

Research Paper



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SOCIAL MEDIA AND WOMEN EMPOWERMENT: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

There has been a change in the media landscape over the past decade with social media outlets such as blogs, online discussion forums, and online communities now supplementing traditional media outlets such as newspapers, magazines, and television programs. Social media is becoming an agent of change. It is changing the way information is communicated to and from people around the world. Its use is increasing day by day with high rate in all over the world. Social media has proven potential for mobilising attention and accountability to women's rights, and challenging discrimination and stereotypes. It has proved to be a powerful vehicle for bringing women's rights issues to the attention of a wider public, galvanising action on the streets of cities around the world and encouraging policy makers to step up commitments to gender equality. The paper is an attempt to study how social media is contributing to women empowerment based on secondary data. The paper likes to conclude that though social media is contributing to women empowerment but there is virtual gender gap due to lack of literacy, cybercrime, cyberbullying, etc. and women are not able to fully utilize the new space.

KEYWORDS: Social Media, Empowerment, Women Empowerment, Cybercrime, New Media

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, the media landscape has dramatically changed with social media outlets such as blogs, online discussion forums, and online communities now supplementing traditional media outlets such as newspapers, magazines, and television programs. Social media are new information network and information technology using a form of communication utilizing interactive and user-produced content, and interpersonal relationships are created and maintained. Social media is becoming an agent of change. It is changing the way information is communicated to and from people around the world. Its use is increasing day by day with high rate in all over the world. Social media has proven potential for mobilising attention and accountability to women's rights, and challenging discrimination and stereotypes. It has

proved to be a powerful vehicle for bringing women's rights issues to the attention of a wider public, galvanising action on the streets of cities around the world and encouraging policy makers to step up commitments to gender equality. The explosion of social media, Cyberfeminism and unprecedented use by women of new technologies represents important opportunities to bring gender equality and women's rights issues to the forefront of both policy making and media attention. India ranks second in usage of Facebook and third in Twitter. These social networking sites not only pave a way for communicating across the globe but they have played a major role in empowering women, encouraging the civic participation among women in Western, Middle East and Asian countries. The paper is an attempt to study how social media is contributing to women empowerment based on secondary data.



Social Media

The word media is defined as ‘one of the means or channels of communication, information, or entertainment in society’ as newspapers, radio, televisions and social networking sites etc. Media technology has made communication increasingly easier as time has passed throughout history. Today, children are encouraged to use media tool in school and expected to have a general understanding of various media technologies available. The media technology shapes the advance modern society. In the contemporary period, social media is the most popular among all other means of communication and information. 30 percent of World’s population is active social media users whereas in India the active social media users are 15 percent of the population which is a sizeable proportion. Usage of social media is on increase and it is estimated that such percentage will increase every year by 10 percent. Moreover, 60 percent of social media users are youth who are prone to cyber crimes and problems. For many connected users in India, access to the Internet is primarily for accessing social media networks. The most popular activities on social media include maintaining one’s own virtual profile on the likes of Facebook and Twitter, posting and sharing an update as well as replying to something a friend has posted.

Empowerment

Empowerment is a construct that links individual strengths, competencies, natural helping systems and proactive behaviour to social policy and social change. Empowerment theory and research link individual well being with the larger social and political environment. Empowerment suggests that individual with others to achieve goals, efforts to gain access to resources and some critical understanding of the socio-political environment as basic components of the construct. Empowerment is a process of transition from a state of powerlessness to a state of relative control over one’s life, destiny and a critical understanding of their environment. This transition can manifest itself in an improvement not only in the perceived ability to control but also in the actual ability to control. Thus, empowerment is a transition from the passive situation to a more active situation of control. It is part of the realization of one’s humanity, as a person who is powerless with regard to one’s life and environment is not realizing one’s innate human potential. Since the sources of powerlessness are rooted in social processes that disempowered entire populations. Thus, the empowerment process aims to influence the oppressed

human agency and the social structure within the limitations and possibilities in which this human agency exists and reacts.

Empowerment theory wants to make a place for itself among those new social theories that are attempting to connect the personal and the social, the individual and society, the micro and the macro. Connecting the individual and the collective in a way which is not organic-biological or systemic-mechanical is the great challenge of Sociology in recent years. An empowerment theory requires a convincing integration of the micro and macro levels in order to make clear the interrelations among individual, community, and professional empowerment. The concept social individuality makes the feminist dialectics explicit. The woman is an individual within the social reality in which she grows up and develops with the contradictions between her and society. The powerlessness of one woman, which changes by means of her activism in collaboration with others in her situation, is a process that empowers the entire community of women.

In India, 1.2 billion people live today with around 50% of women population. The status of women has improved over a time with respect to education, work, rights due to the efforts of social reformers and work of government. Since independence, women in India have occupied high offices, including the positions of The President, Prime Minister, Speaker of Lok Sabha, Top Management Positions, etc. India as a nation is moving forward with great success, and can’t afford to ignore women empowerment. In the contemporary period, technology directly impacts women’s development and has enabled their voice to reach out and be viewed globally. In a recent report published by Google, it is clear that Internet is empowering Indian women with easy access to information and helping them to make more informed decisions in their day-to-day life. According to a report released in June 2013, titled “Women and Web Study”, out of total 150 million Internet users in India, more than 60 million women use Internet to manage their day to day life. Furthermore, the smart phone affordability has further allowed women an easy access to Internet and Social Media.

SOCIAL MEDIA- A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

In sociological context, if we try to understand the social media, then what is important for a sociologist is edition of the ‘social’ term with media. New technological advancements have divided media into two parts; one is which now we call traditional/mass

media and other is contemporary media that is social/new media. Both types of media are present in contemporary society; both are social in nature as both are produced by the society, circulate information or knowledge about the society, to the people of society. Having said that, contemporary media or it can be said 'new media' is more social in nature than the traditional media. Simply it is because of monologues nature of traditional media and dialogues nature of social media.

To understand sociologically social media, primarily we must know the meaning of 'social'. It means living in company of others, group life, commonness, sharing, cooperation, opinion-knowledge-services-goods-ideas-information exchange, positive social learning (functional perspective); on the other hand, conflict of ideas, opinions, and abuse of power (power to write anything, using this fast communication medium for anti-human, anti-nationalist, anti-religious, activities), to create fear among people (Videos posted by terrorists on YouTube, Tweets on Tweeter etc), abuse of available information (Fake profile, misuse of photos), negative social learning etc (conflict perspective). Society has everything; it is ever-changing complex web of relationships.

Media become social media when internet technology is combined with computers, tabs and smart phones these days. These two technologies have connected the whole world irrespective of time and space. Internet based all platforms are like 'online society' or we might call it 'cyber society' as it has all the features, functions and dysfunction similar to actual society. Internet provides different kinds of platforms for communication like actual society provide different kinds of communication; online office like actual office, online buying and selling like actual buying and selling, online relations with known and with strangers sometimes with actual feeling, sentiments and sometimes just time pass, exchange of knowledge, experience, ideas, socialization, like actual society provide knowledge through schools, colleges, by elders etc, online teachings of disciplines, cooking, dancing, games etc like we take in real society lessons of cooking, dancing, play games with friends and sometimes with unknowns, in online society personal communication is possible through e-mails, personal face-to-face communication is possible through Viber like it happens in actual society, along with private chats online society has public chats also like on tweeter, group chat similar to public spheres of real society, in online society people cheat others, misuse of information, conflicts of opinion, ideas, misuse of power takes place similar to actual society.

ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN EMPOWERING WOMEN

Social media is emerging as an alternative media as a platform to share and raise the voice of women when their voice is restricted. People are joining Cyberhands to help women and share their voices in each and every protest. The subject of empowering women is now being linked to social media as it is emerging as a powerful tool for awareness and action. Empowerment of women is necessary for a bright future of the women, family, society and country so as to make them take their own decisions for personal growth. For a long time voice of women is restricted and it can be made loud by way of social media. Social media is the latest technological tool for Economic Empowerment of Women. The concept of entrepreneurship has helped women to get rid of the tag of being a burden on others economically. Online presence in social media is providing women with new freedom, independence and control, liberty, and empowerment like never before. It helps them to try things that were impossible in the real scenario. Social networking offers more of an opportunity to network and get to know people and places. Women can no more be lost. Nor does she have to depend on others to carry out her requirements. Social Media is posing questions and answering questions that could raise and suggests solutions for every search of hers. It can really turnout to be a friend indeed that gives her both intellectual and emotional company without having to lose her identity. The more women use social media, the more she will benefit from it as well. Social media helps women to master with friends, followers and connections all over the country or even the world. She may start to like, tweet, share, follow be linked to a new sort of Technological empowerment and dynamism.

BENEFITS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is comparatively less expensive and easy for training, recruitment, and organization than traditional methods. Various studies have shown that people who are active online are likely to be active in group activities such as creating an online group for any cause, sharing their voices. It enables individuals to share them with friends, to see how many others share their perspective and to coordinate activity and get the word out about protests, social issues.

Social Media and Internet Impact as seen for Women Empowerment:

After the infamous 16th December Delhi gang rape incident, within two days Facebook group "Delhi

for Women's Safety' was created which received 1.75 lakh likes and many other such groups were created. Such groups on social media attracted public attention and created platform both for women justice and women empowerment at global level. Social Media has become so powerful today that in the face of such incidents social media becomes the voice of people. Everyone starts sharing, tweeting, #hashtaging their views, rage and demand for justice on social media; in order to do so they often even change their profile pictures with campaign picture to show their absolute support, as in the Delhi Gang Rape case, a simple black dot with a white background was seen as a profile picture throughout social media and also on Whatsapp. This Incident got so much social media attention, that Government of India was forced to take strict actions against the culprits, passing a more powerful law to prevent such incident in future. Social media has proven potential for mobilising attention and accountability to women's rights, and challenging discrimination and stereotypes. Social media has proved to be a powerful vehicle for bringing women's rights issues to the attention of a wider public, galvanising action on the streets of cities around the world and encouraging policy makers to step up commitments to gender equality. The explosion of social media and unprecedented use by women of new technologies represents important opportunities to bring gender equality and women's rights issues to the forefront of both policy making and media attention.

Celestine Lugaye Ukpere and Andre D. Slabbert (2014) found that Social Media has taken over the dwindling circulation of traditional media such as television, radio, newspapers and magazines. The practice of surfing the web 2.0 to obtain real time information instantly, has led to the rise of an ever more connected infrastructure atmosphere globally. E commerce is flourishing with the help of digital marketing. The study of Social Media Platforms and their impact in unlocking the financial success of the women entrepreneurs globally has been widely observed and quite vital to the new generation of gender based ventures that are digitally driven through the use of technology. This is leading to a new revolution of women job seekers becoming job creators and curators. Uma Rani and Sripriya (2013) stated that Entrepreneurship has changed the way of commerce by adding creativity. Social Media plays the significant role in creating such opportunities. The study of women entrepreneurs in Kancheepuram District showed that the growth of female

owned businesses is growing along with increase in their standard of living, motivation, attitude and self-confidence, and ensures independence - a liberty of new form. Social media is becoming a women's info guide and empowering tool.

Internet along with Social Media has come up as a new form of media which has expanded dramatically over the past decade in India. There are websites that focus on women empowerment, covering diverse spheres such as health, knowledge, lifestyle, education and more. With such power of Social Media, today it is easily possible to find any information related to women empowerment. When any incident happens, social media becomes a faster media that helps people from round the world to participate and show their concern and sympathy towards such incidents. Governments across the world had to take action against such incidents when everywhere people condemned such happenings. Awareness and outburst such as this could only occur with the existence of both Internet and Social Media. Women are now also getting more knowledge about their rights and powers that every woman in a society holds, with equal rights as men in every respect. All these positive changes are now triggered to only increase their pace with time due to Internet and Social Media. However, cybercrime is creating hurdles in women empowerment and they are not able to fully utilize the benefits of IT revolution.

Cyber crime

Cyber crime is a global phenomenon. With the advent of technology, cyber crime and victimization of women are on the high and it poses as a major threat to the security of a person as a whole. Even though India is one of the very few countries to enact IT Act 2000 to combat cyber crimes, issues regarding women still remain untouched in this Act. The said Act has termed certain offences as hacking, publishing of obscene materials in the net, tampering the data as punishable offences. But the grave threat to the security of women in general is not covered fully by this Act. Amongst the various cyber-crimes committed against individuals and society at large, crimes that are specifically targeting women are such as Cyber-stalking, Harassment via e-mails, Cyber Bullying, Morphing, Email spoofing and Cyber Defamation. While Cyber Stalking affects both men and women, women are disproportionately targets, especially of age group of 16-35, who are stalked by men. It is believed that Over 75% of the victims are female. An astonishing one in twelve women and one in forty-five men will be stalked in their lifetimes. Cyber bullying

is a typical type of online harassment, which can be defined as hurling harsh, rude, insulting, teasing remarks through the message box or in open forums targeting one's body shape and structure, educational qualifications, professional qualifications, family, gender orientation, personal habits and outlook. Harassment through e-mails is not a new concept. It is very similar to harassing through letters. Harassment includes blackmailing, threatening, bullying, and even cheating via email. E-harassments are similar to the letter harassment but creates problem quite often when posted from fake ids. Cyber pornography is the other threat to the women which include pornographic websites; pornographic magazines produced using computers (to publish and print the material) and the Internet (to download and transmit pornographic pictures, photos, writings etc). Internet has provided a medium for the facilitation of crimes like pornography. There are gender gaps in literacy in India as literacy rate for males is 82.14% and for females is 65.46% as per 2011 Census which further restricts the use of IT and social media by women. However, on the whole the women are getting benefits by use of social media.

CONCLUSION

Women who are being deprived of basic human rights and life chances are becoming empowered due to social media. They can reach various helpline through the initiative of alternative media groups and members and connect with people. There is no doubt that the developmental facts of women have always been the prime focus of planning since independence and a clear vision is needed to remove the obstacles on the path of women emancipation from the government and women themselves. The various challenges posed by the new era have forced us to provide a concrete and developmental aspects alternatives in lieu of empowerment of women through the possible available media. We need more action oriented programmed and policies which inculcate in understanding the various technicalities and prospects of media keeping into consideration women's empowerment a must need of the society. Various studies of popular media throw light on empowering and debilitating influence of media. Generation of alternate media for women's empowerment and protest against derogatory and indecent portrayal of women in media must go on simultaneously. Committed and gender sensitive men and women can implement gender sensitive strategies within the system and effective use of the media by activists outside the system can generate awareness and non scientist masses

for social transformation favourable to empowerment of women. Likewise, alternative media and other positive approaches need to harness to bridge the age old gender divide issues in India to achieve the rightful share of women and their empowerments in most optimal way. The paper likes to conclude that though social media is contributing to women empowerment but there is virtual gender gap due to lack of literacy, cybercrime, cyberbullying, etc. and women are not able to fully utilize the new space. The paper recommends that there is need to train women to make greater use of information technology for communication and the media and ensuring equal access to and use of new technologies is critical for maximising social media's advocacy role for women empowerment.

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