EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HASHTAGS, MEMES AND SELFIES

CAN SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE ACTIVISM SHIFT GENDER NORMS?

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Acknowledgements

About the authors

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Introduction

Social media is an increasingly important part of everyday life for people all over the world – 55% of the world's population is estimated to use it. And while there is a persistent digital divide in online access based on geography, income and gender, it is starting to narrow (GSMA, 2021a).

Social media both shapes and is shaped by gender norms: the informal rules of society that define how people of a particular gender are expected to behave, and that often entrench inequalities to the detriment of women, girls and people of diverse gender identities.

Research shows that social media can be an empowering space for feminist activism, and a space that can catalyse transformative shifts in thinking and behaviour. However, 'anti-gender' and men's rights activists are also making use of social media, spreading disinformation (incorrect or misleading information that is deliberately presented as fact) with the aim of undermining gender equality policies and egalitarian gender norms. ALIGN's Hashtags, memes and selfies report reviews academic and policy research exploring how everyday users and self-defined activists – both those for and against gender equality – use social media to help others imagine different ways of understanding and enacting gender norms.

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Social media as a distinctive space for activism

Many of the distinctive aspects of social media as a space for activism derive from the way it removes some of the physical constraints of the offline world: it offers the potential to reach a much larger body of potential supporters; content can be shared immediately and presented in visually and emotionally engaging ways; social media spaces are informal and conversational, enabling people who have not previously engaged in activism to take part in discussion and debate; activists can have conversations on both publicly accessible platforms and in closed groups; people can use pseudonyms to post opinions and content that challenge the status quo; and anyone with a data-enabled mobile phone and internet connection can create and share content (see Figure 1) and participate in groups and discussions.

Figure 1: Shareable feminist social media graphic

Source: @cutecatcalls (Instagram)

Box 1: Continuing gendered digital divides

Despite the rapid spread of mobile phone access, 143 million fewer women than men own a mobile phone and smartphone ownership is 15% lower for women than men worldwide. Neither does ownership or access to a device necessarily mean constant access. As well as intermittent and expensive connections, engagement is often determined by overall literacy and digital skills. Additional barriers include the lack of accessible content and poorly designed handsets that exclude those with additional needs and are unsuitable for certain languages.

Sources: Research ICT Africa, 2012; Web Foundation, 2015; USAID, 2021; GSMA, 2021b.

Online strategies activists use to shift gender norms

Activists use a number of different strategies to shift gender norms online, including:

1. **sharing knowledge and reframing perceptions**, encouraging new thinking and behaviour, often using visual media, short texts and memes (images with a textual overlay with a humorous message) to disrupt conventional ideas;

2. **amplifying messages** and voices of people who advocate for new norms, to demonstrate that celebrities, leading public figures and others with substantial influence have committed to new norms and behaviour;

3. **building and expanding like-minded communities** through online groups, creating a sense of togetherness, social support and a collective identity, and providing forums for consciousness-raising and sharing information;

4. **mobilising campaigns**, both reactively responding to events and proactively seeking change.

Figure 2: Changing gender norms through social media activism
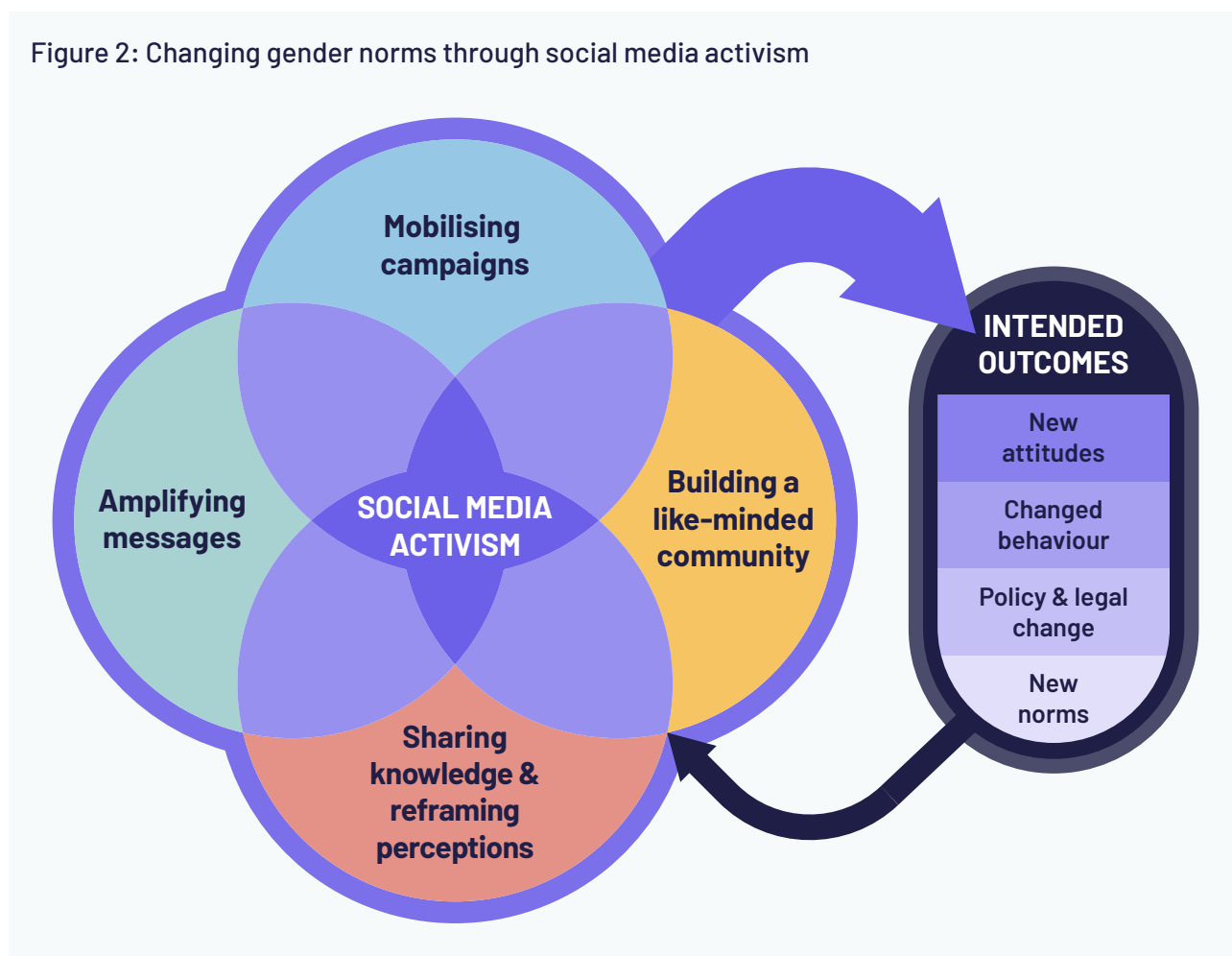
Tactics for social media campaigns: hashtag activism and selfie protests

The report discusses two main ways that activists work for change: through organised social media campaigns, and through organic posting which shift gendered norms. Hashtag activism has become an established tactic for social movements to challenge gender norms in their campaigns. By using a hashtag (a keyword or phrase preceded by '#') across various platforms, activists can create spaces to share ideas, experiences and testimonies, demand change and organise protests. Hashtags also serve as signposts to virtual information hubs where activists and others can share resources.

Selfies (photographic self-portraits) and other visual content are often used as tactics within hashtag campaigns and sometimes show people violating norms or taking part in a campaign action. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, women used the #Women2Drive campaign hashtag to tweet videos and photos of themselves walking and cycling to protest against the country's driving ban. This protest is credited with helping to overturn that ban (Thorsen and Sreedharan, 2019).

Box 2: From hashtags to international social movements: #NiUnaMenos and #LifeInLeggings

The **#NiUnaMenos (Not One [woman] Less) movement** started in Argentina in 2015, following the murder of a pregnant 14-year-old girl, Chiara Páez, by her boyfriend. People were mobilised on Twitter and Facebook using the hashtags #NiUnaMenos and #VivasNosQueremos (We Want Us Alive), calling for an end to femicide and violence against women and girls, better policies to guarantee women's safety and the end of machista culture more generally. In 2016, the brutal rape and murder of 16-year-old Lucía Pérez catalysed further protest. Since then, #NiUnaMenos has become a transnational movement, with thousands of people attending street protests every year in places like Mexico and many Central and South American countries and beyond.

The **#LifeInLeggings movement** started in Barbados in 2016. The hashtag, which refers to women's experience of harassment while wearing figure-hugging clothing, led to a rapid explosion of women sharing experiences of sexual violence. This surge of online activity spread to 11 countries in the region and to the Caribbean diaspora worldwide. Feminists across the Caribbean went on to establish new online and offline networks to organise against sexual violence. The movement has registered a charity – Life in Leggings: Caribbean Alliance against Gender-based Violence – that engages in policy advocacy and the drafting of relevant legislation.

Sources: Lagos and Antezana, 2018; Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela, 2019; Ochieng'-Springer and Francis, 2019; Belotti et al., 2020.

## Posting feminist content to promote egalitarian gender norms

Across social media platforms, both self-identified activists and 'everyday' social media users are creating and sharing new content that challenges perceptions of prevailing gender norms.

Feminist meme pages and accounts, for instance, use memes to challenge misogyny and promote equality. Memes can combine local context and language with more globalised conversations, some drawing on international memes and formats (see Figure 3). They can help create renewed and wider consciousness of gender equality issues as well as engage new audiences with feminist ideas.

Selfies and videos (including livestreams) can be used to subvert gender stereotypes or break taboos that silence discussion of certain issues. Survivors of sexual violence, for example, have used YouTube to share their experiences of rape. Studies have found that such accounts have helped to reframe perceptions of sexual violence and open up space for new perspectives on harassment, reporting, safety and consent (Mendes et al., 2018).

TikTok has become a popular app for sharing videos in recent years, particularly among younger people. Many women from lower castes in rural India first accessed the Internet via TikTok, with researchers describing it as a 'glass ceiling breaker' that enabled many women to step outside the gendered and patriarchal norms of small town India' (Bhandari and Kovacs, 2021: 50).

Figure 3: @too_much_equal (India) meme 'President Trump'
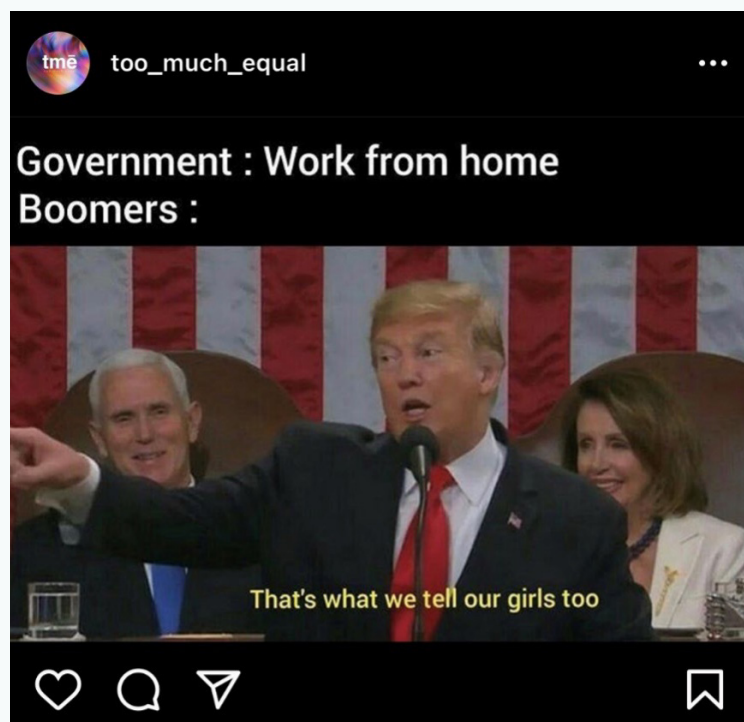
Source: @too_much_equal (Instagram), 7 April 2020.

Activism online and offline often reinforce one another

It is increasingly hard to separate online and offline action. Social media activism has helped raise the profile of some movements and organisations that have been active for many years offline, and it has facilitated the growth of activist networks beyond geographic boundaries. Equally, initiatives that start online can grow into social movements that span offline and online spaces.

Online communities can also provide space for action in contexts where offline protest is challenging, and activists are developing innovative ways to circumvent government censorship of social media. In China, for instance, activists have adopted strategies such as embedding petitions and sexual assault testimonies in tamper-proof cryptocurrency transactions. They have also used emojis, local dialects, or foreign languages for hashtags to camouflage movements and activism (Zeng, 2020). Nonetheless, the risks of repression are real and there is evidence from a number of different contexts of direct suppression of online gender norm activism and repression of activists.

Will online activism achieve lasting impact?

There is growing consensus that although online activism can provide a temporary jolt to consciousness, it must be coupled with offline action if it is to have a sustained effect. Breaking down feminist concepts in short and pithy ways can lead to messages being oversimplified and losing their depth and urgency. However, as social media platforms have evolved, the ways in which ideas can be communicated are increasingly diverse.

Concerns about social media as insubstantial also ignore the fact that it is a central cultural space for many people, particularly younger people. Even if individual posts are ephemeral, viewing a large volume of material and engaging in many thousands of conversations over time is likely to influence viewers' attitudes, norms and practice.

Keeping issues high in public consciousness on social media requires constant creativity, skill and sustained effort. Online activism can take a lot of time and emotional resources. While celebrating the potential of social media to contribute to shifts in norms, it is vital to recognise that this is often unpaid work, the majority of which is done by women (Pain, 2020).

Representation and marginalisation

The online world is shaped by deeply entrenched gender norms and intersecting power structures. These inequalities shape the way in which different people experience and engage with others through social media. Social media-based activism, therefore, risks amplifying the voices of relatively privileged groups and marginalising groups that are more disadvantaged. For instance, the #MeToo movement, particularly in the UK and the US, privileged discussion of violence by men against cisgender white women (Mendes et al., 2018). In India, although some women from poorer backgrounds and LGBTQI+ women did share their experiences as the #MeToo campaign took off, women from rural and suburban areas were under-represented (Chandra and Erlingsdóttir, 2021).

However, many gender equality activists are aware of intersecting identities and concerns, and are using social media specifically to challenge these inequalities. Responding to racial biases within digital feminist activism in the US, Black feminists have created new hashtags (such as #YesAllWhiteWomen, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen and #YouOkSis?) to bring visibility to the intersecting experiences of racism, sexism and other forms of oppression, including the mainstream feminist movement's lack of engagement with them.

Social media can also help groups with limited mobility to engage in activism. This may include people with disabilities and social groups such as girls and women in cultures where norms around 'honour' restrict their mobility, or for those who live in more rural areas where costs to urban centres impede travel for in-person protest.

Backlash: misogyny and gender-based violence online

Online spaces and social media platforms have become increasingly hostile spaces, with hateful content directed at women, girls and gender-diverse groups, particularly those from minoritised racial or religious groups. Activists, politicians, journalists and others who post material that supports gender equality are particularly likely to be the targets for abuse.

The lack of (or inadequate) legal frameworks, safety policies and 'community standards' of social networking platforms have allowed misogynistic content to proliferate. Gendered online violence includes 'trolling' (antagonistic harassment of social media users), hate speech, threats of violence, sexual harassment, doxxing (non-consenual outing of someone's private information), cyberstalking, zoom bombing (intrusion into videoconferences), hashtag hacking and the spreading of gendered disinformation.

Studies have found that hate speech based on gender and sexuality continues to elude automated controls that flag problematic content. This is particularly the case in relatively new 'markets' for social media companies, including parts of Africa and South Asia, where investment in staff who have the necessary cultural, contextual, social and political understanding and language competence has not kept pace with the spread of social media platforms.

Many activists accept abuse as an inevitable part of online engagement and try to ignore it. However, while ignoring abuse can enable activists to continue their work, this does not mean that it has no effects, and the impacts on women of online violence include fear, anxiety and stress, compounded by the risk of physical harm (OHCHR, 2018). Fear of harassment deters online feminist activism; for others it leads to self-censorship and can be extremely distressing, leading to suicide in some cases (Sambasivan et al., 2019).

'Anti-gender' movements online

Anti-'gender ideology' movements define themselves in opposition to policies considered as a threat to patriarchal gender norms, particularly those related to sexual and reproductive rights, and LGBTQI+ rights. They are led and funded by a wide range of actors, including anti-abortion groups, family and parent-led groups, men's and father's rights groups, far-right and religious organisations, conservative think tanks, faith-based organisations and government/political actors (CFFP, 2021). In some cases, as seen in relation to President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, these agendas are supported and entrenched by elected politicians (Faúndes, 2019).

Common themes in anti-gender content include: opposition to sexual and reproductive rights agendas, particularly abortion; opposition to the idea that gender identities are socially constructed; campaigns against sexuality education and content related to gender equality, and LGBTQI+ identities in school curricula; and the inclusion of Gender Studies in higher education.

Anti-gender actors and movements use the online tactics employed by far-right groups, such as manipulating information, provoking an emotional response, and constant repetition of ideas, slogans and images. They often co-opt human rights and feminist language and imagery, such as replacing the term 'women's rights' with 'mothers' rights' and using young women to front their campaigns (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2019: 9).

With anti-gender activism becoming increasingly transnational, networked and funded by those with the power and authority to uphold a 'traditional' gender order, this networked misogyny presents a growing challenge to those working to further gender equality both online and offline.

The 'manosphere' and online men's rights activism

Men's rights activists, whose online presence is sometimes termed the 'manosphere', form another set of online actors who challenge gender equitable norms, and also include 'Incels' (self-defined 'involuntary celibates'). Compared with 'anti-gender' movements, these groups are more openly misogynistic. Understanding how these movements operate on social media is important given the rise in deadly attacks on women by self-identified Incels (Farrell et al., 2019; DiBranco, 2019).

Much of men's rights online activity vilifies and expresses hatred for women. This creates a space for misogynistic discourse and norms among community users where such views, and posting them, is acceptable. The abundance of sexist and misogynistic memes in men's rights activists' spaces is evidence of a digital culture that openly promotes and perpetuates misogyny, supported by norms of online behaviour.

Manosphere activists try to influence both discourse and policy. Men's rights activists use social media not only to attack and discredit women activists but also to reverse gender norm change, such as by attempting to reverse reproductive rights and laws against gender-based violence, and by discouraging women from standing for public office (She Persisted, 2020; Ranganathan, 2021).

Tackling online gender-based violence and disinformation

Activists have organised workshops to help women and girls recognise and challenge online violence, as well as with young people on responsible and respectful social media use. These are often part of broader digital literacy efforts to help social media users recognise disinformation. Other efforts involve the development and dissemination of principles and codes of conduct to promote a 'feminist internet', and advocacy with tech companies for more effective responses to the varied and changing forms of intersectional online violence.

The literature identifies a number of further actions social media platforms and other key actors can take to tackle online gender-based violence, including: educating users to understand what online gender-based violence is; putting obstacles in place to make it harder to post harmful and abusive content; strengthening content moderation processes by developing 'community standards' in consultation with civil society and representatives of groups at risk of online abuse; creating a cross-platform consortium to respond to online misogyny; and enacting stronger legal protection against online hate speech.

To tackle gendered disinformation, research suggests that more investment is needed to understand the political economy of the production of gendered disinformation; that platforms need to work with gender equality activists to identify disinformation in different contexts and languages, and invest in and test effective content removal; that feminist activists from diverse locations and backgrounds should be funded to fight back against disinformation; and that users need to be trained in digital literacy to empower them to identify disinformation. The literature also underscores the need for a stronger information ecosystem to counter disinformation and for education that enhances critical thinking, including recognising and challenging gender stereotypes.

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About ALIGN

ALIGN is a digital platform and programme of work that is creating a global community of researchers and thought leaders, all committed to gender justice and equality. It provides new research, insights from practice, and grants for initiatives that increase our understanding of – and work to change – discriminatory gender norms. Through its vibrant and growing digital platform, and its events and activities, ALIGN aims to ensure that the best of available knowledge and resources have a growing impact on harmful gender norms.

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