

Research Article

Participation of Women in Student Activism amidst the Menace of Online Harassment and Media Trial: A Study of Selected Central Universities in Delhi

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ABSTRACT

Student activism involves the participation of students in collective action to strive for the rights and interests of the student community. It also makes an attempt to usher progressive social change in society at large. India has a rich history of student activism as students actively took part in the freedom struggle and stood at the forefront of the Independence movement. Taking that legacy forward, contemporary social movements in recent times have seen huge participation of students with many such national movements actually emanating from University campuses and being student led. The Fee Must Fall movement which started from Jawaharlal Nehru University, the Anti-CAA/NRC movement with its epicentre at Jamia Millia Islamia and the Pinjra Tod movement spread across university campuses in India are some of the contemporary movements which have been led by students and a key aspect of all these movements have been the huge participation of women students in them. In fact, women students were at the forefront of these movements and many women students emerged as leaders in their own right after these movements. The increasing popularity of these women students has also led to a sustained media trial and online hate and slander campaign against them by online trolls and people of opposing ideologies. The scenario is so grim that they have been even put up for auction on sexist hate applications like Sulli Deals and Bulli Bai. The continuous online harassment hurled at these women student activists has also served as a foundation for violent physical and sexual attacks on them. This article highlights the experiences of prominent women student activists from the three central universities in Delhi

namely Jawaharlal Nehru University, Jamia Millia Islamia and University of Delhi. It lays special emphasis on the menace of online harassment and media trial faced by women student activists. It also highlights the struggles and resilience of these women student activists who are trying to usher a positive change in the society at the expense of their own mental health, physical health and safety.

Keywords: Student activists, Women students, Student movements, Online harassment, Trolling, Sexual harassment, Media trial

INTRODUCTION

Student activism involves the participation of students in collective action to strive for the rights and interests of the student community. It also makes an attempt to usher progressive social change in society at large. It is important that student activism should thrive in universities and higher education institutions as it gives voice to the student community and furthers their participation in the academic as well as social and political spheres of these institutions. ‘Student activism represents an effective way of supporting critical thinking, collaboration, organising, citizenship, identity consciousness, civic engagement, and leadership skills in students through a democratic process’ (Garwe, 2017).

Historically, student activism has played a major role in achieving social change especially in difficult situations and at times of turmoil. Students across the globe have led movements to promote human rights and democracy in their countries and have bravely challenged totalitarian regimes. Student activism reinforces the principles of justice, dignity and equality for all, at times when nations go through their worst moral crisis. Student activists often face the wrath of authoritarian governments and get imprisoned for the work they do and many a time universities come in the line of fire of repressive governments across the globe and are even shut down when students start taking part in protests (Omatsu, 2002).

However, student activism remains incomplete and in a way defeats its sole purpose of transforming higher education institutions and the society at large without the active participation of women students in activism. The participation of women students in activism in schools, universities and colleges gives a new ray of hope to fight issues of gender inequality, sexual harassment, sexual violence, gender stereotypes, prejudices and advocates for a more gender-just environment in these institutions and also in the society. Women student activists across the globe are working on pertinent issues like climate change, period poverty, access to clean drinking water, women empowerment, education for all and many others (Connley, 2018).

The importance and strength of women students in activism can alone be gauged from the fact that the biggest mass movement against climate change in contemporary times which has shaken the conscience of many nations and leaders across the globe has been started by a school going girl student activist, Greta Thunberg, the initiator of the 'Fridays For Future' campaign which is now joined by millions of students across the globe. Greta Thunberg has also become an icon of student activism amongst students across the globe and she is not the only one leading this fight (Starostinetskaya, 2020). In India too, there are many young girl student activists like Ridhima Pandey and Licypriya Kangujam who are leading the fight against climate change and making world leaders accountable (Chakrabarty, 2019; Pandey, 2020).

However, climate change is not the only issue that has led to active participation of women students in activism. Hartocollis (2019) reported about the participation of women students who actively organise and take part in protests to make college authorities accountable against incidents of sexual assaults on students in the campus. She also highlighted, the active participation of women students on issues of sexual harassment and violence against women in the society.

In contemporary India too, women students have taken up to student activism, a collective of women students named Pinjra Tod was formed in the year 2015 and comprised of students of Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia, JNU, Ambedkar University and many other higher educational institutions in Delhi to challenge the discriminatory and regressive hostel rules and curfew timings and have also pressed the authorities of these institution to make internal complaints committees to address the complaints of students who have faced sexual harassment in the campus or at the hands of their fellow students, teachers or university staff outside the campus premises. The Pinjra Tod movement has also spread to other parts of the country including Raipur, Patiala and Bhopal where women students have protested against discriminatory hostel rules and curfew timings (Barua, 2020).

The iconic images of women students of Jamia Millia Islamia namely Chanda Yadav, Ladeeda Farzana and Aysha Renna protesting against the trio of Citizenship Amendment Act, National Register of Citizens and the National Population Register caught the attention of the nation and later the same women students went viral for saving their fellow activists from police atrocities (Sarkar, 2020). Similarly, the many photos and interviews of Aishe Ghosh, the president of Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union (JNUSU), who was beaten for protesting against the fees hike in JNU and leading the Fees Must Fall movement, also resonated widely with the people who came out in her support in large numbers. She also went on to contest the legislative assembly polls in West Bengal as a CPI (M) candidate (Varma, 2021).

The entire movement against the CAA-NRC-NPR in India has seen active participation of women students from various universities across the country. Women students have also actively participated in relief work post the violence which broke out in areas of North East Delhi resulting in a huge loss to life and property in the area. All of these points to the fact that there has been a definite surge in student activism in India in the last few years and women students have been at the forefront of this surge (Yadav, 2019; Lahiri, 2020).

The increasing popularity of these women students has led to a sustained online hate and slander campaign against them by trolls and people of opposing ideologies. The scenario is so grim that they have been even put up for auction on sexist hate applications like Sulli Deals and Bulli Bai. The continuous online harassment hurled at these women student activists has also served as a foundation for violent physical and sexual attacks on them (Yasir, 2022).

Muslim student activists like Afreen Fatima and Noor Mahvish along with many other Muslim women were turned into 'Sulli Deals' of the day on the hate application called Sulli Deals which was hosted on the internet platform called GitHub. Noor Mahvish pointed out that the increasing islamophobia in the country is responsible for this online harassment of vocal Muslim women which includes a lot of women activists. Afreen Fatima had to go through sleepless nights because of the horrific experience as she could not help but imagine the negative impact of the incident on her personal life as well as on her family members (Ali, 2021; Sahni, 2021).

A sustained media trial targeting student leaders has also become a major problem staring women student activists in the face. Media aids the ruling regime in taking forwards the hate and slander campaign against women student activists and leaves no stone unturned to defame them. Running fake news, manufactured opinions and lies has become a part and parcel of the prime time media shows giving them the infamous tag of 'Godi Media' (Fatima, 2021). The current state of media trial against student activists resonates with the teachings of civil rights activist Malcolm X who famously said that 'If you're not careful, the newspapers will have you hating the people who are being oppressed, and loving the people who are doing the oppressing'.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Student activism has significantly impacted nations across the globe. History is witness to the fact that student activism in many countries like South Korea, Turkey, Ecuador and Thailand have taken the shape of huge protests and have even toppled governments (Shyam, 2002). India has its own rich history of student activism which has always been despised by the people in power and the authorities who have always viewed

student activism as a nuance. During the 1920s many national student conferences were held across India which ignited the participation of student in the freedom struggle. In 1936, the All India Students' Federation was founded as the first national organisation of students in India and it was soon followed by the formation of the All India Muslim Students' Federation in the year 1937 (Altbach, 1974).

India has a rich history of participation of women students in activism and the freedom struggle. Women students from all over India participated actively in the Quit India Movement in the year 1942, these women idolised Mahatma Gandhi and the stories of their courage displayed in the face of adversity have been awe-inspiring. In Punjab, twenty-two women students were arrested by the police who were protesting along with the men students on the call of Mahatma Gandhi's 'do or die' slogan. When the police asked them their names, they had some interesting answers in return.

- What is your name?
- Baagi Number 1, 2, 3, 4, 5..... 22
- What is your Father's name?
- Gandhi Ji
- What is your Mother's name?
- Bharat Mata (All India Satyagraha Council, 1942).

In recent times, women students in India have participated in student activism for a host of campus related as well as social issues affecting their lives and intersecting with their gender. In the year, 2015 Pinjra Tod was born when an order of the Delhi Commission of Women termed the hostel curfew rules for women students of Jamia Millia Islamia which did not allow them to stay out of the campus till late nights as discriminatory in nature. It was then that the women students studying in various universities in Delhi came up with their own stories of hostel curfew rules which were discriminatory in nature and started a campaign against these rules. The universities too had to respond to some of the demands of the women students as many colleges in the Delhi University had to extend their curfew timings and even Jamia Millia Islamia came up with a statement that assured the women students of ensuring gender equality on the campus (Saxena, 2015).

Women students in various universities have also raised their voice against the growing cases of sexual harassment of women in academic institutions. Women students of JNU protested against Professor Atul Johri who allegedly sexually harassed many women students in the university. They also protested at the Vasant Kunj, police station under whose jurisdiction the university falls, after which the police assured the women students

of action and arrested the professor (Nanda, 2018). However, the professor got bail by the court within hours of his arrest by the police. The women students continued their protest demanding the university to suspend the professor and bar his entry into the campus premises. The protests of women students against the professor also compelled him to resign from all his administrative posts in the university (Scroll, 2018).

In contemporary times, the biggest push to the participation of women students in student activism came during the anti-Citizenship Amendment Act protests in which the women students of Jamia Millia Islamia led the movement from the front (Press Trust of India, 2019). The iconic picture of courage of women students of Jamia Millia Islamia namely Aysha Renna and Ladeeda Farzana saving their fellow male protestors from police brutality resonated with millions of women across the nation and the anti-CAA movement soon became a movement led by women all over the country. 'Dressed in a maroon hijab and wearing a stern face, the bespectacled Aysha with her right index finger pointing at the policemen warning them not to come near her friend took Twitter by storm with many lauding her for her act of bravery. Overnight, Ayesha became the symbol of the Jamia protests, inspiring caricatures and posters from across the country' (The New Indian Express, 2019).

A study conducted by Pew Research Center (2021) highlights that online harassment can be gauged in terms of different behaviours perpetrated by the harassers online in the garb of anonymity, these behaviours include stalking, threats of physical and sexual violence, sexual harassment, name-calling, intentional embarrassment. The study further states that 50% of the people who faced online harassment pointed out that their political views were one of the primary reasons for their online targeting.

Maundu (2020) opines that 'We now live in a virtual society and offline violence has extended to online, which makes it easier for people to commit violence without consequences. Women are the main targets of online violence, especially women with voices, like female journalists and politicians. Online harassment can include online bullying, trolling, cyber stalking, defamation and hate speech, public shaming, and identity theft and hacking, amongst other offences'.

Gender Role theory associates certain personality traits like assertiveness and ambitious nature with men and therefore women activists who exhibit such traits are seen as breaking the patriarchal norms of the society and hence online harassment of women becomes a tool employed by anonymous members of the society to reinforce the patriarchal gender roles in the society. Misogynistic and Non-Liberal political forces and personalities also encourage and perpetuate online harassment against women activists to silence their voices and force them out of political life (Meco and Brechenmacher, 2020).

Sengar (2020) highlights a study conducted by Plan International which reveals that over 55% of the women on social media have faced some form of online harassment which also includes murder and rape threats forcing many women to either leave or significantly limit their use of social media. The social media platform where women faced the most number of attacks was Facebook followed by Instagram and WhatsApp. Relatively new social media platforms like Tik Tok and Snapchat were also on the list where women are subjected to online harassment.

In recent times, Safoora Zargar, a student activist from Jamia Millia Islamia who participated in the Anti-CAA/NRC movement had to face the worst form of slander and hate campaign on social media sparking national and global outrage. The Delhi Commission for Women (DCW) took notice of the slander campaign against her and issued a notice to the Delhi Police demanding action against the online trolls. The DCW notice stated that ‘a vilification campaign is being run against her and her unborn child on social media and misogynistic comments are being made’. Kapil Mishra a leader of the Bhartiya Janta Party was one amongst many others who passed nasty comments on Safoora’s pregnancy on Twitter (Khan, 2020).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What is the importance of student activism?

What is the extent of participation of women students in activism?

What are the problems faced by women students when they take part in activism?

What constitutes online harassment and media trial?

What is the impact of online harassment and media trial on the lives of women student activists?

Does online harassment and media trial serve as a foundation for physical and sexual attacks on women student activists?

Does online harassment and media trial deter women students from taking part in activism?

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

To gain an insight into the participation of women in student activism in contemporary times

To gain a feminist understanding of the specific instances of online harassment faced by women student activists

To gain a feminist understanding of the specific instances of media trial faced by women student activists

To understand the impact of online harassment and media trial on the lives of women student activists

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is descriptive in nature as it aims to bring fore the micro as well as macro realities of the life women student activists who have studied in selected central universities in Delhi. It encompasses in detail the menace of media trial and online harassment which plagues the lives of women student activists. The research is qualitative in nature and has been conducted over a period of six months. The study uses a feminist lens to formulate the theoretical underpinnings of the research and looks at the issues of online harassment and media trial of women student activists from a feminist perspective.

Area of the Study

The city of Delhi has been strategically chosen as the area of study because it has the highest number central universities in India and so there is a larger pool of central universities to choose from for the purpose of the study. There are a total number of seven central universities in Delhi out of which three central have been chosen for the purpose of the study. The central universities where the study has been conducted include University of Delhi, Jamia Millia Islamia University and Jawaharlal Nehru University. There are multiple reasons for choosing these three universities for the purpose of the study. These reasons include their rich history of student activism, their extremely renowned status in the country considering their date of establishment, academic track records and the contemporary surge of student activism in these universities with special reference to the increasing participation of women students in this surge. These reasons make these universities ideal for conducting the study considering the availability of the huge pool of research participants (respondents) in these universities.

Sampling Design

The population of the study includes all the women student activists who study or have studied (alumni) in the three central universities chosen for the purpose of the research namely University of Delhi, Jamia Millia Islamia University and Jawaharlal Nehru University. The total sample size of the study is 60 with 20 women student activists being chosen from each university. The purposive sampling technique which falls under the non-probability method of sampling has been used for choosing the research participants/sampling units from the three universities.

Methods and Sources of Data Collection

The research study has relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. Primary sources of data include the primary research participants (respondents) of the study which include women student activists from the three selected universities. The secondary sources of data entail the existing literature related to the study accessed from books, thesis, journals, newspaper and magazine articles, online sources, films and documentaries. The data have been collected using interview schedules as the tool of data collection.

NARRATIVES OF PROMINENT WOMEN STUDENT ACTIVISTS

Name: Afreen Fatima

Age: 23

University: Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

Afreen Fatima, a 23-year-old woman student from JNU has held leadership positions in the Students Union of the two top most central universities in India. She was the President of the Women's College in Aligarh Muslim University from where she pursued her graduation and later became the councillor of the School of Languages in Jawaharlal Nehru University while pursuing her Masters in Linguistics. She then went on to become the National Secretary of the Fraternity Movement, an independent youth-led organisation comprising of students from various universities in India which focuses on raising issues of the marginalised communities both in the university campuses and in society.

‘When I was participating in the Anti CAA/NRC movement, a leader of a political party tweeted an edited and out of the context clip of my speech and the media began a vicious trial against me. The media called me a terrorist, jihadist, anti-national. The news channels used terrible and vicious tag lines for me like, ‘Bhole Chehre Ke Peeche, Zehar Ki Kheti Karne Waali’ implying that I have poisonous intentions behind and innocent face. My mental health was adversely affected because of the media trial and the discourse which was created around my participation in the anti-CAA/NRC movement. My picture along with my name appearing for auction on the Sulli Deals and Bulli Bai application was the most numbing experience for me. I have faced hate comments ranging from rape threats, murder threats to people abusing my parents, linking me with male activists and even sending me nude and pornographic clips but auctioning me on an online app was the most outrageous and disturbing thing which has happened with me and even till date I avoid to look at the screenshot of that app which I have with me and neither have I shared it anywhere on my social media even as a mark of protest just because I do not want people to look at it anymore’, says, Afreen.

Name: Safoora Zargar

Age: 28

University: Jamia Millia Islamia, Delhi

Safoora Zargar, a student of MPhil Sociology at Jamia Millia Islamia who actively took part in the anti-CAA/NRC movement was arrested and sent to jail while she was pregnant. She was physically and mentally having a hard time inside the jail while outside it she was being subjected to a vicious slandering campaign and every possible attempt was made to tarnish her image and dignity by online trolls and the media. She was even put up for auction in an online sexist and hate application called Bulli Bai.

‘Since I was inside the jail at that particular time I did not get to know the extent of my character assassination which took place outside the jail. It was said that I got pregnant in Shaheen Bagh and I don’t have a husband and till date, I refuse to clarify any of these allegations as I am not accountable to the shallow standards of this society and I don’t want to do a disservice to all the single mothers out there by justifying myself. Even today when I open my Twitter, Facebook messages, I receive questions like, ‘who is the father of your child?’ along with numerous murder and rape threats. My family also had to go through a lot of trauma because of this sustained hate campaign against me and the stories which were planted in the media about me. I regularly get messages calling me terrorist, jihadi, sulli and many other nasty names. Many of these messages are filled with abuses’, tells, Safoora.

Name: Swati Khanna

Age: 28

University: University of Delhi

Swati Khanna, a 28-year-old woman student who pursued a law degree (L.L.B.) from Delhi University is one of the most prominent women voices on social media fighting patriarchy, communalism, casteism and injustice. She has an active following of over lakhs of people across various platforms like Twitter and Facebook but she never intended to get viral in the first place and was always wary of it. ‘Well becoming too viral on social media also brings along a lot of threats and backlash. It almost renders you unemployable and that is why when the first time I got viral on social media, I deactivated all my social media accounts for some time’, shares, Swati.

‘I took part in the protest against the mob lynching of a Muslim man named Tabrez Ansari, I held a poster in that protest which read, “I am a Hindu and I love Muslims. Muslims are my brothers, sisters, friends.” The picture of me holding the poster got viral and another video of mine from the same protest where I condemned the act of mob lynching while speaking to a YouTube channel also got viral. It was from that very

moment that I was hounded by trolls and right wing ideologues on social media. I received rape threats, acid attack threats and murder threats on my social media profiles. There were nasty comments like I should be publicly raped and taught a lesson. I was so disturbed by all this that for the next one month I deactivated all my social media accounts', says, Swati.

Swati had some very genuine concerns related to her safety that led her to abruptly deactivate all her social media accounts after getting viral for the first time. 'My house was very far from my college in Delhi University (North Campus). I used to take at least two hours of daily travel each day in the metro and I was scared that someone would attack me in the metro or while I am walking towards my college. It's like I had to remain alert all the time and watch over my back as I had received so many threats from people who were extremists and religious fundamentalist. I used to suffer from anxiety and panic attacks and therefore for my peace of mind I decided to deactivate all my social media accounts. I was even branded as a Muslim woman named Sabiha Khan and fake news was spread about me on various social media platforms. My picture was juxtaposed with another Muslim woman named Sabiha Khan who was associated to some political party and I was portrayed as her. I felt as if the trolls have even stripped me of my identity for the sake of their agenda of hate', tells Swati.

Name: Apeksha Priyadarshini

Age: 29

University: Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi

Apeksha Priyadarshini, a 29-year-old PhD Scholar of Cinema Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University is an active member of the Bhagat Singh Ambedkar Students Organisation (BASO). She is a part of the Jawaharlal Nehru University Students Union (JNUSU – 2019) as an elected councillor from the School of Arts and Aesthetics.

Apeksha who is a staunch activist of student and gender rights writes on social media and other digital media platforms to take her voice to the masses, she has also faced online harassment and attacks by social media trolls for expressing her views on the platform. 'I have written articles in The Wire against the incarceration of student leader Umar Khalid. I have also written against the discontinuation of GSCASH and its ill effects on women students in JNU. I try to make use of my social media accounts and the digital media to raise my voice against a system which is becoming unjust with every passing day. I have been labelled as a Hindu traitor, urban naxal and jihadi by social media trolls who post nasty comments and abuses on my social media posts. The manner in which media portrays JNU students as anti-nationals and non-studious has also leads to online targeting from people who have been fed with continuous lies from the media', shares, Apeksha.

Name: Neha Bharti

Age: 24

University: University of Delhi

Neha Bharti, a 24-year-old woman student, pursuing her Masters in Buddhist Studies from Delhi University (DU) started taking part in activism as early as a 19-year-old while pursuing her B.A. in Political Science from DU when she joined the Chhatra Yuva Sangharsh Samiti (CYSS), the student wing of the Aam Aadmi Party where her fiery speaking and leadership skills were soon recognised in various student and political circles leading her to be rewarded with the post of Secretary, CYSS (Delhi Unit).

Neha's growing popularity as a social activist also meant that she was subjected to brutal harassment online by trolls and right-wing social media handles. She received rape threats, acid attack threats and even murder threats for her activism. 'The most disturbing part for me was that the trolls used to describe the way they would rape me in detail, their description was violent and horrifying. I was told that whatever happened to 'Nirbhaya' was nothing and much more will be done with me, an iron rod will be inserted in my vagina when they will rape me. I was told that acid will be thrown on my face and then only I will learn a lesson. There were comments by people targeting my family and murder threats warnings for my parents', says, Neha.

Neha was not the one to back down from these threats and she shared the violent screenshots of her harassment online and tweeted Delhi Police to take action. Many prominent personalities from the field of politics, journalism and civil society retweeted and shared her complaint. Neha also filed official complaints to the Delhi Police in the Jamuna Market and Haus Kazi police stations. She also filed online complaints to the cyber cell of Uttar Pradesh police as she was receiving many death threats from social media accounts whose owners were located in the state. However, till date no action has been taken on Neha's complaint and no arrests have been made.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Use of Communal and Casteist Slurs by Online Trolls

The women student activists who were interviewed revealed that they were targeted on the basis of their religion and caste but no particular religion was spared, being a women student activist was enough to attract the wrath of online harassers. It was important to note that while Muslim women student activists were labelled as jihadists, terrorists, sullies on their social media accounts, Sikh women student activists were called Khalistanis and anti-India. Hindu women student activists were termed as Hindu traitors, urban

naxals and anti-nationals. Casteist slurs were also used against women student activists who belonged to the SC and ST communities. The use of these communal and casteist slurs highlight the interplay of gender, religion and caste leading to online harassment of women student activists as a form of intersectionality.

Rape, Murder and Acid Attack Threats

The women activists revealed that rape threats, murder threats and acid attack threats are used frequently against them. The online harassers use the threats of most heinous crimes against women student activists going to the extent of describing the rape attack on them and justifying the acid attacks on them using lines like, ‘you will learn your lesson only when we will burn your face by acid, you think you are very smart, you will understand to stay quiet, when you will be raped brutally’. Such lines are commented and sent through chats by harassers to women student activists clearly implying that the harassers have a misogynistic mindset towards vocal women student activists who exhibit an agency of their own.

Sexual Harassment Is One of the Most Common Forms of Online Harassment

The women students’ activists told that online trolls in the garb of anonymity send them pornographic clips, dick, nude pictures and other sexually inappropriate content both written and visual. Every tool in the kit is used by online harassers to sexually harass women activists.

Increasing Use of Fake and Troll Accounts to Target Women Student Activists

The increasing use of social media has also led to the increase in number of fake and troll accounts specially made for the purpose of intimidating and harassing women student activists. Sometimes their phone numbers and link to social media accounts are shared on specific WhatsApp groups made for targeting vocal women like women lawyers, activists, actors and journalists.

Death Threat to Family Members and Parents

Many women student activists revealed that trolls abuse their parents and threaten to attack and murder their family members. They justify these attacks too by using lines like, ‘Your parents did not raise you well that is why you have become like this and hence they should be punished too’. Such comments clearly underline the patriarchal undertones and misogyny which is prevalent in society against vocal and successful women.

Misogynistic, Sexist and Abusive Comments

The use of misogynistic, sexist and abusive comments against women student activists is common and trolls try to mansplain and morally school them about their behaviour. The most frequent comments include, 'you are a girl, you should focus on studies, you are a girl you should not take part in protests, you are a girl, you should not speak much, girls like you destroy other girls, girls like you give a bad name to all other girls, girls should stay away from politics'. The comments are a clear reflection of a patriarchal society from where the perpetrators operate.

Negative Impact on Mental Health of Women Student Activists

The online harassment of women student activists has a negative impact on their mental health pushing them towards stress and anxiety. The fear of these online attacks turning into real physical attacks also becomes a cause of extreme worry for women student activists. This negative impact on their mental well-being also adversely affects their academic activities and studies. The women student activists revealed that the stress plays an important factor in their burnout and forces many of them to take a break from activism for the sake of their own mental health and well-being.

Online Attacks Serve as Foundation for Physical Violent and Sexual Attacks

The women student activists who were interviewed revealed that their safety is under constant threat while they are travelling to college and even when they go to public places because people tend to recognise them because of the false narrative against them on mainstream and social media and anyone in the public could be a potential perpetrator who may get incited to attack them. There are chances that people who spew online hate may actually try to attack women student activists physically also. Women student activists like Aishe Ghosh, Preeti Umrao, Kawalpreet Kaur and Apeksha Priyadarshini who have been subjected to continuous online harassment have also faced a series of physical attacks on them causing them to grave physical injuries and mental trauma.

Media Trial of Student Activists and Student Movements

The women activists revealed that media defames and tarnishes the student movements by portraying them as something wrong and against society. For example, the students of JNU were portrayed as Anti-Nationals and Free Loaders when they started the Fee Must Fall movement against Fee Hike when affordable education should be a right for all in India. Similarly, the students of Jamia Millia Islamia were portrayed as terrorists and jihadists by the media when they were protesting against the CAA and NRC.

Media often portrays student activists as non-studious and disruptive students which lead to their online targeting as well as physical attacks on them. After putting the entire purpose and intentions of the student movements on trials, the media then selects specific student leaders and starts a media trial against them in an attempt to aid and give credence to the actions of the state against these students. The media trial of women student activists publicly destroys the image of these students rendering them unemployable and vulnerable to attacks while giving extreme stress and worry to their families.

CONCLUSION

There contemporary surge of student movements in India gives credence to the timeline of this study in acknowledging and bringing to light the menace of Online Harassment and Media Trial faced by women student activists. The study clearly reveals that women student activists are more vulnerable to online harassment and media trial because of their political views and activism. The study highlights the various forms through which women student activists have been harassed online and the negative impact it has on their mental health and academic future. The study also lays the foundation of further studies being taken up in the domain of women student activism and the problems which they face as a result of their being vocal members of the youth and student fraternity.

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