and this challenges the monopolistic media control of not only owners but also governments.

Going Global

With the emergence of New Media local issues can get a global audience and vice versa. Issues of women's rights which were neglected or did not get the attention they deserve in the media has found a new voice with the emergence of New Media. Issues of women's rights in far-away areas get the attention form the other side of the globe due to the shrinking of distances and the ability to highlight social and economic issues which may be unfamiliar to the rest of the world.

Women also share their experiences of violence with other victims and the New Media thus provides a space to exchange knowledge and information, legal services and welfare services with others who are in similar situations.

New Media and Women in Politics

Internet has the potential to increase the participation of women in politics. The New Media provides an opportunity for hitherto unseen citizens to participate with greater transparency in issues that concern their lives. The internet is one of the main sources for news in the world with nearly 168 million social network users in India getting their news information from apps and social media.

Access to the ICT enables women to gain an entry into the world of politics which was limited by the social immobility that many women face in developing countries. Women can explore and forge political alliances with like-minded individuals and develop their own political identities through New Media.

Female bloggers have been able to attract new generation of activists and mobilise public opinion on issues. For example, in the year 2009, protestors poured in to the streets to express dissatisfaction with their governments in Iran, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, Morocco, Bahrain and Yemen. Women formed a significant part of these new media warriors. The women Twitter activists and bloggers who were active during the overthrow of the regime in these places were in no way less than men in political participation. The world could get a glimpse through video clips of citizens uploads and blogs of the protestors and allies about the reality in these places.

Women's cyber activism, citizen journalism and self organisation have been credited with contributing to and reflecting the socio-economic and political changes in the region. (Geytanchi,2014)

Hashtag Activism and Role of New Media

Hashtag activism has resulted in women's right getting the media attention it deserves and setting the political agenda in countries. Social media is a powerful tool to bring the questions of women's right to the public and has proven to electrify the masses to take up such issues and even bring about social change.

New media has resulted in the creation of new terms for political and consciousness raising campaigners such as Twitteractivists; Cyber Warriors; Cyberactivists. These campaigners take up the causes of women and direct the attention of the world on the causes through the use of hashtags (#)

For example the sexual assault and murder of Jyothi Singh in Delhi in 2012 saw the #DelhiGangRape #RapeinDelhihashtag and #GangRapeVictim becoming a trending topicon social networks. This resulted in massive protests in the capital city of India which was responsible for the government making amendments to the Criminal Code and the laws in India for better protection of women. Protests in Pakistan in 2018 against the rape and murder of a seven-year old female child under the hashtag #JusticeForZainab, saw protestors hitting the streets for better protection of children. Worldwide the #MeToo movement spread virally in the social media in October 2017 which aimed to demonstrate the prevalence of sexual harassment at the workplace. It resulted in major revelations and scandals that have rocked the movie industry in USA.

Limitations of the Media

New Media can be a powerful tool for the empowerment of women but it can also limit and hinder the growth of women. The Beijing Platform for Action 2015 identified the "continued projection of negative and degrading images of women in media communications" to be changed. This is especially true of New Media where even children (one in three internet users worldwide are children) who are in the formative years of the psycho-social growth have access to pornography and such other degrading content which can hamper their growth as healthy well-adjusted individuals.

The affirmation of patriarchal notions and sex objectification of women is prevalent in New media too. New Media also becomes a new area where new forms of harassment takes place such as hate speech against women; cyberbullying; stalking and even violence.

Digital Divide

Though men have greater access to the internet worldwide (46 per cent males and 41% females in 2015.)(https://www.statista.com/topics/3119/men-and-women-online/), studies have shown that women are greater users of social media networks. But in India women constitute a low 29% of internet users in the country according to a UNICEF report released in December 2017.

The Digital gender divide impacts women negatively as they are unable to access online services and information which might be beneficial to them.Women also face restrictions that are both social and structural when it pertains to New Media.

Structural restrictions include the lack of ICT literacy among women in poorer nations. The inability to use digital technology, communication devices in what is essentially a knowledge driven society harms the prospects of women joining as equal partners in progress. The Census data of 2011 indicates that only 65.46% of women are literate when compared to over 80% men in India. More than a million girls drop out of school before they reach puberty. Patriarchal norms prevent women from accessing internet centres or undertaking employment or training outside the home.

A recent study has shown that majority of the women who operate a cell-phone in rural MP do not know how to operate the phone. (Aneja, 2017) They were unable to read messages or even dial numbers without assistance. Though the technology was accessible they were unable to put it to good use due to structural barriers.

Social barriers such as stereotypes on women who access media content and the restrictions placed on them prevent their optimal participation as equal members of society. The social barriers which prevent women from accessing new media are more insidious and damaging. In parts of India, local Khap panchayats have even banned women from using mobile phones as they fear that this would lead to a decline in their values. Livemint, an internet website reports that in rural Rajasthan, a panchayat has banned the use of mobiles and social media for girls. (Sharma, 2017.) Mobile phones have been rightly identified as disrupting the patriarchal

regimes and controls on women. The khap panchayats though mistaken in their understanding are able to see the emancipatory potential of such technology where women are concerned.

Conclusion

New Media can be an agent for social change and empowerment of women. It has the potential to positively impact the lives of countless women. Though regulation of the new Media, is not possible or desirable, the creators of such content and the users must be made aware of the potential risks or harm that they can cause as well as the benefits than can accrue from adopting a rights friendly approach.

Women must be empowered by enhancing their skills, knowledge and access to ICT. They must be able to access sources of information apart from the old media. The government must promote the education, training and employment of women. Media systems should adopt self regulatory systems by which a balanced portrayal of women is made.

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