DIGITAL BATTLEGROUNDS:
What Muslim Women Want You to Know about Online Harassment and Its Real Life Implications
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(Muslim Women Edition)
NABIYA

How to be a Better Ally
Zainab is a young Muslim woman. She loves writing poems. She writes about the stars, the sun, and the moon in her poems, but she cares even more about the injustices happening under the same stars, the sun, and the moon. She is a woman moved by empathy and disturbed by hate. Her poetry is a protest against the tyranny of her times. What angers her the most is Islamophobia, misogyny, inequality, and bigotry.

You’ll find her asking a lot of questions, not just to the government and those in power but also to people who strongly support the right-wing government, and even her own community sometimes. Not everyone agrees with what she writes because some people don’t want their established ideas to be questioned, and they don’t want to change their minds. While she has many people who support and stand by her, she also faces a lot of mean comments and bullying online.

Her photos were put on an online auction app called Sulli Deals by the supporters of the right-wing government on an app for being a vocal Muslim woman. She felt humiliated. This was an attack on her on the basis of her religion and gender. Many people from across the folds of society came out in solidarity with her and her fellow Muslim women who were auctioned online on the same app.

These kinds of instances happen with her on an everyday basis. Speaking for the rights and dignity of herself and her community comes with a cost.

As you already know, she questions everything and believes that in order for any community to progress, they need a lot of self-reflection. So, as a Muslim woman, she doesn’t shy away from questioning Muslim men. However, she receives a lot of backlash for the same from the Muslim community.

What keeps her going is the solidarity and allyship that she receives from across the communities. You are here; that already means you want to extend the support in a way that Zainab wants. You want to extend your allyship in a way that Zainab wants from you. In this part of the guidebook, Zainab wants to support people who want to be better allies to Muslim women who are subjected to online abuse by sharing some tips on how to be a better ally.
Understanding Intersectionality:

It is really important to realize that when Muslim women face online abuse from men who follow Hindutva beliefs, it’s not just because they dislike women; it’s also because of their hatred towards Muslims. For example, during the Sulli Deals incident, some good-hearted people who support us saw it as a problem affecting only women, rather than understanding that it’s specifically a problem for Muslim women.

We need to see the overlap of our identity, which means recognizing that we face discrimination because we’re both Muslim and women.

Being a good ally involves continuous learning, self-reflection, and taking meaningful actions to support the community you want to support. That’s why ally is a verb.

Did you know that?

In simple words, an ally is a person or group that supports and advocates for a cause, community, or marginalized group to which they do not personally belong.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Understanding Intersectionality:

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We need to see the overlap of our identity, which means recognizing that we face discrimination because we’re both Muslim and women.

While women in India are generally targets of misogyny, the identity of Muslim women adds another layer to it.

Listen to us:

After the Sulli Deals incident, a well-meaning woman from the upper-caste Hindu community shared images where her photo was photoshopped onto screenshots from the Sulli Deals app, thinking it would come across as an act of solidarity. However, she wasn’t a target of that app. Many Muslim women tried to explain to her that this act was like making fun of our experiences. It’s because, as an upper-caste Hindu woman, she can’t truly go through the vulnerability and challenges that Muslim women face in today’s political situation in India.

So, when Muslim women are working so hard to share their experiences with the world, or give you advice on something that concerns us, it’s essential to listen and learn from us.

Amplifying our voices:

Zainab had a conversation with her friend Samreen, who revealed that a feminist organization had
approached her after the Sulli deals incident; they approached National Commission for Women to raise concern about the same. Samreen’s name was on the Sulli Deals app, so she had direct experience with it. When other women who were mostly upper caste hindu women went to the office of NCW, they did not really let Samreen share her experience.

Amplify voices of Muslim women who are putting their bodies at risk without making their plight about yourself. It’s important to avoid using the challenges faced by Muslim women to advance your own career.

Rather, Zainab recommends passing around the mic to Muslim women who are sharing their stories and compromising their safety. Do not make it about you; instead, let them speak for themselves.

**Avoid comparing your own experiences to those of Muslim women. Instead, listen and empathize with our unique struggles and perspectives:**

The internet can be a pretty wild place where everyone faces trolling for expressing their opinions, even something as harmless as pineapple on pizza. But what Muslim women encounter online is different. It’s systematic and reflects a broader pattern of pushing them into silence and marginalizing their voices. So, it’s important to understand that their online struggles are unique and should be taken seriously.

Muslim women to have a place in these committees. How can we effectively fight this abuse if there are no Muslim voices within these committees?

Samreen mentioned that she and only one other woman were the sole Muslim women at the NCW office when the feminist organization approached her. So, for a more effective solution, it’s essential to have Muslim womens representation in these efforts.

Let Muslim women take spaces in the committees you form to fight online abuse against Muslim women:

We are grateful that committees are being set up to tackle online abuse against Muslim women. However, it is crucial to allow
Draw a line between how you see our experience vs what is our experience:
Many well-meaning people asked us to calm down after the Sulli Deals episode, telling us that it was only an online auction and not a real one. Although your concern is much appreciated, it’s essential to understand that this was an attempt to prevent Muslim women from speaking out against the injustices that the Muslim community in India suffered. It was a means of undermining our resolve. Rather than forcing your own interpretations or presumptions on others, we need to listen to them, acknowledge what they’ve truly gone through, and respect their perspective on it. Basically, it’s about respecting their point of view and not supposing you know all about it without their help.

Reflect on your own privilege, don’t be entitled about it, and be aware of how it can impact your perspective and actions.

Ask what support we need. Very simple, isn’t it?

Be willing to offer support, whether it’s emotional, financial, or through advocacy efforts.

Again, very simple, isn’t it?

**Muslim Men**

**Questioning Muslim men is not questioning Islam:**

Zainab believes in speaking the truth, even if it’s against the men within her own community. She once questioned Muslim men who denied agency to Muslim women and positioned themselves as saviors.

As a result, she received all sorts of online abuse and hate from a section of Muslim men.

Her character was assassinated, and she was declared not Muslim enough. So, it’s important for Muslim men to understand that questioning Muslim men is not questioning Islam. Zainab is as much a believer as any other Muslim. Highlighting problems within the community does not mean one is vilifying the community. With this, Zainab acknowledges how Muslim men are systematically vilified to justify our persecution, and Muslim women are often presented as victims of Islamic patriarchy.

**Your conditional solidarity does more harm than good:**
If you’re a Muslim man and you’re reading this, I have no doubt that you’ve supported us on a number of previous instances and that you want to be a better ally to Muslim women. But do you find it difficult to support us when it’s the Muslim men who abuse us online? Harass you online?

Or, even if you do stand in our solidarity, does it come with many conditions?

It’s important to understand that harassment that comes from the Muslim men or from non-Muslim men is just as harmful. It affects us in the same detrimental ways. So why does your solidarity turn conditional when it comes to Muslim men?

If you wish to do better as our allies, offer your unwavering support when we face online abuse from Muslim men as well.

Avoid victim blaming:

Many Muslim men have asked us to stop sharing our pictures online to avoid situations like the Sulli deals. Some of them even believe that we post our photos to become targets and gain popularity on the internet.

People we know often give advice that tells women to limit their presence online or to stay quiet when they face harassment. While they may mean well, this advice can unintentionally blame the victim and make the problem of online abuse worse, instead of addressing the real issue. When online harassment happens, the only ones responsible are the people who are using their keyboards to abuse Muslim women, not the women themselves.

Identify that a muslim woman doesn’t deserve to be abused because she questioned muslim men:

No one should be subjected to online hate, absolutely no one, except for fascists. So when Muslim women raise questions about men within their own community, it doesn’t justify trolling or online abuse against them. If you admire a strong Muslim woman online who challenges the people in power, you should also know that she will challenge and educate the men around her.

Avoid Mansplaining:

Be a little thoughtful when explaining issues that Muslim women are already well-informed about.
We all love constructive advice on how to be safe online but don't think that you know better than us.

It's important to remember that our lived experiences have taught us a great deal, so we know what is good for us and what is not. You can not walk in our shoes.

**Call out microaggressions and Educate other men:**

Zainab is really thankful to the few Muslim men who supported her during online harassment she faced from other Muslim men.

She understands that, meanwhile, that her experience was not a personal one; rather, it was an issue that many Muslim women face. Sadly, no Muslim men spoke out against it until Zainab experienced it.

Zainab is fortunate to have a strong support system, but what about other women who don't have access to the resources and support they need to cope with hate online? This is where you have to take responsibility. Whenever men target Muslim women, it is important that you confront and question them, even if those women are not your sisters, friends, or family. Educating other men is another way that you may have an influence. Consider giving your men friends access to this guide as a starter.

**Remember that allyship is an ongoing commitment, and continue to educate yourself, listen, and support Muslim women in their struggles against online abuse and discrimination.**

Solidarity can be most effectively defined by the words of Maya Angelou, who once said, "The truth is, none of us can be free until everybody is free. Our liberation is intertwined. It's not just Muslim women who face online abuse; Dalits, people from the LGBTQ community, and other marginalized communities in India also experience online harassment. It's important to understand that this is not a competition to determine who faces more online attacks. This is not a race in marginalization. Online harassment is a collective issue that affects many marginalized communities.

Solidarity recognizes the intersectionality of various forms of discrimination and online abuse, acknowledging that people may
experience multiple layers of marginalization, and their struggles are interconnected. By supporting one marginalized group, we ultimately promote the rights and well-being of all.

Solidarity involves amplifying the voices of those most affected by online harassment.

By coming together, people from different backgrounds can build a stronger, more resilient network of support. This community can share resources, strategies, and coping mechanisms to effectively combat online harassment.
MARIA
Reclaiming Narratives
Understanding Algorithms
We build spaces out of the box,
Where our existence comes alive,
By collecting tears of mourning,
From the community that has been
dead in nation’s pride.

We found fragments of our identity in
futile land,
Claiming our rights in Islamophobic
times.

Once we auctioned on Sulli App,
No consent, a game played.
But none of you took a snap?
You lost your grip,
Flapped like wounded birds,
But none of you give a slap to
distortion!

Again, we auctioned on Bully Bai App,
But none of your liberal stunts
flaunted?
You wilted like frightened cubs,
Your ideas seemed dead,
But suddenly your elitism kissed
The forehead of a teenage girl,
Who is behind cybercrime!

I can’t fathom your actions, so unkind,
No interest in your thoughts, I’ve left
them behind.
Your toxic beliefs, they’re way too
complex,
Beyond our grasp, causing only vex.

Religion doesn’t matter,
Victimization is our excuse,
Privilege is not anyone’s mistress,
Majority in distress,

A Muslim woman is a synonym of
every woman,
Is this everything you claim?

Upon a throne of ignorance, they sit
so high,
Wearing a crown of injustice,
spreading hatred far and nigh.

Yes, hear me out: Don’t ignore this
chasm Do you attain ideological
orgasm,
As you sell us online for your hate to
fill?

If this does not initiate any
correlation, Between you and me,
On the issue of Muslim women,
Then your sympathies do not make
sense.

Your silence lets them commit a
heinous crime,
Those who harm humanity with no
remorse. Your actions, tainted by bias
and hate,
smelled with disgust of stereotypes.
In your comfort zone, they
perpetuate.
Social media has changed how we talk to people, share our thoughts, and find information. Lots of people use it, and it’s useful for businesses and individuals to show off their stuff, interact with their audience, and get more people to visit their websites. But, social media keeps changing, and one big change is how it decides what stuff you see on your feed.

Worldwide, 3.5 billion out of 7.7 billion people actively use social media. Daily, there are 500 million tweets, 10 billion Facebook shares, and over a billion hours of YouTube video watching. That’s a lot of activity!

An algorithm is like a recipe with clear, step-by-step instructions that help solve a specific problem or do a specific job. In the context of social media, an algorithm is a set of rules, calculations, and processes used by social media platforms to determine what content is displayed to users in their feeds and when. Social media algorithms are designed to personalise and optimise the content users see based on their behaviour, preferences, and engagement history.

These algorithms play a crucial role in shaping the user experience on platforms like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and others.

Algorithm = Designed To Optimise User Engagement + Content Consumption.

However, in an online world algorithms are used to process massive amounts of data, make predictions, and formulate decisions that impact our online experiences.

Algorithms= Data- Predictions- Decisions-Impact

They work by taking input data, processing it using predefined rules and patterns, and then producing an output. For example, social media platforms use algorithms to determine which posts and content to show to users based on their interests and engagement history.
Search engines use algorithms to rank web pages in search results based on various factors like relevance, authority, and user behaviour.

**How it works:** Input data - Processing it - Predefined rules - Producing Output

**Table 1:**
Here is a simplified table illustrating the key components that social media algorithms take into account:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Component</th>
<th>What It Does</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>User Activity</td>
<td>Tracks what you do on the platform, likes, comments, follows. Monitor your searches and clicks.</td>
<td>Liking a friend’s photo. Searching for a recipe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Relevance</td>
<td>Decides if a post matches your interests: keywords, topics.</td>
<td>Showing cat videos if you like cats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement Metrics</td>
<td>Measures how much a post is liked, shared, or commented on.</td>
<td>Popular posts get shown more.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timing and Freshness</td>
<td>Consider when a post was made, showing newer posts first.</td>
<td>Recent news stories appear first.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Preferences</td>
<td>Factors in your choices: muting accounts, content you hide.</td>
<td>Not seeing posts from an ex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Content Type</td>
<td>Promotes certain formats, like stories or videos, if you engage.</td>
<td>Showing Instagram stories.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Algorithms are crucial in addressing both the positive and negative aspects of social media. They can help enhance user experiences, but they also play a pivotal role in mitigating safety issues and combating online hate.
The design and implementation of these algorithms require a balance between user freedom and safety, as well as ongoing monitoring and refinement to adapt to evolving challenges in the online world.

**Table 2: Interlinking Algorithms with Social Media**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspect</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Content Filtering</td>
<td>Algorithms are used to filter and moderate user-generated content to ensure it complies with community guidelines and policies. This helps prevent the spread of hate speech and harmful content.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation Systems</td>
<td>Social media platforms employ algorithms to recommend content to users. These algorithms can inadvertently amplify extremist or harmful content if not properly designed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sentiment Analysis</td>
<td>Algorithms analyse text or multimedia content to gauge sentiment. This is used to identify hate speech or potentially harmful interactions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Profiling</td>
<td>Algorithms collect and analyse user data to build profiles. This can help identify potential troublemakers and threats.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reporting Mechanisms</td>
<td>Algorithms support reporting systems, allowing users to flag inappropriate content and behaviour for review by human moderators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy Protection</td>
<td>Algorithms are used to protect user data and prevent unauthorised access, safeguarding users from potential harm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User Behaviour Analysis</td>
<td>Algorithms track and analyse user behaviour to detect unusual or harmful patterns, such as cyberbullying or harassment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fake Account Detection</td>
<td>Algorithms are employed to identify and deactivate fake accounts that may engage in hate speech or other malicious activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trend Analysis</td>
<td>Algorithms monitor trends and identify emerging issues, helping social media platforms respond to safety concerns in real-time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chart 1:
The mentioned table below outlines the key stages in the process of how algorithms can encourage online hate, Islamophobia, and xenophobia against Muslim women. It describes the progression from algorithmic content recommendation to the normalisation of online hate and prejudice within echo chambers in a very systematic manner.

**Algorithmic Content Recommendation**

- **Formation of Echo Chambers**
  - Exposure to Hate
  - Reinforced Biases
  - Amplification
  - Normalisation
  - Online Hate
  - Learned Prejudice

**Algorithmic Content Recommendation:**

Social media platforms use algorithms to curate user’s feeds. They prioritise content based on user engagement, which often means that provocative or polarising content is shown more frequently. Algorithms prioritise content with higher click-through rates, likes, shares, and comments.

Hate speech can be more engaging and elicit stronger emotional responses. Hence, Algorithms on online platforms recommend content to users based on their past interactions and interests.
**Formation of Echo Chambers:**

Users are directed to content that aligns with their existing beliefs and preferences, creating echo chambers where similar viewpoints are reinforced. In other words, Algorithms in the online world often learn and adapt based on user behaviour. This can lead to reinforcing existing user preferences and opinions, creating filter bubbles, and limiting exposure to diverse viewpoints.

**Exposure to Hate:**

If a user interacts with hate speech, the algorithm might recommend more such content, creating an echo chamber effect. In echo chambers, users may encounter hate speech, Islamophobia, and xenophobia content, often directed at Muslim women.

**Amplification:**

Algorithms are trained to optimise for user engagement, which may lead them to favour sensational or provocative content over less controversial posts. Hate speech can be emotionally charged and elicit more reactions, which boosts its visibility. In other words, hate content that receives engagement (likes, shares, comments) gets amplified by algorithms, spreading further.

**Online Hate:**

This amplification can lead to the proliferation of online hate, targeting Muslim women. Social media platforms segment users into cohorts based on their behaviour and interests. Targeted content tends to have a higher engagement rate, making it more prominent.

**Reinforcement of Biases:**

Exposure to such content can reinforce user’s existing biases and prejudices. Some platforms have limited content moderation, or the moderation process is slow and ineffective. This allows hate speech to propagate unchecked. The algorithm can’t differentiate between hate speech and legitimate content if it isn’t properly flagged or removed.

**Normalisation:**

Algorithms often promote content that is going viral. Hate speech can gain traction quickly due to its controversial nature, leading to a snowball effect. Users may be exposed to hate speech because it’s trending, and this exposure can further perpetuate the cycle.
Over time, this can normalise hate speech and prejudice in online communities. The process is not always linear, and users may enter and exit echo chambers as they interact with different content and communities. Additionally, the algorithmic amplification effect plays a significant role in the spread of online hate.

Chart 2:
Why do algorithms fail to effectively combat online hate and address major issues?

User Activity (Post, Like, Comment, Report) → Algorithm for Hate & Propaganda Detection and Moderation

Data Collection & Analysis

Content Analysis & Classification

Flag & Tag Problematic Posts

Decision - Making: Allow or Remove

Failure in Action: Hate posts persists

Challenges in detecting Hate & Propoganda

Failures in advocating complex issues.

Algorithmic Biases & State Propaganda

Insufficient Oversight & Accountability

Algorithmic Limitations & Societal Challenges
User Activity:

This is the input to the algorithm. It includes all user interactions on the platform, such as posts, likes, comments, and reports of problematic content.

Data Collection and Analysis:

The platform collects and analyses the data generated by user activity, including the text and multimedia content.

Content Analysis and Classification:

The algorithm categorises content to identify hate speech and violations of community guidelines. But it faces challenges in detecting them.

Flagging and Tagging:

Problematic content is flagged including state propaganda, and tagged for review and further action. But, algorithm biases are evident.

Algorithm Decision and Moderation:

The algorithm makes a decision on whether to take action or allow the content based on predefined rules and moderation policies. But it struggles with insufficient oversight and accountability. Actions may include hiding content, issuing warnings, removing content, or suspending accounts as needed.

Output/Failure in Action:

The result should be a safer and more inclusive social media environment, where online hate is minimised. But, online hate posts and state propaganda often persist due to algorithmic limitations and societal challenges.
Chart 2 reflects the challenges in detecting hate and propaganda.

- Hate speech and propaganda can be context-dependent.
- Propaganda can be subtle and evasive.
- Algorithms may struggle with detecting emerging trends.
- Algorithms may inadvertently propagate state propaganda.
- State-sponsored content might not be treated as rigorously.
- Societal biases and challenges can affect algorithm performance.

“Many individuals often assume that algorithms are inherently scientific, correct, and entirely objective. However, this perception doesn’t align with reality. While algorithms are indeed rooted in science, they are not universally true or completely objective. This is because they inherently carry the biases of the individuals responsible for their creation” (Former Meta Executive).

Recognizing that algorithms are constructed by individuals with subjective values and interests is essential in addressing the challenges they pose. Hence, algorithms may not be as objective.

Moreover, Algorithms can inherit biases from the data they are trained on. If the training data contains hate speech or biased content, the algorithm may inadvertently amplify such content. Biased algorithms can push users towards more divisive content.

So, the dual nature of algorithms are: It can both empower and exacerbate societal problems. On one hand, algorithms are powerful tools that have revolutionised how we access and share information, connecting people worldwide.

On the other hand, they can inadvertently fuel the spread of hate speech, contributing to divisiveness and real-world harm.
Table 3: 
Identifying Harmful Algorithms

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Algorithm Type</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Potential Dangers</th>
<th>How to Avoid</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Recommendation Algorithms</td>
<td>Analyse user behaviour to suggest content.</td>
<td>Filter bubbles: Isolation from diverse perspectives.</td>
<td>Manually diversify content consumption.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Encouraging extreme content consumption.</td>
<td>Regularly check and adjust your preferences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad-targeting Algorithms</td>
<td>Targeted ads based on user data.</td>
<td>Invasion of privacy.</td>
<td>Use ad-blockers or adjust ad settings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Manipulative ads.</td>
<td>Limit sharing personal data online.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Overspending on unnecessary purchases.</td>
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<td>Designed for maximum engagement.</td>
<td>Excessive screen time.</td>
<td>Set time limits for app usage.</td>
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Discuss the potential for algorithms to perpetuate bias, fake news, and discrimination.

People often don’t stop and think carefully about whether the news they see is true or not. When they do take the time to think, they are less likely to believe fake news. So, people tend to fall for fake news when they quickly scroll through their newsfeeds. Also, when people see a false statement many times, they are more likely to start thinking it’s true. This happens because the information feels familiar, even if they don’t remember where they saw it before.
Fake news is often more interesting and makes us feel strong emotions like fear or surprise. This makes it stand out, and we like to think we are learning new things, so we share it more. Even though we like to think we make logical decisions, we’re often influenced by biases. Some biases are easy to see, while others affect us without us even realizing it. Social media is a place where these biases can spread, and because social media has such a big impact, these biases can become stronger. So, even though AI is supposed to be independent, it can still have biases.

Many Muslim activists expressed frustration as Facebook occasionally flagged their accounts for rule violations while not taking decisive action against Islamophobic posts targeting Muslims. Is this a result of systematic errors, or does it reflect unfair biases within the platform’s rules and practices? The answer is a bit of both, actually. Just like we can use social media to share information, news, and our thoughts, we can also use it to spread false information, rumours, and hateful messages. When we do this, it can influence how people think and make them more likely to protect their own community’s interests. In India, social media is sometimes used to spread hate against certain groups, like Muslims and Dalits.

They’re targeted with false claims, like saying Muslims eat cow meat or want to take over India, or that Dalits no longer need special assistance. Amnesty International also operates a portal called haltthehate.com, which records “hate crimes” from both English and Hindi media. They’ve documented 603 such incidents by September 3, 2018. These high numbers show that communal and caste violence is a serious problem that needs to be addressed.

People fall for fake news for a variety of reasons, and the spread of online hate through misinformation often exploits these vulnerabilities.
Table 4: Shows that this is a complex issue with several contributing factors, including cognitive biases, social dynamics, and the role of algorithms in shaping online content.

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To prevent the spread of online hate speech and dehumanisation, various stakeholders, including individuals, online platforms, and society as a whole, need to take action.
Table 5: Outlining strategies and actions that can be taken to prevent online hate:

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<th>Stakeholders</th>
<th>Preventive Actions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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| **Individuals:** | ● Media Literacy: Enhance critical thinking and fact-checking skills to discern reliable information from hate speech.  
● Responsible Posting: Avoid sharing or engaging with hateful content, and report it when encountered.  
● Promote Inclusivity: Encourage tolerance, respect, and inclusivity in online interactions. |
| **Online Platforms:** | ● Clear Content Policies: Develop and enforce clear and comprehensive guidelines against hate speech and dehumanisation.  
● Robust Moderation: Invest in advanced content moderation tools and human moderation to promptly identify and remove hate speech.  
● Algorithmic Oversight: Review and adjust algorithms to minimise the amplification of hate content.  
● Transparency: Share data and information about content removal, moderation practices, and enforcement actions.  
● User Reporting: Create user-friendly mechanisms for reporting hate speech and harassment. |
| **Society:** | ● Education: Incorporate media literacy and online ethics into school curricula to teach responsible online behaviour.  
● Legislation: Enact and enforce laws that address online hate speech and harassment while respecting free speech.  
● Community Engagement: Encourage community dialogues, diversity awareness, and programs that promote empathy and tolerance.  
● Advocacy: Support organisations and initiatives focused on combating online hate and dehumanisation.  
● Media Responsibility: Promote responsible journalism and media coverage, including fact-checking and avoiding sensationalism. |
FATIMA

Muslim Women and The Media
Sexual harassment of marginalised identities, particularly its widespread prevalence in online spaces, often goes unnoticed. Such targeted online sexual harassment is an indisputable day-to-day reality for Indian Muslim women, and is routinely underreported in the news or isn’t addressed by social media platforms. However, there are times when some incidents catch the eye of the media (such as the “GitHub auctions” of Muslim Women), which then goes into overdrive to cover the same. But just because a particular incident has made it to the news cycle doesn’t naturally imply quality coverage.

Much reportage of harassment of Indian Muslim women has often been simplistic and reductive at best or further dehumanising and traumatising at its worst. Whether with misleading questions, misrepresenting facts, overlooking the social and political context, or simply whitewashing the crime, the media is notorious for contorting the narrative. Erasing and underplaying the identity of the victim and that of the perpetrator is also done routinely.

In an ideal world, the media should have adequate expertise and understanding of sexual violence and assault, existing systemic issues, marginalisations and identities, and the socio-political context of the country. Such expertise helps the organisations present the crime in a contextualised manner. There should also be enough training for reporters not to ask insensitive questions, be intrusive, or indulge in victim blaming. However, often, news reporting in the real world is far from ideal.

In such times, the onus of reframing and reclaiming the narrative falls on the victim(s) of the said harassment. It is, unfortunately, an unfair burden. However, the lack of these pre-existing mechanisms can also be an opportunity for the victims or targets of online sexual harassment to shed light on the crime and re-contextualise it for the reader or the viewer. It gives scope for the victim to reframe their story and establish their agency.

The following is a list of tips for Muslim women who have been targeted or victimised in cases of online harassment when dealing with media organisations/journalists. The list is of course non-comprehensive but includes the precautions to take, how to set a narrative, and how to tackle media bias, misinformation, or
or lack of quality reporting. The list has been prepared by Muslim women who are in the media, and simultaneously, have faced harassment on social media due to their identity. Thus, their lived experience of being Muslim, woman, and media professionals has been utilized in coming up with the following -

**Process it**

Learning that you have become a target of online violence can be intimidating, scary and confusing—thoughts such as “Why did this happen?” or “Why did this happen to me?” are not uncommon. You might also wonder if you did something wrong or could have done something to avoid the online harassment. But, in a while, you will finally realise that this isn’t necessarily about individuals but what they represent.

Let that process of confusion and resolution take the time it needs. Let your mind and body process it before deciding on speaking to the media. If the answer is no, then don’t feel guilty about it.

Do what is needed to preserve your energy and safeguard your mental health. If the answer is yes, still take your time to process how the incident made you feel, how you want to speak about it, via what channels and within what framework. There could be times when the media doesn’t cover such incidents of harassment, and the community has to organise to demand the same. Decide on the role you want to play in that.

**Call To Action**

When Sulli Deals (online auctioning) took place in July 2021, it took a while for the media to react and recognise that what had occurred wasn’t simply run-of-the-mill trolling of women but that something very insidious was at play. It wasn’t until the victims took to social media to call out media as well as feminist organisations for staying mum that organisations gradually began breaking their silence. Imploring the media to do its job is a tedious task.

However, identifying and calling out such blatant gaps in reporting an incident of online gender violence is essential and can help shed light on media biases and blind spots, be it deliberate or unintentional.

**Reclaim the narrative**
Unlike Sulli Deals, when the Bulli Bai incident took place (in December 2021), there was almost instantaneous coverage of the same. This may be because there were a far greater number of Muslim women targeted in the crime, and thus, far more women speaking about it in unison. This, unfortunately, still didn’t ensure sensitivity or even due diligence by many of the journalists. Much of the media reported this as a gendered crime or a crime against opinionated women who challenge the rhetoric of the government. However, this wasn’t just that. It was a targeted crime against Indian Muslim women.

The Muslim-ness of the victims was either completely erased by the media and commentators or only mentioned in passing, minimising the fact that this is the central identity marker behind the harassment. Since the media carries immense power, this erasure of the identity of the victims thus resulted in much of the commentary limiting itself to the sexism and harassment parts of the crime. I vividly remember realising this when a well-meaning acquaintance tweeted about this incident, saying that “no woman should have to go through this.” But the fact was that all women weren’t going through this.

Only Muslim women were. Not recognising or adequately highlighting this was akin to whitewashing not just the victim’s identity but also the identity of the perpetrators and, in effect, the intent behind the crime.

In such a context, it can feel dehumanising and insulting, but agreeing to interviews with reporters, whichever medium, can be a way to reclaim the narrative. The idea is to frame your responses in a way that brings back the focus to what matters: who was targeted, who was the perpetrator, what was the intent/idea/desired effect of the crime, and how the state and law enforcement should respond.

Research and Background Check

When journalists reach out to you for an interview/appearance, it is advisable that you ask them all the questions beforehand. Remember, you can always request an off-the-record conversation; in fact, that is your right and privilege as the interviewee. Before agreeing to any on-the-record conversation, if at all, tell them you want to speak to them off the record first and then decide whether or not you wish to sit for the interview.

Things to remember:
Who is the reporter? What sort of stories have they done in the past, and do they have experience reporting online harassment? You can also request them for a link to their author profile or look them up to see what work they have done in the past. You can also be upfront and ask them if they truly understand what is happening here and what their take on the issue is (if they have one).

You can ask them how they plan on framing the story and whether or not they are reaching out to the other victims. If the perpetrator is known, will they reach out to them, too? If yes, how will the perpetrator’s voice be presented? Will they be glorified, or will their quotes be used to justify their behaviour? Or will they be questioned in order to put them in the dock? Ask about the treatment of the story, and if, at any point, you are not okay with any of it, feel free to present the set of terms agreeable to you. You can let the reporter know you are willing to give the interview only if certain prerequisites are met. You can also ask for an advance copy of questions or broad pointers. Of course, the journalist isn’t obliged to provide you with these, but given that you are the victim here, most journalists who intend to be sensitive about the story will agree.

Moreover, the intention behind your questioning/probing shouldn’t be a form of media censorship but ensuring that your story isn’t being mishandled or misconstrued or that your voice doesn’t end up playing to the advantage of the perpetrators. You can also, of course, stick to speaking to media reporters only anonymously, not letting them divulge your details or any identifiers if you wish to.

**Check with lawyers**

If you/the other victims have lawyers, or are in talks with any legal team, or know any lawyer personally, feel free to use them as a soundboard to figure out who you should speak to and what you should say. The idea isn’t to curate what isn’t the truth but to present it most effectively so that your story isn’t weaponised against you by bad-faith actors.

**Frame Your Own Questions and Answer Those**

After Sulli Deals, I was invited to a talk on AlJazeera about the incident. The questions were fairly generic and broad. That is not a bad thing at all, but it is, in fact, a window which allowed me to underline what I believed was important.
In the interview, I emphasised that this was a mix of Islamophobia and misogyny and that ignoring either would be a mistake. I also spoke about how the targeted women come from a certain profile—despite differences in profession and even regional or social background—but have the common thread of being vocal in critiquing the state. I also gave the pre-existing context in which this was occurring: the fetishising and exoticising of Muslim women’s bodies, the imagined sense of ‘honour’ that the perpetrators sought to breach, the threats and abuse that Muslim women face not just online but also by right-wing leaders in their speeches. This helps place the crime in its specific context that the average viewer/reader might not be aware of or may have forgotten, given the overdose of information in the news cycle generally.

Again, none of these were questions that I was asked. But it was essential that I use the limited window on that show to spell out these points. This allowed me to use my agency to utilise that platform in an effective and impactful way.

**Bad Faith Questions**

There are also times when, instead of being asked a generic question, the interviewer makes it a point to ask misleading questions or, worse, those that indulge in victim-blaming.

For instance, one could be asked why their pictures were uploaded on social media (to be misused by harassers) or even be questioned about their criticism of the government and whether it’s valid. Not only are these examples of victim-blaming, but they are also a way to distract the victim and the viewer from the issue at hand. These qualify as bad faith questions—not intended to listen to or understand the victim but to intimidate, shame and confuse them.

As the person being interviewed and as the one who has undergone this horrific crime, one can and must call out the interviewer if exposed to such a line of questioning. While these conversations can become confrontational or even hostile, know that you have been wronged and there is nothing wrong in correcting someone. Such bad-faith views are unfortunately
prevalent, so by correcting the interviewer, you may just be checking the biases of the average viewer witnessing that interaction too.

**Keep Calm**

Know that you are the party that has been wronged here, and trust your abilities to articulate that. Events of harassment can understandably take a toll on one's confidence and even sense of self-worth. In such times, it’s essential to surround oneself with an inner circle that is rich and uplifts you. This will allow you to keep calm when you go in front of the camera/speak to the journalist. It’s okay if you are nervous. Nervousness is not a sign of weakness. If you need to, practice what you will say ahead of time, and make sure you are coherent, consistent, and calm. This doesn’t mean you aren’t allowed to be anxious or even restless.

The inner turmoil will inevitably impact what’s on the outside, but give yourself time and space to pace yourself.

**Save a copy of your version and final version**

Save a copy of your audio/video interview. You can record it on your own device.

If it is a text-based interview, save the screenshots of the WhatsApp conversations and the emails.

Post the interview (TV, print, or online), ask the journalist to share the link to the published story or report. This will help ensure you have been correctly quoted and your words aren’t taken out of context. Keep a copy of the final report for future purposes.

**Choose Your Medium**

The great thing about living in an age of social media (the massive scope for online harassment notwithstanding) is that there are a variety of mediums to choose from. If you aren’t comfortable with a TV-style interview, you can opt for a conversation with a journalist on the phone, but if you don’t want that either, you can state what you want to do on social media. Use your Twitter, Instagram, Facebook or any social media platform of your liking to say what you want to your liking. If you wish for greater dissemination of your views, you can publish op-eds, which are a great way of putting your thoughts across coherently and holistically and taking charge of the narrative.
To Summarise:

- Do a background check about the media organisation/journalist. If it is not a known organisation/journalist, you can gauge the political or ideological inclinations based on their previous news reports or social media posts.

- You can speak on record, anonymously, or off the record. Familiarise yourself with these options before speaking to a journalist.

- You can send your responses via email or text, too. Save a copy of any email correspondence, WhatsApp chats, or the audio recording of the interview.

- As the victim, it’s okay to ask the reporter to send you the questions/broad outline ahead of your interview.

- If you have consented to an interview, but something seems off about the organisation, or you don’t feel like going ahead, it’s okay to withdraw your consent.

- It’s okay to say no to an interview request. These are draining conversations, and the emotional labour can take a toll.

- Understand the power differential. Ask questions to media organisations/journalists: Where will this be broadcast? Will it be edited, or will the entire interview be used? The same applies to a written piece. Ask for everything before publication or broadcasting. Ask them if they anticipate any repercussions of this going public.

- Request an off-the-record chat with the journalist BEFORE you go on the record. This can help assess your comfort and help you go over your quotes.

- Prepare ahead. Consider what you want to discuss and the likely follow-up questions, practice with a friend and pace yourself. Prepare notes to ensure your thoughts are coherent. Speak to a lawyer for advice.
● Don’t downplay or trivialise or minimise your trauma; vulnerability is not weakness.

● Remember, you can lead the narrative. If a question makes you feel uncomfortable or you find it inappropriate, you don’t have to answer it. You can correct the news reporter/host or reply with what you think deserves the attention but isn’t getting any.

● Don’t let the journalist manipulate you into recounting your story repeatedly.

● If it’s a case of a crime with multiple victims, try and form solidarity groups with those victims and share the burden/responsibility of speaking to the media by taking turns.

● Certain crimes 'blow up' and get far more intense news coverage than others. In such cases, there is a tendency to over-simplify the news event for the readers and viewers. Don’t let that over-simplification or white-washing of crimes happen.

● Context is key, but reporters often fail to emphasise this. As victims, your identity, as well as the identity of the perpetrator, is essential to the story. The political context of the crime is crucial. Don’t hesitate to spell that out or underline it.

● Counter the myths/popular perception around sexual assault, and counter victim blaming with logic and facts.

● If the media houses are not reporting a story, use social media to bring attention to it.

● Reclaim the narrative. This is your story; don’t let anyone else tell it. You can write blogs or op-eds instead of speaking to the media.

● Chat with peers from the community on allyship and what expectations have to lessen disappointments.
BISMA

A Recipe
How to make Online Spaces Harassment Free
(Muslim Women Edition)
Recipe for making online spaces harassment-free (Muslim women edition)
[First, choose a social media platform. I'm using Twitter here because it heats up quickly.]
[Now, add a pinch of empathy to this heated Twitter.]
Don’t wait for the empathy to burn; add a glass of logic.
When the logic reaches a boil, finely chop the facts that break Muslim stereotypes and spread them on Twitter.
[ By now, Twitter has heated up even more. Before the empathy, logic, and facts burn, add a stand.]
[Remember, this recipe won't be complete without your stand. If you prefer this recipe with apolitical views, discard it.]
[If not, spice it up with some love and serve it hot..]
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Some of the resources developed during the writing sprint are present in this report. They were created for and by defenders, including activists, journalists, and individuals working in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and civil society organizations (CSOs). The authors of this report are all Muslim women who were part of the sprint.

The advent of the internet and social media has provided tremendous opportunities for defenders to amplify their voices and advocate for change. However, it has also exposed them to new challenges, particularly online hate speech and harassment. To support defenders, we conducted a focused writing sprint aimed at developing resources that provide guidance and strategies for addressing online hate and harassment.

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