GENDER ADVOCACY IN SOCIAL MEDIA SPHERE - A REVIEW OF POSSIBILITIES& CHALLENGES

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Abstract

With an objective to create progressive conversations around the question of gender equality, governments, privately owned organizations and development counterparts like NGOs engage a variety of mass communications tools including those available on social media. However, the trends across the geographies / communities in general suggest that incidents of gender-based violence are on a rise. This demands a larger level introspection into the hitherto implemented communications strategies in the area of gender advocacy, to assess whether such campaigns delivered desired goal of social change and transformation. To start with, this study limits its scope to an examination of academic literature on various gender advocacy campaigns carried out on social media. Social media usage by privately-owned organizations in gender advocacy have often fetched exemplary results internationally, however the experience of developing countries is different, as gender advocates and governments are yet to use the potential of this medium to the optimum. In this context, a study evaluating past initiatives will help the governments and NGOs to understand the gaps and bridge the same while implementing future projects. Further, there is a dearth of such focus studies in the public domain, all the more a reason for this research paper.

Key words: Gender advocacy, gender discrimination, gender equality, women's equality,LGBTQ+.

Introduction

Discussions around gender and gender equality were initiated as early as the 15th century. Efforts in the direction have been in the centerstage in the past two centuries and relentless efforts in the direction continue in the present era too.The objective of achieving gender parity has received universal recognition over the past few years, and many countries and global establishments have promised to work towards it. Ratification of conventions, the establishment of specialist government agencies, the establishment of new legal and policy mechanisms, and the creation of indicators to measure progress etc. are just a few examples (Verloo, 2009). According to Kabeer(2005), due to its complexity, gender inequality cannot be boiled down to a single factor or a consensus-based list of priorities. Any attempt to do so will have the risk of making it too limited or creating a wish list that is too lengthy and hard to implement.

Even though, there has been tremendous progress in certain areas, the goal of elimination of discrimination and gender-based violence has not been achieved so far. Earlier decades focused on gender issues of women, and today the issues of gender diverse population also come under the purview of gender equality. Discussions in this direction often face roadblocks as gender diversity is not recognized at the governmental level at many countries. Promotion of gender equality through different means is inevitable to stop gender-based violence and discrimination. A variety of educational, community, and media interventions can be used to advance gender equality and harmonious relationships between different genders. Media interventions can influence and change social norms and values, through debates and interactions in the public sphere. It has been shown that media campaigns are effective at raising awareness of domestic violence and changing attitudes towards standards based on gender, but more clarity is needed about their capacity to curb violent behaviour because it can be hard to assess potential changes in levels of violence brought on by media

interventions. However, studies suggest that the most effective media interventions are those that analyze the behavior of the targeted demography and include its members in designing the intervention (World Health Organization, 2009).

The term "advocacy" is used to denote a variety of tactics. These include public campaigns that are meant to challenge ideas and beliefs, facilitate the masses to seek change, and pressurize lawmakers and people at positions of power to adopt diversity and inclusion. Advocates should formulatestrategies that have the capacity to influenceauthorities in government bodies and other establishments to amend laws and change practices accordingly to promote the concept of gender equity(Kingma & Sweetman, 2005). The study focuses on the scope of using social media in gender advocacy initiatives as it is the most promising and measurable medium when it comes to audience engagement and response. Identifying the snags in the existing spectrum of activity in the direction of gender advocacy is important for further improvement in devising of better tools and strategies. This would in turn help the key decision makers in formulating new policies and approaches.

Methodology

The study uses the narrative literature review method (Green et al., 2006) to analyze existing knowledge and to identify gaps in the research area. Valuable information from peer-reviewed articles published during the time -frame, 2000- present is being studied in the research. Key words likegender advocacy, gender discrimination, gender equality, women's equality, LGBTQ+ etc. were used to find appropriate and relevant knowledge related to the area of study.

Discussions

Creating awareness through gender advocacy

The goal of gender equality and raising public awareness of the issue have been of the utmost significance to governments and international organizations. In-depth talks on gender-based issues have been taking place recently on all fronts. Positive developments in the direction of creating new laws and amending those that already exist have happened in the recent times. But, gender-based violence and prejudice are still spreading at an alarming rate, despite the advancements made in gender advocacy and policy development relating to gender (Farrior, 2009).

In advocacy, the message and the supporters of that message unite in the service of principles greater than themselves and are, therefore, essential to the advocacy process (Rane & Salem, 2012). Gender advocacy addresses certain issues that exist in the current societal structure, people of different genders do not enjoy equal access to opportunities, options for making decisions, and chances to exercise their human rights. Both the traditional method, which emphasizes defending moralistic positions, and the "rights approach," which emphasizes empowerment and equal opportunities to enjoy human rights, are taken by gender advocacy. Since gender advocacy also addresses qualitative issues like changing attitudes and behaviors, the quantitative results of these activities may not be entirely reliable (Anigbogu, 2009).

Gender advocacy and women

The history of women's protests against gender-based violence and discrimination are hundreds of years old now. Women have been demanding that rules and regulations, traditional practices, and customs need to be changed. There are many misunderstandings about women's movements, including the belief that feminist protest has only Western roots. Women's movements have happened all over the world in different cultural settings.Studies suggest that women have protested against the inhuman and unfair treatment from relatives, spouses, community leaders and rulers in China in eighteenth-century and in India in early

nineteenth-century(Jayawardena, 2016). The ill effects of violence and discrimination against women are not only limited to the gender but also has a ripple effect on the sustainable growth and progress of societies.

According to studies by the United Nations, gender equality is essential for the development of equitable societies, the attainment of all of humanity's potential, and equitable growth, apart from being an inherent human right. In addition, it has been shown that empowering women increases productivity and economic growth(United Nations., 2022). Focusing on the gravity of the situation in different countries, and the importance of achieving the goal of gender equality, the UN has included it as the fifth component in the sustainable development goals formulated in the year 2015. The component deals with women in particular. The UN report 'why gender equality matters across all SDGs', explains that the attainment of the fifth goal is pivotal in the achievement of all other components in the sustainable development goals (UNWOMEN, 2018). Though many countries have made commendable achievements in the area of gender equality, lots of regions are yet to make considerable progress when it comes to fulfillment of the goal. The 2030 Agenda's promise for transformation is threatened by gender-based discrimination, which is pervasive and deeply ingrained across all nations. This goal-by-goal analysis demonstrates how gender inequality still exists across all aspects of sustainable development(UNWOMEN, 2018). Advocacy initiatives towards the cause of gender equality would be beneficial in addressing the issues related to it. Since the turn of the century, an increasing number of social media-based advocacy campaigns have been launched to address women's issues.

Social media, which has become the most popular form of mass communication in contemporary society, is the focus of various media campaigns over the past ten years (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). The efficacy of the web-based advocacy campaigns is, however, debated. According to Keller, Mendes, and Ringrose (2018), digital mediation allows girls and women to make hitherto unheard-of intersectional discussions. Feminism has been mobilized through social media, building on the crucial work of earlier feminist social movements (Keller et al., 2018; Gill & Orgad, 2018).However, researches reveal that social media-based advocacy initiatives are not always fully effective.

Even in its low-cost web-based incarnation, public campaign actions are uncommon, and when they do take place, they are more focused on institutional actors than on organising masses or creating long-lasting feminist communities (Lang, 2009).

Gender advocacy and gender diverse population

Irrespectiveof a person's gender identity or sexual orientation, all humans have right to freely express their sexuality and choose their gender identity. But, LGBTI people face the most abrasive opposition to these rights (Holtmaat& Post, 2015).

The fundamental idea that everyone is entitled to enjoy human rights has been confirmed by two recent landmarks. First one is the establishment of Yogyakarta Principles, commonly referred to as the Yogyakarta Principles on the Application of International Human Rights Law in Relation to Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity, in the year 2007. UN General Assembly's Declaration on Human Rights, Sexual Orientation, and Gender Identity, presented in the year 2008, is the second one. The body denounced human rights violations against those who are discriminated against due to their sexual orientation or gender identity for the first time in their history. Both documents provide ways to advocate for causes before the judiciary, municipal and federal governments, and multilateral organizations(Farrior, 2009). The necessity of LGBTQ+ community inclusion is discussed in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals 2030. A core principle of the UN SDGs is the commitment to "leave no one behind," which recognizes that all society sectors, including disadvantaged and marginalized people, must accomplish the 169 targets to eradicate poverty and create a sustainably developed world.In order to achieve equality, it is crucial to link LGBTI people's

economic progress to the full inclusion of other disadvantaged groups in the context of UN SDGs(Scolaro, 2020).Inclusion, in the case of the gender diverse population, is possible only through channelizing communication efforts to create attitude andbehavioral changes among various stakeholders.

Since there hasn't been much scholarly investigation into the idea of authentic communication with historically marginalized audiences, authenticity needs to be given much more thought. There is a gap in the literature encouraging LGBTQ people and supporters to move beyond the margins, and recognize and understand meaningful communication with these people (Ciszek, & Pounders 2020). Though there has been a number of earnest initiatives in the direction of LGBTQ+ awareness campaigns lately, most of them go unnoticed as they rarelybecome part of the dominant narrative.

Communication programs that address the masses should include messages that are inclusive of LGBTQ community since studies show that messages that have heterosexual and non-heterosexual imagery are appreciated than content that is completely gay themed (Gong, 2020). It is necessary to produce textual and visual content which contains complex LGBTQ+ perspectives and represents the diversity of identities and life circumstances of LGBTQ+ stakeholders.

Social media can be a potent tool for organizations working at the grassroots level, that work towards seeking social justice for the gender diverse population(Ciszek, & Pounders 2020). The use of social networkingsites or SNS for gender related communication initiatives works effectively to establish a sense of community and an appropriate virtual environment for the search of identities (Jenzen & Karl 2014).

Social media and gender advocacy

Organizations engaged in advocacy continue to place a strong emphasis on social justice, and they do so by utilizing the tools and applications that are already in use.Social media is valuable for enabling global grassroots action that challenges centralized power structures, as evidenced by movements like #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo (Galpin, 2022).Internet and more specifically, social media offer a singular platform for expression and distribution of frequently shunned ideas and identities, making it an essential resource for marginalized groups and their issues (Friedman, 2005).

A model developed by Aaker and Smith in 2010, The Dragonfly model, provides a thorough understanding of how social media can be utilised to address different societal issues. The approach talks about four key components that work together in social media to get desired results: focus, capturing attention, engaging, and taking action.It describes how small changes may have a big impact and also "symbolises the importance of integrated effect", making itself similar to the concept of 'ripple effect' used in sociology, psychology, and economics (Aaker & Smith, 2011).

According to studies, social media have become important to concept of fourth wave of feminism (Solomon, 2009). Professionals, activists, and governmental organizations all over the world fighting to advance the cause of women's equality heavily utilize internet channels. Feminists around the world employ digital technologies in their work, campaigns, and pursuit of gender equity (Mudavanhu & Radloff, 2013). Subramanian, S. (2015) noticed in her research how digital technology had helped venues that enhance the tales of women stay alive. Internet campaigns were much less intimidating than confronting a sexist in the real world because they were easier to access, supported by easy tracking, and were less dangerous (Eagle, 2015).

The internet and digital technologies have fostered a development of connectivity that has established significant networks of identification, belonging, and assistance in the process of establishing new places for discourses of queer sexuality (Pullen & Cooper, 2010). Even though people belonging to the gender-diverse category can access different digital platforms

for engagement, they nonetheless face difficulties there. In different regions of the world, the online spaces have developed symbolically to become collective platforms of protest and conversation to the forces of restrictive power, promoting the open discussion of queer views across spaces and assisting in the development of "queer counter publics" (Soriano, 2014).

While Facebook increases options for interaction among the gender diverse population, it is seen to be perpetuating the dominant discourse by building a framework that restrictsfreedom for self-identification.This meant the heteronormative limitations for gender identity and relationship status (Cooper&Dzara,2010).

Most organisations engaged in advocacy were able to redesign their strategies and make effective use of the social media platforms during the Covid 19 pandemic. For example, in Philippines, UP Babaylan managed its advocacy for LGBTQ+ rights during the Covid pandemic period through the creation of content that, to the greatest extent possible, articulates its human rights agenda without resorting to violence. They also redesigned some of their established onsite events for online delivery, making the most of the social media platforms that they have subscribed to.

A report published by UN Women during the Covid 19 pandemic, suggests that the best way to fight the rise in online misogyny is by creating engaging counter-narrative information that is localised and relevant can help combat the underlying causes of these gender biases and prejudices. This can mean employing content formats and styles that males are more inclined to interact with, as well as seeking the participation and assistance of regional celebrities and influencers who have sizable fan bases (UN Women, 2020).

The challengingdigital divide

Reception of gender advocacy messages become challenging for all genders because of the existing digital divide. An analysis of studies from the past 20 years imply that women generally are less effective than men at learning how to use digital technologies or other subjects using software that is computer-assisted (Cooper, 2006). Biases against women in numerous facets of social life, including work, literacy, and wealth affect the adoption of ICT also. More specifically, gender and ICT use are positively connected, while employment, income, and education are adversely correlated. Uncontrolled correlations combine these impacts, resulting in fewer women who are underemployed, underpaid, and undereducated using lesser ICT than men (Hilbert,2011).

There are lot of chances for women to benefit economically and socially from the recent growth in the digital world. But there are also chances of the reinforcement of current patterns of gender inequity in the present digital scenario. Despite numerous substantial initiatives, a sizable gender gap still exists in the digital sphere, which prevents countries with high, low, and middleincome, from equally reaping the rewards of digital transformation(Wajcman, Young & Fitzmaurice, 2020).Even though pro women organisations have endorsed usage of digital technologies for women's development these platforms have also become prey to sexism and misogyny.

To reduce gender-based violence using ICTs, the machineries should revise policies and laws from a gendered perspective. Understanding the communication capacity gap would offer a more accurate understanding of gendered gap. Legal interventions should not promote protectionalism rather it should uphold women's freedom. ICTs should help to mobilisevoices for the marginalized, aid in improving economic stature of women and offer learning possibilities for women and girls(Gurumurthy et al.,2014).

Studies suggest that there is gender-specific ICT usage habits and mindsets, and these tend to be connected to barriers related with time, place, and literacy. Expressions of gender awareness and the ideas about obstacles to using ICT are connected. Information and communication technologies have enormous potential for accelerating development, but in order to make sure that everyone in society benefits from them, it is crucial to have a

thorough awareness of the unique requirements of women and other marginalized groups(Best & Maier, 2007). The celebratory aspect of internet LGBTQ+ activism must be understood to have constraints due to linguistic, regional, and social inequalities. It's possible that the subject, in any environment, digital or otherwise, wants to stay invisible to the activist in addition to the activist and her thoughts (Dasgupta, 2018).

Gender advocacy - Evaluation & Scope for improvement

Though a limited number of attempts are made to measure the effectiveness of programs that address gender-based violence, good practices in this regard have become more prevalent during the past few years.Reports suggest that there is a shortage of evaluations, even from developed countries. Policy recommendations should be framed and amended based on emerging evaluations from developing countries and rigorous impact evaluations from developed countries. Multiple interventions at different levels might be needed to reduce gender-based violence. There is very limited information regarding violence against women in situations like war, armed conflicts, trafficking, etc. The reports concludes that policy formation and designing of programs without solid data is ineffective and risky (Morrison et al., 2007). Gender equality activists must collaborate with existing national women's machinery to fight violence based on gender in relation with ICTs. They must a) start discussions with women's groups about examining current ICT laws and regulations from a gendered viewpoint. Initiate discussions about the need for a thorough regulatory structure that deals with Violence Against Women as a national priority without succumbing to "paternalism" and "moralism," as current strategies do, and b) influence the agenda for digital literacy for girls and women to give them the ability to comprehend and address Violence Against Women at a personal level (Gurumurthy et al.,2014). In order to mitigate gender inequity, abused women should be provided with better services, and violence against them should be prevented. National governments and development counterparts (in particular, women's organizations) must come up with concrete, well-designed proposals. This requires the support of international funding sources, development agencies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in the form of financial and technical support (García-Moreno et al., 2005).

Conclusion

The study paper's objective was to examine the body of knowledge already available in the area of social media-driven gender advocacy campaigns. According to the narrative literature evaluation, there is dearth of literature that focuses on broader issues. Gender advocacy initiatives aimed at women are abundant in most countries. The advent of social media has given rise to an array of web-based advocacy initiatives which have gained international recognition especially in the developed countries. In the developing countries the digital divide, both gender- based and geography- based, acts as a major roadblock to the transmission of messages to a wider population. Literature pertaining to such initiatives in under developed countries and war-torn nations are not available. It is to be noted that social media has been a game changer when it comes to advocacy initiatives because of its wider reach, but its psychological and social impacts have not been properly studied or researched. The case is different with the gender- diverse population, as there have been limited number of web-based advocacy initiatives for them, majorly because of the stigma associated with the population in most countries.According to studies, knowledge about the lived experiences the gender diverse population across the globe is inadequate and fragmented; nevertheless, in the majority of nations, it is completely lacking. The efforts of States to meet their obligations towards the gender-diverse population and evaluate progress towards important development goals, like the SDGs, depend on data on demographic, economic, social, and cultural features, levels of literacy and education, levels of unemployment, access to digital

technologies and other indicators. The lack of these indicators affects the planning and execution of advocacy initiatives for the gender-diverse population.

Social media, the most democratic form of communication available today, has proved itself to be the most effective when it comes to information dissemination. The immense potential of the medium can be used to bring about changes in perception and behavior through gender advocacy initiatives. In case of initiatives targeting women, the efforts are in the right direction, but in case of the gender-diverse population more concerted and determined efforts are to be made to bring about change and development.For the revision of existing policies and the creation of new ones, accurate and timely evaluation of gender advocacy campaigns and studies based on such evaluations are necessary.

Main Findings

The primary objective of the research paper is to examine the recent scholarly research on the efficacy of gender advocacy initiatives in the social media sphere. Upon investigation and analysis of available literature it was found that though there is no dearth in the number of social media-based gender advocacy initiatives, there are limited number of studies that deal with the evaluation of gender advocacy initiatives for women and gender-diverse population.

Limitations of the study

This study examines social -media based gender advocacy initiatives, through the prism of narrative literature. More contemplative, empirically validated research is crucial in the area of gender advocacy initiatives and its effectiveness, as it may help policy change and formulation. Also, thecomparatively smaller number of literatures related to LGBTQ+ advocacy is a limitation.

Paper's practical application

The paper will be useful for government, non-governmental and private organizations engaged in gender advocacy to understand the current issues in the realm. It may also offer the scope of amending the existing policies and formulating new ones.

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