

Research Article

Social Media: An Alternative Space For Meitei Women's Empowerment

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become an important agent to empower women in various fields in the recent past. Social media platforms like Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, Youtube etc. have emerged as revolutionary spaces for self-expression, information dissemination, education and learning, leisure and creativity, marketing and e-commerce, activism for women's rights and issues and networking for women. Social media has opened a new frontier for women's rights organizations. For one, it encourages solidarity and emphasizes shared experiences. This research paper attempts to examine whether social media can be an important agent to empower women in Manipur especially Meitei women. By disrupting the mainstream male-centric media industry structure, and offering a more flexible, inclusive domain, it analyses whether social media has become the crucial alternative space for the empowerment of women for more active and meaningful participation in society. Social media proves to be the potential for mobilising attention and accountability to women's rights and challenging discrimination and stereotypes. This research paper explores how social media serves as a powerful tool for addressing women's issues. 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 policymakers to step up commitments to gender equality. It attempts to analyse the role of social media in empowering women, it also covers its effect on women's rights, bringing these issues to the forefront of political agenda, social media as a tool for gender sensitization and increasing women's participation in decision making. This study used analytical and exploratory methods which are based on both primary and secondary sources. Thus, social media has been increasingly used by women at the individual level as well as by women's organizations to call for greater public accountability towards gender equality in society.

Key Words: Social Media, Women, Empowerment, Rights

INTRODUCTION

Social media refers to websites and applications that are designed to allow people to share content quickly and efficiently through smartphones, but this communication tool started with computers. As per Paulo Freire's theory of "conscientization" in the field of popular education,

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women can connect their experiences of oppression with those of other women and thereby see the political dimensions of their problems (Carr, 2003). In the recent past, social media has become an important agent of social change, which help in empowering women in various fields. Studies on the relationship between social media and protest highlight communicative characteristics of the Internet to renew feminist politics (Baer, 2016; Fotopoulou, 2016).

Women usually are active on social media, and they communicate naturally across them. Women's participation in online activities is not limited to uploading photos, writing comments or social networking, but a bodily reaction to the flow of information and positioning of subjects in an experiential relationship, which probably indicates empowerment (Levina 2014). Social media has served to be potential for mobilising attention and accountability to women's rights and challenging discrimination and stereotypes. It has upped to be a powerful vehicle for bringing women's rights issues to the attention of a wider public by encouraging decision-makers to take up commitments to gender equality.

We live in a 'networked society' with our digital media providing access to the external world, nowadays regarded as close-knit as that of a 'global village' community. With the ubiquitous adoption of mobile phone technology and increasingly affordable Internet services, social media platforms like Facebook, Whatsapp, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube etc. have emerged as revolutionary spaces for self-expression, information dissemination, education, leisure, marketing and networking. By converging the different possibilities of the traditional media technologies and disrupting the mainstream male-centric media industry structure, social media has become the crucial alternative space for women empowerment.

To understand the global significance of consumer mobile phone technology and social media, which is hardly two decades old, one must first acknowledge its rapid spread and adoption. The world population as of August 2020 is a little over 7.8 billion. Out of these, unique mobile phone users worldwide number about 5.15 billion with a 66 per cent penetration (Global Digital Overview July 2020 Data Reportal). Internet users worldwide number about 4.57 billion, out of which 3.96 billion people are active social media users. On average this means that half of the earth's population or 1 out of 2 people worldwide are now engaged in social media. And 99 per cent of these social media users are accessing them from their mobile phones. The persisting presence of the digital divide is visible in the regional variation of social media usage, with a reported 63% in Eastern Asia, 69% in North America, 68% in Southern America, 66% in Northern Europe and 56% in Western Asia, Northern Africa with 40% and only 7% in Middle Africa. (Smart Insights). However, these are seen as massive opportunities for further growth in terms of the digital landscape. And with the mobile phones evolving at a fast pace in terms of features and data speed--from simple voice calling handsets in 1G cellular networks in the 1980s to the ubiquitous smartphones with multiple features in 5 G cellular networks--the mobile phone and social media market is expected to grow exponentially.

SOCIAL MEDIA AS AN IMPORTANT AGENT FOR EMPOWERING WOMEN:

The social media phenomenon may be said to have begun in 1997 with the advent of Six Degrees, which had about a million members. 2004, 2005 and 2006 saw the birth of popular social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, MySpace and Twitter. Today, there are a myriad number of social media channels with sophisticated audio-video features utilizing live videos,

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Virtual Reality, Augmented Reality, 360-degree videos etc. The popularity of some of these social media sites is presented in the table below.

Table 1 Popular Social networks with number of active users (Statista, July 2020)

Social Media Channel	Active users (in million)
Facebook	2603
YouTube	2000
WhatsApp	2000
Facebook Messenger	1300
Weixin/ WeChat	1203
Instagram	1082
TikTok	800
Snapchat	397
Pinterest	367
Twitter	326

Facebook, one of the leading 4 Internet companies of the world (GAFA: Google, Apple, Facebook, Amazon) has the highest number of active users at present with over 2.6 billion users. The company owns three other billion-user properties: mobile messaging apps WhatsApp and Facebook Messenger; and photo-sharing app Instagram. Currently, with 290 million users, India is ranked first in terms of Facebook audience size. The United States, Brazil, and Indonesia also all have more than 100 million Facebook users each (Statista).

An interesting view is to have a gendered look at social media practices.

Table 2 Gender Distribution of Social Media Audiences (January 2020, Statista)

SNS	Female	Male
Snapchat	61	38
Instagram	50.9	49.1
Facebook	44	56
LinkedIn	43	57
Twitter	38	82

It has been generally noted (Bogomilova, 2016) that just as women and men communicate differently, their preferences and use of social media are also affected by gender. For instance, women are said to prefer a more visual platform with higher use of emoticons, while men seem to participate more in text-based platforms and used a more formal, authoritative language. Women allegedly use social media more for connecting with people, sustaining old relationships through more personal posts and selfies, while men seem to be more interested in seeking information, indulging in abstract or issue-related posts and are likelier to vent their aggression and indulge in trolling through social media. Men are furthermore likely to highlight their achievements and activities on social media while several experiments have shown that women receive more abusive comments which perhaps lead to their being more reticent about their views and achievements.

Even though gendered practices are somewhat carried over to social media communication, it cannot be denied that social media offers a relatively accessible space for self-expression, freedom

of speech and advocacy for women's rights and issues denied the same in traditional society and the mainstream media. Instances include Manal Al-sharif's videos uploaded on YouTube and Facebook in 2011 as a campaign for women's right to drive in Saudi Arabia leading to her recognition by global media, Foreign Policy, Time, and the Oslo Freedom Forum. In 2014, an exiled Iranian journalist, Masih Alinejad opened a Facebook page called 'My Stealthy Freedom' campaigning for women's right against compulsory hijab as a symbolic gesture seeking basic human rights, freedom and equality. The page has garnered over a million followers and Alinejad received a human rights award in Geneva and initiated a new wave in the Iranian women's movement.

With the Internet offering various communication elements on a single platform, the users become narrators of their own stories or tales of their environment. This is termed digital storytelling (Lundby, 2008). Digital storytelling has given birth to the emergence of women telling their intimate stories to the world with hashtags #PussyRiot, #YesAllWomen, and #Slutwalk (Baer, 2016; Fotopoulou, 2016).

Another powerful case of social media activism was the #MeToo movement, which was initially started by Tarana Burke in 2006 in MySpace social media platform as a call for 'empowerment through empathy' and solidarity against sexual abuse and harassment. It gained momentum in almost 85 countries in different fields following the coming out of high profile Hollywood actresses against sexual violence in 2017. This #MeToo movement was a social media phenomenon that shed light on sexism across industries, including the humanitarian aid sector, and gave women a platform to speak out about sexual abuse. The movement is based on the idea that we all share responsibility for eliminating sexism, striving for a world in which no woman has to claim #MeToo.

In India, following the 2012 gang rape of a young woman in Delhi, the #Delhi Gang-Rape hashtag campaign brought the scale of gender-based violence into the spotlight. The 'Nirbhaya movement' against the inhuman gang rape and murder of Jyoti Singh in December 2012, regarded as the beginning of 'India's Arab Spring' gained momentum after protesters used social media sites like WhatsApp and Twitter to organize mass protests in the country. Indian WhatsApp and Facebook users changed their profiles to the 'black dot of shame' in solidarity against victims of sexual assault, opening up a legitimate space to speak out against sexual violence and to pressurize the mainstream media and the government to act, eventually leading to a change in criminal laws of the country, and the setting up of a fast track court to prosecute the attackers. It has also helped to shed light on issues like menstrual hygiene, female genital mutilation etc. which were previously considered taboo by the mainstream media.

SOME CASE STUDIES IN THE CONTEXT OF MANIPUR:

Manipur is a state in northeastern parts of India, which is inhabited by Meitei, Meitei-Pangals, Scheduled Tribes which can be divided into two proto-type communities—the Nagas and the Kukis etc. Manipuri society is predominantly a patrilineal society where the birth of a woman is still not welcome usually in a family and the craze for a son is still prevalent even though Manipuri women have been contributing to every sphere of society in Manipur.

In the social media landscape, women from different walks of life in Manipur rose in outrage against a social scientist in January 2020 for his alleged 'demeaning and unfounded statements' in

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public regarding childbirth and women in general, which had gone viral in social media. This was followed by intense debates on women's rights and condemnation of patriarchal mindsets on social networking sites like Facebook. Thus, it is clear that social media platforms offer a space for women to get their voices heard, empowering them to change the status quo by forcefully bringing out what traditionally has been concealed within the private sphere to the public domain for legitimate debate and discussion. It is this power of the social media that women like a lady police officer, Brinda Thounaojam, is harnessing in her Facebook posts in her diatribe against the all-powerful judiciary and executive powers of the state of Manipur. By making public her outrage and telling her side of the story through her Facebook posts, she has emerged as a heroic figure not only locally but nationally, garnering thousands of supporters for her cause as a 'one-man army' fighting the powerful nexus of drug cartels, corruption and nepotism in today's society.

Social media has also emerged as the most suitable medium of networking for women across all fields of interests. Many all-women groups are actively networking, sharing their expertise and experiences, pooling their resources and highlighting their achievements, which are little acknowledged or highlighted in mainstream media. For instance, The Solo Female Traveler Network is a Facebook group where women from all over the globe post about their solo travels, providing support, advice and encouragement to other female travelers. Recently a Facebook group called Eta: Northeast Women's Network Group has been formed where hundreds of professional women from the Northeast Indian Region could network, co-operate, support each other and mobilize to actively reach out to society. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the group reached out to the public with medicines and masks supplies.

With social media, it has been easier to organize regional chapters of women's groups, leading to decentralization and more participation from the grassroots levels. For example, a national organization like the Women's Indian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (WICCI) is presently working at setting up state chapters for its various areas, and this has been made possible through digital and social media platforms like WhatsApp, Email and video conferences. Opportunities like these have encouraged participation from women living in satellite states, like the women of the North-East Indian region, suffering from socio-cultural and geographical distance from mainland India. The North-East chapter of the Network of Women in Media, India, on WhatsApp is a powerful and lively hub for women journalists of the region sharing news, resources and information related to women.

Many women are exploiting platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Instagram to display their creativity and reach out to the public. From influencing food, beauty and fashion, art and craft, music, literature etc. to appealing for public support and understanding by women rocked by public scandals, social media have also emerged as a popular space for personal expression, which is denied in the mainstream media.

Social media platforms have become a hub of e-commerce and marketing with many women advertising their products and services online at little or almost no cost. In Manipur, women entrepreneurs are showcasing their products and services like handloom and handicrafts, packaged food, baked items, catering services etc. with great success. Personal marketing and peer-to-peer references and reviews seem to be more effective and cost-effective for small businesses usually headed by women. Monica Ingudam's 'Finding the Voices' page on Facebook has highlighted

many achievers of the Manipur, including several female entrepreneurs of the state in different fields.

Social media has also been a boon in terms of disseminating information and creating awareness among women. With the constant availability of news and information over social media, women, who might have otherwise missed it on the more traditional media like newspapers and television, now have access to them, being able to access them with more flexibility in terms of time and space. This flexibility is crucial for women as social norms in most cultures dictate a more structured space and routine for women. Women are likelier to be in charge of the day-to-day running of the house and maintaining the daily schedule at home, which leaves them with limited time for themselves. Thus, social media platforms present a valuable world of choices in terms of gaining awareness and information, leisure and learning for women.

CONCLUSION

Thus we can conclude that it will not be overstating to say that social media has emerged as a world of opportunities and an alternative space for women to empower themselves and others. While women are still underrepresented in media generally, social media encourages a more level playing field, allowing for the voices of women from a wider array of backgrounds and countries, with or without traditional power, to be heard. Indeed, social media has opened a new frontier for women's rights organizing. For one, it encourages solidarity and emphasizes shared experiences. Though literacy and digital divide remain gendered with women at the losing end, if the women can harness the power of social media, it will go a long way in helping women gain confidence and the ability to support each other through creative self-expression, networking, mobilizing, marketing and actively participating in society. Social media has provided a platform for women to voice their opinions about matters which affect them which were hitherto unspoken. Social media has turned out to be potential for mobilizing attention and accountability to women's rights, challenging discrimination and stereotypes. Social media has served to be a powerful vehicle for bringing women's rights issues to the attention of a wider public by encouraging Decision-makers to step up commitments to fight for gender equality. The eruption 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. Even though social media is helping as an important space for women's empowerment, there is a virtual gender gap due to lack of literacy, cybercrime, cyberbullying, etc. and women are not able to fully utilize the new space.

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