



**MAKE ONLINE SPACES
SAFE FOR WOMEN**

INDIA

AMNESTY
INTERNATIONAL





KAVITA KRISHNAN is a feminist activist. She is a Politburo member of the CPI(ML) and Secretary of the All India Progressive Women's Association. She has not let gender-based abuse and death threats in online spaces silence her opinions, and continues to 'post' and work on issues close to her.



I get tweets saying I am not attractive enough to be rape-able. I sometimes feel I am in a 1950s movie setting while on Twitter, with adjectives such as ‘Kalmukhi’ used for me.”

In 2013, Kavita Krishnan was participating in an online chat on rape and rape laws when an anonymous rape threat was posted to her. This was her first experience of online abuse and she was not even active on Twitter or Facebook back then.

Now active on social media platforms, Kavita says how abuse on Twitter is a daily occurrence. “The abuse is not random. It is very obviously coordinated. There are a swarm of abuses for the same post - and most of these abuses are extremely gendered in nature. The use of the term ‘dark’ in its various forms is also very common. I sometimes feel I am in a 1950s movie setting while on Twitter, with adjectives such as ‘Kalmukhi’ used for me.” Those who abuse her online have gone to the extent of writing that she is not “attractive enough to be rape-able.” According to her, political opinions she posts online have invoked the ire of pro-government and hardline Hindu groups, who regularly hurl all kinds of online abuses at her.

Reporting online abuse on Twitter has not been an easy journey for Kavita. On most occasions when she did report, the social media platform responded saying it did not recognise the content as abuse. Another issue that hampered reporting was the fact that a lot of times the language used in the comments, tweets, etc., was not English. Kavita shared how mere blocking does not solve the problem. “They seem to think blocking is an easy solution. The fact that I have to read those comments about me is degrading and demeaning. If what is said to me online, via the internet, the abuses hurled, the name calling, etc., is not acceptable when said in a crowded physical space, how can it not be seen as abusive? Can abusers be allowed to get away with it only because it is online? I am still the same person facing it!”

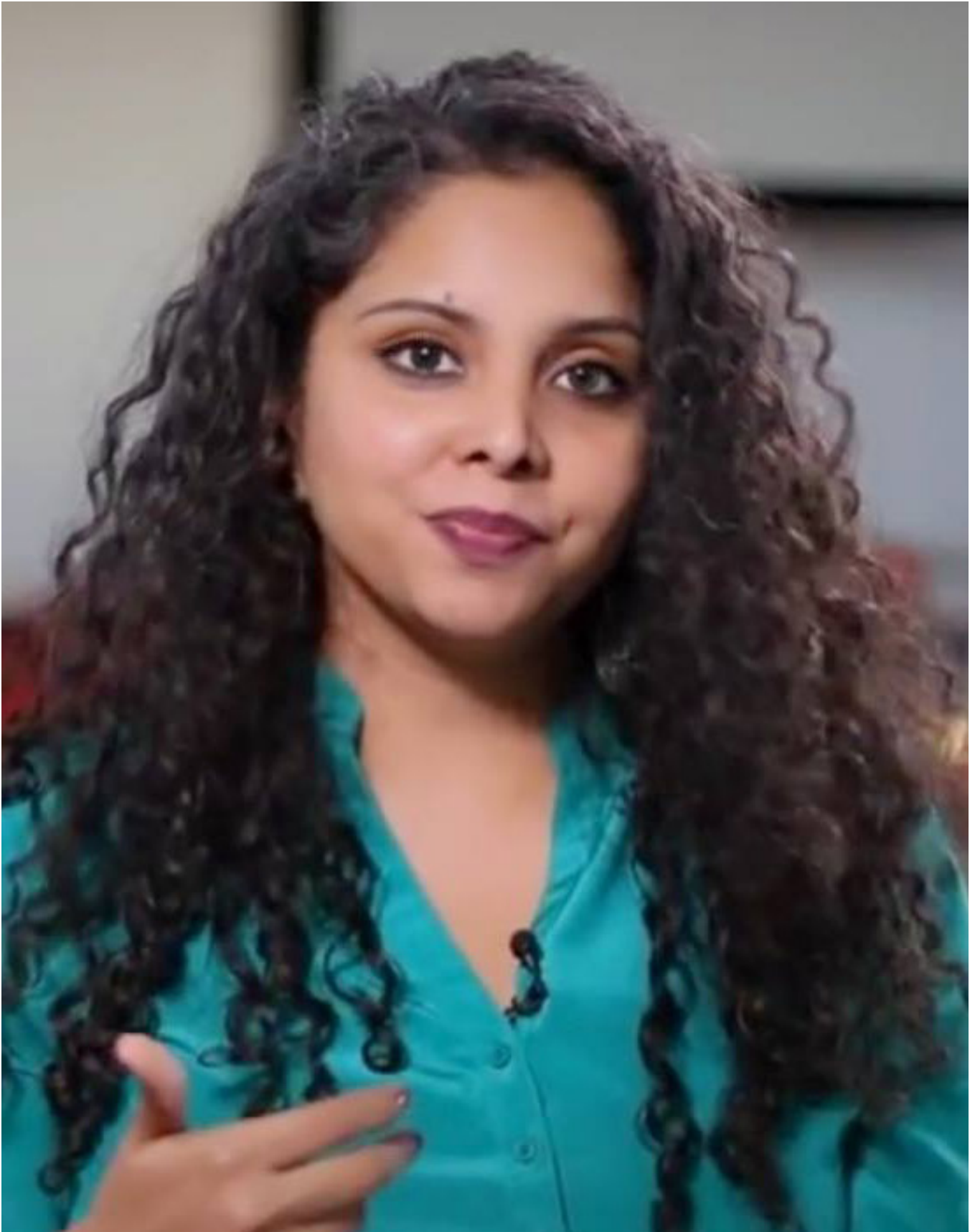
Reporting online abuse to authorities was no easier for her. In the first case of online abuse that she reported, the investigation took extremely long, people investigating the case changed, she was told the case needed to

be shut, and she needed to go to court as the abusers could not be traced. On another occasion, when she tried to file a case against someone who said “I want to have sex with you at India Gate”, the authorities told her it was merely an online threat.

Despite having received threats and abuse online, Kavita sees social media as a platform where she would want to continue to raise her voice about issues she believes in, and never once has she felt like leaving the space permanently. Like others, she too takes a break at times when the abuse gets to her, only to come back stronger! “This is what they want you to do. To leave the platform. I distance myself from most of the abuse, but make sure I share the more outrageous ones.” Kavita also shared how women across the world with an opinion about issues face similar abuse. “Scottish National Party Member of Parliament, Mhairi Black’s story of homophobic and misogynistic abuse directed at her tells the same story. Like me, she has also been told she is so ugly that no one would want to rape her.”

On being asked how online abuse is an extension of the offline abuse that women face, Kavita told Amnesty International India “It is also very easy for online abuse to spill into abuse in physical spaces and with no action taken, it emboldens people to verbally assault you. I am a public figure, people on trains, etc., have come up to me and said sometimes how I am of bad character, owing to the ‘fake news’ that they have read and believed about me. There have been tweets that have said that I should also be tied around a jeep and paraded!”

Online violence needs to be taken seriously. Organised violence of this nature is also an attack on free speech. “As citizens we need to ask for accountability from our leaders, specially when we see they follow abusers and those threatening violence on social media. We also need to ask social media platforms to be more accountable, because by not acting, platforms like Twitter create a situation of potential physical violence.”



RANA AYYUB is an award winning author and journalist. In May 2018, five United Nations Special Rapporteurs urged the Indian Government to protect her from the threats to her life and person that she was receiving online.



I was targeted with online abuse and the abuse was many a times very gendered and targeted at my religious identity. 'Jehadi Jane', 'Apa' and 'Didi' is what I was often referred to as."

Prominent journalist Rana Ayyub created her Twitter account because she saw the online platform as a space to amplify her work and let the world know of her writings. Little did she know of the vitriol she would face online for expressing her opinions, and of the indifference she would be met with when reporting online violence to the social media platforms she was posting on.

“When I got on Twitter, I was enjoying exploring the platform, getting to know the views of various people and posting my own stories for people to read. Within a few months, when people saw the face to the person behind a lot of the investigative pieces, a lot of vicious and abusive responses started coming my way. I was targeted with online abuse and the abuse was many a times very gendered and targeted at my religious identity. ‘Jehadi Jane’, ‘Apa’ and ‘Didi’ is what I was often referred to as. The price I had to pay for my voice to be heard and for my opinions to reach out to a large number of people was quite a bit. A few days after I broke an important story on the Ishrat Jahan fake encounter, Twitter was trending with ‘Rana Ayyub CD’, the assumption being that the CD would definitely have something ‘dirty’ featuring me. The responses to my tweets were full of misogyny and violence. Rape threats, death threats, Islamophobic and gendered comments had become common parlance.”

One time, when she publicly shared the abusive and threatening comments sent to her by an Indian national in the United Arab Emirates, the man was fired from his job and deported to India. She was hopeful that this case would be taken up by the authorities when the man reached India, but nothing was done. She wrote to the Minister of Women and Child Development but still nothing happened in that case.

When asked about her experiences of reporting online violence to the authorities, she said, on one occasion, having received over 40 threatening phone calls a day, when she filed a First Information Report in Mumbai, her case was registered but the safety options she was given were to either

keep a licenced gun or accept two constables assigned to her, provided she paid them herself. “Was I going to kill someone with that gun? Could I? No. Being a freelance journalist, could I afford to pay the constables assigned to give me security cover?”

Her experience of reporting online violence directly to the social media platform, Twitter, was no better. “I have reported so many profiles on Twitter but the platform seems oblivious to all these. It seems like it just does not matter to them. In addition to the hate and abuse, there are fourteen fake profiles in my name and with my picture. I have reported those profiles but they continue to exist because apparently, they are not against Twitter’s policies, or so I have been told.”

Did she let online abuse silence her? Rana shared that, “from early 2013 to the run up to the elections in 2014 the online threats got very vicious. There were morphed pictures of me doing the rounds, WhatsApp messages with my body superimposed on the face of an acid attack victim. It got even worse when my book, ‘Gujarat Files’, came out. It was infuriating and disturbing and there was a point I thought it was best I left Twitter. But I eventually decided not to. Why should I let someone else’s actions and the inaction of those accountable, whether it is the social media platforms or officials and law enforcement authorities, affect mine?”

“Only this year I have started blocking people. ITS GETS REALLY TOXIC.”



SAGARIKA GHOSE is an Indian journalist, news anchor and author. She has over three and a half million followers on Twitter and has been active on social media, Facebook as well as Twitter, since 2008. She has been facing serious threats and intimidation for expressing her opinions online.



In 2013, I faced threats of gang-rape as well as gang-rape and kidnapping of my daughter. These threats were repeatedly made on Twitter. Last year, after the Gauri Lankesh murder I faced a death threat when a Facebook user made a 'hit list' and called for me and four other women to be assassinated."

“As a journalist, I post my articles, blogs, opinions and analyses of current events, online. My views fall in the ‘liberal’ category as I defend democracy, pluralism, rule of law and individual rights against majoritarian, nationalist, Islamophobic, anti-woman and jingoist views”, Sagarika Ghose told Amnesty International India.

She posts her opinions on her Facebook page, and tweets regularly. “I have been facing threats and abuse online for precisely this. In 2013, I faced threats of gang-rape as well as gang-rape and kidnapping of my daughter. These threats were repeatedly made on Twitter. My daughter was separately targeted with threats of gang-rape” Sagarika shared. She said that the abuse also related to perceptions of her being “anti-Hindu” and “anti-national.”

On the question of how she responds to those who have been harassing her online, she said, she often confronts the abusers. However in her experience, this merely emboldens the ‘trolls’. Online harassment and abuse has not silenced her. Sharing an instance where her son’s admission into medical college was targeted online and she was accused of bribery, she explained that she replied to these online allegations with facts, as she did not want her children to be unfairly targeted.

“Last year, after the Gauri Lankesh murder I faced a death threat when a Facebook user made a ‘hit list’ and called for me and four other women to be assassinated”, Sagarika told Amnesty International India. Online violence often spills into offline violence and one must not ignore it just because it has not escalated to physical spaces. Responding to the targeted abuse that women face online, Sagarika has said while Rajdeep Sardesai, her husband and fellow journalist, receives a lot of abuse on Twitter for posting his opinions and views, the abuse is not sexual or related to his gender.

For those like Sagarika who face online violence repeatedly and end up reporting abusers on Twitter, the reporting procedure seems fairly easy. Some accounts are even suspended as a result. However, the major problem is that new accounts spring up again and the abuse continues. Therefore, Sagarika feels simply “blocking and muting” the abuser is easier than reporting. Which means, in essence, that the abuser goes scot free.

“Tech companies need to be vigilant about fraudulent accounts and suspend abusive and violent users.” Sagarika explained that she does not have any faith in the government’s ability to resolve this issue as governments themselves are known to use ‘troll armies’ to foster ‘fake news’ to target political opponents, crush dissent, and engender “enormously damaging and divisive, hate-filled campaigns online.”

Replying to whether she ever considered leaving these platforms, Sagarika was determined to stay put: “No, I am determined to fight these forces, and feel we ‘liberals’ should speak out strongly against people threatening us and creating an anti-democratic ecosystem in India.”



AUDREY TRUSCHKE is Assistant Professor of South Asian History at Rutgers University in Newark, NJ, U.S.A. She is the author of two books: 'Culture of Encounters: Sanskrit at the Mughal Court' (2016) and 'Aurangzeb' (2017). She has been at the receiving end of online abuse for her social media posts on Indian History, especially on Aurangzeb, and on modern Indian culture and politics.



I am regularly attacked using sexist and misogynistic language, on the basis of my perceived race, and on the basis of my perceived religion... I have received generalized threats of violence, wishes for my death, and rape threats.”

Audrey Truschke, author and historian, has been active on both Facebook and Twitter for a few years now, but most of the abuse and harassment that she has faced has been on the latter.

“I am regularly attacked using sexist and misogynistic language, on the basis of my perceived race (white/Caucasian), and on the basis of my perceived religion, this includes Christianity and sometimes specifically Catholicism or Evangelicalism, Judaism, and Atheism. I have received generalized threats of violence, wishes for my death, and rape threats”, Audrey shared with Amnesty International India.

Referring to how common it had become for her to see racist and sexist comments on her profile she said she did not keep records of most. “I do keep screenshots of some of the most abhorrent and/or memorable ones, especially the anti-Semitism.”

Audrey detailed that she has a number of ‘trolls’, who frequently abuse her online. While some of them are ordinary people, others seem to be paid ‘trolls’ associated with ruling party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). She explained that the BJP has been known to use a well-organized ‘troll army’ to launch coordinated attacks on specific individuals, which is the subject of Swati Chaturvedi’s book, ‘I am a Troll’.

Responding to the frequency of the abuse and her response to it, she said that at its worst, she has received hundreds of hateful tweets within a few hours. “Usually, it’s more of a trickle, several a week typically. This has been going on for well over a year. I stopped reporting sexist and misogynistic tweets to Twitter because they never did anything about them. Following Twitter’s change in policy about ‘hate speech’ in late 2017, I again began reporting the worst of the misogynistic tweets, and, occasionally, Twitter does something about it.”

The historian, mostly, does not let online abusers have the better of her but she is concerned about the chilling effect that such attacks have on academics and freedom of expression more broadly, especially for women. She shared with us: “I am told regularly by academic colleagues that they stay off social media, in part, because of what they see happening to me.” In addition to the mental toll of regularly receiving abuse, there is the concern that social media attacks can inspire physical violence. Audrey reports that, owing to the growing vehemence of online abuse directed at her, she sometimes arranges security for her public academic lectures.

“Online harassment and threats of violence against women are a growing plague that needs to be addressed. I have no magic answer for how to solve this glaring problem, but I am keenly aware of how such attacks dampen free speech, constrict academic inquiry, and put women in harm’s way.”



KIRUBA MUNUSAMY is an advocate practicing in the Supreme Court of India and founder of the Legal Initiative for Equality. She is a social, political and judicial activist striving for social justice. She has faced online violence because of her opinions, offline and online, on discrimination, oppression and inequalities in society.



Where the nature of abuse faced by women belonging to the upper caste or women of privilege is mostly sexual in nature and is gendered, the violence that women like me face is many layered. Not only is the abuse gendered, it is directed at our identity, with the aim to dehumanise and deface us.”

Having nearly 20,000 Facebook followers, Kiruba, a Supreme court advocate and a Dalit rights activist has often been at the receiving end of online violence and abuse. The abuse directed at her has mostly targeted her caste identity and her gender.

Kiruba posts in both English and Tamil. Having posted in Tamil once about a leading environmentalist and her experience of abuse at his hands, she experienced a barrage of online abuse on Facebook. Her photographs were used and all sorts of abusive and gender-related slurs directed at her. “So I went to a police station in Karol Bagh, I wanted to lodge a complaint, but they told me we do not understand the post, everything is in Tamil, you better go to Tamil Nadu. I flew to Tamil Nadu, I lodged a complaint and my experience was really bad. The police official called me and gave me, a Supreme Court lawyer, legal advice. He said, “you are a lawyer in the Supreme Court, why do you want to defame yourself?.” “I was stunned!.”

Responding to how toxic spaces like Twitter and Facebook have become for women posting their opinions online, she explained how even the most innocuous opinion are met with accusations and slander, which would not happen offline. “When I wrote about the lack of diversity in the Indian judiciary, people were scolding me on Twitter and Facebook for playing the victim role.”

On how the social media platforms and police officials are selective in their reporting processes, Kiruba shared that “mostly when we write something about politics or the ruling party and someone complains they block our posts or they remove them. But when we complain about certain hateful posts, etc., the platforms say that it does not violate their community standards.”

Kiruba has also been very vocal about the intersectionality of violence faced by women in online spaces, specially by those women who belong to marginalised communities. “Where the nature of abuse faced by women belonging to the upper caste or women of privilege is mostly sexual in nature and is gendered, the violence that women like me face is many layered. Not only is the abuse gendered, it is directed at our identity, with the aim to dehumanise and deface us. I am often targeted for the colour of my skin and my dressing choices. Many people online seem to have a problem with a dark-skinned Dalit woman like me wearing what she likes”, she added.

In an article written earlier this year, Kiruba explained how even though social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, have options to report abuse and block abusers, their response to reportage is mostly that the content does not violate community standards. In her experience, while certain posts that are reported for discrimination are removed by the platforms because they violate their policies and guidelines, many others are not addressed. She shared, “hateful, abusive and demeaning content against Dalits and content that defames outcaste leaders and women is not barred and remains online, generating and inspiring even more hateful content.”

“If someone like me, a practicing lawyer has faced this kind of a response from police, and others, while reporting, it is unimaginable what many other women facing online abuse have to go through.”

Kiruba said she knows that the aim of ‘trolls’ is to silence women’s voices. “I will continue to speak out and not let the toxicity on online spaces directed at women like me, stop me.”



GURMEHAR KAUR is a student activist. She has recently authored a book, a memoir, called 'Small Acts of Freedom', which was published in January 2018. Last year, she was a regular college student, until one day, when the opinions she posted online made her a target for those who wanted to silence her voice.



The experience was harrowing. Initially I was scared. The online abuse ranged from people giving me rape and death threats to extremely personal and gendered comments on my family and I. Reporting the abuse to authorities was not helpful as no swift action was taken by them.”

In February 2017, in response to the violence perpetrated by a student group during a protest at Ramjas College, Gurmehar posted a photo of herself holding a placard, which read: “I am a student from Delhi University. I am not afraid of ABVP. I am not alone. Every Indian student is with me. #StudentsAgainstABVP”

In response to this photo and the #StudentsAgainstABVP online campaign that she initiated, she was criticised by many male political leaders and prominent public figures, and faced targeted online abuse from other internet users, including rape threats.

“I have been an ‘Indo-Pak’ activist since I was 17 years old. When I posted my picture online earlier in 2017, I knew there may be backlash, but I did not expect it to be of this size. I had two choices before me, either let the online violence silence me, or use the platform to amplify my cause. I chose the latter.”

Speaking to Amnesty International India on the effect the constant abuse and violence have had on her, she said, “The experience was harrowing. Initially I was scared. The online abuse ranged from people giving me rape and death threats to extremely personal and gendered comments on my family and I. Reporting the abuse to authorities was not helpful as no swift action was taken by them.”

Gurmehar explained how difficult it was to find out which laws could be used to report online abuse. Although she reported her case through the Delhi Commission for Women, the police have been very slow with their investigation and there has been no outcome till date. She also detailed her experiences with reporting the online abuse directly to the relevant social media platforms. While Facebook’s response to her complaints was “extremely disappointing”, she said that Twitter’s response was at least relatively “swift.” She stressed that much more needs to be done to make these platforms, and the internet at large, safe for women.

“I feel it is very important that we start addressing the issue of online violence against women more seriously. The internet is a great space for us women to express ourselves and speak out. However, since most of the platforms are not as diligent as they should be when it comes to addressing online gendered abuse, a lot of women choose silence. I’ve been trolled, called an ‘anti-national’ and mocked, but this incident and what followed has only made me more determined. I was lucky to get support from all quarters when I decided to be brave and not let online harassment shut me up. But not everyone does so. Therefore, it is all the more important to stand up for those who face harassment and abuse, specially women, whether, offline or online.”



DYUTI SUDIPTA is a feminist researcher and gender rights activist who has been posting her views about patriarchy and what she perceives as anti-women policies, on Facebook and Twitter. On one such occasion, she received 20-30 messages per hour, with 400-500 notifications of abuses, where she was either tagged or mentioned in the comments. This was despite the fact that her Facebook profile was private and only her friends could comment on her posts.



They were calling me a lesbian, a ‘slut’ and saying I was in need of corrective rape. On many occasions, graphic descriptions of sexual violence that they wanted me to be subjected to, were written on individual posts. My name was tagged in the comments so that I would see those posts and perhaps be intimidated.”

“I have received rape threats, threats of acid attack and abduction as well as death threats. ‘Trolls’ have not spared my family either”, Dyuti told Amnesty International India. The abuse faced by Dyuti has been very gender specific, and specific to her sexual orientation. In 2014, when she posted a photo of herself where she was about to kiss her friend during the ‘Kiss of Love’ protest in Delhi, the picture went viral and abuse of a sexual nature was hurled at her. “They were calling me a lesbian, a ‘slut’ and saying I was in need of corrective rape. On many occasions, graphic descriptions of sexual violence that they wanted me to be subjected to, were written on individual posts. My name was tagged in the comments so that I would see those posts and perhaps be intimidated.”

When asked if she understood the community standards around reporting abuse, Dyuti told us how her posts were taken down by Facebook instead of the profiles or posts of those who were harassing her! “They did not take down posts threatening me with sexual violence in Hindi but took down one of my posts that had the screenshots of threatening comments I received. Probably because it had the word sex, or because the people whose screenshots were there, reported it in huge numbers. How does any social media platform justify this?.” She reported multiple posts, multiple times. Most of the time, the response received from the platforms was that the posts reported did not violate their community standards.

Reporting the abuse to the authorities was no easier for her. She reported the abuse to the Cyber Crime Cell of the Delhi Police. There was no response at first. After repeated emails, she was asked to share the IDs and profiles of those who abused her online, which she could not as many of them had deactivated their profiles. After she sent them the few profile links she could find, they took six months to respond and when they did she was asked to be present in court the next day for a hearing. “Because I was in Mumbai, it was not possible for me to go. They wanted me to send in writing that I wanted the case to be closed if I could not come. I had to do that because I had no other choice.”

Constant threats to her life and safety not only made Dyuti conscious of the consequences of her online presence and the opinions she posted, but also forced her to restrict her movements in physical spaces. She recalls walking on the road in Mumbai, when a group of men pointed at her and said “Look, its that girl.” “My photos were being circulated on WhatsApp. I left my rented accommodation for a few days and started living with my friend. After this incident, I made sure not to leave the house on my own for nearly a month.” Dyuti shared with us that she has a history of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which was aggravated as a result of the abuse she recieved and that she had to seek therapy.

“I started posting less political content, not because I was scared but because I was very tired. My mental health was in shambles and the possibility of having to face a similar episode made me extremely frightened”, she said, when asked whether the abuse changed the way she expressed herself online.

Being on the receiving end of online abuse and having had her profile blocked by the social media platforms where she faced this abuse instead of her abusers, Dyuti was very clear in stating that there is a dire need to involve more humans in the process of investigating whether or not any content violates the community standards of the social media platform, rather than just “letting algorithms define this.” She also said that it was important that, “Those holding important offices in the government need to immediately disassociate themselves from online ‘trolls’ and stop following them on Twitter. This emboldens them further.”

“I have recovered now, but back then I felt scared, powerless and in danger.”



POOJA VIJAY is a noted stand-up comedian. She has a slight speech impediment by way of a stutter and uses comedy to address gender issues and dispel myths about speaking disorders. Recently, she has been at the receiving end of online harassment and abuse because of the views she expressed online on sexism in the comedy industry in the country. In May 2018, she started facing the ire of 'trolls' for calling out misogyny and was forced to delay her shows and restrict her movement because she feared for her life and physical safety.



Before I approached the concerned authorities I did not know that this was a crime and that the people involved could face legal consequences. Prior to my own experience of facing online abuse and reporting it, I didn't know how poor social media regulations were in dealing with the same."

“I posted about how ironical it was for a venue in Bengaluru, which has been very vocal against online violence faced by women, to be hosting a misogynistic comedian who posted abusive online content about women. I further made a comment on these posts about how I had previously also been on the receiving end of misogynistic ‘trolls’. It was this comment of mine which triggered the harassment that I faced for a few weeks. The group who had previously ‘trolled’ me, picked up on this comment, denied that it had ever happened and used it as an excuse to harass me online for a few weeks.”

Pooja started receiving abuse in the form of messages in her mailbox on Facebook and Instagram. The ‘trolls’ also kept repeatedly tagging her on harassing Facebook posts and comments. A thread about her on Twitter, saw her receiving multiple threats. ‘I have received a rape threat and there were various posts saying that I will be sued for defamation and that my career will be ruined. They said they would not stop writing about me till I was taken down and till I issued an apology. I was called all sorts of names/abuses in Hindi and English. I was accused of fame/attention seeking. The posts said that I made false claims, and that I need to be shown my place. My stutter, my appearance, everything was made fun of.”

Amnesty International’s study on online violence against women ([insert link](#)) talks in detail about the effect online violence and abuse has on women. Pooja told Amnesty International India that the threats scared her, and she could not find the courage to even leave her home on her own. “I restricted my movements, I was scared. I lost my appetite. I was scared for my safety, of possibilities of acid attacks or facing physical violence. I was scared for the safety of those near to me.” Pooja also told us that she cancelled her shows for over two weeks because she feared for her physical safety.

When asked how she responded to the abusers, Pooja told us that she responded by putting up a post on her Facebook wall, and on her Instagram

story feature, stating that she feared for her life. Soon after, both of the posts she put up were morphed by the online ‘trolls’ with a different message from what she had initially posted and they were put up on the social media walls of the harassers.

“Most of whom I reached out to for advice, in my sector, asked me to lay low and let it pass. I initially did, but the harassment did not stop immediately.” Pooja, like most women interviewed by Amnesty International India, did not get much support when she reached out to the social media platforms for help. “I reported multiple times about multiple people but the response I received from Facebook was very poor. One post and one comment got taken down but the accounts of the harassers are still up and running. My face is still there on their walls with the morphed text, which has been shared multiple times thereafter. Other than the abusive inbox messages and comments, the original post about me resulted in 500 retweets and around 200 shares on Facebook.”

Pooja did seek legal advice, however she has not taken any legal action. “Before I approached the concerned authorities I did not know that this was a crime and that the people involved could face legal consequences. Prior to my own experience of facing online abuse and reporting it, I didn’t know how poor social media regulations were in dealing with the same.”

The harassment and abuse has now made Pooja sceptical of her online presence. “I crosscheck a couple of times before I post something and I am definitely scared of the repercussions.”

“The failure on the part of the social media platforms to address online harassment and abuse faced by me and others like me, will only embolden harassers. They need to follow strict guidelines when it comes to online abuse, especially the abuse faced by women. The harassment needs to stop.”



NIDHI RAZDAN is a senior journalist and a news anchor. She is often at the receiving end of online abuse and harassment on social media platforms for having an opinion and expressing it freely in online spaces. A recent death threat online only emboldened her to ensure that the person behind the threat is brought to justice. She filed an FIR against him.



One needs to develop a thick skin overtime. The comments made at women in the online spaces are extremely humiliating and it is very difficult to deal with the kind of abuse that is meted out to us. It can be and is very traumatising for young women who express their opinions online, or use the space in whichever way they want to.”

Nidhi remembers being on the receiving end of online abuse from the time she joined Twitter. “I first joined Twitter nearly five to six years ago. The abuse and harassment that I experienced there was so toxic that I decided to leave. I only rejoined last year”, she told Amnesty International India. “I decided to come back on Twitter when I was informed that there were a number of accounts under my name, impersonating me. When I tried to address this by reaching out to Twitter, they advised that I create my own verified account to counter the fake accounts under my name.”

“I am trolled whenever I write anything questioning the government or when I ask questions addressed to the ruling party. It seems almost like there is an organised army of ‘trolls’ who attack you online the moment you post something which does not conform with the popular narrative.” Nidhi also shared that she generally does not respond to the tweets online and only responds, if at all, to those that are abusive.

When asked about the nature of abuse that is faced by women online, vis a vis others, Nidhi, like most women we interviewed, opined that “the abuse is very gendered, very misogynistic and much worse for women. It is not just directed at the woman, comments are made with insinuations etc., on her partner, husband or boyfriends, in a condescending tone, aimed at humiliating her.”

In June 2018, Nidhi received a death threat on Instagram. When she reported it, the platform got back to her saying that it does not violate their community guidelines. She tweeted saying, “I got a death threat on @instagram via a pvtmsg: “I will hang you, I will execute you.” I reported the account to @instagram. They replied that it does not violate their guidelines. Shame on you @instagram. Am deleting my account. And yes, I’m filing an FIR.” Soon after her public tweet, Facebook got back to her telling her that the reply was an error on Instagram’s part. She tweeted again saying, “Update: got a call from Facebook, the said account has been suspended, all details will be handed over to the police. Appreciate

that FB admitted the response by Instagram was an error. Hope this is now followed through by the police @facebook @instagram.”

“The incident and the response from Instagram made me angry. Yes, once I tweeted about the incident they admitted it was a mistake, but that is not enough. Social media platforms need to do much more.’

Talking about her experience of reporting the death threat, she said that she filed a First Information Report with the cyber police but that she had to explain the issue to them repeatedly for them to take her complaint seriously. After arrests were made in Congress Spokesperson Priyanka Chaturvedi’s case, who had received online rape threats, Nidhi said she called the police again and asked why it was taking them so long to make any progress in her case.

“One needs to develop a thick skin overtime. The comments made at women in the online spaces are extremely humiliating and it is very difficult to deal with the kind of abuse that is meted out to us. It can be and is very traumatising for young women who express their opinions online, or use the space in whichever way they want to. These platforms, specially Twitter seem to have become slightly more responsive than what they used to be a few years ago, but there is much more that needs to be done.”

She recommends that, despite the delays associated with responding to reports of online abuse and harassment, women who are at the receiving end of such abuse should continue to report.



AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL INDIA

Head Office

BANGALORE:

#235, 13th Cross, Indira Nagar,
2nd Stage, Bangalore – 560 038,
Karnataka, INDIA.

Tel: +91 080 4938 8000