

SOCIAL MEDIA AS CATALYST OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN INDIA

Sonela Sengupta

Assistant Teacher

Bansberia Ganges High School

Bansberia, Hooghly, West Bengal, India

Abstract

Social Media as electronic platforms provide scope for interactions between people, communities and groups on a plethora of subjects. It is found that users of social media often explore networking opportunities not only for their personal needs but also for greater causes and concerns of society. As such, social media has a crucial role to play in terms of generating awareness and enhancing the quality of life of the users. This paper attempts to observe the role of social media in the lives of women in India and also to explain its impact on their empowerment. As such, the paper focuses on the factors affecting empowerment of women in India, role of social media in their empowerment and also throws light upon the problems imposed by social media in this context. The method of this paper is descriptive and data has been collected from the secondary sources. The findings of the study reveal significant implications of social media and affirm their importance in the context of women empowerment in India. Judicious use of such platforms is recommended to effectively utilize the prospects and possibilities in this regard.

A. Introduction

Social Media refers to the use of computer technologies to facilitate sharing of ideas, thoughts and information through the medium of virtual networks and communities. It provides platform for exchange of ideas and social interactions. Social media users, according to a study of smartinsights.com, are now spending an average of 2 hours and 24 minutes per day multinetworking across an average of 8 social networks and messaging apps. Also, the „Datareportal Digital 2020 July highlighted that more than half of the world now uses social media.ⁱ In 2018 the no. of social media users in India was 326.1 Million.ⁱⁱ

Here in lies the essence of this paper that seeks to observe the role of social media in the empowerment of women. Women's empowerment implies a process that aims to promote women's access to all such opportunities in life which help them to attain self-accomplishment. In spirit, women empowerment means qualitative enhancement of the lives of women in terms of personal, economic, social and political fulfillments. It throws a challenge to the system of sexual stratification that paved the ways for women's subordination and marginalization.ⁱⁱⁱ

With the world now evolving out everyday with respect to the variety of content and active participation of people in social media, scope and role of social media is also witnessing significant changes. As the networking process in social media is mainly based on relations and interactions among the common masses, it is very likely that the real issues emerging out of the lives of them occupy key space in such platforms. Among many such issues, the still-existing discrimination between the genders and marginalization of women in society are some of the most important ones. Thousands of facts and incidents related to these issues are widely discussed and shared by the people among their circle of acquaintances. As a result, both the propagators and the victims of such practices are revealed to the common people. Alongside this, social media also contributes a lot towards empowering the lives of women in many ways thereby leading them towards self-reliance. Through it, women get access to multiple range of content available across different sites / blogs etc. and enjoy scope of expression. To get a wider view of the role of social media in the empowerment of women, it is pertinent to discuss the needs of women empowerment in India.

B. Factors affecting women empowerment in India.

Equality of access and opportunity is still an unrealized dream in India. Not only in literacy rate, but also in socio-cultural spheres of the country, women lag behind their male counterparts. There are many reasons that necessitate the need of women empowerment in India. Some of them are:

i) Denial of access and choice

Many of the Indian women do not even get the right of choosing when to marry. There are even instances of social and family trials in cases of the unfortunate lot who try to assert their opinions. In spite of granting „Right to Equality“ to its citizens as a fundamental right, India still needs to go a long way to ensure it effectively. Apart from the right of choice in marriage, many a girls do not even have power of expression in family matters.

Also, education for all in India is a mission which is significantly unfulfilled due to the lack of access for millions of girls in the country. Be it social and cultural chains or the patriarchal ego of men, women education in India is full of challenges and restrictions. The landmark act of Right to Education (2009) has undergone a decade since its implementation. But, girls in India are only just trying to begin their claim for half of it.

ii) Restricted mobility

Another issue that poses a serious demand for empowerment of women is restricted mobility in educational, social and professional world. It is a shameful fact that many of the talents belonging to the women of India are many times wasted due to lack of acceptance and acknowledgement from the families in particular and society at large. The burden of household work is disproportionately loaded on the shoulders of women who hardly get scope of nurturing their inherent talents or get the opportunity of receiving or completing compulsory education even. In a recent report of the National Commission for protection of child Rights, it has been said that around 40 percent of 15-18 years old girls were out of school and among them around 65 percent were engaged in household chores. This seriously has a role in the low contribution of women to the country's GDP which is only 18%. Also, out of the total percent of the country's labour force, only 25% belong to women.^{iv}

iii) Lack of Political awareness and representation in women of India.

According to a recent study by Lokniticentre for the study of Developing societies (CSDS) and German foundation KonradAdenauerStiftung (KAS), two in every three women reported having no freedom at all in matters of political participation. Moreover, a major share of the population needs permission from their husbands or senior members of the family to attend political events. Also, it is widely seen that most of the women respondents of the survey were not interested in political career and six out of ten simply rejected the idea of it.^v

C. Role of social media in women empowerment

i) Access to educational and informative content

Due to lack of adequate access in terms of information, women often remain outside the purview of decision – making in personal and social affairs. Thanks to technology, social media is penetrating into the lives of ordinary women that has a great impact on the development of women. According to a report published by Google titled „Women and Web study“, it has been observed that out of the total 150 million are women who remain online to manage their day to day life. This is very much related to empowerment of women. Thus, RajanAnandan, VP and MD, Google India, remarked, “With this report, it is clear that Internet is empowering Indian women with easy access to information and helping them to make more informed decisions in their day to day life. It is interesting to note that in variety of online activities, email, search and social networking were the biggest attractions for women. From downloading music to accessing educational content, looking for jobs and following news, women explored many types of content material on this type of platforms.”^{vi}

ii) Breaking taboos related to women

Taboos and superstitions still prevail in the heart of Indian society and in case of women, the number as well as the intensity is grave enough to make the lives of millions of them miserable. In this context, social media is playing a pivotal role in spreading awareness against the obsolete beliefs and rituals. One such instance was remarkably observed after Prime Minister Narendra Modi's discussion on menstrual hygiene during his Independence Day Speech, when many of the celebrities from Bollywood supported campaigns on Instrgram on menstrual health. Many of them condemned the age old practice of sharing associated with periods. Thus actor KirtiKulhari observed, "There should be no need for code words for period, no need for wrapping newspaper around a pack of sanitary pads when buying it and asking for a pad doesn't have to be a hushed request."^{vii}

Like wise, there burst out a lot of hashtag movements on social media to put an end on violence against women. These helped in building solidarity among women across the globe which raised their voices for supporting each other.^{viii} The table given below will highlight some of the famous hashtag movement of recent times:

Table 1.Famous hashtag movements on women in social media

Name of the Movement	Founder	Key issues
1) #metoo	Tarana Burke	* To help and support dark women against violence
2) #hearmetoo	United Nations	* Elimination of violence against women
3) #IShapeMyWorld	Levi's	*To celebrate unstoppable women who shaped their world
4) #Lahuka Lagaan	She Says India	*To exempt 12% tax on sanitary pads
5) #Padman Challenge	Arunachalam Muruganatham	* To end taboos related to periods
6) #Selfie With Daughter	ShriSunil Jaglan	* To fight against sex election
7) #KnowYour Lemons	Corrine Ellsworth Beaumont	*To educate women about breast cancer
8) #HEFORSHE	United Nations	* To create united force for gender equality.

iii) Social media and economic independence of women

Among the top indicators of women empowerment through social media, perhaps the economic independence and entrepreneurship of women deserve special attention. In the era of globalization, society is undergoing rapid cultural exchanges and modifications. Thus, business sector, which was once believed not to be the forte of women, is witnessing significant prominence of them and in this matter, social media has important functions to play. Women of contemporary times are harnessing social media platforms to expand and promote these micro businesses. Thus, 163 million women became entrepreneurs and commenced businesses last year around the world due to social media. It is said that 63% of Indian women also use social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook for promotion of their business and to attract customers. It allows them to directly connect with their customers and also to collaborate with other entrepreneurs.^{ix}

iv) Enhancement of political awareness and conscious citizenship.

Apart from the socio-economic sectors, the importance of social media could be traced in the political affairs of the world in the contemporary times. The US presidential election of 2008 and the 2014 Lok Sabha elections in India affirm the influence of social media in the political events of the respective countries. Thus social media is used for election campaigns in different countries.^x

Apart from this, women are also gaining information related to their rights and duties through social media and expressing views on different political issues. Be it the surging price of the commodities, the background of election contestants or the debatable actions of any government, social media bears incessant posts from the users irrespective of the genders.^{xi}

v) Achievements of Indian women through social media

These are many women in India who hold a strong base on social media platforms. They create content, publish them and share them via e-networks. For example, Prajakta Koli from YouTube community has more than 3.4 million subscribers on her channel and is a star among the comedy content creators. Her most popular video known as „No offence' has over 11 million views. Then, there is Santoshi Shetty who is an architecture student and also a fashion blogger. She founded the website called as the style edge on beauty, fashion, travel and lifestyle. Among other famous bloggers is Natasha Noel or popularly known as Yogini Natasha is a yoga blogger who basically deals with fitness and positivity. She has more than 2 lakh followers on YouTube.^{xii}

Nisha Madhulika is another Indian woman who is extremely popular on YouTube with her interesting recipes related to Indian cuisine. She holds the record of having 10.4 million subscribers. She has won many awards such as the YouTube top chef in 2014 and Top YouTube cooking content creator in the Social Media Summit and Awards in 2017.^{xiii}

D. Problems faced by Women on Social Media

Despite the above – mentioned advantages of social media in the empowerment of women, problems of abusive language, trolls, maligning of reputation are some of the concerns that impose challenges to its effectiveness. According to an article in bbc.com, women in politics have shared their experiences of dealing with abusive language and hate speech on social media while expressing their political opinions.^{xiv} Same type of experiences are also faced by Indian women every now and then. Along with this, many women also face problems of profile hacking or duplicate profiles which make them encounter unnecessary harassments and also malign their image. It is important to cite here the example of a study conducted by Amnesty International in 2017 which showed that out of the total population of women surveyed, more than 70% faced some type of abusive experience online that altered their way of using social media.^{xv}

E. Conclusion and Recommendations

Thus social media has a crucial role to play in the empowerment of women in India. With its rapidly increasing popularity and digitalization of the major resources of life, it is expected to cast a positive influence on the concerns related to women, who, shedding off the shackles of obsolete conventions could embrace new vibes of progressivism and development. This in turn will have a deep and long lasting impact on the socio-economic development of the nation. As the population of women form an important section of the masses, it is the duty of every citizen to ensure them safe and constructive use of social media. For this, awareness campaigns and programmes should be organized to train people about the proper use of social media. The cyber crime departments of the country also need to update the advisory guidelines time to time so as to help people prevent abusive activities on social media. Strict laws should be made and implemented against those who use such platforms in unfair ways and for unethical purposes. If all these steps could be taken then social media could be expected to become a fruitful platform for exchange of ideas, dissemination of information and more importantly as gateways of women empowerment.

References

- <https://www.smartinsights.com/social-media-marketing/social-media-strategy/new-global-social-media-research/>
- ⁱⁱ <https://www.statista.com/statistics/278407/number-of-social-network-users-in-India/>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Chen YZ. , Tanaka H. (2014), Women's Empowerment .In : Micholas A.C (eds), *Encyclopedia of Quality of Life and Well-Being Research*. Springer, Dordrecht.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0753-5_3252
- ^{iv} <https://time.com/5614642/india-girls-education/>
- ^v <https://qz.com/india/1751955/patriarchy-holds-indian-women-back-from-participating-in-politics/>
- ^{vi} <https://yourstory.com/2013/06/google-indias-women-web-study-says-internet-influences-hair-skincare-and-beauty-product-purchase-decisions>
- ^{vii} https://m.hindustantimes.com/more-lifestyle/break-the-taboo-celebs-support-menstrual-health-via-social-media/story-c4J71mNEJkEKDaDDoVdU4N_amp.html
- ^{viii} Kumari Madhu, (2020), Social Media and Women Empowerment, *International Journal of Scientific and Technology Research*, Vol-9, Issue-03
- ^{ix} <https://www.empoweress.in/resources-for-women/impact-of-social-media-on-women-entrepreneurship/>
- ^x Kaur Manpreet, Verma Rajesh (2016), Social Media: An Emerging Tool for Political Participation, *International Journal of Social and Organizational Dynamics in IT*, Vol-5, Issue-2
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/304536968_Social_Media_An_Emerging_Tool_for_Political_Participation
- ^{xi} <https://www.redalkemi.com/blog/post/impact-internet-social-media-women-empowerment-india>
- ^{xii} <https://www.firstpost.com/tech/news-analysis/womens-day-2019-a-must-follow-list-of-21-amazing-indian-women-on-social-media-6211831.html>
- ^{xiii} https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nisha_Madhulika
- ^{xiv} <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-wales-politics-52785157>
- ^{xv} <https://thewire.in/women/online-trolling-of-indian-women-is-only-an-extension-of-the-everyday-harassment-they-face>