

## **Feminism in the Virtual Space: The Indian Context**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The present paper examines the new ways in which feminism is articulated. More specifically it examines the ways in which feminism has occupied the virtual space. This occupation is not an adjunct to the feminist street marches and protests in the physical spaces. Though that is not to say that it is contradictory to protests in the geographical space. It has emerged in its own right. It is another mode of protest which tackles patriarchy, misogyny, and gaslighting in its own way. Feminism in the virtual space through the use of technology has emerged as a powerful tool of activism and resistance. Online feminism challenges the 'angry' feminist trope. Feminism is also not just about angry, frustrated, and bitter women. It is about people of all kinds of sexuality who challenge the dominant structural inequalities in society. The paper briefly traces the history of the feminist movement and the interlinkages between offline and online protests. It then discusses the other ways in which feminism and the feminist movement occupy the virtual space. This is done through the analysis of two websites. It is not just about Hashtag (#) feminism but goes beyond that. These websites in a multitude of ways challenge the rhetoric of feminism and also question the dominant androcentric and patriarchal structures. Digital feminism is real and it is valid. In contemporary times it shapes the feminist discourse even though it is still not completely inclusive and intersectional. Digital protests should not be viewed independently of offline protests. They have to go hand in hand with offline street marches. The methodology used is cyberethnography and lurking using non participant observation.

**Keywords:** Feminism, digital spaces, language, cyberethnography, structural inequalities, rhetoric of feminism, keyboard warriors.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Gender is deeply entrenched in our everyday lives. The feminist movement has played a vital role in highlighting the position of women in society. Traditionally, the feminist movement has been associated with protest marches and occupying physical spaces. The advent of the internet has changed the way we connect with each other. It has invaded all aspects of our lives. Feminists too have taken to the internet as a means of communicating and networking in society. Many discourses on contemporary issues take place over the internet. Feminism in the virtual world initially emerged as a means for garnering support for offline movements. The virtual space has been the home of #feminism. However, the evolution of feminism in the virtual space is not just limited to # activism but goes beyond that. This paper examines the different ways in which feminists have taken to the World Wide Web (www) to question the structures of society. The focus is on the analysis of two websites that are present across different social media platforms.

## THE FEMINIST MOVEMENT: AN OVERVIEW

The feminist movement began in the nineteenth and twentieth century when women fought for their legal rights in the West. Women throughout the world challenged their subordinate status and fought for equality. The earliest struggles between the nineteenth and twentieth century were around the issues of the right to vote and a demand for social and economic equality. In the 1960s and till about the 1980s women questioned their subordinate status and the inherent patriarchal norms in society. They took out protest marches and openly resisted the masculine frameworks within which they were defined. It was the beginning of mass scale protest movements for the rights of women. It was also in the 1960s and 1970s that women began to focus on issues concerning their sexuality, workplace, and abortion. The second wave which began in the 1960s questioned the inbuilt social structural inequalities. The feminists fought for a range of issues that included civil rights, political rights, gay rights and also the right to abortion (Pearson, 2015). This was also the time that we see writings by Mary Wollstonecraft, Virginia Woolf, and Simone de Beauvoir. Their writings questioned the premise of women being defined from an androcentric perspective. They questioned the 'naturalness' of the various roles performed by women as mothers and primary caregivers. Betty Friedan in her work *The Feminine Mystique* and Germaine Greer's work. *The Female Eunuch* argued that women by being confined to domestic roles had lost their 'femininity.' Thus, the 1960s and 1970s problematised the masculine framework for defining women (Bhatia, 2021).

### The 1990s

Post-1980s, till about the early 1990s, one sees the emergence of the next phase of the feminist movement. There was a conscious effort to include women from all sections of society. Gloria Jean Watkins, better known as bell hooks, Chela Sandoval, Cherrie Moraga, Gloria Anzaldua, Audre Lorde and several others brought in intersectionality and emphasised the importance of diversity and differences in the feminist struggle. It was for the first time perhaps that the importance of micro struggles was acknowledged (Findlen, 1995).

It was also for the first time that there was a realisation that the feminist struggle did not move along a single unified path. It was more like a radio wave that intersected and overlapped and moved along different frequencies (Hewitt, 2012). This was also the time that women did not hide their sexuality, unlike the previous times. Women of this generation were against 'victim feminism.' They were not also anti-male or anti-fun. They celebrated their femininity. Unlike their foremothers, their concerns were not centered around fighting for their civil and political rights. Equality was taken for granted and they thus expressed their femininity.

Since the 1990s one sees a change in the feminist movement. The 1990s was a time when women took their equality for granted. With the advent of the internet in the 1990s, feminists also began asserting their identities through online communities and publications. This phase of feminism was different since it also saw the use of social media platforms to protest. The Riot Grrrl<sup>1</sup> band in USA was one of the first instance of the use of online communities and zines by the feminist movement (Bhatia, 2021; Findlen, 1995).

The Riot Grrrl innovations of the third wave have now culminated in what can perhaps be called the fourth wave. This is characterised by blogs, tweets, Instagram and websites and

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<sup>1</sup> The Riot Grrrl band was an important part of the of the feminist identity. It was a punk movement that began in the early 1990s in USA. It combines music with feminist consciousness and politics. It asks girls to be loud, angry and aggressive. The fans of the band from the community that communicated through zines. They also have a very strong online presence.

several other social media platforms. Social media platforms make this accessible to netizens (Philips & Cree, 2014). As per National Family Health Survey 5, India has forty-eight percent internet penetration with thirty-three percent of women using the internet actively since 2019-2021 (McDougal, 2022).

### **Feminist Movement in India: A Brief History**

In India, around the nineteenth century, one sees the emergence of the feminist movement. The feminist movement at this point was linked to the larger issues of reform and was focused on issues like the abolition of Sati<sup>2</sup>, prohibition of child marriage, widow remarriage, and education of women. The movement was limited to the upper caste Brahmin women. Mahatma Phule was amongst the first to highlight the need for an intersectional approach with the inclusion of lower caste women as well as other social pariahs like widows from all caste groups. He worked on spreading the reforms to the untouchable castes through measures like the opening of schools for lower caste girls. Feminist issues and concerns at this point merged with the larger project of modernisation. Tarabai Shinde, an associate of Phule, writing in 1882, in response to the conviction of upper caste women for infanticide, argued for a larger recognition of the social context in which women were victims of injustice in the family and at home too.

In the nineteenth century, one sees the emergence of the *shadharmani* i.e. a woman as a dutiful wife. Chakravarty (1989) states that in this version of womanhood, she followed her husband unquestioningly. This was also true as far as her participation in the freedom struggle was concerned. These women were symbols and icons of Sanskritisation, in which the women were veiled and confined to the home. In the last decade of the twentieth century, militant Hindu feminism protested against this extreme oppression of women. Though women's issues were a part of the nationalist agenda the approach was not intersectional and treated women as a homogenous category and thus women at the grassroots were left out. Feminists like Rasasundari, Kailashbasini, Kundamal, and others did challenge this patriarchal depiction of women but their voices were far and few (Ghosal, 2005).

From 1947 till about 1970s, the feminist movement in India believed that the larger ideals of secularism and egalitarianism, and democracy would prove beneficial for women too. The UN report "Towards Equity," in 1974, served as a wake-up call by highlighting the discrimination faced by women in society. In response the feminist movement in India, on the one hand, though civil society focused on issues like health, mortality, nutrition, and empowerment of women through various laws, on the other hand, around the 1980s one also sees the emergence of the autonomous movements like the ecological, tribal, backward caste and ethnic movements. By the 1980s women led civil society initiatives brought into focus the rights of Dalit and marginalised women. Women's groups like the *Shetkari Sangatahn* and the *Shetkari Mohila Agadhi* started focusing on issues like violence against women, justice for rape victims, Uniform Civil Code, against liquor consumption, and environmental concerns. In the 1980s and 1990s and also later in the 2000s, there were national protests against the rape of Bhanwari Devi<sup>3</sup> and Pratibha

<sup>2</sup> Burning of a woman on her dead husband's funeral pyre.

<sup>3</sup> In 1992 a low caste woman activist working with the state government to prevent child marriages was raped by five landlords from a higher caste group. It was believed that she was raped because of her work. Lawyers and activists filed a Public Interest Litigation in the Supreme Court under the Vishaka collective platform to prevent harassment of women at the workplace. The SC in 1997 passed the Vishaka Guidelines which made the employer responsible for the welfare of the employees. The judgement was criticized by some since it did not take into account Bhanwari Devi's the intersectionality of caste and gender.

Murthy<sup>4</sup>. The period around 1990s was also significant since there was also a rise of women's organisations based on religious fundamentalism. These include the *Hindutvabadi*, *Rashtarsevika Samity* of the RSS, *Durga Vahini* of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad. The Bombay and Surat riots in 1992 and Gujarat riots of 2002 also saw an increase of such organisations working towards the emancipation of women. There have also been many other autonomous women's movements in India directed at specific issues like anti-*Arrack* movement, against female feticide and the environmental movements like the *Chipko* movement and the *Narmada Bachao Andolan*.

### The Virtual Movements

Technology is a powerful tool of resistance and activism for the feminists. The SlutWalk in Toronto in 2011, was the first time when women used Facebook, and Twitter to garner support for a protest against being labelled as 'sluts' for dressing in revealing clothes. Subsequently these rallies and marches have occurred all over the world. It has become a site where women dress in revealing clothes, they chant, they sing and in many cases rape survivors speak out. The SlutWalk is now regularly held all across the world. In India the SlutWalk is also called the *besharmi morcha* and it began in 2011 in Delhi.

The #MeToo Movement started in 2006, on the social media platform MySpace by Tarana Burkes to highlight sexual harassment and sexual misconduct in the workplace. The campaign #MeToo by 2017 emerged as a global movement on the social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and others. It became a part of the global discourse against sexual violence experienced by women at work. The 'Everyday Sexism Project' launched by Laura Bates in 2012, similarly had women all over the world writing about sexual harassment at the workplace (Philips & Cree, 2014).

In India the #MeToo movement was led by a US based Dalit lawyer Raya Sarkar when she created a List of Sexual Harassment or LOSHA. The list created by Sarkar was referred to as the LIST. The LIST was dismissed by some prominent many Indian feminists who contended that institutional due process should be followed and they were not in favor of naming and shaming without sufficient evidence. In 2018, as a part of #MeToo, a prominent Bollywood male actor was accused of sexual harassment, but the case was dismissed due to the lack of enough evidence (Express Web Desk, 2019).

Roy (2018) and Tella (2018), writing on the #MeToo movement in the West and in India, respectively, contend that the movement lacked intersectionality. In the West the divide was a generational one between the second and third wave feminists. The second wave feminists were in favor of using the social media to name and shame and the latter were more in favor of following the legal process. Even in India, Roy (2018) comments that for some feminists the focus was on due process and legal intervention but for others, it was about extra juridical interventions to ensure justice. Further, the movement in India also became a debate on caste differences and social hierarchies. Nivedita Menon (2017) too commented on this and stated that this had created a divide in the Indian feminist movement. Raya Sarkar, who was instrumental in generating the LIST in LOSHA was a Dalit activist and the signatories too were *Savarna* feminists. Sharmila Rege (1998) commented that "dalit women speak differently" (Rege, 1998). Dalit Bahujan feminists following LOSHA and #MeToo argued that the movement had been blind to the injustices faced by them (Rege, 1998). Despite the

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<sup>4</sup> Pratibha Srikanth Murthy was a young office employee who was raped and killed on 13 December 2005 on her way to work at the night shift. The case became important since NGOs demanded that companies to take cognizance of the safety of their women employees working at the night shift.

divide amongst feminists in 2018, #metoo led to the strengthening of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act (2013).

In India, some of the other campaigns that have used social media extensively include the Blank Noise Project<sup>5</sup> against eve teasing. The Blank Noise Project was launched against street harassment in 2003. It seeks to initiate a dialogue on street harassment and to ensure a safe space for all on the streets. Women are labelled as Action Heroes and they are encouraged to take action against harassment. It was started as a participatory project in Bangalore but has spread to cities like Mumbai, Chennai, Kolkata, Chandigarh, and Hyderabad. The blog [blanknoise.org](http://blanknoise.org) in tandem with women on the street, features stories and narratives of Action Heroes. These include narratives of women and how they reclaimed the streets and helped shape the processes that tackled and arrested gender-based violence.

In response to the 2012, 'Nirbhaya rape case', Blank Noise launched a Safe City Pledge. The Nirbhaya rape case involved the brutal rape and torture of a young women in a moving bus in the New Delhi. The victim succumbed later to her injuries. Thousands of protestors across the country took to the streets protesting against the security forces and the government's failure to protect women on the streets. Many also used social media and networking sites like WhatsApp and Facebook to express their grief, rage and anger. Thousands of people also signed online petition protesting the incident. They launched campaigns like #Delhibraveheart to fight for justice for the victim. The protests also spread across South Asia; Nepal, Sri Lanka, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Protestors marched in Paris and other parts of the world. As a result of the online and offline protests by all sections of society in 2013, the Criminal Law (Amendment) Ordinance was passed by the then President Pranab Mukherjee. After considering around 80,000 suggestions received during this time, several new laws were passed and fast track courts were set up to hear rape cases (Das, 2019).

The Pink Chaddi<sup>6</sup> campaign in 2009, Why Loiter, for women's rights to occupy public spaces in 2011 and the Pinjra Tod in 2015 against curfew hours in hostels played an important part in India's feminist movement. In 2017 #Lahukalagan (this literally translates to blood tax) on Twitter was amongst the first such digital movement. It focused on the twelve percent tax on sanitary napkins, which was removed in 2018 as an impact of the movement. #whyloiter was trending on Twitter in 2017 and led to women reclaiming public spaces and resisting patriarchal domination in virtual and physical spaces. In 2017, there was the Bekhauf Azadi, by women occupying and reclaiming public spaces.

A social movement, by its very definition, is a form of protest through which the collectivity gives voice to their grievances and highlights their concerns about various issues. The media, and particularly, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for the feminist movement. As the preceding discussion highlights, online and offline protests are often intertwined with each

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<sup>5</sup> <http://blog.blanknoise.org/2017/11/action-hero-narratives-blank-noise-and.html>  
<http://www.hindu.com/2006/09/17/stories/2006091711180300.htm>

<sup>6</sup> Pink Chaddi campaign (PCC) saw its birth from the media activism of Delhi based journalist Nisha Susan. Started as a collective on Facebook named as 'Consortium of Pub-Going, Loose and Forward Women; the campaign was a political response to 24<sup>th</sup> January 2009, violent attack by members of Sri Ram Sena on young women and men at Amnesia Pub of Mangalore. A month later, Pramod Muthalik, a member of SRS had threatened to marry off young couples seen together on Valentine's Day, stating that this culture is alien to Indian tradition and mostly practiced in the Western cultures. The members associated with PCC campaign adopted Gandhian method of protest to address the repressive masculine ideology of members of SRS. They did so, by dispatching pink under wear close to four thousands in number to SRS head office on Valentine's Day.

other. These interlinkages are very important. However, online feminism has emerged in its own right too. This, in no way, implies that it is disconnected from the larger feminist agenda. It is just another way of highlighting misogyny and sexism in society. The next section will focus on some of the new ways in which the feminist movement has evolved.

The internet has helped contemporary feminism evolve into a multidimensional and intersectional movement. Ruth Philips and Vivienne Cree (2014) argue that the internet has led to a resurgence of feminist movements. The internet has enabled a global community of feminists challenge misogyny, gaslighting, and normative oppressive structures. Online digital activists are often referred to as keyboard warriors and their form of activism is called slacktivism, indicative of the perception that feminists are slacking off and not taking to the streets to protest (Das, 2019). However, despite the drawbacks, the internet has created a space for all individuals and others who wish to participate but remain anonymous. The internet enables quick and fast online communication. Posts can go viral in a matter of minutes. Irrespective of how people choose to engage in activism whether online or offline, they are working towards bringing about change. It could be through photographs, poetry, podcasts, art or cartoons, jokes, memes, or in any other way.

The virtual movements are movements within the larger feminist movement. They give space to all. Everyday users who proclaim themselves to be feminists, promote and proliferate feminism in multiple and complex ways across the digital landscape. They highlight the fact that there is no one way of being a feminist. They also question heteronormative sexual orientation. By occupying positions that are contradictory and controversial these are new ways of questioning the normative. These are also ways in which alternative discursive fields are created through the use of language and in other ways.

Blogging, and tweeting have become powerful tools. # movements have paved the way for the digital revolution. Digital media can be excluding too since its main focus is on dominant languages and cultures. Sexism, misogyny and gaslighting in the offline spaces are often found in the digital medium too. The ease of communication via the internet and social media platforms enables feminists to create content and share it easily almost seamlessly. The context of the feminist movement for today's generation has changed from the earlier generations. The young women from the 1990s onwards take equality for granted and they pose a challenge to adult feminism. The present day feminists are not anti-male, anti-sexual, anti-femininity and anti-fun. They celebrate their femininity and claim to be sexy, fun and feminine.

### **The Feminist Movement: A New Direction**

Alternative forms of media became a part of the feminist movement in 1972 with the appearance of zines (which is short for magazines) in the West. The zines were non-commercial, handmade miniature magazines and comics that dealt with specific issues related to politics, art, music or anything that was of personal interest. These were first started by the fans of the Riot Grrrl band. The *Grrrl* zines were a part of grass roots publishing by young fans. They were independent of any censor and were generally a form of writing by young feminists that was apart from mass media and print media and also from other forms of writing by 'adult' feminists. The zinesters used this media to discuss their experiences, thoughts, anger, theory, politics, fashion, feminist gifting ideas and the like (Darms, 2013).

The zines by the 2000s had also become e-zines that were self-published. These emerged all over the world in countries like Brazil, USA, Italy, Canada and Malaysia. They have names like Bitch, Pretty Ugly and Pink Punkies. The South Asian community in the United Kingdom has a zine called *Burnt Roti*. In India some of the zines that emerged were *Oh Nari*,

*So Sanskari!*, Bombay Underground, Unfolding the Saree and several others. It was for the first time that one saw feminists using the internet, for not just for garnering support for an offline movement, but also, for creating awareness and challenging misogyny and gaslighting in their own way (Das, 2019).

Apart from zines there are also websites that are focussed on promoting the feminist cause. FeedSpot<sup>7</sup> lists twenty best Indian women and blogs on the basis of traffic, social media followers, domain authority and freshness. These include Women's Web at number one position. Women's Web deals with issues related to work, parenting, health, social issues, finance and leisure. The other sites like Women's Web, Girl Power and eShe which were the top rated Indian women's blogs were focused on specific issues related to women's careers or only young women or women leaders<sup>8</sup>. Sites like Sanitydaily focusses on mental health issues, Bodywise on women's health, Fashionlady and Verve on fashion and WomenofWorth is a network of women across the city (Feedspot, 2022).

The focus is specifically on the social media sites Feminism in India (FII) (<https://feminisminindia.com>) and Indian Women Blog (IWB) (<https://www.indianwomenblog.org>). FeedSpot ranks FII at number six and IWB at number thirteen. FII has approximately 86,000 followers and is also available in Hindi. IWB has 618000 followers (Feedspot, 2022). Both FII and IWB exist across various platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. As compared to the other social media sites these were not focussed on any one aspect and had a wider range of topics that cut across diverse aspects. They also had content that was relevant for all age groups. The content ranged from movies to health to sports and women's rights to mention a few. These sites were easy to navigate and registration or creating a username and login id were not mandatory. These websites will be further analysed in the next section.

## METHODOLOGY

The methodology used is snowball sampling using cyber-ethnography. Snowball sampling using cyber ethnography involves surfing online content across various sites. These sites often connect to other online sites and to furthermore content. Cyberethnography enables us to observe sites that are free of geography and location in terms of physicality. Even though these sites only exist in virtual spaces and do not occupy physical spaces, content is often culturally specific.

The posts that were selected were representative of the account, hashtag, or website. This is a part of internet historiography and critical histories of the present times (Jane, 2016). The method used was "lurking" which involves non participant observation (Catterall & Maclaran, 2002). Data was collected by scrolling through the various posts. It's a multimethod approach that uses ethnographic analysis, historical analysis, semiotic analysis, and document analysis.

Two social media sites, FII and IWB, are further analysed in this section.

## FEMINISM IN INDIA (<https://feminisminindia.com/>)

FII was created as a Facebook page in 2013 by Japleen Pasricha and it initially curated content from the internet. The aim was to access feminist resources in India which were not academically dense and were free to access. FII at that point of time did not have a very large

<sup>7</sup> FeedSpot is a reader for RSS (Really Simple Syndication) feeds. It operates all over the world and has feeds on every website. It provides users with new content from updated websites.

<sup>8</sup> [https://blog.feedspot.com/indian\\_women\\_blogs/](https://blog.feedspot.com/indian_women_blogs/)

presence. The website was the first of its kind to create easy to understand and accessible content written in the Indian context.

The website FII “is an award digital intersectional feminist media organisation to learn, educate and develop a feminist sensibility among the youth. It is required to unravel the F-word and demystify the negativity surrounding it.” Very clearly the focus is to understand the meaning of feminism and to connect with people in a positive way. The statement also conveys that feminism is not negative and is something to be enjoyed. FII challenges the stereotyping of feminists as frustrated and angry women, who are often portrayed as a killjoy with no sense of humour. The FII website sets out to challenge the angry, frustrated, ugly feminist trope. It is obviously a challenge to the portrayal of feminists as women who do not do their natural duties of getting married and bearing children within the marriage. The feminists were therefore assumed to be uncaring and unfeeling about the plight of their families. The word ‘feminist’ becomes a negative one.

The challenge to resist stereotyping of women and feminists is on several fronts. The vision statement clearly says that the website was created for “dismantling patriarchy and social injustice.” The “mission” of the website is to create awareness and to educate people about “feminism and social justice” through digital storytelling and also through podcasts. It claims to be the ‘go to place’ for anything and everything related to feminism. FII has content on society, health, history, intersectionality, podcasts, body imaging, current trending issues and much more. The content is aimed at breaking stereotypes and calling out androcentrism.

### **An Illustrative Account of the Content on FII**

One of the campaigns is “#MyBodyMyMethod: Because Contraception Matters,” with the tagline “So, what is the best contraceptive method? Who gets to choose it for you?” These are some pertinent questions about our sexual and reproductive health that need to be answered. Which is why FII and FMM have come together throughout the month of September 2020 to call for #MyBodyMyMethod, because “contraception matters.”<sup>9</sup> The campaign is directed towards discussing and creating awareness about contraception which is often surrounded by myths and taboos and issues that are not discussed openly. It also calls out the uteropolitics around contraception which is gendered with women bearing the burden of childbearing.

Apart from contraception, the section on health also highlights the gendered representations of ‘women’s health problems.’ These include discussions on women’s diseases like hypertension (Banjan, 2022)<sup>10</sup> and arthritis (Gupta, 2022). Banjan (2022) argues that by linking hypertension to menopause or even pregnancy ignores the disease and dismisses it as being in a woman’s imagination. Gupta argues that social conditioning and socialisation assign women the bulk of caregiving responsibilities in a family. The physical labour of domestic chores and the repetitive muscular movements involved in doing the chores results in wear and tear of the joints leading to Rheumatoid arthritis. The sheer amount of domestic ‘invisible work’ adds on to the burden. Malnutrition and vitamin deficiencies in women due to neglect and the gendered social conditioning in food consumption patterns add to the problem. Gender stereotyping, where women must suffer in silence and the non-prioritising of women’s health issues in a family lead to a gendered perception of these diseases. The large number of cis gendered male doctors adds to the burden of diseases and leads to them being dismissed as being ‘non-serious’ and a woman’s problem. In conclusion, Gupta states,

<sup>9</sup> <https://feminisminindia.com/campaigns/mybodymymethod-because-contraception-matters/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://feminisminindia.com/2022/07/05/hypertension-in-women-misdiagnosed-and-dismissed-as-stress-or-menopause-related-discomfort/>



“Moreover, it is high time we acknowledge the health implications of gender roles within households, especially physical labour, on women.”

A hyperlink after the article leads to another discussion on domestic chores that women perform at home. The focus is specifically on *roti* (Indian bread) making as a routine gendered task (Upadhyay, 2021). Upadhyay discusses the process of *roti* making as a ‘loaded’ one. The article is on the gendered process of making *roti* and its interlinkages with household labour. It is the “linchpin of gender roles and national identity in our country.” The article goes on to link it to patriarchy and women’s invisible domestic work. Upadhyay says, “I cannot accept any unsolicited humour from men about rotis. Even well-meaning romanticism around *maa ke haath ki roti* angers me.” ‘*Maa ki haath ki roti*’ literally translates to bread made by my mother. The concept of the mother making hot *rotis* for all and feeding the family is indicative of her love and is a sign of her being an excellent homemaker. In a patriarchal family the labour of *roti* making is equated with the labour of love and is considered to be the hallmark of domesticity and love. Women who do not feed their family hot *rotis* are considered to be lacking in domesticity and are often considered to be domestic work shirkers. Often a woman may end up making hundreds of rotis in her lifetime. The family dynamics is such that the men earn the *roti* and the women make them. It is an everyday job for women across the country to make *rotis* often for all the three meals. By the end of a stint of *roti* making a woman often has no energy to make any *roti* for herself and sometimes may prefer to forego eating. Thus, adding to the burden of disease.

FII uses humor, satire, wit, illustrations, serious articles and other ways to highlight the different ways in which patriarchy and misogyny play out in the everyday and otherwise too. It also conveys the message that feminism is not angry and dull and dry. Feminism is also not just about women. It is also about men and other genders and sexualities.

#### **INDIAN WOMEN BLOG (<https://www.indianwomenblog.org/>)**

The Indian Women’s Blog is a website similar to Feminists in India. It can be accessed through various social media platforms like Facebook, Pinterest, Google+ and Twitter. “Indian Women Blog is an online media portal that gives wings to women across India and beyond through its heart-touching narratives & creative campaigns!” The ‘about us’ section claims that the .... “Indian Women Blog is the reflection you often long to see in the mirror. It’s the self-assurance you often seek, but can’t quite find.” This statement reflects the fact that IWB is focussed not just on women fighting for their rights but on women asserting themselves and revelling in their sexual and gendered identity.

It focusses on ‘girl love’ and states that it is directed towards bringing together women who are ‘beautiful the way you are.’ It is about women, whether by birth, by choice or otherwise, accepting themselves as they are and celebrating their sexuality. It claims to shatter stereotypes through creative campaigns and offers self-assurance to women across the country. It has some sections like art and culture, business, health etc. that are similar to FII. The IWB is different from FII since it also focuses on children and also uses music. IWB also runs several campaigns like FII.

#### **An Illustrative Account of the Content on IWB**

Some of the campaigns play around with words like “The Cuntry” with a tagline “the Cuntry for Women” with an obvious play with the word ‘cunt’ which is a vulgar term used to refer to women’s genitalia. The ‘cuntry’ section deals with sexuality and has articles ranging from sexuality of women in Indian mythology to the idea of virginity and sexuality of androgynous

figures. To illustrate the point it includes a discussion on Kavita Kané's<sup>11</sup> work on lack of women's agency in Indian mythology and the invisibilising of women's sexuality. Kane discusses the sexually liberated characters from Indian mythology, on the misconception of women sexual desires during the Mahabharata and Ramayana, on the importance and acceptance of women's consent, on the evolution of sexual desires within a marriage from the Mahabharata to the present times.

It also includes an interview of Leeza Mangaldas, a "pleasure-positive content creator" with the title 'We Need To Rethink The Idea Of Virginity As A "Loss": Leeza Mangaldas' (Sharma, 2019). The interview focusses on female sexuality and related issues like female orgasm, the importance of consent and the preoccupation with virginity, surveillance over a woman's body all in the name of honour. In the interview Mangaldas points out the need to do away with the idea of virginity as a 'loss' and instead focus on the woman's choice to have sex and enjoy her sexuality.

Another section "Unblushing" features women of all shapes and sizes. The tagline reads "Dialogues on Sexual Desire." Blushing as a phenomenon is associated with women's faces reddening due to embarrassment, shyness, stress etc. It is associated with a young, virginal and sexually unaware woman. 'Unblushing' as opposed to blushing is associated with bringing out in the open all issues that cause blushing. The intent is obviously to do away with any embarrassment associated with sexual issues and to enjoy sexuality. Prominently featured is an advertisement of an Indian women's friendly sex toys shop.

Some of the other campaigns have humorous titles like "Fat" "8<sup>th</sup> day of the Week"- with a tagline "I Need a Day Between Saturday and Sunday" inviting comments on what women wish to do on this day. Another "Lakshmi Off- duty"—"Four Lakshmis of different ages and responsibilities will show us what Lakshmi does when she is Off Duty, Off Lotus! She has one too many hands for a reason! You'll know soon." It's about what women do when they are not working. The campaign is on highlighting women's work and the complete lack of rest and relaxation.

The section focussed on socialisation is 'ABCKA of Girl's Rights.' This section has flashcards, colouring books and songs about women's rights which can be used to teach young children the alphabet and non-gendered norms. The ABCD flashcards are the feminist version of the alphabet and is used to teach children about themselves and their rights. For instance, 'A' is for your right for Ambition; with an accompanying question 'What do you dream to be when you grow up? Each alphabet is linked to issues that are central to gender and sexuality. The pedagogical approach used counteracts gender stereotypes, misogyny, and gaslighting.

The website also has rhymes and jingles that call out patriarchy and sexism. The section on "feminist rhymes" questions sexism and gender stereotypes in day to day interactions through fun rhymes. For instance, one of the rhymes is called 'Girl in the Mirror.'<sup>12</sup> It is all about #genderjust views: It is about a girl doing sports and adventure activities and also doing maths and wearing what she pleases. It teaches girls to speak out and be confident about themselves and to be curious, unlike stereotypes associated with women and girls. The jingles and accompanying rhymes are sung in a way so as to appeal to young children.

<sup>11</sup> "Kavita Kané On Reclaiming Progressive Sexuality From Indian Mythology" .Khushboo Sharma 4 October 2019

<sup>12</sup> <https://youtu.be/2LAI4CB3ByY>

The section called ‘The Locker Room’ has discussions on women’s sports. The term Locker Room is a changing room, especially for sports and generally for men. It is traditionally a masculine space where jocks crack ribald jokes and indulge in horseplay. The appropriation of the term by IWB challenges the conventional masculinity associated with sports and also the locker room. The campaign #thelockerroomtalk focusses on the narratives of gritty Indian sportswomen. It also highlights the sports that women in India play. It features discussions, interviews with the captains of the women’s teams, the challenges faced by women’s sports and the possible solutions, recipes for healthy food and fitness tips and so on (Sharma, 2019). There are also hyperlinks to various Anthems of the Indian Women’s Sports teams.

The FII and IWB sites are in their own ways promoting digital feminism. There is a mix of serious with the non-serious. Wit and humour are used to call out sexism and misogyny.

### **The Role of Language**

Both the social networking sites that have been discussed in the preceding section highlight the different ways in which the feminist movement has moved horizontally like radio waves. The collectivity and solidarity of the online feminist movement has spanned cultures and sexualities too. The solidarity emerges from shared collective emotions and identity. The goal is to make the audience rethink the ‘everyday reality’ and structures with which they think. Feminists have always argued that language needs to be viewed as a system that exists historically in specific discursive contexts. It is a reflection of the power relations in everyday life. The use of foul language and cultural bias in language create social hierarchies in everyday life. They create misogyny. Use of words like Slut, Bitch or *besharmi* are some of the ways in which feminist movements have appropriated language. The effort by the two sites discussed is also directed towards appropriating language and using it in different contexts. For instance, words like *unblushing* and *cuntry* create a disruption in the way that language is used. It exposes the sexism in language and makes people aware of the inherent sexist bias in the use of language.

Meaning is produced within language and individual signs<sup>13</sup>. The interpellation<sup>14</sup> of language is also a reflection of the power structures in society. Meaning and consciousness exist in language. The conflicting discourses created by feminists in language act as an act directed towards transformation and consciousness raising. This is a process through which the feminists are rewriting personal experiences and positioning them in a way so as to bring about change. They challenge everyday practices like relaxation, roti making and off days in the existing discursive practices fashioned in a patriarchal world. The feminists challenge the institution of patriarchy that produce this fixed meaning (Varadarajan, 2020).

Discourses are not just ways of producing knowledge but are also a part of the ways of thinking both the conscious and the unconscious. It is also a part of the emotional life of the ‘subjects they seek to govern’ (Weedon, 1987, p. 108). The attempt is to change the meanings of existing structures themselves and also the position of the subjects.

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<sup>13</sup> Saussure’s construction of language as an abstract system consisting of signs. Each sign being made up of a *signifier* i.e. sound or written image and *signified* i.e. meaning. However, this does not take into account that meaning can be plural and not necessarily fixed. It is acquired unconsciously. Jacques Derrida’s focus on writing and textuality through the concept of *différance* in which he argues that meaning is not fixed and can only be understood in a certain context. It is also subject to an endless process of deferral. The meaning may also differ from one reading to another depending on the mental state of the receiver/reader.

<sup>14</sup> As Louis Althusser uses it.

## CONCLUSION

The two social media sites discussed, challenge the structures of society across diverse sites. They also challenge the family as a patriarchal site which is assumed to be a natural site for meeting emotional, sexual and other needs. Power relations are structured in ways that men have more power than women. The 'naturalness' of division of labour in the family is questioned. The feminists focus on identifying how meanings are produced.

The state's efforts for digitisation in India is often couched in hypermasculinity. The focus on women's identity and agency is limited to development projects and welfare schemes. Social media campaigns like #Selfiewithdaughter for instance do not really bring about change. Similarly, projects like Start up India, Skill India Mission and Digital Literacy Mission target the Indian housewife but are not really empowering. They lack intersectionality and inclusivity. The efforts though laudable will not bring about change unless they are directed at overcoming the basic structural inequalities in society.

The shift in the dynamic of control is evident in the content available on these sites. An alternative discourse is emerging in the discursive field of patriarchy, whether in the family or otherwise. Patriarchy has become an object of satire by feminists. They resist and subvert patriarchy. The play with words and puns has always helped shape the feminist discourse. The feminists, through the mix of the serious and the non-serious, are able to highlight the fault lines of society. By focussing on the everyday they highlight the inbuilt power structures, paradoxes, and sexism. The use of media very powerfully highlights not just the visible but also the invisible. The play and subversion of language and the everyday mundane tasks make visible the invisible. They question and highlight the normative and accepted patterns of living. The audience, or in this case, the visitor to the sites, articulates and decodes the message in their own social context. They create a vision of society that appears to be real and plausible. The media pages are interactive and thus invite the visitor to participate and articulate and rearticulate the content in their own way. The flip side is that the plethora of online campaigns on specific issues can also lead to online fatigue.

This does not however mean that cyberspace is free of structural inequalities. Structural inequalities that exist in the physical spaces in feminist discourses and academia get reflected in online spaces too. Misogyny and sexism gets reflected through trolling and censorship in the online world. The digital divide does exist and cannot be overlooked. Barriers to women's agency in the offline space also get replicated in the online space. Access to social media is often limited by illiteracy, language barriers, and also lack of adequate infrastructure. Further language creates a barrier and it is often not possible for women at the grassroots to participate. There are however Instagram pages like 'Women at Leisure' based only on photographs of women relaxing and having fun. More importantly, these websites have brought gender related issues to the forefront in a fun and easy to understand way. The impact of this on the young computer literate generation is visible. They participate and create their own content. The anonymity offered by the internet often facilitates the participation of women in online communities. It offers a space where they can freely discuss many issues that are considered to be taboo or sensitive.

Despite the high visibility of these campaigns and online activism the impact of these on policymaking has been mixed and patchy. The impact is the greatest however when the online campaigns combine with offline women's efforts to build advocacy. The digital version of feminism has to still go a long way in becoming truly intersectional, but it is slowly and gradually getting there.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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