

NORTH-SOUTH FEMINIST DIALOGUE

Online Sexual Harassment in
Higher Education (HE)

April 29, 2022



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Panel I: Framing Online Sexual Harassment

Dr Mara Keire (Departmental Lecturer in US History Oxford)
Rikke Amundsen (King's College London)
Aiman Khan (lawyer, India)



Working Paper Launch by 1752 Group: Online sexual harassment in UK universities and performing arts institutions: are we doing enough?

Workshop

A closed door workshop for us to learn from each other and develop a list recommendations/demands around online sexual harassment that participants can take to their respective institutions.

Some of the questions explored are:

- What are your top 3 concerns when it comes to online sexual harassment?
- Does your university policy document address/ adequately address online sexual harassment?
- How can policy documents address questions of online sexual harassment?
- How does the university deal with cases of online sexual harassment?
- Are there any campaigns/sensitization/training around online sexual harassment?
- How can we spread awareness about the different forms of online sexual harassment?
- How do we want universities to respond?

Workshop: How to Organize Online Feminist Safer Spaces:
Tech and care pathways
with
Javaria Abbasi and Madeleine Foote



FOREWORD

by Professor Nicola Henry (Australian Research Council (ARC) Future Fellow, Social & Global Studies Centre, RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia)

Digital technologies have profoundly changed the way that humans interact and communicate with one another. The sheer speed and breadth of information dissemination, as well as the diverse means for online engagement, have paved new ways to craft individual and group identities, fostering encounters among digital citizens within an increasingly independent and networked global society. While providing an array of possibilities for expression, discovery and communication, the flip side is that digital technologies give trolls, hackers, predators and ordinary “run of the mill” people the means to exert power over others to bolster their own sense of power and self.

Increasingly, academics, lawmakers, practitioners and activists are turning their attention to abusive online behaviour, commonly referred to as “technology-facilitated abuse” or “online abuse”. We have a new lexicon to describe the different behaviours that make up this phenomenon, including such terms as: upskirting, downblousing, creepshots, revenge porn, image-based abuse, sextortion, deepfakes, doxing, cyberbullying, dick pics and cyberflashing. Research demonstrates that online abuse and harassment is a common experience for many people, particularly women and girls, people of colour, gender- and sexuality-diverse people, and those with a disability. For instance, a 2020 Plan International survey of 14,071 girls and young women across 22 different countries found that 58% of women had experienced online abuse. The study also found that 42% of respondents who identified as LGBTIQ+ reported they were harassed because of their sexuality or gender, 37% said that they were harassed because of their race or ethnicity, and 14% reported that they were targeted because of their disability. And it should be noted that often online abuse towards women and other minorities is overtly sexualised.

There has also been growing recognition of the impacts of online abuse, including (but not limited to) fear, depression, anxiety and social isolation. Online abuse can silence voices and bodily expressions, preventing the victims or targets from pursuing certain career pathways or engaging publicly in either online or offline spaces. These acts of psychological violence, which include private and public insults and humiliations, threats of harm, or excessive demands, can have significant impacts on belonging and digital citizenship. A narrow prioritisation on physical violence in law enforcement, policy and educational interventions has meant that online harms are often trivialised or brushed off as “virtual” or “not real” harms. Furthermore, there has been a failure to understand the ways that victims of online abuse are targeted because of their gender as well as their race, sexuality and ability, or the complex ways that gender intersects with other markers of identity to shape their experience of online abuse and their help-seeking after the abuse.

The increasing attention to online abuse and harassment can in part be attributed to the continued influence of the #MeToo Movement, which was started by Black survivor and feminist activist Tarana Burke in 2007 and which culminated in a transnational feminist phenomenon to raise consciousness of sexual violence and harassment. A few years before the #MeToo Movement went viral in 2017, sexual violence and harassment in university contexts had also received unprecedented attention after the release of the 2015 *Hunting Ground* documentary, which exposed the nature and extent of sexual assault on US college campuses. And yet, despite the swell of attention towards both online abuse and sexual assault and harassment in university contexts in recent years, surprisingly there has been little focus on the nature, scope and impacts of online sexual harassment and violence within universities and schools.

In May 2016, I was invited by my university to do a presentation on sexual violence at Australian universities. As part of that presentation, I spoke about the 2012 Steubenville Ohio case, where the rapes of an unconscious 16-year-old girl by two high school football players were recorded on digital devices by onlookers who then distributed the images via mobile phones and social media. I also spoke about the horrendous online abuse and harassment faced by 15-year-old Audrie Pott, after images of her being sexually assaulted were posted online, leading her to take her own life eight days later. At the time of this presentation, I didn't have examples of online sexual harms within university contexts to draw on, but I knew the reason for this wasn't because they weren't happening, but rather because there just wasn't much attention specifically to this topic.

In late 2019, I was invited to speak at a workshop called "Identifying and Addressing Online Harms at Australia's Universities", organised by the Australian Human Rights Institute at the University of New South Wales. Again, I struggled to find any existing research on online harms in the higher education sector that could answer the following questions: What kind of online harms are being perpetrated in university contexts? How are they enacted alongside so-called "traditional" sexual harms? What are the impacts of these harms? And what are universities doing to prevent and respond to online violence and abuse?

There are significant gaps in our knowledge about online sexual harm in the higher education sector which requires further attention. I was delighted to be invited to speak at the North-South Feminist dialogue one-day workshop on the topic of online sexual harassment in the higher education sector. Unfortunately, COVID-19 prevented me from participating in the event, but I am delighted to be able to write this foreword for this very important Handbook. This Handbook brings together important research and conversations on this emerging topic, with the aim of demanding practical transformation within the higher educational sector. The North-South Feminist Dialogue is fundamentally focused on the coming together across geographical and geopolitical borders to bring much-needed attention to the global South and move beyond the myopia of global North echo chambers. This is an important handbook that will stimulate and encourage further research and conversations that can lead to real change in this sector.

INTRODUCTION

by **Adrija Dey**

This handbook is a result of a one-day workshop on online sexual harassment as a part of the North-South Feminist Dialogue conversation series that aims to bring together academics, activists and survivors from the Global North and South, working in the area of Sexual and Gender Based Violence (SGBV) in Higher Education (HE). Through this handbook we attempt to share some of the knowledge produced in this day-long workshop with fellow academics, activists and organisers. Along with sharing experiences and strategies, we collectively formulated a list of demands to address online sexual harassment that we can take to our institutions to urge transformation or even our organising spaces for further reflection. These demands and reflections for change (see pg. 10) are by no means comprehensive and we see this as a live document that others can add to. While much has been written theoretically about online sexual harassment, within the HE sector its understanding remains quite nascent. Hence, we imagine this workshop only as a beginning of a much wider and ongoing conversation.

North-South Feminist Dialogue started in 2020 with the aim to create an equal and safer space where survivors, academics, activists and organisers could come together across borders and learn from each other. The need for the workshop emerges from the realisation and frustration that much of the research on the issue of SGBV problematically focuses on the global North. There is also little to no knowledge exchange between the global North and South. However, to appropriately address the depth of the problem and to devise plausible solutions, there is a need to decentre, de-Brahmanise and decolonise the understandings and praxis, by also bringing focus to the global South. In a scenario where most HE institutions across the world share similar issues and concerns, constricting the process of knowledge creation based on empirical evidence from the global North creates silos and echo chambers. Further, it is routine for bodies from the global South to be ignored in institutional responses to SGBV, including mental health support, in the global North, leading to normalisation and invisibilisation of this violence. Lack of understanding and sensitivity to cultural contexts, especially in the case of international students, coupled with a lack of sensitivity for questions regarding race, class, caste, religion, nationality, religion, immigration status, lead to differing and complex forms of everyday violence.

The idea of specifically focusing on online sexual harassment also emerged from the experience of being hacked by right-wing trolls from India on day 1 of our workshop in 2020. While we stood together against that in rage and solidarity and came back stronger and louder, it was still traumatic and triggering. This and the experiences of online trolling and abuse faced by many of our comrades pushed us to critically think about what it means to create safer spaces online.

While Covid renewed conversations around online sexual harassment, this is not a new phenomenon. Even before the pandemic, online sexual harassment emerged as a pervasive problem within UK Higher Education (HE) with the exposure of several sex chat scandals. In [Warwick a group chat](#) between male students discussed not only rape, sexual assault and genital mutilation of female classmates but racist, antisemitic and queerphobic comments were also made, raising serious questions not only about prevailing lad cultures in universities but also about universities' handling of such cases. An independent report issued by Warwick following the incident, and ensuing student movements, revealed that Warwick needed to grossly improve its procedures for dealing with sexual violence and misconduct. Soon after the Warwick incident, six male students were suspended from [The University of Derby](#) over degrading and offensive comments they made about their female peers in an online group chat which included rape jokes and several crude sexual remarks. In another similar [group chat at Durham](#) around 60 male freshers' students discussed sex, rape and drugs. One comment from the group revealed a competition where 'posh lads' planned a competition to attempt to have sex with the 'poorest girls on campus' and even discussed date rape drugs (BBC, 8 September 2020). [Figures being published by the charity Everyone's Invited](#) suggest the online sexual harassment to be a widespread problem. Anonymous posts on its website to report rape, upskirting, sexting, revenge pornography, sexual harassment, rape jokes and being sent nude or "dick" pictures by fellow pupils jumped from involving 3,000 schools in July 2021 to nearly 8,400. The biggest increase has been among primary schools where reports have more than trebled from 406 to 1,574.

However, this is a global problem. A survey of 2350 female students at Beni-Suef University in Egypt showed that almost 80% of them experienced online sexual harassment during the past 6 months, and most were exposed to online sexual harassment more than once. During my own fieldwork for my research on SGBV in Indian Universities, many students spoke about the existence of similar chatrooms. In some cases, sexist, ableist, casteist jokes were shared even when female students were present in these groups leading to severe trauma. When challenged, the comments were dismissed as banter. In 2020, screenshots leaked from an Instagram group called "Bois Locker Room", comprising of young schoolboys from Delhi revealed that pictures of female classmates were shared without consent on the group and crude comments ranging from body shaming to jokes on sexual assault and rape were made.

Such locker room conversations are a common aspect of toxic masculine behavior both inside and outside of higher education. With digital technologies and social media becoming such integral parts of our lives, such behavior and violence automatically manifest in online spaces too. So, the online becomes a mere extension of offline spaces where misogynistic violence and [lad cultures](#) can continue.

Online sexual harassment within universities can encompass a wide range of behaviours (bullying, stalking, coercing) that uses one or multiple form of digital content (images, videos, messages, emails, posts, pages) over a variety of platforms which could be either public or private. Academic researchers by nature of their profession tend to make

substantial use of online platforms for networking, collaboration, and knowledge exchange which makes them prone to online harassment. Their contact details are available publicly on the university website and universities actively encouraged academics to have more online presence.

The shift to digital teaching and engagement brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has further increased the vulnerability of the individuals in these spaces. With Zoom becoming the preferred platform for online teaching due to classes moving online, the platform has seen numerous instances of sexual harassment in online classrooms. The abuse is commonly found to be directed towards lecturers conducting classes in the form of anonymous sexual comments or videos being posted. This is now being referred to as 'Zoombombing' wherein uninvited, anonymous guests join zoom chatrooms and share explicit content or abuse other members in the room. Lecturers globally have reported several cases of harassment such as [pornography](#) and other [obscene messages and posts](#) being shared on zoom by students during classes.

Another common experience especially for activists within HE is that of trolling. Targeting students and academics for their identity or political beliefs through hate speech over social media is regularly done in an extremely sexualised manner. [A report from India](#) points how a large proportion of online sexual harassment that women are facing is due to their political opinions and them being critical of the right-wing government's ideology and policies. Below is a screenshot of a student activist from India

Dear BJP trolls, let's not get into discussing the religion of molesters and victims. I'm digitally molested every minute on Twitter by your party members, leaders, sympathisers alike. Every abusive mention is an act of sexual violence. I face it every minute.

Recently there has been some helpful research on online harassment. [The Universities UK \(UUK\) report](#) and toolkit titled **Tackling Online Harassment and Promoting Online Welfare (2019)**, the [Online Harassment and Hate Crime in HEIs report](#), and the [Higher Education Online Safeguarding Self-review Tool](#), make some very important contributions. Irrespective of this, available literature on online harassment in HE, while highlighting the severity and pervasiveness of the issue through its increased prevalence, fall short on discussing the online forms of sexual harassment in a more distinct manner. The Pew Research Centre in their [report of the State of Online Harassment](#) in 2021 lists sexual harassment as one of the more severe forms of online harassment which saw a steep rise in occurrence from 2017 thus further stressing the need to individually look at the issue in greater depth.

This lack of specific focus on online sexual harassment has also resulted in the lack of clear definitions. In this workshop we decided to use the definition proposed in the [working paper](#) by The 1752 Group:

Online sexual harassment is unwanted conduct of sexual nature online, which has the purpose or effect of violating the recipient's dignity or creating an intimidating environment because of their gender or sexuality. Online sexual harassment exists on a continuum with other forms of sexual and gender-based violence and at the intersection with other protected characteristics and forms of minoritized positionality.

The recent UCU report called [Eradicating Sexual Violence in Tertiary Education](#) defined gender-based violence as a 'continuum of behaviours and attitudes such as (and not limited to) domestic violence, sexual assault, sexist harassment on the streets and online spaces, trans/homophobic expressions and behaviours, and expressions on social media which normalise sexism and sexual objectification'. In the report the term sexual violence is used to include rape, sexual assault, stalking, revenge porn, as well as a range of everyday behaviours in the online and offline world. Further survivors do not view the online sexual harassment as something separate from physical violence but an extension to it. Survivors interviewed by [Sarkar & Rajan \(2021\)](#) states that the harassment directed at them through online channels was framed around their bodies as women, often threatening its very existence, causing actual physical harm to them in how they felt after engaging with it. This also rejects the notion that such harassment can be viewed as a disembodied experience due to a virtual, supposedly non-physical version of self, individuals have on online platforms.

There is a greater possibility of bystander participation through sharing harmful content or contributing to an internet pile-on. There is an increased level of permanence to such harassment because once it is shared in the digital space in the form of images, comments etc, it could circulate to a wide circle of people, even if it is taken down from one place. There is thus an increased accessibility to this content to a limitless audience for an indefinite period of time. Also, such images or other media are now available for everyone to view and circulate without the [survivor's consent](#) causing unique forms of distress which are more prolonged and pervasive. Such harmful material could reappear after many years, due to being available in the digital sphere, causing the survivor to have to revisit their trauma.

The [existing literature](#) on online sexual harassment also heavily stresses its adverse effects, threatening the long-term mental, emotional and physical well-being of the survivor. Survivors, many a time, have resorted to leaving these digital platforms and sometimes becoming dormant online altogether. This causes silencing of their voices in a public sphere which is becoming increasingly digital. This would also harm their personal and professional lives which again has become increasingly dependent on digital platforms.

However, as [Henry and Powell \(2015\)](#) state, as survivors struggle to define that harm that is done to them, there is need to move away from a medical approach to harm. 'Harm is whatever is defined as harmful by subject'. This also allows us to understand online sexual harassment within the larger contexts of capitalism and patriarchy and hence a structural problem and not an individual problem.

The existing literature also stresses how online sexual harassment, like other forms of sexual violence, is deeply [gendered in nature](#) impacting women and queer folks on a much larger scale leading to more adverse effects for them.

Irrespective of this reporting online sexual harassment within higher education is challenging. [The working paper by The 1752 Group](#) further states that universities are largely unprepared to deal with online sexual harassment with a lack in policy, training, and inconsistent information across platforms (see page 6 for more details) This is consistent with a Guardian article 2 years ago that read: [I Told My University I Was Harassed Online. They Asked Me What A Hashtag Was](#) suggesting that university staff in the UK may have very limited understanding of the nature and extent of online sexual harassment.

The findings from the UCL Institute of Education, the University of Kent, the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) and the School of Sexuality Education, shows that **teenage girls are overwhelmingly affected by the impact of unwanted image-sharing** and that the practice has become 'dangerously normalised' for many young people. The study involving 480 young people from across the UK shows that **51%** who had received unwanted sexual content online or had their image shared without their consent **reported doing nothing**. When asked why they didn't report the incident, around a third of people said ['I don't think reporting works'](#). Professor Jessica Ringrose who was the lead author of the report stated that young people in the UK were facing a crisis of online sexual violence with **young people, in particular girls, saying they felt 'disgusted', embarrassed and confused' about the sending and receiving of non-consensual images**. However, they rarely want to talk about their online experiences for fear of victim-blaming and worry that reporting will make matters worse.

Inherent power dynamics in higher education makes people working within that environment more vulnerable to online sexual harassment. This leads to harmful behaviour like which has been described by [Bull & Page \(2021\)](#) as grooming.

Coupled with its inherent hierarchies, the highly competitive nature and its precarious character of academia prevents survivors from reporting such cases as the cost of doing so could be detrimental to their careers. [Students also hold back from reporting](#) such cases as reporting could create barriers to their employment opportunities and/or their future trajectory in the academic space.

The main questions that this workshop dealt with were:

- What are your top concerns when it comes to online sexual harassment?
- Do your university policy documents address/adequately address online sexual harassment?
- How does your university deal with cases of online sexual harassment?
- How do we want universities to respond?
- What kind of changes do you want to see policy documents address questions of online sexual harassment?
- Are there any campaigns/sensitisation/trainings around online sexual harassment?
- How can we spread awareness about the different forms of online sexual harassment?
- What are our main recommendations?

The entire day was divided into 3 sections.

The first part of the day was about **learning more about online sexual harassment**. In the first panel where speakers addressed online sexual harassment from different perspectives such as image based sexual abuse, histories of technology mediated sexual abuse, sexting and right-wing trolling. This was followed by a launch of the working paper from The 1752 Group and Account for This titled [Online Sexual Harassment in UK Universities and Performing Arts Institutions: Are We Doing Enough?](#)

The second part of the day was about **contextualising the learnings** in the first part of the day, within the Higher Education sector. In this closed-door workshop, we aimed to learn from each other and develop a list of demands and reflections for change around online sexual harassment that participants could take to their respective institutions.

In the final section of the workshop, **we discussed how we can organise online safer spaces**, both tech and care pathways. This session was led by two student organizers from Oxford, Javaria Abbasi and Madeleine Foote, who discussed feminist best practices for creating digital spaces and hosting online events. The discussion focused on how to balance community building and connection with accountability and safety. While digital organising comes with specific risks, it can also enrich community and enhance access to feminist spaces. This workshop delved into how tools like online codes of conduct and customizable settings in digital platforms complement strategies for moderation, publicity, and participant interaction.

In the following sections, we will expand on each of these sessions highlighting key discussions and takeaways

Following feedback from our last handbook, we have not used the usual academic citation style in this handbook and citations are embedded as links instead to make them more accessible. There are several articles and resources stated in this handbook and we understand that not everyone will have access to these. If you cannot access any of the articles, please email us and we will send it to you.

Finally, I want to say a huge thank you to everyone who participated in this workshop: for your time, labour, solidarity, patience and love.

PANEL DISCUSSION ON ONLINE SEXUAL HARASSMENT

Speakers

Dr Mara Keire: "Obscene Phone Calls: The Role of Technology in the History of Sexual Harassment"

Dr Rikke Amnudsen: "Adult Women, Hetero-sexting, and the Negotiation of Sexting Risk for Intimacy"

Aiman Khan: "The increase of Online Abuse faced by Muslim Women in India"

The panel was moderated by **Dr Navtej Purewal**



Each speaker touched upon a different aspect of how the increasing developments in technology and the proliferation of various digital platforms are being used to perpetuate online sexual harassment.

A common theme emerging from all three speakers was how technology is not a neutral medium of communication as it is often made out to be. The ability to use such mediums for harassment and the inability of the creators of such mediums to stop such harassment, reveals a complicity of technology with harassment which runs counter to any notion of neutrality.

Their presentations were foundational in initiating conversations around online sexual harassment that were continued in the subsequent sessions of the day but with a more specific focus on harassment in institutions of higher education.

Obscene Phone Calls: The Role of Technology in the History of Sexual Harassment

Dr Mara Keire's presentation traced how **new developments in technology in the second half of the 20th century served as platforms to carry out sexual harassment.**

She began by stating that her work as a historian had led to her firm belief that technology was not neutral even though it was presented as an objective medium. New technologies were developed by cis white men with the intent of strengthening the status quo which always favoured to them. It thus served as means to further entrench gender, racial and other inequalities which were beneficial to the creators of such technologies.

However, the proliferation of these technologies on a wider scale led to its usage for purposes which were not intended by its creators such as reporting and documenting abuse. For example, mobile cameras being widely used to document incidents of police violence against African American men in the US. It could thus be used subversively as well.

So **technology serves as a double-edged sword** which on the one hand can work as methods of harassment, but they can also document abuse of women and gender non-conforming individuals.

The Telephone: Dr Keire described how telephones had been historically used by men as a tool for carrying out abuse and perpetuating a hostile work environment. In the post-World War II period, telephones started being widely used by male colleagues to **share obscene jokes** among themselves about their female colleagues; **an excuse to call back a client and get in touch** - which also required the use of the newly invented rolodex, which allowed for multiple people's contact information to be stored in one place; and it also began to be used to **conduct pranks which were quite often sexual in nature.** In advertising agencies in the US in the 60s such activities were widely prevalent and it was normalised by being described as being done in 'good fun and jest'. Pop culture of

the time like movies and TV shows also depicted such activities in a similar light-hearted manner, adding to its normalisation. However, from the mid-60s onwards, people could also **record their phone calls** due to the answering machine and other new developments in technology which meant they could now **document these instances of abuse and harassment**.

The Polaroid: The invention of the polaroid again allowed for newer forms of abuse but also provided a means to document and report violence as well. The Polaroid camera was **used by abusers to take pictures of their victims** and to keep count of their 'conquests'. It allowed individuals to develop their pictures on their own without having to go to a studio for the same. They could thus take and store pictures of their abusive activities without the concern of a third person in the studio seeing these pictures and having them reported.

Polaroid was marketed to point out how the technology itself gives consent to this abusive behaviour. The Polaroid Swinger (1965-70) was one of the best-selling products and one of the top selling cameras of all time. The Swinger was widely advertised using a famous jingle called '[Meet the Swinger](#)' which was sung by Barry Manilow. The lyrics of the jingle were as follows: "Hey, meet the swinger, the polaroid swinger, swing it up, yeah yeah, it says yes, yeah yeah, take the shot, yeah yeah, zip it down, yeah yeah, it's the swinger." The jingle highlights how the product says yes to whatever pictures are being taken by the person using it regardless of the content of the pictures or the consent of the subject. The popularity of this advertisement showed the normalisation of this attitude among the public.

The unintended consequences of the polaroid however were that it could also be **used by victims of domestic abuse to take pictures of the bruises** that were inflicted on them by their partners. Polaroid pictures were famously used in the OJ Simpson trial to depict the violence he inflicted on his wife Nicole Brown Simpson. The company Polaroid started developing courses for certifying investigators for taking pictures of evidence of domestic violence. [Police departments](#) also highlighted how Polaroid pictures could serve as effective tools of documentation. For example, the **pictures could be dated properly** as the time and date appeared on the picture itself which may not have been so with other pictures. Unlike digital photography, which could be tampered with, these pictures could not be manipulated.

He said/She said vs the Digital Footprint: Building on the example of the Polaroid, Dr Keire highlighted how even though these new technological advancements were being used as a medium for harassment and abuse, they were also subversively being used to document abuse which would not have been possible without the technology. This use of technology helps to strengthen and amplify the voice of the survivor which normally would get overpowered in the 'he said/she said' debate. Coercive control of technology by the creators and developers of the platform or the state regulatory authorities which restricted usage or took away access of these platforms completely would also limit the individual's ability to use them for documentation.

Coercive control is thus not an appropriate remedy for growing harassment on digital platforms. **She stressed on the need of keeping a record of digital evidence** because any form of grievance redress either through criminal or civil justice, university complaint, or employee arbitration required some sort of 'proof' to be shown. Such digital documentation can even help to persuade family members and friends about the harassment. This is reflective of the sad reality that a **survivor's testimony is not given much consideration without such evidence** and the burden of proof falling on them. Considering this situation, however, it is essential that people use their increased access to technology to document such evidence.

And still ways to blame the victim: Dr Keire went on to describe however that even with the increased availability of digital evidence of sexual and gender based violence, the investigating authorities and society in general still found ways to blame the victim. During such instances, the objectivity of tech-based evidence, otherwise widely praised, was brought into question and considered unreliable. Beyond this, even the motivations and course of action of the survivor were negatively assessed.

For example, it could be said that digital photographs could be easily tampered with and the survivor deliberately photoshopped them in a particular way. It could be said that fights between partners were only recorded to frame the man later. Survivors are blamed for not leaving relationships or not choosing to inform friends and family about such instances, or not reporting it to the police. Even in an era of growing dependence on tech and its widespread proliferation, it could be brought into question to prevent powerful men from being accused of their acts of harassment. This did not mean however that digital evidence should not be recorded but there is a need to maintain a simultaneous corroboration through non-digital mediums like paper copies and 'offsite' digital storage to further substantiate the digital evidence provided.

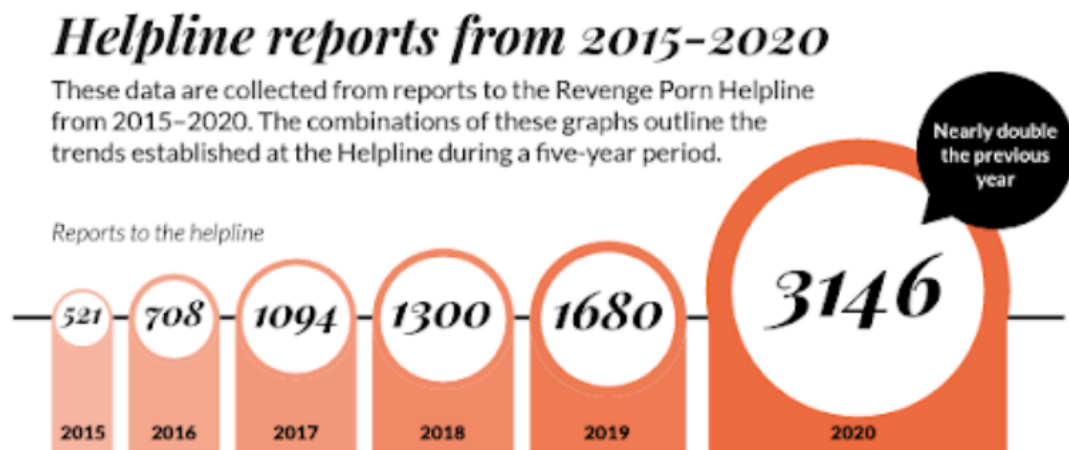
Adult Women, Hetero-sexting, and the Negotiation of Sexting Risk for Intimacy

Dr Rikke Amnudsén's presentation was based on her research about **how adult women negotiated the risk of sexting with their romantic partners**. She defined sexting as the creation and exchange of private sexual images, and videos for sharing with partners. Her findings were based on 44 semi structured interviews that she conducted with self-defining women between the age of 18-38 and out of which 22 interviewees were single and 22 were in a relationship. The interviews were conducted between June 2016 and August 2017.

Image Based Sexual Abuse (IBSA): IBSA can be defined as 'the taking, distributing, and/or making of threats to distribute, a nude or sexual image without a person's consent' (Powell et al. 2019, 392). The non-consensual sharing of material created for sexting purposes is also a form of IBSA. The impact of such abuse could be extremely severe both for the mental and physical health of survivors.

An analysis of the cases dealt with by the [Revenge Porn Helpline](#) from 2015-2020 revealed

how the cases had nearly doubled since the previous years by 2020 when the number of reports was 3146 (In 2019, it was 1680). We need to understand IBSA as a **very gendered phenomenon** with such abuse being normally directed towards women. Sexting, thus, had an inherent possibility to turn into IBSA and could also often carried out as a means of extortion. Dr Amnudsen found that her interviewees were well aware of this but saw this risk as beneficial in establishing intimacy.



Sexting Risk as a Resource for Intimacy: She points out how her interviewees responses reflected that a greater degree of sexting was thought to be indicative of a higher degree of intimacy in the relationship. **Undertaking the high risk involved in process of sexting was seen as a means of enhancing the intimacy of the relationship.** It reflected a **degree of comfort and a level of trust** between both partners which was perceived to be seen through undertaking the risk of sexting. Sending sexual photos was directly related to a way of establishing intimacy that by sending more explicit or identifying material, they are also contributing to the further strengthening of intimacy in their relations. Many of the interviewees did not mind putting themselves in that position of weakness and vulnerability that sexting put them in, because of the increased intimacy which it provided as a result.

Sexting risk is always negotiated in relation to the sender's level of trust in the receiver of the private sexual image. Some of her interviewees described how they sent sexual images differently and even on different platforms depending on who they were sending it to, which reflected their level of trust in them. Dr Amnudsen depicts sexting as a form of intimacy labour wherein the woman were aware of their own at-risk position while undertaking the task but took it up nonetheless as a means to strengthen their relationship.

The process of sexting had the very negatively loaded possibility of turning into IBSA but the risk involved in it, as articulated by her respondents, was seen as an opportunity to enhance the intimacy of the relationship. Taking this risk is seen to be profitable. Hence, the risk was an opportunity and a resource to make use of it like in the economic sense.

Any technology is created by humans and is created in specific contexts by those who create

them. This is reflected in how we monitor, design, and maintain this technology. Biases will always be present by those who create them and those who use them. The legal question is difficult because the digital space is not bound in the same way as a physical space. There are different laws and regulations that apply in different geographical regions which define how digital abuse is prosecuted (or not). This makes the question of targeting tech through legal frameworks very difficult. This rapidly changing nature of technology further adds to the problem.

Even if abusive content is banned or removed, it doesn't stop harassment from happening in the first place. **It is not enough to simply deal with the effects of bias, discrimination and misogyny, they need to be countered in their entirety.** Hence, looking just at the technology is not enough. Since technology is the mode through which these inequalities and violence are further perpetuated, the inequalities and the mindsets need to be addressed first. There is also a need to develop technology based on principles and politics of care and not profit. **If we scrapped these tech platforms and started over again, and tried to build them with a policy of ethics, would/could things be different?**

The Increase of Online Sexual Harassment of Muslim Women in India:

Aiman Khan began her presentation by describing the steep rise of anti-Muslim violence in India under the right-wing BJP government of Narendra Modi which was growing on an almost daily basis as reflected on the attacks on Muslim places of worship, Muslim run businesses and the right to education of Muslim women through the [Hijab ban in Karnataka](#). She highlighted the warnings given by experts of impending '[genocide](#)' of [Muslims in India](#).

Within this broader context, **there is a specific rise in the instances of physical and digital sexual abuse against Muslim women.** The online harassment was mostly being carried out by the Hindu right-wing ecosystem in India who have a massive online presence and access to vast resources. She stated that the ruling right wing government in India has one of the biggest online army in the world at present with a presence on nearly all digital platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter. They are also active on direct message-based platforms like Whatsapp and Clubhouse to strategise and disseminate their content. Many of the individuals operating in this sphere were paid as well. The terminology used in these spaces is very influenced by that which is used by Alt-Right circles in the US and sometimes directly refers to them.

This **online right-wing troll army has been actively harassing many Muslim women in India who are vocal against the government policies and rising Hindu fundamentalism.** The women who use digital media platforms to express their dissent are attacked incessantly. In the cases of the [Sulli Deals](#) app of July 2021 and the [Bulli Bai](#) app of January 2022 wherein photos of prominent Muslim women journalists and activists were uploaded on these apps without their consent and the women were virtually auctioned off by various online participants. Both apps were hosted on GitHub, a platform widely used

for hosting open-source projects on the internet. GitHub removed both the apps after the widespread outrage and condemnation that they received. These apps were in use for 3-4 months and shared widely among right-wing circles before they gained notoriety and were finally taken down.

She stressed on how because there was **no action at all taken against the creators of the Sulli Deals app** in July 2021, there was a sense of impunity conveyed to these abusers and the new app emerged in January 2022. Even though, during the second time, an investigation took place, and the creators of the app were sent to jail, they were also granted bail very soon on humanitarian grounds, stating that continued incarceration would affect the accused's future as they were all very young. Aiman related this to how White men in the US were regularly let off easily for the crimes they committed on the grounds of mental health. Hence, there was no repercussions whatsoever for the criminal activities that these individuals had undertaken by creating such apps which further emboldened the perpetuation of such online harassment of Muslim Women.

She stated her own positionality as a Muslim, feminist women and rejected the viewpoint that was being put forward by certain feminist groups in India that this rising violence against Muslim women was a 'Man v/s Woman' issue. She finds this viewpoint to be unfounded because of how **upper-caste Hindu women themselves were equally contributing to and actively participating in this online persecution** of Muslim women. The issue thus had to be addressed according to its particularity where the **women were specifically being targeted because of their religion and their gender.**

She described how there were long conversations in right-wing groups on platforms like Clubhouse which graphically discussed sexual abuse against Muslim women and even providing perverted rationales for the same. There are no repercussions for individuals taking part in such conversations. **It has been exceptionally difficult to demand for regulation against hate speech and calls for violence as there appears to be no accountability.** Moreover, calls raised by various activists on digital platforms to report abusive content is itself attacked by trolls. There is thus a complicity in the abuse on the part of the judicial authorities, the police and the platform creators in their refusal to take action against such digital abuse.

She also highlights the links between the online and offline space where the language, terminology and rationale used by many of the online trolls were similar to that used by Hindu Godmen during the numerous religious congregations held across the country. There was thus a continuum in the abuse from digital platforms to widely attended communal gatherings.

Muslim women activists or journalists face dire consequences such as stalking, doxing, and rape threats if they spoke against the Modi government. Rana Ayyub, one of the most vocal critics of the Modi Government and rising Hindu fundamentalism, is one of the most attacked women on the internet today.

Currently, there had been a tremendous rise in anti-Muslim violence planned and carried across India. Muslim women's bodies are deliberately targeted. They were attacks that were sexual in nature. The testimonies of the survivors revealed how much of these online and offline groups are connected with each other, coordinating and planning their attacks together.

She highlighted the grim situation in Karnataka where over the last few months those speaking out online against the Hijab ban of the Karnataka Government were facing a tremendous amount of backlash and abuse. Their faces were taken from their profiles and photoshopped onto porn stars and women in bikinis, and then circulated through various right-wing groups.

Due to these relentless attacks many women had begun to self-censor themselves or completely avoid using digital platforms to voice their opinions publicly.

Around 20 of the women who had been victims of the apps that were mentioned above, had now chosen to stop using Twitter completely. The cost of speaking out was being seen as far too high and many women were hence reducing their digital participation. Thus, as more and more Muslim women were censoring themselves on digital platforms, there was a marginalisation and invisibilisation of an already marginalised voice. Hence voices of Muslim women need to be amplified as much as possible through the various digital platforms. It is also one way by which possible across the world can show solidarity with what is happening to Muslim women in India.

WORKING PAPER LAUNCH

By The 1752 Group and Account 4 This

Online Sexual Harassment in UK Universities and Performing
Arts Institutions: Are We Doing Enough?

Read the working [here](#)



Key points:

- Despite an increased focus on online harassment in higher education (HE) in recent years, **online sexual harassment tends to get lost** within this broader focus
- Our research and activism has found that **online sexual harassment in HE takes various forms** including 'grooming' and boundary-blurring behaviours by staff, and abusive messages, gaslighting, stalking, threats and image-based sexual abuse
- We analysed sexual harassment and social media policies and reporting information at 14 universities and 9 performing arts institutions (conservatoires and drama schools) to see whether these behaviours were visible in policies
- Across the performing arts' institutions, out of nine institutions, **only two (LAMDA and Guildhall) had bullying and harassment policies that mentioned online harassment** but neither of these included clear definitions of online sexual harassment
- Across the 14 universities investigated, **none had clear definitions of online sexual harassment in their social media policies**, and in their harassment policies, online sexual harassment was subsumed under other forms of bullying/abuse
- The use of the word "repeatedly" came up in some definitions of online harassment. This is incorrect; **behaviour does not have to be repeated to constitute sexual harassment**
- **HE institutions need to pay more attention to online sexual harassment.** Online sexual harassment and violence must not be trivialised as 'less serious' than offline violence/harassment

Recommendations

- All higher educational institutions should have a **stand-alone policy to address sexual and gender-based violence**. It should not be embedded in other policy documents such as Dignity and Respect, Equality and Diversity, or Bullying and Harassment
- Policies should be **written in a way that helps people to recognise and label their experiences**. This means that sexual and gender-based violence policies must explicitly define online sexual harassment. They should explain that harassment can be offline or online and the two can form a continuum. Policies should also provide specific examples such as, but not limited to, grooming, online chat rooms, image-based sexual abuse, rape threats and blackmail
- Policies **should not require login details to access**, but should be accessible to prospective students, alumni, and the public
- **The social media policy, the sexual harassment policy and Report and Support (or similar tools) of any institution must clearly link to one another.** Both social

media and sexual harassment policies must address online sexual harassment. Consistent information should be given across all platforms

- **The use of the word “repeatedly” in policies should be avoided** so that students are able to recognise that a one-off incident will be taken seriously by their university
- **Consciousness- raising programmes and training are needed** for both staff and students around sexual harassment and violence that include online sexual harassment.
- We further recommend drawing on the Universities UK (2019) report Tackling Online Harassment and Promoting Online Welfare: Case Studies for best practices and examples of initiatives from the UK higher education sector, specifically around anonymous reporting.

WORKSHOP

Online Sexual Harassment - Sharing Experiences and Drafting Recommendations

Format

Breakout rooms to discuss questions and come up with demands and reflections for change

Coming together: Putting together our list of demands



In the first part of the workshop participants were divided into two breakout rooms facilitated by **Anna Bull** and **Madeleine Foote** respectively, to share their experiences and concerns of dealing with cases of online sexual harassment in their own university or organising spaces. Practices which worked well were shared and each group listed down recommendations. Towards the end of the workshop, both groups came together and shared some of the key points discussed in their groups along with the recommendations. In conclusion of this workshop, all participants collectively drafted a list of demands that they could take back to their universities or organising spaces.

Questions for Discussion

The discussions in each group were conducted along certain broad questions, which participants engaged with to open up the conversation.

Question 1: What are your top concerns when it comes to online sexual harassment?

Lack of definition and understanding: Since there are no clear definitions of online sexual harassment, there exists a big question about **what qualifies as harassment** or even what qualifies as a university space when interactions are taking place online. Increased use of online spaces for teaching and networking by the university also increases the potential for confusion around what is officially considered to be a university space and whether harassment that occurs on such platforms is covered by the university policy. These gaps in defining such spaces and effectively covering them under institutional policy as well as the discrepancies in policy between institutions allow predators to thrive.

There is an urgent need to think about what spaces qualify as part of the university. Are online spaces on or off campus? How do we deal with online sexual harassment of university students and staff on non-university digital platforms?

In cases of online harassment, there is also a blurring of boundaries between the digital and physical spaces. How can such boundary-blurring behaviour, presently undefined and so uncovered by institutional policies, be recognized?

Any good policy document and/or reporting procedures should address this confusion. Universities should collaborate and bring their policies in-line with each other to ensure a degree of institutional isomorphism.

Lack of clear examples within policies: There is a lack of knowledge about the extent and forms of online sexual harassment. Experiences such as doxing, trolling and public gaslighting often go unrecognised.

Doxxing: Doxing is a major concern when looking at cases of online sexual harassment. By revealing a person's private information like: full name; address; phone number; and social security number/national insurance number on digital platforms, an individual's online/public persona is linked to their personal lives. This is used in liberal circles as a way to silence valid criticism.

Public gas-lighting: Tenured professors will virtue-signal equitable behaviour publicly to their victims to justify harassment, grooming, and abuse online as normative/innocent. There is also a desensitising effect with grooming when people post pictures on public platforms but then DM those same pictures in a different context to victims.

Continuum: The continuum between the online and the offline - grooming behaviours, predatory behaviours from staff, etc. - speaks to **the need to take online behaviours just as seriously as offline.**

Lack of trust: There exists a high degree of distrust with respect to the existing mechanisms for reporting cases of sexual harassment thus preventing students from using them.

Fear of repercussions: This is another major barrier which prevents students from reporting. There is a fear of how this may affect the student's prospects in their current course and also their future career path. Safeguarding the complainant from any such repercussions is a pertinent need.

Unwillingness: There is observed to be a widespread unwillingness among members of faculty or administrative staff, who implement the policies related to sexual harassment, to devise solutions for the issue. This stems from ignorance about the issue and how it could be mitigated as well as a lack of initiative to learn more about it despite the existence of literature and other learning material on the topic. There is also a fear that this could adversely impact one's reputation. People in such positions operate under the assumption that goodwill is sufficient to deal with these issues which restricts them from engaging constructively with broader solutions.

The groups also raised the following questions related to the points mentioned above:

- **Why do we not have more teams and faculty members in institutions dedicated to preventing this?**
- **How do we ensure that once universities implement policies, further action is taken and the policies are not just forgotten?**

Question 2: Does your university policy adequately address online sexual harassment?

The answer was a resounding "no." An example of good practice for formulating a policy document emerged from a London university where a working group was formed with key allies and representatives from all university communities including students, union representatives, workers and security staff, as well as management and HR. This was the result of a student-led movement that created prolonged pressure on management. The working group also conducted a policy reading workshop and its report can be found [here](#).

It was also acknowledged that the process was being undertaken at a very slow pace, but it was still indicative of progress.

Another example of good practice can be found in the American Policy Debate Association (APDA) where reaffiliation is used as a method of recourse. Reaffiliation allows members of university debate teams who experience targeted harassment and/or assault to no longer have to associate competitively with their home university by allowing them to compete on behalf of another university team instead. While reaffiliation occurs infrequently due to strict approval requirements, the greater usage of online platforms with electronic records has generated conversation around online harassment as a warranted reason for competitors to discretionarily strike abusers and harassers from the judging pool (functioning similarly to the strike for cause in American jury selection processes).

Question 3: How does your university deal with cases of online sexual harassment?

Here examples from the Gender Sensitisation Committee against Sexual Harassment ([GSCASH](#)) model in India designed to investigate complaints of sexual harassment, was shared as a radical examples of how cases of sexual harassment could be dealt with.

GSCASH which was set up in the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi was discussed as an effective way to deal with the issue wherein sensitisation¹ and rehabilitation approaches were adopted using different forms of media and activities. Some examples discussed included film screening following discussions or workshops facilitated by experts. The members of this committee were also elected by the students themselves and not appointed by management which increased the trust for them among the student populace and improved their efficacy.

Another issue discussed was how federated college systems like the University of Oxford colleges (39 and 6 permanent private halls (PPH)) have no standards between the individual policies of each institution and how there is a lack of consistency. Colleges are also defined as separate legal entities which means that they do not have to follow the broader university policy.

Question 4: What kind of changes to do you want to see in policy documents addressing questions of online sexual harassment?

There is an urgent need to repurpose the language of 'a priori obligations' or prima facie duties that exists in many university policies, bye-laws, and codes. This language shapes the broader university culture around sexual harassment and assault. Where there

1. Sensitisation is the word that is widely used in Indian academic, policy and activist circles to understand consciousness raising or training. It is a process through which individuals can be re-socialised, made aware of or made sensitive to issues of gender, class, caste, sexuality, disability etc. The term is widely used in the context of dealing with sexual and gender based violence in HE. In the workshop we decided to use this term as it encompassed the holistic approaches of training, consciousness raising, care pathways etc. that we discussed.

are ostensibly competing obligations for a university, say between its duty of care to an individual victim and its reputation, many college codes cite a university's reputation as superseding its duty of care, alleging it as the major determining factor in the institution's ability to exist.

In cases of sexual harassment the reputation of the university is prioritised over the experiences of the student and such a skewed prioritisation is reflected in policy documents and administrators' treatment of victims. This has to change for future working groups to have any efficacy.

There is also a need to strengthen policies to deter harassment. For example, individuals with upheld harassment complaints and/or who choose to lie about the same, should not receive university funding.

Question 5: Are there any campaigns/sensitisation/trainings around online sexual harassment?

In this context a module on gender issues from a university in India was discussed as best practice. The course was student-led and it encouraged collaboration and learning through alternative methods without the pressure of exams. Participants discussed whether a module of this nature could be implemented in universities in different countries and if so, what that would entail. In the UK, it was discussed whether creating a student-led module to discuss gender issues, sexual misconduct, bullying etc as an compulsory introductory module that students could claim credit for, would be good start.

The challenge being faced by the institution was securing a buy-in from the management/provost about implementing changes and providing the required funds for such initiatives.

Another good practice discussed was a consent-training at one university in London which covered 1.5 hours with students and was piloted last year. The training did not explicitly discuss cover online harassment, but this was included in the definitions covered as part of the training. The course content was available online so that participants could go through the content on their own and then participate in the conversations in person.

Online forums in the American Policy Debate Association (APDA) also allow people to report harassment anonymously to equity officers who, with their consent, can make general equity announcements during the same tournament. This allows organisers to make in-person tournaments safer spaces and judging panels to instantly be made aware of pervasive issues.

Question 6: How can we spread awareness about the different forms of online sexual harassment?

More social media campaigns and literacy training are needed to increase awareness about the nature of digital spaces and how to navigate them.

Demands and Reflections for Change

1. Transparency

- Online sexual harassment needs to be clearly defined along with suitable case studies and examples. University policies should address the intersectional and gendered nature of online sexual harassment.
- Clearly defined processes should be made available to survivors when reporting. (Here the 1752 sector guidance to address staff sexual misconduct in UK HE is a helpful resource).
- Actions the university will take need to be transparently stated.
- Precautionary measures as well as remedies must be put in place to ensure there is no detriment to survivors (whether those reporting or not reporting).
- Genuine care and wellbeing pathways and external support should be made available to survivors (both reporting and non-reporting).

2. More democratic processes for devising policies and handling reports

- The representation of students, staff and unions in working groups devising new policy frameworks.
- New Systems and processes should be created through community participation.

3. Jurisdiction

- Online/digital spaces with Higher Education Institution affiliation should be considered as “university” spaces.
- Universities have a duty of care towards its students and staff. So, universities must support any members of the university community facing online sexual harassment.
- Universities need to take collective accountability no matter the jurisdiction of the reporting survivor.

4. Acknowledgement of Online and Offline Violence Existing as a Continuum

5. Sensitization (Consciousness Raising)

- Student-led trainings and modules on online sexual and gender-based violence.
- Training for all members of the university community including staff and workers.

- Alternative training methods such as film screenings, panel discussions and collaborative workshops.
- Training needs to be an on-going process instead of one-off instances.
- Instances of bystanders observing and even participating are very prevalent particularly in the case of online sexual harassment. This allows harassment to continue online unabated. So, bystander training which addresses online sexual harassment is urgently needed.
- Need to move away from carceral norms such as severe punishment and suspension towards more transformative justice mechanisms and care pathways.

6. Movement building, collective responsibility and allyship

- Having systems in place for taking collective responsibility as a community instead of individual responsibility.
- More collaboration between movements and campaigns to learn from one another. Otherwise, we are replicating labour.
- Think about archiving movement memories.
- As academics, refusing to participate on panels, online and offline, if made aware that another member of their panel has a record of abuse.
- Institutions should not invite/disinvite known abusers within university spaces for panels, lectures or events.
- It is always easier to direct criticism at a university that is not your own. This is where being an ally can be powerful.

WORKSHOP

How to Organize Online Feminist Safer Spaces - Tech
and Care Pathways

by Javaaria Abbasi and Madeleine Foote



During the first panel, a common theme that was presented was a pattern of **digital abuse**. This abuse has made the cost of organising safe online spaces incredibly difficult for women and other marginalised communities. In order to combat this digital abuse, there is a need for a stand-alone policy that does not require login details, and definitions around online sexual harassment need to be made clear. The difficult thing about such policies is that they often take years to be developed and they usually do not include student voices or participation. This workshop will investigate the essential query of how to organize **online feminist safe spaces** by discussing how we can mitigate the risk of having an online presence. However, we want to acknowledge that these strategies need to be adapted to particular circumstances because there are many disparate communities that are formed around feminist notions.

Specific considerations for feminist organising online are:

- How can we develop clear norms for healthy online communities?
- What are the boundaries for communicating with one another online?
- What do the limits of tolerability look like for a feminist online space?

At our collective, non-students and/or people who identify as men are not allowed to be included. They are welcome to attend in-person events and participate in activities, but they do not have a role in decision making and policy making. With this in mind, it is necessary to consider how this translates to online spaces. **This requires a balance between safety and accountability.**

Things to put in place to ensure a safe online feminist space:

Code of Conduct

- Having a code of conduct in place that all members and participants adhere to is crucial for holding people accountable for their behaviour.
- When developing a code of conduct, we must clearly identify individuals to report to if any violations occur. For online participants, develop an administrative system to handle complaints separately for logistical issues and for ease of moderation.
- Creating a coded system that can ban people for using certain words is helpful for moderating chats and can be clearly defined in the code of conduct.
- Here is an example of a good code of conduct formulated by the organisers of the [Transforming Silence](#) conference

De facto vs. De jure Model

- Norms have the ability to develop organically (de facto norms) as a common community is formed. In these cases, these norms do not need to be explicitly detailed.

- When this is not the case, having written rules (de jure norms) is essential. De jure communities that expand rapidly require explicit rules and multiple moderators for online events.

Protocol for Collective Responsibility

- When thinking about labour in digital spaces, we must not think of it as menial. Considerations of risk exposure for banning people, calling people out, etc. are necessary.
- Oftentimes, the most junior individuals of a team are given these responsibilities, which puts a lot of risk on their shoulders.
- It is pertinent to think about who is responsible for certain tasks/roles by considering the individuals' race, age, gender, etc.

Institutional Memory

- Implementing procedures for maintaining institutional memory is a way of preventing institutions from insulating themselves from critique.
- Public Google drives that allow people who join your institution in the future provide the knowledge of what worked and what did not work in the past.

Questions raised:

How can institutions deal with threats?

Enforcing the code of conduct is essential for establishing procedures that deal with threats and determining who deals with disruptions and violations that occur. If we create a space that is powerful, people will want to access it. If we create a space that is working, people will want to access it. If we want to create a safe feminist space, we need to have something to stand on, and that is the code of conduct.

What happens when someone from within the community violates your community standards?

When people feel comfortable in a space, this is more likely to occur. Every member of the community must sign the code of conduct in order to be held accountable.

How do we talk about acts of violence that often get invisibilised, such as caste, within codes of conduct for Northern spaces?

Good practice is to not rely on any one institution as a good model. Considering other marginalised voices, such as caste, trans, disabilities, etc. is crucial. The role of the code of conduct is to open the conversation to the standards that we want to set, even if making accommodations means losing participants. Keeping it as a live documents that can be updated upon feedback and discussions is also a good practice.

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