

# Indian Women Finding Voice and Visibility through Social Media Support

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**Abstract** - Social media has brought a social reformation for Indian women who have been otherwise restricted and suppressed for ages in the name of societal norms and traditions. It has given our women a platform to discuss otherwise considered too 'sensitive' in the public domain of Indian society. Their presence, visibility, and voice in social media have led to women empowerment, cyberactivism, and a rise of new 'feminism.' Indian women can be more vocal, confident, and expressive due to the existing social media's support.

The paper will look into social media events and campaigns to establish that social media support has successfully empowered the women to give them a voice and visibility. It will further discuss how social media participation has helped the Indian women to raise concern and voice on issues related to them

**Keywords** — Social Media, Social Status, Social media support, Social movement.

## INTRODUCTION

Besides dealing with society's various aspects and concerns, social media has pro-actively presented women-related matters and issues. It has given women a platform to come out and express themselves in the public sphere. Social media has acted as a strong advocate of women's rights, freedom, and wants. It has helped change the old perception of the patriarchal world, which has treated women as the 'second gender.' The Indian women, through social media's support and digital activism, are re-introducing feminism. The social media features like selfies, snaps, hashtags, challenges, posts, likes, dislikes, and shares have helped them communicate with the world. Their life, success stories, and work on the social media platform are inspiring others. They are using this virtual support to connect, create, and express themselves to the real world. There are a number of cases where we can see issues related to women injustices, atrocities, domestic violence, and infringement of freedom of speech, thought, and expression that was not possible to discuss in the mainstream media were discussed and shared in the social media.

The social media campaigns and online protests have helped women to come out in the open to ire their grievances,

anger, and concern on violence and injustice against each other. A small movement in the social media supporting women's cause has often seen changed to people's movements, mass demonstrations, and protest in a short time. Such movements have forced the people to change their outlooks and even the government to change the legal and social system function.

The social media support has given the Indian women the confidence to speak before many, speak on camera, and take a stand. Though Tik Tok is banned for now by the government, such apps and social media sources have given many Indian women the confidence to talk to people with an income source. Social media has empowered them, providing socio-economic opportunities, and narrowing gender inequality. Social media is changing the lives of women living in cities and metros but slowly of women staying in Indian villages and remote places with the spread of telecommunication and internet users in India.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Social media and women's relationship is important because whatever image women have in our country is because of media portrayal. Media is the mirror of society, which shows the real status of women in our country. So, women's visibility and voice are crucial for any society possible through extensive media coverage. But if we go through the mainstream media like T.V, print, and radio, we can find these mediums emphasize 'male voice.' Male can voice themselves freely without fear in our patriarchal society. But let's go by the reports, according to Women's Media Centre report 2007. Women are underrepresented in traditional media as they receive only 38 per cent of bylines in print, TV, and wire news. Hence, women need such a platform where they could be heard and understood. The emergence of new media technologies and social media has made for them this easier and convenient.

In her book, Sue Thornham(2007) found that the relationship between 'feminism, women and new media,' has profoundly found out that the new technologies have changed gendered identities. Social media has given momentum to women's empowerment and women's equality. It successfully mobilizes public attention, putting them in the centre of public discourse. Women use social



media as a tool to create and strengthen social networks and communities to share information. As a tool for feminist consciousness-raising and feminist hashtag activism. 2 All over the world, social media with its online platforms and the increasingly powerful mechanism is mobilizing public support. India is no exception to it. If we look back, the media coverage of the horrific Delhi gang-rape case and the online responses changed the youth's mindset, and it seems that people no longer willing to accept rape and sexual assault as 'a simple fact of life.' 3 In India, not with the local communities, but people join hands globally through groups and communities to help women. Social media is emerging as a platform to share and raise the restricted voices of women.4

Along with the women's voice, their visibility in social media is being established through social media entrepreneurship's financial security and opportunities. Women are using social media to drive everything from social exchanges to transactions .5 Rani and Sripriya (2013) have stated that social media plays a significant role in creating female financial opportunities. Entrepreneurship has changed the way of commerce by adding creativity.6 A study conducted by NITI Aayog showed that communication forms through WhatsApp and Facebook had recorded the fastest growth in reaching women. Therefore, the Indian government has increased social media use as it a key medium to reach women beneficiaries in villages.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DATA COLLECTION

The study has made an exhaustive study of online secondary data on the growing significance of social media, thus encouraging women participation and empowerment. Campaigns and events have been studied to see how social media provides them with a more visible and vocal platform. The study has also employed primary research and data collection through a survey of 75 women chosen randomly within the age group of 20 to 40. Women who are active users of social media were selected for this study. The Questionnaire Survey was used to know how social media has been instrumental in strengthening and empowering women. If, in any form, they have participated in social media public discourse on specific given women-related issues asked in the questionnaire.

#### Social Media, Social Taboos and Indian Women

The Indian women face a range of social, cultural, and religious taboos, stigmas, myths, and superstitious beliefs due to our age-old societal structure. They are not expected to speak on mensuration, breastfeeding, sex, relationship status, and equal distribution of household work in the public arena. Instead, they are expected to have long hairs, perfect and covered bodies, fair complexion, soft voice, and

a sober personality being born as women. The Indian women who have struggled hard to live to these taboos and stigma finally able to break them with social media support. Women who take this path have had to talk about things that they previously thought were private.7

Recently, the World Health Organisation to break down the stigma about breastfeeding in public by calling women to share breastfeeding selfie "Brelfie" of their own or someone they know. Similarly, there is an initiative being taken from time to time to come over the 'fair complexion' taboo associated with every woman with social media support. Similarly, India's first digital model- A 20-year-old Nila, wide-eyed and dusky, entered the world of fashion and made her debut on social media. Instead of fair, her dusky colour symbolizes digital feminism and activism against body shaming and accepting women the way they are. Women are coming openly on social media against social taboos like Menstruation, spreading awareness on it. Aditi Gupta, a social cause entrepreneur and co-founder of Menstrupedia, has created a menstruation website that educates girls and women on illustrations and graphics.

There are many examples of women not exercising a right to choose assignments and work compared to their male counterparts. The lack of equal opportunity has widened gender inequality. In such a case, social media has helped women put the cause of empowerment and gender equality. The women with social media support are also raising voice against the unequal distribution of work during the pandemic situation with an online petition.

An Indian woman has started an online petition on Change.org, urging Prime Minister Narendra Modi to tell Indian men to share household chores equally with women. At present, her petition has 70,060 signatures and aims to reach 75,000. "Unequal distribution of unpaid household work has rendered the harshest blow to women across India during this lockdown. Yet, women's care work continues to be invisible, and no one wants to address this gross imbalance," Subarna Ghosh from Mumbai, co-founder of an NGO called ReRight Foundation, wrote in her petition. The absence of domestic bits of help under lockdown has also reinforced existing sexist gender roles.8

Similarly, in 2009, a campaign called 'Pink Chaddi' was popular, which started to oppose women's moral policing by Sriram Sena, a socio-political group. Through social media, the women gave a clear message that others have no right to control their lives and how they live.

The pink chaddi campaign started as a group on Facebook on February 5 by a young woman, Nisha Susan, in 2009. Thousands of people joined the Facebook group, urging their friends through emails and other messages to send pink underwear to Sri Ram Sene. Over 3,000 people joined 'The Pink Chaddi Campaign' to send a bagful of pink underwear

to the Sri Ram Sene office on Valentine's Day. Indian culture.<sup>9</sup>

Other movements like #curvy or #curvee for positive body image are among such online protest and movement, giving every Indian woman confidence to embrace their bodies. Thus, breaking the taboos of the perfect body and perfect shape.

### Social Media, Social Justice, and Indian Women

Today Social media has become a crucial tool for getting social justice. It was bringing to light not only crimes and violence that is reported but also that goes unreported. The active link between social media and social justice has helped many get judgment and justice fairly. No one can forget the Nirbhaya, Priyanka Reddy rape cases where digital online protest pressurized the government and the administration to take quick and justified actions. Social Media has become so powerful that it becomes the voice of people overnight. Everyone starts sharing, tweeting, #hashtagging their views, rage, and demand for social media justice. To do so, they often even change their profile pictures with a campaign picture to show their absolute support. As in the Delhi Gang Rape case, the users use a simple black dot with a white background as a profile picture throughout social media seeking justice.

On Google Trends' search volume Index, "Delhi gang rape," "Rape in Delhi," has been among India's top search phrases till December 20, 2012. Change.org, an online petition platform, received more than 65,000 signatures for an appeal seeking the president's intervention.<sup>10</sup>

Social media has given women the space to speak up and be heard in public discourse. Those voices which were not represented in mainstream media could be heard in the social media. Social media made it possible for them to get a supportive platform and supporters to join them. The same happened in the case of the Priyanka Reddy rape and murder case also. Along with normal citizens, celebrities and sports personalities also came in large numbers to support the victim demanding justice. Social media was trending with hashtags like #RIPHumanity and #HangRapists. Not only women, but men also could be seen in large numbers posting posts and expressing anger against this heinous act of crime against women.

Twitter used @ Ravigupta\_0 posted: "Speechless, shocked, ashamed, angry....The judiciary, police, governments, society. It's a big failure. We can't protect our daughters, our sisters, our friends. From Nirbhaya to Priyanka... #Priyankareddy." <sup>11</sup>

Social media has also raised concern on domestic violence like violence against which often ends with silence as the victim and against whom the allegation is made belong to

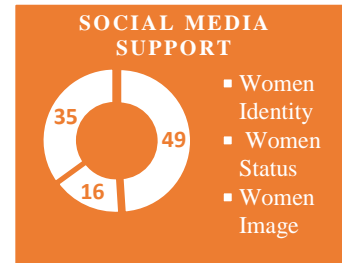
the same family. The women, therefore, chose to keep quiet considering their own and family reputations. Many famous women personalities like Madhuri Dixit, Kangana Ranaut, Tapasee Pannu have urged women through social media to strong take action against domestic violence amid lockdown.

In the wake of the rising domestic violence in India, National Bodies and Twitter India have launched a search prompt of related keywords for domestic violence. The Twitter social media team will search related words like #dowry, #gender violence, #maritalrape #ghareluhinsa, #mahilaaatyachaar # lockdown violence in English and Hindi to have a check on the violence against women.<sup>12</sup>

The posting of monochromatic and black and white selfies of women on social media using the hashtag #Challenge Accepted, #Women, supporting Women, #Mee too movement is a trend to support other women the world for the injustice and violence they face through the social media platforms. Such online protest, petitions, challenges, and campaigns have made justice delivered to them faster in most cases.

### Social Media, Social Status and Women

Social media is supporting and reaching to the women providing them with the opportunities and increasing their social status. It has opened new frontiers for Indian women, thus empowering them financially and socially.



With the constant development in the Indian startup ecosystem, more and more women are chasing the entrepreneurial dream and succeeding in their ventures. This is empowering other Indian women still confined to the traditional homemaker role to think for themselves. As the social media wave sweeps India, homemakers use their creativity and potentiality to do their business, through blogs, Food, and craft designs. Indian women are using social media to turn passion into the business they are responding to queries, positing videos, visuals, pictures, even getting the confidence to accept the negative feedback, which further built their confidence.

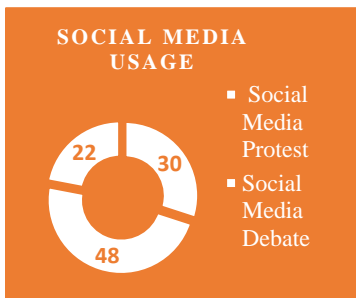
With the rising penetration of smartphones, the internet, social media, e-commerce, and on-demand service platforms becoming part of our daily lives. These changes in lifestyles have also given rise to thousands of micro-entrepreneurs, particularly women who now had a chance to be financially independent for the first time. A slew of online platforms has also come up, enabling women to be online sellers and entrepreneurs from the comfort of their homes.<sup>13</sup>

The eCommerce company Amazon partnering with SEWA

(Self Employed Women Association), has launched 'The Saheli Store' to sell products of women entrepreneurs in India. Facebook has also launched 'Pragati' to boost women entrepreneurship in India. It provides digital literacy and is working towards spreading awareness and the adoption of technology among women in India.<sup>14</sup> The social media has also become the most effective medium during this COVID 19 bridging the gap between urban and rural women in India. During this crisis, many city-based women-led business owners on Facebook, Instagram, and other social sites have taken the entrepreneurial plunge to help provide a steady flow of income for the women artisans of villages, helping their products direct sell in the e-commerce sites. Social media is creating an identity of women inspiring others who look up to them with pride and honour.

### RESULT AND FINDINGS

When asked the women respondents whether they have ever joined the social media protests, debate, or campaign to support or criticize or raise the voice, the majority of the respondents 48percent said that they had joined social debate at their



own will to give their opinions. In contrast, other 30percent and 22percent said they had joined the social media protest and social media campaigns respectively at different point of time to take a stand on topics they don't agree with or to support other women, or any socio-political issues they feel has affected them or the country.

The majority of women respondents, about 49 per cent, feel the social media has played a crucial role in giving them an identity of their own. They feel now people recognize women on social media, read to their posts, understand them and their fields. Even homemakers have made their identity now with their post of thoughts, poems, recipes, entrepreneurship. While the other 35 per cent believe social media has changed the image of women. They are now more bold, assertive, straight forward and extrovert in their expression and words, thus breaking the social taboo image of submissive and 16percent feels it has raised the status of Indian women giving them social and financial freedom.

The respondents when asked about the way of representation of women in the social media that is more prominent for social empowerment, 64percent of respondents unanimously kept the view that more and more visibility of women has helped. They irrespective of their colour, physic, views, class and creed has come out in the public platform with selfie photos, images and videos that have helped other

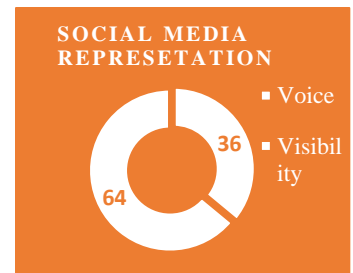
women to gain confidence. It has helped to believe the real women instead of 'beauty standard and photoshopped women' on-screen, unlike other mass media like TV and Print. 36 per cent feels the women using their freedom to express 'voice' has helped bring changes. Women representation through voice in the social media using their opinions has ended social taboos and help raise concern on injustice and discrimination against women.

The women respondent asked on their social media participation on topics concerning or affecting them being in a patriarchy society, 24percent of them accepted that they have talked about gender inequality and posted the video, posts, given likes, dislikes, express view and opinions on it. Second, most talked, the criticized topic was rape (20percent) followed by very sensitive topics hardly discussed earlier by women in open, i.e. Menstruation(12percent) followed by issues like domestic violence(10percent), Divorce, Breastfeeding (8percent), Honour killing (7percent) Workplace Harassment (6percent) and on their sexual preference(5percent). The respondents felt that issues concerning the women which were not so comfortable to talk about in public domain or mainstream media have been possible to talk freely with the support of social media in India.



### CONCLUSIONS

The social media in India has no doubt, provided a platform to be more visible and vocal regarding issues pertaining to women. More visible women are, more helping them to create an identity and reshape their image. Social media has no doubt



strengthening them and proving them a place where they could be heard and listened. Women are communicating freely and boldly on many topics and issues now that has been considered 'sensitive' in our society since ages. They are actively participating in public debate, public protest and campaign that goes on social media. It's not that the issues that they face being a woman matters to them only, but they take a stand for other genders and sections also. Their participation in social media public discourse can be seen in various issues other than women-oriented that affect the country from political, economic to social.

The women have to face the wrath of being open and extrovert and for taking such topics and discussion on the social media platform. They even face threat calls, bullying, derogative and vulgar comments on their remarks and posts. Despite this, they are willing to come forward and have the right to freedom of expression through social media. It has helped in the transformation of women making their presence felt in the patriarchal society. The social media has provided a progressive online culture for the sustainable development of Indian women.

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