#MeToo in India: What’s Next

Shareen Joshi

Last October, India was swept by the winds of the #MeToo movement. The first move came from the Indian film industry, when Tanushree Dutta, a prominent Indian actress, accused Nana Patekar, an established actor and filmmaker, of sexual harassment on the set of a movie in 2008. Days later, journalist Priya Ramani accused M.J. Akbar, a leading government minister, of sexual harassment. These moves opened the floodgates for many other women working in the Indian film industry, media, government, private sector, and academia.

The movement had some immediate impacts. Nana Patekar was removed from his latest movie, M.J. Akbar resigned, and a wave of other resignations and boycotts followed. Since then, however, the winds have calmed. Many of the accused have marshalled legal, financial, and government resources to protect themselves. Nana Patekar, who had denied the charges, issued a legal notice to Tanushree Dutta to withdraw her allegations. Dutta has also been accused of placing a “curse” on others who she named as enablers of her alleged abuse. M.J. Akbar has accused Priya Ramani of defamation. Actor Alok Nath, who is on trial for the alleged rape of writer-producer Vinta Nanda, will star in a new movie entitled #MainBhi (a Hindi translation of #MeToo), in which he will play a judge who takes a strong stand against sexual harassment in Indian society.¹

The arrival of the #MeToo moment was not a huge surprise. India is one of the most gender unequal societies in the world. India is ranked 130 out of 155 countries on the Gender Inequality Index, an aggregate measure constructed by the United Nations’ Human Development Report that takes into account reproductive health, empowerment, and economic activity.² India has one of the lowest female labor force participation rates in the world. Only 27 percent of Indian women work in the formal sector, and this number has been declining in recent years. India’s male to female sex ratio remains heavily male,


suggesting systematic discrimination against girls, even in the richest districts and states of the country. Moreover, India’s rape statistics, though low by international standards, appear to be rising rapidly. A recent, albeit controversial, report by Thomson Reuters argues that India is one of the most unsafe countries for women in the world.

On the surface, India’s #MeToo movement appears to bear many similarities to its Western counterpart. It was sparked by social media, and the early effects took aim at the Indian film industry, media, and politics. But the similarities end here. The reality is that the #MeToo movement in India is largely confined to urban, professional, English-speaking elites. Most Indian women are excluded on the basis of their class, language, and access to technology. Many of these women, however, are actually part of a different kind of movement altogether. For nearly three decades, 100 million rural Indian women have been steadily working towards empowerment and collective action through “self-help groups” (SHGs). The scale and transformative power of this movement have been well-documented: women’s collectives have raised rural household incomes, increased the participation of women in politics, and improved the agency of women in their communities.

The big question facing India’s #MeToo movement is whether it can achieve sufficient depth and scale to affect the long-term well-being of women. In the remainder of this essay, I will examine the underlying drivers of the #MeToo movement, comment on its deeper impacts on society, and compare it to the existing SHG movement. In summary, I argue that it will take a lot more than tweets and media firestorms to improve gender relations in India. Women will need to cross the divides of class, language, and caste to challenge age-old male privilege in Indian society. This effort will likely take time, but the new technologies of a globalizing society can be very helpful. The real significance of the #MeToo moment lay in demonstrating those possibilities.

#MeTooIndia – a Result of Globalization?

India is increasingly connected to the rest of the world. According to a paper from the Center for the Study of Developing Societies in New Delhi, among Indians aged 15 to 34, 57 percent watch TV news a few days a week, 53 percent read newspapers at the same frequency, and about 18 percent consume their news on the internet. India has the second largest number of internet subscribers in the world after China – it is actually ahead of the United States in absolute terms. As many as 230 million Indians use WhatsApp, making the country the messaging platform’s biggest market. Though Indian

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In recent years, urban, educated, and globalized Indians have successfully mobilized on issues of importance to them. In 2011, there was a widespread movement against corruption. A series of demonstrations and protests across India demanded stronger legislation and enforcement against corruption within the political system. In 2012, the rape of a medical student, now widely named Nirbhaya (the Fearless), spurred thousands to pour onto the streets and sparked a national conversation about violence against women. The movement led to an attempted overhaul of the nation’s laws for dealing with rape crimes. India’s rape law (Section 375/376 of IPC) was expanded to include many types of harassment. Sexual assault laws were strengthened, and fast-track courts were created for the prosecution of rapes. At least four states introduced the death penalty for rapes of minors.

In the aftermath of the #MeTooIndia firestorm, the conversation about gender equality in urban India has intensified. A particularly salient example of this is a recent demand for reform of the judiciary itself. The Indian judiciary has a serious deficit of women. Since independence, there have only been eight female judges in the Supreme Court of India, out of a total of 229.\footnote{“Former chief justice and judges,” Supreme Court of India, accessed May 27, 2019, https://www.sci.gov.in/chief-justice-judges.} Almost no senior advocates are women. On March 8, 2019, Indira Jaising, one of the three sitting women judges, wrote an open letter to the Chief Justice of India about the challenges faced by women in the judicial system.\footnote{Indira Jaising, “An Open Letter From Indira Jaising to the Chief Justice of India on Women’s Day,” The Wire, March 9, 2019, https://thewire.in/law/open-letter-indira-jaising-to-cji-womens-day.} She provided personal experiences with sexism and denounced the use of misogynistic language in both formal and informal channels of judicial communication. Jaising also requested concrete steps be taken to improve the working conditions for women in the judiciary including: (a) a gender audit of the culture of the court, discriminatory behavior, the availability of toilets and appropriate child care services; (b) a fact-finding committee to review court judgements and documents that contain sexist remarks; (c) greater scrutiny of appointed judges and senior leaders for past sexist behavior; (d) the issuance of clear guidelines to judges across the country to check the usage of sexist language by lawyers, litigants, and others in their courtrooms.

Shortly after the publication of Indira Jaising’s letter, on April 19, 2019, the Chief Justice of India was accused of sexual harassment. By May 1, 2019, the woman filing the case withdrew from the probe because of the general lack of sensitivity or respect from the in-house committee that was convened for a formal investigation.\footnote{“India chief justice Ranjan Gogoi’s accuser quits sexual harassment inquiry,” BBC, May 1 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-48105752.} These events – Indira Jaising’s letter and the filing of allegations by a former employee – may
have little real impact on the court in the short run, but they are symbolic victories in themselves. These efforts have sparked a deeper conversation about women and formal justice in India. Though neither were affiliated with the #MeToo movement explicitly, both were published in English and harnessed the power of the media to connect with Indian civil society. Indira Jaising’s letter was published primarily in an English-language newspaper, and then translated into other languages across the country.

An important criticism of all these efforts however, is that they are limited to India’s elites. The #MeToo movement itself is largely constructed by upper class, urban, English-speaking, and privileged women. What about the rest of the country?

**Women’s Movements in Rural India**

While the digital world sorts out the aftermath of #MeTooIndia, an entirely different story is unfolding in India’s villages. For at least three decades now, rural Indian women have been actively engaged in a battle for empowerment through coordinated action. Local organizations such as the Self-Employed Woman’s Association in Gujarat, *Jagori* (in Hindi, “awaken women”) in Rajasthan, *Lijjat* in Maharashtra and *Kudumbashree* in Kerala have invested in grassroots mobilization campaigns that encourage women to form official collectives, or SHGs. These are small, voluntary groups of poor rural women who work together to save regularly and mutually contribute to a common fund, which would be spent based on group deliberations. In most cases, the groups consist of 10-15 members that meet weekly or bi-weekly to save a small amount of money.

In recent years, partnerships between the Indian government and these local organizations have actively invested in these groups. In 1992, the Reserve Bank of India established a pilot program that linked these groups to formal banks for the purpose of obtaining collateral free loans. The success of the pilot program has led to the mainstreaming of SHGs into the financial landscape. According to the most recent estimates, about 8.7 million SHGs, which include approximately 100 million women, have received subsidized loans. The poor and marginalized women who were once regarded as “unbankable” have mobilized 195.92 billion Indian rupees ($2.8 billion) and received loans worth about 756 billion Indian rupees ($11 billion). The extent to which these funds are actually spent on business activities are unknown. Nonetheless, even the most conservative calculations suggest that these women in rural India control financial assets with an annual turnover that is much larger than many multi-national corporations in India. Academic studies now almost unanimously agree that efforts through SHGs have been effective in strengthening women’s agency in their homes and communities.

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Conclusion

This above example suggests that the road to equality, dignity, and security for Indian women will likely involve a lot more than tweets and social media campaigns. It will require women to bridge the class, language, and caste divides and work together to challenge the male privilege that is firmly encoded in laws and traditions. Actresses, journalists, lawyers, women in self-help groups, vulnerable domestic workers, and homebound women will need to find a common ground where parallel stories will converge. New institutional platforms such as SHGs or digital platforms will need to be strengthened and expanded.

In the short term, however, every effort has its place. The impact of #MeToo in shaming high-profile and powerful men challenges the conventional narrative about rights and responsibilities. It nudges Indian society towards a discussion about the underrepresentation of women in positions of power, and strengthens the voices of women in courts, legislatures, and other workplaces. Most importantly, it brings a country of a billion people to be part of a global conversation on how women are defying precedent, making change, and demanding equality. Given the scale of the population as well as the magnitude of gender inequality, the future of the global #MeToo movement may very well depend on India's own battle for gender equality.

Shareen Joshi is an Associate Professor of International Development in the Global Human Development Program at the School of Foreign Service, Georgetown University. She is an applied micro-economist, but also has a strong interest in broader issues of gender, identity and social change in the developing world, particularly in India.