'Don't Let it Stand!'

An Exploratory Study of Women and Verbal Online Abuse in India

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Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the different forms of verbal abuse that women who are publicly vocal on online platforms in India face and the strategies they use to deal with such abuse. Giving rise to new ways to exercise the right to freedom of expression, to the potential of fluid identities and to new ways to interact for those with limited offline opportunities, the democratisation of societies through the Internet is a phenomenon many have celebrated. But in reality, the hierarchies of the real world are all too often not effaced in the virtual world; instead, they are reborn and reconstructed in such a way that new mediums become the sites for old discriminations. Despite the Internet's empowering potential, the gender-based hierarchies, violences, and manifestations of discrimination that women (or people who do not define their genders as singularly male) must face on a daily basis are also paralleled online, in India as elsewhere.

Images and voices

The UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women states that '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' falls under the category of Violence Against Women (VAW), or wider gender-based violence. Manifestations of this violence include street sexual harassment, domestic violence, financial abandonment, sexual assault, physical beatings, and rape.

But to qualify as violence – as illustrated through the UN Declaration's emphasis on 'psychological harm or suffering' – physical proximity and contact is not a necessary condition. While forms of violence change with the medium through which it is carried out, the violence still nevertheless continues in its new and multiple digitised avatars. A paper from the Association for Progressive Communication states: 'ICTs allow perpetrators to commit violence anonymously and at a distance from the women they are targeting, making it harder to identify perpetrators and charge and prosecute them.' The number of rape threats, calls for violence, misuse of images, and sexuality based attacks directed at women across the world online –including in India – is indicative of the gender-based discrimination that the 'democratic' space of the Internet has not effaced. Women experience a consistent and systemic demeaning of their selves, which rather than being based on their views, politics or ideas – or essentially, what they *say* - attacks their gender.

This abuse has not gone unnoticed. There is already a fair amount of work, research and campaigning being carried out both globally and nationally around certain types of abuse women face as a result of the increased availability of new technologies. For example, Take Back The Tech is a global campaign that empowers women to take control of technology to prevent violence against women, and organisations such as the Association of Progressive Communication (APC) and some Indian NGOs have attempted to explore the connection between ICTs and gender-based violence.

These studies have, however, largely focused on the role of *images* in the perpetuation of violence against women online. For example, a paper by the APC entitled 'Digital Dangers' largely focuses on the distribution of images and pornography as a significant global issue in relation to ICTs. The Delhi MMS scandal – where a young woman was filmed performing a sexual act, which was then distributed without her consent – and others along similar lines have been extensively reported by national media, adapted by Bollywood, and seen as a central issue when considering the interaction between gender and technology. These instances are not unique to India, and many places –

including India and the United Kingdom- have laws pertaining to the use and abuse of images online and through digital communication. The focus of these laws – especially in India and other South Asian countries – rests largely around the portrayal of the female body, and the ways in which these representations are circulated within society (online and offline).

The emphasis placed on the female body is not unique to laws pertaining to the Internet, and stems from a longstanding debate around female sexuality that consistently plays itself out in public discourse. Seen on the one hand as a marker for purity, chastity, and by extension, 'Indian Culture', the female body is used as a marker of cultural and national worth. On the other hand, however, the sexualisation of women through cinema, advertising and, equally importantly, the self-expression of their sexualities by women themselves, images of women are often seen as potentially corrupting, immoral or indecent. Within this mixture of expectations and representations, the consent of women is very rarely considered, which often results in a legal structure of censorship that assumes *any* representation of a woman's body is either exploitative to women or morally injurious to viewers. The lived experiences and reactions of women to imagery is therefore both created and complicated by the legal and visual conversations that consistently seek to shape and define the parameters in which the representation of women is negotiated[1].

However, outside of the Photoshop and illicit videography discourse, there are other forms of violence against women online that have remained largely bypassed – in both legal procedures, campaigning efforts and wider research. Verbal abuse specifically designed to attack women on the basis of their gender is a growing problem of global proportions. Women who are active on social media (especially Twitter) and in the blogosphere may receive many threats or comments that directly attack their gender, their safety, and by extension, their very right to have an opinion in a male dominated space. As we will discuss in greater depth in chapter 3, to be a woman online – just like to be a woman walking the streets of an Indian city, town or village – is to transgress an unwritten law of patriarchy; to cross over into a space that isn't meant to be yours. And in the case of online abuse, speaking out about the violence is often hampered rather than heightened by the wide berth of space provided by the Internet. As we will see, uncertainty about who the attackers 'really' are in a world of fluid identities, fears about heightened attacks, a lack of awareness – or a mistrust – of legal systems all serve as potential barriers to addressing what is a growing problem for women across the world.

Trolling or abuse?

When considering who the perpetrators of online abuse and violence are, the term most commonly encountered in the answer is 'troll'. The definition of an Internet troll, according to Wikipedia, is as follows: 'In Internet slang, a troll is someone who posts inflammatory, extraneous, or off-topic messages in an online community such as a forum, chat room, or blog, with the primary intent of provoking readers into an emotional response or of otherwise disrupting normal on-topic discussion.' However, the troll as 'nuisance-creator' or 'provoker of all-and-sundry' is an image often created by the trolling community themselves. Portraying themselves as friend to none and mischief-makers, 'trolling' has become synonymous with anything bad that happens on the Internet, particularly in relation to what is *said*. But does this definition in fact negate the wider context and specific effects of trolling? Are trolls simply annoying individuals 'provoking' a response that may or may not be required? Simply those who intentionally go off-topic? Or does the wider context of violence against minorities (in this case women) and the effects of violent speech– individually and collectively – perhaps mean that the term 'troll' is too gentle a descriptor within a sinister climate of

[1] For more on this issue, see the briefing paper on related legal issues in the Indian context that complements the current paper: Kaul Padte, Richa and Anja Kovacs (forthcoming). Keeping Women Safe? Gender, Online Harassment and Indian Law. Briefing paper, Internet Democracy Project, New Delhi.

hate-fuelled vitriol?

In an attempt to move away from the discourse of trolling to a serious addressing of the complicated and unequal context in which it manifests itself, it is crucial to focus less on *intent* and more on *effects*. Whether the troll 'really' hates women or 'actually' intends to rape them is irrelevant if women feel hatred or feel threatened. The misogyny that takes place online, irrespective of its intention or cause, contributes to a wider climate of sexism, and negatively impacts the ways in which women are able to participate in the cyber world. Says American journalist Megan Tyler, 'It creates a hostile culture in which sexism and woman-hating can be freely expressed, if not praised, and this ultimately works to exclude and silence women. And make no mistake, there are serious issues of hostile, misogynist cultures in many places online' (Tyler, 2012). As the present study seeks to explore the experiences of women in India – whether in the forms of threats or harassment or abuse – it also hopes to shift the discourse of 'annoying trolls' towards a more focused and concrete conversation around the sexism faced by women online.

When examining the manifestations of trolling and sexism online in an Indian context, it is important to consider the highly politicised nature of many instances of violence. Writes journalist Sagarika Ghose, who coined the term 'Internet Hindus':

> Self-professed supporters of Narendra Modi and Subramanian Swamy specialise in abusing what they call "paid media". For them, "whore", "bitch", "Congress pimp", "Muslim-loving whore", "Congress-funded media" are all in a day's work… the daily invective and defamation by hundreds of Twitter handles speaks of an organised campaign.'

The experiences of other women who have faced abuse online – including that which followed Kandasammy's beef-eating Tweet – often trace the violence to a organised religious right wing, that analyst B Raman says, 'are not just lumpen elements…they are motivated and well-organised cadres.' Another example of how women face the brunt of the religious Right online can be seen through the attacks against trader Sonali Ranade, who tweets about everything from market trends to gender issues to current affairs. However, her stand that Gurajat Chief Minister Narendra Modi should make amends for his handling of the Gujarat riots led to a vicious attack by the 'trolls'. She says, 'The attacks are pre-planned, timed, orchestrated and executed in terms of time/topic. The sheer number of people tweeting, the number of tweets, topics and timing leave no doubt on that score.' These examples and trends are indicative of why the term 'troll' may perhaps not suffice when considering the abuse and violence faced by women on the Internet.

Sexism and the Internet's DNA

The proliferation of misogyny via trolls on the Internet speaks volumes about the ways in which the wider, global online environment may in itself be hostile towards women. Take the case of Reddit[2] user Violentacrez (recently exposed as Michael Brutsch) – the founder of a series of hate inciting sections (or subreddits) including Jailbait, Chokeabitch, Rapebait, Hitler, Jewmerica and Incest on the social media portal. As details about Brutsch were brought to light, what is particularly relevant to our study is the close links between the misogynist troll and the Reddit administrators, who would actually use him as their official moderator for the website's more seedy sections. To the larger Reddit community, Violentacrez was anonymous, but the people in charge of the portal knew who he was and the types of content he posted. When men with pro-rape stances like Brutsch and his followers are determining what content is deemed appropriate or discriminatory, the Violentacrez case illustrates not only the necessity for a stronger terminology than 'troll', but also

[2] Reddit is a user-controlled social news and entertainment websites, which allows registered users to submit content, which is then ranked by other users to determine where the information is positioned on the website. The website comprises many subreddits, or sub-sections, which are also user-created. There are currently 67,000 subreddits in existence.

serves as a comment on the manner in which the power structures of social media and Internet sites are themselves complicit in fostering discriminatory environments by privileging those who already have privilege in reality.

This case might seem to many like an isolated instance taking place on a tech-savvy, geek community platform. However, the situation is very similar on Facebook, where pro-rape and pro-violence against women pages are allowed to flourish with growing numbers of supporters, whereas images posted by women of breast-feeding, for example, are removed under the category of 'explicit' content. Despite the recent apology issued by Facebook for permitting a photograph of a battered woman with the caption, 'Women are like grass, they need to be beaten/cut regularly' to remain online even after several complaints, the social networking site is generally not sympathetic to issues of gender-based violence. When questioned publicly in an article about why pro-rape pages are allowed to remain on the social networking site, Facebook issued the following response under the heading 'Controversial rape pages':

> We prohibit content we deem to be genuinely harmful, but allow content that is offensive or controversial. Harmful content is generally defined as that which leads to or organizes real world violence, theft or property destruction, that which intentionally and directly inflicts emotional distress on a specific private individual, and that which is broadly illegal… we understand your concern about the pages you referenced… Having said that, as long as these types of pages do not violate our policies as explained above, we err on the side of allowing people to express themselves.

According to the Facebook administration, rape does not fall under the category of 'genuinely harmful' or leading to 'real world violence'. If violence against women is not harmful, but pictures of women who have suffered from breast cancer are considered to be sexually explicit, the question of in whose favour such policies are designed remains pertinent. The examples of Brutsch policing Reddit and Facebook's refusal to see rape as a legitimate violence contributes to a reinforcement of gender hierarchies and existing power structures – where policies of 'protecting' serve to protect the already-powerful. And given the ways in which the space of the Internet largely crosses national borders, the relevance of these systemic biases is as pertinent for Indian women users of social media as women from developed countries.

Does gendered online abuse of women qualify as hate speech?

In order to combat these instances of abuse, it is important to define what forms this abuse can take. Many people often use the term 'hate speech' to talk about abuse that is directed against an individual on the basis of his or her identity; however, it is important to consider whether or not something is legally recognised as grounds for hate speech, and should therefore be criminalised. Hate is an intangible emotion, and to make the distinction between hate speech and speech that is offensive or insulting, UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression Frank La Rue recommends the establishment of certain thresholds before any speech should be criminalised. These thresholds at a minimum are a real and present danger, the intention to cause harm, and a result of obvious harm. What may socially, therefore, be seen as hate speech against women, may in fact require more rigorous measures to legally qualify as speech that can be criminalised insofar as it incites hatred.

Whether or not gender-based abuse online qualifies as hate speech is an issue further complicated by the fact that neither international nor national laws see gender-based hatred and incitements to violence as hate speech. The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) states that 'any advocacy of national, racial or religious hatred that constitutes incitement to discrimination, hostility or violence shall be prohibited by law.' This definition of incitement to hatred is echoed in national laws pertaining to the issue, where Section 153 of the Indian Penal

Code criminalises 'Promoting enmity between different groups on the grounds of religion, race, place of birth, residence, or language' and in the country's only law that specifically addresses the notion of systemic discrimination, the Scheduled Castes and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act deals with caste-based discrimination. But in reality, hate speech is an incitement to violence based on a historically marginalised aspect of an individual's identity, and can target gender, sexual orientation, disability and various other facets of a person's being – none of which fall within the legal parameters that seek to define it. A research study from the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) explored the demographics of hate speech amongst young people from largely European countries online. The findings revealed that nearly 50% of all hate speech online is gender related (encompassing women, trans people, and people with non-normative sexual orientations). In light of the pervasive nature of gender-based incitements to violence, many are calling for a more inclusive definition of what hate speech entails.

However, even where there is no immediate threat of violence, gender-based abuse can still lead to a range of harmful consequences. Speech that may not fall under even a more broadly defined category of hate speech but still targets women on the basis of their gender nevertheless leads to women feeling threatened, intimidated, harassed or silenced. In these instances, how do women deal with such forms of abuse, and are there still measure – both legal and extra legal – to which they can take recourse? In light of this, while the present study does include hate speech in the narrow legal sense, it seeks to explore the wider spectrum of verbal abuse and violence women face online.

Methodology

The purpose of the present study is, then, to explore gender-based abusive speech online. By speaking with Indian women who are active users of social media, the study aims to consider instances of abuse, how and why they occur, what forms they take, and if and how women strategise in order to address this verbal abuse or hate speech. An exploration of these issues will also consider to what extent women Internet users consider legal recourse to be a useful strategy, while a complementing paper will address to what extent existing laws have empowered women to fight gender-based abuse online.

At the heart of the study are interviews with seventeen women who actively speak in virtual public domains, so as to better understand the nature and range of responses to abuse in a specifically Indian context. Women who are celebrities, who have publicly spoken about the abuse they have faced, or who have been involved in well publicised cases pertaining to online abuse are named. The rest of the interviewees are anonymous.

While we recognise that men face abuse on the Internet as well, the focus of the present study thus is specifically abuse speech or hate-speech directed agains women on the basis of their gender. However, the experience of all women will not be the same, given the ways in which other aspects of a woman's identity intersects with her gender and influences her experience of the Internet as well as the abuse she may receive. Instead of treating 'women' as a homogenous category, the study seeks to consider various facets of a woman's identity, including class, caste and religion, and consider how these other markers of identity may affect women's experiences online.

Furthermore, the focus of the study will be to consider the abuse faced by women *in response to their own speech*, and may include verbal abuse, sexual harassment, and hate speech. Given that this study is centred around speech, other forms of abuse - including stalking, for example – that may follow a woman's speech will not be considered in depth in this research.

The present study will concentrate on women speaking in the public domain. While distinguishing

between the public and the private is complicated by the nature of the Internet, for the purposes of this research, a public forum on the Internet will refer to popular social media websites, which in themselves differ in the way that they are used. Globally, Twitter and Facebook are the two most popular social media platforms on the Internet, alongside a variety of blogging platforms. Twitter is an almost entirely public forum, where Tweets – comprising 140 characters – can be seen by anyone who follows or subscribes to a user. Facebook, on the other hand, has a range of privacy settings which mean that an individual's profile may be visible only to people they know, friends of the people they know, or all Facebook users. Blogs are largely public platforms; however, some people may create blogs that are visible only to a select group of Internet users. For the purposes of this study, 'women speaking in a public domain' will be those who are active on Twitter, who have a public blog, or who have a Facebook account visible to all Facebook users. By interviewing women who choose to be visible and vocal on public forums, the study explores the experiences of these women and gendered abusive responses they often receive as they claim their right to speak. Furthermore, the study considers what strategies – both legal and extra-legal – do women use to counter such speech.

In order to select women for the study the method applied was snowball sampling, which is the process by which already identified interviewees or contacts referred us to other potential interviewees from their acquaintances (thus resembling a snowball as the sample grows in size using existing links). A call for input in written form was posted on the Internet Democracy Project blog and shared on various other platforms. Though the call was widely shared, and received almost seven hundred hits on our blog alone, it had a very low response rate, for which the reasons remain unclear. In addition, we attempted to speak to women who were involved in well-known cases made public by the media where possible. Even when we were unable to interview them, we used these cases to triangulate findings.

In addition to interviewing women who had faced abuse, we also spoke to several key informants, including the Mumbay Cyber Crime Police Cell. In the final stages of producing the present paper, two national consultations on the research were held, one in New Delhi on 18 February 2013 and one in Mumbai on 6 March 2013. The attendees included bloggers, Internet experts, women's and youth organisations, journalists, academics and lawyers. Many insightful ideas and experiences were highlighted at these meetings, and though we have not been able to do full justice to the richness of the debates, some of these have been incorporated into this paper.

Given the size of the sample and other restrictions, the scope of the study has certain biases and limitations. The women in our sample have different levels of popularity, where some have small followings and others are media celebrities; however, all the women interviewed are highly vocal, and continue to be vocal despite the abuse they receive. Experiences of women from different parts of the world point to examples where women stopped using online platforms as a result of abuse, but the present study considers only women who are *still online*. Moreover, as this is a qualitative rather than a quantitative study, the research can also only explore which strategies are employed by women who remain online. It cannot comment on which strategy is most commonly employed.

Though very real efforts were made throughout to broaden the sample to include women from as diverse backgrounds and identities as possible, here, too, our study has its limitations. After speaking to various individuals and organisations from within the LGBT movement – and circulated the call-out for responses on their internal lists – it became evident that the majority of queer women online do not disclose their sexual orientation. The women that we have spoken to thus do not address the issue of their sexual orientation or gender identity, therefore the broader assumption – made both online and by this study - is that they are all heterosexual, with a female gender identity assigned to them at birth.

Moreover, while the abuse of women online takes place in cities, towns and to an extent, villages, the snowballing method resulted in a final sample of women who are predominantly English speaking (though some have an Internet presence in a second language) and live in cities. However, given that only 12% of the country's population has access to the Internet, this bias is perhaps unsurprising, as the majority of regular Internet users themselves inhabit urban spaces and until today tend to be from privileged castes and classes. Therefore, while the study does include women from somewhat varying socio-economic backgrounds and one minority caste woman, the majority of interviewees are from upper classes and upper castes. The sample does, however, comprise women from different parts of the country, and includes women from minority religions, across the political spectrum.

This is the first study of its kind in India, in that it systematically considers in depth the ways in which women face and counter gender-based abuse in online spaces. Online violence against women is extremely high, but it often remains hidden given the silence around it. This study explores in detail the manifestations of violence, and in bringing out a diversity of strategies that women employ, broadens the terms of the debate around abuse speech beyond a discourse of censorship. The research and analysis seek to politicise an issue that is often either watered down through the use of the soft-word 'troll' for an abuser, but also document the strategies women forge for themselves when faced with such abuse. In these ways, the present study hopes to make a valuable contribution to wider discussions around gender rights, the internet, sexuality and censorship.

Structure of the paper

Chapter one of this paper provides an overview of the people, topics and situations around which abuse tends to concentrate, and aims to understand why the abuse takes place. Chapter two focuses on the strategic manipulations of women's bodies and sexuality by harassers, and how images, sex and threats of sexual violence are used to silence women online. Chapter three examines the ways in which the public and the private are reconstituted on the Internet, and the complex ways in which women negotiate these spaces. Chapter four explores the range of non-legal strategies employed by women to counter the abuse they face. Chapter five then looks at women's engagements with legal recourse and the law.

This paper is further supplemented by a discussion paper (see footnote 1)&, which comprises a detailed study of the laws surrounding women, both online and offline, and presents various suggestions for strengthening legal practice.

Chapter 1. The Landscape of Online Abuse: What, Why, How?

When an abusive image or speech is mediated by a digital medium, is its *effect* heightened or lessened? One study using both male and female undergraduate college students in North America explored how differing mediums (online versus offline) affect the way in which a threat is perceived, and therefore, experienced[3]. Examining eight potentially harassing acts – sexually explicit pictures, content, jokes, misogyny, the use of nicknames, requests for company, sexual favours, and comments about dress – the study found that different behaviours were seen as differently harassing depending on the medium. For example, requests for company were perceived as more harassing in a face-to face situation, with the implication that one is in the presence of the harasser and being forced to stay. However, misogyny and the use of nicknames were seen as more harassing online, because the act of writing something down may imply thought and seriousness to the behaviour[4].

Though the above study provides some pointers, online as offline, the question of what qualifies as 'abuse' is not an easy one, and in the emails that we sent out to women who are vocal online to invite them to participate in the research, we did not use the word 'abuse' but the phrase 'speech that makes you feel uncomfortable as a woman'. We decided to do so as we were aware that some women might find that the earlier term did not reflect their experiences, even if those experiences were of the kind that we wanted to investigate in the research. As mentioned earlier, the UN definition of Violence against women is a holistic one that accounts for the multifaceted and complex arena in which patriarchy plays itself out to the detriment of women – depending on the situation, the people involved, and the wider environment. We were, therefore, as interested in milder instances of sexism and bullying, with or without much success, as in severe forms of abuse and harassment: as long as the speech acts in question were designed to target, humiliate and hurt a woman on the basis of her gender, an instance would fall within the ambit of this research. If we use 'abuse' or even 'harassment' in this study, it is, thus, often a shorthand for a wide range of experiences. In this chapter, we explore what such experiences might consist of.

It has to be acknowledged from the outset that sexist abuse that women receive does not only come from men: sometimes, women too, engage in such speech. Namrata, who runs a feminist page on Facebook, for example, commented: 'I receive a lot of hate messages from women as well. Many women are also a part of misogynist pages. When they say something hateful, the men in such forums praise them. They crave for such approval.' Trishna, a popular mommy-blogger, noted:

> In my experience, men who find my blog uninteresting, don't come back again. With women, here is a combination of fascination and abomination. If they don't like you, they will still come back to your blog to read stuff, so that they can hate you more: 'See what she's said today!!!!'

It also has to be acknowledged that men, too, do receive abuse – and their experiences, in fact, also deserve further research. But even though not the focus of our study, it is clear, and this needs to be emphasised, that the abuse that men and women receive is not the same. For example, journalist and active Twitter user Sagarika Ghose noted that while her husband, Rajdeep Sardesai, who is also a well known journalist, gets viciously attacked on Twitter for his views as well, the vitriol that he has to face is not of a sexually violent nature. In an article, she has written: 'As a television journalist, I get a daily dose of abuse on Twitter… Some examples: "Bitch, you deserve to be stripped and raped

[3] Li, Qing (2005). Gender and CMC: A Review on Conflict and Harassment. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, 21(3): 382-406.

[4] Interestingly, women participants found the described behaviours to be on average more harassing than their male counterparts. This can perhaps be seen as a wider comment on the ways in which sexual harassment itself is differently perceived across genders.

publicly." "*Randi ki aulad maadar...*". In fact, I and other women journalists on Twitter regularly receive threats of sexual assault'.[5] While men receive abuse on account of the views they hold, the comments women receive seem to quickly target their identity *as women*. As Ghose asked in a personal interview, 'A known user with many followers on twitter says: "you and Barkha [Dutt, another well-known TV journalist and anchor] – the ISI [the Pakistani intelligence services] should use you as prostitutes!" Will he ever say this to a male journalist?'. Because of their gender, attacks on women take a different form than those on men.

Despite the severity of some of the attacks described here, that we decided not to use the term 'abuse' in our invitations to women to participate in this study turned out to be a wise choice, however: many women explicitly said in the interviews that they do not consider themselves victims, and do not want others to consider them as victims either. In part, this may reflect the extent to which women have become habituated to such speech: it has become normalised. Kalpana, an Internet enthusiast who works with online volunteers and is active on a range of online portals and forums, reflected many other women's words when she noted: 'This [online abuse] has happened so many times that it does not even strike me as something particular [anymore]'. Mridula, human rights activist, frequent blogger, and active Twitter and Facebook user, said: '*Yeh toh hotein rehta hain'*. But as we will see in chapter 5 on women's strategies to deal with such abuse, for some women, refusing victimhood also involved a conscious choice. In the remainder of this chapter, we will be describing the range and form of abuse that women experience and the circumstances that trigger it in greater detail. It is with their conscious and proactive refusal of victimhood in mind that what follows has to be read and understood.

Range and forms of verbal abuse targeted at women online

Let us consider some more examples of the abusive speech that women who are vocal online are often faced with.

When Anshika, a media professional active on various social media platforms, retweeted a message noting that a respected left-leaning historian had argued that the politics behind book-banning should be identified, she was asked how she would react if someone wrote about the sex life of her parents without proof. When she responded that she wouldn't read it, she received a whole series of tweets supposedly describing her father's role in sexual intercourse between her parents in graphic detail. A seemingly innocuous exchange had quickly descended into a hateful spiral, simply because Anshika had a contrary opinion. The abuser's profile picture was the sacred Hindu symbol Ohm.

In a now well-known incident, popular Dalit writer Meena Kandasamy sent out, on 25 April 2012, a tweet that read, 'Was at the Osmania university beef eating festival. Awesome experience in spite of violence by ABVP.' Following this statement – considered to be an insult to Hindus who regard cows as sacred animals – an avalanche of reactionary tweets totalling more than one hundred called her everything from a 'bitch' to a 'whore' to a 'terrorist'. Tweeter handle @sidhh108 wrote, 'Bloody bitch, u shud be gang raped and telecasted live. That will be awesome experience.' It wasn't clear whether rape was the punishment for eating beef; for talking about beef eating; or for being an opinionated woman in public.

TV anchor and senior journalist Sagarika Ghose shared with us:

> I face a huge amount of daily abuse, harassment and I would say gender discrimination, gender insensitive talk on Twitter. Not just me, most women journalists who happen to be liberals [...] liberal women

[5] Ghose, Sagarika (2012). Netiquette, Not Censorsip. Right-wing Hatespeak on Social Media Needs to be Monitored. Outlook, 10 September 2012. http://www.outlookindia.com/article.aspx?282107 Retrieved on 18 November 2012.

> journalists face harassment or abuse on the net. Stuff like: 'you should be gang raped, you should be raped in public' [...] A lot to do with rape [...] 'You should be beheaded. If you come to Mangalore, we will behead you' [...]. I get called *buddhi,* references to my looks, my hair. There was a time I used to block ten to fifteen people a day."

Other women commented on the kinds of abuse they faced with less detail. Sumona, a popular Twitter user and author said, 'On an average, I block 5-10 people [a day] on Twitter. On an average. You get called everything from a darling, you get sent porn, you get called a bitch.' Muskaan, a Kashmiri woman and an active Twitter user, noted, 'Once you are a woman and you are not anonymous, any kind of trolling that happens, they will throw in the key words of slut, whore.' Muskaan is also told frequently 'Stupid Jihadi woman. Go back to Pakistan!' Sharda, a seasoned online activist who uses both Twitter and Wordpress to campaign for the rights of various marginalised groups, said, 'I have been called a slut, have received a rape threat. When I supported Slutwalk, I was told that "maybe this is her chosen career".'

In some cases, a person uses multiple accounts to harass a woman. Wikipedia defines such a phenomenon, in which multiple [Wikipedia] user accounts are used for inappropriate purposes as sock puppetry[6]. In a volunteer-driven community dependent project like Wikipedia, volunteers use sock puppetry to derive support for their point of view, especially while editing an article that has contentious views by many people. Kalpana noted that sock puppetry was also resorted to to target women. She explained:

> Sock puppetry is basically one person making multiple accounts and it is like split personality. It happens on Wikipedia all the time. There is an article about the Guwahati molestation case on Wikipedia – there is a documented discussion. Multiple guys have come and said, 'you are writing about this; why are you not writing the case about rape cases that are happening in all parts of the country?' It is *your* problem. You want to write about them go ahead. I think this is relevant and so I am writing. And what they did is, they create multiple accounts just to be able to gang up against me. That happens a lot on Wikipedia. What I have realised is that basically, there is no point having a strategy because you shut one guy up, [and] he'll bring an entire group just made of him on the internet.

Not all forms of abusive speech and harassment are direct, however. Some women also reported having been abused 'on the sly': without any mention of their name, or where the comment wasn't sent directly to them. Though not addressed to them directly, women often know that they are the intended target of such speech, however, and the audience for the speech knows so too. Muskaan has had this experience repeatedly:

> Then there is this whole separate, fun group that sly tweets. Sly tweeting is talking about someone without using her handle – it's like online backbiting. So let's not name her because then she would know. So let's make fun of her and giggle. And of course you find out because it is a small online community. I know this is true of the Kashmir community, because I say a lot of things that don't go well down with a lot of juvenile online users in the Kashmiri community. So they have a whole little group – and the Kashmiri jokes start.

Women who were the targets of such sly communication were often considerably troubled by it, as they saw in it a technique to get a larger group to gang up against them. This was so especially where the abuser in question was someone more powerful or popular than the woman, as in such instances, the sly communication will frequently also result in an increase in *direct* abuse. Muskaan's relations with a popular Twitter user soured after they had an argument about a comment he had made against Islam, and she unfollowed him. When subsequently an opinion piece of hers on Kashmir got published in a newspaper, he wrote a long rebuttal on his blog, which she did not respond to. She said:

> I did not bother. That was him using his clout write about me without engaging with me..... [But] it is

[6] http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wikipedia:Sock_puppetry

> disturbing when people, who are influential, start attacking some person. A simple dissent from him will mean that their followers will start writing to me. I started getting comments on my blog. I started getting amazing amount of traffic on twitter from abusive trolls, right wing people etc. A lot of hate, too.

Trishna, too, became the target of a rather vicious piece of sly communication, in which the offline and online connected:

> A famous writer, who used to comment on my blog often, befriended me and wrote to me saying she would like to meet me. She came home, played with the babies. My husband dropped her home. Later, somebody brought to my attention a blog that was making fun of every post I wrote. Anything I wrote, she would take that and make a parallel blog. I did not know who it was... I started making inquiries about who she was. Meanwhile, she invited some common friends to comment on that blog. She assumed that they all hated me like she did. Some of them called me and told me that this woman has been writing a parallel blog. It's only then that I came to know who she was.
>
> Although it struck me that I could go the cyber police way to find out who she is, there was no real crime here. It is perfectly legal to call someone a rat or an idiot. There was a fine line that she did not cross....I felt horrible because I invited this woman home and she betrayed me.

In addition, women were not only abused through words. At times, abuse also centred around pictures, especially in the later stages of an episode of abuse, with pictures being morphed or shared with new audiences without the woman's consent. Mridula, a human rights activist, chooses to remain faceless on the Internet. 'I am all over the Internet', she commented, 'but I am faceless because I want my work to speak for itself'. In one particular incident, however, a group of men managed to find her picture, defaced it and posted it on the public Facebook page of a music festival, all the while hurling abuses at Mridula, because she had asked uncomfortable questions about the impact of the event on the local community. Mridula was subsequently thrown out of the forum. She did not relent, however, and started a page of her own to continue to question the event organiser's practices [or to challenge the abuse?]. The abusers then followed her to this page, and the abuse continued. However, she says, 'This time, they were abusing me on my forum and I had my friends to defend me. But unlike them, I did not block them.'

The particular importance of images and references to the body and sexuality in many of the worst cases of abuse was striking throughout women's testimonies. In fact, it seemed to play a crucial role in determining whether women would consider an instance of abuse as a mere 'annoyance' or a case of real harassment. We will therefore look into this issue in great detail in chapter two.

Finally, not all comments women receive online are outright abuse: women are also harrassed in ways which overtly don't seem like abuse but which are nevertheless intended to make them feel uncomfortable as women. Through subtle and seemingly harmless slights, women are made to feel that they don't belong in a particular space[7]. Though often difficult to point out while it is actually happening, the harm inflicted by repeated instances of such microaggression, too, can be considerable. Kalpana noted that microaggression is used with particular frequency in tech spaces in India:

> People will not be outright abusive towards you, which is a lot I face in my job. When someone does not want to be a part of your community, they will not abuse you because you get banned for it. They will goad and nudge you in ways to tell make sure that you are not welcome. So they will ask you- Oh, so when did you learn Javascript knowing that you don't know Javascript. Just to make you feel that only those who have learnt Javascript have the right to be there [in the forum]."

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7 http://www.themarysue.com/psychology-of-the-fake-geek-girl/

What circumstances give rise to gender-based abuse online?

What exactly gives rise to gender-based abuse online? Do specific topics trigger such reactions, or is merely being a woman really enough? The opinions are varied. Some believe that gender-based abuse has little to do with *what* women talk about; rather, they believe, as Kandasamy does[8], that it is more about 'the idea that an independent, thinking woman should not make her voice heard.' Or as Sumona put it, 'If you have a vagina and a strong opinion, that is enough for you to get abuse. Trishna's experience, too, seems to confirm this. As a mommy-blogger, she noted: 'The assumption seems to be that because I have a uterus and talk about my children, I'm not allowed to have an opinion on social or political matters.' Sowmya, a blogger with a wide range of interests, was shocked to find that a lot of the abusive comments she received after she wrote about national politics were from regular male readers of her blog. While some of them subsequently apologised to her, they also asked her why she was writing about politics. 'They said they liked my posts about gender and family but asked me what was the need to write political posts,' she says. That a woman exercises her agency to be online and express her views strongly is, it seems, seen as threatening by a lot of men – and some women. Or as Laurie Penny has famously said, 'An opinion, it seems, is the short skirt of the internet. Having one and flaunting it is somehow asking an amorphous mass of almost-entirely male keyboard-bashers to tell you how they'd like to rape, kill and urinate on you.'[9]

Supporting the idea that what you say isn't as relevant as the gendered body from which you speak is illustrated by the experiences of transgender people, who have been a part of online spaces as both men and women. The resulting abuse (of the same individual with the same opinions and politics) was disproportionately higher when online avatar was female as compared to male. Asking whether women are 'doing something' to warrant the abuse they receive – being overtly feminist, speaking about things they 'shouldn't', or antagonising the balance of forces – is similar to checking the length of the rape survivor's skirt. Violence against women, whether online or offline, takes place within a wider context that sees women as worthless, less important, and unequal to men – and no one ever deserves it.

However, 'simply gender' is not a ubiquitously applicable argument, and many women find that the topics they choose to write, blog, or Tweet about is directly proportionate to the abuse they receive. Mumbai-based blogger Ramya Pandian has noted that it is when she discusses certain issues – especially ones without easy answers, that she receives the most offensive responses. Discussing the nature of the harassers she says[10], 'There are rabid ones that blame women's liberation, working women and women in general for the downfall of society, the breakdown of marriage and even the increase in rapes. Expressing such sentiments in the real world would provoke severe reactions. Online, they are just shrugged off as 'creepy characters on the Internet.'

In our interviews, too, while women reported abuse in response to a wide range of statements, certain topics seemed to function as triggers in particular. Perhaps most well-known, as it has received considerable attention in the media as well, is the harassment many women face at the hand of supporters of the Hindu Right: those who proclaim their allegiance to Hindutva ideology and/or organisations related to it, including the Bhartiya Janata Party. A term first coined by Sagarika Ghose, trolls with allegiances in this direction are now collectively known as 'Internet Hindus'. Initially meant in a pejorative way, many of those aligned with Hindu nationalist right wing ideology have now proudly appropriated the identity and use the term as a badge of honour, including on their Twitter profiles.

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[8] http://www.theatlantic.com/sexes/archive/2012/11/the-problems-with-policing-sexism-on-twitter/265451/

[9] http://www.independent.co.uk/voices/commentators/laurie-penny-a-womans-opinion-is-the-miniskirt-of-the-internet-6256946.html

[10] http://www.mid-day.com/lifestyle/2011/nov/201111-Why-men-wont-let-women-speak.htm

The most innocuous statements can trigger the ire of the Hindu Right's supporters. For example, when Sumona commented on Twitter about her son, 'this child will send me to an early grave', she was abused extensively by a popular anonymous right wing account, who first asked her, 'So you are not a Hindu? I thought you were a Hindu!', then tweeted, 'This bitch, Sumona, says she is not a Hindu'. Hindus do not bury their dead. The abuse that followed continued for days. Sumona is half Muslim, half Christian and married to a Hindu. She self-identifies as atheist. Reflecting on the incident, she commented:

> This is how it takes off., Something innocuous that you tweet gets pounced on and twisted completely out of relevance. A tweet about the child, that was bothering me about something and he'll send me to an early grave, became a Hindu-Muslim thing and me being against Hindus. A few days ago I tweeted about Santa Claus. Now he said, 'now she is for the Christians!' I blocked him because I can do without the stress of this nonsense.

It is the figure of Narendra Modi, chief Minister of Gujarat and a member of the Bhartiya Janata Party, who has emerged in particular, however, as a polarising force on the Internet, around whom large amounts of abuse revolve. Almost every woman in our sample mentioned that commenting on Modi or his policies in Gujarat would inevitably lead to a barrage of abuse – and many had stopped addressing these topics for this reason. For example, Mridula commented on the many hate emails that she has received on email groups that she is a part of – emails which she jokingly calls love letters – for condemning Narendra Modi and the BJP's politics. The emails are laced with lines such as, 'Like the women in Gujarat, you should have been raped because you converted!' Kalpana, too, had several experiences to recount which involved comments on Modi or Gujarat:

> I received 15 responses in an hour. I took screenshots. I did not do anything more. But by then I had read about Internet Hindus. So I figured that I had written about Gujarat and this is bound to happen... I tried an experiment wherein I just wrote #Gujarat and #Modi and tweeted. I still got the same response—Go save your libido for your husband... It's some automated response which systematically direct hate to you... You don't know who's against you: bot or a human being!

Our research showed that Modi might not only be a dangerous topic for his critics: supporters, too, reported having received abuse because of their comments about him. Thus, Nidhi, an open BJP supporter said, "I receive abuse from people who hate Narendra Modi. Once, a man told me that Modi will send a man who will get a baby out of me, because I am a woman and a public Modi supporter." Nidhi also reported receiving abuse from many Pakistani men.

Nidhi admitted that Internet Hindus engage in abuse and hate speech at times, and when she intervenes in cases of online abuse of women, she thus frequently ends up having to taken on men from her own political camp. In the process, she acknowledged, she does also receive abuse from 'her own people'. She commented:

> I have friends from all political sides. When a woman is abused, I believe that ideology is separate. This is not done. I have intervened on women's behalf in many fights. During a fight, I intervened and this man [who had similar political leanings as Nidhi does] got irritated. He blocked me and started sly tweeting about me. Things became so bad that his tweets about me were started affecting my offline relationships. I had to personally go and tell people. He kept it going for months.

It is not just supporters of the Hindu Right who attempt to cut short women's political commentary, however. Politics in general is an issue women are discouraged to comment on, and this is true of women across the political spectrum. When Sumona spoke out against the anti-corruption movement of Anna Hazare when it was on the peak of its popularity, she received abusive speech from both publicly identified right wingers and anonymous egg heads (profiles with no display pictures on Twitter). 'They called me a bitch, a woman with loose morals, among other names.' These words were in addition to the words that were also attributed to men, such as 'sickular' and 'paid media'.

When Muskaan comments on the politics of Kashmir, her home state, she regularly receives abuse from supporters of the Hindu Right, who tell her, 'Stupid Muslim woman! Go back to Pakistan', as well as from Kashmiri men. She added:

> When I speak about women's issues or actually any issue I feel strongly about – Kashmir; politics; women's issues; I am very very obviously moved by rape, rape jokes, which I don't understand; just various injustices; the legal system not working – it is mostly cynical and disgust... But then sometimes you come and make a statement. And then you start getting hit back because you are a girl saying... Name calling – once you are a woman and you are not anonymous and then, any kind of trolling that has to happen, they will throw in the words of slut, whore etc.

Similarly, Trishna, a popular mommy-blogger, commented:

> When I have written on Dalit issues, casteism etc, I have been abused, attacked and I have received responses like 'why don't you stick to your USP of mommy blogging?'. People don't like a mother having an opinion on anything but her children. I face a lot of negativity from people who don't want to hear your opinion and also think that you are a mother, all you should be saying is moo! Like a cow! People get very upset when I shake the image of what a 'mom' is supposed to be.

Another issue that seems to trigger abuse is, indeed, when women express their opinions on gender issues and speak against patriarchy and its various practices. When Sharda, a popular Twitter user, extended her support to the 'slutwalk' phenomenon spreading across the world, she was called the 'Chief Slut'. When Sumona carried out an online campaign against child sex abuse, a Twitter user who she had briefly interacted with before, tweeted back child pornographic links to her. Strong opinions on domestic violence, marital rape and other such injustices in the private sphere are also sure to receive a lot of abuse. When Sowmya was writing about domestic violence, a man tried to humiliate her by saying 'Oh your husband must be abusing you; this must be happening in your home and that's why you are saying this', thus attempting to invoke the shame that is commonly associated with being a victim of domestic violence and in that way shut her up. When Muskaan writes about marital rape, she gets abuse from fundamentalist Muslims who insist that talking about marital rape in itself is against Islam and that there is no phenomenon like that:

> Some people get very touchy about it... especially the so called defenders of Islam. 'There is no such thing as marital rape'. 'What do you know!' 'Once you get married...' Personal things like this. 'Once you are married you do as your husband pleases'. And then they start using the religious card but that doesn't work because I know more about my religion than them and I respond back to their narrow-minded views."

Sumona added: 'When you talk of domestic violence, you are [considered to be] instigating them [women] to leave families. They don't want women to have an opinion.'

Yet as we mentioned above, in some cases, being a woman in itself does indeed seem to be sufficient reason to attract harassment and abuse online. Many women, in the course of the study shared that they received abuse when they refused to chat with a man on a public platform. It seems that all too many men's sense of entitlement is such that, if a woman is available online on Facebook or a chat forum, she should talk to them whenever they approach her. A woman's failure to do so may result in verbal abuse in the form of sexually explicit remarks by men on the social networks they are a part of. That women have the right and agency to only speak to men of their choice is not respected. Kalpana has had this experience for example: 'On chat forums it has happened multiple times that if you refuse to talk to them, they will call you a bitch or a whore or other names.' Fathima, a journalist with a public Facebook profile, too, said:

> I receive a lot of abuse from men on chat. I think men don't have any netiquette. People start talking to me without any courtesy, without saying 'hello', 'sorry' or 'are you busy'. Some people start calling me by a

> nickname. I am a thirty nine year old. I am not a seventeen year old girl. They also flirt with me....say I love you...and other explicit stuff. And if I don't respond, the men become angry almost as if, if I am online, I have to respond.

When Sumona receives such messages, she takes swift action. Treating the issue in a light-hearted way, she said, 'I do get the 'Hi sexy', 'Hi darling' messages on Twitter, which I immediately block. I call them the lonely hearts club, those looking for looove!'

Apart from those who expect women to be always available to serve their needs, there are also those who feel that they have the right to discipline all women. In other words, when women focus on writing about their personal lives, the abuse ends up coming from the moral police on the internet. For example, when Tripti, a Mumbai blogger who mostly writes about her personal life, shared with her readers that she had decided to relocate to India, she received several hate mails from anonymous email addresses. She explains:

> I was keener on relocating back to India than my husband and I had written about that on my blog. I got several hate mails saying that I am a selfish bitch and that I have no right to dominate my husband and making him relocate when he doesn't want to.

Trishna noted:

> I once received comments like, 'I hope your brother dies', 'Your family sounds weird'. This was when I had posted about how I met my ex when I had taken my kids to the park. I had written about how it was really sweet to see him to see him playing with my son and how sometimes you get closure that way. I can't remember what I wrote because I wrote it 5-6 years ago. I immediately got an email saying, you and your family are weird and how did your husband allow this and how you all are characterless... I was really impressed with the effort people put into this. I have had people sending me emails from ids like xyz356 – from complete gibberish email ids. That's when you realise they have made this up just to be able to send emails... That really gave me insight into people's lives. My God! People can be so jobless so as to create email ids [just] in order to send hatred.

Muskaan commented, 'If I say an actor is good looking, they say, "You call yourself a Muslim!" Moral *thekedaars* [police] that are all over the Internet.'

What the above clearly indicates, then, is that while particular issues may indeed be especially prone to triggering abuse, being a woman online is, in itself, in many ways sufficient. We will examine in greater detail why that is so in chapter three.

Conclusion

It doesn't take much for the abuse to flow. In this section we saw that women receive all kinds of threats that start from insulting their looks to sexuality to violent rape and death threats. It was also seen that being a woman with an opinion was a strong trigger for abuse. While men also received abuse for their opinions, women were attacked not only for their abuse for also for being a woman. It was also observed that expressing opinion about specific topics including politics, feminist issues, domestic violence received abuse on a consistent basis. What was alarming was how much time some people took out just to spread hate and abuse in an effort to frighten women off from occupying their space in the virtual world. How do women negotiate with these elements that hinder their experience of enjoying the public space are things that we will look into in detail subsequently in the study.

Chapter 2. Targeting Women: The Continuing Importance of the Body and Sexuality

> *a woman's right not to be exploited, degraded and demeaned by the sexual use of her body is counteracted by her right to consensually expose her body in whatever way she deems fit, as also by her – and everyone else's – right to freedom of speech, expression and representation that is guaranteed by democratic constitutions all over the world.*
>
> (Bose, 2006, p. xx)

This section considers the various ways in which women interviewed experience abuse directly related to their bodies or sexuality, and their strategies for dealing with such abuse. Nidhi, a right-wing political commentator and active Twitter user says in her interview: The real problem is 'when they do not talk about my thought process, but about my appearance.' This statement provides a useful framework through which to explore one of the most common responses that women who actively speak out in public forums receive – comments about their bodies (rather than their views or work). In another example, Manju, a South Indian journalist who keeps a public Facebook profile as a means of meeting new and interesting people, often gets chat requests from men who are interested in her simply because of her gender, rather than her work. Given this, she most often declines to have a conversation with them, which leads to a growing irritation on their part. One such instance of refusing to chat with a man immediately led to his asking her, 'Are you not an ordinary woman with one vagina? Do you have 100 vaginas around your waist?' Her refusal to participate, in this way, is somehow linked to what was assumed by her harasser to be a deviant sexuality. In yet another example, Vishakha, a well known journalist, describes an incident where she tweeted a photograph of a well packaged, expensive milk carton. She immediately received a tweet from a man asking her if that milk was from her breasts. Most women interviewed said they do not mind engaging with people they do not know if the engagement directly pertains to the topic they were initially speaking about. However, the conversation quickly – and often immediately – turns into a comment on her body or her sexuality.

Gender-based abuse faced by women online often targets the most visible marker of gender – the female body, which, as we have seen, is a highly contested arena in Indian public discourse. Women's bodies are polarised into two extremes, where one on hand they are upheld as the symbol of virtuous, pure and *chaste* Indian – or at least middle class – culture, whereas on the other hand, they are viewed with both suspicion and desire as a force of indecency, obscenity and sexuality. This impossible dichotomy presents itself in various arenas, and fuelled by the advertising industry, religious values, and cultural myths, various political, social, cultural and economic battles often play out on within its polarities, and on the same female body. Caught within what is often termed as the mother/whore dichotomy, abuse and violence against women – both online and offline – seeks to punish women who fall into the latter category. But given the complex, multifaceted lives and roles of an individual woman, the question of to what *any woman* qualifies as a 'true mother' is a pertinent one. A mother, obviously, is never purely chaste – she's had sex at least once in her life. However, the religious and cultural scripts placed upon her seek to efface that sexuality in favour of a *maa-durga* image of purity that ultimately, even the 'best' of mothers, can invariably never live up to. And on the other hand, if the 'whore' is something to be feared as a threat to cultural purity through her uncontrolled sexuality, she is simultaneously worshipped on the altars of Bollywood as an object of desire – a prize to be won. Where do the lived experiences of women fall into this impossible polarisation? Are the punishments for a lack of virtue the other side of the coin that punishes women for 'ugliness', for a lack of beauty defined through sexuality?

Images

The ways in which harassers use a woman's physical appearance to respond to her speech and in an attempt to silence her was highlighted as an important aspect of abuse by women interviewed. During their interviews, many women found it difficult to recollect specific instances of verbal harassment that particularly resonated with them, indicating that verbal abuse is a daily part of their Internet lives. However, while the study only questioned women about speech they received, many remembered examples where their pictures – or other visual images and videos - had been used against them.

Mridula, an activist who uses social media platforms to campaign for the rights of marginalised groups, is open about her contact details, including her address and phone number, so that people who need her can easily get in touch. However, she opts never to put a picture of herself on any platform she uses, because she believes her work should speak rather than her face. She says that she can remember no singular examples of abuse, given the frequency with which they occur. However, the one instance of abuse she *does* recall was an incident where she questioned the implications a music event would likely have on a local community – on the event's Facebook page. She says,

> When I started that, suddenly the organisers pounced on me: Who are you…why are you doing this? Then the bitch, cunt, *yeh vooh,* finding my picture. I don't have a picture online, I am like a faceless, and I don't want my picture to be online. But I mean since I have written so there are one or two pictures which are online, which somebody went all the way to find out who I am and then put in my picture and made a moustache and tarnished the face and all that, and put it on the group […] This was a very intense one[…] This is something which I don't want. Then distort it, and sexist remarks, all the female-ka-*gaalis* were there. I was angry and agitated. [she tries to recount other instances, but fails to remember them] Since you have asked me, the clear thing [is this incident] that had in a way sort of upset me, but then it just went off. *Baaki hota rehta hai* but it is not in recollection for me to remember, because I care two hoots. *Tum gaali dete ho, to dete raho*, you know, my attitude is such. If somebody tells, "I'm going to rape you", I'll say, "Come on, ya, where? Let's do it" […] But my choice is not to show my face online […] It's like I'm there for my work. I don't want people to identify me […] And I want to be respected in that.

This same woman says that she laughs off rape threats on a regular basis, because 'it shows what their mentality is.' The image, however, 'upset her'.

Similarly, Muskaan, a Kashmiri woman active on Twitter, talks about an incident where someone took pictures from her personal blog and made a hate page. She describes the incident:

> It was after I had spoken so much about [this topic in Kashmir] and I had written an article in [a newspaper]…On the Kashmir forum some kids had taken my pictures and started writing shit about it – 'look at her, she's a Kashmiri. But shameless, partying!' […] It was on an online forum, I don't even remember the name of it because I'm not a part of the forum [...] That had started going around on Twitter which is how I found out. And I didn't have a problem with anything, because as I said they can [say what they want], I just didn't want my photo up there. It was my personal photograph [...] [This was done by] Kashmiris who disagreed with me and were offended that I had more reasonable views on the subject [...] Maybe they didn't like that I wore jeans and a T-shirt plus a hijab, that doesn't go down well with them […] I was not disturbed […] I was just annoyed […] Their idea was obviously just to intimidate me, and say we've got a page up for you and now everyone is going to know – *what* I don't know [….] I just said, get my picture off the page, you can write whatever you want to.

A striking point from her recollection of the incident is the way in which her harassers may have felt that there was something that 'everyone is going to know' through the republishing of her photograph – the idea that the photograph in itself is 'telling' with respect to a woman, even though it was, as she describes it, 'a very normal photograph.' Furthermore, it is useful to note here that she perceives one reason the picture may have been published was because her appearance didn't conform to the accepted identity for not only a woman, but a *Muslim* woman. As discussed at the beginning of this section, this can perhaps be seen as representative of the ways in which a woman's appearance is compared to what is expected from her – more beauty, less exposure, religious conformity, etc – and used as a means to intimidate her.

In response to this instance, Muskaan wrote to the website administrator, who had the picture removed. 'He was very nice about it […] He didn't know what had happened.' The policies and effectiveness of social media and online forums themselves in assisting with situations of abuse and harassment will be further discussed in the strategies section.

What women's experiences also point to is that while they may refuse to censor what they say despite the abuse they receive for it, many who were once candid with their pictures do not publicly display them anymore. Kalpana, an Internet-enthusiast who works with online volunteers and is active on a range of online portals and forums talks about her experiences on Orkut in her early days of social media use:

> These were the days when you weren't very protective about pictures, and…there weren't mechanisms by which you could protect your pictures…[so guys would be] taking your picture [from your profile] and circulating it among their friends, saying that "Oh I saw this cute girl" or something. You didn't know them directly, but they're a friend of a friend. You add them because they are in your school or something […] So after that I removed all my pictures.

Today, along with using social media under a pseudonym, she displays no photographs of herself.

Similarly, Trishna, a blogger, talks about an incident when she put up a what she calls a 'Johnson's Baby-type picture' of her and her baby daughter on her blog. 'You could tell it was a naked baby, but there was nothing objectionable, [you couldn't see] the private parts.' Following this, a male blogger known in the blogging community for targeting women, took the picture and reposted it on his own blog – which was 'all about misogyny, about bashing women - any woman who was a successful blogger - with the comment, 'This lady has been putting up naked pictures of her children. I wonder if she'll put up naked pictures of herself.' This was the first time, despite all the varying forms of abuse she had received, that she thought about going to the cyber police for help. However, thanks to her own interventions, which will be further discussed in section six of this paper, by the next day, his blog post was taken down. She is now careful about the images she posts, and no longer puts up pictures of her family.

Nidhi, too, no longer posts images of either herself or her children, despite initially being less careful about it. This trend, where women who were once more open about their photographs subsequently developed more careful policies, is indicative of the ways in which what was once perceived as a safe space (social media platforms) is now seen as a public space open to harassment and exploitation. This notion of privacy and public domains will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

The use of images – extending to video – to abuse women online is not confined to the use of an image depicting the woman herself. Many women talked about how the men who harass them would often have naked or otherwise 'vulgar' (as one interviewee puts it) images as their display pictures on Facebook or Twitter. Says Namrata, a Women's Studies student with a public Facebook profile, 'The kinds of display pictures people put – of their genitalia – and then they come on to you. It's sexual harassment, I suppose.' Similarly, Vishakha, a prominent journalist and active Twitter user, recounts an incident where another senior (male) journalist sent her a link to a video of 'an elephant raping a rhino…I thought he was mad.' Despite saying, 'I didn't think it was offensive', this is an incident she cites many times during the course of her interview. While the degree of offense may not have been high, the event in itself stayed with her.

The resonance of image-related abuse likely has much to do with the way in which the female body has been constructed through public discourse and visual media. On the one hand constricted by ever-tightening waistlines and item-girl stereotypes, on the other hand there has simultaneously also been a drive to 'cover up' the female body for the sake of religion, morality or culture. Given that women consume, interact with and respond to this polarising of their bodies in visual culture, the

manipulation, morphing, or even republishing of their images can be seen as an attack on what *society tells them* is their greatest asset or worst enemy – their appearance. Therefore, when an image is stolen, morphed or re-published, it may be perceived as a woman's loss of control over how her body is represented and what its appearance signifies. Taking a personal profile picture and using it for a hate page about a woman, for example, takes us back to the woman's words who says, they did it so that everyone 'would know [something about me] – *what,* I don't know.' The meaning of an image is dependent on its context, and when the context is non-consensually changed, the owner or subject of the picture no longer has control over what it may signify to others.

This extent to which images hold a certain power, and when used against women, are significantly perceived as harassment, is further echoed in the laws around the use of images. In the IT Act, the punishments for image-based abuse (as stipulated in Section 67, which pertains to obscene material and section 67A, which pertains to sexually explicit material) are far higher than the punishments for verbal harassment (covered largely by Section 66A). Furthermore, sections 67 and 67A replicate and therefore further enforce their offline counterpart – Section 292 of the IPC dealing with obscenity - contributing to the seriousness with which the use of images is legally perceived, wherein laws that exist offline are further enforced through *separate online provisions.* This is also the case with the Indecent Representation of Women Act, which is now under consideration by Parliament to specifically include images circulated online[11].

What is also interesting to note here, however, is the way in which the importance given to images is furthered by women themselves, and to what extent this has influenced the laws around the representation of women. The interviews with women for this study have demonstrated some women's strong reactions to image-based abuse (as opposed to verbal harassment), and the privileging of this visual harassment over verbal harassment within the law can perhaps also be traced to the discomfort of women themselves. For example, literature around the development of the obscenity and indecency laws demonstrates that various groups within the urban women's movements were key instigators in this legal shift, given their belief that sexual images of women were part of the exploitation of women, and that there is a close link between the visual exploitation of women and the real violence women faced. The development and implementation has earlier been discussed in the introduction to this paper, and is something we will come back to in later sections as well.

However, the interviews also found that at least in our sample, the majority of abuse women face online relates to words rather than images, and that while instances of image-related abuse remained a strong memory and a pertinent example of what they found unacceptable or harmful, for the women in the study's sample, such forms of harassment do not occur with the same frequency as verbal abuse.

Sex

The idea that a woman who has sex is somehow morally corrupt and outside the purview of decent 'Indian Culture' is present throughout public, cultural and religious discourse. The shame that women are expected to feel about (having) sex is built into girls from a young age, and there is a great deal of silence around the sex that women are having. Therefore, the speculated details of a woman's sex life are commonly used to harass women on online forums, perhaps in the belief that the shame of the subject will work to silence her.

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What does it mean for 67 and 67A to have offline counterparts in comparison to 66A? The significance of Section 66A having no direct offline counterparts, but various sections within the IPC that could be used instead of it, needs to be further discussed.

Says Vishakha, 'People ask, "Have you had sex before you got married?" And in Hindi, so it's ever cruder…[just] because what you've said, people don't agree with. There have been people like that: men.' Rather than being a response to a specific type of speech – overtly political, feminist, etc – she talks about these incidents as a frequent occurrence in response to any opinion she vocalises that someone else may not share.

The question of why women's sex lives are conflated with their opinions or their voices is further elaborated upon in the other examples. Recounting an instance that occurred when she was talking about events in the state of Gujarat, Kalpana received the following reply to her tweets: 'Save your libido for your husband'. On viewing the person's profile and speaking with other women online, she learned that this was something that he would say to *all* women who were active online that he came across.

The idea of a woman having an excess of libido, or sexuality, and therefore being vocal online is not confined to this incident. Nidhi talks about an instance when a man who was following her

> started calling me things like a desperate housewife who wakes up at 2am or 3am in the night. He went to other people I speak to and started saying things like how I treat my husband or family life…that I'm here to hobnob with men who I would want to be with.

Here we once again find an example of the way in which it is assumed that a woman choosing to be present online is sexually deviant in some manner, and in the case of the above two examples, refers to sexual relations outside of marriage, which many feminists see as an institution that seeks to control women's sexualities. We find here the underlying idea that if a woman's reproductive organs were kept in check, she wouldn't need to be so vocal or public about her opinions. Women's speech, like their sexuality, is often seen as something that must be regulated. Many feminist theories point to the ways in which the expression of voice and the expression of sexuality are both important in the acquisition of *agency* for women, and essential to fights for a gender-equal world [12]. Furthermore, given the ways in which the Internet and social media provide new platforms for women to make their voices heard on an unprecedented scale, this linkage of voice with deviant sexuality can be seen as a move to *remove* the empowerment gained through voice, and constrict women within the confines of their bodies, and by extension, into traditional methods of patriarchal control.

Another reference to sex that is used to abuse women online are statements that refer to the sex lives of families or partners. Sex and sexuality are never family matters, and to discuss, or even recognise, that parents or family elders engage in sexual conduct is considered to be unacceptable. Furthermore, the silence around sex in most households leads to a culture of shame around sex, which harassers seek to capitalise on. Culturally rooted in a family-system that above all demands 'respect for elders' – a catchphrase that most Indian children are brought up with – respect and sex can simply never be juxtaposed. Therefore, by sending a woman comments about her family's sex life, a harasser may hope that she will be shamed into silence.

Anshika, a media professional active on various social media platforms, recollects the following incident that occurred on Twitter

> There was one [incident] where I was discussing freedom of expression and saying that books should not be banned. And this man went on and on and on about whether my father had sex, whether he still has sex, that kind of stuff. I have no idea what the connection is, but I think it is this belief that the talk of sex or sexuality will bother women. And it does tend to…[I felt] angry, angry as hell. I was so angry I was hot. You could feel the heat radiating from me…[It happened] over a five hour period.

[12] Feminist theories that explore the regulation of women's speech – and further, link this to sexual regulation, or vice versa – need to be further explored here.

The man sending her these tweets wasn't an 'unknown troll' but someone she knew and who she followed on Twitter. Here, the reference to her father enraged her beyond anything else she experienced online. Chapter three will further explore the ways in which women are adversely impacted by references to and attacks upon their families.

However, some women have become inured to the ways in which the sex lives of their families are questioned. Mridula talks about her experience of talking on Twitter about the fact that people need be more open about sexuality. In response, one user tweeted back, 'Your mother is so fuckable', to which she responded, 'Hello good morning I am in the world!'. She recollects that her reply gained so much appreciation that it was retweeted nearly 200 times.

Through these two examples it is possible to see that while many women face abuse that targets the sex lives or sexualities of their families, because of 'the belief that it will bother women', the responses of the women themselves vary depending on how much the abuse has affected them. It is also perhaps important to consider to what extent women accept or reject the power that sex, sexuality and even images are supposed to wield over them, and whether a refusal to grant importance to these attacks – such as the case of the last interviewee in this section - is a valuable strategy for dealing with gender-based abuse online.

Rape

Furthering the attacks on a woman's appearance or sexuality, a frequent threat of violence exercised against women online is the rape threat. These threats are used on a range of platforms and in response to a variety of situations, some of which are outlined below.

Sometimes, the threats may be linked to the physical appearance of the woman. Namrata talks about abuse she received following the recent, brutal and heavily publicised gang rape of a 23 year old woman on a Delhi bus, following which she succumbed to her injuries. This incident was something this Internet user was very vocal about, particularly on Facebook, where she maintains a public profile. In response, other Facebook users – men - sent her private messages such as, 'How can you expect to go out in the clothes you do and not get raped?' Interestingly she says, these threats were 'from the same people who had the black dot [as their display picture] standing against rape.' Through this example it is evident that even those who claim to be against rape – many during the time were sporting a back dot as their profile picture in order to condemn the situation - believe that there are certain qualifications a woman must have (more mother less whore), in order not to be deserving of sexual violence.

Background research and testimonies of women bloggers from different parts of the world suggests that rape threats are a rite of passage into the blogosphere, and irrespective of your popularity or readership size, there will always be harassers who seek a woman out, simply on the basis of her gender. Though this was not a trend across the sample, the following example corroborates this view. Namrata talks about her early days of blogging, when she ran a blog tracing the history of a feminist movement. The blog had very few readers, but it was on this blog that she received 'three explicit rape threats [where they spoke about] hunting me down and raping me, slitting my throat and raping me.' At the time, she didn't share the incident with anyone, 'because there was a fear of victim blaming.' Following these rape threats, the woman shut down her blog, and only re-entered online public platforms much later.

Some women believe that another instigator for rape threats is women speaking around the issue. As Namrata says in reference to her experiences on various platforms, 'Talking about rape means that people say you deserve rape.' To use another example, Sharada, a behavioural mediator and

online activist on Twitter and Wordpress, talks about an incident on Twitter where she was challenging certain comments about rape that she termed 'anti-women', and entered into a debate with a man, who 'ended up making a rape threat along the lines of, "Get down on your knees and I will show you who the big boy is."'. Rape threats often use the more violent elements of pornographic language and visuals, which is an element of abuse that women from across the world experience.

The proliferation of pornographic language into speech is a debate within feminist circles, and writing in New Statesman, London-based blogger, activist and comedienne Kate Smurthwaite has argued, 'There is a clear link to Internet pornography. Much of the language used could have come straight from pornographic sites.' Many feminists believe that the violence depicted in pornography, particularly in 'rape pornography', contributes to a wider 'rape culture', or the ways in which rape and violence against women are normalised in our day to day lives and speech. The same blogger goes on to say, 'There is an underlying issue though – the people who post these comments reveal a deep-seated hatred towards women. I find that unsurprising in our culture. Violent, extreme pornography is normal Internet fare' (Smurthwaite in Lewis, 2011). As per a feminist understanding of rape culture, irrespective of whether these threats will be carried though in real life, their proliferation across the Internet contributes to wider, misogynistic attitudes that see rape as an invariable occurrence in the world.

However, the question of whether these threats can indeed cross into offline spaces is for many women a real concern. A prominent journalist and media personality talks about receiving many 'serious rape threats' including frequent comments such as, 'I know your way back from the office and I'll come and rape you.' Despite the fact that threats made online may rarely translate into actions offline¸ the fear felt by women of real danger – and the negative effects this has on their ability to participate equally in virtual spaces – means that the words do, irrespective of physical harm, have real consequences.

Recently writing in the Huffington Post, Soraya Chemaly's perspective on the issue is a useful framework with which to consider the potential movement from online to offline violence. She says,

> The intent is to silence women online. Unfortunately, sometimes, in Schrodinger's Rapist fashion [where every man may or may not be a rapist, and there is no way to tell until he sexually assaults a woman] it gets real results offline. I don't know many women engaged publically, certainly not those advocating for gender equity, who have not been harassed or threatened, many to the point of feeling physically endangered. While much of the communications is ugly and innocuous, some of it isn't. (Chemaly, 2013)

While there are no clearly established links between online threats and offline violence, the ways in which threats can contribute towards silencing women online (as seen through the example of the young woman who shut down her blog on a feminist movement), shows how rape can be used as an effective tool of intimidation. Furthermore, some argue that the *fear of rape*, in itself, prevents women from being safe. In a paper titled 'Gendered Usage of Public Spaces', author Shilpa Phadke writes, 'Safety defined in relation to public space is not just physical safety but also the feeling of being safe and a lack of anxiety about public space and an uncontested claim to the space that one inhabits. By this definition, most women do not feel safe' (Phadke, 2010, p.4). The threat of rape leads to the fear of rape, which contributes to an environment where women live under the threat – whether perceived or real – which then affects the ways in which they mediate virtual spaces.

Conclusion

A discussion of women's experiences of abuse relating to their bodies or sexuality problematises the

mother-whore dichotomy that seeks to separate women into two categories, given that *all* women, irrespective of their marital status, appearance or sex life, can be said in some manner to fall into the latter of the two. Women's bodies and sexualities are used in order to control them, and this wider misogyny is mirrored online through the abuse of women, and is evident in the three forms of abuse discussed above: imagery, sex and rape. The use of women's photographs is often used to undermine their voices and opinions by instead, focusing on what has always been used as a means of controlling women – their bodies. Furthermore, references to sex and sexuality – that of the women themselves or their family members – seeks to shame women, who are expected to conform to a pure, 'motherly' stereotype in which chastity is a virtue, and anything pertaining to sex is immoral. Finally, the frequent use of rape threats as an extreme form of control of and punishment to women's bodily and sexual autonomy seeks to foster an climate of fear, where a woman's right to use her voice and be heard is always subject to potential violence – whether real or perceived - and is an attempt to silence her.

Chapter 3. The Context for Women's Strategies: Negotiating the Public and the Private Online

> '*Women are particularly badly abused on the net. It's like a public humiliation; a public harassment. And they love humiliating women – it's like a stone pelting mob*' –
>
> Sagarika Ghose

Streets and spaces

The verbal abuse faced by women can be seen through a framework that constructs the Internet as a large public domain, which, much like the real world, comprises many streets and spaces. Its public aspect, in one sense, allows people to interact with and meet others whom they may otherwise not come into contact with offline - to form friendships, plan campaigns, and inhabit or create spaces for themselves to be heard.

Sociologist Jurgen Habermas has extensively written about the notion of the public, about which he says,

> The public sphere is a discursive space where private citizens debate issues of public concern and engage in criticism of the government in an environment free of power relations.

Says Namrata, who maintains a public Facebook profile (something that most women do not choose to keep), talks about the positive engagements possible within the virtual public sphere: 'This [keeping my profile public] is intentional. There are a lot of good people you can interact with, and I didn't want to lose out on that.' In this way, the Internet is a space of unlimited potentials and interactions – reaching further than a physical street ever could.

However, as we have seen throughout this paper, the 'public' space of the Internet does not exist in a vacuum distinct from the power hierarchies that govern society. Feminist Nancy Frazer was the first to actively critique Habermas' theory, arguing that it failed to account for the structural inequalities that prevent women and other marginalised groups from accessing public spaces. Furthermore, she challenged the dichotomy between the public and private, which was again discriminatory towards women in that issues such as violence within the home, for example, were not considered to be 'public' topics. Subsequently, many feminists continue this dialogue, and in doing so, advocate for an understanding of public spaces that take gender inequality into account.

When discussing the Internet, it is important to note at the outset, however, that the metaphor of the 'street' cannot be homogenously applied to all of the Internet and its forums, and that the ways in which users demarcate certain areas as private and others as public create new boundaries for what public space means. This point will be furthered discussed in the section exploring privacy.

However, like a physical street, the Internet – and particularly public forums like Twitter – is not a gender-equal space. Trishna says, 'There's a mob mentality which is as real as on the street. Gentle people who on a road would not get down and hammer people, given the chance to do it virtually, they [won't think twice].' Kalpana noted, 'If you choose to reveal yourself as a woman…then you [are] be open to a variety of responses that only come to you as a woman.' And many of these responses can be abusive. The consequences pf being a woman walking down a street in real life, or being visible 'as a woman' on highly public forums like Twitter that have very few privacy settings, was noted by Sumona, a published author, blogger and social media user: 'It is like street sexual harassment at your computer…There's no fear online, and there is no fear offline as well.' Gender

abuse online, similar to that faced on the street, is often perceived by women as being a part of the street itself.

As even Namrata, who sees Facebook as an important public forum says, 'This [abuse] is the sort of thing that comes along with it I suppose…It's very similar to when we walk on the street and [they] lech at us – beyond a point it doesn't matter [anymore].' The idea that abuse is something that must be accepted or ignored is not uncommon, and many women believe that the best thing you can do is not give the 'trolls' or abusers extra attention, which may spur them on further. Ignoring is often the strategy women adopt.

However, studies that look at sexual harassment often point to the fact that not responding to the harassment or accepting it as a part of being a woman in public space, does not lessen the frequency or intensity of the abuse[13]. Writes author Shilpa Phadke, 'Spaces, both private and public, are hierarchically ordered through various inclusions and exclusions, and as important markers of segregation they reinforce social power structures… Public spaces have been historically understood to be the preserve of men; a position that reinforces male control and authority over women as well (Phadke, 2010, p.2).

Not all women simple accept these gender-unequal frameworks though. Responding to the way in which women are crowded out of wider public domains both online and offline, Sharada, a blogger and active Twitter user says,

> Don't let it stand. That is your dignity and stake. It is like dealing with street harassment. You walk on the street, someone whistles at you, you put your head down, you walk a little bit faster, you cross that patch, you move on. Second day. Third day. Eventually the space on the street you can walk on keeps shrinking, shrinking, and eventually you are just off the street. It's your street. On the road, fighting off the bad guy is full of risks. On the Internet, it is not that risky. There is absolutely no excuse for not doing it. Look at it as street harassment happening on the Internet. But you are no longer limited by your physical size. You are no longer limited by what society will think. You and the guy both have the same amount of powers, you both have keyboards, then what the fuck is stopping you from defending yourself. You can no longer claim that he will overpower me. This is a mind game and women lose before they start.

What is central to the idea of gender in public spaces – whether online or offline – is as the blogger above says, about *occupying space*. The male dominated nature of public spaces also means that women's presence in them should be *justified with a purpose.* Women are on a street because they are going home, shopping in the market, or *doing something*. Conjuring up an image of an Indian street, whether in a town, city, or village, its most visibly idle inhabitants are men. Sitting. Standing. Talking. Smoking. Sleeping. The street, as it is mediated through gender unequal power relations, belongs to men, temporarily on loan to the women who *need it* for a specific reason. In this context, the entering into public space by women without reason is a transgression of an unwritten rule. In light of this, if the Internet – or for the purposes of this study, a forum in which women maintain a public profile – can be likened to a street, then to what extent does the space on that street belong to women? Is being on Twitter or on Facebook seen as 'loitering' – a distraction from the 'correct' things a woman should be doing?

In her book, *Beyond The Veil* author and sociologist Fatima Mernissi outlines how traditional Moroccan thinking views the street as male space. A woman who is on the streets is trespassing; she is in male spaces; spaces in which she has no right to be. 'If she enters them, she is upsetting the male's order and peace of mind. She is actually committing an act of aggression against him merely by being present where she should not be' (Mernissi, 1987, p.144). In this way, a woman who is on the streets without purpose, simply occupying the space, is committing a double trespass of sorts – she is *trespassing in the nude.* What does this mean for how her presence is treated by men?

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13 Studies from both India and other countries need to be cited here.

Says Anshika:

> Look at any place where women are. Do you think women and men are treated the same way? Especially [for] women who are successful and independent and can stand up for their own rights it's going to be doubly worse. It's the price that you pay…You have chosen to be there. I'm not saying we deserve it, but it's part of what you need to accept.

Her words suggest that while being in a public space doesn't mean a woman *deserves* sexual harassment, it is an inevitable outcome of her occupying a space that is not seen as hers to be in.

The various ways in which women are made to feel as though they do not belong in public forums is illustrated through the study. Kalpana describes her experiences on Facebook:

> If you become a part of user groups, on one of those pages, anywhere you try and have a conversation people immediately start locating you because of your identity and they send you all kinds of unwelcome inbox messages – private messages. They're not abusive, but I've had a couple of instances where I expressed my views on Hitler or some peace process or something and initially they just say, "Oh you are rubbish, you don't understand." But I think I had one or two comments where they said, "Oh but you're a woman, you don't understand this" or "Go back to playing with your dolls" or something.

Sometimes, this may have to do with the specifically gendered nature of the particular forums. The same woman works on various Internet-related projects, and talks about her experiences on those forums in what she terms as 'micro-aggression', a term from an article she recently read. She says,

> People may not be outright abusive to you – which is a lot of what I face… [It] is where if someone does not want you to be a part of their community, and they know you are a woman, they will not abuse you – because you get banned for it – but they will goad you and nudge you in ways that tell you that you are not welcome. So they'll say, "Oh, when did you learn Java Script?", knowing that you don't know Java Script to make you feel only people who know Java Script have the right to exist here.

This example serves to illustrate the ways in which specific domains that have traditionally been male dominated – here, technology – seek to make women feel unwelcome or under-qualified.

In another example of a woman occupying a space that is not 'hers', Nidhi recounts the comments she received on Twitter – from both the opposition party as well as from the party she supports - while speaking in support of the Anna Hazare movement. She describes the incident:

> The ones [abuse] that I faced – during the Anna movement it was very high because I was very pro-Anna movement, and there was obviously the pro-government people and even the pro-BJP people who were against the movement [who] would come up to say things that would be generally gender-oriented abuse. Now my feeling is that I usually ignore this, but my understanding is that if you see in the complete platform [Twitter] people who are Tweeting about politics or sports [or things that are] generally meant for men…But I am a bit thick skinned for this. They tried to intimidate me, they tried to tell me that this was not my platform.

Another indication of the fact that there is a general belief that public space is not meant for women can be perhaps be deduced through women's accounts of their choices not to tell their families or partners about the abuse they receive online. Kalpana says that her parents don't know what she faces in terms of abuse, 'because it would just be making an argument against my profession.' In a similar vein, Vishakha laughingly says, 'As it is my husband thinks "what a weird waste of time" – if I told him he would say "you deserve it" [the abuse]!'Similarly, Rishika – a youth activist for a major political party - says, 'My husband's initial reaction is that of annoyance and he says that "you get yourself into trouble", but he eventually comes and supports.'

These perceptions of women 'deserving' abuse for being online – similar to the *purposeless presence* of women on the street 'asking for it' – is not uncommon. Says Tripti, 'My family are totally aware that I blog…[But] I don't talk to [them] about abuse…My mom would be paranoid and protect me from negativity and tell me to shut down my blog.' In another example, Namrata says that her family knows she posts a lot of articles and things online, but not the kinds of hate

speech she receives because they would worry a lot. Sumona would consistently lower her voice when discussing abuse, given that her husband was sitting in the next room. When asked whether he was aware of what she faced, her immediate reaction was, 'Don't ask him!'

While a few women do share their experiences of abuse with their families, and others cite 'disinterest', 'a lack of knowledge around technology' or not having close relationships with their parents as reasons for not involving their families, the overwhelming majority of women interviewed believe that if they were to share these experiences, the resounding response from family members or partners would be to tell them to leave the platforms. Echoing the ways in which women are told not to go out after dark unless necessary, stay in well lit areas, and certainly never 'loiter' unless in the company of other men, women perceive similar opinions to exist around their occupying virtual streets that are not seen as 'theirs'.

However, what the interviews also found were the ways in which women actively reclaim space for themselves. Sharada recounts an incident on Twitter when 'she herself was a troll'. Coming across a thread that was roughly titled 'How to woo a Pakistani woman', she discovered many derogatory, stereotypical and sexist remarks being circulated. She says, 'I barged into that thread', and started saying things like 'grow up, 'bathe daily' or 'become worthy of her'. Following this, she found that many Pakistani Twitter handles approached her and thanked her for the intervention, and soon after, feminists from Pakistan also began contributing. By the time she left the thread, it had almost entirely been taken over by progressive voices seeking to redefine the stereotypes around gender relations and women in Pakistan. She says,

> There was absolutely no need for me to go and meddle there. But I didn't like what I was seeing…[so] I did what I wanted to. This is not just about not being a victim. *It's about taking all the space you want*' (my italics).

Through this example it is possible to note the ways in which women actively intervene in public spaces, and also how their presence in those spaces alters the space itself. If the public realm is seen as a traditionally male dominated arena, then it is only through the active presence of women claiming that space that these power relations may begin to shift. At a later point in the same activist's interview she poignantly says, 'I'm the *bhai* on the street out there. No one messes with me.'

Anonymity: Masked villains

One of the most marked ways in which the notion of the Internet as a street deviates from the lived experience of a real life street is that the Internet – and in particular Twitter – gives rise to an unprecedented degree of anonymity. On one hand, this can be seen as pushing the notion of the public to its logical conclusion, where eventually, every individual is just another citizen. A famous cartoon depicting a dog sitting at a computer reads, 'On the Internet, nobody knows you are a dog'. A Twitter handle or a blogger under a pseudonym can have an identity that has no links to who the user is offline, or at least, that does not allow the user to be identified. In a paper, Anita Gurumurhty and Niveditha Menon write,

> New technologies enable a transgression of the boundaries of 'physical or 'real' identities, and in these fluid spaces, individuals forge new relationships and networks, navigating new, and often times, multiple identities….The anonymity and forays into new self-expression and selfhood inherent in new ICTs comprise new spaces for information, access, empowerment, and solidarity. At the same time, these very characteristics associated with online spaces allow perpetrators of violence against women to get away. Since cyber identities and physical identities may not necessarily overlap, the former are not necessarily bound to the same social content or rules that the latter might operate under (Gurumurthy and Menon, 2009, p.1)

Many women interviewed held similar views with respect to the ways in which anonymity on the

Internet is used in order to perpetuate gender-based abuse. Says Sharada,

> The anonymity of the Internet really frees people out to speak without any consideration of another human being being there and receiving their words…When you are online, it's fairly easy - you're in front of your laptop, you are in the privacy of your room, [and] you don't realise you are speaking to someone

Another woman from the sample, Sumona, believes that it is not simply a question of 'forgetting' that you should responsibly engage with people, but lacking the courage to put your name to your thoughts or words. She says, 'They don't have the guts to put up their own faces; their own identities.'

Tripti, A young blogger who was amongst the first wave of bloggers in India talks about instances of abuse on her blog where the harassers were anonymous, and she responded in a fairly tempered manner so as not to potentially offend people she did not know. She reflects on the incidents:

> Had the people [been] known to me, I would have said exactly what I felt, and spoken in clearer terms, and not filled it with ambiguous politeness. They don anonymous masks…That is the biggest tool on the Internet. Anonymity gives them a lot of power to do things that they wouldn't otherwise be capable of doing…They know they can get away with it without any consequences…Their friends or family would never know what they did.

Comments such as these depict the stark difference between the virtual street and the offline street, wherein in the context of the latter, it is rare that a woman's harassers – and almost never in the case of verbal or sexual harassment – wear masks. Though a woman being harassed on a street will most likely never know her harasser's name, his physical appearance is known to her, and can be used in the case of legal measures, if she chooses. However, this may not be the case on the Internet.

Says Trishna:

> What does anyone get out of whistling at a woman on the road? It's just a cheap thrill. If you went any further and you touched her, I can imagine you got some pleasure out of that…This virtual interaction…I think a lot of people misuse the Internet because anonymity gives you so much freedom. The moment you have to sign it with your own name [the situation changes].'

Renowned journalist Sagarika Ghose agrees: '[This] issue of anonymous handles – why should people be allowed to be anonymous? This policy of anonymity is a little bit questionable to me'.

Not knowing who your harassers are, says a blogger and Twitter user who works in the technology industry, means that 'You don't know who you're up against.' Furthermore, if, as some believe, the freedom of expression afforded by the Internet comes with a responsibility for that freedom, an activist of a political party says, 'You cannot go under anonymous handles, and take freedom of expression seriously.'

However, not all the women interviewed wish their abusers had names and faces. Namrata talks about the men from whom she received rape threats on her blog outlining a feminist movement:

> I think if I had known the abusers it would have been a lot more scary for me. I think the anonymity gave me the comfort of thinking at least this person is a coward of sorts who doesn't want anyone to know who he is, and is just threatening for the heck of it. But someone who is okay with me knowing who he is, that would have been a lot scarier.

However, the issue of anonymity is, for the women interviewed, a complex one. The benefits of privacy that anonymity affords is incredibly important to those who do not want to put their names or faces to their profiles, and allows freedom of expression to those who may otherwise feel unable to express themselves, or who live in parts of the country where the risks of speaking out against prominent individuals, or the government, is very high. In an article talking about the protection of LGBTQ people online, the APC (Association for Progressive Communications) states:

> Real LGBTI people living in repressive societies often assume false identities when they go online – it in an important safety measure…The rights to anonymity and privacy online must remain respected and protected. A recent UN report of freedom of expression and the Internet noted that throughout history willingness to engage in debate on controversial topics in public spaces has been linked to the ability to do so anonymously.

In the same way, women who may otherwise feel unsafe voicing their opinions in public spaces - something that may be particularly true for minority women or those from highly conservative or repressive communities – can do so through the anonymity that the Internet allows for. In light of this, even women who condemn their harassers for hiding behind 'masks', would not necessarily want to expose who they are. Says one blogger and social media enthusiast, 'You can't call someone out on their pseudonym, even if you know who the person is.' Though she herself does not explore this point further, this unwritten code of respecting a person's anonymity – however abusive they are - can perhaps be linked to the ways in which women negotiate issues of privacy and anonymity in their *own* virtual lives – something that is discussed in greater detail in the section below.

Anonymity as privacy

The issues surrounding privacy and anonymity on the Internet are complex, and extend to fraud, government surveillance and the extent to which people feel free to speak about controversial subjects under their own names, and cyber security (ie: whether or not anonymity makes it easier or more difficult to track down perpetrators of crimes). However, for the purposes of the study's aims, this section will focus on the ways in which women negotiate privacy and/or anonymity in relation to their personal safety from abuse online.

While the Internet can be seen as a wide, public space, within its contours various demarcations of privacy are chalked out. While Twitter is accepted as a truly public platform that has been previously likened to a virtual street, where what an individual chooses to share via their profile page or their Tweets is open to the wider community – including 'mentions' about them in other people's Tweets – most women largely use Facebook for more private correspondence. In this way, if Twitter is a virtual street, then perhaps Facebook can be seen as a virtual backyard.

Says well-known journalist Vishakha, 'On Facebook, I've kept it as my friends – only people I really know, who I've interacted with or met in the real world. I do make stuff public, but the stuff I make public is not personal stuff.' When comparing the gender-based abuse she faces on Twitter as compared to Facebook she says, '[On Facebook] they know me as a person, so nobody reacts badly to things I say.' Similarly, Trishna says, 'The nice part about Facebook is that no one is anonymous, and everyone knows me. So there is a context to conversations and the things I say.' Given the privacy settings available on Facebook, it allows women who choose to, to demarcate it as a private space for people they 'actually' know. However, the more public parts of Facebook leave women as vulnerable to abuse as other platforms. Namrata is not only a blogger but also co-runs a feminist Facebook page, where people regularly come and threaten her in various ways. This is a good reminder that even if a woman may choose to keep her Facebook profile private, she may still not enjoy the safety of privacy when she enters certain forums, pages or discussions on the same platform.

Some women choose to use Facebook in the same way as Twitter, however, and maintain public profiles that all users can interact with. However, even when women's Facebook profiles are public, there are lines of privacy and respect for space which they feel should not be crossed. Manju, for example, maintains a public profile because it allows her to share her work as a journalist and ideas with a greater number of people. She talks about the ways in which men incessantly try to start chat

conversations with her on Facebook, and how when she does not respond – particularly because they have failed to look at her profile but just want to talk 'because she is a woman' – they quickly become irate. She says, '[The worst thing is] that people are demanding that I respond back. That is the most abusive thing for me. How the hell can they demand this from a woman?...This is a very ugly chauvinism' What is significant here is the way in which this *demand for attention* can serve as an intrusion into a woman's personal space.

In another similar example, Kalpana says,

> On and off this has happened so many times it doesn't even strike me as something very particular. On chat forums it's happened multiple times that if you refuse to talk to somebody, they immediately call you a whore and call you different names and they hang up on you. This also happened when I was learning a language….on Rosetta stone.

Given the ways in which women are harassed in public spaces online, despite the suspicion and uneasiness with which the anonymity of harassers is viewed by women, four of the women interviewed do not blog or Tweet under their real names. Building on her recollections of gender-based abuse that she frequently faces, the same blogger from the IT industry quoted above says,' Now it's come to the point for me where I have to necessarily hide my identity – now it's become a privacy issue, I use pseudonyms.' Similarly, Tripti, a young blogger talks about her experiences on Facebook – where she is not anonymous – as 'stressful', given the 'pressure of judgement' and that 'people don't take kindly to frank opinions.' In this way, her blog, which she runs under a pseudonym, 'frees her' from these pressures. Through these examples, it is possible to see that women may choose to be anonymous online as a direct consequence of the abuse or harassment they face.

Trishna writes extensively about her family and personal life under a pseudonym, and characterises her blog as her personal space. She says, 'It's like my house. If you enter my house, and you misbehave, I can ask you to leave.' Though blogs are essentially public spaces in which anyone can read and comment on a post, the bloggers themselves may view the space differently. In the above example, the woman's blog is likened to her house, when in reality, anyone can enter. Here, we find the tension between ideas of public and private on the Internet, where spaces that may seen as public by some (the blogosphere as largely being accessible to any reader) may be considered as private by others (bloggers themselves may find certain comments on their blogs to be an intrusion into their privacy).

Trishna explains that how initially she wasn't so careful about her personal details or privacy. She says, 'This was my mistake in imagining the world is so big that I'll never bump in anybody I actually know.' However, even with increased anonymity, there was still no guarantee. In fact, she says, 'The more you hold on to anonymity, the more people want to know who you are… It's only later on that I realised that anonymity is a joke on the Internet and that eventually people will find you.' Rather than citing her reasons for anonymity as a means to avoid abuse herself, she believes that anonymity will protect her husband and children's personal lives from being exposed, given that they are her regular blogging topics of interest. However, despite being anonymous, at various points in time she has had her and her family's details exposed on other blogs and forums as soon as someone has learned who she is.' Anonymity, as seen through these examples, is certainly 'a joke', and despite aliases, may still leave one open to threats and breaches of privacy. In this way, anonymity in itself is not a guarantee of protection from threats – whether real or perceived – though for some women, it does allow them to express views without the fear of judgement or repercussions [14].

Not all women choose anonymity, however. While the question of why women chose to remain

[14] Given that anonymity is not a guarantee for protecting one's identity, this may have further repercussions on the ways in which women view anonymous abusers as opposed to those with real names.

non-anonymous on the Internet was not a specific question in the interview, some women do talk about their views on blogging under their own names. Says Muskaan from Kashmir: 'I don't find anonymity attractive – why should people not say what they are thinking?' However, even here the issue is complicated, because while the woman herself Tweets under her real name, she recognises the need for certain (Kashmiri) activists to remain anonymous due to security and surveillance concerns. Similarly, Mridula, who openly blogs and Tweets under her own name, cites the example of Kashmir and other politically sensitive areas where anonymity may be necessary 'if you are uncomfortable for certain reasons.'

The concerns of privacy on the Internet are, however, a very real concern for many women. Says Nidhi, who uses social media under her real name:

> Right now, one peril of the system is that whatever you do [ie: whether you choose to be anonymous or not], your personal details will be out in the open…there is very less possibility of keeping things in a safe lock. So whether it's my child's name…my husband's office. Everything is known, even if I have not given it. So people would come and tell me, "I know where your kid studies in school so beware" …They know mothers will be particularly sensitive to things like this.

This notion of protecting one's family is important, and echoing blogger's concerns about having information that may harm her family made public, the above political commentator goes on to say, 'The most harmful is when they talk about your family life…that is a far more disturbing element for me.' As seen in the section focusing on body and sexuality, attacks and accusations that implicate a woman's family are where many women draw the line, and what often leads women to protecting their identities in virtual spaces And even women who enter public online spaces under their own names, or with fully open profiles, their family life is still a sacred arena – a space of privacy. Women may feel like they need to protect their families, or that they cannot jeopardise their family's safety or professional lives as a result of their interactions online. As interviews with many women have indicated, attempts to break into this private area affect them deeply, and may happen as a conscious effort on the part of harassers, who 'know mothers will be particularly sensitive to things like this.'

What is also important to note is that the decision to not be anonymous occurs in various contexts, and can act as a way to reclaim power and space. Blank Noise, an Indian campaign addressing street sexual harassment in creative, engaging ways, has promoted the concept of an Action Hero. In an ever-expanding definition of what it means to be an Action Hero, the one provided by the organisation is as follows:

> An Action Hero is a woman who faces threat and experiences fear on the streets of her city, but can devise unique ways to confront it. Her final response might have been to choose to ignore the violator, but she will have chosen to do so, not failed to notice it. An Action Hero does not surrender to power on the street. (Blank Noise – What Does It Take To Be An Action Hero?)

Action Heroes then write in to the Blank Noise blog and share their stories of confronting sexual harassment, and in this way create a repository of strategies and experiences for others to build on. Attending the National Consultation on behalf of Blank Noise, in a following email correspondence Jasmeen Patheja says,

> Being an Action Hero is a process and defined by the Action Hero herself. It encourages and builds an attitude of coming up and speaking out, of rejecting blame, shame guilt; of shifting the paradigm within which largely anonymity resides […] What we want is to encourage the spirit of speaking out.

Therefore, while some Action Heroes *do* choose to remain anonymous, the concept itself is rooted in the idea of rejecting shame and silence around harassment, and taking ownership of the streets with pride and dignity. While Jasmeen says that she is 'uncomfortable' with anonymity, she also says, 'I understand it…I value what it brings in terms of people's stories, truth, etc.' In this way,

rejecting anonymity can be way to reclaim space, but other the other hand, choosing anonymity as a means of freely telling one's stories is a valuable strategy that women employ online.

Anonymity as freedom

While the discussion anonymity has so far largely focused on women's safety and privacy, it is important to return to the importance of the Internet as a space for freedom and self-expression. For many women, the reasons for their anonymity are not fear or a consequence of abuse, but because the liberation it affords.

Says Sowmya, a blogger with a range of interests including her family life, politics and social issues, 'I am just shy, I'm not afraid of anything. It's not fear that makes me go anonymous. Rather, I'm not the kind of person who would like to be centre-stage or identify with her opinion openly.' While attending the National Consultation (18 February 2013), Sowmya goes on to talk about the fact that anonymity is not a full-proof means of protecting your identity. However, she says, 'Even if it's not complete anonymity, it gives you the privacy to write freely. And that's enough…I don't see my name written after each post. That's enough.' In this way, there is a certain pleasure to writing without the pressure of your 'real' identity, and one reason an individual may choose to be anonymous online.

The freedom of a pseudonym, and of an online identity separate from your own, also allows those who may otherwise face barriers to expressing their voices - not just on the basis on gender but rooted in caste, disability, class, sexual orientation etc – to see anonymity as a way of *playing* with the potential of the Internet. One group of women who have taken not just the potential of anonymity, but that of fluid identities, and used it as an empowering means of communication are sex workers. The experiences of sex workers from the collective VAMP, based in Sangli, Maharashtra, can be used to illustrate the potential of anonymity as freedom. These women use social media forums to talk to friends and connect with sex workers' organisations across the world. However, they operate under consistently shifting identities and names, which is an interesting deviation from the other examples of anonymity we have seen, where one real life name is associated with a single Internet persona. However, these sex workers use multiple identities and move between them from one day to the next, which has the effect of them being virtually untraceable by intermediaries or law enforcement, but also creates potential for relationships that would otherwise not be possible offline.

Speaking at the National Consultation (18 February 2013) Meena Seshu of Sangli, VAMP's parent organisation, says,

> For sex workers, it's been freedom and expression. In the virtual world, these multiple identities give you so much access. And I am also talking about caste and class…You can't be friends with people across caste and class… in small town. But on[line], they are friends.

Says Ishita Chaudhry from the YP Foundation (National Consultation, 18 February 2013), 'What's interesting about the Internet is that you can mess around and make your own rules', which is perhaps nowhere as evident as the experience of the ways in which sex workers reject the notion of a unitary identity (either under a real name or a pseudonym) to experiment and play with fragmenting identities and forging new spaces for themselves in this manner[15].

[15] Another example of a similar use of social media was cited in an article by Stephanie Nolen, who explores how street children in Delhi adopt two identities on Facebook. One is their name, and the other is a new identity, for example – a graduate from New York University – which allows them to forge 'a connection with people outside their small community.' Says one young boy, '"I tried to make friends as [myself] Raju, but that didn't work out."

However, despite the diverse possibilities that anonymity affords to various different groups of people, it is pertinent to question *where* this need to be anonymous arises from. Attending the National Consultation (18 February 2013), lawyer Karuna Nundy comments, 'Anonymity can be like a [piece of] clothing that covers you. But when somebody uses anonymity because they fear an attack, that's when I get uncomfortable.' While lower caste sex workers may enjoy the autonomy and liberation afforded by the fluid identities and pseudonyms they adopt, is the primary reason for adopting them the fear of operating under their real names? On the other hand, Sowmya's statement that she is 'shy' to speak under her own name but 'not afraid of anything' can be seen as an example of anonymity without this element of fear.

But to widen the question of anonymity, one could perhaps also question the broader context of cyber security and surveillance under which individuals access the Internet, and ask, whether to some extent *all* people who use anonymity are responding to the fear of State monitoring and surveillance? Seen through this light, perhaps anonymity can be seen as the final threshold of free speech, and one that must be defended at all costs.

Conclusion

It is within the complexities of the virtual world comprising public streets (Twitter), backyards (Facebook – though not all of it) and houses (blogs) that discussions surrounding privacy, anonymity, families and access are held. As women negotiate these various arenas and the violence they face within them, the interviews above suggest both the ways in which violence serves to silence, intimidate and oppress women in male-dominated spaces, as well as how the presence of women within these spaces disrupts or threatens these gender-unequal structures. Women seek to carve out spaces for themselves – both online and offline – where their voices may be heard on an equal, legitimate footing to those of men, while simultaneously responding to and trying to avoid the violence they often face in public areas as a consequence of increasing their visibility and voices. Phadke poses a pertinent question within which to frame this discussion. She asks, 'How can we assert that women are at risk in public spaces while simultaneously rejecting representations that project women only as victims in need of a protection that inevitably moves towards restrictions, surveillance and control?' (Phadke, 2010, p.15). While taking into account the ways in which the Internet has been a space of liberation and potential for many women – particularly with the adoption of fluid identities - this is a question take we may take forward with us as we move towards a consideration of various strategies employed by women in response to the different forms of abuse they face.

So he invented his New York alter-ego, and found that far-away strangers were more eager to get to know him.' In this way, individuals can use the Internet to transcend the limitations of their real identities, and create new possibilities for themselves.

Chapter 4. Non-Legal Strategies Women Use to Deal with Online Abuse

> *One cannot but engage with various binaries, especially those of public and private, even as one attempts to disrupt them and demonstrate the fluidity of space…[We must also look at] the everyday strategies, anxieties, the quest to both access public space and avoid violence'.*
>
> *Phadke, 2010, pp.1-5*

If abuse is so widespread, how do women respond to it? During the course of the study, it emerged that women used a combination of variety of strategies in order to stay online. Let us have a look at these in detail.

Ignoring the abuse and the abuser

When exploring the possible responses to sexist abuse online, it is imperative to first consider what is likely the most common strategy employed by women: ignoring it. In a Canadian research from 2000, Kimberly Fairchild and Laurie A Rudman, using data from violence against women surveys, found that only twenty percent of the women surveyed used assertive or coping strategies to deal with their harassers; a whopping eighty percent ignored or responded passively to the abuse.

In this study, women's responses to online abusers, who often are anonymous, mirror their strategies when experiencing street sexual harassment. Under the motto 'Don't Feed the Trolls', ignoring the abuser is a strategy that is widely advocated by women and men alike. Our study also showed that ignoring the abuser was a common response across social media platforms, and one which extended to email groups as well. Especially in their earlier stages, attacks were generally ignored.

In fact, it is noteworthy in this context that when women were asked to remember the first time they were abused, they were frequently unable to recollect a particular instance. This indicates that facing abusive speech is so common a phenomenon that it often almost assumes a quality of normality; As Sagarika Ghose put it, 'I get a lot of hate mail on my gmail. You know, that's a part of the game.'

It is important to recognise ignoring abuse and/or the abuser as a legitimate strategy that may have its roots in the fear of real violence and humiliation for not just themselves but other family members who may have demeaning remarks made against them, or in exhaustion following consistent efforts to keep combating the abuse on a daily basis. In a blog post entitled 'On Blogging, Threats and Silence[16]', blogger S.E. Smith discussed the alarming frequency with which female bloggers receive threats (and particularly rape threats). The sheer number of supportive comments from other women bloggers Smith received served as an indication of the levels of sexist abuse on the Internet, but also the fear of speaking out about it. Women also expressed a concern that talking about these things would just 'spur the trolls on' to become even more aggressive and abusive, in a perverse situation where combating violence becomes a way of 'asking for more'.

If fear didn't come out as an important reason to keep quiet among the women in our study, this

16 http://tigerbeatdown.com/2011/10/11/on-blogging-threats-and-silence/

does not necessarily mean that it isn't an important factor among women in India. Many women in our sample had already carved out a niche for themselves online, and, as we have illustrated elsewhere in this paper, had built important support networks on the Internet for themselves that they know they can draw on in times of need. Where an assessment of the extent of fear as a driver for ignoring abuse is concerned, this paper can, in other words, make few contributions.

But women in the study did indicate a range of other reasons to resort to the strategy of ignoring abuse. For one thing, many women considered trolls a nuisance that should not be encouraged and therefore should be given as little publicity as possible.

Others noted that they would not respond to anonymous abusers, but would take on abusers they knew. For example, Tripti said, 'I get emails from random email IDs which are not easy to trace and track. Quite often, many of them are hateful abusive mails. They don't deserve my attention. I just ignore and delete them'. However, 'if I know the abuser, I would take the liberty of being rude to them. I am not worried about how they will take it. I can always sort it out with them personally, at a later point, even if it doesn't end over there."

Similarly, others would make a difference between abuse they received in public and in private communication. Mridula explained**:** 'I respond when a person sends me a hate mail publicly addressing it to me in an email group but I don't respond when it is addressed to me personally. I will speak out publicly. Personally, I won't engage.'

When discussing their decision to ignore abuse, several women also commented on the perceived greater weight that men's responses to gender-based abuse, even if targeted at women, often seem to enjoy. Realising that they received the abuse only because they are a woman, one strategy adopted therefore was for the woman not to respond herself, but to let male friends do so instead, as this was thought to be the more effective.

Rishika gave an indication as to why, in some cases, men's intervention may be more effective. She argued, 'I have a male friend who gives it back as good. The language I can't use, he uses it for me and gets back at them on my behalf.'

In another case, Nidhi was abused on Twitter by a man who subsequently blocked her but kept saying derogatory things about her on the platform, though without using her name. She explained what happened next:

> My friends used to keep informing me about what he said. He kept continuing it. Finally, months later, a friend openly thrashed him. Apparently this friend meant a lot to that man too. After that I believe he has stopped. Despite not asking for support, it was heartening to get support from friends. I really appreciated it [...]. But I think he stopped it only because a friend and a man lashed out at him publicly. If a woman would have done this, he would have gone ahead and harassed her as well."

Although Nidhi did not actively seek out for help, she appreciates the support offered by her male friend and sees value in men taking up fights for women.

Even while ignoring the abuse, some women would, however, take into account that it might spiral out of control and that action might be required at some point in time – and prepare themselves. Said Kalpana, for example: 'Best thing I do is keep a screenshot and shut up, unless the person is running a hate campaign. Then I will take steps.' Even in the case of a campaign, however, Kalpana thinks carefully about whether to indeed respond or not. On one occasion, she faced an attack of right-wing trolls after getting into a discussion with a popular Twitter user on Narendra Modi and Gujarat. She explains:

> I received fifteen responses in an hour. I took screenshots. I did not do anything more. But by then I had read about Internet Hindus. So I figured that I had written about Gujarat and this is bound to happen [...]. I tried an experiment wherein I just wrote #Gujarat and #Modi and tweeted. I still got the same response: 'Go save your libido for your husband' [...]. It's some automated response which systematically directs hate to you [...]. You don't know who's against you: bot or a human being!

With its reference to machines, Kalpana's words above also hint at the main drawback of this strategy, then: in its long term effects, it might be the least effective one, as it systematically disregards the structural nature of the abuse women get. 'Don't Feed the Trolls' might seem like common sense. Yet in its essence, ignoring abuse can also constitute a highly apolitical response to what is a very political problem indeed.

Moderating Comments on Forums that Allow for This

Moderation of comments is a facility offered by many free blog hosting providers, including Blogger and Wordpress. Women in our study using the Wordpress platform have used the facility of moderation of comments, pointing towards an effort to police their online space of expression. Wordpress also allows the blog owners to edit the comments of their visitors. This facility is also used by many women bloggers to control what gets published on their blogs. Tripti, for example, uses both Wordpress features actively:

> I moderate all the comments on my posts. The comments have to be free from profanity. I make appropriate changes and then publish the comments. Very rarely have I approved of a comment in a language that I am not comfortable with. If I don't approve of a person's comment, he or she can keep commenting but I won't publish it.

Similarly, Trishna noted, 'I allow dissent only when it is polite and not rude**.** Just as people who you don't like are not welcome in your home, the same logic applies to blogs as well'.

Prolific blogger Sowmya, too, doesn't publish abusive comments on her blog, which addresses a broad range of gender issues. 'I just ignore and blog about the comments without giving publicity to the trolls.' She explains, 'Once a person left a comment on my blog: 'What is the difference between a porn star and a homemaker'?. I didn't respond to the comment but I wrote a very logical post about it. I replied to the question in a very matter-of-fact way without getting angry or offended'.

Some women insist on knowing the identity of people who comment on their blogs and refuse to allow those with email addresses that seem aimed at hiding their identity to post. Trishna notes about such email addresses:

> I was really impressed with the effort people put into this. I have had people sending me emails from ids like xyz356, from complete gibberish email ids. That's when you realise they have made this up just to be able to send emails. The point is [if it were an original email address] it wouldn't be gibberish like this. That really gave me insight into people's lives [...] My God! People can be so jobless so as to create email ids in order to send hatred.

Blocking Abusers

One of the most common ways to tackle abusive speech on a public platform like Twitter has been to block the abuser. The 'block' option prevents two people from communicating with each other. For instance, when a woman blocks an abuser, she will no longer be able to see tweets of the abuser that mention her Twitter handle. The abuser will also not be able to directly address his tweets to the woman. Blocking users is possible on some blogging platforms as well. Wordpress, for example,

records the IP address of everyone who visits a blog, whether it is to comment or to simply read an article. If so desired, users can block a particular IP address.

Several women commented on the value the blocking feature of social media platforms has had for them. Rishika for example, noted that when she was trolled heavily for the first time, she attempted to respond to each person. 'Like I an idiot I responded to even people who were abusive to me. I thought that if I'd engage/explain, they will change – and they didn't. I started blocking after I realised that I am not here to please everyone.' Going even further, Blogger Sowmya specifically recommends the use of Wordpress on the grounds that it allows bloggers to track and block visitors to their blog. Another widely used platform, Blogger, does not provide this facility and allows for anonymous comments.

Whether on Twitter or on Wordpress, it is, however, important to be aware of the limitations of the blocking strategy. Commenting on Twitter, Sumona outlined these clearly when she said, 'Blocking is good for my peace of mind, yes! But they don't disappear. Imagine there is a harasser on the road. You might have dealt with him but then there are still other girls on the road.' Like ignoring the abuse, blocking is thus a strategy that deals with the abuse on an individual basis, rather than bringing out its structural foundations.

Muskaan says, "I don't want to engage with riff raff. They want attention and when they don't get it they stop eventually. I block them whenever they are abusive."

Reporting Abusers

Mechanisms to report abuse are in place both on Twitter and Facebook. The Twitter mechanism can be accessed here: https://support.twitter.com/forms/abusiveuser. Upon receiving a complaint, Twitter investigates it and suspends the account if the user is found guilty. However, it cannot stop the user from accessing the social network by registering using another email address.

Sumona came to realise this soon after having successfully reported an abuser. When a man sent her child pornography links while she was campaiging against child sexual abuse, she says:

> I immediately reported him to twitter. His account got suspended. The process was fast. It happened in a day. But he was back the next day with a new Twitter handle. Someone brought it to my notice that he was back. I could identify that it was him because he had the same mug shot and his new handle was a slight variation of the old one. I immediately blocked his new handle too.

Facebook, too, has a mechanism in place that allows women to report abuse, be it if she is being harassed on chat or if abusive comments are being posted on her wall or if she considers any content inappropriate. In the former cases, Facebook advises complainants to immediately block the user in question. In the latter case, upon evaluation of the complaint, Facebook claims that it removes the content from the specific page if the complaint has been found legitimate.

Mridula is among those who make use of this facility. Drawing on several strategies at the same time, she describes,, 'If I receive abuse on Facebook in the form of a message, I will report abuse and share the abusive message as a Facebook status' (see 'Naming and shaming', later in this chapter).

The processes used by Facebook are not, however watertight, as is evident from the testimony of Namrata, who runs a public page on feminism and feminists on Facebook. Feminists in the West have long complained about Facebook's discriminatory policies that bans pictures of a woman

breast feeding but allows groups that propagate rape. In a response to a blog post that reflected feminists' concerns regarding Facebook's policies on this count, Facebook clarified[17]:

> When evaluating speech on Facebook, we analyse the nature of the speech itself, as well as its perceived intent as indicated by any additional context we may have. We believe this additional information is important, since identical words may be hateful in one context, or off-color attempts at humour in another (such as with stand-up comedy).

However, Namrata's experience contradicts these claims. According to Namrata, content on her page has been taken down repeatedly for having contained words such as slut, whore etc. The political context in which these words were used on Namrata's page was not taken into consideration by Facebook, negatively affecting the potential of Facebook for activism around such issues. Namrata has not been satisfied with Facebook's response to complaints on this issue from her side:

> Facebook has an evident bias towards these [hateful, abusive] pages. When we were blocked recently, I got in touch with a Facebook official in USA. He told us that since we use the world slut, bitch on our pages and there is a programme which automatically searches for words like these, and that's why they were deleted. But this is a lie because there are so many pages that use the word slut, bitch in a derogatory way and those pages are still there and they are just flagged off as 'controversial humour.'

Looking for and finding support

A common pattern that emerged in the study was the reluctance on the part of the women to involve the family members whenever the women found themselves in trouble. Support was considered crucial, but was usually drawn from an online community and took the form of public tweets, private messages and sometimes even phone calls, when friendships move to offline lives as well. Tripti, for example, commented:

> I usually respond to all comments the moment I approve of them. But sometimes I haven't had the time to respond after approving the comment. Even before I can respond, my online friends have gone ahead and responded, fought, argued on my behalf. It's a feeling of great support.

Mridula, similarly, beamed:

> I don't have to respond to every hurl of abuse, which has come to me. I had people responding and people saying who Mridula is. For me it's great. If I wouldn't have received support from online community, I would have been more aggressive, and probably would have contemplated going to the police.

In Trishna's case, the support took a slightly different form. An anonymous blogger, she found out one day that a person had dug out her personal details and posted these in the comments section of other people's blogs. She says, 'Once I wrote to them, they all removed the comments from their comments section. Nobody refused.'

In the case of Kalpana, who spends time on technical forums as well, the support she receives takes a wide variety of forms:

> I have a few friends who are really Internet-savvy, in the sense that they have a technical background or they have been system admins for a long long time. So [they've] hung out in these forums to know how to deal with these things. So at times when I am riled up and I don't know what to do - like report this guy to the police or not if he is a minor - then I would just go to them. They are friends, but they are also online. If need be, they come up on the threads and shut the guy up. Or they offer me some kind of advice on how to bypass this. And if need be, they will also be ready to come to the police with me.

[17] http://www.elephantjournal.com/2012/11/dear-facebook-your-response-was-less-than-inadequate/

When she faced cyber stalking and harassment, Kalpana also 'widely circulated the issue among my [online] friends just to show everyone... to get a perspective if I was misinterpreting it [the issue] as stalking.'

Seeing the crucial role that a support network can play, where women have been faced with online abuse multiple times, they, too, may therefore make a conscious effort to find and befriend likeminded people online, who they hope can come to their rescue in times of need. Rishika, for example, did so on Twitter:

> I started looking out for people who were of similar thinking [...]. I started reaching out to them. I went out of my way to find like-minded people. It is a sense of support that I feel I wanted to make sure [would be there], that it won't be just a DM support [support through private direct messages on twitter]. I wanted that if I'd be abused, they will come forth in open and support.

At least for Rishika, this strategy did turn out to be successful, as she managed to find the kind of people she was looking for. But even from people of whom it is expected, support on social media platforms, as in the offline world, is not always forthcoming. For example, Rishika noted:

> I was expecting certain outrage over the abuse that was happening to me. People I speak to everyday just kept silent. When I was getting abusive speech like 'You will be gang raped', I was shocked that so many people chose to be silent. I did not even get support in the form of a direct message on Twitter.....Right now, the people I am friends with offline are people who supported me through DMs, phone calls, retweets, etc.

Similarly, when Sumona faced abusive speech from a man when she was campaigning against child sexual abuse on Twitter, she immediately blocked him and reported him as spam. Though his account was blocked, the person returned to the platform under multiple alternative identities. She said, 'I did receive support from friends after I retweeted his tweet. People fought with him, supported me. [...] [But] there are people whom I know and are friends with, who are still conversing with that person. As I said, on twitter, you are alone.'

The importance of support networks is recognised by collectives as well. For example, the youth Organisation the YP Foundation ensures beforehand that when possibly controversial campaigns are launched, scores of people are in position online to provide support as and when needed. As Ishita Chowhdury from the YP Foundation explained in our National Consultation in Delhi (18 February 2013), when there is such a surge of support for a woman who is being attacked, in their experience this frequently scares the attacker(s) off. Chowdhury recommends drawing on social media analytics when planning such responses. She said, 'Trolls have certain entry points [...]. There are certain times when certain trolls are more active. It's coming from a certain group of people at a certain point in the day'. Collecting and analysing data on their behaviour helps to demystify online abusers' behaviour, as well as to organise and callibrate collective responses appropriately.

A group of women in Hyderbad went even a step further and, after organising online to protest against the abusive comments directed at women on the Facebook page of a local notary, carried forward their activism offline. Speaking at the National Consultation, Vanaja C., an independent journalist from Andhra Pradesh, says,

> When we intervened to engage with them on their page, they got back to us with abusive comments. Finally, a women's journalist group in Hyderabad took up the case, and started calling people to meet at the Press club. Then they actually felt threatened. As long as it is a virtual fight, people don't care. If you really organise – through a Facebook page, talking about what to do with these people – don't confine yourself to virtual comment. Have a real fight. By the evening they started apologising, even through video apologies, and got off facebook.

While some women have found success in dealing with an abuser while restricting their actions to the virtual sphere, the collective element clearly makes a big difference in such efforts. Online or offline, to effect change, the importance of organising remains.

Naming and Shaming

Retweeting abuses on Twitter emerged as a popular way for women in this research to make themselves heard. There were two reasons for this. Many women rely on their followers taking up their case and expressing outrage against the abuses meted to them. But retweeting was also done with an intention of 'naming and shaming' the abuser, often with a clear expectation that the online community would support this endeavour.

Sumona, for example, uses retweeting to name and shame. Says she, 'I retweet the abuse because people should know the kind of misogyny that exists. They [misogynists] need to be called out.' Muskaan, too, retweets the abuse that she receives; alongside, she also asks her followers on Twitter to report the abuse to Twitter. In instances where women are abused, she does not hesitate to use the 'report abuse' button. Sharada explicitly noted the advantage of retweeting an abusive tweet: 'If you have a big account, your followers tend to take care of them for you.' Vishakha's comments mirrored Sharada's. She said, 'If I am retweeting an abuse and nobody responses then I feel really bad, because I am retweeting for a reason.'

However, women who use this strategy do not necessarily do so consistently. In particular, if a woman has many followers, and the troll has far fewer, women may refrain from retweeting the abuse so as to not provide the abuser with free publicity. Women may also be aware of contradictory dynamics among their followers. Said Nidhi, for example,

> 'I don't always retweet the abuse because I am followed equally by people who hate me and by people who like me. The problem of putting it out in the open is that I won't just get support. It will spread more than I want to. There is no point. It will increase the problem.'

For still others, retweeting abuse is simply a fall-out of another strategy they use, and prefer. Anshika's was a case in point. She said:

> I don't retweet. I'll tell you why: very simply. because I fight back and I fight back dirty. I don't retweet abuses I get because I don't want to give publicity, because it only attracts more nutcases. I don't want to publicise bad behaviour. If it gets into a space where I am threatened personally, then I will publicise. I have about 13,000 followers, and when I am attacked, it automatically gets publicised, especially when I fight back.

Taking the trolls head-on

Very few women in the study recommended taking on the trolls in response to their abusive speech. Sharada and Anshika were among the exceptions. Anshika, who we earlier also quoted in the section on naming and shaming, commented, '[Abusers] are cowards and bullies. The only way of dealing with them is to stare them down... Use humour to deal with them... One needs to hit them where it hurts, their ego, and then: ignore.'.

Sharada, who we have quoted extensively earlier on her belief that women should 'not let it stand', believes in dealing even more directly with troll. She says,

> I am not going to let an assault to stand. The words you let stand are the words you allowed. If someone calls me a slut and I ignore all of them— that will never happen. Do not allow abuse to stand. Dignity of the conversation has to be on my terms.

She further added, 'If you have 40 people asking different questions, you cannot answer them all. Choose a leader and respond to that person. Ignore the others.' However, she noted, she does not believe in abusing abusers back: 'You can respond without abusing. [A troll sending abusive speech is] like seeing someone wet his pants. You don't want to wet yours in return.'

Anshika and Sharada are, then, clear examples of women who not only want to be part of public space, but also want to occupy it, and on their own terms. Seeing that so much of being able to speak freely in public, as we have seen earlier, depends precisely on that capability, it is disconcerting that even on social media platforms, so few women seek to do so proactively.

Self-Censorship

'Watering down' content, or self-censoring, is not an uncommon strategy for women to employ online. In a deeply honest comment, Blogger Eleanor O'Hagen[18] says:

> On the whole, I've managed to avoid the worst threats and misogyny that other women writers endure but I don't think that's luck or because my opinions are well-argued. I think it's because, very early on, I became conscious of how my opinions would be receive and began watering them down, or not expressing them at all. I noticed that making feminist arguments led to more abuse and, as a result, I rarely wrote about feminism at all."

In our study, too, while many spoke about how they have become more aggressive with each incident of abuse, these experiences also affected many women's online behaviour in a negative way. A lot of women ended up changing the way they behave and express themselves online.

Rishika says that she doesn't share as much as she used to:

> I follow news but I don't feel the need to tweet all the time. I don't respond to half of the people who have a differing point of view. Earlier I used to give people benefit of doubt. Also, I have become more aggressive online. I don't divulge details of my offline activities on Twitter anymore. Earlier I used to share 'I'm in Delhi now' or 'Bangalore now'! I don't do that anymore.

Trishna stopped blogging altogether about current affairs. Says she – and it is worth quoting her at length:

> I become very upset when I am thinking of a response if they say something negative. I have cut down on my reactions to current affairs. I have had people coming and sending me messages like 'I hope your snotty nose children end up turning into lousy failures in life' and 'We curse your children so that they end up absolute useless failures' over email and comments. The negativity plays on your mind. *Unke bolne se kuch nahin hone wala* [Not that everything will happen as they say]. But do you want the bad vibes directed to your children? Do you really need such negativity in your life? So I have stopped writing about current affairs. People tend to connect my opinion on current affairs to when I write about my family. Now they know I have a son and a daughter and brother and a this one or a that one. Either I should be like a regular TV columnist - you don't know anything about their [personal] lives, you only know their opinion on Modi and Gujarat. But with me, you will get an opinion on Modi and Gujarat and I will also tell you about my daughter's first steps. So if they disagree with my Modi opinion they will come back and curse my children and say [referring to her daughter] '*langdi ho jaaye looli ho jaaye*' [wish your daughter lost her legs, wish she becomes dumb]... Each one of these incidents made me realise that I should not invest in so much.

18 http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/helen-lewis-hasteley/2011/11/comments-rape-abuse-women

Hate speech can be considered as one of the greatest enemies of free speech because it hinders free expression. Self-censorship might be one of the ways of coping with the daily onslaught of abuse. But to what extent is this effective? O'Hagen's statement above suggests that the level of misogyny directed at her has drastically diminished; however, not all accounts point to the same experience. We have earlier highlighted the example of a woman blogger who received threats when she had just set up her blog, with less than ten regular readers. Rather than being criticised for her opinions, her attackers targeted her simply on the basis of her gender- the topics she spoke about were irrelevant. Given the disparity in experience, the extent to which certain topics – specifically women's issues – result in more abuse can only be determined after further research.

Trishna's response, in which women keep a low profile on controversial issues in favour of topics that others consider more appropriate for them to address, is unfortunately an all-too-common one. Seeing the wide range of topics that trigger online abuse of women, it remains to be seen, however, how effective this strategy is. Even if it helps individual women to reduce the cost of their presence online in the short term, it is also likely to undermine the Internet's empowering potential in the medium to long term. If the Internet has enormous potential in helping women to truly find their voice, misogyny continues to work to undermine that.

Conclusion

In this section, we explored the range of non-legal strategies that women deploy to fight abuse online. Women ignore the abuse and/or the abuser, block or report the abuser and police their online space by moderating the content on their space. They also look for support from their online community, including to name and shame abusers, and in some instances, take trolls head-on. Irrespective of the strategies women used, almost all women engage to some extent in self-censorship. As the dangers of speaking their minds become more obvious, most women will tailor what they say in this new online sphere accordingly.

The law is thus far from the only strategy that women rely on when fighting online abuse. Any efforts to aid women in their efforts to be secure online should take this into account. Though the law and law enforcement generally tends to get most attention when discussing this issue, there are many other strategies women deploy to stay secure on the Internet, and thus many other ways in which they can be supported. For the feminist movement, the importance of having a supportive online community and the new possibilities that an online public sphere opens up to 'not let it stand' provide particularly important entry points into thinking and action around this debate: online as offline, it is through organising, through the collective, that women have the greatest chances of making public space truly their own.

Chapter 5. The Final Solution? Women's Engagements with the Law

While women may deploy a wide range of strategies to stay secure on the Internet, in the public debate, greatest attention has gone to the law as a solution to deal with verbal online abuse. How do women view the law as a solution for verbal online abuse in India? And when and why do they actually seek recourse to the law? It is to questions such as these that this final chapter of the paper is devoted.

Lack of faith in law

A trend that emerged quite strongly from the study is that women are reluctant to use the law, for a variety of reasons. For one thing, although most women in the study are heavy users of social media and blogs, few know the law in any detail and many of them did not think that learning more about the law was something that would be of help to them in moments of distress. A common perception was that the law is not useful.

One set of concerns related to ineffective implementation of the law on procedural grounds. For example, Tripti said, 'I have never considered police complaint because I thought it would be futile.' She added, 'Even if they are in place, to actually implement them or have good result would never happen. The process would be a waste of time so I never ventured there at all.' In a similar vein, Sumona said: 'No, I don't have much faith in the law. It takes too long. I have seen my mother embroiled …in a property dispute since she was 3 years old. She is 74 years old now and it is still going on. I have a dread of the legal system and the police. I don't think she's going to see it resolved in her life time.' Muskaan, noting that she had no knowledge of the law, added:

> Everyone I know, any normal person I know is very uncertain of any law and is very unconfident about whatever the legal framework. First step to the police station and you know it is not going to be of any help to you....it is going to be a headache for you...in terms everything...in terms of listening to you, in terms of helping you. If I go to a police in my State, first of all it will take them one hour in order to understand what I am trying to telling them.....what twitter is, what is a handle... So the level of awareness....that's going to be a big hassle... For a girl particularly, to go to a police station she will have to think of her family....her family doesn't know much about the police station and all that. Going to a police station itself is a hassle. I am always hoping that it will never ever go to the realm of actually hitting the legal framework."

Though this needn't actually be a hurdle for the police in practice, anonymity of the abusers also made women hesitate to go to the police, as for example in Sumona's case.

Reflecting the voices of prominent women online mentioned in the previous section, another set of concerns expressed a fear of bias in the law's implementation. For example, Namrata said,

> I have never considered going to the police because I don't want to deal with victim blaming. I do not have faith in the system. They might just tell me: 'Why don't you delete your Facebook profile?'... I am also not aware of the law - I don't know anything about it. I also feel that if censorship laws become stronger, the kind of speech that will get censored will be our speech [i.e. progressive speech] and not their speech.

Kalpana, too, noted, 'Most of what we read is how Section 66A (of the IT Act) is used against the Internet users. I am not sure that if I should go to the police if I face abusive speech online.'

The last resort

For most women, going to the police was, then, a last resort. In rare cases, this was a positive choice. Sharada, for example, argued, 'I will not use the law. Law should not play a role unless you have reasons to believe there is a physical threat to your life'. According to women such as Sharada, only where an online threat may have offline consequences, thus, a police complaint becomes justified.

In many more cases, however, the choice appear a negative one. Even where women thought they should go to the police, a visit was generally put off as long as possible. The lack of faith in the police documented above emerged as one crucial factor in the decision to delay a police complaint as long as possible. But there was another one. Some women reported not going to the police because they worried about the consequences of this action as they believed it might only direct more abuse in their direction: they feared reprisal.

For example, when Nidhi was abused and then threatened by a mean who claimed he knew where her child was studying, she decided against filing a police complaint for these very reasons. She said: 'I did not file a police complaint against him because I thought this was a one-off thing. It is better to ignore. He'd have better things to do in life, I think. If I start concentrating on him, probably that's why he is doing it. He will concentrate back on me.′

Something similar happened to Rishika:

> Recently I received so much abuse from people that I seriously contemplated going to the cyber crime police. However, I did not go because, I consulted my family and they decided against it. They felt it was best if I lie low rather than going to the police station and rubbing people the wrong way. Honestly, they were scared with small kids at home. They wanted the whole incident to die a natural death, which it did eventually.

It is noteworthy here that Rishika's input her reflects Muskaan's comments above and makes clear that going to the police is often not simply a matter of an individual woman's decision, but is the outcome of a process of deliberation, in which often the whole family is involved and in which a whole range of factors may come into play. In this particular case, Rishika herself did not seem completely happy with the outcome of that process: 'Next time if something like this happens, I will definitely go to the police,' she commented.

Discouragement by family members when it came to filing police complaints was something that was noted in our study for women of all walks of life.

Women's experiences with law enforcement

Some of the women who did opt to use the law indeed had discouraging experiences to share with us. Manju's is a case in point, and worth recounting in detail. When Manju first got sent volley of sexist abuses on Facebook chat for refusing to speak to a man who pinged her, she approached the cyber police. 'I first emailed the complaint. They did not register. I kept calling them but there was no response.' When she finally approached her State's cyber crime police cell, she was directed to its Deputy Superintendent.

> His first question to me was where is my husband?! I said I have come alone and my husband is not with me. Can't I go to a police station on my own? He then asked me why I put my photos on Facebook. I told him that it is not against the Indian Constitution to put pictures on Facebook. I insisted that I am a citizen and I have got all rights and that he should accept my complaint. Then he started complaining about how many such cases he has and how he is burdened by them. After sometime, he suddenly starts talking about [a popular regional actress] and he said something to the

> extent that my pictures are sexier than her pictures. I was shocked! I just kept listening. I wanted to know what all he wanted to tell me. He then asked me if I knew where prostitutes kept the money. He then said they keep four hundred rupees on one side of their blouse. When the police catch hold of them, they pull up the money and go back to what they have been doing. When I asked him what is the connection, he said he is just telling this to me generally."

Following this deeply disturbing experience, Manju filed a complaint against the officer in question with the Director General of Police. A probe is on. In a separate incident, where Manju had been sexually harassed by a man in an offline public place, she had also approached the police. 'Instead of registering the complaint, the police first asked me why I tried to beat up my harasser.' The gender-insensitive behaviour, victim-blaming and harassment that she was faced with repeatedly at the hands of the police have made Manju wary of going to the police for help in the future. She has sworn that she will not approach the police again.

Others have more positive experiences to report. When Fathima filed a complaint of harassment against a man who kept sending her sexually explicit statements using 'filthy language' on Facebook, investigations revealed that the man in question was based abroad. As an official of the Mumbai Cyber Crime Police Cell confirmed in an interview, the law is particularly handicapped in such cases. While they requested Facebook for help, the social network did not respond. Says Fathima, 'They said they even asked Facebook for details but the social network refused to share it with them. Apparently Facebook shares details of its users only in issues of national interest, like terrorism'. Interestingly, and perhaps in an attempt not to further encourage perpetrators, the police requested Fathima, however, not to publicise the fact that, when the abuser does not stay within Indian jurisdiction, there is little they can do.

Moreover, the jurisdictional complication in any case did not prevent the police from taking effective (though perhaps not altogether expected) action in this case. Explained Fathima: 'The police traced the man's address and called his wife. That was enough to scare him. He immediately sent me a message on Facebook saying how sorry he was. Within a day or two, his profile was deleted and he could not be traced.'

After filing the complaint, when the police finally filed a chargesheet, Fathima spoke about this incident on her Facebook page: 'I wanted to tell the women that they should try the option of going to the cyber police instead of facing abuse every day.' But Fathima also realised that there was an important difference between herself and most other women: as a journalist, she has a level of access to higher police officers that many other women do not possess. In fact, when she dashed off her complaint, she sent it directly to the Director General of Police (DGP) and she herself noted:

> The police inspector had a tone of advising me. He kept telling me how I should not be posting pictures on the Net. When I told him what he was saying was nonsense, he immediately changed his tone and then told me, 'I am just suggesting as a friend. I am not telling you as a police inspector'. Of course he knew my complaint was forwarded directly by the DGP, so he kept quiet. This same inspector had spent 45 minutes advising my friend, when she had approached him with a complaint.

In our sample, most of the women who went to the Cyber Crime Police Cell enjoyed such easy access. Contacts in the police seemed essential to making the experience a productive one.

For most women, then, the victim-blaming that is often associated with sexual assault offences is something they might well also face when they go to the police to seek help with regard to cyber incidents of abuse. Online as offline, the immediate advice of the police is overwhelmingly related to the safety precautions that a woman should take. For example, mirroring offline advice to women to 'avoid' wearing 'provocative' clothing and not to move alone at night in order to 'avoid' being sexually assaulted, an official of the Mumbai Cyber Crime Cell, in an interview with us, said:

> Girls should not face these problems. Girls or Females should not find themselves in a position where they have to go to the police. They should not give their personal information and should not post their original photographs on the

> Internet. Anyone can snatch the photograph on the Internet and use it for their own purposes. One should do those things to avoid probable offences.[19]

Both where offline and online harassment are concerned, where police officials are not gender-sensitised, even the most progressive legal provisions will not be of help.

Law as a tool to threaten the abuser

Does all of the above mean that as long as there is no proper enforcement, laws on cyber abuse of women have no value at all? Interestingly, even though there is a reluctance to actually use the law, women have used threats of police complaints and sections of IT Act as tools to fight harassers. They have tapped into the very same discomfort in approaching the police and going through a lengthy, tedious legal procedure to cut the abuse that they have to face short. For example, when Trishna noticed that a photograph of herself and her child had been shared without her consent and commented on out-of-context, she drew on the tactic of threatening to go to the Cyber Crime Police Cell. Said Trishna:

> I made a big noise on my blog. I wrote about it. I also asked around for cyber cell details. I started asking around because I knew that going to a cyber cell, getting things in place would take forever. All I wanted him to feel scared enough to stop doing this...
>
> I just cried wolf. I really did not have the time to be running around the cyber crime cell. Anyone in India knows how the law over here works. It takes forever to get anything done. Very often people don't know their rights and neither did I for that matter. I just took a guess that he didn't either...
>
> If you hear somebody rustling in your front yard lawn in the middle of the night, all you have to do is pretend to call the police and the person will run away. You don't have to get into the *jhanjhat* [trouble] of having the cops at your place in the middle of night, which will keep you, awake for the next few hours.....[it works] if the idea is just to save yourself.

Trishna's testimony exemplifies an important point: the ultimate aim many women strive for is not so much punishment, but the withdrawal of an abusive post, tweet or comment, a rectification of a statement and/or an apology. The law can be a tool to achieve this goal.

In a slightly different case, when Sharada retweeted a rape threat she had received in response to one of her own tweets, tagging the abuser and adding 'What a great argument!' as a comment, a friend who is also a member of Mumbai's Thackeray family, asked her publicly if she needed legal help or if she wanted the abuser to be referred to some party members. Sharada promptly retweeted this peculiar offer of assistance as well. Despite having no intentions to do so, she also responded that she would like to file a complaint. The strategy turned out to be highly effective: in less than half an hour, the man came back and apologised profusely. 'He sent about 11 tweets saying sorry.'

Seeing the fear many people in Mumbai feel for members of the Shiv Sena and the MNS, it is well likely that this extra-legal part of the threat played a crucial role in scaring the abuser and hence in securing an apology. However, it remains interesting to note Sharada's decision to herself privilege reference to a police complaint to threaten the perpetrator, even if going to the police or taking recourse to the law is something that she will not resort to, except in the most extreme cases, on principle, as we have explained above.

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[19] When recently the Mumbai Police came out with a series of four videos on the topic of cyber security, one of these explicitly addressed women, another was directed towards women and children. Both videos reinforced similar notions by emphasising tips that women ought to follow in order to safeguard themselves online, as well as the need for men to 'protect' women (without, however, clarifying how). None of the videos, however, contained any direct messages to men regarding the kind of punishments they can expect under the IT Act if they send sexually abusive messages to women on the Internet. The videos can be accessed here: https://www.youtube.com/user/cybersafety2013.

It can well be argued, however, that for the threat to be effective, the abuser also has to feel that there is a chance that it will be put into practice. For example, when Fathima first told the abuser that she would go to the police, he laughed it off. In her case, that actually strengthened her resolve. She notes:

> I do not believe in going to the police over such cases. I think that state should not intervene in matters related to speech. But I went to the cyber police in this instance because he was not bothered. He didn't care. He behaved as if women cannot do it. I was forced to do that.

In other words, Fathima went to the police to combat and disprove the sense of impunity that her abuser seemed to have. But as mentioned above, not all have the social capital to translate such threats into an actual complaint, and where an abuser assesses this inability correctly, using the threat of police action is not only likely to fail, but can contribute the a further strengthening of a sense of impunity that some abusers seem to have.

Conclusion

This paper investigated the verbal online abuse that women who are vocal on the Internet in India face, and the strategies that women use to fight such abuse.

The gender-unequal landscape of the Internet is, of course, a worldwide concern. While 'triggers' for abuse may have country or culture-specific contexts – such as speaking about the Hindu right or being a Muslim woman – and types of abuse may be designed to specifically hurt Indian woman – such as attacks on women's parents and accusations of betraying certain culturally entrenched ideas of women – gendered verbal abuse exists across Internet platforms, across the world. The most common impulse behind this abuse, whether pertaining to a woman's appearance, her sexuality or her children, appears to be to *silence* women.

If Twitter or the blogosphere somewhat resembles a virtual street (with Facebook serving a little more like a private party), our study found that the parallels here to street sexual harassment are incredibly pertinent. Studies across the globe all point to the fact that ignoring street sexual harassment doesn't end it; rather, it fuels the perception that city streets are a masculine space, and that the presence of women is a trespass that must be aggressively countered. The speaking woman is seen as a threat to a male dominated Internet structure in a manner similar to the way in which the visible, loitering woman is seen as a threat to a male dominated public space. Of course the metaphor is further complicated online, where responding may goad people into being more vicious, and the fluidity of virtual identities can give way to a certain form of interaction or aggression that face-to-face encounters generally do not.

The most visible marker of gender, the female body, our study brought out, is often the site of attack. Several women we spoke to strongly remembered instances when their own images, or sexually explicit images of others, had been used to harass or threaten then. For many, even those least affected by the sexism that they often face online, these instances stood out in their minds. In this way, online gendered abuse becomes an extension or mirror of street sexual harassment: a way to tell women that their voices are unwelcome, and that their presence in public domains – both online and offline – can be reduced to their gendered bodies.

Furthermore, women who we spoke to had rather little success or faith in institutional support against the abuse they received. From unsuccessfully reporting abuse to platforms such as Twitter to finding that their feminist pages are deleted by Facebook, some of the study's findings corroborated the idea that the wider environment, online is a gender unequal one. In addition to this, most women who we spoke to said that they have never resorted to legal measures, and feel that engagements with law enforcement in India were rarely favourable experiences for women.

Given this, the most heartening and important finding of the study was that despite the high levels of abuse women face, they have and continue to develop a range of non-legal strategies for countering it. While some women ignore the abuse they recieve, believing that 'feeding the trolls' only makes it worse, several women on Twitter use the strategy of either retweeting the abuse or naming and shaming their abusers. Some women have successfully used humour, which is often an important strategy that receives support and appreciation from others online. Support from others, in fact, was often the most important factor for the women who we spoke to when dealing with gendered abuse, which raises questions around whether women with fewer followers or readers online would be able to successfully avail of such support. In fact, in our study we spoke to women who were already vocal about the abuse they received, as opposed to those women who remain quiet, silence themselves, or go offline after facing hate speech. Given the fact that data from across the world suggests that many women *do* choose to go down this route, the question of

collective organising online becomes increasingly urgent. As feminist movements have long histories of organising around violence against women, there seems to increasingly be an important role here to play for them, online as offline.

Despite these positive individual and collective responses, it must be noted that speaking out about and confronting issues of abuse is neither simple nor easy. One blogger explains how the desire to address these issues must be balanced with the necessity for caution, especially with the ready availability of personal details on the Internet, which could cause online violence to quickly escalate into real-world violence. Furthermore, the same blogger found that whenever she spoke about the hate speech that she had received, readers who had visbily supported her would become the subjects of similar attacks, including harassers following and abusing readers on their own websites or social networking pages. These instances show that when women *do* choose to respond, there may be a degree of caution exercised, along with underlying concerns and fears. Therefore, the choice to not respond, or to self-censor – irrespective of whether this course of (non)action is detrimental to a wider gender-rights movement – must be seen as legitimate, and often as an indication of the severity of the threat of violence.

Moving forward, apart from the strategies that are used by *women* to counter gender-based hate speech/abuse on the Internet, there are also wider policy changes and initiatives that some advocate as potentially playing an important role. Various autonomous groups and studies based in Europe advocate education and awareness-raising amongst children in schools, specifically focusing on hate speech and media safety. The British Institute of Human Rights lists examples of effective initiatives including working with the perpetrators of cyber-hate, mass messaging around the issue, holding offline meetings and conferences, increased support for victims, wider community building initiatives around media and hate, and advocacy for the changing of legislation. India has seen several creative and effective initiatives, such as perhaps most notably Blank Noise, organising themselves around the issue of street sexual violence; perhaps, in seeing the Internet as anotoher public domain, similar work can be done around the issue of online verbal abuse.

While the law can be one way to deal with verbal online abuse, we thus must be cautious to see it as the only one. Other strategies, focusing on awareness raising, support and collective organising might be far more empowering, and effective. In India, our study brought out, individual women already have understood the importance of such alternatives. Online as offline, it is when women are supported to find each other, build collectives and scale such strategies that the fight against verbal online abuse will be most likely to succeed.