Women and Online Harassment

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Abstract

The promise of social media platforms on the internet was the creation of a level playing field that would enable users equal access to express themselves online. However, the experience of women journalists and human rights defenders has shown that while they are able to use the medium, they are attacked for expressing unpopular views and threatened with physical violence. This paper looks at cases from the UK, the Philippines, Bangladesh, Pakistan and India, and examines other instances where organised groups have attempted to intimidate women into silence by forcing some to leave social media platforms, and in certain cases to leave the countries where they live. The paper also notes research by Amnesty International and other civil society groups that have shown how toxic the online environment has become. There is also a continuum between online threats and offline violence. Women are also being driven away from other kinds of activity on the internet, including gaming. The paper concludes with a call on social media platforms to regulate the platforms more effectively so that the medium does what it was intended to do – offer space to all voices.

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Between 2017 and 2019, the British science writer Angela Saini published two important books – *Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong and the New Research That's Rewriting History* (2017) and *Superior: The Return of Race Science* (Saini, 2020). Both were deeply researched critiques of how the scientific establishment has systematically undermined the contributions of women and people of colour, and reinforced the idea that scientific achievement is primarily a white male achievement. As a British writer of Asian descent with a degree in science, she was not going to take such assertions as facts, and unearthed evidence, stories, and facts that made the establishment uncomfortable. 'My critics simply didn't like the

idea of either their race or gender-based superiority being challenged by anybody, particularly coming from a brown woman,' she said.[i]

For those sins, and for her outspokenness in criticising viewpoints that were right wing and male chauvinist, Saini was relentlessly and mercilessly attacked on social media. She would get dozens of abusive responses, messages, and tagged, all of which convinced her to leave social media. She is no longer on Twitter or Facebook; she posts her events and writing on Linked In and engages only with those she knows or those who adopt a civil tone. 'Gender and race are contentious topics,' she said,[ii] 'and I knew there would be extreme opinions online. And I was prepared for that, but over the last few years such alt-right views appeared in such huge numbers that it became difficult for me to handle.' She began to block accounts that trolled her, but she simply could not block them fast enough – like the heads of Hydra in multiple forms, they re-emerged before she was done with one set. 'And so I left,' she said.

She had joined Twitter in 2011 or 2012 and left in 2020 after she found the environment too hostile and toxic. She had written an earlier book on Indian science (Saini, 2011), which celebrated Indian scientific achievements but even so, Indian right wingers attacked her when they found that she was critical of India's political lurch towards the Hindu right. 'There is no doubt that being a woman, especially being a woman of colour, exacerbates it because people make it a point to attack you as a woman of colour – the racist abuse is a huge part of it,' she said.[iii] She would later leave Facebook as well, when she concluded that it was harder to trust the platform to do a good job of protecting people from hate speech, misinformation and disinformation. She could no longer rely on the platforms to take her complaints seriously; often they suggested that she delete the content, or mute or block the abuser. 'Social media is normalising extreme language,' she said.[iv] 'Developing a thick skin is not an option; sometimes they do touch a vulnerable nerve.'

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Alarmed by the sharp rise in rape cases in her hometown, Davao City, the Philippine writer Jhoanna Lynn B Cruz wrote a column[v] in September 2018 that criticized the city's mayor – Sara Duterte, the daughter of the Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte, who was, at the time of writing, provisionally elected vice-president of the Philippines. Cruz alleged that the mayor was understating the extent of the city's rape crisis (Coconuts, 2018).[vi] The response from the local government was swift. Jefry Tupas, public information officer of Davao City, posted a screenshot of Cruz's column, criticised Cruz and tagged her online. This encouraged a large number of pro-Duterte supporters to write abusive comments and posts against Cruz, along with sending her direct messages threatening her well-being. Further online attacks followed.[vii]

Cruz did not complain to the police because she did not trust local law enforcement officials. But she did complain to Facebook and asked her friends to report the threats. Since then,
Cruz has quit writing her column – her last column appeared in October 2018. 'I also self-censored myself on Facebook even after I blocked (Tupas) and the other accounts.' She began to express dissent on Twitter, but pro-Duterte supporters followed her there too; as recently as January 2020, they verbally harassed her. 'One direct message said in the local language, "You are better off dead",' she said.

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Neha Dixit is an Indian journalist who grew up in Lucknow, the capital of India's most populous state, Uttar Pradesh. When she decided to study journalism in the Indian capital Delhi, family elders told her it was not a

profession for women from reputable families. Some family members, including her father, broke off contact with her for three years.[viii]

In the 15 years since, Dixit has written courageous reports on human trafficking (Dixit, 2016), child abuse (Dixit, 2014), gender-based violence (Dixit, 2015) and extra-judicial executions (Dixit, 2018), and received awards in India[ix] and internationally.[x] And yet, she routinely wakes up to obscene messages and imagery sent to her online. Occasionally she sees long twitter threads discussing how she should be sexually assaulted[xi] because she writes critically of the government. She has received graphic online warnings threatening her with brutal violence, describing different ways she would suffer. Her home address has been revealed and she has received threats of physical violence, including threats of gang rape and acid attack. In early 2021, someone unsuccessfully tried to break into her house. The abuse has been going on.[xii]

Other women writers in India, such as journalists Patricia Mukhim and Rana Ayyub have also received violent online threats. Some women journalists have been assaulted or murdered. Many are constantly keeping an eye on their surroundings when they are on a sensitive reporting mission. A few years ago, a reporter[xiii] was at an Internet café in the Indian-administered Kashmir using one of the shared desktop computers when she received an anonymous email message describing what she was wearing, whether she liked the shawarma she had eaten that day,[xiv] and named the hotel where she lived.

Complaints made to the Indian government’s law enforcement machinery that tracks online threats have not yielded much and many women reporters have received veiled threats, sometimes from law enforcement officials. Dixit says:

The task of online trolls is easier when the target is a woman. All they have to do is to question her intention, agency, intellect and her character. When men are trolled they are called corrupt…. When women are trolled they are called sex workers, porn actors… That way, they not just affect the morale of the woman journalist who then resorts to self-censorship but also promotes an abysmal quality of public discourse that relies more on mob justice than intellectual or legal arguments.

Dixit added. ‘Bravery is not a virtue but a compulsion for women journalists. It bothers me that in the sea of attacks, trolling and abuse, my identity has been reduced to that of a victim.’[xv]

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Supriti Dhar is a Bangladeshi journalist and writer currently living in exile in Norrköping, Sweden. Earlier she lived in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. Since 2013, (during the Shahbagh movement), she has published a portal called *Women Chapter*,[xvi] and regularly posted articles on social media (including Facebook) on corruption, governmental misdeeds, religious fundamentalism, and discrimination and violence against women.

‘I was a soft target for different actors as I was a woman, female journalist, activist and from Hindu origin,’[xvii] she said. ‘I was monitored by them, sometimes they criticised me in their [social media] walls or sent me threatening messages such as they will rape me and my daughter, slaughter me, hang me,’ she said. [xviii]

By 2013, Dhar had become a frequent target of abusive online attacks by those she suspected to be members of extremist groups. She received threats on her cell phone as well. The threats included intimidation, criticism, defamation, insults and vulgar language. Some people followed

her to her home, she said, and targeted her and her children. 'They knew where I lived,' she says.

Writing online, including blogging, can be dangerous in Bangladesh. In 2015, fundamentalists had killed Avijit Roy, [xix] a Bangladeshi-American rationalist author and blogger who was visiting Dhaka, and violently attacked his Bangladeshi-American wife, the free-thinking author Bonya Ahmed;[xx] she still bears scars of wounds inflicted during the attack. In the months that followed, at least ten more bloggers were murdered or violently attacked (Tripathi, 2015).

Dhar complained to the police in 2015 and 2016, as well as to Facebook. One police officer suggested to Dhar that she should write on safe topics like cooking, flower arrangements or fashion, instead of dangerous topics such as religion or women's rights. When she was threatened the third time, the police did not even write down her complaint. 'They were laughing at me as I left the police station,' she said.

Dhar provided detailed information to Facebook about a specific page where she was being named and attacked. Facebook removed that page, but the perpetrators created another page. She was described as 'Islamophobic' and 'atheist.' Her writing would get removed, but pages that threatened her remained online. Similar to Saini's experience, those pages kept reappearing. Dhar reached out to international organisations. Frontline Defenders[xxi] highlighted her case and she sought help from PEN International. In April 2018, the International Cities of Refuge Network[xxii] arranged for her to move to a safe city. She has revived her blog, but she continues to feel that she is monitored and threatened. She has a case pending against her and her daughter under Bangladesh's Digital Security act. In July 2021, the case was revived, and the police have questioned Dhar's parents and in-laws about her views on religion and her children's whereabouts.

‘Sometimes I feel I will leave everything; I don’t need to do anything. My daughter is in the Netherlands, my son is in India, and I am in Sweden. All are scattered in different countries, my son cannot join us, we cannot go to him. We are profoundly depressed and frustrated. It's not a life.’[xxiii]

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Qandeel Baloch became Pakistan’s first social media celebrity, posting frequently on social media platforms. Her video ‘How I’m Looking?’ went viral and she was included in Google’s list of the top 10 Pakistanis searches online in 2015. By early 2016 she had nearly three-quarters of a million followers on Facebook. She tantalisingly promised to post a risqué video of herself online if Pakistan’s cricket team won a match. She began receiving vitriolic online abuse, such as: ‘If I find this woman alone, I would kill her right on spot’; ‘Please shoot her wherever you find her’; ‘Finding a gun send me her address LOL.’

On 22 March 2016, Baloch’s Facebook account was suspended after a blogger called Farhan Virk (who had over 100,000 followers) launched a campaign against her. He posted: ‘We can’t see … her shaming our nation. Keep sharing this message and reporting her page. We need to get it banned.’

Baloch’s identity had been kept hidden for safety reasons. But in June 2016 her real identity was discovered and made public online. Images of Baloch's passport and national identity card were revealed, showing her hometown and father's name. A month later, Baloch was killed. Her brother confessed to the killing, saying her actions had brought dishonour to his family. He told the press ‘you know what she was doing on Facebook’ (Maher, 2019). He was sentenced to a long prison term, but in early 2022 he was released after her parents pardoned him. Under a

specific provision of Islamic law, the court had to release him (George, Suliman, 2022). The Pakistan National Human Rights Commission expressed outrage and the government is considering an appeal.

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The internet was meant to open up space for free expression and give voice to the marginalised. It was an extravagantly rosy prospect that promised an opening for the weak to speak to the strong, the powerless to the powerful, and to level the playing field and terms of discourse. People who had no outlet to express themselves would be able to do so freely. It would be a marketplace of ideas, with people at liberty to speak without governmental, religious, patriarchal or parental control. Those who did not earlier have access to platforms would now be able to speak without restriction. Some would still prefer the safety that anonymity offered, while others could be bold.

But the internet soon began to resemble the real world, but in more extreme forms. Traditional misogynistic behaviour surfaced in cyberspace. Over the years, women who have spoken up online have felt intimidated, threatened, and ridiculed. Sexualised insults are hurled frequently. Privacy is violated. Racist attacks abound. The Cambridge academic Priyamvada Gopal is a frequent target of white nationalists who write ungrammatical threats to her supervisors at Cambridge, wondering how someone like her (a PhD from Cornell University) could teach at such an elite an institution (Huskisson, 2020), particularly after a subtle tweet of hers was deliberately mischaracterised (Tripathi, 2020). Women who have good reason to conceal their identity find that they are tracked down and their identities made public. And sustained efforts are waged to drive them off the internet. Some have left social media. The absence of protection mechanisms in the real world, the slow response from social media companies in reacting to complaints, and the lack of business volition to

apply global rules on freedoms and hate speech across the board – which ends up permitting excuses based on cultural relativism – have all contributed to strengthening misogyny and patriarchy online instead of making the internet a more equitable space.

The spectrum from online abuse and that occurring offline in the form of real world violence is in fact a continuum, as the Baloch case shows. As other cases from Latin America show – that of Mexican journalist Lydia Cacho[xxiv] and Honduran human rights defender Dina Meza[xxv] – even international renown does not protect women from being stalked and trolled. Indeed, in recent years several prominent women investigative journalists have been murdered after receiving online abuse, though the perpetrators are rarely held to account, which makes it difficult to establish a causal link. In 2006, Anna Politkovskaya[xxvi] in the Russian Federation was murdered; and in 2017 Gauri Lankesh in India and Daphne Caruana Galizia (Taub, 2020) in Malta were murdered. They had all received threats online.

Indeed, online trolling has consequences in the real world, as the Indian poet and writer Sumana Roy has noted in a powerful essay on kindness (Roy, 2021). Viktorya Vilk, director of digital safety at PEN America, said:

> The whole point of online abuse is that it is meant to intimidate, censor, and silence women or other affected groups. Removing abuse is not censorship; it is meant to ensure access to those who are prevented from expressing themselves. If we don't deal with it seriously, all claims that social media platforms make, of being diverse, are hollow, if people disproportionately impacted are people of colour, women, or from LGBTQI communities. They won't be there on the platforms, and it won't be an inclusive Internet.[xxvii]

In a free-for-all internet, abuse may be called a form of expression. Not only do governments have laws regulating hate speech, defamation and privacy that restrain speech, but companies that run platform also have content policies and community standards that they invoke to remove content they consider objectionable. Sustained abuse adds noise to a platform, it does not illuminate discourse, and many platforms routinely remove chronic abusers to make the user experience positive.

While the First Amendment of the US constitution protects by preventing the state from passing any laws that restrict free expression, and in so doing it goes further than European standards, the provision restrains the state, but does not apply to private parties – such as publications or internet platforms. These organisations can and do remove objectionable content, sometimes for good reasons, sometimes arbitrarily. Removal of an abusive person from a platform does not restrict the person's right to speak freely; it stops the person from being abusive on that particular platform. Other avenues remain open to that individual to continue to speak freely. While Spotify and Twitter have begun removing some users from their platforms (and in seeking to acquire Twitter, businessman Elon Musk has given his distaste for Twitter's content moderation policies as one of his primary reasons), alternatives like Rumble and Truth Social (in the US) and Koo (in India) have emerged as so-called 'safe havens' for free (as in unrestrained) speech which others may find disturbing or offensive.

Online abuse of women is not uniquely Asian or European phenomenon. In the US, the Gamergate (Dewey, 2014; Mantilla, 2015) episode showed how women who participated in or developed online games were hounded out and humiliated (Heron, Belfor et al, 2014). In 2014, a sustained campaign harassed women prominent in the video game industry such as Zoe Quinn (Jason, 2015), Brianna Wu (Starr, 2014), and feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian, whose non-profit organisation Feminist Frequency [xxviii] had examined pop culture from a feminist

perspective. Journalist Amanda Hess documented the online bullying in an essay (Hess, 2014). These and other women in online gaming received obscene messages and even death threats. Some cultural critics have said the controversy showed how culture wars were spreading through the world of online gaming, cutting women off from the platforms.

The online space has become corrosive and hostile to women who wish to speak up, as Amnesty International's report *Toxic Twitter* showed:

At a watershed moment when women around the world are using their collective power to speak out and amplify their voices through social media platforms, Twitter's failure to adequately respect human rights and effectively tackle violence and abuse on the platform means that instead of women using their voices *'to impact the world*', many women are instead being pushed backwards to a culture of silence. (Amnesty, 2018).

In the United Kingdom, author Caroline Criado-Perez – who campaigned for a woman (other than the Queen) to be represented on British banknotes – was trolled viciously. She said: 'Twitter has enabled people to behave in a way they wouldn't face to face' (Hattenstone, 2013). On social media, violent threats are occurring more frequently. Garrett Miller, a right-wing extremist in Texas who was arrested for taking part in the insurrection at the US Capitol in January 2021, was known to have made online death threats (Leonard, 2021) to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, a high-profile Democratic congresswoman from New York.

There are other means used to silence women online. One of those is spreading disinformation on the internet, which might prevent a journalist or human rights defender from doing their normal work. In the months before the pandemic, the Indian human rights defender Teesta Setalvad found it difficult to announce online in advance where she might be

speaking because the venue would be threatened or the event disrupted. Fake messages would get circulated claiming her event was cancelled, to reduce the number of people who might attend it.

As technology is value-neutral, the media that provides entertainment and information can also be used to violate privacy and dignity. The proliferation of technologies has provided new opportunities for users to express their creativity. There is legitimate space for satire and fantasy, but there are also sinister implications. While publishing distorted images through technologies like photoshopping has long been established as a way to sexualise or humiliate women, the ability to 'airbrush' videos had been considered to be too difficult. But in April 2018, Rana Ayyub, an investigative journalist in India, discovered a morphed sex video circulating on the Internet intended to humiliate her. The video was shared across social media, including instant messaging services, sometimes accompanied by threats.

Ayyub, who happens to be a Muslim, has written critically about India's Hindu nationalist government (Filkins, 2019). She has received international honours[xxix] for her courageous journalism.

Women journalists have also become victims of 'deepfake', or digitally manipulated videos that leverage machine-learning algorithms to create highly realistic impersonations. Most of the discussion about deepfakes tends to focus on the implications for spreading fake news (Schwartz, 2018), but a recent study from Deeptrace Labs (a cybersecurity company that detects and monitors deepfakes) has shown that the biggest threat posed by deepfakes has little to do with electoral politics; the technology is used more often as a way to humiliate and subjugate women than for any other purpose (Deeptrace, 2019).

An overwhelming number of deepfake videos – by some estimates, 96% of such videos on the internet – are used in non-consensual porn that discloses private and intimate images or videos of another person, without that person's consent. Some 25% of the subjects in deepfakes are classified by the researchers as involving South Korean musicians or K-pop singers (Deeptrace, 2019). In addition, a 2016 report by the non-profit Data & Society shows that individuals who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual were seven times more likely to be threatened with non-consensual pornography than heterosexual individuals.[xxx]

Deepfakes remain an immature form of online harassment, but these early trends paint an alarming picture for human rights abuses with respect to gender. It abuses several rights – of privacy, reputation and health (since sustained harassment can cause incalculable harm to mental health), all of which are rights under the International Covenant for Civil and Political Rights, as well as the International Covenant for Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. By undermining women's dignity, they also undermine the core principle of non-discrimination and equality.

Companies that develop and provide technology and platforms that enable communication and expression, and provide information and entertainment, have the responsibility to provide equal access to everyone as long as they abide by the terms of service the companies have established. Most companies maintain clear rules about what constitutes permissible behaviour. Companies also set up terms of service and codes of conduct to regulate online behaviour for reasons of compliance with local laws and international standards, as well as their own standards of decency and fairness.

Many companies in the technology sector are based in the US, where S. 230 of the Communication Decency Act[xxxi] offers what has been described as safe harbour principle. That means companies that provide the

'highway' of information are not liable for the content carried on the highway. While this has reduced the legal liability of the companies, it has neither ensured unrestricted free speech (because companies still apply their community or decency standards), nor eliminated hate speech (which remains largely undefined). Most companies have elaborate policies to govern the use of their sites. Their terms of services are flexible and enable the company to suspend and even terminate accounts, and the companies frequently cooperate with local law enforcement authorities by providing private details of users when law enforcement authorities are investigating criminal complaints. Users have limited remedy. In May, a US court dismissed a class action suit filed against Twitter by several litigants seeking to overturn their suspicion; the most prominent among them was former President Donald Trump.

Human rights defenders, rationalists, journalists and advocates of specific causes around the world have often complained that they have been suspended, removed or banned by the platforms for what they have said; not because their content violated terms of service, but because it upset governments, companies, religious leaders or other powerful people.[xxxii] At the same time, powerful political and religious figures have been able to use the same medium to attack specific individuals and groups, heightening their vulnerability. They are able to marshal hundreds, if not thousands, of users to complain about specific accounts. Companies, which are overwhelmed with requests to take down offensive material, tend to suspend accounts when complaints reach a specific threshold that is often measured by the number of complaints. Hostile groups have learned how to game this and routinely send multiple complaints, and the companies' automated systems respond by placing the account under some kind of suspension (Tripathi, 2021). When this has been applied in the case of women, it means some women have felt silenced or prevented from speaking; some women have been attacked by other users and the companies have done little to prevent the abuse.

Companies are alert to the problem and taken steps. For example, Facebook has added deepfakes to its list of banned content[xxxiii] and Google's policy against non-consensual pornography now applies to deepfakes (Chesney, Citron, 2018). But companies need to do more. This includes engaging with affected people, civil society organisations and human rights campaigners to identify, prevent, mitigate and account for how they would address the adverse human rights impacts (UNDP, 2019). Unless the companies adopt a gender lens to their human rights due diligence, they will not be able to prevent the disproportionate adverse impacts that their services may have on women.

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THE GREAT PROMISE of the digital revolution was that it would widen access. The Internet was expected to democratise communications and enable people to speak without restrictions. While the digital revolution did, indeed, provide access to more people than ever, it did so without any special protections for those who had relatively limited access to power. While it created space for minorities to speak, it also enabled the majority to speak more loudly. And once those with power used the power at their disposal, they pulled all stops to drown out voices they disagreed with.

The digital realm was meant to liberate women, but it became a double-edged sword for them. On one hand, it has enabled women all over the world to exercise their right to freedom of opinion and expression; on the other, it has granted similar freedoms to those intent on harassing women online. Online harassment violates the right to privacy, enshrined in Article 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR): ‘No one shall be subjected to arbitrary interference with his privacy, family, home or correspondence, nor to attacks upon his honour and reputation. Everyone

has the right to the protection of the law against such interference or attacks.'[xxxiv]

While digital technologies of the kind prevalent now did not exist in 1948 when the UDHR was drafted and adopted, the language in the declaration is broad enough to include impacts in the digital realm. In 2016 the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the right to privacy in the digital age.[xxxv] However, if practice in regard to the human right to privacy online does not apply the gender lens, it will not do justice to the experiences of women on social media platforms.

Online gender-based violence violates the rights of women and girls to privacy. By threatening and intimidating them into silence, it restricts their right to speak freely and without fear. It impedes their right to seek, receive and impart information, as well as the right to participate in political processes. Distorted photographs created to humiliate a woman or using sexualised imagery, or images used without consent, and techniques such as photoshopping images to these ends, infringe on women's rights. This violates their right to dignity and aggravates risks that can threaten their right to live a life free from violence, as a report by the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women has noted (UNHRC 2018).

While nobody is obliged to or compelled to use social media, the internet has become a vital mode for communication, completing transactions, seeking information and imparting ideas. People have written personal posts and offered advice, and shared personal photographs on social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, as a way to connect with their friends, families and the wider world. It is the means with which people exercise the right to free expression, as well as participating fully and equally in political, economic, social and cultural life. Freedom of expression, enshrined in Article 19 of the UDHR, guarantees the right of

everyone 'to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.'[xxxvi]

However, privacy and anonymity form a double-edged sword. On one hand, online gender-based violence has led women to prefer anonymity or pseudonymity online. But the same provision allows perpetrators to hide their identity, enabling them to harass, intimidate or threaten women by staying anonymous or pseudonymous. Most countries have some restrictions on freedom of expression. These range from outright censorship on one hand, to offering substantial freedom on the other, with only a few narrowly defined exceptions to prevent violence. But language or forms of expression that are designed to incite discrimination, hostility or violence, including online violence against women,[xxxvii] often remains subjective. Strong privacy laws may prevent the victims from accessing justice because they cannot identify the individual who is harassing them, when they hide behind an anonymous identity. Laws would need to change to make it possible to link digital identifiers, such as an IP address, to physical devices and perpetrators.[xxxviii] However, this presents its own human rights implications, such as exposing human rights defenders who may prefer anonymity. As those laws aren't clear, victims have little choice but to turn to companies to enforce standards, as some cases highlighted earlier show.

Under the UN Guiding Principles for Business and Human Rights, companies are required to undertake due diligence to assess the human rights impacts of their actions and then offer remedies to mitigate or eliminate harm, where they are responsible for having caused or contributed to that harm. Companies are also expected to provide remediation through legitimate processes such as grievance mechanisms or dispute settlement mechanisms. Unfortunately, there are no precise

rules to define what those are; less so, when the gender lens is applied to them.

The gender guidance for the UN principles adds that these remedies must be gender-transformative: 'Remedies in appropriate cases should also be aimed at bringing about systematic changes in discriminatory power structures' (UNDP 2019). That's important and relevant as a principle but does not offer practical guidance to companies about what they are required to do. Women are subjected to online harassment – and they need transparent, rapid and effective remedies, which can only be achieved if both states and private parties work together to integrate a gender-oriented perspective to balance freedom of expression and the right to privacy.

There is an ironic corollary here in the fact that women – especially women human rights defenders – who choose to remain anonymous on websites like Facebook, are often reported by harassers for possessing a "fake" profile. When such instances have occurred, companies have sometimes responded by requiring the women concerned to disclose their identity and put them at further risk of potentially serious harm, or face suspension of their accounts. This shows the severe limitation of relying on blanket rules that can be applied with a binary logic, without taking into account nuances.

This is precisely the tactic deployed by the repeat harassers of Qandeel Baloch, and they succeeded in their campaign to have her Facebook profile suspended. Her brother, who murdered her, did the rest. And now he is a free man, because Pakistan's Islamic law permits the victim's family (Baloch's parents) to forgive the perpetrator (her brother, who was the murderer, and hence his parents). This is a mockery of justice.

Academic institutions have recommended (Barrett, 2020) that companies pay far greater attention to their moderation policies and make them consistent with international human rights standards. While those recommendations are general, social media platforms should undertake several important steps to apply them in the context of women's rights. These range from policies that companies should adopt internally, and those that require external contributions.

Social media platforms should train their staff in gender sensitivity so they can apply uniform international standards everywhere in an informed manner, without being subject to the tyranny of cultural relativism. They should consult widely with groups campaigning around human rights, women's rights, and freedom of expression. They need to institute internal panels; their role would be to receive feedback and consult regularly with appropriate external stakeholders, and develop robust policies to deny outlets to those who persistently abuse the platform to intimidate or harass women or other vulnerable groups.

Companies must promptly report criminal conduct to appropriate law enforcement authorities and protect the privacy and anonymity of users who use the medium for peaceful expression of their opinions and have a well-founded fear of intimidation or prosecution. They should stop outsourcing content moderation to ensure a consistent application of standards and raise the moderators' role within the workplace.

Furthermore, companies need to increase the number of moderators to improve the quality of content review and hire content overseers who can apply the gender lens. They should expand content moderation in high-risk areas and contexts, especially where women are vulnerable, and provide moderators with the tools for assessing harassment and intimidation.

Companies with sufficient resources should sponsor research into health risks, in particular effects on the mental health of those who do the moderating and those who are subjected to abuse. They should also explore narrowly tailored government regulations and significantly expand fact-checking to debunk misinformation and disinformation.

Companies have acted with alacrity on child pornography, human trafficking, modern forms of slavery and indeed, disinformation concerning the vaccine. It is high time they make the online environment safe for half of the humanity.

Salil Tripathi is a writer based in New York, who has earlier lived in Mumbai, Singapore, Hong Kong and London. Born in India, he has worked as a foreign correspondent and an award-winning journalist, and he is the author of three works of non-fiction. From 2015 to 2021 he chaired PEN International's Writers in Prison Committee and is presently a member of its board. He is also senior adviser for global issues at the Institute for Human Rights and Business. He was educated at the University of Bombay and later, at Dartmouth College in the US.

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[i] Author interview with Saini, summer 2021.
[ii] Saini interview (ibid).
[iii] Saini interview (ibid).
[iv] Saini interview (ibid).
[v]The column is no longer online.
[vi] Duterte's father, the Philippine President, made light of the rape cases, saying that incidence was high in Davao because the women of Davao were beautiful. https://coconuts.co/manila/news/duterte-says-davao-rape-cases-high-many-beautiful-women/
[vii] Information from an email interview with the author, January 2021.
[viii] Author interview, 2017 and 2021.
[ix] https://thewire.in/culture/neha-dixit-wins-chameli-devi-award-for-outstanding-woman-journalist-for-2016
[x] https://cpj.org/awards/neha-dixit-india/ and http://twocircles.net/2015dec01/1448932541.html#.V1t_PeRHMy4
[xi] DIXIT, Neha. 'Sexually explicit abuses land in my inbox' (International Federation of Journalists, 8 March 2017) https://samsn.ifj.org/neha-dixit-sexually-explicit-abuses-land-inbox/)
[xii] https://www.newslaundry.com/2021/01/27/she-says-someone-tried-to-break-into-her-house-earlier-this-month

[xiii] Private communication with the author by the journalist who prefers anonymity.

[xiv] She had indeed eaten shawarma that day, which indicates that she was being followed.
[xv] Dixit interview with author.
[xvi] https://womenchapterenglish.com/author/supriti/
[xvii] Bangladesh is a Muslim majority country.
[xviii] Interview with the author, January 2021.
[xix] https://pen.org/advocacy-case/avijit-roy/
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[xxiii] Dhar interview with author.
[xxiv] https://cpj.org/2007/07/mexico-leading-journalist-cacho-harassed/
[xxv] See https://nobelwomensinitiative.org/support-human-rights-defender-dina-meza/
[xxvi] https://pen.org/advocacy-case/anna-politkovskaya/
[xxvii] Interview with the author, January 2021.
[xxviii] https://feministfrequency.com/about/
[xxix] She received the McGill Medal for Journalistic Courage in 2020. https://grady.uga.edu/washington-post-writer-rana-ayyub-awarded-with-mcgill-medal-for-journalistic-courage/
[xxx] Data & Society (2016), accessed via https://datasociety.net/

[xxxi] https://www.eff.org/issues/cda230
[xxxii] Disclosure: the author of this paper was suspended for less than two days on twitter for breaching its policies on abuse. More details about it in this statement from PEN International, where he chairs the writers in prison committee: https://pen-international.org/defending-free-expression/india-pen-wipc-chair-journalist-and-editor-salil-tripathi-suspended-from-twitter-in-a-targeted-deplatforming-campaign-undermining-freedom-of-expression-on-the-social-media-platform
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