

Women Empowerment in the Digital Age: Significance of New Media

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Abstract

The worldwide scene was totally altered by the technological revolution brought about by new media, the internet, blogs, and social networking sites and influenced the fundamental framework of societies, fostering more conversations, arguments, and intellectual production while enhancing the democratic capacity of governments. It is widely believed that new media can be an effective tool for women's development and empowerment, moreover gives women a voice and a forum to communicate their thoughts and concerns without fear of prejudice or retaliation. Women make up a large portion of the global population, and as science and technology advance, so too does the status of women, which is changing quickly. However, we cannot deny that there is a world in which women face numerous forms of discrimination, marginalisation, and oppression, new media provides innovative spaces and platforms to address and effectively overcome such discrimination. These are being developed as spaces that are democratic in nature, embodying freedom and equality, while enabling a liberal space for women to speak out. It is relevant that other spaces do not have the same potential and capacity as the new media to become women's media, even if sometimes gender inequalities exist. This paper also examines the ways in which new social media spaces are the cause of women's advancement and the challenges they face.

Keywords: Empowerment, Digital, New Media, Activism

Introduction

The technological revolution with new media, the internet, blogs, and social networking sites completely transformed the global landscape. It affected the basic structure of societies, increasing discussions, debates, and the creation of ideas, as well as enriching the democratic potential of states. New Media is considered a powerful tool for women's empowerment and development. It provides a platform for women to express their opinions, raise their voices, discussing their concerns without any fear or discrimination. Women comprise a significant percentage of the world's population, and with scientific and technological development, the status of women is also changing at a fast pace. Still, we cannot ignore the very existence of a world where women are discriminated against, marginalized, and oppressed because of various issues. The country's overall development depends significantly on the inclusion of women. The status of women in a society is the reflection of socio-cultural and political development. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "There is no occasion for women to consider themselves subordinate or inferior to men." The fact is that development will be incomplete without the active involvement of women. There is ample evidence to suggest that the active participation of women in various social, economic, and political spheres can significantly contribute to the stability, progress, and overall development of nations. The presence of women in leadership positions, for instance, can lead to better governance, improved decision-making and

more inclusive policies, among other benefits. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize and promote the central role of women in society to ensure sustainable and long-term development of nations.

Importance of women's empowerment

Women empowerment is essential for women living in developed and developing societies; inequality and vulnerability exist in all spheres of life. Establishing a new social order may only be realized with their active participation, and they need to be empowered. Empowerment is a constructive process that seeks to transform the nature and direction of systemic forces that marginalize disadvantaged sections in a given context. Its primary objective is to improve their situation by creating growth opportunities, enhancing their capabilities, and giving them access to the tools they need to combat obstacles to achieve their full potential. By empowering marginalized communities, "We can work towards building a society that is fair and just, and that provides equal opportunities for everyone." Women's Empowerment may be defined as "a process whereby women become able to organize themselves to increase their self-reliance, to assert their independent rights to make choices and control resources which will assist in changing and eliminating their own subordination" (Keller Mbewe, 1991). Women's empowerment does not imply women taking over control of power relations previously held by men; instead, there is a need to transform the nature of power relations. Many United Nations conferences have advocated that women's empowerment is central to sustainable development. The Copenhagen Declaration of the World Summit on Social Development (WSSD) called for the recognition that empowering people, particularly women, to strengthen their own capacities is a primary objective of development. That empowerment requires the full participation of people in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of decisions determining the functioning and wellbeing of societies. Gender equality, good educational status, independence, awareness on rights, sound health, employment, and control over resources are essential indicators of women's empowerment. Empowering women is a source of development not only for women but also for families, nations, and the world. It is one of the needs and rights of women to bring positive exchanges in society.

New Media

Empowerment is a transformative process that seeks to redirect and reshape the systemic forces that disadvantage and marginalize vulnerable groups in a given context. It's important to prioritize the empowerment of marginalized communities in order to enhance their well-being, enable them to assert their rights, and facilitate their full participation in society. Unlike traditional media structures, it alters geographical boundaries and provides instant and rapid channels of communication and opportunities for interaction. Internet, websites, blogs, mobile phones, and other user-generated media constitute the new media. Neuman describes new media as "we are witnessing the evolution of a universal interconnected network of audio, video and electronic text communications that will blur the distinction between interpersonal and mass communication and between public and private communication. New media technologies facilitate interaction between user to user as well as user to information. In the words of Voithofer, specifically contrasts the new media with the old media in terms of changes in production due to convergence of technology and media storage(digitization and indexing), presentation (in a video display of sorts), and distribution over telecommunication".

Women and New Media Activism

Women's rights movements have been quick to capitalize on new media's unprecedented political and awareness-raising potential. New media provides women with information at the doorstep and opportunities to bring social intercourses in more rapid ways. The world is witnessing the impact of new media in recent years as a mechanism for mobilizing public support. Arab Spring, Orange Revolution, Green Movement, etc. show the strength of new media or online activism against undemocratic and autocratic regimes. All these mass protests reveal the participation of women on a large scale. People make use of new media to make their voices heard. In Indian situation, recent Katwa, Unnao incidents follow the protests and actions of frustrated people through social media. The public strongly expresses their concerns, sympathy, and anger against the culprits and governmental mechanisms through platforms like Facebook and Twitter. Hash tags and support movements are the unmistakable sign of vibrant citizenry in a democratic society. The cyber protests against women's violence not only assert the societal status of women but also act as the source in which a spark of empowerment is created.

New Media and Women Activism: Global Experiences

The involvement of women in cyber activism, citizen journalism, and self-organization is both a reflection of and a contributor to the social and political changes that have taken place in regions such as Iran, Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco. Despite not constantly experiencing improvement in their legal status and social positions after participating in social movements, political protests, and revolutions, women in the Middle East and North Africa have been actively involved in such activities for a long time. In order to propagate their message, find followers, and bring attention to their cause on a global scale, MENA women activists have turned to the internet, and social media platforms. They have frequently used ICTs to communicate with people both locally and internationally while eluding censorship and control by state media. By doing this, advocates for women's rights have evolved into media activists and joined the ranks of citizen journalists. One distinctive feature of these women's movements is that they are neither centralized nor hierarchical. It has thus shifted into loose social networks of advocates of women's equality, participation, and rights in their respective countries. Women's groups in particular have formed women's rights organizations throughout the region, demanding family law reform and other changes to women's legal status (Gheyntachi & Moghadam, 2014). For women rights activists, with its unparalleled capacity for connectivity and mobilisation, the internet has played a significant role in the "feminization of the public sphere" by fostering both online and offline conversations, debates, and opinions about women's rights, governmental regulations, and the effects of socio-political change on women. Women have in fact led the way in nonviolent political action, and their participation in the MENA social protests is closely linked to the larger social movement in these nations that is advocating for socio-political reform. In Egypt, women activists brought their children to the street protests, and in their blogs, they demanded a better future for their children. Many women browsing the internet connected with these in-person and online manifestations of activist mothering, leading to the emergence of what are known as inadvertent activists or feminists. Numerous unintentional feminists and activists in Iran claim that they found a safe area to explore new paths and vent their discontent with the present quo when they encountered social justice and women's rights problems online. Some of these activists come from the families of high-ranking officials who find cyberspace safe to express solidarity with women's rights activists. It should be highlighted that in the new century, Iran's virtual public sphere grew significantly. Following the Arab Spring, there has been a growing public acknowledgement of the contributions made by women to the protests and a growing call for increased female involvement and representation. Lebanese women called for a march to

call attention to the role of women in the Arab Spring. The decision to hold the World Social Forum in Tunis provides an additional opportunity for women across the region and collaborators from all around the world to plan events, workshops, and discussions pertaining to women's rights. The introduction of ICTs in Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region has created a more public space and offered social movements, specifically women's movements, across new chances to collaborate and form alliances with other movements. Women's groups worked together engaging on issues like social safety and human rights with other civil society organisations, fair elections, and a series of social and economic factors that led to mass social upheavals in MENA. The internet, especially social media, thus becomes an indispensable tool for women struggling for change within authoritarian or patriarchal contexts.

Women and Digital Media: Perspectives from the Indian Setting

Indian situation, the Pink Chaddi Campaign initiated by Nisha Susan, can be considered a turning point. It recognized the importance of social media as a tool for activism. It's inspiring to see collective action being taken against violence. Nonviolent protests can be a powerful way of raising awareness and bringing about change. The response to the attack on women in the pub in Mangalore is an excellent example of this. It's heartening to see people standing up for what's right and refusing to tolerate violence against women. A group of women who called themselves "Consortium of Pub going, Loose and Forward Women" launched a Facebook group, which saw close to 30,000 members in a week. The campaign became famous not only for its innovative mode of protest that challenged traditional notions of activism but also for the way it effectively used social media to garner widespread attention to its cause. Since then, digital technology has been explored and appropriated by Indian feminists in various ways to draw attention to a number of feminist issues (Subramanian, 2015). The Kiss of Love Campaign against the so-called moral policing in India is another instance of social media-led protest. It is an effective online campaign that could beat the oppressive masculine nationalism in India. The new cult of feminist contentions on these internet platforms has raised questions about moral policing and the prevalent male prejudices against women. Their resistance against cultural stupidities and patriarchal expectations has become more visible in the last couple of years. They are a sort of counterculture, which was not possible prior to the social media age (Biju, 2017). A document titled India's Daughter, directed by Leslee Udwin, based on the Nirbhaya gang rape in Delhi, is a typical example of the power of the Internet in spreading information, in spite of the censorship by the state apparatus. Women share pictures and videos, post comments and replies, mark likes, and share. In the connected space, women navigate issues of identity and gender justice in a more secular manner. On social networking sites, young, educated women assert a new identity. They express their suppressed feelings on blogging platforms such as Blogger and Word Press, feelings that are unable to be expressed in a rigid patriarchal structure. They also become an inspiration for other women. In Kerala, there are more recent examples of women's activism on social media. Dalit interactions, activism for the Sabarimala Temple entry of women, protest against moral killings, thoughts and comments on menstruation, etc. make social media a democratic realm. Women's thoughts and interventions on common concerns have been positively advanced by the new media in addition to supporting women's issues and intervening in them.

Modes of Women's Empowerment

Political Empowerment

The extent to which women are represented in public life and in decision-making processes has a gendered impact on policy making. Increasing their political participation has been linked to more gender responsive public policies (Brody, 2009). Following are the areas where new media has enabled women's political activism.

- **Hash tag activism is a powerful tool to raise awareness about women's rights.** By using social media, people can bring many issues to the forefront of political agendas, leading to meaningful changes towards a more equitable society. For example, in 2013, the Bring Back Our Girls Campaign reached over 1 million tweets, helping to raise awareness of both national and international actors of the need to help rescue the abducted Nigerian school girls (Tomchak, 2014). Before the hash tag campaign's success, the case received little media attention. UN Women's successful and high-profile 'HeForShe' campaign further highlights the potential of social media to attract new and larger audiences. The campaign effectively engaged with over 1.2 billion people, emphasizing the importance of involving men and boys in the pursuit of gender.
- **Leveraging the power of social media tools to tackle and combat violence against women.** It's inspiring to see how social media tools have facilitated communication and knowledge exchange among female victims of violence. These platforms have created a valuable space for victims to share their experiences, learn about their rights and legal processes, and access welfare services. An exemplary initiative in this regard is Harass Map, a mapping tool launched in Egypt to enable victims to anonymously report cases of sexual harassment through their mobile phones. This innovative tool has been a crucial step in empowering victims to speak out against these crimes. By providing a platform for anonymous reporting, it has helped victims to overcome the fear of retaliation and take action against harassment. Furthermore, it has created a sense of solidarity among victims, fostering a community of shared purpose. The emergence of such social media tools is a positive development in the fight against sexual harassment and violence and showcases the potential of technology in addressing the issue and highlights the importance of creating safe and constructive spaces for victims to share their experiences. It is encouraging to witness such initiatives and the positive impact they have on society. This effort is a positive move towards establishing a secure and encouraging space for women to voice their concerns about violence and access the assistance they require.
- **Public Accountability towards gender equality.** Social media has been increasingly used by women's grassroots organizations to call for greater public accountability toward gender equality. The DelhiGangRape hash tag campaign brought the scale of gender-based violence in India into the spotlight. The hash tag campaign supported public street mobilization, which saw the government introduce specific anti-rape provisions in the criminal code (Sharma, 2014). A massive Twitter protest took place in Turkey through the use of hash tags, following the rape and killing of a young woman. Political and civil society leaders engaged in a discussion on violence against women in the country following the occurrence of large street protests.

Economic Empowerment

Women using new media enjoy economic empowerment, too. Economic reforms and subsequent job avenues in an enhancing market have given women newer social spaces, career opportunities, and self-sufficiency. The pivotal role of women's empowerment in reducing poverty in developing countries has been widely acknowledged. Moreover, it has been closely linked to the process of democratization in these countries, as it aims to provide women with equal rights and opportunities to those enjoyed by men until

now. Empowering women through access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities can enable them to contribute to their families and communities, thereby having a positive impact on society. Additionally, the promotion of gender equality is not only a matter of human rights and social justice, but it also has economic benefits and leads to overall societal well-being. They are benefitting beyond the boundaries of the patriarchal family system and rigid social structure. The Beijing Platform for Action recognized and predicted the media's potential to make a far more outstanding contribution to the advancement of women. This call has been echoed in the proposed targets under Goal 5 of the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals. In a digital world, women are now creating their own landmarks and can effectively contribute to the success of an organization; many business organizations have increased the number of women in the workforce and perform leadership roles as well. Digital media initiatives transform the industrial sector in a way that is feasible for women. Sociologists believe that EQ is higher in women than men, and this enables women to deal with and survive in the corporate sector. Diverse culture, strategic ability, planning, and inclusiveness helped women establish their capacities. The digital economy is expected to generate 60- 65 million employment opportunities in India by 2020-25. Women in the digital media world are far better than men in increasing the potential of the organization by more than 28 percentages. Women entrepreneurs are now increasing and they use the Internet for their ventures. Jaipur Rugs Foundation stands for providing social and economic opportunities for all women, giving them the power to earn and raise themselves and their families. They have a program for women in entrepreneurship development and skill development to help women get educated and learn beyond it to stand on par with men.

Cultural Empowerment

A number of religious ideologies conflate women's rights over their sexuality with notions of purity and virtue. Such an understanding of nationalism and Indian culture has been questioned by Indian feminists through various modes of protest carried out in online spaces. The Facebook pages have argued for a politicization and redefinition of the concepts of love, sex, and morality. Other feminist pages, such as Feminist India, constantly engage with questions of patriarchy, seen in updates such as Happy Republic Day to the Upper Caste, child-related issues as part of traditions, critique of religious culture, etc.

Online Feminism

Online feminism is a parallel world. Feminists create new identities that are complex, overlapping, and virtual. The Internet resurfaces online feminist activism, identity assertions, political contentions, and collective action on the trajectory of social media and feminist movements. India's Twitter landscape is abundant with tweets on issues that are addressed to women as a category. Since its inception, Twitter has been a male-dominated media, but a recent study by Beevolve.com says that women now outnumber men on Twitter by 6 percentages. In addition, women users are more active, tweeting an average more often than men (Dayal, 2017). Women have increased their activism in nongovernmental organizations and found social media to be an appropriate place for writing and sharing information. Cover designers, freelance content writers, bloggers, web designers, fashion designers, photographers, and other professionals are going online. Now, feminist websites and book review websites run by women exist. Social media pages are created for women-owned restaurants, bakeries, and cafes. Women-based career pages and sites are online for benefitting women.

Me Too Movement and Women's Empowerment

The year 2017 sparked off the Me Too Movement Campaign after the Harvey Weinstein Scandal in the United States, has motivated women to throw allegations in India, especially in the Bollywood and media arena. The pivotal role of women's empowerment in reducing poverty in developing countries has been widely acknowledged. Moreover, it has been closely linked to the process of democratization in these countries, as it aims to provide women with equal rights and opportunities to those enjoyed by men until now. Empowering women through access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities can enable them to contribute to their families and communities, thereby having a positive impact on society. Additionally, the promotion of gender equality is not only a matter of human rights and social justice, but it also has economic benefits and leads to overall societal well-being. It also raised awareness among women about their rights as individuals in and outside the workplace and helped men understand the consequences of the same.

Challenges to Social Media-Driven Women's Empowerment

It is true that while women's online activism has gained a lot of visibility and success in recent years, its impact on policymaking has been inconsistent and unpredictable. While some campaigns have been successful in bringing about change, others have not been able to achieve their objectives. This may be due to various factors such as the limited reach of social media, lack of resources, or the inability to sustain momentum. However, it is vital to acknowledge the significance of women's online activism in raising awareness, building networks, and amplifying voices that have been historically marginalized. It's amazing how new media has given women the power to create platforms for themselves and others to share their stories, connect with like-minded individuals, and advocate for their rights. It's a great way to uplift and empower women across the world! This has contributed to a broader discourse on gender equality and empowered women to take an active role in shaping their own destinies. This reflects the struggle of grassroots women's activism to be heard in decision-making processes and the broader marginalization of women in public life. Barriers to influential women's online activism are the following.

- Digital illiteracy
- Limited access to new technologies
- Gendered and sexualized violence in online spaces
- Limited networking with institutional actors
- Online harassment

Conclusion

Women must not be treated as second-class citizens but as essential to society. If a country needs to develop and advance, then emphasis should be placed on empowering the nation's women. New media has a significant role in helping women be empowered. It acts as a source to speak out against the suppression and oppression of women at the grassroots level. "Where activists were once defined by their causes, they are now defined by their tools" (Gladwell, 2010). New media facilitates equal access to information without discrimination, bias, or interference. It persuades and moulds opinions, perspectives, and ideas on various issues. To fully leverage the transformative power of ICTs, it is imperative that we work towards eliminating any and all barriers that explicitly or implicitly discriminate against women's access to equal education and digital training. It's great to see that women are becoming more aware of their rights and power in society. Violence against women is a serious issue that demands our attention.

Fortunately, social media provides us with a powerful tool to bring about positive change. By promoting gender equality, we can create a future where everyone can thrive and succeed. Let's use social media to empower women and create a better world for all. By using platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram to raise awareness and share stories of survivors, we can help to break the silence around this issue and create a culture of accountability. With the help of technology, we can build a world where every woman can live free from violence and discrimination. It's crucial to promote inclusivity and equity in all aspects of life, and empowering women is a crucial step towards achieving that goal.

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