



Editorial Introduction

As the use of the internet and social media has surged in India, there has been a corresponding rise in the occurrence of technology-facilitated sexual violence. This briefing paper demonstrates that in India, one of the common ways in which 20 women survivors experienced technology-facilitated sexual violence was in the form of backlash. The paper identifies that survivors received backlash in the form of sexual abuse, physical violence and intimidation for expressing their opinions on social media. Two key findings that this paper demonstrates are: one, Dalit, Muslim, and lesbian and bisexual women experienced multiple layers of backlash due to their marginalised identities; second, experiences of backlash did not happen in isolation, and it was evident that it traversed into physical space.

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Experiences of Backlash Against Women in the Form of Technology-Facilitated Sexual Violence in India

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The proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in India has surged exponentially since the 1990s (Asrani, 2020). This rapid adoption of internet-enabled devices and services has resulted in an increase in tools used to perpetrate sexual harms against women (Equality Labs, 2019; Henry & Powell, 2014, 2015, 2018). The persistence of patriarchal and conservative social norms that fuel offline violence has also extended into online spaces and the realm of ICTs, leading to the perpetuation of online gender-based violence (Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Harris, 2020; Vitis & Segrave, 2017). This briefing paper provides an overview of findings based on in-depth interviews on 20 women survivors’ experiences of technology-facilitated sexual violence (TFSV). One component in particular that will be discussed here is the wide array of TFSV deployed as backlash including gender-based sexualised vitriol, cyberstalking, image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), doxing and unsolicited contact. Women survivors’ experiences of backlash further relate to the intersecting forms of oppression based on their caste (which involves categorizing people into hereditary social groups and implementing a system of labour allocation to fulfil the interests of the higher castes), religion, sex/gender identity and sexual orientation. The marginalised identity of the survivors amplified the intensity of the backlash, subjecting them to multiple layers of harms. This is an important finding because it underscores the necessity for online platforms and governing policies to gain a comprehensive understanding of the myriad experiences that women undergo. This understanding is instrumental in catalysing transformative changes aimed at establishing a more secure and equitable online milieu.

Overview of Key Findings

The term 'backlash' in the literature refers to the retaliatory response against women's progressive social change (Dragiewicz, 2011; Faludi, 2006). Survivors of TFSV experienced a pattern of backlash due to their feminist and political opinions, as well as their marginalised identities. Any expression or assertion of progressive change and opinions by the participants triggered various forms of TFSV, including cyberstalking, gender-based sexualised vitriol, IBSA, doxxing and unsolicited contact. This aligns with Susan Faludi's analysis of backlash against women's movements in the 1980s, where she aptly argued that the primary objective of such backlash is to coerce women back into prescribed and 'acceptable' roles (1993, p. 16). This research revealed instances of severe backlash against women engaging in feminist expression online, effectively narrowing the space for civil discourse and dissent among feminist activists in India. As Faludi (1993, 2006) astutely observes, this backlash is not a static force but adapts to our evolving culture, especially when any feminist movement makes significant strides. Consequently, while Faludi's foundational work has been pivotal in conceptualising backlash, there arises a critical need to contextualise it within contemporary feminist movements and political landscapes. For example, the advent of new technologies has led to a transformation in the landscape of feminist movements, with a significant shift towards digital activism. In this digital sphere, anti-feminist backlash often assumes the form of TFSV, as elucidated by scholars such as Ging and Siapera (2019) and Loney-Howes (2019). Thus, it becomes imperative to bridge the gap between historical observations and the present-day reality, recognising the evolving nature of backlash within the ever-changing landscape of feminist activism and its digital frontiers.

Cultural & Social Context of Backlash

In the realm of women advocating for their rights, the 20 minority group survivors interviewed shared that the prevalence of backlash is an omnipresent social phenomenon. Survivors' stories served as a poignant illustration, revealing that women who challenge the existing rape culture, patriarchy and power dynamics surrounding sexual assault often become targets of backlash. The backlash that many survivors and activists experience on social media indicates the persistence of deeply entrenched social attitudes (Loney-Howes, 2019). The social attitudes manifest in the understanding of hegemonic masculinity, which is built on the ideology of 'what is a man' (Mshweshwe, 2020). The ideology is further characterised by physical strength to discipline women who go astray from the cultural norms (Mshweshwe, 2020). In the context of patriarchy and women's roles in India, a 'good woman' is expected to be demure and not express opinions overtly in public (Chopra, 2021; Grewal, 2013; Priyadarsini & Panda, 2021). Similar cultural construction is visible through perpetrators' acts of sending unsolicited dick pics to punish and/or discipline women for challenging the patriarchal ideals of the society. Participants in this study experienced TFSV because their expressions did not align with the prevailing cultural values in India. The backlash experienced by these women is deeply influenced by the historical context of postcolonial religious violence, caste discrimination and gender-based violence. In many instances, it was not solely the intensity of the backlash that was overwhelming and threatening, but also the sheer magnitude of it. The combined impact of these forms of TFSV created an environment of fear, intimidation, and danger for the survivors, reinforcing the need for urgent action to address and prevent such violence against women.

a) Backlash Against Muslim Women

Experiences of backlash was deeply influenced by casteist, Islamophobic and homophobic slurs. In an attempt to suppress Muslim survivors' dissenting voices, pro-Hindutva men resorted to networked harassment, perpetrating various forms of violence. Muslim women recounted incidents where their personal information, such as phone numbers and addresses, was doxxed as a consequence of publicly expressing their support for Muslims and critiquing the current Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government, leading to physical violence. The political landscape of India has witnessed the rise of Hindutva politics since 2014, which has fostered an extremist, discriminatory and dehumanising attitude towards Muslims. The expansion of digital and communication technologies has only amplified these attitudes, which have further intersected with survivor's caste, sexuality and sex and gender identity. Consequently, an exclusionary form of nationalism has emerged, painting Muslims as invaders and the 'Other.' This imagined 'Hindu-nation state' has fostered a culture of violence, perpetuating prejudices against Muslim women who spoke against the regime. The environment, therefore, became hostile for survivors as they experienced targeted TFSV for challenging the prevailing discriminatory narrative against Muslims.

Hindu-nationalists' agendas posit that violence against non-Hindus are acts of nationalism (Hussein, 2022). Supporting beef consumption resulted in Muslim survivors being subjected to violence. In India, beef is regarded as a symbol of anti-nationalism by right-wing Hindu supporters called the 'gau rakshaks' (cow-protection brigade). They undertake vigilante attacks upon those suspected of producing or consuming beef (Alam, 2017; Hussein, 2022). As cows are considered sacred among many sects of Hinduism, cow protection is performed by Hindu nationalists and supported by the current BJP government (Alam, 2017). Therefore, beef plays a symbolic role in fomenting hate towards Muslims who eat beef in India, which Hussein (2022) describes as 'toxic-gastro nationalism'. After one of the Muslim survivors posted her article on consumption of beef and its connection to nationalism, she received rape threats on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp. She recalled being followed from college to her home by a group of men wearing saffron head bands [Saffron colour is closely associated to Hindu religion, like the robes of the Hindu monks and the flag of the Rashtriya Swayam Sevak (Sengupta, 2023)], which she linked to the rape threats she received. She made that link because the rape threats mentioned that they will wear the saffron headbands when they rape her.

b) Backlash Against Dalit Women

In this study backlash was also directed at Dalit women, grounded in the histories of caste violence, caste hierarchy, and gender-based violence. Caste manifests through everyday interactions and cultural norms. Forms of violence erupt when caste norms and values are challenged. Dalit women are particularly vulnerable to caste-based atrocities. Their assertion of identity on social media has often been met with severe backlash, including casteist slurs, doxxing, deepfakes, cyberstalking and unsolicited explicit images. The violence against Dalit survivors manifested in two distinct ways: first, as a perpetual practice of caste violence, wherein men employed violence to reinforce caste norms; and second, as caste violence occurring when Dalit individuals challenged or transgressed these norms. When Dalit participants expressed their Dalit identity on social media, it was perceived as defiance against the established social order dictated by upper-caste communities. Consequently, systemic violence was unleashed against them, effectively re-establishing and re-institutionalising the oppressive caste system. This unfortunate reality underscores how technological networks are deeply ingrained within the socio-political and cultural histories of India, perpetuating systemic discrimination and violence against marginalised communities, particularly Dalit women.

c) Backlash Against Lesbian and Bisexual Women

Lesbian and bisexual survivors faced significant backlash targeted at their sexuality when they challenged the heteronormative status quo. The backlash they experienced was not isolated but rather a reflection of larger patterns of subordination that they encounter in their daily lives. Lesbian and bisexual women have been specifically targeted with threats of corrective rape and gender-based sexualised vitriol, often using homophobic slurs. Participants shared experiences of being doxxed for expressing support for gay rights on social media. These behaviours constituted an extension of deeply ingrained social practices that contribute to the oppression of lesbian and bisexual women, systematically restricting their capacity and autonomy to function without fear. It is the existing institutionalised practices and prevailing discourses that allow for the victimisation of lesbian and bisexual women in India. These practices are deeply rooted within patriarchal and heterosexual behavioural norms, which, unfortunately, legitimises violence, including the threats of corrective rape. The ongoing victimisation of lesbian and bisexual survivors highlights the urgent need to challenge and dismantle these harmful norms and practices, working towards creating a society that respects and upholds the rights and safety of all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation.

Conclusion

The key findings of this research highlight that women's experiences of TFSV in the form of backlash are intrinsically shaped by a complex interplay of their sex and gender, caste, religious, and sexual identity. Further, these experiences were not separate from their offline incidents as it is a continuum of violence. For instance, the participants collectively described instances where their encounters with violence in physical spaces were frequently intertwined with experiences of sexual harassment and intimidation in those spaces, or conversely. The lenses of intersectionality also shed light on how power differentials and oppression manifest in relation to TFSV. Furthermore, the perpetrators' reassertion of Hindu identity is executed through discursive strategies that include using caste, religious, and sexuality-based slurs. These experiences have been ingrained in the survivors since childhood, as they have grown up knowing and experiencing violence directed at their identity. Moreover, the continuous circulation of harmful discourses in media and society, demonising Muslim, Dalit and queer women, creates an atmosphere of fear and hatred towards them. As a result, the attacks facilitated by technology perpetuate and feed off these harmful stereotypes. Finally, the findings of this study underscore the urgent need to address not only the technological aspect of TFSV but also the deeply rooted societal norms and harmful discourses that perpetuate violence and discrimination against marginalised communities.

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