

# Digital Activism As A Tool of Women Empowerment: An Analysis

Dr. Gagandeep Kaur\*

## Introduction

“...Women are increasingly seen, by men as well as women, as active agents of change: the dynamic promoters of social transformations that can alter the lives of *both* women and men.”

Amartya Sen

The digital world has grown globally and India is no exception. The emergence and widespread adoption of computers and the world wide web in the late nineties have revolutionized the modes of communication.<sup>1</sup> Over the past few years, the world has realized the prospective of digital technologies in social movements & campaigns. The term ‘Digital Activism’ is used in the context of digital tools that are an integral part of communication as the speed, reliability, scale and low cost of digital networking have reshaped contemporary activism. The context of digital activism refers to both technologies that are used in a given activism campaign and to the economic, social, and political context in which such technology use occurs.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, the term ‘**Digital activism**’ or ‘**e- activism**’ is a form of activism that uses the information and communication technologies and the digital media as a key platform for the expression of ideas freely. Emerging dimensions of technology have also expanded social horizons, by frequent use of social media, where geographically distant people have become our virtual neighbors. The last several years have transcended women-empowering activism into the digital landscape, as feminists became increasingly skilled at creating movements and conversations online. As a result, many digital feminist campaigns have literally changed the world for the better. Digital feminist activism is a new iteration of feminist activism, offering new tools and tactics for feminists to utilize to spread awareness, disseminate information, and mobilize constituents to achieve women empowerment.

In the literature, there is considerable diversity in the emphases, agendas, and terminology used to discuss women’s empowerment. For example, it is not always clear whether authors who are using terms such as “women’s empowerment,” “gender equality,” “female autonomy,” or “women’s status” are referring to similar or different concepts.<sup>3</sup> Despite the similar concepts, the concept of women’s empowerment in this paper follows the general meaning. As a general definition, empowerment is a multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power (that is, the capacity to implement) in people, for use in their own lives, their communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important. Empowerment is multi-dimensional, social, and a process. It is multi-dimensional because it occurs within sociological, psychological, economic, and other dimensions. Women’s empowerment has five components:

- i. women’s sense of self-worth;

---

\* Assistant Professor in Law (SS), School of Law, University of Petroleum and Energy Studies, Dehradun.

1 Sudha Misra and D. Arivazhagan, “Reimagining Physical Store in Digital World”, *International Journal of Civil Engineering and Technology* (IJCIET) Volume 8, Issue 10, October 2017, pp. 166–174, Article ID: IJCIET\_08\_10\_018.

2 Mary C. Joyce, *Digital Activism Decoded: The New Mechanics of Change*, IDEA, 2010, p.3.

3 Retrieved from: <https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/326b/504f1c6dbf711891118ef7d0eeac9494342c.pdf> visited on 13 Jan. 2020.

- ii. their right to have and to determine choices;
- iii. their right to have access to opportunities and resources;
- iv. their right to have the power to control their own lives, both within and outside the home;
- v. and their ability to influence the direction of social change to create more just social and economic order, nationally and internationally.<sup>4</sup>

Women have the power to change the world, and social media continues to inspire women to use their voices to do just that. As women's activism around #MeToo, #TimesUp #LeanIn, and other movements continue to build, social media is giving women a space to speak up and be heard. From politicians and lawmakers to farmers and small business owners, conversations on social media are connecting women around the world so they can support one another in the push for change.<sup>5</sup> Internet activism has become the mirror of women's empowerment.

### The Scope of Digital Feminist Activism in India

The internet has evolved into a single global matrix where activists gain real-time international attention for their struggle. In a global village, the impact of international movements is cross-borders and cross-countries. In this paper, some inspiring feminist campaigns in the world from the past five years have been highlighted as their achievements are worth celebrating.<sup>6</sup>

Sr. No.	Name of the Movement	Founder of Movement	The objective of the Movement
1.	#MeToo	In 2006, over a decade before the hashtag was trending, a community activist Tarana Burke founded the #MeToo Movement to spread awareness about sexual assault among women of color. In 2017, #MeToo became a viral movement when an American actress Alyssa Milano tweeted with #MeToo, asking sexual abuse victims to share their stories. The campaign burst into the global spotlight. In India too the impact of this movement was tremendous.	Tarana Burke, a survivor of sexual violence herself, wanted to create a platform for girls with similar experiences to connect with one another in a safe space. Way before tweets sparked global conversations, she launched her campaign online on MySpace.

4 K.C. Joshi, "Law and Women: Problems And Prospects" in *Women And The Law: Problem And Prospects* edited by R.K. Raizada, The Bright Law House, Rohtak, 1<sup>st</sup> edition, 1996, p12.

5 Retrieved from "Six activists who are using social media for change offline" <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2018/6/compilation-social-media-day> visited on 25 January, 2020.

6 Anastasia Gergalova, "10 Inspiring Feminist Campaigns You Should Know" on April 27, 2017. Retrieved from <http://yonah.org/channel/inspiring-feminist-campaigns> visited on 16 January, 2020 12:23 pm.

2.	#SheInspiresMe	On International Women’s Day (March 8), Twitter launched #SheInspiresMe. Poet Denice Frohman crafted an original work that she recited at the event, which encapsulates the spirit of the experience.	Twitter gathered a group of amazing women from around the world. The initiative’s goal is to create a culture of women supporting women and to lift and empower female voices.
3.	#LeanIn	Facebook Chief Operating Officer Sheryl Sandberg gave a TED Talk and wrote an eye-opening book about how women can feel held back in the workplace. Her book drove a national conversation on how women can take charge of their careers by “leaning in”. She encouraged countless women to not be afraid of speaking their truth.	In her book, Sheryl Sandberg has expressed that “Women are held back by many things – by bias, by lack of flexibility, by lack of opportunity. We also hold ourselves back – we don’t raise our hands, we don’t let our voices be loud enough.”
4.	#HeForShe	Emma Watson, an English actress, born in Paris, tapped into the power of social media to bring people together for women’s rights and gender equality with the #HeForShe campaign. This time the target audience was men.	Emma Watson approached men and expressed, “I am reaching out to you because I need your help. We want to end gender inequality—and to do that we need everyone to be involved”. The objective of this movement is to try and galvanize as many men and boys as possible to be advocates for gender equality in real sense.
5.	#Cerakamybam (#ISpeakUpNow)	Inspired by the global #MeToo and #TimesUp campaigns, a group of women from Macedonia started sharing their personal testimonies of sexual harassment by perpetrators in positions of power. Vasileva and other feminist activists kicked off a new social movement in FYR Macedonia against sexual harassment under the hashtag #Cerakamybam (#ISpeakUpNow).	Vasileva and six other activists shared their personal stories about sexual harassment, mainly focusing on abuse of power, and the trend spread like wildfire. By the end of the first day, many women had spoken up about their experiences using the hashtag, drawing attention from the regional media for being the first campaign of its kind in the region.

6.	#Timesup	Time's Up is a movement against sexual harassment and was founded on January 1, 2018, by Hollywood celebrities in response to the Weinstein effect and #MeToo. Lisa Michelle Borders is the former president and chief executive officer of Time's Up.	Time's Up shares a similar vision for women's empowerment with #MeToo, but it has some different, specific goals. Time's Up can be thought of as a solution-based, action-oriented next step in the #Metoo movement. The organization's aim is to create concrete change, leading to safety and equity in the workplace.
----	----------	--	--

It is observed that since the introduction of the Internet in India, Indian women have used this medium not only as a means of accessing and disseminating information but also as the means of voicing their concerns about discriminatory laws and to participate in public discourse.

“Media used to be one way. Everyone else in the world just had to listen. Now the internet is allowing what used to be a monologue to become a dialogue. I think that's healthy.”

Joseph Gordon

In each and every corner in India, the Internet provided a voice to repressed and marginalized groups, particularly young people and educated women. Blogging has helped repressed and marginalized groups reach out, including women's and human rights activists to get their voices heard and to challenge the long-standing univocal government. Women bloggers have been among the leading bloggers within the Iranian blogosphere.<sup>7</sup>

### Risks in Digital Feminist Activism

The Information and Communication Technology (ICT) revolution has not only opened up new opportunities for economic growth and social development but has also posed problems and challenges. It has been observed that women are using the technology as a form of empowerment, by creating women's venues, resources, and networks for organizing. Networking and strategizing among women and women's groups have led to the abovementioned #movements. However, the fact is that the more women post and engage the more vulnerable they become. The aggregated data may be targeted against them. Over time, such data can be used to build an accurate picture not only of their preferences, likes, and behaviors but also of their beliefs, political views, and intimate personal details; things that even their family and friends may not know about them. A series of “moral panics” regarding information accessible on the Internet and its use for criminal activity.<sup>8</sup>

“Privacy is not an option and it should not be the price we accept for just getting on the internet.”

Gary Kovacs

First and the foremost threat is (i) the breach of data and sensitive personal information of

7 FaridShirazi, “Information and communication technology and women empowerment in Iran”, *Telematics and Informatics*, Volume 29, Issue 1, February 2012, Pages 45-55.

8 Sean M. Zadig and Gurvirender Tejay, *Emerging Cybercrime Trends: Legal, Ethical, and Practical Issues*, Retrieved from <https://www.igi-global.com/chapter/emerging-cybercrime-trends/59936> visited on (Jan. 16, 2020 08:45 PM).

females attached to the movements. (ii) Secondly is the Cyber Stalking.<sup>9</sup> Cyber Stalking means to stalk someone by various modes that become fearful after some time like following the posts of concerned persons, noting down contact details and address, downloading pictures, and friends List. This term is used interchangeably with online harassment and online abuse. This offense is made punishable under section 509 IPC, Section 67, 67-A of the Information Technology Act, 2000 (2008). (iii) Thirdly, the offense of Phishing or Identity Theft. The word 'phishing' is commonly used to describe the offense of electronically impersonating someone else for financial or other gains. This is frequently done either by using someone else's login credentials to gain access to protected systems or by the unauthorized application of someone else's digital/electronic signature in the course of electronic contracts. This is penalized under section 66 C and 66 D of the Information Technology Act, 2000 (2008) and (iv) fourth is Vishing. Vishing is the act of using the telephone in an attempt to scam the user. Much the same as 'phishing' is the utilization of caricature messages intended to trap focuses on clicking malevolent connections. Rather than email, vishing, for the most part, depends on robotized telephone calls<sup>10</sup>

### **Legal Provisions on the regulation of Digital Communications: Relevant Provisions of the Information Technology Act, 2000 as amended in 2008**

The Information Technology Act was enacted in 2000 and has been revised most recently in 2008. The Information Technology (Amendment) Act, 2008 has added several provisions that are privacy-centric. Sections 43 provides **penalty and compensation for damage to the computer, computer system. Section 66** deals with computer-related offenses. Section 66-C punishes Identity Theft or Hacking. Section 66 D provides punishment for Cheating by Personation by using a computer source. Section 66 E deals with punishment for violation of privacy, **Section 67 C provides Preservation and Retention of information by intermediaries, Section 69 states powers to issue directions for interception or monitoring or decryption of any information through any computer resource, Section 72** mentions regarding privacy and confidentiality and **Section 72 A deals with Punishment for Disclosure of information in breach of lawful contract (Inserted vide ITAA-2008)** of the Information Technology Act, 2000, which relate to computer/cybercrimes.

The IT Act makes hacking and tampering with computer source an offense and penalizes unlawful access to data. However, it does not prescribe any minimum security standards which the entities having control of data should comply with except in cases of Personal sensitive information.<sup>11</sup> The Justice BN Shrikrishna Committee was formed to propose a draft data protection regime to identify current issues and possible statutory protections. The Data (Privacy and Protection) Bill, 2018, grants a statutory Right to Privacy. The Bill also proposes to streamline the data protection regime in India by providing a holistic framework and proposes the creation of Data Privacy.<sup>12</sup> This Bill has discussed several emerging privacy issues, 'legitimate expectations', BHIM (Bharat Interface for Money), 'due diligence', 'consent criterion' and online banking. However, till the enactment of this legislation, the situation is unclear generally in privacy

9 Louise Ellison and Yaman Akdeniz, *Cyber-stalking: the Regulation of Harassment on the Internet*, Retrieved from <http://www.cyber-rights.org/documents/stalkingarticle.pdf> visited on (Jan 16, 2020, 8:46 PM).

10 Retrieved from <https://www.cnet.com/news/protecting-yourself-from-vishing-attacks/> visited on (Oct. 4, 2019).

11 Retrieved from <http://www.livelaw.in/data-protection-india/> visited on (Jan. 3, 2019).

12 Retrieved from <http://www.livelaw.in/relevance-data-privacy-and-protection-bill-2017-highlights-entails/> visited on (Jan. 1, 2018, 5:42 PM).

and particularly in women context. According to the judgment of Justice K S Puttaswamy<sup>13</sup>, the Supreme Court has made the 'Right to Privacy' as a fundamental right. Therefore digital feminist activism and the privacy of their information are of utmost importance.

### **Conclusion and Suggestions**

It is observed by the author that in times of excessive mass surveillance, data collection, online harassment, cyberbullying, doxing, online connectivity, it becomes imperative for women to be aware regarding the protection of sensitive personal information online. It is need of the time to learn about privacy and security tools in digital media. Women have started expressing themselves at a digital forum like #MeToo, #LeanIn, #WomensMarch, and #SheInspiresMe, as the 'Freedom of Speech & Expression' is a fundamental right. However, the expression must be regulated by women users so that their privacy, as well as data breach, is not threatened. I firmly believe in the opinion that:

"A strong woman understands that gifts such as logic, decisiveness, and strength are just as feminine as intuition and emotional connection. She uses and values all of her gifts."

Nancy Rathburn.

In the smart world, women must be more smarter while handling data and information on the internet. As the nature of the internet is transborder and anonymous, therefore, women must refrain from oversharing of complete details on digital forums. Digital platforms must be utilized in the expression of firm points rather than making hate speech. The choice of response is the prime responsibility of e-users. The article has highlighted certain risks in digital feminist activism and legal provisions. Therefore, women must approach the police and government agencies if their privacy is threatened without any hesitation. It is felt that the internet has not created different 'Safety Rule Book' for women; and framing of rules will not work if we, *the Women* don't equip with our own rules while using the internet that is not privacy-centric.

---

<sup>13</sup> K. S. Puttaswamy v. Union of India (2017) 10 SCC 1.