

Information technology as a key factor in women empowerment in the 21st century



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From prehistoric societies to the tech savvy societies of today, women have always been struggling to free themselves of subjugation, dominance and command of men. The movement for equal rights and protection of women against all forms of discrimination, which formally began in the nineteenth century, gained unprecedented momentum in the 20th century after Betty Friedan's book **The Feminine Mystique**, published in 1963, criticised the idea that women could find fulfilment only through childrearing and homemaking. Her book ignited the contemporary women's movement in 1963 and as a result permanently transformed the social fabric of the United States and countries around the world. Waves of feminism followed one after the other and finally the cause of women's emancipation and empowerment found the most vibrant platform of social media in the 21st century. Hashtag is arguably the most effective weapon in the fourth wave of feminism which is also inundating facebook, instagram, youtube and the internet. It is, therefore, an established fact that information technology is playing the key role in women empowerment in the 21st century.

As recently as a decade ago, those seeking to fight sexism had few avenues to easily do so in an effective way. Discussion of feminism and feminist values was scarce, activists had been branded "feminazis" by Rush Limbaugh, and numerous celebrities, like pop star Katy Perry, actress Shailene Woodley, and actress Kaley Cuocco rejected even the word "feminist." Before Twitter and Facebook exploded as platforms for news, participating in rallies was limited to those who were in those cities, or those who could afford to take time off work and travel. However, now the spread of information technology has enabled feminist activists to break new ground in campaigning for women's rights regarding body integrity and autonomy; abortion and reproductive rights and prenatal care; protection from domestic violence, sexual harassment, and rape; workplace rights, including maternity leave and equal pay; and protection against all forms of discrimination women encounter. Ubiquity of information technology has given opportunity to women to take their struggle for emancipation and empowerment to the next level.

Although debated by some, many claim that a fourth wave of feminism began in 2012, with a focus on sexual harassment, body shaming, and rape culture, among other issues. A key component was the use of social media to highlight and address these concerns. The new wave arose amid a number of high-profile incidents. In December 2012 a young woman was brutally gang-raped in India and subsequently, she died, sparking local protests and international outrage. That was followed two years later by the GamerGate campaign, a manifestation of the so-called "men's rights movement" that had its origins on the Web site 4chan. GamerGate ostensibly sought to promote ethics in video-game journalism, but it was in reality a harassment campaign against "social justice warriors." The latter were often women who objected to female stereotypes in video games and were subsequently inundated with death threats and rape threats.

Against this background came Donald Trump's defeat of Hillary Clinton in the U.S. presidential election in 2016. Trump had made a number of inflammatory remarks about women, and the day after the election a grandmother went on Facebook to propose a march on Washington, D.C. The suggestion quickly gained traction and became a call for social change, especially in regard to gender equality. Known as the Women's March, it grew to include demonstrations across the United States and around the world. The protests took place on January 21, 2017, the day after Trump's inauguration, and as many as 4.6 million people attended various events in the United States, making the Women's March perhaps the largest single-day demonstration in that country's history.

Social media has democratised feminist activism, opening up participation to anyone with a Twitter or Facebook account and a desire to fight patriarchy. By removing the barriers of distance and geography, sites like Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram have made activism easier than ever, facilitating public dialogues and creating a platform for awareness and change. So, we see that when a group of women wanted to protest an abortion bill in Texas in 2013, local women rallied together at the Texas State Capitol, but those who couldn't attend protested online with #StandWithWendy, supporting State Rep. Wendy Davis through her 13-hour filibuster.

Similarly, UK's top-selling newspaper "The Sun" was forced to stop printing 'Page 3' topless models after a run of 44 years, delighting critics of the "sexist" images. Rupert Murdoch, the media mogul who owns the paper had to make this decision after a successful online petition campaign spearheaded by 'No More Page 3' leader Lucy Holmes, who garnered the support of 244143 signatories online. Similarly, when women wanted to protest sexist T-shirts by a children's clothing company, they flooded their Facebook page until the company could not ignore them and had to remove the product.

2014 was arguably the year that hashtag feminism finally reached the tipping point. #YesAllWomen trended for weeks after Elliot Rodger, who had written about his anger towards women, went on a shooting spree killing six people and injuring another fourteen in Santa Barbara, California. Thousands of women used the hashtag to share their stories of how everyday sexism and violence against women had affected them. In the wake of the Ray Rice domestic violence scandal, when some pundits asked why Rice had stayed with her husband, thousands of women took to Twitter sharing their own personal stories of domestic violence with the hashtag #WhyIStayed. When conservative columnist George Will claimed that rape victims have a "coveted status that conveys privileges," in society, women used the hashtag #survivorprivilege to respond to Will. The hashtag #changetheratio has been used over the years to protest tech events whose speaker lineup features far more men than women. And #BringBackOurGirls trended worldwide as people around the world raised awareness of the 200-plus Nigerian schoolgirls that had been kidnapped by Boko Haram.

"Hashtag activism" is a term that has been much maligned, but it has been effective at pressuring politicians and companies to change. The #MeToo movement sent shockwaves from America to Australia. The hashtag has trended in at least 85 countries, including India, Pakistan, and the United Kingdom. The campaign prompted survivors from around the world to share their stories, and name their perpetrators causing many to get thrown out of their offices, settle cases in the courts by paying heavy damages and losing face. The European Parliament convened a session directly in response to the Me Too campaign, after it gave rise to allegations of abuse in Parliament and in the European Union's offices in Brussels. Cecilia Malmstrom, the European Commissioner for Trade, specifically cited the hashtag as the reason the meeting had been convened. Though in Me Too movement a few cases of males beings assaulted by females or other males also surfaced with the passage of time yet its major beneficiaries are still women who sent an equivocal warning to sexual predators.

The Me Too campaign also gave rise to certain other identical movements in which victims of sexual harassment in some of the most respected institutions like the church came out with their stories of victimisation. In November 2017, the hashtag #ChurchToo was started by Emily Joy and Hannah Paasch on Twitter and began trending in response to #MeToo as a way to try to highlight and stop sexual abuse that happens in a church. In early January 2018, about a hundred evangelical women also launched #SilencelsNotSpiritual to call for changes to how sexual misconduct is dealt within the church. #ChurchToo started spreading again virally later in January 2018 in response to a live-streamed video admission by Pastor Andy Savage to his church that he sexually assaulted a 17-year-old girl twenty years before as a youth pastor while driving her home, but then received applause by his church for admitting to the incident and asking for forgiveness. Pastor Andy Savage then resigned from his staff position at Highpoint Church and stepped away from ministry.

The impact of women's anti-harassment activism compelled US congress to amend legislation or make new laws. Jackie Speier proposed the Member and Employee Training and Oversight on Congress Act (ME TOO Congress Act) on November 15, 2017. The House and Senate — which had previously been at odds on how exactly to address the issue of harassment in the government body — overwhelmingly approved legislation in December 2018. This is an amendment to the Congressional Accountability Act of 1995. The purpose of the bill is to change how the legislative branch of the US federal government treats sexual harassment complaints. Under the old system, complaints regarding the legislative branch were channeled through the Office of Compliance, which required complete confidentiality through the process and took months of counselling and mediation before a complaint could actually be filed. The bill would ensure future complaints could only take up to 180 days to be filed. The bill would also allow the staffers to transfer to a different department or otherwise work away from the presence of the alleged harasser without losing their jobs if they requested it. The Office of Compliance would no longer be allowed to keep settlements secret, and would be required to publicly publish the settlement amounts and the associated employing offices.

In Pakistan, social media has also served as a vibrant platform for the cause of women emancipation and empowerment. After the death of 7-year-old Zainab Ansari in January 2018, who was raped and killed, there were a wave of declarations on Pakistan social media in the #MeToo style. A new generation of feminists is also pressing to change the current situation. The wife of a famed celeb Mohsin Abbas launched a campaign “zulm bardasht karna bhi gunah hai” meaning: “tolerating oppression is also a sin” against her husband whom she accused of inflicting severe physical torture on her after she caught him cheating on her. The campaign took the social media and the mainstream media by storm and severe public pressure caused Mohsin Abbas to lose several contracts with tv channels along with his mega programme “Mazaq Raat”. The tv channel which aired a pre-recorded episode of ‘Mazaq Raat’ had to publicly apologise to the audience for hurting their feelings by airing the episode with Mohsin Abbas in it. Many voices are now being heard in support of women's rights on platforms of social media. Activists believe that social media in Pakistan "has struggled to make an impact in a deeply patriarchal country”.

The #MeToo also spread in Afghanistan where, according to some analysts, 90% of women experience sexual harassment in public, at school, or at work, but was quickly silenced when those who shared their stories started fearing for their life. Sharing stories of sexual abuse against higher-ranking men is especially dangerous for women in the country, and may result in the killing of the victim or her family members. Even then,

women are sharing their ordeals using first name or a fake name, and typically describe the story without naming the perpetrator. It caused the Afghan government to define sexual harassment for the first time in 2016, though no laws were put in force to deal with the culprits. The activism for women's rights is getting up from slumber though women have a long way to go to achieve any substantial relief there.

Apart from providing a noticeable platform where women and supporters of feminism can demonstrate their existence and expose the perpetrators of crimes against them, digital technology and social media also provide women several opportunities to earn money while staying at home by means of providing services in the realm of world wide web. In stifling patriarchal societies in which they are not allowed to go away from home for education, they can get education through online classes and educational channels on you tube. Samasource is a non-profit project which provides computer-based data projects to women in backward areas all over the world. Since its founding in 2008, Samasource, has given a number of data projects for companies like Getty Images, DropBox, Microsoft, and TripAdvisor in countries such as Haiti, Ghana, Uganda, Kenya and India. Thousands of women across the globe are now earning by marketing their homemade products online. Hence, the information technology is opening up new avenues for women's economic empowerment.

The new information technology revolution has changed people's outlook on feminism to a great extent. Feminist social media activism does not just raise awareness; it has generated tangible results, too. Organisations have changed course as a result of social media backlash created by everyday people having their fingers on the triggers of social media. Powerful parliamentarians, members of assemblies, bureaucrats, businessmen, celebrities and even academicians and 'holy men' were shown the door when the victims of their sexual harassment posted stories of their ordeals on social media platforms. In some cases the shockwaves created by feminist movements as powerful as #MeToo even caused parliaments to make amendments in existing Acts concerning women's rights or introduce new laws for their protection and empowerment. Though women in the developing countries have less access to the internet, or their life remains under potential threat if they share their ordeals in predominantly patriarchal societies, yet virality of feminist content on social media and hashtag activism by more privileged women and feminist activists have been enough to bring about huge tidal waves of feminism in the 21st century.