



ORF ISSUE BRIEF

JANUARY 2015

ISSUE BRIEF # 87

Gender and Identity on Social Media

Nishtha Gautam

Introduction

If anyone ever completely understood Jurgen Habermas's conceptualisation of *Öffentlichkeit*,¹ amongst them would be contemporary digital social-networking giants such as Facebook and Twitter. Technically a nowhere-land, these social networking sites are the ideal public spaces where the formulation, articulation, distribution and negotiation of ideas take place. As Habermas suggests, it is in the public sphere that private individuals constitute themselves in a collective body.² This is exactly how people group together on social-media sites through various 'communities' and 'pages,' and as 'followers' as well. Moreover, social-media sites have emerged as important platforms for voicing opinions, both public and private. Twitter, for example – which has become the fastest medium of news broadcast – brings live discussions from newsrooms to mobile-phone screens, empowering consumers of 'news' by making them interactive participants not only in the consumption of news but also in its production.

Over the years, feminist critiques of Habermas's conceptualisation of the 'public sphere' have been published by various theorists including Nancy Fraser, Seyla Benhabib, Iris Marion Young, Mary Ryan, Carole Patman and Joan Landes. These scholars have alerted us to the physical exclusion of women from the public sphere. Additionally, their responses have flagged a bigger problem: Habermas's own unwillingness to accept the challenge and make a critical examination of the subject of women's exclusion. Portuguese sociologist Filipe Carrier da Silva – in his contribution to what Lisa McLaughlin's calls "the feminist project of revising the Habermasian public sphere" – makes a formulation of how such gendered exclusion is interlinked with the sexual split between public and private.³

Observer Research Foundation is a public policy think tank that aims to influence formulation of policies for building a strong and prosperous India. ORF pursues these goals by providing informed and productive inputs, in-depth research and stimulating discussions. The Foundation is supported in its mission by a cross-section of India's leading public figures, academics and business leaders.

It is within this context that this Issue Brief looks at digital public spaces to observe the process of identity formation, its occasional bifurcation, and even the obfuscation of the same, in the context of gender-specific issues. The paper limits itself to women-centric concerns, as any discussion on alternate sexual identities is a complex one and merits a separate study. The issues analysed in this paper include: the politics of silencing women; propriety; social media; and health and gender-specific vulnerabilities.

The History of Silence

In a lecture in early 2014 in London, the classicist Mary Beard expounded on her examination of how the prejudice against women has been hardwired over two millennia, “from Homer to Twitter.”⁴ According to Ms Beard, whenever women attempt to voice their opinions on so-called 'non-women' issues, they have always been denied the gravitas which is easily granted to their male counterparts. Worse, they are silenced not by debate and engagement but through abuse and intimidation.

Habermas's theories defines the Hellenic public space, *polis*, in contrast to the private space, *oikos*. *Oikos* was the site of basal needs, wants, desires and their procurement. *Polis*, on the other hand, was the space that facilitated pursuits which were regarded as 'more dignified'. Public life was played out in the marketplace and that is where people gained prominence through their various skills, whether intellectual or physical. The near-absence of women in the public space was taken as a given. Yet it is noteworthy that even in *oikos*, the private space, women were still denied their voice: Chelone, the nymph, mocks the wedding invitation sent by Zeus and Hera and stays home on the day of the wedding. Hermes punishes her by turning her into a tortoise, a symbol of silence.

In *The Odyssey*, Penelope requests the Bard to stop singing; for that she is banished to the private quarters by her son. Telemachus's rebuke of his mother for asserting her wish in the presence of guests highlights the patriarchal nature of public spaces and adds a further nuance to the concept of 'private' for women.

A sea change swept the world in the 18th century, and the bread-march by the market-women of Paris served as a signal movement for the French Revolution. The march symbolised the end of monarchical authority and a celebration of women's role in public affairs. What is interesting, however, is the fact that while the women marchers have remained anonymous, a man, named Stanislas-Marie Maillard, came to be known as their leader.⁵ Maillard became the mouthpiece through which the women marchers voiced their concerns over their gut-issues such as scarcity of food.

A look into the history of women's writings alerts us to the ordeals of the pioneers: Who will write, where will she write, how will she write, what will she write, and most importantly, *why* will she write –

these are the questions that had always riddled female writers. Today, while the situation has much improved, the debate lingers on, even as it has shifted to platforms like social media.

Throughout the 20th century, women's rights activists expressed their anger against the practice of silencing the woman through various tools. Simone de Beauvoir's scathing attack on capitalist institutions for instilling a false sense of empowerment in women is a vital starting point in re-imagining women in public space.

Gendering the Social Media

As mentioned earlier, with the advent – and phenomenal growth – of social-networking sites like Facebook, Orkut and Twitter, a new public space has been created which defies traditional spatio-temporal restrictions. Social media is said to have revolutionised the way interactions are conceptualised in a society by attempting to undermine class and intellectual hierarchies. In some ways it has effectively democratised the process of dissemination of ideas. No longer are people dependent upon snooty publishers and expensive agents to make their ideas public in the form of books and essays.

The world of social media almost appears utopic to an individual hitherto marginalised and disenfranchised. With the proliferation of cheap smartphones, more and more people are finding their voices. There remains a huge digital gap, however: in many parts of the world, factors such as disenfranchisement due to poverty (and thus unaffordability of even the cheapest smartphone), illiteracy and archaic *fatwas/Khap* diktats forbidding usage continue to deny large populations of what has become a 'fundamental right'. What social media has achieved for women as a demographic group, or failed to achieve, is thus of great importance.

Women now make up a huge proportion of the world's digital population. A 2012 report by the *Huffington Post* says 62 percent of Twitter's more than 200 million users are female.⁶ The HuffPost author's online and offline interactions with Twitter enthusiasts showed that even this modern version of public space is 'gendered', much like India's *nukkadpaan* shops where a woman's presence is considered a transgression of propriety. While it is true that women have a sense of empowerment when their thoughts are 'retweeted' on Twitter and 'liked/shared' on Facebook, it is still far from the utopia of equality – or recognition – that they hope for and deserve. The constantly shifting paradigms for different users can be seen by taking specific examples from social-media sites.

For example, 'Sonali Ranade', a popular Twitter handle from India with more than 51,000 followers, tweets about economy, politics and socio-cultural issues. Ranade, who many people assume to be female if it is indeed a real name, has not divulged any details about her personal life. Her insights and predictions about markets and stock-exchange movements have often been proved right, and, ironically enough – or perhaps predictably enough, given prevailing sexist attitudes in Indian society

– she has been at the receiving end of vitriolic online attacks. There has been intense speculation about Ranade's identity and many users would like to believe that there is a man, or a group of men, behind the handle. These digital users of the conservative kind could somehow not fathom that a woman on Twitter could possibly master serious issues of economy, national security, and politics – which are all still seen as bastions of male thought.

Naturally, they thus conclude, this highly sharp, insightful Sonali Ranade must be a man masquerading as a woman! What bolsters this view, as far as the sexist section of the Twitterati is concerned, is the fact that Ranade does not display any of the so-called “feminine” traits – such as getting publicly upset, or resorting to name-calling even when provoked, or descending into the 'hysterical woman' trope in the face of some of the harshest online abuse.

Social Media's Codes of Propriety

Another Twitter handle from India has elicited similarly abusive response though for different reasons. Vidyut Kale, a stay-at-home mother and an online activist from Maharashtra, often tweets about the domestic abuse which she says she suffers at the hands of her husband. She faces as much abuse for her radical socio-political views as she gets for washing her dirty linen in public. The codes of propriety, naturally, apply more stringently to women, even in the virtual world. From the first Twitter divorce of Ben Goldsmith and Emma Rothschild⁷ to former union minister Dr Shashi Tharoor's wife Sunanda Pushkar's public allegation of infidelity on Twitter, the women are being told to “keep it private.” It may be inferred that women make attempts to solicit help or solidarity from strangers in the public domain when their kith and kin fail them in private.

With the proliferation of social media, the gap between *öffentlichkeit* and the *intimsphäre* has narrowed. In a Euro RSCG global survey conducted recently among 7,213 adults in 19 countries, around 61 percent agreed that “people share too much about their personal thoughts and experiences online; we need to go back to being more private.”⁸ A huge 47 percent of the respondents in the same survey expressed concern that friends or family will share inappropriate personal information about them online. Around one-third regretted posting personal information about themselves and more than half (55 percent) were worried that “technology is robbing us of our privacy.”

Within this context of growing concerns over privacy, the rules for female users seem to be clearly stated: the woman is expected 'to remain a woman' and if necessary become a woman – discreet, obedient and keeping the private, *private*. While concerns over privacy may be seen as gender neutral, women have an added responsibility to remain private for the sake of propriety.

The issue of women airing their dirty linen in public is relevant to how family as an institution is perceived in a society. The majoritarian view of family as a holy cow is perpetuated by silence around it, consensual or imposed. When women begin to talk about themselves within the framework of

family as an institution on a public platform, it is an act of re-imagining and rebellion. The anxieties surrounding privacy here are more to do with maintaining the status quo.

The process of representing the family through verbal or visual images has undeniable links with voyeurism. As an insider, the woman user not only follows the lives of her family members but lays them bare for others as well. Laura Mulvey in 'Visual and Other Pleasures' suggests, "Voyeurism has associations with sadism: pleasure lies in ascertaining guilt, asserting control and subjugating the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness."⁹

Mulvey further writes: "This sadistic side fits in well with narrative. Sadism demands a story, depends on, forcing a change in another person..." This is precisely what unfolds on social media. When the Dalit poet activist Meena Kandasamy revealed her abusive marriage two years ago, piecemeal details from everywhere were put together to show how 'she deserved it'. While a large section empathised with her and lauded her for being brave, there was no dearth of those accusing her of breaking the polite social contract.

While voyeurism and gaze¹⁰ are important elements in assessing responses to women on social media, there is a curiously positive appropriation of the same. A woman user sharing details about, for example, domestic abuse resulting from 'private characteristics' of her family members sets a chain of voyeurism in motion. She, the voyeur, observes her family closely and privately before she exposes them on social media. By doing so, she may achieve a kind of catharsis through role-reversal and wield power over her tormentors. Perhaps this is what irks the latter and their sympathisers. Also, such women challenge the identity formation at its very basis by refusing to feel guilty for the deeds of others, an important function of deliberate socialisation for women.

Social Media, Health and Gender-Specific Vulnerabilities

The stigma attached to breaking this social contract may be seen as a reason behind the schizophrenic behaviour of many individuals online, mostly women. The insistence on putting up a happy face even when things go wrong in a marriage or with parents/siblings, may lead to paranoid exaggerations of happiness. In a similar fashion, conservatism in real life may lead to online flamboyance and risqué behaviour. Private individuals turn into public figures with all the mores attached to such a positioning.

When these women speak out about abuse, they are often labelled as hysterical, as seen clearly in the case of Kale. The stereotypical 'mad woman in the attic' comes onto a public platform to solicit corrective action and is obviously ridiculed. The irony is that most hard-hitting abusers invoke words such as 'madness' and 'schizophrenia,' referring to the woman's health when attacking her for not keeping her issues private. Health – whether physical or mental – is considered a private matter of an individual.

While confidentiality is an important element in Code of Ethics Regulations as far as medical profession is concerned, other people's speculations are at least distasteful and, as observed above, ironic. It is also seen as an important indicator of happy and normal families. Doris Lessing in *The Golden Notebook* has used the trope of health to exhibit how physical manifestations of mental and emotional breakdowns often confuse women and how brutally they are ridiculed for the same. In the novel, women sending letters to solicit advice for their ailments become a source of entertainment and frustration to the men dishing out medical advice through columns. Decades later, they are still receiving comparable responses on social-media sites.

Reports on cyberbullying demonstrate that women users are far more vulnerable than their male counterparts. Irking ideologues who assume a kind of 'representative publicness' – *Repräsentative Öffentlichkeit*, non-conforming women face threats that sometimes spill over to real life. Obfuscating their identity by hiding behind the veil of anonymity offers safety from physical harm but does not shield them from psychological trauma that threats of sexual violence may cause.

Countering the class/religion/regional/linguistic/caste/professional collaborationism is more difficult for women. Identity formation in the virtual world on the basis of the above parameters often culminates in a majoritarian monolithic worldview with a relentless thrust on conformity. Thus a woman actor/model posting a risqué picture of herself is accepted, but a 'regular' woman doing the same inspires the online equivalent of stares and nudges. The recent furore over breastfeeding pictures posted by women on social-media sites is an example. Conversely, intellectual discourses are considered to be the domain of the ones in the same business. Voicing contrarian viewpoints often results in an ironic situation for women. For example, a Muslim woman talking against the use of *hijab* or a Hindu woman questioning the festival of *karwachauth* gets subjected to sexist and fundamentalist attacks from her own people, while she gets appropriated as a champion by the other side.

Conclusion

While it rightly appears that the situation is bleak, it is not without a silver lining. Through social media many women have found their voice and many have reinvented themselves. But the most important contribution of social media for women's empowerment is providing a platform for speaking what was once unspeakable: Be it domestic violence or sexuality or even a discussion on bodily functions, women are increasingly encouraged to speak out. Although many a times women initially hide behind an anonymous or masculine-sounding handle, many of them come out once they get the desired traction. In many cases, women have presented their versions of the story to counter the slander campaign against them. The Goldsmith-Rothschild case is an example.

The emergence of a vocabulary dedicated to social media indicates a democratisation of social spaces. So a tweeb is as influential as a celeb. Not only that, lexis and praxis come together for

individuals in distress. Positive interventions have been made in many cases whenever SOS messages have been sent by users. It is noteworthy that even voyeurism is positively appropriated for assertion of identity as seen in the case of Vidyut Kale.

To conclude, Nietzsche had told us that sedimented interpretations of the world, often touted as truth, must be countered by individual imaging and imagining. The notions of Self, unfolding on the social media through the individual re-imaginings, attempt to do precisely that. Through dialogue and multilogue on social-networking sites, the givens are challenged in a way that can only be described as Bakhtinian carnivalesque.¹² The cacophony on social media, despite its flaws, is a step towards the realisation of Self.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Nishtha Gautam is an Associate Fellow at Observer Research Foundation, New Delhi.

Endnotes:

1. Habermas, Jürgen (German(1962)English Translation 1989), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Thomas Burger, Cambridge Massachusetts: The MIT Press.
2. “The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public; they soon claimed the public sphere regulated from above against the public authorities themselves, to engage them in a debate over the general rules governing relations in the basically privatized but publicly relevant sphere of commodity exchange and social labour.” Habermas 1989, 27
3. In their paper titled 'Media and the (Im)permeability of Public Sphere to Gender,' Sara I. Magalhães, Carla Cerqueira and Mariana Bernardo sustain the argument Filipe Carreira da Silva made in his book *O Espaço Público em Habermas*, 2002.
4. Hard-wired cultural conventions are seeking to deprive the woman's voice of its authority, Mary Beard says in London Review of Books lecture. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/women/womens-life/10639194/Women-who-speak-out-are-treated-as-freakish-androgynes-says-Mary-Beard.html>
5. Stanislas-Marie Maillard (December 11, 1763 – April 11, 1794) was a captain of the Bastille Volunteers who participated in the attack on the Bastille and accompanied the women who marched to Versailles on October 5, 1789. Maillard testified in court to the events at Versailles. Maillard had also participated in the taking of the Bastille on the 14th of July, 1789 and bore the title “Captain of the Volunteers of the Bastille” henceforth. More information on him can be found in *Women in Revolutionary Paris, 1789-1795* ed., Darline Gay Levy, Harriet Branson Applewhite, Mary Durham Johnson, University of Illinois Press, 01-Jan-1981.
6. Social Media By Gender http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/20/social-media-by-gender-women-pinterest-men-reddit-infographic_n_1613812.html
7. “Go away and fix your own lives! Rothschild heiress finally realises playing out her marriage split on Twitter is a bad idea and calls a truce with Goldsmith husband.” <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2156174/Kate-Rothschild-lashes-Twitter-critics-Ben-Goldsmith-split.html>

8. Naomi Tromi, global CMO of Euro RSCG Worldwide shares these figures in her article for Forbes titled, 'Social Media Privacy: A Contradiction In Terms?' <http://www.forbes.com/sites/onmarketing/2012/04/24/social-media-privacy-a-contradiction-in-terms/>
9. Mulvey, Laura. Visual and Other Pleasures. London: Macmillan, 1989
10. In the psychoanalytical theory of Jacques Lacan, gaze is the anxious state that comes with the awareness that one can be viewed. The psychological effect, Lacan argues, is that the subject loses a degree of autonomy upon realizing that he or she is a visible object.
11. After sexism and misogyny in the cyber gaming world were called out in mainstream and social media in August 2014, a number of gaming industry members supportive of equality, feminist critics and celebrities were subjected to harassment, violence threats and doxxing (broadcast of personal information like address, phone nos). It grew serious and some of them fled their homes. The targets were mostly women, and feminist media critic Anita Sarkeesian and indie game developers Zoe Quinn and Brianna Wu.
12. Russian cultural and literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin conceptualises 'carnavalesque' as a mode that subverts and liberates the assumptions of the dominant style or atmosphere through chaos and levity.



Observer Research Foundation,
20, Rouse Avenue, New Delhi-110 002
Phone: +91-11-43520020 Fax: +91-11-43520003
www.orfonline.org email: orf@orfonline.org