HASHTAGS, MEMES AND SELFIES

CAN SOCIAL MEDIA AND ONLINE ACTIVISM SHIFT GENDER NORMS?

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Acronyms

CSO	civil society organisation
EVAW	End Violence Against Women
GBV	gender-based violence
GST	goods and services tax
HESA	Horn, East and Southern Africa (region)
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
LGBTQI+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, queer/questioning, intersex (+ denotes that the acronym is non-exhaustive and can also include other identities)
MGTOW	men going their own way
NGO	non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
STEM	science, technology, engineering and mathematics
UCL	University College London
US	United States

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Glossary

Anti-feminist movements – Movements that define themselves in opposition to equal rights and/or policies that aim to achieve gender equality and justice.

Anti-gender movements – Movements that define themselves in opposition to policies considered to be a threat to patriarchal gender norms, particularly those related to sexual and reproductive health rights, and LGBTQI+ rights.

Cisgender – Refers to people whose gender identity and expression matches the biological sex they were assigned when they were born.

Disinformation – Incorrect or misleading information that is deliberately presented as fact.

Feminist activism – Activism to advance gender equality and justice, whether or not it uses the label 'feminist' explicitly.

Gender norms – Socio-culturally defned rules about how a person should behave and present themselves in accordance with their perceived gender.

Hashtag – A keyword or phrase added by a user to enable sharing of content on similar topics.

Hashtag hacking – Flooding hashtags with violent, pornographic or misleading content to undermine a hashtag or a campaign.

Heteronormativity – Views about gender and sexuality rooted in a belief that heterosexuality and binary gender categories (man/woman) are natural and normal, with other sexualities and gender identities considered to be deviant.

Incels – Involuntarily celibate men. Incels harbour hostility towards women for denying them the sex they believe they deserve.

Intersectionality – A concept, originating in black feminism, which explains how different social categories interconnect to produce differing experiences of oppression and privilege for different groups of people (such as depending on their race/ethnicity, gender, class and sexuality).

Manosphere – This term refers to the websites and blogs of various men's rights activists characterised by misogynistic viewpoints that blame women, particularly feminists, for social problems.

Memes – Images with a textual overlay shared on social media with a humorous message, often based on an in-joke.

Misinformation – Incorrect or misleading information that is unintentionally presented as fact.

Selfies – Photographic self-portraits.

Shadowbanning – The practice, used by some social media platforms, of blocking or limiting the visibility of a users' content without their knowledge.

Social media platform – This report uses Carr and Hayes' (2015: 50) defnition of social media platforms as 'internet-based channels that allow users to opportunistically interact and selectively self-present, either in real-time or asynchronously, with both broad and narrow audiences who derive value from user-generated content and the perception of interaction with others.'

Transgender – Refers to people whose gender identity and expression does not match the biological sex they were assigned at birth.

We discuss a selective list of social media platforms in this report, focusing on the platforms that have emerged as dominant in the 2010s and in existing research. This includes: social networking sites, specifically Twitter, Facebook and Tumblr; the image and video-based social media applications Instagram and TikTok; the video sharing platform YouTube; and messaging applications, including WhatsApp and Telegram.

1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Social media is an increasingly important part of everyday life for people all over the world, keeping the world's population connected, informed and entertained, and enabling them to share their views. By April 2021, there were an estimated 4.33 billion social media users worldwide (55% of the world's population), with more than 520 million new users since April 2020, around the start of the global Covid-19 pandemic (We Are Social, 2021). Facebook alone had 2.89 billion users in October 2021.[1] And while there is a persistent digital divide in access to social media – based on geography, income and gender (among other factors), it is starting to narrow (GSMA, 2021a).

The way in which issues are shown and discussed on social media platforms can shape how they are understood, perceived and debated (Kim et al., 2012; Gurman et al., 2018). Much research has focused on how gender identities, norms and relations are represented, negotiated and reproduced online in different cultural contexts, and how this differs from one social group to another. Many studies explore how social media activity can both reflect and amplify existing gender dynamics and inequalities, while a smaller, but growing number, focus on its role in shifting knowledge about gender inequalities, attitudes and behaviour (see Box 1). This study starts from the position that technologies such as social media both shape and are shaped by existing social inequalities (Wajcman, 2010; Toyama, 2011).[2] These include those linked to 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.

Social media provides a new and constantly evolving space in which gender norms are reinforced and challenged; while many users reflect or exaggerate the gender stereotypes and norms they witness in their offline spaces, others use it to help viewers and readers imagine different ways of being and of interacting with others. The focus of this report is largely on the latter – on efforts to transform how social media users understand and enact gender norms.

Social media has evolved from spaces designed to connect friends, families and professional networks to spaces where individuals who do not necessarily know each other offline and institutions interface with one another, sharing news, political views, public service announcements and a range of other content. This has had a profound impact on the way in which many activists communicate, organise and take action, both within specific contexts and transnationally (Şener, 2021). For example, social media enables activists to extend their networks rapidly beyond their usual offline contacts, and interact constantly with others in real time. It can amplify and facilitate collective action offline to support coalition-building, campaigning, lobbying and fundraising (O'Donnell and Sweetman, 2018; DeLuca et al., 2012). In a matter of seconds, a social media campaign can go viral and affect offline life in many ways.

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1   The data refers to 'monthly active users' (a metric of engagement over the period of a month) and are expressed in US billions – 1,000 million. Available here: https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/.

2   Discussion of the substantial theoretical literature on gender, social inequalities and technology is beyond the scope of this study.

Box 1: Social media: a space where gender norms are both reinforced and challenged

Gender norms are, consciously or unconsciously, shaped by the ways in which users share content on social media (Caldeira et al., 2018). Most research focuses on the ways users' self-representation – particularly in visual images – reflects and reinforces gender stereotypes. Research from the United States, for example, suggests that men are more likely to portray themselves as active, dominant and independent, and women as attractive and dependent (Butkowski et al., 2019; Rose et al., 2012). Butkowski et al. (2019) also found that women who perform and exaggerate gender stereotypes in their selfies tend to receive more feedback (comments and likes) on Instagram.

Research from Viet Nam shows that young urban women use various techniques (e.g. selfies, group photos and joining debates on group posts) to present a 'gendered self' on Facebook, informed by competing gendered social, political and cultural norms (Nguyen et al., 2020). For example, participants in the research felt it was important to be seen as taking responsibility for themselves and as academically successful among their peers. At the same time, however, they also felt pressure from their families to not present themselves as being 'above men'. Participants were, therefore, careful about the opinions they shared online.

Social media platforms also offer opportunities to challenge gender stereotypes and dominant gender norms, and to express diverse gender identities. For example, Saudi female influencer Amy Roko, who has a large following on Instagram, has used the platform to challenge stereotypes about women who wear the niqab. Young women have also used the #BreakStereotypes and #ILookLikeAnEngineer hashtags on Instagram to highlight women's achievements, particularly in the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM).

Research by Barbovschi et al. (2017) found that Brazilian adolescent boys and girls both reproduce and contest gendered norms around femininity and masculinity through their self-representations on social media platforms, particularly Facebook and Snapchat. While younger adolescents typically posted content that strongly conformed to existing norms around heterosexual attractiveness and gendered presentation, older adolescents (aged 15–17) were more likely to play with, bend or challenge norms.

As a result, social media platforms can connect people to social movements and provide the tools and opportunities for new social movements to emerge. This also means that social media has vast potential for both those who seek gender equality and those who are opposed to it, whether they are posting as individuals, or as part of organised activism.

> " In a matter of seconds, a social media campaign can go viral and affect offline life in many ways.

While it is clear that social media activism is on the rise, there is continued debate on its actual effectiveness. The nature of much social media activism – which is often low-cost and low-commitment (simply liking a post, retweeting, using a hashtag, or joining a Facebook group) – has led many to claim that it is broadly ineffective (Foster et al., 2019; Lee and Hsieh, 2013). In recent years, critiques of 'performative activism' – taking simple online actions without working more deeply for change – have become more widespread.[3] Some have suggested it leads to 'many clicks, [but] little sticks' (Lim, 2013). This report seeks to probe how far this is the case in relation to feminist activism to promote egalitarian gender norms.

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3   Many of these arguments and concerns are summarised in a blog by In the Write (2021).

There is increasing recognition that the business models and architecture of many social media platforms contribute to polarised discourse, including around gender norms. The ways this takes place are discussed in more depth in the companion ALIGN report _Hidden in plain sight: how the infrastructure of social media shapes gender norms_ by Diepeveen (2022). To summarise, the business models of most platforms are built on selling data about us so that we can be targeted for promoted, sponsored or advertising content. Platforms' algorithms show us material related to previous searches and positive responses, and which others perceived to belong to a similar demographic, or have already viewed or responded positively to. This can limit the amount of material from alternative viewpoints that we see and reinforces certain perspectives. For example, someone who interacts positively with content about feminism or a particular struggle or campaign is likely to be shown further material of a similar nature. However, someone who interacts negatively with such material is likely to be shown more anti-feminist content. How far such filtering takes place and contributes to polarised views depends on the particular algorithm used by a given platform, the diversity of a user's information sources and the strength of their pre-existing political attitudes. Some studies suggest that the extent to which algorithms create an 'echo chamber' is exaggerated in popular discourse (Möller et al., 2018; Geiß et al., 2021).

Feminist movements are making greater use of digital spaces to galvanize activism, gain media attention and bring about policy change (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al., 2021). Research on online feminist activism has focused primarily on campaigns to achieve specific goals, such as the reform or implementation of laws on gender-based violence (GBV), or the removal of taxes on menstrual supplies. These campaigns – and content posted in support of them – may indirectly help to shift norms alongside their primary goal. However, there has been more limited research on whether the periodic posting of content around a particular theme or in broad support of gender equality and justice may help to shift gender norms. This report aims to help fill this gap by presenting a framework for understanding how social media activism may contribute to shifts in gender norms, and by interpreting empirical evidence in the light of this framework.

© Protesters with their phones in Washington, DC / United States. © Jackson Fox-Bland/shutterstock

A growing body of research also examines the role of social media in spreading misogyny and other forms of hate. These studies illuminate the ways in which the 'manosphere' (misogynistic online spaces) promotes discrimination and violence against women and girls, both online and offline. This abuse is often intersectional, and combines misogyny with racism, homophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism and many other forms of hatred (Bates, 2020; Ging, 2019). Another body of research is exploring organised social media activism that seeks to undermine gender-egalitarian norms, policies and laws ('anti-gender' activism). This report draws together insights from these two bodies of evidence.

This report focuses on two key questions:[4]

- How do different actors opposed to shifts towards egalitarian gender norms use social media, and with what effects?
- How do everyday users and self-identified activists (see Box 2) use social media to promote shifts towards egalitarian gender norms, and with what effects?

Box 2: Different types of social media use[i]

Activist – in this report, activist refers to people who make conscious attempts to catalyse social change or advocate for specific actions in support of a cause.

Feminist activism – refers to efforts to promote gender equality and justice.[ii]

Everyday social media user – refers to people who do not necessarily consider themselves to be activists; however, they may influence others' views of a particular issue by liking, sharing or posting content.

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i   The activities of social media influencers and online advertising that use feminist language to promote brands is outside the scope of this report. For studies of celebrity and influencer feminist activism see Banet-Weiser (2018); Glatt et al. (2020); and Tennent and Jackson (2017).

ii   We use the term 'feminist' as shorthand for efforts to challenge sexism and promote gender equality and justice, while recognising that not all activists who seek gender equality and justice identify with the term 'feminist'.

1.2   Methodology and report structure

This report draws on a qualitative review of academic and policy literature on social media and gender norms, feminist activism, anti-gender movements and online violence against women, girls and LGBTQI+ identifying groups. It also draws on selective searches and analysis of content on social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and YouTube. For further methodological details, see Appendix 1. While the primary language of the literature examined is English, the authors also draw on examples of social media activity in Arabic and Spanish.

This report is structured as follows: Chapter 2 sets the discussion in subsequent chapters by outlining a framework for thinking about how social media can contribute to changing gender norms. Chapter 3 then examines the strategies used on different platforms to promote change (Sub-sections 3.1 and 3.2), and discusses their potential and limitations (Sub-section 3.3). Chapter 4 discusses the backlash experienced by women who share or create content to promote gender equality or who actively challenge gender norms

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4   See Appendix 1 for more-detailed research questions.

online, and efforts to prevent online GBV (Sub-sections 4.1 to 4.3). It also discusses the online strategies and activism used by anti-gender movements and others who resist change in gender norms. The report concludes with some final reflections on insights and knowledge gaps. It avoids the use of technical social media-related terminology wherever possible.

1.3   Research challenges and limitations

Examining the role and potential of social media in shifting gender norms has been challenging for three reasons.

Few studies focus directly on the relationship between social media activism and gender norms, or the building blocks of norms, such as attitudes. There are several reasons for this, including: many social media campaigns have one specific objective (such as changing a law) and do not necessarily aim to catalyse wider shifts on norms;[5] and there are inherent challenges in understanding the impacts of social media. Challenges include an emphasis in data science on identifying patterns and making predictions about future behaviour based on observations, rather than analysing what shapes particular patterns. Common social media analytical tools (e.g. network analysis) can provide only limited insights into behaviour or opinion change, while restrictions on the types of user information that can be collected from social media (gender, age, location, etc.) make it hard to understand the demographics where change is or is not taking place (Iskarpatyoti et al., 2018; Dehingia et al., 2021). Some research is now exploring the potential of mixed methods and quasi-experimental methods to better understand the impacts of online activity (Liu et al., 2021), but this research area is still in its infancy.

The academic literature is skewed in three ways:

1. *A focus on specific types of social media activism and platforms with content that is relatively easy to access and analyse.* For example, much literature concentrates on 'hashtag' activism, and on Facebook and Twitter. Research on activists' use of other practices and platforms (such as sharing memes or posting videos on YouTube or TikTok) is growing, but fewer case studies are available.

2. *A focus on efforts to address different forms of gender-based violence[6], and sexual and reproductive health and rights, including menstrual activism.* Social media activism to shift general norms around gender equality often receives less attention, as does activism to promote equality in areas such as education, work, and political voice and representation, or other aspects of health and well-being.

3. *Geographical biases.* Academic literature on feminist social media activism is still skewed towards OECD countries, and particularly the US. Insights and experiences from a wider range of countries have become more visible in recent years, in part through concentrated efforts to amplify a wider range of

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5   One exception is the recent evaluation of Oxfam's global 'Enough' campaign (Oxfam, 2020) – a campaign that aimed to change the social norms that contribute to GBV, and involved both online and offline activities.

6   The term 'gender-based violence' appears extensively across gender research and is used here to situate this report within the current literature. However, the authors would like to acknowledge ongoing feminist debates which question the generalising and expansive way in which the term and acronym GBV is used.

voices (as seen in Chandra and Erlingsdóttir, 2021). However, linguistic divides still mean that analyses in English dominate. There is an under-representation in the global literature of online activism in China (Jun, 2021) and contexts where Russian is widely used (Sedysheva, 2021), and this skew is, inevitably, reflected in this report.

Social media activism is only one strategy used by feminist activists to achieve change, and studies rarely attempt to disentangle the effects of social media activism from those of offline strategies. As the case studies in this report show, activists often use social media to organise and gain coverage for offline protests and campaigns. In some cases, online campaigns attract the attention of, and are further broadcast by, mass media channels, amplifying their effect. However, little research considers these factors when examining the outcomes of social media activism.

What this report does not do. This report does not attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of all types of feminist online activism to shift gender norms, nor would that be possible. Where possible, it prioritises studies of social media activism led by people in low- and middle-income countries, and focuses on two main types of approach: hashtag campaigns, and the posting of feminist content by 'everyday' social media users. Where possible, it highlights initiatives that show some evidence of impact. The primary focus is on activism to counter patriarchy and sexism, while recognising that efforts to challenge homophobic and transphobic norms are closely related.

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2 Context and conceptual framework

This chapter outlines a framework for understanding how feminist social media activism may contribute to shifts in gender norms. It starts by outlining the key attributes of social media that affect its potential as a space for activism. It then highlights recent thinking on what gender norms are and how they change. Building on these two sections, it then sets out the routes through which social media can contribute to shifts in gender norms.

2.1 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.

Scale and reach. Compared with much traditional social movement activism, which takes place in a physical space, social media offers the potential to mobilise a much larger body of potential supporters. It can also build connections across contexts. The ability to live-stream protests and events, and to share opinions through, for example, Facebook, Instagram Live and Twitter posts, gives users the chance to engage with sensitive or political issues, including those related to gender norms, from different parts of the world (Ochieng'-Springer and Francis, 2019).

Speed and timing of engagement. Content posted on social media is available immediately, meaning that conversations can take place in real time – but they can also be accessed by users at any time that suits them (Haymond, 2020: 75). This means that issues raised and campaigns or content shared can quickly gather attention and pace to reach a large audience.

Content that is visually and emotionally engaging. Social media platforms enable issues to be presented in ways that are accessible and can be easily shared (as, for example, in Figure 1). Information or viewpoints can be packaged attractively and presented visually, with relatively small amounts of text, or in audio-visual formats. As a long history of psychological research shows, visual information is often more successful than long text in engaging audiences, particularly those with lower levels of literacy or shorter attention spans (Chaiken and Eagly, 1976; Petty and Cacioppo, 1986). As Mendes et al. (2018) point out, social media engages users' emotions and influences their feelings, as well as their knowledge; and the ability to engage 'hearts' as well as 'minds' is critical for shifting norms (Harper et al., 2020). The rise of Instagram, a visually focused platform, has spurred the use of visual posts still further as a key way to share messages.

Figure 1: Shareable feminist social media graphic

Source: @cutecatcalls (Instagram)
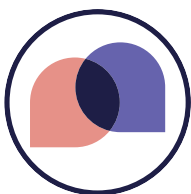
Informal, conversational engagement. As well as providing engaging content, social media spaces are mostly informal and often conversational. This can enable people who have not previously engaged in activism to take part in discussion and debate, and can help break down perceived barriers (such as not having specialised knowledge of an issue). At their best, social media platforms give people a space to explore new ideas and make connections between their experiences, those of others and the goals of social movements (Clark, 2016; Jackson et al., 2020; Papacharissi, 2015). However, as examined in Chapter 4, there is also potential for constructive discussion to be replaced by hate speech and abuse.
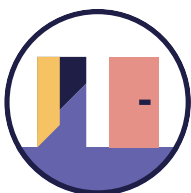
Both open access content and closed communities. Social media users can find conversations on publicly accessible platforms through hashtags and keyword searches, and related content suggested by algorithms, and can also discover closed groups, such as Facebook or Reddit groups. These closed spaces can enable the development of like-minded communities (Cammaerts, 2015). Such communities are important for exposure to information, idea sharing and the building of networks. Some activists build protected communities (requiring a moderator to screen and admit would-be members) to enable participants to speak freely, seek support and organise (Clark-Parsons, 2017; Kanai and McGrane, 2021). It is not only feminist activists who make use of secure groups – there is growing evidence that closed spaces on the 'manosphere' have nurtured violent misogynistic norms and behaviour (Farrell et al., 2019).

Anonymity. The anonymity that social media can provide, through the use of pseudonyms, can enable people to post opinions and content that challenge the status quo because it reduces the risk of rejection by one's social network. These might include posts that transgress gender norms, reveal a LGBTQI+ identity, or that present politically unpopular views on feminism, gender or sexuality. For example a study by University College London (UCL), Why We Post, found that social media enabled women and men in patriarchal communities in south-east Turkey to participate in activities that would otherwise have been frowned upon by their family and community. One of the young women interviewed explained that she uses anonymous accounts to upload her music without attracting dishonour as a woman for her public profile as a musician (UCL, 2021). But equally – as discussed in Chapter 4 – the anonymity of social media can also facilitate online abuse and is, therefore, a key area of current debate. As discussed further in Sub-section 3.3.1, using pseudonyms does not make accounts untraceable and tech companies, at times, may be compelled to share some users' identities with the authorities. In reality, the protection social media affords is only partial and varies across jurisdictions.
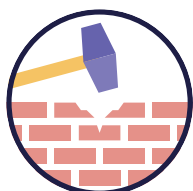
Breaking down barriers to engagement. On social media, anyone with a data-enabled mobile phone and internet connection can create and share content, start a hashtag, create a TikTok video, or participate in a group interested in a certain issue, anonymously if necessary. This can be of particular importance for women and adolescent girls in contexts where their mobility and voice are limited by patriarchal gender norms, and for activists who fear for their safety if they reveal their identities in public. Social media can, therefore, provide space and a platform for voices that have been marginalised and silenced in ways that offline spaces cannot always offer (Chen et al., 2018). However, there are continued and stark inequalities in access to social media (see Box 3). Furthermore, intersecting inequalities often determine whose voices are considered to be credible, how experiences and viewpoints are presented for a digital audience, and how they are received by that audience (Serisier, 2019; Fileborn and Loney-Howes, 2020).

Box 3: Continuing digital divides

Mobile phones are the main way in which the majority of people in low- and middle-income countries access the internet – and therefore social media (USAID, 2021). 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, although the scale of the gender gap varies across regions and has been narrowing (GSMA, 2021b). Women and girls are more likely than men to borrow or share mobile phones, often from male family members. This is particularly the case in cultures with powerful norms around maintaining family honour, given perceptions that mobile phones enable illicit relationships (USAID, 2021; Web Foundation, 2015).

Ownership or access to a device does not necessarily mean constant access, however: 'many of the people who are counted as connected in official statistics actually experience fragile, intermittent, and unaffordable connections' (Roberts and Hernandez, 2019: 2). As well as physical access, engagement is often determined by overall literacy and digital skills (USAID, 2021; Research ICT Africa, 2012; Web Foundation, 2015). Additional barriers include the lack of accessible content, coupled with poorly designed handsets that exclude those with additional needs and are unsuitable for certain languages (USAID, 2021).

2.2 How can activists use social media to shift gender norms?

Understanding gender norms and how they change

Gender norms are informal social rules within a particular society or culture that express how people of a particular gender are expected to behave. They combine broad cultural beliefs about gender (e.g. gender roles are distinct and complementary) with more specific beliefs about the range of acceptable behaviour in a given context or type of interaction. Gender norms are often taken for granted and deep-seated, and their influence on attitudes and behaviour is not always apparent. They matter because they help to maintain gendered inequalities, usually to the disadvantage of women, girls and people of diverse, non-binary ornon-conforming gender identities and are, therefore, the focus of this report. Of course, gender is only one aspect of people's identities, and gender norms intersect with other norms and inequalities related to age, race, ethnicity, class, geography, disability and sexual orientation among many other factors (ALIGN, 2021).

Norms are partly upheld by social rewards, such as approval (including social media likes) and sanctions (such as the fear of social disapproval, and exclusion or violence for not conforming to expected norms). They shift when a critical mass of people no longer believe that certain forms of behaviour are appropriate and can – or should – be expected of others, and new standards of behaviour start to emerge.

At individual, family or community level, such shifts are often driven by new knowledge that challenges beliefs, and through observing that other people have adopted new ways of behaving. Changes in the broader social, economic, technological and political environment can also drive changes in norms. As new opportunities and challenges arise, people adapt their expectations of themselves and others. For example, rising educational and work opportunities have helped to shift norms about the appropriate age of marriage in many countries (Harper et al., 2020).

Deliberate efforts to shift norms use various strategies to change beliefs and behaviour. These include: making new information available; encouraging reflection on one's beliefs, behaviour and practices; and sharing awareness of change among others in a physical or virtual community. This could involve connecting people to others who have adopted new norms, or showcasing influential individuals who endorse change. They also involve the use of policy or legal levers to set new standards and to create the right environment for the desired change (Marcus and Harper, 2015).

Social media is both a space where norms may shift organically, and which can be used to catalyse norm change. It is a space where information and ideas can be discussed, and where networks of people who do not necessarily know each other offline are exposed to one another's views and experiences. It is also a space where certain individuals can develop positions of influence, as self-defined 'influencers', or because of the number of their followers and subscribers, giving them unprecedented platforms to reinforce norms or to nudge shifts in particular directions. Finally, the nature

> " Social media is both a space where norms may shift organically, and which can be used to catalyse norm change.

of social media algorithms – discussed in more detail in Diepeveen (2022) and Noble (2018) – means that content and posts that receive 'likes' are more likely to be shown to others, and, therefore, more likely to influence their thinking and behaviour.

Framework for understanding how social media activists use social media to shift gender norms

Equipped with these insights on what norms are and how they change, the authors distinguish four mechanisms by which social media activism can influence gender norms directly or indirectly. These are framed in terms of pro-gender equality and justice activism, but as Chapter 5 shows, they are also used by anti-gender equality activists.

Framework of social media mechanisms activists use to shift gender norms online:

1. **Sharing knowledge and reframing perceptions.** These strategies – focused around informing and encouraging new thinking and personal behaviour – make extensive use of visual media with captions and explanatory text or voice-overs, short texts such as tweets, and memes that use humour to reframe issues and disrupt conventional ideas.

2. **Amplifying messages.** This strategy tends to amplify the voices of people who advocate for new norms, and can help demonstrate that celebrities, leading public figures and others with substantial influence have committed to new norms and behaviour. It involves posting content that aims to change gender norms on widely followed channels and to influence public discourse. It may also help to apply pressure for policy and legal change. Compared to strategies that aim to inform others, this sort of content is more likely to use short texts (e.g. tweets or Facebook posts) and short videos.

3. **Building and expanding like-minded communities.** Participation in groups with other people who have similar perspectives can create a sense of togetherness, social support and a collective identity, reinforcing support for egalitarian norms. It can also provide a forum for consciousness-raising and sharing information within groups, and resources (e.g. access to knowledge and campaign materials) that activists can use to try to shift norms (Jackson et al., 2020; Şener, 2021).

4. **Mobilising campaigns.** Campaigns both react to events, such as a sexual assault (e.g. #NiUnaMenos, see sub-Section 3.1.1), and proactively seek change (e.g. addressing specific challenges facing women, such as the ban on driving in Saudi Arabia). Activism of this kind often has a two-way relationship with gender norms: through publicity and mobilisation for change on a gender inequality issue, it may contribute to shifts in norms; while growing commitment to gender-egalitarian norms may help to engage people in campaigns. Campaigns often use a combination of visual and text-based posts to inspire and mobilise action.

In practice, an individual social media post or campaign may contribute to norm change via several routes simultaneously and at different levels. Shifts in attitudes – both in favour of and opposed to gender equality and justice – form a feedback loop that influences the content and framing of ongoing social media campaigns. Figure 2 summarises this thinking. The evidence presented in the following chapters focuses in particular on the use of social media to mobilise campaigns and to reframe perceptions. Both approaches depend on a like-minded community, and amplify particular messages and viewpoints to catalyse change.

Figure 2: Changing gender norms through social media activism
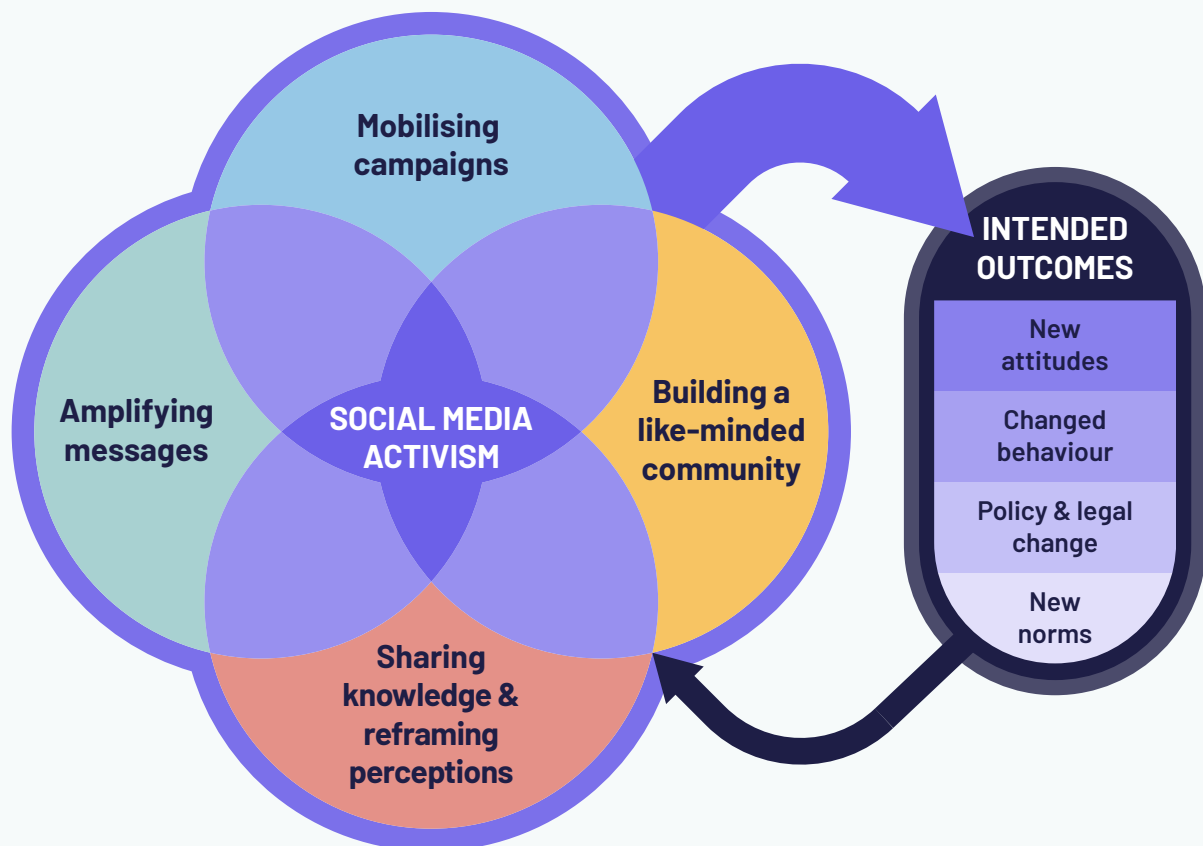
3 The evidence: social media as a space to drive gender norm change

This chapter discusses the potential of two main types of organised online campaign (hashtag and selfie activism), and the more organic posting of visual and textual content, to shift entrenched patriarchal gender norms. In practice, the boundaries between these two sets of activities are often blurred. As almost no studies discuss the direct impact of such initiatives on changing norms, the implications are inferred from selected examples. It outlines insights from evidence and examples of different approaches before discussing their strengths and challenges as spaces to catalyse shifts in gender norms. The discussion is skewed towards hashtag activism – an area where there is substantially more literature than on other forms of activism.

Table 1 groups the social media activity examined in this review by key features, objectives and types of material posted. As discussed in Chapter 5, activists working to prevent or reverse egalitarian gender norm change use similar approaches but with different content.

Table 1: Summary of approaches, objectives and main platforms for different types of social media activity

Approach	Key objectives	Main platforms	Main types of content	Examples of gender norm change activity
Organised campaigns with specific objectives (#hashtag and selfie activism)	• Seek justice • Policy or legal reform or implementation • Promote commitment to a cause/build a community	Twitter, Facebook, Instagram	Varied – visual and text	#EndMaleGuardianship (Saudi Arabia) #Happytobleed (India) #NiUnaMenos (Latin America) #LahukaLagaan (India) #MiTu/Rice Bunny (China)
Organic/ individual posting of feminist content	• Share information • Reframe perceptions • Promote commitment to a cause/build a community	YouTube, TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr	Selfies, memes, videos, emojis	Aaj Phir Mahina Aya Hai (TikTok, poem about first menstruation, India) Meme competitions e.g. El Control es ridículo (Bolivia) *Canción sin Miedo* (Latin America, originating in Mexico; Patiño, 2021)

In practice, the distinctions between these approaches are not always clear-cut. In particular, individual posts can evolve into an identifiable campaign if they are widely circulated and if more people post material using a particular hashtag. As discussed here, where online activity inspires offline action and organisation, it can play an important role in the formation of feminist social movements (see Box 4 on #NiUnaMenos and #LifeInLeggings).

> **Box 4: From hashtags to international social movements: #NiUnaMenos and #LifeInLeggings**
>
> The **#NiUnaMenos (Not One [woman] Less) movement** started as a hashtag in Argentina in 2015, following the murder of a pregnant 14-year-old girl, Chiara Páez, by her boyfriend (Belotti et al., 2020). 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 (Lagos and Antezana, 2018: 139). In 2016, the brutal rape and murder of 16-year-old Lucía Pérez catalysed further protest in Argentina and beyond.[i] Since 2016, #NiUnaMenos has become a transnational feminist movement, with thousands of people mobilising each year to attend street protests in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Mexico, Peru, Uruguay, and other Latin American countries and beyond (Chenou and Cepeda-Másmela, 2019; Belotti et al., 2020).
>
> The **#LifeInLeggings movement**, started in Barbados in 2016 as a hashtag on Facebook and quickly spread to other platforms, such as Instagram, Twitter and Tumblr. 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, breaking a taboo on discussing the issue in 'traditional media', and revealing its widespread and systemic nature (Ochieng'-Springer and Francis, 2019). 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 that included politicians, to address and organise around sexual violence. Many of these discussions are now being led by young women activists, including some who identify as LGBTQI+ (Sanatan, 2017). By building networks, the movement has generated conversations around GBV and the sexual abuse of children, and has enabled women and girls across the region to feel connected and to challenge perceptions in local and regional contexts.
>
> Recognising that digital activism can provide a temporary jolt but does not necessarily lead to sustained change, 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 (Ochieng'-Springer and Francis, 2019). The movement has also experienced backlash with men posting victim-blaming content, using hashtags such as #LifeInPants and #EggplantEntries, aiming to invalidate the movement (Sanatan, 2017).
>
> **i** https://time.com/4538241/argentina-protest-lucia-perez-teenager/

3.1 Organised social media campaigns: hashtag activism and selfie protests[7]

Hashtags (#) pull together and encourage the posting of content, based on a word or phrase, and make it easy for users to find discussions on a particular topic (Mendes et al., 2018). Appearing first on Twitter, individuals, brands and political actors now use hashtags across social media platforms, including Facebook, Instagram, TikTok and YouTube, to share online narratives and content with their desired audiences (Chen et al., 2018: 199). Hashtag activism has become an established strategy for activists and social movements to challenge gender norms (Klien-Thomas, 2020). By using a hashtag in posts across various platforms, activists can create spaces for the collective sharing of ideas, experiences and testimonies, demand change, organise online and offline protests, and make their voices heard (Mendes et al., 2018; see also Khoja-Moolji, 2015; Clark, 2016). Appendix 2 summarises just a few of the hashtags and campaigns that have proliferated in recent years.

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7 Other types of campaign are outside the scope of this report. These include the use of social media as a space to organise boycotts (Errázuriz, 2019).

Some hashtag campaigns are proactive in aiming to raise awareness of an issue while others respond to a particular event – such as a sexual assault, a case of femicide or a proposed law.

Proactive hashtag activist campaigns tend to call for specific actions. Organisers may, for example, support campaigns with a social media activism toolkit, as with social media campaigns around the #16DaysofActivism (to end GBV) that begins each year on 25 November – the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Any impact on gender norms is likely to be the result of increased awareness. However, successful campaigns to change laws and policies can also spur the development of new norms (Bicchieri and Mercier, 2014), for example, where the criminalisation of particular forms of violence leads to shifts in accepted behaviour.

Reactive campaigns tend to respond to a recent event (whether online or offline) or a proposed law or policy change. In India, for example, student Nikita Azad started the #HappytoBleed hashtag in 2015 on Facebook after the Sabarimala temple in Kerala banned all women from entry in case they were menstruating and would 'pollute' its holiness (Arora, 2017; Chen et al., 2018; Pain, 2020). The campaign contributed to the decision of the Supreme Court of India to overrule the temple's ban in September 2018 (Cohen, 2020: 115). Also, in India, the #LahukaLagaan (#TaxonBlood) campaign challenged the government's decision to impose a 14% goods and services tax (GST) on sanitary pads, categorising them as a luxury commodity. Although the campaign led to only a small reduction in GST (to 12%), it achieved substantial media coverage and raised the profile of menstruation issues, with news channels engaging primetime audiences on the issue, and fiery debates between activists and politicians (Fadnis, 2017). In these cases, any shifts in norms are likely to arise from general publicity on the issues across broadcast media and in offline spaces, as well as online (see Appendix 2 for further examples).

In practice, the boundaries between proactive and reactive hashtag campaigns are blurred as posts that respond to an event often seek to raise awareness and mobilise others to join online and offline actions. Box 4, for example, highlights how the #NiUnaMenos hashtag, started in response to a series of brutal murders of young women, catalysed a movement to change the machista (sexist) norms that underlie femicides, sexual assaults and other forms of GBV. In addition, some hashtags are short-lived and function primarily for coordination. They may, for example, aim to ensure the safety of activists during demonstrations or alert protestors to developing situations of repression by security forces.

> **Some hashtag campaigns are proactive in aiming to raise awareness of an issue while others respond to a particular event – such as a sexual assault, a case of femicide or a proposed law.**

Hashtags also serve as signposts to informal virtual information hubs where activists and others can share and circulate resources. For example, many activists use Twitter threads (a series of tweets) to share information and ideas (Housley et al., 2018). For example, in India, the #MeToo hashtag became a tool for education, with links to resources for survivors, and signposted users to offline support systems and legal advice (Pain, 2020). In the Gulf, a prominent Saudi women's rights activist, Loujain Hathloul, used a Twitter thread to share information and resources about feminism and the rights of

domestic workers, initiating a conversation with others on the topic (@LoujainHathloul, 2021). Likewise in South Korea, the #Iamafeminist movement developed a Google document with resources on gender equality (in Korea and beyond) that was circulated on social media platforms along with the movement's hashtag. This served as a 'mother tag', helping to connect related hashtags and initiate feminist activism online and offline (Kim, 2015). Pinned tweets can also make it easy for people to find specific information.

> 'Now, feminist ideas are readily accessible on smartphones and organizations can maintain intensive exposure to ideas curated from various sources.'
>
> *Kangere et al. (2017: 901)*

Many campaigns both launch new hashtags and re-use existing tags to build connections between issues amd to bring (back) issues to users' attention. This use of hashtages can amplify messages beyond individuals' immediate networks, linking them to other like-minded individuals (but also to trolls who want to derail campaigns – see Chapters 4 and 5). By mobilising a large number of posts in a short time, they can sometimes attract media coverage and influence public debate. Two prominent examples are #MeToo around sexual violence, and #BlackLivesMatter around racial justice.

Social media in general – and hashtag activism in particular – can help to make the personal, political. Individuals who share their stories and prompt others to do so can make issues visible and engage viewers' emotions, particularly when common threads run through a large number of narratives (Dixon, 2014; Rodino-Colocino, 2014; Thrift, 2014). This can, in turn, stimulate people to mobilise for change. For example, #EverydaySexism, started in the UK, brought together women from more than 20 countries to share their daily experiences of sexism, gender inequality and male violence. A study of its impact concludes that 'the effect of reading so many similar stories in such sheer numbers, different voices testifying to similar experiences from diverse places, serves as powerful evidence for the pervasiveness of violence against women – evidence that cannot be easily silenced' (Eagle, 2015: 352). See Box 4 for a case study of the #LifeInLeggings hashtag and movement in the Caribbean, which made visible a form of violence (sexual violence) that was previously considered taboo in much of the mainstream media (Ochieng'-Springer and Francis, 2019).

Selfies and other visual content are often used as part of hashtag campaigns and sometimes show people violating norms or taking part in a campaign action. These are particularly common on visual platforms such as Instagram, but have also been seen on Facebook and Twitter – reflecting patterns of use in different parts of the world and among different demographic groups.

" Social media in general – and hashtag activism in particular – can help to make the personal, political.

In 2014, for example, the Iranian journalist Masih Alinejad shared a photograph of herself online in a convertible car without a hijab. She challenged women globally, and specifically in her home country, to share pictures of their own #stealthyfreedom to protest against hijab laws that punish women for being in public without

a head covering. #MyStealthyFreedom quickly became an internationally used hashtag on Facebook and Twitter, averaging one million shares per week (Novak and Khazraee, 2014).

In Saudi Arabia, 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). In another example, trans activists challenged North Carolina's 2016 ban on using bathrooms that did not align with one's gender assigned at birth through a selfie protest with the hashtag #wejustneedtopee, taking photos of themselves in public bathrooms to normalise their right to be there (Vivienne, 2017; Spencer, 2019). The use of images may have helped to amplify the messages of all these campaigns. However, other than in the case of Saudi Arabia's driving ban, it is not clear how they contributed to change.

How activism online and offline can reinforce one another

While some social media campaigns exist purely in cyberspace, it is increasingly hard to separate online and offline action, as many people's lives and relationships span both contexts. Movements that are primarily offline often use social media to extend their reach and amplify their messages, as in the example of the GBV Prevention Network in the Horn, East and Southern Africa (HESA) region (see Box 5). Equally, initiatives that start online can grow into social movements that span offline and online spaces, as illustrated by #NiUnaMenos and #LifeInLeggings (Box 4).

There are a number of ways in which online and offline activism can reinforce and complement each other. These range from raising the profile of movements that have been campaigning for years, to expanding their reach beyond their original geographic boundaries; and from amplifying the voices of those who are rarely heard to finding ways around government censorship. However, there are risks, including pushback against online gender-norm activism and activists. Here we set out some of the synergies and the risks.

Social media activism has helped raise the profile of some movements and organisations that have been active for many years offline. For example, the Pañuelo Verde (movement for abortion rights in Argentina) has used social media to extend its reach and engage younger activists (Macón, 2020). It reinvented a powerful image – white scarves – worn by the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo who campaigned for justice for the thousands of people who disappeared during Argentina's military dictatorship in the 1970s and 1980s. The green scarf campaign evolved into the Marea Verde (Green Wave) movement (Nayar and Garnier, 2022), which used imagery across various social media platforms to build an emotionally resonant mass campaign for reproductive rights and justice (Vacarezza, 2021). This campaign has been recognised as having helped to drive the legalisation of abortion in Argentina in December 2020 (Howe, 2021). Similarly, the GBV Prevention Network in the HESA region used social media campaigns to reach new audiences and recruit new members (Kangere et al., 2017).

Social media activism can and does mobilise people who have never engaged in activism before (Daby and Moseley, 2021). For example, #NiUnaMenos activists used a twitter storm (*'tuitazo'*) to invite every girl and woman to share (with a tweet or Facebook post) her own experiences and motivations to join the movement (Belotti et al., 2020). Many of these young women would eventually become key actors in the Pañuelo Verde abortion rights movement in Argentina, while also raising the issue within their own families and communities (Garibotti and Hopp, 2019). In India, as well as mobilising large protests and contributing to legal change, the #IwillGoOut campaign created a new coalition of feminist activists and organisations on social media. The campaign used Facebook pages to 'tear down physical barriers that restrict dialogue around women's issues' and was instrumental in creating an online platform for young activists across South Asia to build awareness around women's safety and gender issues (Titus, 2018: 242).

Social media has facilitated the growth of activist networks beyond geographic boundaries. Hashtag campaigns, in particular, have helped to build national and international connections among like-minded people, bringing new voices and perspectives into movements, and connecting activists who would not otherwise have been connected. This can lead to further activism and movement building through the sharing of resources, experiences, and responses to local and global issues. Examples include the #LifeInLeggings movement in the Caribbean, #NiUnaMenos in Latin America (Box 4) and the online campaigns conducted by the GBV Prevention Network in the HESA region, such as #lifewithoutpatriarchy (Box 5).

Box 5: Using social media to articulate African feminist visions

The Gender-Based Violence (GBV) Prevention Network in the Horn, East and Southern Africa (HESA) region began in 2003 as a network of 25 organisations that shared a feminist approach to tackling GBV. Over the course of a decade, the network grew to include more than 1,000 organisations in 21 countries. It felt, however, that its feminist roots had become diluted. Faced with shrinking civil society space, declining funding for feminist organising and the dominance of international non-governmental organisations, the network initiated various social media campaigns to reignite a feminist approach to violence prevention, and engage new members and allies. Specifically, these campaigns hoped to 'popularize feminism' by sharing a compelling and accessible feminist analysis of violence against women on diverse platforms in creative ways to generate widespread interest, uptake and action for social norm change.

These campaigns aimed to debunk the idea that feminism is a Western import by highlighting prominent African feminists, articulating what feminism means to them and using graphic art alongside audio messages. Campaigns such as #lifewithoutpatriarchy and Let's Talk about Power (#Power101) challenged the norms that underpin GBV and reached 190,000 and 70,000 people, respectively. Organisers argue that they created a 'community of aligned individuals and groups who otherwise would not have been in touch with each other'. Social media presence has enabled groups to support each other through tweeting, retweeting, and sharing events, opportunities, resources and activism. These enhanced connections have also strengthened offline organising. Reflecting on the network's experiences, Kangere et al. (2017: 902) conclude that:

> 'Overall, social media's contribution to accessibility of the feminist discourse beyond academic or traditional activist spaces holds new potential for widespread social norm change, increased activism and, ultimately, safer lives for women in the HESA region.'

Online communities often provide space for action in contexts where offline protest is challenging, and a platform for individuals who are denied political space and voice. In Saudi Arabia, for example, the # اسقاط _الولاية (#EndMaleGuardianship) and #Women2Drive campaigns enabled women to transcend, to some extent, the gender segregation of public discourses and spaces in Saudi society (Thorsen and Sreedharan, 2019: 1125). In both campaigns, activists began to include additional hashtags such as # تحرري _ من صمتك (#SpeakOut) to encourage women to share their experiences of violence and abuse, and the difficulties they faced as a result of male guardianship and broader discrimination in society. Both campaigns received a high level of supportive international media attention, in part because activists tweeted in more than 10 languages, which meant that their tweets were widely picked up (Thorsen and Sreedharan, 2019). The campaign to end the driving ban is recognised as having contributed to ending this policy, alongside factors that meant the campaign landed in an environment already disposed to a positive shift.[8]

Social media can enable other awareness-raising content (e.g. artwork or performances) to be shared with a much wider audience. For example, the Chilean feminist collective Las Tesis (2019) used social media to coordinate and stage a street dance protest *Un violador en tu camino* ('A rapist in your path'), streamed it to a global audience. After originating from an art collective of four women in Valparaiso, in a matter of days the performance went viral, and was retweeted and shared thousands of times (Rodriguez et al., 2020). Groups of women across the world began to replicate and 'vernacularise' this action (Jiménez Thomas Rodriguez et al., 2021), adapting it to their own context, experiences and language (Serafini, 2020; Martin and Shaw, 2021).[9]

In India the activist group Blank Noise combines online and offline performances to reclaim public spaces for women that are safe from harassment. In one Blank Noise demonstration, women sat in the general compartment on different forms of transport (instead of female-only train cars and bus sections). Participants were encouraged to use the hashtag #segregationnosolution on social media to share photos and videos of the protest and their experiences (Losh, 2014).

Activists are developing innovative ways to circumvent government censorship of social media. Evidence from China shows that activists have adopted strategies such as embedding petitions and sexual assault testimonies in tamper-proof cryptocurrency transactions.[10] They have also used emojis, local dialects, or foreign languages for hashtags to camouflage movements and activism (Zeng, 2020: 181–182). For example, #RiceBunny – phonetically pronounced 'mi tu' in Mandarin Chinese and sometimes also depicted using the emojis of a bowl of rice and a rabbit – has been used as the codename for #MeToo. Foreign languages and various Chinese dialects, such as those of Sichuan and northern China have also been used to camouflage #MeToo (Zeng, 2020; Jun, 2021). Nonetheless, the risks of repression are real[11] and in some contexts limit the extent to which social media represents an alternative space for feminist activism.

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8   These include Saudi Arabia's accession to the UN's Commission on the Status of Women, the level of supportive media coverage received in neighbouring countries (which may have created normative pressure) and the King's 'open door' policy on Twitter, which meant that activists could tweet him directly. While they did not receive any responses, this may have raised the overall profile of the campaign (Thorsen and Sreedharan, 2019).

9   A map of all performances to date produced by GeoChicas, a women's collective, is accessible at https://umap.openstreetmap.fr/es/map/un-violador-en-tu-camino-20192021-actualizado-al-0_394247#2/-0.2/32.2.

10 Cryptocurrency is a digital currency designed to work as a medium of exchange through a computer network that is not reliant on any central authority, such as a government or bank, to uphold or maintain it.

11 See, for example, Davidson (2021); https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Feminist_Five.

There is some evidence of direct suppression of online gender norm activism and repression of activists. While the main motivation of governments is often to prevent criticism of their actions, gender equality and justice activists have been targeted for suppression where contested visions of gender norms and relations are bound up with national discourses or political projects. In Jamaica, for example, Latoya Nugent, a leading LGBTQI+ activist and co-founder of the Tambourine Army (a movement that campaigns against GBV) was arrested for 'cybercrimes' after encouraging survivors of sexual abuse to name their attackers on social media under the #SayTheirNames hashtag (Mendes-Franco, 2017).

In Egypt, there has been a recent rise in the arrests of young women who challenge gender norms and beauty standards by posting content to TikTok, resulting in them being charged with 'immorality' and violating 'family values' (HRW, 2021). Some governments, such as that of China, are responding to online activism around sexual harassment by addressing individual reports and introducing some policy reform, while also seeking to limit collective organisation (Jun, 2021). In addition, the extent to which platforms must release data to governments continues to be contested, with clear implications for the safety of activists (Gillespie, 2018; Leerssen, 2015).

3.2 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 around prevailing gender norms. This section concentrates on efforts to shift norms through posting visual content – such as selfies,[12] memes [13] and videos – and text that challenge viewers' perceptions of issues, and the gender norms and stereotypes that uphold them.

These types of content have subtly different implications in terms of shifting gender norms. Selfie-takers and video-makers control the visual messages they share with others, including the posing, composition, editing and captioning of their own photos (Butkowski et al., 2019), which may replicate or challenge prevailing gender norms. Memes use humour to reframe perceptions and to build a shared community among users who understand the joke, which may often refer to other well-known memes. As Keller (2016) points out, practices such as feminist blogging offer teenage girls who do not have any access to more formal political processes a way to share their values and attempt to influence others. Sharing memes fulfils a similar function: using humour both to reframe perceptions and build a community among those who share the joke (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015). This section focuses on the potential of memes and selfies to shift gender norms.

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12 Much analysis of selfies has categorised them as 'vain' and 'narcissistic' (see Fox and Rooney, 2015) or as contributing to 'positive identity formation' (see Kasch, 2013; Shah and Tewari, 2016), ignoring their potential as a form of protest or to catalyse norm shifts.

13 Memes are images shared on social media that have a textual overlay (Boling, 2020). They are 'created, circulated, and transformed by countless cultural participants', as users mix new ideas with established concepts (Milner, 2016). Memes humour functions through relatability: 'an ability to provoke a feeling of identification in the viewer' (Dean, 2016).

Memes

Social media activism through memes uses popular culture as a way to challenge the status quo (Shifman, 2014; Rentschler and Thrift, 2015). Memes originated on far-right dominated platforms such as 4chan and some Reddit groups (sub-Reddits), and many popular meme formats embody sexist, classist and racist stereotypes, 'transmitting loaded messages in their content under the guise of humour or jokes' (Drakett et al., 2018: 36). Feminist meme production and circulation seeks to subvert these roots and use memes to challenge patriarchal gender norms (Breheny, 2017; Gbadegesin, 2020).

On the basis of interviews with self-defined feminist 'memers' (meme-creators) on Instagram, Breheny (2017) argues that feminist memes work in three main ways. First, they generate empathy between people with similar experiences, while encouraging others to recognise their privileges and express their solidarity. Second, they deconstruct dominant norms, making the unseen ways they operate visible, and thereby challenging the viewer to resist them. Finally, they help to build and strengthen a community that values diversity and inclusivity, which helps to reinforce the strength of each individual to challenge oppressive norms.

Feminist meme pages and accounts such as @too_much_equal (India) and @Indonesiafeminis (Indonesia) use memes to challenge misogyny and promote equality (Parahita, 2019). They do so by challenging deeply entrenched gender norms in such as areas as male violence against women, equal education, equal pay, women's experiences in the workplace and gender relations. Memes can combine local context and language with more globalised conversations, some drawing on international memes and formats (see Figure 3). As one of the feminist meme-makers interviewed by Breheny states:

Figure 3: 'President Trump' Meme by @too_much_equal

Source: @too_much_equal (Instagram), 7 April 2020.

> 'I think they can be effective because they're so easily digestible for some people. it's not a wordy article on a site people may not have heard of, it's like a quick read of an image usually....always on social media sites people frequent every day...I think memes are extremely accessible and that's what makes them so much more appealing and powerful than mainstream media.'

Parahita (2019: 84).

Feminist memes can help to both create renewed and wider consciousness of gender equality issues as well as engage new audiences with feminist ideas (Rentschler and Thrift, 2015). Memes can also be used alongside other forms of online activism, as was the case with the #DistractinglySexy movement in 2015 when women scientists satirised misogynist stereotypes (such as they are 'distractingly sexy', they cry and they fall in love with male scientists) in memes and other formats. Brantner et al. (2019) argue that the media coverage of the campaign spurred a debate about the structural causes of women's marginalisation in science in the UK.[14] However, the extent to which memes generally or necessarily spur shifts in attitudes and norms remains unclear. In Nigeria, for example, 'Correct Bro' and 'Correct Bae' memes draw on gendered youth culture (Bro referring to young men, Bae to young women and Correct to being 'smart and savvy' (Gbadegesin, 2020). An analysis of the use of these memes on Facebook found that they have been used to both reinforce and challenge prevailing gender norms and stereotypes. Both men and women use humour to make fun of the other gender, but women's posts also challenge hegemonic masculinity. The counter-memes posted in response suggest that gender stereotypes remain strong among people who engage actively with online content (Gbadegesin, 2020).

Memes can also be used proactively to engage people in conversations around gender norms. For example, as part of Oxfam's Enough project in 2017 the youth-led '*ACTÚA Detén la violencia*' ('ACT, end violence') campaign in Bolivia ran a 'meme contest' on the theme '*El Control es ridículo*' ('Control is ridiculous'). Young people from three Bolivian cities were invited to take part. In less than two weeks, the contest received 134 entries, and generated nearly 20,000 reactions and 400 shares, reaching over 77,800 people. The memes were posted on the campaign's Facebook page and the online community voted for their favourites. They focused on themes such as jealousy, emotional and physical control, violence against women and stalking, and stimulated discussion in the comments around the different social norms that can justify violence (Oxfam, 2019).

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14 Brantner et al. (2019) compared the media reactions in the UK where the protest originated to reactions in Germany, and found much deeper coverage and questioning of women's marginalisation in science in the UK.

Figure 4 shows one of the memes, which challenges men's controlling behaviour within relationships using a widely used and recognised meme format. The text in the top image reads: 'How you think you look when you control everything your girlfriend does', while the text in the bottom image reads: 'How you really look' (authors' translation).

Figure 4: Entry for the ACTÚA meme contest

Source: ACTÚA Detén la violencia campaign, Facebook page.

Selfies and videos (including livestreams)

Selfies and videos 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). Campaigners have also encouraged users to post images that defy gender stereotypes. For examples the Vidimo–Nevidimo (English translation: 'Visible–Invisible') campaign in Russia encouraged people to post images to challenge gender stereotypes, such as men doing housework or wearing make-up, and women working in construction (Oxfam, 2020).

TikTok has become a popular app for sharing videos in recent years, particularly among younger people, and has the potential to both reinforce and challenge gender norms. Its simple visual interface, which is available in many languages, has made TikTok accessible to people who do not use more text-based platforms, such as Twitter or Facebook (Bhandari and Kovacs, 2021). Across cultures, TikTok videos often take the form of lip-syncing, role-playing or dancing to songs or scenes from popular culture. In contexts where dominant norms emphasise female modesty, women who post videos of themselves singing or dancing online can be perceived to be transgressing norms of appropriate behaviour. This has resulted in backlashes against TikTok. In India, for example, women posting TikTok videos have been accused of corrupting families and behaving promiscuously: 'like prostitutes' (Bhandari and Kovacs, 2021). TikTok was banned in India alongside a number of Chinese-owned apps in 2020, largely over security concerns (Parth, 2021). Reflecting on its impacts in rural and small-town India, Bhandari and Kovacs (2021: 50) argue:

> 'In India's highly stratified class and caste society, TikTok was a "glass ceiling breaker" that enabled many women to step outside the gendered and patriarchal norms of small town India while engaging with the Internet. For many women from small towns or lower castes, in particular, TikTok was their first point of entry to the Internet, and became a source of entertainment, fame and sometimes, income. In addition, it gave many women self-confidence and an independent sense of identity, distinct from their marital status.'

Some further examples from India show how short videos on TikTok have been used to challenge norms around menstruation: Nitin Kumawat's poem 'Aaj phir mahina aya hai' (Kumawat, 2019), talks about a woman's experiences on the first day of her period and how norms that consider menstruation shameful are transmitted by women through generations. Rajat Sharma's role play looks at how men treat women on their periods and is accessible here (Sharma, 2019; Chatterjee, 2020).

Young feminists around the world are also making greater use of TikTok and other video-based platforms (such as Instagram's Reels) to post explicitly feminist content, to raise consciousness among their peers, and spur behaviour and social change from the bottom up (Vijay and Gekker, 2021). Many young women in Mexico and other Latin American countries, for example, have posted videos using Vivir Quintana's '*Canción sin miedo*' ('Song without fear') as the soundtrack (Patiño, 2021).[15] Not all TikTok videos are set to music or involve a performance. For example, Jezebel Plange, a Ghanaian feminist, posts mainly videos of herself talking about issues from a feminist perspective.[16]

In the UK, the 2021 kidnap and murder by a serving London Metropolitan police officer of Sarah Everard (a young woman walking home), led to a wave of feminist grief, anger and activism. A statistic on the scale of sexual harassment was widely shared – with evidence that 97% of UK women aged 18–24 had experienced sexual harassment in public – leading to feminist posts about the reality of male violence and the continued lack of safety for women and girls. These were tagged as #97percent on TikTok and became a viral trend, receiving over 21 million views.[17]

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15 Examples include:
    www.tiktok.com/@encantobolera/video/6936205873857432837?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1
    www.tiktok.com/@paulinagmelo/video/6937053386885958918?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1
    www.tiktok.com/@glesly/video/6959728439754493189?is_copy_url=1&is_from_webapp=v1
16 www.tiktok.com/@efplange_gh
17 www.popbuzz.com/internet/viral/tiktok-97-percent-meaning-trend/

Activists are also increasingly using TikTok as a tool for informal education and norm change. In India, for example, the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Project KHEL[18] used TikTok in its work with young people to challenge menstrual stigma. In one video[19], a young woman describes the fear she has of staining her clothes and bedsheets during her period; another[20] shows a young man watching TV when an advert with menstrual pads pops up and he asks his mother what they are. In a third[21], which imagines a future where menstruation is not considered shameful, a young girl who gets her period during class asks her male teacher for a sanitary pad.

Figure 5: #97percent Sarah Everard social media statistic

Source: @rachaelb_ts (Twitter), 11 March 2021

Table 2 summarises some of the key features of different social media platforms, and the ways in which they can help to shift gender norms.

18 https://projectkhel.org/resources/
19 www.facebook.com/watch/?v=879529489228061
20 www.facebook.com/watch/?v=240843533666266
21 www.facebook.com/watch/?v=281900072825576

Table 2: Platform features that facilitate norm change activism

Feature	Potential	Platforms	Gender norm change example
Groups	Allow people to discuss and share content with like-minded others in private groups.	Facebook, Telegram (groups of up to 200,000)	Blank Noise[i] and private groups challenging gender-based violence in India; Brenda's reads[ii], a Kenyan feminist channel
Threads and comments	Educate readers and help to shift perceptions.	Twitter, Facebook	Twitter thread on rights of women domestic workers in Gulf[iii] and related discussion
Images/ videos plus text	Shift perceptions through memes, images and comment threads.	Instagram, Facebook, Twitter	Too_much_equal, India[iv]
Videos	Shift perceptions through performances/ entertainment, or more serious educative content.	TikTok, YouTube, Instagram Reels	Project KHEL[v] on menstruation in India; 'Canción sin miedo' (Patiño, 2021) performances in Mexico and many other Latin American countries

i.   www.blanknoise.org/home
ii. https://t.me/s/brendasreads?before=1992
iii. https://twitter.com/LoujainHathloul/status/1388576792286580740
iv. www.instagram.com/too_much_equal/
v.   https://projectkhel.org/resources/

3.3   Strengths and limitations of social media activism for shifting gender norms

This section reflects on both the examples presented above and the wider literature on the potential and limitations of social media activism to catalyse shifts in gender norms. We focus on two main issues: whether, or in what circumstances, social media campaigns can be 'weighty' and impactful rather than insubstantial; and how far they engage and represent diverse and marginalised groups. While the specific ways in which these issues play out varies considerably between campaign and context, we tease out some common threads. Many are not unique to social media but are long-standing issues playing out on a new terrain.

What helps achieve lasting impact?

Social media campaigns vary vastly, in terms of both their ambition and their impact. One common concern is that hashtag campaigns privilege superficial actions over those that lead to structural change, including lasting change in gender norms. Some – including some campaigns focused on gender equality issues – only ever aim to be light-hearted or ephemeral, or to mobilise funds (Losh, 2014), rather than seek more substantial change. But where campaigns aim to catalyse substantial social change, how much evidence is there that they can do so? What supportive factors are necessary to achieve such change? And can posts that are intended to be light-hearted catalyse change by helping people perceive an issue in a different way?

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 as 'entrenched cultures cannot be solved by viral social movements alone' (Ochieng'-Springer and Francis, 2019; Garza, 2020). Short user attention spans and the rolling, constant nature of social media, means that posts can quickly be forgotten.[22] Furthermore, social media favours content that is 'light and populist, with flash appeal' (Kangere et al., 2017). Breaking down feminist concepts and explaining complex ideas in a short and pithy way can lead to ideas and messages being oversimplified and losing their depth and urgency. This can depoliticise them and limit their potential to shift gender norms.

At the same time, the ease of posting on social media gives activists tools to keep issues high in public consciousness, but this requires constant creativity and sustained effort. It can be particularly challenging to compete with breaking news and topical political discourse; in comparison, 'feminist narratives that challenge the status quo and question male privilege seem less urgent or topical' (Kangere et al., 2017). Part of the skill of online campaigners is to create and harness any 'golden moments',[23] where themes and topics can be pushed to go viral, without oversaturating social media and pushing away potential supporters.

The case studies discussed in the previous section suggest that online activism has had the greatest impact when it has inspired or bolstered offline activism, as in the examples of #NiUnaMenos and #LifeInLeggings. A comparison of #MeToo in South Korea and Japan suggests that the movement had more sustained impact in South Korea as it 'landed' in a context where there was a previous history of substantial mobilisation around sexual violence. It was also quick to mobilise high-profile allies, with a prosecutor (Suh Ji-Hyeon) testifying to her experiences on live television. It gained momentum on social and broadcast media as many women came forward with allegations, and activists mobilised support for online and offline protests. Following the protests, special committees were established to investigate sexual harassment and GBV, and propose new guidelines and legal reforms – leading to the passing of seven new laws at the time of analysis.

By contrast, the movement has had slower momentum in Japan. Women preferred to remain anonymous 'due to the risk of victim blaming and the lack of a support system for victims of sexual violence and harassment' in the country. There were also few organised offline protests, and although activists demanded legal reform, the government was less receptive to dialogue (Hasunuma and Shin, 2019).

As campaigns go viral, they risk losing their original meanings and nuances. Once a hashtag is started, a meme created, or a campaign mobilised, it is largely out of the hands of its creators. In some cases, this may be a relatively benign trade-off, with some nuance being sacrificed as the reach of the campaign widens. In others, it risks stripping out the original meaning and feminist intent. For example, the #ChallengeAccepted (or #İstanbulSözleşmesiYaşatır, or 'Enforce the Istanbul Convention') campaign was started by activists in Turkey to draw attention to femicide, and to the fact that murdered women were being reduced to black and white photos in newspapers (Mwaba et al. 2021; Özşenler, 2021). However, it was quickly co-opted by Western celebrities who posted selfies or black and white photos without reference to the campaign, or to the context of femicide and violence against women in Turkey (Özşenler, 2021). The feminist hashtag #aufschrei (#outcry), created to articulate experiences of everyday sexism, was later infiltrated by anti-

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22 Posts can, however, be endlessly repeated and recirculated, bringing particular posts and images back to users' consciousness.
23 The term 'golden moments' was coined by Mairaroto (2013), cited in Ochieng'-Springer and Francis (2019).

feinist and sexist messages (Drüeke and Zobl, 2016, cited in Brantner et al., 2019). Kagal et al. (2019) highlight the risks reported by Muslim women in France, who warn that posts about sexual violence may be used in Islamophobic ways to further demonise their community, adding to the challenges and barriers they face in speaking out.

> "
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> Online activism can represent a significant drain on activists' time and emotional resources.

Online activism can represent a significant drain on activists' time and emotional resources. The 'informational and emotional labour' (Pain, 2020) involved in creating and curating content, responding to others' posts, and dealing with trolls and abuse, is usually unpaid and unacknowledged. In gender equality and norm change activism, this work falls mostly to women. Pain likens it to housework: repetitive, tedious and not valued by others, although activists themselves often see it as hugely important. While celebrating the potential of social media to contribute to shifts in norms, it is vital to recognise this unpaid work. Unlike anti-gender activism that is often well-funded (see Chapter 4) and can pay 'troll farms' to derail pro-equality activists and seed disinformation, pro-equality activism is often undertaken on a voluntary basis.

Representation and marginalisation

> 'For Indian minorities, Facebook India has become a critical platform for building community and seeking new audiences. It provides a unique window into the lives of Indian Dalits, women, religious and gender/queer minorities, lifting up voices that might not be heard otherwise. It also creates powerful opportunities for dialogue, engagement, and global connection. This is why, as representatives of these communities, we are deeply concerned that Facebook products have also become the central avenue for spreading hate speech and disinformation.'
>
> *Soundararajan et al. (2019: 10)*

As captured in the quotation, social media opens new opportunities for marginalised voices but can also replicate existing inequalities. With the exponential growth of access to internet-enabled devices, particularly smartphones, barriers to social media are falling and new opportunities are emerging for representation and for marginalised people to make their voices heard. As discussed in Sub-section 3.1.1, digital spaces can allow activists to challenge gender norms and inequalities in contexts where public organising is difficult. It can also help groups with limited mobility to engage in activism. This may include some people with disabilities, and social groups such as adolescent girls or young married women in cultures where norms around maintaining individual and family honour restrict their mobility, or more broadly where family members would not support their activism (Keller, 2016). As Keller (2016) points out, with reference to the US, online engagement offers people who are constrained by geography, class, age or ability (and intersecting racial inequalities), and who are unable to take part in face-to-face protests, the chance to participate in feminist activism.

Nonetheless, technologies reflect the societies that create and use them, as many authors have commented (O'Donnell and Sweetman, 2018; Shaw, 2014; Toyama, 2011; Wajcman, 2010). This means they reflect existing inequalities and have the potential to amplify them. Gender, racial and other biases and inequalities have been 'hardwired' into the 'infrastructure' of social media, as the companion ALIGN report to this one, Diepeveen (2022) explains. Here we focus on the ways that online activism has replicated, amplified or challenged societal biases in varied campaigns and contexts. Chapter 4 discusses the intersecting forms of abuse faced online by feminists from minority backgrounds.

As Box 3 showed, inequalities persist in access to and use of the internet and mobile phones. These inequalities go beyond access to devices, and influence who has the time, energy, skills or interest to post content on social media. This means that the views and experiences of more privileged groups tend to dominate, as shown by various studies in Chandra and Erlingsdóttir's (2021) collection of articles on the politics of the #MeToo movement. In India, for example, 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. The #HappytoBleed movement, in particular, was dominated by young urban middle class activists (Pain, 2020). In China, few low-income workers or young people in rural areas participated in the movement (Zeng, 2020). Haraldsdóttir's (2021) analysis of #MeToo in Iceland pointed out that the specific experiences of women with disabilities were often marginalised. Likewise, Keller's (2016) study of teenage feminist bloggers in the US points out that the majority are middle-class: working class and poor girls often lack the time to blog, as they need to earn an income or take on significant unpaid work at home. These dynamics are often similar to those of offline activism – although as discussed in Section 3.1 above, online activism can also allow people who could not take part in a physical protest, for example, to take action and be part of a movement (Breheny, 2017).

Unconscious biases among users mean that viewpoints and concerns of more privileged groups often dominate and those of marginalised groups are erased. This can lead to online spaces that do not always feel inclusive, relevant or welcoming to people of diverse identities. As Mendes et al. argue:

> 'Although it may be technologically easy for many groups to engage in digital feminist activism, there remain emotional, mental or practical barriers which create different experiences, and legitimate some feminist voices, perspectives and experiences over other.'

Mendes et al. (2018: 237)

Unconscious biases among users mean that viewpoints and concerns of more privileged groups often dominate and those of marginalised groups can be erased.

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Two studies by Mendes et al. (2018) show how mobilisation under the #MeToo movement's banner in the global North (particularly the US and UK) has tended to privilege discussion of violence by men against cisgender white women. Their analyses found both that violence within the LGBTQI+ community was considered 'off-topic' and that posts by trans or other queer users typically attract less sympathetic or more negative content. By contrast, analyses of #MeToo in India

highlight an explicit recognition of the specific challenges, violence and discrimination faced by LGBTQI+ communities (Pain, 2020; Dehingia and Raj, 2021).

With growing awareness of intersectional inequalities, some gender norm activism on social media has also made a conscious attempt to challenge marginalisation and under-representation. For example, an analysis of feminist posts on Twitter in India over a six-month period in 2020 by Dehingia and Raj (2021) found that the most commonly raised topics were education (including the importance of educating boys about consent), GBV, and tweets in solidarity with groups facing intersectional forms of marginalisation, such as Dalit women and the transgender community. In a similar vein, existing campaigns on the rights of marginalised groups have sometimes capitalised on the overall impetus of online movements, even where these have been dominated by more privileged voices. Also in India, campaigners against abuses in garment factories and in domestic work used the momentum generated by #MeToo to attract attention to the lack of effective protection and redress for affected women (Ranganathan, 2021).

Responding to racial biases within digital feminist activism in the US, Black feminists have created new hashtags to bring visibility to the intersecting experiences of racism, sexism and other forms of oppression. For example, the #YesAllWomen hashtag highlighted that while not all men perpetrate sexual violence, all women are at risk. Racially marginalised women (such as Black and Indigenous women) built on this to highlight their greater risk of domestic violence, hypersexualisation, imprisonment and related violence compared with the risk for the population as a whole. New hashtags such as #YesAllWhiteWomen, #SolidarityIsForWhiteWomen and #YouOkSis? aimed to draw attention both to these inequalities and to the mainstream movement's lack of engagement with them (Jackson and Banaszczyk, 2016). Analyses of how campaigns such as #BringBackOurGirls[24] and #JusticeforLiz[25] that originated in Nigeria and Kenya, respectively, were presented on social media in the 'Global North' emphasise the importance of solidarity efforts that are sensitive to colonial and imperialist legacies and avoid perpetuating racist stereotypes (in this case of African girls in need of outside intervention).

Research on norms within feminist online activism also highlights the ways that certain practices can be experienced as exclusionary. Research by Kanai and McGrane on closed feminist online communities in Australia found that they 'were often deemed to be both socially affirming and necessary political spaces, at the same time as they were also experienced as spaces of anxiety and some social risk' (Kanai and McGrane, 2021: 2314). Participants feared appearing ill-informed, but also being judged, politically and personally.[26] This led some members to mostly listen, rather than post, and to avoid topics that could be controversial.

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24 This campaign was started by activists in Nigeria after the abduction in April 2014 of nearly 300 girls by the extremist group Boko Haram from a school in Chibok, Boro state, and attracted a high level of global media attention, with the campaign endorsed by Michelle Obama, among others (PASGR, 2018).

25 This hashtag started after a 16-year-old girl was gang-raped by six men and left to die in a pit latrine, with her perpetrators facing few consequences (Higgs, 2015).

26 Jane (2018) suggests, based on interview data, that such attacks are often linked to issues such as pregnancy, parenting and children's health debates (such as vaccination); debates around transgender politics; and whether individuals and groups are performing feminism in the 'right' way.

4 Social media backlash: misogyny and gender-based violence online

The previous chapters have explored how social media activism can drive gender norm change, as well as some of the challenges for social media activism. However, online spaces and social media platforms have also become increasingly hostile spaces, with hateful content directed at women, girls and gender-diverse groups, particularly those with minoritised racial, ethnic or religious identity or sexual preference (UN Women, 2020). Women who are visible in public life, such as activists, politicians, journalists and others who post material that supports gender equality, are particularly likely to be the targets for abuse.

The visibility of feminist and LGBTQI+ activism on social media offers new opportunities for those who resist change to watch, intervene in and derail attempts to challenge gender norms. Some studies suggest that online violence is often targeted, in particular, against people who challenge established gender norms (Megarry, 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). This chapter, therefore, discusses online misogyny as a barrier to activism on gender norms in some detail.

4.1 Scale and forms of online gender-based violence

Online GBV can be defined as:

> 'an action…that harms others based on their sexual or gender identity or by enforcing harmful gender norms, which is carried out by using the internet or mobile technology. This includes stalking, bullying, sexual harassment, defamation, hate speech and exploitation, or any other online controlling behavior.'
>
> *Iyer et al. (2020: 10)*

This violence is facilitated by some of the very factors that also enable online feminist activism, including: the anonymity of the internet and its relative affordability; the ability to contact anyone in real time or upload different types of visual and, often, unverified content; and the speed at which material can be circulated (Are, 2020; Dragiewicz et al., 2018; Iyer et al., 2020). The lack of (or inadequate) legal frameworks, safety policies and 'community standards'[27] of social networking platforms have also allowed misogynistic content to proliferate. Reports suggest the problem is growing as algorithms aggregate content that supports online misogyny and violence (Rentschler, 2014; Diepeveen, 2022). Box 6 summarises data from various studies indicating the scale of the problem.[28]

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27 Community standards or guidelines are written policies from the company behind the platform on how they identify and address problematic activity and content. Policies cover content and user behaviour (e.g. harassment), and set the terms by which platforms moderate and censor content (Diepeveen, 2022).

28 Despite the proliferation of studies, there are significant knowledge gaps about the prevalence and impact of online GBV.

<div style="border: 2px solid #1a2b4a; padding: 20px;">

Box 6: Key recent data on online gender-based violence

Violence against female internet users

- 23% of women respondents surveyed in Denmark, New Zealand, Poland, the UK and the US, reported experiencing online harassment or abuse (Amnesty International, 2018); as did 28% of women interviewed in Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda (Iyer et al., 2020).
- 58% of young women aged 15–25 across 22 countries reported having experienced online harassment on social media with minor differences by region: Europe, 63%; Latin America, 60%; Asia Pacific, 58%; Africa, 54%; North America, 52% (Plan International, 2020).
- 42% of women respondents in Egypt reported experiencing online violence over the previous year, with 45% who had experienced online violence reporting multiple incidents (Hassan et al., 2020).
- A study in India found that more than half of the women surveyed had experienced online violence; 58% of those said they had been harassed by more than 40 people online (Pasricha, 2016).

Violence against female activists and public figures

- 50% of women activists in Ethiopia, Kenya, Nepal, Uganda and Zimbabwe report experiencing violence on social media, and 89% say they have witnessed another woman being subjected to abuse (Womankind, 2018).
- 47% of young feminist activists reported being attacked on social media apps and platforms (Plan International, 2020).
- 73% of women journalists have experienced online abuse, harassment, threats or attacks (ICFJ and UNESCO, 2020). Amnesty International (2017) found that 1 in 14 tweets sent to women journalists were abusive or vitriolic.

Intersectional abuse

- In a study of girls who had experienced harassment online related to their identities, 42% of girls who identified as LGBTQI+ said they were abused because of their sexuality; 37% of those with a disability reported abuse related to their disability; and 14% of girls who identified as belonging to an ethnic minority reported abuse related to their ethnic identity (Plan International, 2020).
- Research in South Asia found that online abuse was targeted, in particular, towards young, rural, low-income women, women with disabilities and sexual minorities (Sambasivan et al., 2019).
- Research in India found that women politicians identified as Muslims received 56% more problematic or abusive content online than women of other religions. A quarter (26%) of this content contained ethnic/religious slurs, nearly double the figure for women perceived to be Hindus (14%). Women from marginalised castes received 59% more caste-based abuse than women from non-marginalised castes (Amnesty International, 2020a).

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Content that challenges gender norms is particularly likely to attract abuse and backlash. In particular, posts that speak out on violence against women, promote equal gender role and decision-making powers, fight corruption and promote LGBTQI+ rights attract the most abuse. The link between these issues is clear – they are all about challenging and disrupting structures and redistributing power (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2015: 5). Research in South Asia has also found that online violence against women is more prevalent in response to news media updates, political agendas, government policies and everyday events relating to gender equality or feminism, suggesting that it reflects a backlash against perceived threats to the 'status quo' (Kumar et al., 2021; Dehingia et al., 2021). In Pakistan, for example, there was a peak in the number of misogynistic tweets targeted at activists in March 2020 around the annual rally on International Women's Day (Dehingia et al., 2021). Research by Kumar et al. (2021) in India found that women journalists, academics and activists were targeted with more extreme threats of violence online than women who do not occupy public roles.

LGBTQI+ and non-binary activists also face abuse online for not conforming to norms of masculinity and femininity. For example, Fernanda Soares, an LGBTQI+ activist in Brazil who started the YouTube channel *Canal das Bee* (Bee channel), reported receiving death and rape threats almost every time the channel posted content (Truong, 2016). Elsewhere, after Liberated T (an Arabic feminist campaign seeking to challenge negative gender stereotypes) posted a eulogy to Sarah Hegazi, an Egyptian queer activist who committed suicide in 2020, there was a wave of online violence and abuse against those who had commented, wishing death upon the LGBTQI+ community and its allies. Women who supported Liberated T also received violent and abusive messages. This led to over 300 people unfollowing Liberated T (Erhaim, 2020).[29] A study of hate speech on Facebook in India found that 13% focused on gender and sexuality, and one-quarter of this was transphobic or homophobic. Around 12% of gender or sexuality focused hate speech glorified or trivialised rape; many posts combined casteist and/or Islamophobic hate speech with misogynistic or anti-queer content (Soundararajan et al., 2019).

In contrast to physical violence against women (most often perpetrated by someone they know), women are more likely to experience violence online from a stranger or anonymous social media users (Womankind, 2018; Plan International, 2020). Research by Glitch and the End Violence Against Women (EVAW) Coalition reports that 84% of respondents (women and non-binary people) in an online survey undertaken in the UK experienced online abuse from people they did not know (Glitch and EVAW, 2020). These figures emphasize the double-edged nature of social media – as well as providing enormous opportunities to reach others, it also enables activists to be reached by people intent on attacking them personally or diluting their message.

The increase in online activity during Covid-19 lockdowns appears to have contributed to a rise in online abuse (UN Women, 2020). The UK-focused Glitch and EVAW study cited above found that almost one-third (29%) of those who had experienced online abuse before the pandemic reported that it became worse during Covid-19, with clear racial disparities in incidence: 52% of black and minoritised respondents[30] reported experiencing online abuse during the Covid-19 pandemic, compared with 42% of white respondents (Glitch and EVAW, 2020). The proportion of tweets containing misogynistic content (defined as using abusive language to dominate, silence and control women, or that focuses on the inferiority of women) rose significantly in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, from 0.046% of tweets examined before the pandemic to 0.057% during it (Dehingia et al., 2021).[31] While these numbers are low as a proportion of all tweets examined, their impact on recipients is likely to be greater as abusive tweets are not scattered randomly: they tend to respond to and 'pile on' to specific posters.[32]

The patterns and types of violence and abuse experienced by women and feminist activists online vary enormously. Attacks often include more than one type of violence and some transition from online to offline. Table 3 summarises some of the most common forms. The majority of these forms of violence are directed at individuals; some – such as hashtag hacking – are more focused on challenging feminist movements and activism.

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29 What proportion of followers this constituted is not reported.
30 The implication is that this refers to racially minoritized groups, but this is not stated in the report.
31 This would imply a rise from 8,740 to 10,830 misogynistic tweets (authors' calculations).
32 'Pile-on' refers to attacks from large numbers of social media users, often spurred by a single tweet using the 'tweet quote' as discussed at: https://freedomtoons.org/is-this-the-end-of-the-pile-on-twitter-if-so-i-am-delighted/. 'Piling on' is also referred to as 'dogpiling' (Jankowicz et al., 2021).

Table 3: Examples of types of gendered online violence

Type of online violence	Definition	Example
Trolling (or e-bile)	An umbrella term for antagonistic and antisocial behaviours and motivations online (Sanfilippo et al., 2018). Trolling is used as a 'collective form of harassment perceived as having the malicious intent to provoke another user' (Ortiz, 2020: 1) and spur on other trolls (Moloney and Love, 2018: 4). Gendered trolling is 'heavily laced with expletives, profanity, and explicit imagery of sexual violence' (Jane, 2014: 558). Trolls seek to silence women on social media while proclaiming that their rape jokes and promotion of violence against women are both funny and socially acceptable (Cole, 2015: 357). The examples in this table can be considered different forms of trolling.	• A study of online conversations about 13 female politicians in Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the US across six social media platforms found more than 336,000 pieces of abusive content shared by in excess of 190,000 users over a two-month period. In all, 12 of the 13 politicians were subjected to gendered abuse, and nine were subjected to gendered disinformation. The majority of the abuse (78%) targeted just one person: US Vice President Kamala Harris. Sexual narratives were the most common forms of abuse (31% in total) (Jankowicz et al., 2021).
Hate speech	Any expression that is abusive, insulting, intimidating, harassing and incites violence or discrimination (Erjavec and Kovačič, 2012). It is directed at people based on their race, ethnic origin, religion, gender, age, disability, or sexual orientation (Chakraborti and Garland, 2015).	• A study of Facebook in India by Equality Labs reported many examples of hate speech based on religion, caste, gender and sexual orientation. Different forms of hate speech often intersect, for example combining sexist and casteist or Islamophobic content (Soundararajan, 2021).
Threats of violence	These include rape threats, death threats, threats to property, threats that target family members and friends, and further acts of intimidation.	• Mexican activists for sexual and reproductive rights have been targeted by death threats, harassment in public spaces and acts of intimidation, including against their children (OHCHR, 2018).
Sexual harassment	Includes sending unsolicited nude images, non-consensual sexting ('the creating, sharing or sending of sexually explicit messages or images', Ringrose et al., 2012), and 'revenge porn' (the non-consensual posting of images or videos of women and girls to online pornography sites).[i]	• In a study of 55 women parliamentarians, 41.8% had experienced 'extremely humiliating or sexually charged images' of themselves being spread through social media during their parliamentary term (IPU, 2016).

Doxxing	Outing private information, such as intimate photos or finances, location or contact information, non-consensually to the public (Dascalescu, 2021).	• Team Mafisi, a Kenyan Telegram channel, which shared misogynistic content, doxxed women and posted intimate images of women and girls (Achieng, 2021). • Women's rights activists from the Sulá Batsú cooperative in Costa Rica regularly have their photos, identities and contact information revealed, which has led to many activists losing their jobs, being unable to find work with other companies and being blocked from obtaining land for agriculture (Poetranto, 2020).
Cyberstalking and stalking	Unwanted repeated contact from the same person or account, which can transition from social media to email or text messages and offline (Sambasivan et al., 2019; Barak, 2005).	• 66% of the women interviewed by Sambasivan et al. (2019) in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan had experienced cyberstalking, including receiving daily calls, friend requests and direct messaging from unknown men (most of these were sexual in nature), some of whom initially impersonated women to gain their trust. Some of the women in the study reported that lack of privacy on other apps they used (such as ride hailing apps) led to increased levels of cyberstalking.
Zoom bombing	The 'unwanted intrusion into a videoconference by an uninvited participant' – occurring on varied platforms, not only Zoom (Brown and Holmberg, 2020).	• During the 2020 municipal elections in Brazil, violent and pornographic 'Zoom-bombings' hijacked and disrupted events organised by women candidates and prevented them from participating in political debate (Rupp, 2020).
Hashtag hacking	Flooding hashtags with abusive, pornographic or distressing content, rather than or alongside directing abuse at individuals. This can derail activists' community-building efforts and posts that educate others, as they cannot safely promote or direct others to a hashtag for risk of being hacked.	• In October 2015, the hashtags #TakeBackTheTech and #ImagineAFeministInternet were hacked by thousands of anti-feminist and misogynistic tweets and memes (APC, 2015). • In India, trolls tried to derail meaningful conversation about violence against women and flooded the #RingtheBell (#BellBajao in Hindi) hashtag with violent and abusive tweets and images (Losh, 2014).
Gendered disinformation	Involves 'false or misleading gender and sex-based narratives against women, often with some degree of coordination, aimed at deterring women from participating in the public sphere. It combines three defining characteristics of online disinformation: falsity, malign intent, and coordination' (Jankowicz et al., 2021: 3). Purveyors of gendered disinformation often camouflage their messages via memes, other visual messages and coded language that are not picked up by content moderation algorithms.	• Jankowicz et al. (2021) found examples of narratives, memes and phrases suggesting that prominent female US politicians variously: had slept their way to the top; were not eligible to stand for office if their parents were immigrants; had entered the country on false pretences if they were born outside the US; were transgender (with the implication that this would discredit them); had manipulated elections; and had exaggerated or misrepresented the policies they supported; as well as more generic sexualised abuse and the gendered racialised abuse of women politicians of colour.

i. Some feminist researchers and activists are not comfortable with the term 'revenge porn', believing it implies there is a level of consent in the creation of the content, which is not always the case (Henry and Powell, 2014).

4.2 What platform features and policies facilitate abuse?

The distribution of patterns of online abuse reflects the usage patterns for different platforms, with the most-widely used platforms generally being those with the highest levels of abuse. For example, the study by Iyer et al. (2020) in Ethiopia, Kenya, Senegal, South Africa and Uganda found that 71% of the incidents of online violence reported by participants took place on Facebook. These findings are consistent with Womankind (2018) research in Ethiopia, Kenya, Nepal, Uganda and Zimbabwe, which also reported the highest levels of abuse (both experienced and witnessed) on Facebook, followed by Twitter, Instagram and YouTube. Plan International's (2020) research in 22 countries with young activists (aged 15–25) also found that abuse was most common on Facebook (39%). Reflecting the youthful sample, respondents also reported abuse on a number of other platforms: Instagram (23%), WhatsApp (14%), Snapchat (10%), Twitter (9%) and TikTok (6%).

The risks of online abuse may be greatest on platforms with weak or no moderation. Messaging apps such as WhatsApp and Telegram (which are closed groups without moderation) were found by Iyer et al. (2020) to be second only to Facebook in terms of the number of incidents of abuse experienced by respondents. Several studies have highlighted Telegram as being attractive to social media users who want to avoid bans or content being removed, and it has become a preferred channel for right-wing extremists in the US who have been expelled from Twitter, Facebook and Parler.[33] Although Telegram takes down some extremist and terrorist channels and groups, this is less common with misogynistic channels. As a result, misogynistic social media users who are expelled from other platforms, usually for other reasons, sometimes move to Telegram. One such example is a popular Kenyan blogger who shares misogynistic content and often targets Kenyan influencers, politicians and journalists. After he was expelled from Twitter for defamation allegations, he formed a channel on Telegram that attracted thousands of followers, where he continues to share his misogynistic content (Achieng, 2021).

Although the policies of most platforms are intended to prevent the dissemination of hate speech,[34] they suffer from a number of limitations, which are discussed in more depth in ALIGN's companion report (Diepeveen, 2022). Content moderation tends to involve both the automated removal of content (using an algorithm or artificial intelligence) that violates policies, and the flagging of posts that users believe to be contrary to platform guidelines. A 2020 study by Carlson and Rousselle of Facebook's hate speech removal process in 2018 and 2019 found that gender-based hate speech was consistently less likely to be removed from the site than hate speech targeting any of the other protected categories. Although the amount of gender-based hate speech removed from the platform increased by 15% between 2018 and 2019, less than half of it (45.2%) was removed.[35] Soundararajan et al.'s (2019) study of Facebook in India found that only 6.8% of posts flagged as violating community standards were finally removed, and many were reinstated after initial removal.

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33 Platforms such as 4chan, 8kun and Gab generally only restrict content that violates the law, and attract users interested in content forbidden on more mainstream platforms, such as white supremacist and some misogynist content (Jankowicz et al., 2021).

34 The European Union's 'Framework Decision on Combating Certain Forms and Expressions of Racism and Xenophobia by Means of Criminal Law' defines hate speech as the public incitement to violence or hatred directed to groups or individuals on the basis of certain characteristics, including race, color, religion, descent and national or ethnic origin (Council of the European Union, 2008, cited in Carlson and Rouselle, 2020).

35 Previously Facebook moderators had often classified misogynistic content as 'controversial humour' but in response to complaints, this designation no longer exists (Buni and Chemaly, 2014).

The extent of moderation of online violence and hate speech also reflects platforms' levels of investment in particular regions. As Iyer et al. (2020) point out, social media platforms have historically ignored African markets and continue to invest much less in tailoring their products to these diverse markets than they do in higher-income settings. Despite serving a population of 1.2 billion, the number of staff within these companies dedicated to and working from Africa is negligible (Iyer et al., 2020). This means that much less effort is dedicated to content moderation, and few staff have skills in relevant languages, or are able to understand cultural nuances and modes of expression. All of these factors contribute to a situation where a great deal of online misogyny goes undetected and unchallenged by social media companies. Iyer et al. (2020) also found that 28% of reported incidents were unresolved, but the figure was much higher in Uganda (57%) and South Africa (35%).

Soundararajan et al. (2019) highlight similar concerns with respect to Facebook in India, where 1.3 billon people had more than 294 million active accounts at the time of the study, and where the number of accounts is likely to exceed those in the US in the near future. They point out that Facebook's community standards are not available for users to read in most Indian languages, meaning that a high proportion of users have no opportunity to become aware of what constitutes acceptable and unacceptable posts. Soundararajan et al.'s (2019) study points out that Facebook's community standards were designed with North American and European users in mind and require further development to tailor them to India's religious, social and political complexities, to enable reporting of hate speech based on caste. Soundararajan et al. (2019) also advocate that Facebook invests in auditing all of its policies and programmes from a lens of their potential impact and interpretation in India, establishes consultative arrangements with civil society and internet freedom advocates, and sets up a reparations fund for victims of violence facilitated by Facebook-owned platforms.

4.3 How does abuse affect feminist social media activism?

Many activists accept abuse as an inevitable part of online engagement and try to ignore it. As a young activist in the US shared, 'it has become so normal to get a passing comment that upsets me that I don't often tell people about it because (laughs) it's become a normal part of running the Instagram account. I normally block it and then move on…'. Another young activist in Chile stated, 'At the beginning it probably would affect me a little, but now I feel I'm so used to it, that we just laugh…' (Plan International, 2020). While ignoring abuse can enable activists to continue their work, this does not mean that the abuse has no effects.

The impacts on women of online violence include fear, anxiety and stress, compounded by the risk of physical harm (OHCHR, 2018). In all, 42% of the young women activists who took part in the 2020 study by Plan International reported lower self-esteem or losing confidence and experiencing mental or emotional stress as a result of online violence.[36] Research by Amnesty International (2018) in Denmark, New Zealand, Poland, Spain, the UK and the US found that at least 41% of women who had been abused online feared for their physical safety, and that 24% feared for the safety of their family. Almost two-thirds (61%) said they had experienced lower self-esteem or loss of self-confidence, and 55% reported stress, anxiety

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36 In addition, nearly a quarter reported feeling physically unsafe (24%), with others having problems at school (18%), problems with friends or family (19%) and problems finding or keeping a job (7%).

or panic attacks after experiencing online abuse or harassment. Online violence can add to the trauma experienced by survivors of previous violence (Lewis et al., 2017),[37] or if individuals feel their reputation has been compromised.

Activists are rarely equipped to deal with trauma resulting from online abuse, or trained to support survivors. In particular, activists campaigning on GBV are exposed to vicarious trauma: the effect of reading about the traumatic experiences of other people. For example, Pain's (2020) study of the #MeToo movement in India found that most respondents reported that they felt 'triggered' by the stories they read and the similarities to their own experiences. Activists also have to engage in a great deal of emotional 'labour' to remove abusive or violent content and prevent trolls or other malicious actors derailing the movements they are trying to build (Losh, 2014).

Research by Womankind in Kenya, Nepal and Zimbabwe highlights that activists feel less willing to speak up and voice their opinions after experiencing or witnessing abuse online. Almost three-quarters (71%) of women said the threat of online violence and abuse affects their engagement with social media. Some women withdrew from certain conversations, while others stopped using the internet or social media altogether, and others reported self-censoring their responses. Interviewees in studies by both Amnesty International (2018) and Plan International (2020) reported similar responses, with some avoiding certain topics (e.g. abortion or LGBTQI+ rights) and others reducing their use of social media or particular platforms. Groups who face intersecting forms of online abuse may be particularly likely to modify their behaviour as a result: the research by Glitch and EVAW (2020) in the UK found that 88% of Black and (racially) minoritised respondents reported modifying their behaviour online following incidents of online abuse, compared with 72% of white respondents.

Appendix 3 summarises some emerging initiatives to counter online GBV. These span digital literacy initiatives to help social media users recognise and challenge different forms of violence; helplines and information on sources of support and ways to respond; efforts to promote norms of respectful online engagement; and initiatives to increase the effectiveness of platforms' responses to online hate. All of these approaches have an important role to play. As Soundararajan et al. (2019: 14) point out, online hate is not static and 'the constantly evolving memes and narratives at play in the heart of hate speech must be met with an equally nimble process to contain them'.

> " Online violence against women exerts a 'silencing effect' on women's right to participate in public spaces.

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[37] Herek et al. (2002) suggest that this may be particularly the case for minorities who carry with them a consciousness of the violence and injustice that has been inflicted upon members of their group.

5 Organised 'anti-feminist' and 'anti-gender' activism on social media

This chapter discusses organised social media activism that challenges feminist activism and that seeks to reinstate 'traditional' patriarchal norms and heteronormative family values.[38] Many of the features that facilitate the sharing of pro-gender equality content also enable 'anti-gender' equality movements to mobilise online, and to coordinate and network across borders (Hoctor et al., 2021: 56). The chapter focuses on 'anti-gender' activism (Section 5.1) and the 'manosphere' – online misogynistic movements (Section 5.2).

5.1 'Anti-gender' movements online

Anti-'gender ideology'[39] movements have coalesced since the mid–late 1990s as a response to perceived efforts to upend traditional gender roles and relations (Corredor, 2019; McEwen, 2020). These movements define themselves in opposition to policies considered as a threat to patriarchal gender norms, particularly those related to sexual and reproductive health and rights, and LGBTQI+ rights. They can be dated to the coalitions that emerged to contest the extension of these rights as called for in the 1995 Beijing conference on women's rights and the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo (Corredor, 2019). This initial positioning informs and shapes the narratives of anti-gender activism online and offline today (Paternotte and Kuhar, 2018).

Central to anti-gender activism is an appeal to patriarchal gender norms as the true values of society. This appeal is often phrased or couched in religious terms or in terms of protecting families, but depending on the context, may also be framed as resistance to progress towards gender equality or feminist discourse (Griffon et al., 2019). In many ways, 'gender' works as a 'symbolic glue' that holds together various fears and concerns about shifting social, cultural and religious norms (McEwen, 2020; Corrêa et al., 2018; CFFP, 2021a; Kuhar and Zobec, 2017).

Anti-gender activism is 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 (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; CFFP, 2021a; Janulewicz and Balint, 2021). In the US and Europe, anti-gender activism has been initiated and led by religious actors such as the Catholic Church and right-wing think tanks such as the US Heritage Foundation

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38 Sanders (2018) refers to the attempts of anti-gender actors to weaken the influence of international women's rights norms as 'norm spoiling'. They employ similar tactics to activists who aim to build equitable gender norms: lobbying, activist training and mobilisation, strategic litigation and public awareness campaigns.

39 There are close similarities between anti-gender and anti-feminism movements in their goals and politics, with many commentators and researchers often using the terms synonymously.

or the World Congress of Families (CFFP, 2021a: 28). Many of these actors have great influence on national and international politics through lobbying, the funnelling of political funding, and networking with other powerful actors to disrupt progress on gender equality at the international and national levels. In some cases, as seen in relation to President Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, these agendas are supported and entrenched by elected politicians (Faúndes, 2019).

New actors have emerged in the past decade who organise in opposition to 'gender ideology', progress towards gender equality, norm change, or legislative change (CFFP, 2021: 30). They include protest movements, civil initiatives, concerned citizens and parents, think tanks, academics and institutions as well as political parties and parliamentary groups (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; Janulewicz and Balint, 2021). Many of these groups started as local movements but are increasingly spreading into transnational coalitions, organising both online and offline. For example, *La Manif pour Tous* ('Protest for all'), which emerged in France in 2010 to campaign against equal marriage, has inspired activist movements across Europe, including in Germany (*Demo für Alle*) and Finland (*Aito avioliitto*) (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; CFFP, 2021a: 30). Similarly, in Spain, the *Hazte Oír* ('Make yourself heard') movement was founded in 2001 to 'restore the natural order' and support married couples and families. The movement quickly became more radical, with their slogan becoming *Hazte Oír – Victimas de la ideología de género* ('Make yourself heard – Victims of gender ideology') (author's translation) (Kuhar and Paternotte, 2017; CFFP, 2021a: 30). *Hazte Oír* now has international reach in more than 50 countries through its online platform and foundation CitizenGO (Rivera, 2019).

Table 4 shows the numbers of subscribers to the anti-gender movements and organisations discussed in this chapter as of January 2022, indicating the scale of their support. In the absence of studies that examine directly their influence on attitudes and behaviour, subscriber numbers give some indication of the scale of their social media influence.

Table 4: Subscribers to various anti-gender social media platforms, January 2022[40]

Organisation/ platform	Facebook Number of likes (l) and followers (f)	Twitter Number of followers	Instagram Number of followers
La Manif por Tous	50,733 (l) 49,000 (f)	42,500	8,610
CitizenGo	96,030 (l) 99,534 (f)	28,600	1,983
Hazte Oír	95,085 (l) 94, 818 (f)	55,700	11,400
Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas	236,366 (l) 248,156 (f)	18,999	12,600

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40 The data were collected from these organisations' official accounts on 14 January 2022. Not all likes or subscriptions are necessarily active. However, as content is widely reshared on social media, these numbers probably underestimate the scale of engagement with the material produced by these organisations.

The primary concerns of anti-gender actors vary across campaigns, movements and contexts. However, common themes include: opposition to sexual and reproductive rights agendas, particularly abortion (either seeking to outlaw abortion altogether or demanding stricter controls); 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. Some campaigns oppose LGBTQI+ rights, especially trans rights and equal marriage. Some movements campaign against laws that criminalise GBV or violence against children.

Many strategies and practices employed by anti-gender actors mirror some of those used by feminist activists. On social media, anti-gender actors use platforms as an effective way to disseminate alternative sources of information, to lobby institutions and politicians, to mobilise for protest, and to target and silence pro-gender equality actors (Corrêa et al., 2018; Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation & EuroMedRights, 2019). They use memes and videos to 'educate' their followers, relying heavily on Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to mobilise for online and offline action, and use hashtag activism to disrupt pro-gender equality movements' activism[41] or to mobilise support for their own campaigns.

Some activities, however, go beyond those of feminist movements. For example, some anti-gender campaigns – which tend to have far more funding than feminist movements thanks to their powerful backers (CFFP, 2021b) – have paid hackers to harass and troll activists, politicians and academics online (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2019). The Facebook page of the Czech Women's Lobby, for example, has been inundated with 'raids of hateful comments' from anti-gender actors on a weekly basis (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2019).

Social media activism of this kind has been termed 'networked misogyny'. It creates a hostile digital environment and functions to maintain and reinforce specific gender norms, and to keep women and LGBTQI+ minorities in their 'perceived place' (Banet-Weiser and Miltner, 2015; Cole, 2015). With anti-gender activism becoming increasingly transnational, networked and funded by those with the power and authority to uphold a 'traditional' gender order that maintains their interests, this networked misogyny presents a growing challenge to those working to further gender equality both online and offline.

Anti-gender actors and movements also use the online tactics employed by far-right groups,[42] such as manipulating information, provoking an emotional response, and constant repetition of ideas, slogans and images. In particular, anti-gender actors share partial facts and 'fictitious constructions' 'until the discourse becomes a new truth' (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2019: 8), bolstering these with visual images and strong narratives to provoke an emotional response (Wardle and Derakshan, 2017, cited in Mina, 2019). During his election campaign, for example, Bolsonaro repeatedly described a *Partido dos Trabalhadores* (PT) ('Workers' Party') anti-homophobia education project, as 'kit gay', an attempt to encourage early sexuality among children and 'open the door to paedophilia' (Hirao, 2021; Maranhão Filho et al., 2019).

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41 Anti-gender actors also seek to 'de-fund' movements and civil society organisations (CSOs) that advance a so-called 'gender ideology' (CFFP, 2021a), including in the areas of research, development aid and public health. Simultaneously, they seek to establish or fund CSOs or movements that actively advance anti-gender ideas (Zacharenko, 2016).

42 Corrêa et al. (2018) point out that support for anti-gender movements in Latin America crosses the political spectrum and is not an exclusively right-wing project.

Anti-gender actors also use social media to spread 'moral panic' among parents and other 'concerned citizens' (Hirao, 2021; Maranhão Filho et al., 2019). Somali gender equality activist Hanna Abubakar has been the target of disinformation campaigns alleging that she is selling Somali women into sex work and that she is trying to convert them to Christianity. An investigation found that some influential diaspora figures were paying vulnerable women to post such content (Mahmood, 2021).

Recognition of the extent and nature of hate-filled online content has resulted in social media platforms adopting policies whereby posts or accounts are shut down immediately if they are reported as violating community standards and are investigated afterwards. Opponents of online gender equality activists – often coordinated on social media – have 'weaponised' this policy to make it harder to post pro-equality content. For example, Hanna Abubakar's Facebook account has been disabled multiple times and anti-equality activists have attempted to get her YouTube channel shut down. Although she has been able to get these shutdowns reversed, her content continues to be 'shadowbanned', she has been unable to get her page verified with a blue tick as trustworthy content, and has had issues with new followers subscribing to her page (Mahmood, 2021).

Pain's (2020) study of feminist activism on Twitter in India found examples of accounts being blocked as a result of complaints about feminist content, largely on issues around sexual harassment and other forms of GBV, tagged with #MeToo. The activists that Pain interviewed reported that although they had expected trolling, they believed that Twitter would be more supportive of social movements and that it would not be such a 'battle' to get accounts reinstated.

The strategies and content created by anti-gender movements are tailored to the context, reflecting local debates and framing of issues (Paternotte, 2020). For example, the language and strategies they employ have, in parts of the world, shifted from religious to secular framing (CFFP, 2021a), and are co-opting human rights and empowerment discourse to frame their vision (Goetz, 2020; CFFP, 2021a). The term 'women's rights', for example, is replaced with 'mothers' rights', and 'gender mainstreaming' is replaced with 'family mainstreaming' (Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation, 2019: 9). Many current anti-gender campaigns deploy young women as the face of the campaign, as in the *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* ('Don't mess with my children') campaign (Box 7), aiming to portray themselves as aligned with their current or near-future concerns.

Box 7: Case studies of anti-gender movements' activism online and offline

Two anti-gender movements are highlighted here that have effectively used social media to organise and amplify offline protest. *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* has used social media to raise opposition to specific curriculum policy changes, as well as to mobilise against shifting gender norms. CitizenGo used its platform to publicise the tour of its #FreeSpeechBus, which asserted that a person's sex is a biological given and cannot be changed.

***Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* ('Don't mess with my children')**

In 2016, after Peru adopted a new school curriculum based on gender equality and non-discrimination against sexual minorities, a group of actors connected to conservative churches and evangelical leaders mobilised under the slogan *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* ('Don't mess with my children'). The group uses traditional forms of activism such as street protests and legal action, as well as social media activism, to oppose sexuality education and disrupt pro-gender equality activism (Rousseau, 2020).

In December 2016, the first campaign banner appeared in Lima across one of the city's main avenues. Overnight, the group's Facebook page received thousands of 'likes'. Organisers began to post information and started to mobilise street protests across the country (Meneses, 2019). Across Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Instagram, *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* uses hashtag activism and videos to mobilise protests and to lobby politicians for legislative change. Similarly to other anti-gender equality movements, it has a young and vibrant social media image, often putting young men and women or children centre stage (see image).
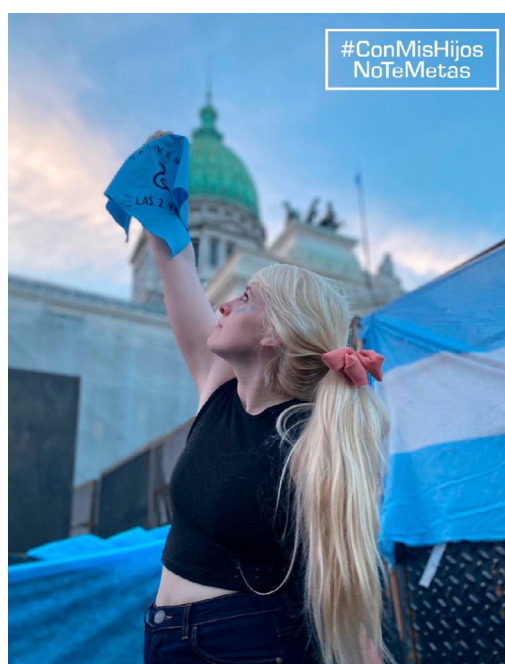
Source: Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas (Argentina) campaign image, Twitter.

At first, *Con Mis Hijos No Te Metas* organisers and followers relied heavily on the use of memes on their Facebook page and Instagram to disseminate their messages and ideology, and to depict LGBTQI+ people in derogatory and violent ways (Meneses, 2019). Politicians associated with the movement also used social media to spread disinformation about the new curriculum, aiming to provoke moral panic. For example, a congresswoman tweeted an adapted story of 'Little Red Riding Hood' that showed a change of roles between boys and girls, claiming it was from the proposed new curriculum (Meneses, 2019). The movement has now extended to Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Ecuador, Mexico, Panama and Spain (González Vélez et al., 2019). It is actively involved in debates around education and gender identity, and the legalisation of abortion (in Argentina) (Torres et al., 2020).

Box 7: continued

CitizenGO's #FreeSpeechBus: 'They are coming for your children'

The Spanish anti-gender movement *Hazte Oír* ('Make yourself heard') has digital and transnational reach through 'CitizenGO', which is active in 50 countries (Whyte, 2017). CitizenGO was originally designed and launched as a petition platform, modelled on sites such as Change.org but promoting 'ultra-conservative' action (Whyte, 2017; Janulewicz and Balint, 2021). It now leads *Hazte Oír's* global activism on social media. In 2017, CitizenGO supported a #FreeSpeechBus, bearing the message: 'Boys are boys… and always will be. Girls are girls… and always will be. You can't change sex. Respect all' (Parke, 2018).[i] The #FreeSpeechBus has toured Chile, Colombia, France, Germany, Italy, Kenya, Mexico, Spain and the US (Parke, 2018). CitizenGO launched the tour on Twitter, announcing that the first stop would be Nairobi, and tracked the bus's progress, mobilising further support via the hashtag and through posting regular vlogs on YouTube (Whyte, 2017; Parke, 2018) (see image).

Source: @CitizenGo Africa, Twitter

The bus met resistance from pro-equality and LGBTQI+ protesters in nearly every city (McEwen, 2020). In Madrid, a judge banned it from travelling through the city on the grounds that it could provoke hate crimes. In Bogota, LGBTQI+ activists splashed rainbow-coloured paint all over the bus (Whyte, 2017). Recent interviews with activists also highlight CitizenGO's use of social media to organise offline and online attacks on abortion clinics, sexual and reproductive health rights activists and NGO workers in Kenya, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria and Tanzania (CFFP, 2021a: 34).

i.   This was not the first time *Hazte Oír* used a bus to coordinate its online and offline activism. In 2019, it used a 'Feminazi' meme (depicting Adolf Hitler with make-up, a pink moustache and a feminist symbol on his hat), originally disseminated on social media, on a bus campaign. The bus toured Spain to lobby against 'gender laws', including laws protecting all citizens against GBV (Torres et al., 2020).

5.2 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' (involuntary celibates)[43] and 'men going their own way' (MGTOW) (Jones et al., 2020).[44] Recent research highlights a 'growing social movement that transcends cultural and geographical differences by mobilizing resources and ideology online' (Cockerill, 2019: 89), including on Facebook, Tumblr and Reddit (Massanari, 2015). There has also been a surge in dedicated websites set up by those actors, such as MensRightsIndia.net, MensRightsAssociation. org and Masculinist-India.com. In her research on the Incel movement, Ging (2019: 16) argues that men's rights activism has reached a high level of emotional charge and toxicity that threatens 'the capacity of digital feminisms and women generally to operate online'. Understanding how these patriarchal and violent misogynistic 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).

Compared with 'anti-gender' movements, which sometimes co-opt the language of feminism and aim to present an alternative vision of society, these groups are more openly misogynistic. While much of their online activity vilifies and expresses hatred for women, it creates a space for misogynistic discourse and norms among community users where such views, and posting them, is acceptable. As Jones et al. (2020) argue, even where groups such as MGTOW do not harass women online explicitly, they normalise sexism by posting derogatory content about them. 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. Cockerill (2019: 89) argues that the misogynistic content in these circles constitutes 'a self-sustaining cycle: a violently misogynistic meme attracts people who agree with its message, and their participation in the community generates more violent content to fit their tastes'.

Manosphere activists try to influence both discourse and policy. There is emerging research on the use of social media by men's rights' activists, not only to attack and discredit women activists but also to reverse gender norm change such as rolling back reproductive rights or discouraging women for standing for public office (She Persisted, 2020). For example, in response to India's #MeToo movement, men's rights activists tweeted, calling for the repeal of laws that 'demonise men' (Ranganathan, 2021).

Despite the growing body of examples such as those highlighted above, more research is needed to understand how anti-gender and anti-feminist actors and movements are using social media to build online communities. In particular, there is a gap in knowledge about how they use social media to bolster their activism and ideology, as well as the threat they pose to women's rights' movements, individual feminist activists, and women and girls in general, and how they can best be countered.

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43 'Incels' harbour hostility towards women for denying them the sex they believe they deserve (Tranchese and Sugiura, 2021; Jones et al., 2020). They view women and norms of desirable masculinity as the cause of their problems (Heritage and Koller, 2020).

44 MGTOW are separatists who want to abandon the 'gynocentric order' (Lin, 2017) and 'stop pursuing romantic relationships with women to focus on self-development and preservation' (Jones et al., 2020: 1904).

6 Conclusion

'A surface assessment of the current digital ecosystem may indicate that feminism has never had it better. After all, our screens and feeds light up with messages, memes and endorsements reaffirming that the future is female! But digging deeper reveals a less inspiring reality. Feminism's cultural currency has grown at the expense of its political edge. Shallow forms of pluralism seem to compromise real diversity and the right to be heard – a vital aspect of communicative agency – does not meaningfully obtain for vast swathes of the world's women. For those that do manage to defeat these odds, the forces of virulent online misogyny remain a constant threat.'

Bharthur and Aggarwal (2021).

Many of the themes Bharthur and Aggarwal raise in the above quote chime with those raised in this report. However, the evidence reviewed also reveals the great potential for feminist social media activism and the creative ways in which both organised campaigns and individual feminists use different platforms to effect change. It is vital to recognise that social media can be an empowering space for feminist activism, and a space that can catalyse transformative shifts in thinking and behaviour.

> " It is vital to recognise that social media can be an empowering space for feminist activism, and a space that can catalyse transformative shifts in thinking and behaviour.

The potential of social media to help shift discriminatory norms

The use of social media continues to grow rapidly around the world and is an increasingly important space where gender norms are both contested and reinforced. Cultures are never static and there are constant shifts in the balance between how far users reinforce or challenge norms.

By creating and sharing content, social media users may contribute to shifts in gender norms both directly and indirectly. Direct routes to change include content that reframes viewers' perceptions of issues and that influences everyday interactions or shapes public discourse around gender equality. More indirect routes to norm change via social media involve expanding the space for participation in politics and public discourse; engaging a wider range of voices in conversations about gender equality; and campaigning for or catalysing legislative or policy change. These shifts can be progressive (more egalitarian) or regressive.

The potential of social media activism to contribute to shifts in gender norms is rooted in many of its particular attributes. Social media platforms remove many of the constraints of the physical world: they allow users to reach others around the world in real time, and to post anonymously, which can be important for safety but can also fuel the posting of more extreme and abusive content. They facilitate both in-group discussion (in closed communities) and outreach to broader networks. Social media posts and conversations are often informal and conversational, and highly visual and emotionally engaging. Many use humour to

challenge perceptions. Because social networks are at the heart of a person's social media experience, it is a key space for efforts to shift norms, which also exist within and across social networks.

This report has considered two key types of social media activity: specific campaigns and more organic efforts to shift norms by posting feminist memes, selfies and blogging. These are closely related, with visual materials such as memes being widely shared in hashtag campaigns and users tagging blog posts, photos or memes with hashtags that show their identification with broader movements. Both activities have the potential to contribute to norm shifts and many defy attempts to classify them: hashtag campaigns tend to focus on achieving a specific policy or legal change, with cultural shifts a secondary objective, while 'everyday activism' is more directly concerned with reframing perceptions.

The literature on gender equality activism on social media has mostly focused on hashtag campaigns, and in particular, #MeToo. This literature explores the origins of campaigns, their online reception and the representation of different voices within these campaigns. It also shows how hashtags can be information sources on particular issues and signpost access to relevant services and support. One strand of this literature argues that hashtag campaigns have the greatest impact when they are linked to offline activism: by serving as a tag to allow activists to coordinate offline action; by inspiring people to engage others in their social networks with issues and causes; and by inspiring action among powerholders and gatekeepers with the potential to change policies, laws and practices. There is relatively little literature on whether or how high-profile campaigns that gain broadcast media coverage (and often include offline protests) have contributed to shifts in attitudes, norms and practices.

'Everyday activism', such as posting feminist memes, selfies and blogging to shift norms and practices is gaining greater academic attention. This type of activism often aims to reframe perceptions through humour (especially via memes, captioned selfies and short videos) or through narratives around life events (for example, by blogging) and can also direct viewers to sources of information. These forms of activism tend to be common among younger social media users, often with an explicitly intersectional feminist focus. As with hashtag campaigns, there is little literature that explores shifts in norms directly, but it is likely that posting, sharing and viewing feminist content both strengthens commitment to egalitarian norms and diffuses these norms across social networks.

Challenges and limitations of social media as a space for gender equality activism

There are two main types of challenges: those that are inherent or specific to social media and those that reflect broader social and political issues that are being played out on a new terrain.

Challenges specific to social media

The business models and architecture of social media platforms that aggregate and amplify content based on users' inferred characteristics contribute to polarising discourse, including around gender norms. The business models of most social media platforms are built on selling individuals' data so that they can be targeted for advertising. This leads to algorithms showing users material that they (or others perceived to belong to a similar demographic) have already viewed or have responded positively to, or that is tagged with similar markers. As a result, the content individuals see can quickly be channelled and aggregated. This has

benefits for building connected communities of activists who have similar objectives (whether they support or are opposed to gender equality). But it also means that users see only limited material from alternative viewpoints. This reinforces certain perspectives, and generates more polarisation. In particular, it makes it easy to amplify disinformation (see the companion report, Diepeveen (2022) for a deeper discussion).

Short user attention spans and the rolling, constant nature of social media, means that posts can quickly be lost or forgotten. Social media favours light-hearted content that is 'light and populist, with flash appeal' (Kangere et al., 2017). There is certainly a risk that social campaigns are ephemeral, easily dismissed, or encourage insubstantial actions such as retweeting to like-minded others, rather than engaging with those with opposing views and interests. It is also challenging to package feminist (and other countercultural ideas) in ways that can be communicated easily on social media. However, as social media platforms have evolved, the ways in which ideas can be communicated are increasingly diverse – including Twitter threads and YouTube videos – which allow for depth, as well as memes that boil an issue down to its essence and attempt to reframe it visually and humorously.

Concerns about social media as insubstantial also ignore the fact that social media 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.

Broader challenges playing out on a new terrain

The online world is shaped by deeply entrenched gender norms and intersecting power structures of race, class, sexuality, disability and age, among other identities. These power inequalities shape the way in which different people experience and engage with others through social media. They also determine whose voices and experiences dominate online spaces, as well as who is considered a credible actor. Social media-based activism, therefore, risks amplifying the voices of relatively privileged groups and marginalising groups that are more disadvantaged. However, many gender equality activists are increasingly aware of intersecting identities and concerns, and are using social media specifically to challenge these inequalities.

Some states view online gender equality activism as a threat and there is growing evidence of repression of activists. This is particularly true where national discourses or politicians' political projects are tied to a certain view of gender norms and relations, or where feminist activism challenges the interests of powerful groups and individuals. Anonymous accounts provide only a limited degree of protection, and online activism thus shares many of the risks of offline activism.

Social media platforms have become increasingly hostile spaces for women, girls and LGBTQI+ communities, particularly those facing intersecting forms of marginalisation. This may reflect a normalisation of aggressive and misogynistic styles of engagement on social media, particularly in response to content on gender equality. Online gender-based violence is infringing on the rights of many women to participate in public life and express themselves online. This undermines the potential of social media to drive sustained gender norm change.

Online GBV is particularly common where the content moderation of platforms is weak. Studies have focused particularly on Facebook's content moderation policies and practices, and although patterns vary by location and language, 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 growth of programmes. Telegram, for example, has been identified as having particularly weak moderation. As with other forms of hate speech, misogynistic, homophobic and transphobic posts are likely to be seen as 'banter' or 'controversial humour' and are either not removed after complaints or are reinstated. This lack of action reflects institutionalised biases in content moderation, which are discussed in more detail in the companion report (Diepeveen, 2022).

Anti-gender actors and 'manosphere' activists are also making more use of social media to spread disinformation, aiming to undermine gender equality policies and laws and egalitarian gender norms. These campaigns challenge laws and policies perceived as 'anti-family', including reproductive rights, protection against GBV and comprehensive sexuality education. They seek to reinstate 'traditional' norms, including those associated with heteronormative, patriarchal ideologies, and to disrupt feminist activism.

Both anti-gender campaigns and 'manosphere' activists typically develop strong narratives based on the selective presentation of partial facts, claims of 'common sense', constant repetition and striking visual imagery. While also engaging in personalised attacks on individuals – including the repeated targeting of some individuals to get their content taken down or shadowbanned – this form of activism is more focused on shifting discourses, norms and policies.

Action to address challenges

Activists and others are trying to shift norms of online behaviour as well as the underlying norms that contribute to GBV, both online and offline. Efforts include workshops and training to help women and girls recognise and challenge online violence, and with young people (of all genders) 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. It is vital that efforts to address its harmful aspects must not inadvertently close down these important, positive spaces for feminist activism.

Although this report has not aimed primarily to assess gaps in policy and action, some priorities for action have emerged from the literature reviewed.

Tackling online gender-based violence[45]

- Educate users to understand what constitutes online GBV and the harm it can cause – for example through pop-up windows on platforms, as well as through educational institutions.
- Use nudges or 'friction' (obstacles) to make it harder to post harmful and abusive content. For example, remind users that they risk being banned if they continue to post similar material.
- Strengthen content moderation by developing 'community standards' in consultation with civil society and representatives of groups at risk of online abuse;[46] improve 'community' policies to protect all users from online violence by employing more moderators from diverse backgrounds and with a range of language skills and sensitivity to different social, cultural and political contexts. This is important both to ensure that automated content moderation can identify misogynistic content and to increase its sensitivity to the nuances of different cultural contexts.
- Consider imposing and enforcing a tiered escalation system on repeat offenders that target marginalized groups, including women, such as lengthy bans, removing followers, etc.
- Create stronger, more effective and accessible reporting mechanisms.
- Create a cross-platform consortium to track and respond to online misogyny, similar to the existing consortiums that counter terrorism and extremism (Jankowicz et al., 2021).
- Enact stronger legal protection against online hate speech, including hate based on gender and sexuality, that recognises its often intersectional nature, and support access to justice for marginalised groups.

Tackling gendered disinformation

- Invest in understanding the political economy of the production of gendered disinformation: who is producing and disseminating it and why, who is funding it and who is benefiting from it. This needs to investigate trends in different parts of the world and in multiple languages. This will improve understanding of online anti-feminist and anti-gender activity.
- Effectively remove disinformation from social media: this requires an iterative process whereby gender activists identify disinformation in different contexts and languages, and platforms invest in and test effective content removal.
- Fight back: fund feminist activists in diverse locations and backgrounds to fight back against anti-gender equality disinformation, through the varied tools that social media offers.
- Reduce harm: training and supporting people to identify disinformation, for example through digital literacy training.
- Develop a strong information ecosystem: as a report by the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression observes 'the most powerful antidote to disinformation is a well-informed and digitally literate population with access to multiple, diverse media and information sources, and multifaceted, multi-stakeholder approaches involving States, companies and civil society, including women's groups' (Khan, 2021: 18).
- Support education that enhances critical thinking, including recognising and challenging gender stereotypes.

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45 These recommendations draw on Soundararajan et al. (2019) and Jankowicz et al. (2021).
46 Various analysts including Soundararajan et al. (2019), Jankowicz et al. (2021) and Khan (2021) all make this recommendation.

Tackling knowledge gaps

This report has identified substantial knowledge gaps around the impact of social media on shifting gender norms. These include:

- actual shifts in gender-related norms, attitudes or behaviour as a result of social media engagement, going beyond the most-written about campaigns, such as #MeToo
- the impacts on gender-related norms, attitudes and behaviour of sharing feminist content through memes, short videos, blogging etc., particularly among younger users
- how hashtag campaigns have contributed to cultural shifts, and how far the visibility generated through coverage of campaigns in broadcast media and/or through law and policy enforcement and change contributes to shifts in norms
- the impacts of online anti-gender and anti-feminist activism in shifting attitudes and norms, particularly beyond the best-documented examples in Europe and Latin America
- the impact of different efforts to reduce online GBV and gender-related disinformation.

Ways to help fill these gaps include the following:

- strengthening methodologies to measure gender norm change through both organic social media interactions and social media campaigns
- undertaking more research among specific communities on social media to understand how they feel their engagement has affected their perceptions of gender norms, and their stance on particular issues
- encouraging movements working to shift gender norms to build measurement and analytics more systematically into their social media work, and providing the financial and technical support to enable this.

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Appendix 1: Methodology

A1.1 Detailed research questions

The review aimed to answer the following questions.

Social media activism for gender equality

- How do activists use social media to try and shift gender norms?
- Which norms, beliefs or practices are activists most commonly trying to shift through social media?
- Which social media strategies, content, or practices have the most significant impact in changing gender norms?
- How can social media activism lead to or enable sustained gender norm change?
- How do activists combine online and offline strategies in shifting gender norms? What drives effective linkages and amplifies the effects of online and offline activism?

Resistance, backlash and challenges

- What forms of resistance, backlash and online violence do activists face when creating and sharing pro-gender equality content? Is there evidence that backlash is framed in terms of identity (e.g. racialised, homophobic, Islamophobic, anti-Semitic)?
- Which actors are driving this backlash and abuse?
- How does online violence affect how activists post and engage with gender equality or feminist content?
- Which norms, beliefs and practices are anti-gender movements most commonly trying to shift online?
- How do the strategies of pro- and anti-gender equality social media activists differ?

A1.2 Search approach

Academic databases – Google Scholar, Web of Science, ProQuest and JSTOR – were searched with keywords around social media activism or digital activism and gender norms, anti-gender movements, and online violence against women, informed by previous research (e.g. Harper et al., 2020; CFFP, 2021a). All academic searches were conducted in English but directed language searches were conducted in Arabic, French and Spanish.

Table A1: Example of searches performed

Terms	Search strings (Web of Science example)
social media, social media activism, feminist movements, gender norms, cultural norms, gender attitudes, gender equality, change, transform, shift + [COUNTRY OR REGION]	TS=("social media") AND TS=("feminist movements") AND TS("gender norms" OR "gender attitudes" OR "gender equality") AND ("change" OR "transform" OR "shift"*)
social media, activism, whatsapp, facebook, instagram, twitter, wechat, tumblr, qzone, reddit, weibo, telegram, snapchat, meme, parler, youtube, gender norms, cultural norms, gender attitudes, gender equality, change, transform, shift + [COUNTRY OR REGION]	TS=("social media" OR "activism") AND TS=("Twitter" OR "Facebook" OR "Instagram" OR "TikTok" OR "YouTube" OR "WhatsApp" OR "WeChat" OR "Tumblr" OR "QZone" OR "Reddit" OR "Weibo" OR "Telegram" OR "Snapchat" OR "Parler") AND TS=("gender norms" OR "cultural norms" OR "gender attitudes" OR "gender equality") AND TS=("change" OR "transform" OR "shift"*)
social media, activism, meme, hashtag, blog, video, tiktok, selfie, influencer/influencing, celebrity, emoji, emoticon, youtuber, gender norms, cultural norms, gender attitudes, gender equality, change, transform, shift + [COUNTRY OR REGION]	TS=("Social media" OR "activism") AND TS=("hashtag" OR "meme" OR "blog" OR "selfie" OR "youtube video" OR "emoji" OR "emoticon" OR "online video" OR "snapchat" OR "instastory") OR TS=("celebrity" OR "influencer" OR "influencing" OR "youtuber") AND TS=("gender norms" OR "cultural norms" OR "gender attitudes" OR "gender equality") AND TS=("change" OR "transform" OR "shift"*)
social media, social media activism, lgbt, lgbtq, lgbtqi, gay rights, trans rights, transgender, lesbian rights, queer, gender norms, cultural norms, gender attitudes, change, transform, shift + [COUNTRY OR REGION]	TS=("social media" OR "social media activism") AND TS=("gender norms" OR "cultural norms" OR "gender attitude") AND TS=("LGBT" OR "LGBTQ" OR "LGBTQI" OR "Gay rights" OR "Trans rights" OR "Transgender" OR "Lesbian" OR "Queer") AND TS=("change" OR "transform" OR "shift"*)
social media, social media activism, lgbt/lgbtq/lgbtqi, gay rights, trans rights, transgender, lesbian rights, queer, stigma, discrimination, prejudice, bias, gender norms, cultural norms, gender attitudes, gender equality, change, transform, shift + [COUNTRY OR REGION]	TS=("social media" OR "social media activism") AND TS=("gender norm" OR "cultural norm" OR "gender attitude" OR "gender equality") AND TS=("LGBT" OR "LGBTQ" OR "LGBTQI" OR "Gay rights" OR "Trans rights" OR "transgender" OR "Lesbian" OR "Queer") AND TS=("stigma" OR "discrimination" OR "prejudice" OR "bias") AND TS=("change" OR "transform" OR "shift"*)
social media, social media activism, srhr/rights/justice, sexual and reproductive rights, abortion, menstruation, contraception, maternal health, gender norms, cultural norms, gender attitudes, gender equality, change, transform, shift + [COUNTRY OR REGION]	TS=("social media" OR "social media activism") AND TS=("gender norm" OR "cultural norm" OR "gender attitude") AND TS=("SRHR" OR "SRHR rights" OR "SRHR justice" OR "sexual and reproductive rights" OR "sexual and reproductive justice" OR "abortion" OR "contraception" OR "maternal health" OR "reproductive health"*) AND TS=("change" OR "transform" OR shift*)
social media, social media activism, srhr/rights/justice, sexual and reproductive rights, abortion, menstruation, contraception, maternal health, stigma, discrimination, prejudice, bias, gender norms, cultural norms, gender attitudes, change, transform, shift + [COUNTRY OR REGION]	TS=("social media" OR "social media activism") AND TS=("gender norm" OR "cultural norm" OR "gender attitude" OR "gender equality") AND TS=("SRHR" OR "SRHR rights" OR "SRHR justice" OR "sexual and reproductive rights" OR "sexual and reproductive justice" OR "abortion" OR "contraception" OR "maternal health" OR "reproductive health") AND TS=("stigma" OR "discrimination" OR "prejudice" OR "bias") AND TS=("change" OR "transform" OR "shift"*)

social media, social media activism, gbv, menstruation, menstruation activism, periods, period activism, period poverty, tampon tax, period taboos, gender norms, cultural norms, gender attitudes, gender equality, change, transform, shift + [COUNTRY OR REGION]	TS=("social media" OR "social media activism") AND TS=("gender norm" OR "cultural norm" OR "gender attitude") AND TS=("periods" OR "period activism" OR "menstruation activism" OR "menstrual activism" OR "period poverty" OR "tampon tax" OR "period taboos") AND TS=("change" OR "transform" OR "shift"*)
social media, social media activism, gender norms, cultural norms, gender attitudes, gender equality, gbv, domestic violence, everyday terrorism, intimate partner violence, vawg, change, transform, shift + [COUNTRY OR REGION]	TS=("social media" OR "social media activism") AND TS=("gender norm" OR "cultural norm" OR "gender attitude" OR "gender equality") AND TS=("domestic violence" OR "GBV" OR "gender based violence" or "everyday terrorism" OR "intimate partner violence OR "VAWG") AND TS=("change" OR "transform" OR "shift"*)
social media, social media activism, work, pay, unpaid labour, paid work, unpaid work, fair pay, living wage, gender norms, cultural norms, gender attitudes, gender equality, change, transform, shift + [COUNTRY OR REGION]	TS=("social media" OR "social media activism") AND TS=("gender norm" OR "cultural norm" OR "gender attitude") AND TS=("work" OR "pay" OR "unpaid labour" OR "paid work" OR "unpaid work" OR "fair pay" or "living wage") AND TS=("change" OR "transform" OR "shift"*)
social media, social media activism, politics, representation, voting, political participation, gender norms, cultural norms, gender attitudes, gender equality, change, transform, shift + [COUNTRY OR REGION}	TS=("social media" OR "social media activism") AND TS=("gender norm" OR "cultural norm" OR "gender attitude") AND TS=("politics" OR "representation" OR "voting" OR "political representation" OR "political participation" OR "elections" OR "women in politics" OR "women leaders") AND TS=("change" OR "transform" OR "shift"*)
social media, social media activism, activist, women activism, lgbt activism, backlash, abuse, violence, hate, trolling, doxxing	TS=("social media" OR "social media activism") AND ("activist" OR "journalist" OR "politician") AND TS=("women" OR "minority" OR "minorities" OR ""LGBT" OR "LGBTQ" OR "LGBTQI" OR "transgender" OR "Lesbian" OR "Queer") AND TS=("backlash" OR "abuse" OR "violence" OR "hate" OR "trolling" OR "doxxing"*).
activism, movement, social media, whatsapp, facebook, Instagram, twitter, wechat, tumblr, qzone, reddit, weibo, telegram, snapchat, meme, parler, youtube, anti-gender, anti-feminist, anti-feminism	TS=("activism" OR "movement") AND TS=("social media" OR "Twitter" OR "Facebook" OR "Instagram" OR "TikTok" OR "YouTube" OR "WhatsApp" OR "WeChat" OR "Tumblr" OR "QZone" OR "Reddit" OR "Weibo" OR "Telegram" OR "Snapchat" OR "Parler") AND TS=("anti-gender" OR "anti-feminist" OR "anti-feminism" OR "gender-traditionalism"*)

Academic searches were supplemented by a Google search of similar keywords, undertaken in English, Arabic, French and Spanish. Additional searches were conducted on social media platforms (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, YouTube) of similar keywords and popular social media trends and memes (in English, Arabic, French and Spanish) to source primary data and content. Where the researchers did not have access to platforms (e.g. Weibo) or content due to location, relevant content (e.g. memes or TikTok videos) was viewed or sourced from secondary sources (local blogs or news articles).

Appendix 2: Examples of hashtag campaigns to promote gender equality

Table A4: Subscribers to various anti-gender social media platforms, January 2022

Hashtag	Activist/ organisation and location	Details of the campaign or activism	Reach	Reference
#LeaveSheAlone	Say Something, TogetherWI and CariMAN, and singer Calypso Rose – Caribbean	To raise awareness of GBV and mobilise for International Women's Day 2017.	N/A	Klien-Thomas (2020)
#16DaysofActivism	United Nations – global	Calls for action to raise awareness and encourage activists everywhere to mobilise around the hashtag, sharing information and innovations to end violence against women and girls.	More than 6,000 organisations in 187 countries involved since 1991, reaching 300 million people.	Özşenler (2021)
#meuprimeiroassédio (#myfirstharassment)	Brazil	Online protest against the sexist and violent abuse posted towards a 13-year-old MasterChef Junior contestant, reflecting the sexism and abuse all women face.	N/A	Siqueira (2020)
#IWillGoOut campaign	A coalition of feminist activists and organisations in India	Began after a series of sexual assaults on New Year's Eve 2016. Two-week campaign to mobilise widespread support calling for the safety of women and minorities in public spaces.	5,430 'fans' of Facebook page in April 2018. Protest marches and events in over 30 cities and towns.	Titus (2018)
#EleNão (not him)	Brazil	First appeared on a Facebook group, *Mulheres unidas contra Bolsonaro* (Women united against Bolsonaro), to protest the sexism embedded in Jair Bolsonaro's views and disseminated through Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.	Over 2 million uses within 2 months. Led to mobilisation of large-scale marches across Brazil and in diaspora.	Siqueira (2020)

Women-Shoufouch (scream of anger)	Started by activist Majdouline Lyazidi	Aimed to appeal to every girl and woman exposed to daily acts of aggression on the streets.	Less than 15 days after the Facebook campaign launched, more than 3,000 members (women and men) had endorsed the movement and offered to take action.	Skalli (2014)
#sendeanlat (tell your story too), #ŞuleÇetIcinAdalet (justice forŞuleÇet) #AyşegülTerzininSesiOlalim (Let's be the Voice for Ayşegül Terzi)	Turkey	Highlighting acts of violence (including murder) against women and demanding justice.	640,000 comments in first week of #sendeanlat. Mass protests in major cities in mourning for murdered women and against lenient sentences for violent attacks on women.	Ogan and Bas (2020)
#TogetherforYes campaign	Republic of Ireland	Used narrative-based social media activism to campaign for a Yes vote in the 2018 referendum to ratify the Thirty-sixth Amendment, which removed the Eighth Amendment's constitutional ban on abortion in Ireland.	Voters chose to legalise abortion in 2018 referendum.	CFFP (2021a)
#SupportIslandWomen	Prince Edward Island (PEI), Canada	Circulated posters and graffiti offline and images and memes online depicting the book character 'Anne of Green Gables' as 'Rogue Anne' – wearing red braids and a bandana. Hashtags encouraging online debates and mobilising protest included #HeyWade (referring to Wade MacLauchlan, Premier of PEI), #AccessNow, #ItsTime and #SupportIslandWomen.	Following the campaign, the Premier announced that PEI would open its first women's health clinic, ending a 28-year ban on abortion services.	Harding (2016)

Appendix 3: Initiatives to end online gender-based violence

This appendix summarises some of the initiatives identified through this research. It is intended to provide illustrative examples of different types of action.

Table A1: Example of searches performed

Approach	Organisation/Campaign
Raising awareness of online violence	https://acoso.online (in English and Spanish) provides information on how to respond in the event of 'non-consensual pornography' (sharing of sexual images online without consent) with a focus on Latin America and the Caribbean. #TakeBackTheTech, a global, collaborative campaign reaching 18 countries in most world regions, aims to raise awareness and challenge the norms underlying violence against women on social media.
Helping internet users, especially women, gender minorities and young people, develop skills to resist and prevent online abuse through workshops and training	Some examples include: • Glitch (UK) • WomenatWeb in Tanzania[i] • Luchadoras (Mexico) • Point of View (India)
Helpline for people affected by online violence	Pakistan's Digital Rights Foundation has a daily cyber harassment helpline to support people affected by online violence (Digital Rights Foundation, 2019).
Developing tools and guidelines to help shift sexist norms and stereotypes online	The Association for Progressive Communications developed Feminist Principles of the Internet through a consultative process in 2014. These are currently under further discussion to incorporate environmental justice perspectives. Luchadoras (a Mexican feminist collective) develops tools and guidelines to support activists online and aims to shift 'macho cultural norms and gender stereotypes' (Luchadoras, 2021).
Campaigning for tech companies to adopt more stringent standards and for stronger regulation	Examples include research and advocacy by: • Pakistan's Digital Rights Foundation, focusing on advocacy with Government of Pakistan and UN system; • Equality Labs on how Facebook can more effectively prevent online hate speech in India (Soundararajan et al., 2019); • Glitch (UK) campaigns focused on better regulation to promote online safety (Glitch and EVAW, 2021).

i.   In an interview on the Human Rights Watch podcast series, 'Speaking Truth to Power' (2021), founder Carol Ndosi discusses how #WomenAtWeb pushes for the creation of safe spaces for women online.

ALiGN

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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