



# “It took me quite a long time to develop a voice”: Examining feminist digital activism in the Indian #MeToo movement

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## Abstract

As my analysis of the tweets and interviews with participants and activists of the resurgent #MeTooIndia movement in 2018 show, the work of elite activists and the risks they took were critical for the success of the campaign; however, there was an exclusion of suburban voices and experiences. The onerous and taxing nature of digital labors are an unrecognized feature of women’s activism online, especially in the Indian context, adding more work to women’s already rarely acknowledged and undervalued burdens of labor. Online action here may have been supplemented by offline action, but participants found little support otherwise. Compounding issues, as the interviews reveal, are social media platforms that by nature are sexist and this has negative consequences for online feminist advocacy.

## Keywords

Dalit, feminism, feminist, hashtag activism, inclusive, India, #MeTooIndia, platforms, sexist

## Introduction

On 23 Oct 2018, the New York Times (NYT) reported that the #MeToo movement in the US had brought down 201 powerful men, nearly half of them replaced by women. While the hashtag, designed to demonstrate the horrifying prevalence of harassment and insidious sexual abuse in the professional sphere, swept through the US in October 2017, it took nearly a year for the movement to gain momentum in India. Like the US, in India,

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#MeToo started trending with stories from the film industry. On 4 Oct 2018, actor Tanushree Dutta revived a decade old sexual harassment claim against another actor, Nana Patekar. Dutta said that Patekar had tried to molest her in public and later sent goons to threaten her with dire consequences when she protested. By 7 Oct 2018, nearly 1000 tweets with the hashtags #MeTooIndia, #TanushreeDutta, and #ibelieveyou started trending on Twitter in India.

As the NYT stated, “After a year of fits and starts, India’s #MeToo movement has leapt forward over the past week, getting concrete action in two of the country’s most powerful industries: entertainment and the news media” (Goel et al., 2018). The movement succeeded in naming and initiating decisive action against influential men in the very month it broke out. The #MeToo Twitter handle had the word India added to it to differentiate it from the US hashtag. Curated by journalists and activists, tweets were first gathered on personal Twitter feeds and then collated under the #MeTooIndia hashtag. Journalists, activists, and different civil society organizations got together to gather and amplify the stories. Lauren Berlant’s conceptualization of “intimate publics” (Berlant, 2011), which considers the ways in which strangers can form communities through affective ties find a forceful feminist resonance in this hashtag where women shared intimate stories of violence and found validation and support from other women on a public platform.

As the movement gained traction, it offered a critical chance for scholars to examine the emotions and expectations that attract individuals to such campaigns (Khoja-Moolji, 2015) as well as the activist work required to take such demonstrations forward. Through a qualitative textual investigation of tweets and interviews with participants, this article analyzes three aspects of digital feminism in India—the nature of digital participation, digital labor, and thematic features of conversations online. In the process, it examines how Twitter was used as a platform for digital activism by examining the defining features proffered by the #MeToo movement and analyzes the promises and pitfalls of digitally challenging rape culture in a country marked by patriarchy (Mies, 2014). This study also maps the experiences of those involved through interviews with participants and activists and examines the nature of the work involved in digital feminist activism.

My analysis of over 35, 000 tweets and interviews with activists shows that digital feminist activism in India is extremely nuanced. Class and caste that traditionally arbitrate access to issues like education, ensure that some women can, both technically and economically, access digital platforms and have a voice, while others, notably the poor, remain critically marginalized; thus, legitimizing some voices over others. For the activists and participants, the experiences of being digital activists and participants are often distinctly negative, mediated by various barriers like online abuse and the sexist nature of online platforms that have adverse consequences for digital feminist activism. But while the #MeToo movement in India did suffer some glaring gaps in terms of inclusion, as a movement it stands out as a powerful advocacy movement aimed at ensuring safer workplaces for women in India.

## Hashtag feminism in India

In India, feminist activism on social media, notably Twitter, and the power of hashtags came into its own with the horrific 2012 rape case in Delhi where a 23-year-old student

was raped and murdered on a moving bus. Trending hashtags like #Nirbhaya and #Damini saw citizens, organizations, journalists, and activists protest as a strong unified front (Poell and Rajagopalan, 2015). In the years spanning 2015 to the beginning of 2017, hashtags in the area of women's issues saw growth. For example, like the #Boardthebus campaign (Eagle, 2015), the #SafeCity campaign used YouTube videos to document the treatment of women in public spaces. In November 2015, when the Sabarimala temple, an ancient and prominent shrine, banned the entry of menstruating women (Anand, 2016), 20-year-old Nikita Azad started the #HappyToBleed: An Initiative Against Sexism campaign. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) India reported, "Since its launch . . . , #HappyToBleed has received a lot of responses, especially from young urban Indian women" (Pandey, 2015). In April 2017, when sanitary pads were categorized as a luxury commodity and levied a 14% tax, SheSays, a women's rights non-profit organization, protested via the hashtag #LahukaLagaan (tax on menstruation; Fadnis, 2017). In 2018, the government repealed the tax. Others, primarily led by youth activists, like the #hokkolorob (let there be noise) and #Pinjra Tod (July 2015), created by university students also garnered online support. Yet little is known about these affective publics who network online (Williams et al., 2019) to "feel their own place in current events, developing news stories, and various forms of civic mobilization" through social media like Twitter (Papacharissi, 2015: 4; Williams et al., 2019), especially in terms of participation, in the Indian context.

Also, unlike #LahukaLagaan, hashtag feminism in India has not always achieved its goal. #SafecityIndia has more than 6000 recorded testimonies of harassment, and as the Hollaback hashtag records, instances of such aggravation are only increasing. Azad's #HappyToBleed ensured conversations about menstruation and the rights of women over their bodies in the public sphere, yet the ruling has not been overturned.

## Gender and Twitter activism

Internet penetration in India has been pegged at 627 million in 2019 (Kantar, 2019) of which about 93 million use Facebook and 33 million use Twitter (Statista, 2019). This 33 million is a small percentage of the online population and, thus, while news of gender violence is highly pervasive on Twitter, its limited user base reduces substantially its potential for dialog (Poell and Rajagopalan, 2015). Journalists, feminist activists, students, and generally young middle-class men and women are among the most active users (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2014).

Hashtag activism is on the rise in India, but gender stereotypes play out with impunity, even in the digital sphere, where men represent 61% of total users and women only account for a mere 39% (Statista, 2019). Halder and Jaishankar (2016) have shown in their seminal work on cybercrimes and women that the presence of women in social media is viewed as a dark threat to notions of masculinity, which encourage women to live up to unrealistic demands of demureness and chastity. Thus, online spaces are rife with trolling that includes name calling, sexual slurs, and public shaming (Gudipaty, 2017). Algorithms like the kind used on social media platforms themselves can be sexist, a result of gender bias implanted in the language data sets (Knight, 2020).

Besides, participation in online activism involves intensive digital labor (Losh, 2014) that can be both informational (creating the hashtag, posting it, and collating tweets, among others) as well as emotional (dealing with trolls and online abuse). Notions of digital labor in feminist movements in India are extremely understudied. Even in the west, while a healthy body of research examines the digital labors involved in content creation (Mendes et al., 2019), there is still a paucity of work focused on the nature of digital labors especially in feminist activism online. As Mendes et al. (2019) emphasized, such activist endeavors can be mundane and time consuming with very little immediate reward and thus is often relegated to the tedium and invisibility associated with work like child rearing and housekeeping, generally, regarded as women's work and, therefore, unimportant.

Prior studies on hashtag feminism and online activism in India have shown that careful hashtag use reflects the policy and organizational decisions of activists and that the most transformative social movements must have offline activities to make them relevant and effective (Chadha and Harlow, 2015; Losh, 2014). Scholars have also shown that feminist hashtag campaigns in digitally emerging countries like India need to converge with mainstream media to garner wider support (Guha, 2015). Research has also emphasized that Twitter in India generally comprises the opinions of youthful tech-savvy participants while mostly mirroring elite views (Losh, 2014) with little space for the voice of the poor and the oppressed woman from the country's hinterland (Fadnis, 2017). For example, the pictures posted on the #SafecityIndia Twitter feed shows urbane women with access to sophisticated computer equipment. But as a 2018 survey found, that, over 28% of urban and rural poor women that make up nearly 94% of the unorganized work sector in the country face extreme sexual harassment in their workplace (Marron, 2019). These examples emphasize the complex nuances of online activism in India where although internet usage is powered by growing rural users who now have greater access due to the launch of 3G services and the growth of the low-cost mobile market; the rural woman as an active online participant is still missing. While social media has made it technologically easy for women to participate; hashtag feminism here shows, *only a certain type of woman* can and does in fact participate, thus, strengthening the idea of feminism in India representing a site of "inspirational contradiction" (Sircar, 2018) where women's rights are centerstage, but also where the illiterate and the poor women's visibility has always been a matter of negotiation with the economically stronger classes.

The harbinger of the #MeToo movement in India was a list of alleged sexual predators in Indian academia, which was collected by a young law student, Raya Sarkar, in 2017. Sarkar's list was criticized by influential older feminists who stated that this was akin to a witch hunt (Anasuya, 2017). However, as Moraes and Sahasranaman (2018) have shown that, in the face of such backlash and resistance from established feminists, youth and feminist movements in India have strengthened themselves through potential supporters and members to become more politically mature and nuanced and, in the process, even disrupted established feminist discourse.

While these studies are among the earliest to throw scholarly attention on hashtag feminism in India, my study aims to fulfill certain key gaps. Agreeing wholly with Losh (2014) that it is indeed an aberration to credit corporate products like Twitter as sole crucial creators of social movements, and thus discredit the practices of the people whose

responses and participation ultimately give the movement life, this study drafts the experiences of those involved, through interviews with participants and activists. As Tamara Burke, founder of the #MeToo movement, stated (2018), “Stop asking poor women to risk their jobs to tell their stories. We have to use intersectionality more and understand how these identities intersect with our identities as survivors.” Intersectionality or the interconnected nature of social categorizations such as race, class, and gender as they apply to a given individual or group is a core element of feminist analysis (Aldoory et al., 2008) and thus using an intersectional lens, I also look at how issues of class, access, and ability may have ensured the subjugation of certain voices in the movement and how activists are working toward more inclusive action.

It is in this light that this article examines:

RQ1: What are the defining themes and discourses raised by the resurgent #MeToo movement in October 2018?

RQ2: How representative of different voices was this resurgent #MeToo movement?

RQ3: What are the key characteristics of the emotional and informational labors of their participation as characterized by activists and participants?

RQ4: What are the promises and pitfalls of digitally protesting patriarchy in India as shown through the #MeToo movement?

## Methodology

Tweets with the hashtag #MeTooIndia, #TanushreeDutta, and #ibelieveyou were collected using the Google Twitter archiver function during the period in which the hashtags trended, extending from 5 October 2018 to 28 February 2019. As my analysis shows, the tweets peaked from 5 October 2018 to 28 February 2019 (with about 20 tweets per day), gradually tapering off since. However, this does not imply that the movement has come to a standstill. Although new tweets were being posted as this analysis was being done, this study considers the set of tweets posted at the time the movement saw new life in 2018. The tweets with the hashtags were collected individually. The Google Twitter archiver collected the relevant tweets on a Google drive and the original Excel sheet downloaded had 40,356 tweets. This dataset had no images or photographs. Redundancies and threads, especially responses to tweets (retweets with comments), were carefully removed. For example, one tweet dated February 2019 that said “Women already got more privileges and entitlements compared to men and enjoying their over empowerment. #FeminismIsCancer #Feminazis #MeTooIndia” had 105 responses and 30 retweets. This tweet was counted as one tweet and the retweets were deleted from the Excel sheet. Repetitive tweets were color-coded, rechecked and, later deleted. The final corpus of 35,065 tweets (collected from 5 October 2018 to 28 February 2019) was textually analyzed to isolate the themes and examine the emanating discourses. I read the entire corpus thrice to generate the broader themes and later checked them against the themes generated by three student assistants who had read the entire corpus twice to independently develop their themes.

To answer the research questions (RQ1 and RQ2) about the themes, discourses, and representation of voices, I textually analyzed the corpus of tweets and augmented the analysis with interviews. The idea to conduct a textual analysis of this large body of tweets was inspired by a recent study conducted by Pain and Masullo Chen (2019), where the authors eschewed computation analysis and manually textually analyzed 30,386 tweets by President Trump to understand the nature of his conversations with the US public. Text is understood as a “complex set of discursive strategies that is situated in a special cultural context” (Fürsich, 2009: 240) and is investigated for what is said as well as what very importantly remains “unsaid” or its implied aspects. When texts are produced because of events, for example, like the #MeToo movement, they have causal effects and can bring about social change (Fairclough, 2003). As we see, the #MeToo movement has been successful in ensuring that some of the most powerful men accused have at least been held accountable. But as Fairclough (2003) says, such changes cannot be deemed mere mechanical causalities rather their nuances must be better understood. This study, seeking to consider the implications of the tweets, uses Barthes’ (1994) and Fürsich’s (2009) definition of textual analysis as “a type of qualitative analysis that, beyond the manifest content of media, focuses on the underlying ideological and cultural assumptions of the text.” The interpretive nature of textual analysis helps view communication as a holistic product of various influences as well as societal structures, especially power structures (Hawkins, 2017). Since this is among the earliest empirical studies on the #MeToo movement in India, my aim was to examine the discourses in the tweets posted and, in the process, analyze the implied meanings to understand the broader themes underlying the conversations (McTavish and Pirro, 1990). I had to manually examine the tweets because most of them used more than one language or a combination of Indian languages like Hindi, Bengali, and Tamil to get their point across. For example, one tweet in English, “my mother sensed a war in her womb, and so she raised me to fight. #apa #justice #Metooindia” (Dec 2018) included the hashtag “*apa*,” a word which means “sister” in Hindi and Urdu. It is difficult to train software to detect words in different languages as well as different language fonts, which I could easily distinguish because of my multilingualism. Semi-structured interviews with the participants were conducted to better infer the impact of the messages and answer RQ3 (key characteristics of the emotional and informational labors) and RQ4 (the promises and pitfalls of digital protests).

### *Selection of participants*

Fifty-five women from the most recent participants, as shown by the dates of their tweets on the Google Archiver sheet, were messaged for interviews. Time and logistics did not permit approaching a larger sample size. Fifteen of those contacted responded, out of which 10 were interviewed by phone at the time of this analysis. Distance and logistical issues made face-to-face interviews difficult and participants preferred phone interviews. Face-to-face interviews have long been considered the most competent way of doing qualitative interviews; however, nowadays telephone interviews are being used effectively as well (Opdenakker, 2006). Several issues can affect the sample size in qualitative research; however, the guiding principle should be the concept of saturation. Selection of

interviewees is another area of weakness. For example, my selection of participants did not take all the participants (those who were tweeting) into consideration and thus, my sample is not as inclusive as a study of this kind warrants. But as studies (Chadha and Steiner, 2015; Kvale, 1996) have shown, a participant pool of 10 is enough to go beyond the anecdotal and “investigate in detail the relationship between the individual and the situation” (Kvale, 1996: 102–103).

Six interviewees described themselves as “activists” and said they were associated with different organizations working in the area of health, education, and human rights. Four were journalists, who were participating, enthused and encouraged, by the different stories shared. After participants consented to the interviews verbally on record, interviews were conducted over the phone. Interviews lasted an average of 45 minutes. Participant ages ranged from 25 to 45 years. All but one of the participants had a master’s degree and had worked in various cities. All but one of the interviews was conducted in English. The remaining interview was conducted in Hindi, as requested by the participant, who worked in a small town in the northern part of India. Participant and tweet details have been kept confidential (as much as possible) as per the Institutional Review Board’s (IRB) requirements. McCracken’s (1988: 85) long interview technique was used, which allows researchers to “step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves.” This method allows an immersion into the culture and norms of the subjects and topics to gain singular insights that are very helpful to interpret the data (Creswell and Clark, 2004; McCracken, 1988). Questions were added in, while the participants spoke, depending on the issues they were referring to (McCracken, 1988). Grouping interrelated ideas together, these data were coded into categories and reviewed multiple times for critical understanding (Creswell et al., 2004).

## Findings

The analysis has been grouped under two main subgroups —social movement tweets and activist interviews. My analysis of the corpus of tweets, from 5 October 2018 to 28 February 2019, shows that the invigorated 2018 #MeToo movement had certain defining characteristics that give it a unique character and seeks to answer RQ1 (themes and discourses) and RQ2 (representation of voices).

## Analysis of tweets from the movement

### *Celebrating anger for social change*

The anger was palpable and resistance to patriarchy was strong and defiant. Tweets encouraged women to be angry, celebrate the emotion, and “make anger a habit, a culture. #MeToo #MeTooIndia.” As one tweet stated: “The thing about social change is that it takes an angry group. #MeToo #MeTooIndia.” The word “anger” used in a similar vein was found in 45% of the tweets. Women were encouraged to share and become a part of the narratives. As one tweet stated, “Women in every profession have to speak now . . . SPEAK NOW ABOUT THE SEXUAL HARASSMENT YOU HAVE FACED if you want things to change #MeTooIndia.” There was no shying away from clearly expressing



the sexual nature of harassment in professional spheres. For example, one tweet clearly calling out a renowned newspaper editor stated:

When will we talk about the fact that Bhawan Singh is a sexual predator? He harassed a colleague at India Today in the early nineties and was found guilty by a probe. In 2015, he was given a National Award to whitewash his predatory past. #MeTooIndia #timesup.

Trolling was resisted and responded to with reasoned responses. Tweets like “Women already got more privileges and entitlements compared to men and enjoying their over empowerment. #FeminismIsCancer #Feminazis #MeTooIndia” were plentiful. Each sexist tweet dismissive of the work done by the movement was countered by scores of respondents explaining why it was sexist and what a new response could be like. For example, one tweet, “#Men has been doing all such risky jobs like mine workers, fire fighters, and so on, but never whine or complain like greedy selfish #feminist #Feminazis #ToxicFemininity #MeTooIndia #MeToo?” was responded to by more than 25 replies with responses ranging from “Their problematic statements are just trivializing the victim’s experience. Not cool! #MeTooIndia” and “A man can be nice and still harass a woman. #MeTooIndia.” As tweets were posted, highlighting and responding to different issues, topics that deserve comprehensive public attention such as marital rape were also referred to: “I wanna know what #MeToo #MeTooIndia has in store for harassment in marital life?” which got a response that said, “Marital rape is not a husband’s privilege, but rather a violent act and an injustice that must be criminalized #MeTooIndia#TimesUp.” The #MeToo handle became a tool of education with links to resources for survivors. As one tweet (Oct 2018) said:

What should you do if you encounter sexual harassment at work and what should your bosses do in such a situation? Read ahead to find out. #MeTooIndia. RT @thebetterindia: #MeTooIndia: Sexually Harassed at Work? Here’s How You Can File a Complaint.

### *Space for suburban voices and younger feminists*

Focused on the voices represented by the movement, RQ2 examined tweets that discussed caste and the experiences of women far from the mainstream glare and that these had found some, although limited, space. As one tweet (retweeted 10K times) stated, “Like everything else in the world, sexual harassment intersects with caste in devastating ways. Specificity IS important #MeTooIndia.” Complex connections between caste and socio-economic status were emphasized: “Among the poor, women are poorer. Among the Dalits, women are more Dalit. Among the indigenous, women are considered more backward. #MeTooIndia.” The 2018 edition of the #MeTooIndia “. . . spread its wings to domestic workers, construction workers, waste workers, sex workers, transgenders, and the whole gamut of working-class women . . . RT @thewire\_in: #MeToo.” Khabar Lahariya, a completely women-run newspaper, working in some of India’s most patriarchal states, came out with their #MeToo moments, “stories of battling sleaze and abuse, every single day” as well. They spoke about the harassment they face as they go about reporting and dealing with a largely hostile patriarchal social system: “The case of sexual assault I was able to file, miraculously, got you in jail for a brief period of time, but it has ruined my career.” The travails of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT)



populations found space as well: “While we are on the subject of #MeToo and #MeTooIndia let us also acknowledge that rape, sexual assault, and harassment are gender neutral. Both, the survivor and the perpetrator, can be men, women, or transgender.” As one tweet clearly stated, “Let it be the voice of the affected—women, men, and transgenders. #MeTooIndia.” There was a clear affirmation of younger feminists who challenged older feminists’ thought. Forerunners of the movement like Raya Sarkar was applauded: “#MeToo movement is based on faith: young feminist icon, Raya Sarkar’s exclusive video to #NetizensForDemocracy #MeTooIndia.” Another tweet, celebrating, Raya Sarkar’s work, said: “We witnessed what happened to our sister Raya Sarkar when she made #LoSHA, these same champions called it a witch-hunt and said due process is not followed. Welcome to a new younger more assertive generation of feminists.”

### *Creation of tangible support systems*

Women spoke up for and supported women’s rights. Besides responding to trolls and other naysayers, tweets were aimed at helping those victimized: “Two students from #Symbiosis Law School, Hyderabad were asked to leave their hostel after they revealed instances of harassment by a college professor. Help them get back to their hostel. #MeToo #MeTooIndia.” Tweets asking for lawyers and other legal help were frequent and saw responses that ranged from sharing helpline numbers to offering pro bono services. For example, “#MeTooIndia: Some of us have put together a list of lawyers who have come forward to help women with pro bono service if they need it after outing predators . . .” The work of activists and participants were lauded:

“Amazing to see the love and solidarity between the women who are leading the charge in #MeTooIndia. On top of their day jobs as badass journalists, they’re working behind the scenes, organizing, talking to survivors, making connections.”

This tweet offered the best summation of the nature and impact of the #MeToo movement in 2018: “#MeToo #MeTooIndia is the best example in the recent time of women standing up for women together and believing each other against harassment and exploitation at workplace.”

### *Online action complemented by offline activities*

As conversations online gained strength, activities offline started complementing the online action. For example, various panels and discussions were held around the issue of the #MeToo movement as well as its impact and import. For example: “Join the #dignitymarch on Feb 22nd in New Delhi to support survivors of sexual violence! #MeTooIndia.” The media in India, especially English language newspapers, followed the movement closely on Twitter, working with activists and participants as the narratives unfolded. Tweets, lauding this support said “Congratulations to newspapers for being proactive in #Metoomovement. #MeToo #MeTooIndia—Silence from @narendramodi @PMOIndia.” Digital media like NewsLaundry and FirstPost with prominent online presences took up stories, highlighting crimes and amplifying the horrific nature of abuse and harassment that has been kept secret for so long. Mainstream media like The Times of India created webpages where stories related to the movement were collated. As one

tweet pointed out, “Why I finally decided to name my abuser. I spoke to @QuilledWords who wrote about it and other #MeTooIndia stories for @newslandry.” But television media like CNN and certain newspapers were called out for their lack of support: “Except for @ndtv, a single show on @CNNnews18, why are TV channels running away from covering #MeTooIndia where are the day-long debates? What are they scared about?”

Women refused to be part of panels and programs that did not act against those called out for sexual harassment. As one tweet stated, “Writers pull out of lit fest to protest silence on claims against ex-director. #MeToo #MeTooIndia.” Tweets declared that women had developed a voice that would not be silenced. As one tweet (with 1500 likes) states, in capital letters, “IT TOOK ME QUITE A LONG TIME TO DEVELOP A VOICE, AND NOW THAT I HAVE IT, I AM NOT GOING TO BE SILENT #WomenSupportingWomen #MeTooIndia.”

## Activist and participant interviews

This section presents the data in response to RQ3 and RQ4, which examines the key characteristics of the emotional and informational labors of participation as described by activists and participants as well as the promises and pitfalls of digitally protesting patriarchy in India. As the interview data show, labors of digital feminist activism range from dealing with extreme harassment online (rape and murder threats and threats of harm to family) to mental trauma and issues at the workplace. The participants said their online labor was—“invisible,” “misunderstood,” and “undervalued.” However, collectively, they agreed that the #MeToo movement was “something I had never experienced before” (2018).

### *Labors of participation*

For the activists and other participants who tweeted either their own experiences or in response to the experiences of others, the use of social media to highlight gender-based and social injustice showed them an aspect of social media they had rarely encountered before. As my respondents said, they were motivated to participate out of “anger and desperation to bring in change” (2019). While believing in the potential and power of such media to advance social change, they agreed that the labors involved were demanding. The hashtag was thus curated by different groups, including YP Foundation, a youth organization and a group working for transgender rights that curated the handle for a while.

Another participant said that, at her workplace, once co-workers realized that she was a curator of tweets, labeled her participation a “crazy . . . a sort of overreaction” (2019). This kind of deliberate (she felt) misunderstanding was galling. As one respondent said, she had felt that she was contributing to “a collective catharsis” (2019). “Catharsis” was a word that came up often, being mentioned by six of the interviewees. Catharsis was something, they said, they did for themselves as well. The efforts they put in were not always visible, but they sought this out to fight and ensure that others were not ignored. As one journalist said, “I am a journalist. I thought that it was my work to tell other people’s stories . . . now my story matters too” (2018). There was a deep appreciation of the

audacity of those who came forward and my respondents felt that it was this courage that motivated them to keep encouraging other women to come forward. One participant said she persisted in curating and ensuring that these tweets were sent out because she wanted to let people know about the true state of professional spheres so that “women could be aware and not afraid” (2019). The idea was to educate and reduce fear and stigma. As one participant said, “Abuse is to be exposed not endured” (2019).

While participants were deeply motivated to carry out the labors involved, they were keenly aware of its burdens. Most of the respondents said that they often “felt triggered” (2018) by the stories they were collecting but also felt a shared sense of sameness when they processed how similar their experiences were, no matter where they were situated. As one participant said, she thought women who worked in “large offices” in cities were safer. One interviewee from a small town in India said, “I realized that men would forward me porn to harass and intimidate me and claim it was an accident. When I see what is happening to other women . . . I know no one is safe (2018).” One participant pointed out that her family thought she was on social media all the time. The relentless nature of social media meant she had to be “on . . . literally all the time and that was exhausting” (2019). There was little value attached to this work from close circles including family. I probed whether monetary compensation would have made their work easier and two participants (journalists) laughed in response. As one of them underlined, “We have to do the work, read the horrific accounts, keep our sanity, and carry on . . . all in the hope that one day change would come” (2019).

### *Social media as activist platforms*

This section presents the interview data generated to explore answers to RQ4, which looked at how activists and participants described the potentials and pitfalls of using social media for feminist activism in the country. Social media platforms, such as Twitter, had certainly increased the reach and influence of what the women from the movement had to say, the interviewees explained. An important consequence of their participation, my respondents felt, involved exposing the patriarchal nature of social networks. As one journalist who is also an activist and curator of the #MeTooIndia movement said, her Twitter account had been blocked because people had complained about the kind of tweets she was curating. It took “quite a battle” with Twitter to get her account back. My respondents unanimously mentioned that, while they had expected trolling and other users to question them and the nature of their work, corporate interference and obstruction of this kind was completely unexpected. As one journalist said, “Censorship in the media now has new meanings for me. I had always considered social media to be a space that encouraged self-expression” (2019). Two others said that since the Indian #MeToo movement had broken out in close temporal proximity to that of the USA, they were taken by surprise when their accounts were flagged. They had expected greater awareness on the part of Twitter and, considering the amount of credit that is given to social media platforms for spearheading social movements, had expected greater support.

This was the first time, six participants, said, that they had used a hashtag to protest. Twitter, they felt, helped them be a “conduit” for narratives that needed to be told. As the

participants underlined, social media, especially Twitter, had certainly helped feminism in India by providing a space where they could congregate and be supportive of each other.

Participants agreed that in a society like India, where generally “women were expected to be neither seen nor heard” (2019), digital media provided a space where such narratives could find support and traction. But like any other public space, they were not “free of the judgements and condemnations” (2019) and thus, while social media have added important elements of speed and urgency, they did not offer any protection to those coming out bravely under their own names. This, they felt, was the most disappointing aspect of digital activism. Patriarchy was so pervasive that even online spaces, generally, considered to be more egalitarian, were not immune to its influence. In a movement that addresses sensitive issues, rarely spoken about in public; every share, every retweet, counted. There was an awareness that, while many were coming forward, large numbers of women remained silent. They did refer to women who were left out of this conversation due to the inherent nature of the internet, which primarily requires technological knowledge, access to infrastructure, and basic literacy; however, they had no concrete designs on how they could be encouraged to join as well.

## Discussion and conclusion

India, no stranger to hashtag feminist movements in the area of women’s safety, health, and human rights, was given a reintroduction to the power of digital feminist activism in the reinvigorated #MeTooIndia movement in October 2018. My analysis, focusing on participation, the nature of conversations online, and the digital labors that powered the movement shows that #MeTooIndia in 2018 was characterized by a heavy dependence on the unpaid and often unacknowledged burdens of digital labor placed on certain elite activists whose work was crucial to the success of the movement. My main theoretical contributions lie in the insights, the analysis provides into the essence of this digital labor as characterized by the activists and participants, the nature of Twitter as an activist platform, and the attributes of affective publics who use social media platforms to mobilize (Williams et al., 2019). How did networked publics in the movement become affective connected to each other by ties of sentiment buoyed by sharing stories and experiences (Papacharissi, 2015)? How did this affect the nature of the “intimate publics” as envisaged by Berlant (2011: 22)?

The dataset of tweets (35,065 tweets) shows that participation was certainly enthusiastic but like other hashtag movements, like #LahuKaLagaan, here as well elite voices found greater representation, excluding the experience of the poor and traditionally marginalized. A startling point about the extremely “sexist nature” of social media platforms was made by my interview participants, who counted this as being extremely detrimental to the impact of the protest. As we see, unlike prior digital protests, as a protest strategy, #MeTooIndia was effective in bringing out the very sexual nature of harassment in the professional sphere without downplaying its harshness. Unlike prior hashtag movements, it also sustained itself powerfully online without the help of mainstream media (Chadha and Harlow, 2015).

As the themes and discourses (RQ1) generated from the tweets show, #MeTooIndia participants actively confronted, through *engaged resistance* and *persistent challenge*,

the patriarchy and sexism that came in the form of disbelief, online trolling, and abuse; having measurable impact in the ways such harassment is perceived and dealt with. Each of the defining themes and discourses raised by the resurgent #MeToo movement in October 2018 were clearly interconnected. Women celebrated their anger, created tangible support systems, and ensured that online activities drew support from offline action. Women refused to serve on panels that had accused men as speakers and ensured that the new generations of feminists were actively able to participate, strongly indicating that hashtag movements are gradually becoming more mature and stronger in the face of all backlash and, in the process, even unsettling prevalent feminist debate (Moraes and Sahasranaman, 2018) where younger voices earlier had little space. Yet certain inherent inequalities persisted.

In the area of representation and participation (RQ2), we see that while the #MeToo movement had some, although limited, participation from India's villages and marginalized LGBT communities, its intersectional margins clearly need more broadening. Working class women did share their stories of harassment and commonly marginalized voices like those of the LGBT communities and low caste and traditionally poor women did find some space, the majority of participants were overwhelmingly from English-speaking city-based women, thus demonstrating, once again, that the online sphere in India belongs to a particular type of participant. For example, if the journalists from Khabar Lahariya had not participated, rural India, perhaps, would have found no representation at all. As Burke said, poor women should not be asked to repeat the stories of their ordeals; rather they should find support through shared identities as survivors. But as the tweets and participant interviews showed social categorizations such as race, class, and gender did prevent the creation of a more egalitarian participation (Aldoory et al., 2008) because, once again, they proved to be key negotiators of access. Participants did engage with interrelated concepts like power, gender, caste, and diversity, and there was an acknowledgment that "Specificity is important" and that among ". . . Dalits, women are more Dalit" but this remained limited in approach (Baer, 2016). The character of the general social media user in India as being young, tech savvy, urban and belonging to the middle and professional classes remained largely unchallenged (Belair-Gagnon et al., 2014). So although the space and chance afforded to younger feminists was an important aspect of the movement, its potential for greater inclusivity was certainly diluted through its rather muted acknowledgment of India's urban and rural poor and the contribution of women in the domestic and unorganized work sphere, where over 28% of the female workforce faces extreme harassment (Marron, 2019). While certain voices like those of Dalits (so called untouchables) and other suburban voices have found some, but clearly not enough range, marginalization (no matter how unintentional) of certain voices, especially those of the non-English speaking poor, in both urban and rural areas, is still an issue. Previous movements like #HappytoBleed and #Lahukalagaan, this too was predominantly voiced by "young urban, Indian women" (Pandey, 2015). The #MeToo movement in India resurged nearly 7 years after the first hashtag movements protesting the rape of the student in Delhi debuted in 2012. While lessening digital divides and increasing access (Kantar, 2019) has boosted online participation, the underprivileged woman is still left negotiating visibility with economically stronger classes (Sircar, 2018).

An important impediment, as the interviews showed, was a lack of concrete plans to expand the movement and bring in the vast number of women from the unorganized sector. While the #MeTooIndia has certainly come a long way from the time such voices would have found no acknowledgment at all, it is disheartening to see how long the road ahead for real inclusivity still is. Besides, women online, and specially women with a voice are a threat to notions of masculinity (Halder and Jaishankar, 2016) and thus, name calling, sexual slurs, and public shaming (Gudipaty, 2017) were rife. This coupled with the small percentage of Indian users, who are active on Twitter, further calls to question its potential for real dialog (Poell and Rajagopalan, 2015).

As the #MeToo movement in India and elsewhere show, feminist movements, especially online hashtag movements, are deeply dependent on mostly uncompensated digital labor. The defining features of the informational and emotional labor of their participation (RQ3) were characterized by words like “unacknowledged,” “cathartic,” and “invisible.” This was work like childrearing and housekeeping; tedious, invisible, and without value (Mendes et al., 2019). Their work was undervalued, not just professionally, where colleagues deemed participation an “overreaction” but even in the personal sphere where families are unsupportive. Participation was motivated by “anger and desperation” and, as the activists said, this labor also had some important rewards. As tweets were shared, the movement gained credence and support. It proved to be cathartic. Constant curation and steady responses to tweets, retweets, and trolls, ensured that for once hashtag movements did not have to work with mainstream media to gain drive and power (Chadha and Harlow, 2015; Guha, 2015).

The emotional tolls of dealing with trolls and naysayer were exhausting but despite the clear tensions regarding the nature of digital labor, which can be both exhausting and cathartic, the activists choose to respond defiantly and encouraged women to “make anger a habit, a culture.” Although the #MeTooIndia movement shared the burden using different organizations to curate the hashtag; as the interviews show, trolling, curating, and amplifying voices required extensive exertion. It is no secret that without the curators of tweets, whether in India or in the US, where it all started, perhaps, there would have been no movement to speak of. Activists believed that Twitter was an effective platform where rich personal narratives could be used to create connections and help combat stigma and isolation as well as provide legal and other assistance to survivors. As a movement, #MeTooIndia may have failed to create a truly effective and inclusive “intimate publics” (Berlant, 2011), which is critical and crucial, to ensure authentic and representative collective action that brings sustainable social change. But as participants shared intimate stories, networked publics found and forged connections to become affective publics (Papacharissi, 2015) and add to collective voices to fight for social change, thus going beyond a passive sharing of experiences and making Twitter an influential conduit for feminist protest.

But the inherently patriarchal nature of the social media platform proved to be a huge impediment. Responses to RQ4 that examined the usefulness of social media as activist platforms showed that unlike earlier movements, activists here keenly emphasized that platforms by nature can be extremely biased and sexist (Knight, 2020) and many had to fight to protect their accounts from being shadow banned. As they reflected on the nature of the affordances that social media platforms such as Twitter can create in a country like



India, they agreed that it is inappropriate to credit corporate platforms, alone, as perpetrators of impactful movements (Losh, 2014). For movements like this, dependent on the free and largely uncompensated online labor, which includes both informational as well as emotional toil, is the responsibility to increase diversity, the work of activists alone? How do we increase participation from traditionally excluded groups? A recognized weakness of this article is that it does not address these important questions.

Despite its lack of diversity and the harsh nature of digital labors involved, the 2018 #MeToo movement saw important departures in the way hashtag feminism has previously occurred in India (Mies, 2014). The movement first gained momentum online and provoked mainstream media like the Times of India and First Post to work convergently with the online movement and not the other way around. It demonstrated that active protests could be started and sustained online, strongly, and effectively, without the corresponding complementary offline activities at least at the beginning (Chadha and Harlow, 2015; Guha, 2015). Although television stations were slow to provide support to the movement, their apathy was noted and called out. As an online movement, it powerfully sustained itself, thus becoming the earliest movement in India that emerged, grew, and continued mostly online. While other hashtag movements like #SafeCity, #Boardthebus, and #HappyToBleed focused on the essential rights of women and equity like the #MeToo movement; herein participants were embodied actors willing to assume risks rather than participate under assumed names or hide behind pseudonyms and they named perpetrators from their own handles.

While this analysis provides insights about how the #MeToo movement has heralded a new era of digital feminist activism in the country, it falls short of extending our understanding of the possible long-term impact of such hashtag feminism. Clearly, analysis of such movements with such limited participation leaves critical gaps in our understanding of the unique emotions and motivations that propel individuals to participate (Khojamaoolji, 2015). I invite researchers to explore such initiatives with the hope they will be able to shed more light on such complex nuances.

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