



RESEARCH PAPER

“Sell-outs, Fatsos or Whores?”: Representation of Politically Active Pakistani Women on Social Media

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ABSTRACT

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The democratic nature of social media coupled with its unprecedented growth due to easy access and somewhat anonymity of users have had implications for various social groups during the last few years. A natural corollary to the vast amount of discourse on social media is the competition and conflict among individuals and groups to gain control and dominance. Like the male politicians, the politically active women in Pakistan also take to Twitter, a social media platform, to express their ideas. Since Twitter is a public platform, politically active men as well as women are exposed to a variety of comments from their followers as well as critics. Through textual analysis of tweets, and using the feminist lens, the present study found issues of women objectification and delegitimization. It was found that younger women political activists were framed as immoral while senior politicians were body shamed. Vocabulary used by members of Twitter to develop their discourse for representing various politically active women in Pakistan shows uncivil behavior and gendered prejudices.

Introduction

These days, social media is widely used for communication (Alsaif, 2016). It is used for networking, interaction, advertisement and business purposes. There are many platforms available for social networking like Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Youtube, Google, Whatsapp, Snapchat and many more. These platforms involve people where people interact and communicate. These social media networks have brought people closer, made them friendly, established networks, boosted businesses, and revolutionized marketing. People interact with each other, comment on posts, like or dislike posts, discuss happenings, create events, indulge in debates, fight and do a lot of things on social media.

Social media is so dynamic and flexible, it reacts with unprecedented speed and precision to social change; because it is more widely accessible than print media [and] it is inherently more democratic" (Mautner 2005, p. 821). Social media has empowered the masses as they have got an opportunity to voice their opinions through Twitter, Facebook and numerous other websites and applications. Such platforms afford people with an opportunity not only to voice their opinions about various issues but also to communicate with people in position of power and authority: an opportunity that they were hitherto denied. Politicians and government officials find it quite convenient to address tens and millions of followers from the comfort of their homes.

However, the bright side of social media is balanced by concerns of its potential harms. One of these harms is that Twitter furthers political polarization. This is especially so during the campaign seasons, with political activists directing their attacks on personality traits of their rivals (Zheng & Shahin, 2018). However, political activists direct their attacks at opponents on every political issue at hand. Such attacks not only focus on political ideology and decisions but also on character and personality of the opponents. Although women post more frequently as compared to men on social media (Ross, Fountaine & Comrie, 2015), yet men's responses are usually directed at women; however, it has also been observed that social media perpetuates dominant discourses in society as far as gender is concerned (Demirhan & Demirhan, 2015).

People spend a lot of time on social media these days, and it involves them in nonproductive as well as unethical activities. They start using social media due to different reasons including peer pressure, negative motivation or need based motivation. Once they plunge in, they are entangled in tentacles of social media.

Akram & Kumar (2017) have listed positive and negative effects of social media on society. They have discussed these effects in different sectors including business, medical and health, education, teens and youth. They maintain that socialization, knowledge sharing, knowing new things, utilizing various sources, sharing one's inner-self, connectivity, help and like are the positive effects of social media. While cyber harassing, hacking, addiction, fraud and scams, risky sexual behavior and low grades in education are the negative effects. It shows that the negative effects include harassment and risky social behavior.

Research has found that women face more cyber harassment than men do. Winkelman, Early, Walkerman, Chu, & Flanagan (2015) state "Cyber harassment and other forms of cyber abuse are largely crimes against women. Growing empirical evidence has shown that more women than men are the victims of cyber stalking or harassment". It reveals that the harassment against women is more than men and that social media is a big source of bullying on women. It is discussed by the researchers that "Cyber harassment often interferes with women's livelihood, identity, dignity, and well-being"

Researchers have disclosed that “one in three teens” faces cyber-bullying in one form or the other. The result of this cyber-bullying is very negative and it creates emotional distress, is often resulting in emotional distress and psychosocial shock with a drop in self-esteem (Lenhart, 2007). It is observed that the technology pervasive social media has become the source of harassment and mocking others. On social media, people poke their nose in the life of other people, point finger on their lives and troll them. O’dea and Campbell (2012) conclude that social media sites become a reason of contact with unwanted strangers. These strangers penetrate in personal life of a user and try to intimidate. Secondly it is not important how much time you spend on social media and your time has no correlation with cyber-bullying. You can be bullied even in shorter span of your time spent on social media.

Rheault, Rayment & Musulan (2019) have quoted Bowles (2016); Carter and Sneesby (2017); Hunt et al. (2016) and Saner (2016) who have referred to media reports on women leaders in UK, USA and Australia. They have reported that women are abused and harassed on social media. Rheault, Rayment and Musulan (2019) concluded that “women who achieve a high status in politics are more likely to receive uncivil messages than their male counterparts”. It shows that female leaders are subject to abusive comments more than male leaders. Moreover, they are harassed, trolled and bullied by the social media users.

Citron (2014) declared social media platforms as critical place for gender-based harassment. Chen, Zhou, Zhu, & Xu (2012) have described offensive and insulting comments on social media. Cross (2014) has examined experience of women with online harassment. Magsi, Agha, & Magsi, (2017) have researched cyber bullying in Pakistani context. They have found that the harassment is very high in Pakistani universities for young female students.

Pedersen (2018) has concluded “the roots of the modern media’s obsession with the appearance, weight, bodies, clothes and even sexuality of modern women politicians can be found in the newspaper coverage of the suffragettes”. It shows that the new media has considered it important to focus appearance, bodies, sexuality and like which further paves the path towards trolling, bullying, stalking and harassment. Blower (2016) has endorsed that use of social media effects “self-identification and self construction” among female users.

Sen (2018) in a meeting of United Nations Women states that “The range of experiences of political life have been the stories of abuse, violence and the fear of violence that have impeded women’s participation and full contribution to political life. Those are, of course, rights. And violence against women in politics is a violation of those rights. We won’t have true democracy anywhere without the safe, full and equal participation of women”. This is general discussion of violence against women which is replicated on social media as well.

Twitter, a social media platform, is widely used by people for expressing ideas, establishing connections, communicating and establishing relations with others. Like other people, political leaders use twitter for expression of their ideas, share news, update their political tasks and like. Like male politicians, female politicians also use twitter to propagate their word, interact and discuss things. Since twitter is an open forum, the community is free to discuss, comment and reply to their tweets.

The present study is undertaken to find out representation of politically empowered women in Pakistan on Twitter to find out and analyze how female politicians are painted on social media.

Method

We analyzed 500 tweets, 250 each from supporters/activists belonging to the government and opposition parties in Pakistan. We took screenshots of tweets and comments on the tweets. In the first step, 1,200 tweets that mentioned or profiled women politicians were selected. Out of these, 500 most discussed and liked tweets were selected for analysis. On the basis of the previous research, we analyzed these tweets for teasing out common themes. In order to avoid any potential harm to the users, we have refrained from naming the people tweeted or commented on the tweets.

Analysis

Islamic or anti-Islamic

One of the most favorite brushes to paint a politically active woman in Pakistan appears to be the religious brush. Women politicians are declared non-Muslim and anti-Islamic, and this is used to arouse religious sentiment against them. Integrity of women politicians is challenged by highlighting their religious beliefs. Religious sentiment has been used by declaring their dressing anti-Islamic, pointing out their habits of smoking and drinking and questioning their makeovers. A Twitter user writes in a comment

“The column for religion in her ID mentions her as non-Muslim”.

Hence, it is her religion, and not her opinion and actions that matter for this user. Moreover, as evident from this tweet, religion is being used to delegitimize this woman. Such practices are exercised to get political gains.

Destabilizing Agents

Women politicians are portrayed as destabilizing agents by most of the twitter users. One of the comments on a tweet by a dissenting woman gets responses of censure and she is labeled as a destabilizing agent. The original comment goes like “Pakistan is a strong country which cannot be destabilized by bi***es like.....”.Resorting

to abuse and regarding someone's comments as an act of subversion is suggestive not only of hyper-nationalism but also of misogynistic trends. Another important factor here is the comparison between the strength of the country and the destabilizing intent of the so-called "bi**es". The strength suggests masculinity while the dissent of a woman, not due to her gender but because of her political ideology, is being regarded as an act of promiscuity or prostitution. It seems that views of a woman will throw the country into chaos and will destabilize it.

Women are also accused of fomenting treacherous sentiments among their party workers. Their opponents believe that they are ready to subvert the national security through their deceit. One of the activists proclaims about a woman politician who appears to be all set to lead her party, "She has trained *Patwaris* in a way that some of them will silently support Indian Army if there is a war between Pakistan and India." In a society dominated by men, a woman is not liked by many if she is getting powerful. The reason behind calling them whores and destabilizing agents is the mindset which does not want them to come into power. The conversation goes like, 'she, a female, is leading a party. This sexist behavior and biased mental state results in this discourse of abuse.

Westernized Liberal, Immoral

The female politicians are mocked as westernized liberals and their morality is questioned; their dressing, makeup is highlighted and their sitting and standing postures are ridiculed. The criticism of powerful women goes down to such levels that they are termed as '*Gashitore*' [prostitute]. A twitter user challenges the piety of a female politician by saying

"Remove *Syeda* [title for woman who claims to be a direct descendant of Prophet] from your name as *Syeda* does not sit like you do in front of someone. Shame on you!"

In a hateful and misogynist political culture, it is the men that create reality for women. They decide how a woman should sit if she has to be considered noble.

Moreover, activists on digital platform make fun of women on account of their age, face, makeover, attire, actions, postures, backgrounds and even education. It is claimed that their education has changed nothing in them except making them liberal. A user tweeted,

"This is what these women supports [sic] and promotes [sic], BE FREE, the western Education or teaching of making people into animals and slaves. And destroy your norms and culture by bringing this indecency in this country".

Such statements are not unusual. There are a plenty of others like this. Politically active women are believed to be turning humans into animals. Freedom of women seems to threaten the social fabric and is believed to introduce, what this activist believes, indecency in the country. Politically active women are shown to be

promoting western education and culture. They are also termed as “*the drinking aunties*”. Exercising your freewill becomes even more problematic once you are in political limelight. A political leader’s former wife, who comments on various political and national issues, is branded as a prostitute. She is labeled and judged because of her “*divorce twice*”. While severely criticizing such women, men on social media offer them companionship, express their desire to sleep with them and spend nights with them.

Even when men in politics are criticized, there is a reference to women in their family even if they are not even remotely associated with politics. A user directs his invective at a politician by saying, “*providing sisters as bribe is quite customary for people like you.*”

Wearing western clothes, allegedly revealing dresses, mannerism, postures and personal lives, not their political ideology or practice, are some of the ways through which words and actions of the women politicians are delegitimized.

Data suggests that even the personal choice of who to marry are used as a tool not only objectify women but also to discredit and delegitimize them. One of the tweets reads, “*She eloped; don’t you recall?*” Another goes a step further and declares, “*It was she who eloped; otherwise [he] could not have taken the courage to elope with her.*” Both the man and the woman are politicians, and both are accused to having “*eloped*”, but the tone is harsher toward the woman merely because she is politically more active and is prospective party leader.

Model/Actress

The women politicians of Pakistan are also called models and actresses and their outfit t is ridiculed. They are criticized even for their beauty, being well off and being well dressed. A twitter user writes

“best actress of the year award goes to Miss.....”.

This type of statements springs from men’s bias towards the woman. It not only amounts to sexual objectification of women but also declares that they are unable to do anything worthwhile except being actors and models. Such harassment of women is quite commonplace on Pakistani social media platforms.

Hot or Fatso

The political discourse on Twitter is filled with derogatory remarks about political female leaders. Women are called *tractor trolly*, *khusra*[eunuch], *angry bird* and so on. It is observed that most of the abusive tweets are sexist, and carry misogynist angle. The physical appearances of the female political leaders are mocked negatively and it has been done for all rival parties. Someone is mocked as *HotNani*(grandmother)while at the same time it is claimed, “*she can be a good source of*

entertainment for people". Another female politician is mocked for her appearance and is called tractor trolley. Same is the case with many other female politicians who have been trolled on twitter in different ways. That are called hot or fatso, their physical appearances have been mocked and they have been abused.

Aunties

The general habit of Pakistani Twitter users is to call Pakistani female politicians as *aunties*, *sexy aunties*, *vulgar aunties*, *seductive aunties*. The word "aunty" is used, in negative connotation, for morally corrupt and loose character aged ladies. The use of this word for politicians is very common and these politicians are thus negatively portrayed. One Twitter user writes,

"If aunty deactivates her twitter account, probably half of the world's turmoils[sic] will come to an end".

This portrayal is killing for the female politicians. This character assassination/harassment is very often carried out by the twitter users. The use of word "aunty" for politicians is doubly negative. Firstly, it shows bias against women regarding their moral character and secondly, it shows age bias.

Sexualization

The Pakistani female politicians are highly sexualized by users on twitter. They portray female politicians as an object of sexual gratification and humiliate them by vulgar sexual remarks. The comments are so below the belt that they cannot be quoted even. They are openly called prostitutes like in the comment

"Look at who appears on TV like a prostitute and then defends these jokers".

The comments sometimes declare these ladies shameless and challenge their piety like in the comment

Madam! This is very shameless lady. Leave her. No one know how often she has compromised her honor and piety to reach here. She is a high class shameless lady".

Sometimes, Twitter users directly sexualize these ladies like in the comment "....., show me your assets dear". This is blatant harassment which is carried out through twitter. It is actually assaulting in public. Then, another comment

"This woman for winner for one year and that woman politician for loser"

This comment shows that women are being objectified as tokens of reward and punishment. Anyone who wins gets the beautiful politician while the one who loses has to live with "ugly" one.

Did you also go to see (male name) alone like she (female name) had been meeting in solitude?

Such comments are scandalous in nature. Moreover, woman politicians are taken as objects of sexual gratification and they are offered by the user to the winner of competition as reward like in this comment. Another instance of such scandalous tweets is “*Seeing her figure, he calls her every week to enjoy her*”. Twitter is full of sexualization comments against female politicians. They are thought so low morally that they can remove clothes to gain power. Thus, female politicians are humiliated, harassed and made fun of by the Twitter users.

Conclusion

The study confirms findings by Saner(2016), Bowles(2016) and Carter & Sneesby (2017) that women have to face abuse and harassment on social media. This study has found that female politicians are mostly mocked, trolled, harassed, sexualized, and criticized. The trolls make fun of their womanhood and challenged for having authority. Their participation is either considered un-Islamic or they are declared non-Muslims. The religion is used to exploit political gains in case of women but same attitude is generally not adopted for male political leaders.

Women politicians have been portrayed as destabilizing agents in society. A sizeable number of people on both sides of political divide on Twitter think that the female politicians appear in such a way that created subversion in the country. They will go against country based on their negative campaigns. We found accusations that female politicians are preparing traitors and this thing is very dangerous for the country. This approach shows bias against women in general and against these women politicians in particular. The hatred for political women leads to delegitimization on digital media platforms, especially Twitter.

Women politicians are painted as westernized liberals and actresses by people on twitter. People call them models, aunties and liberals. All these tags are attached to women and men are not tagged in this way. The comments are passed to the level of harassment and trolling. Women are abused, ill-named and ridiculed for being women politicians. Their dresses, make-over, make up, show, postures, actions, words, everything is mocked badly. This again shows biasness against such women who are in power.

The study also found that the female politicians are described as fatso or hot, models or trolleys and like. There are terms of objectification like *Khusra*[transgender], angry bird, charger, trolley, and a long list of other bad names that are being used for these women. The study reveals that this type of attitude is reflection of male dominant society where a woman is discouraged from playing any leading role, especially in the political sphere. She is chained and when she wants to break the chains, she is ridiculed.

The woman politicians are sexualized on Twitter where people treat them as a source of entertainment. They are explained in a way which is very negative and humiliating. The woman is not taken as a human being; she is treated like an object and the language used for her is very dirty. This reflects the mindset of the people

who think that the ultimate role for a woman is to provide sexual pleasure. Despite being famous and powerful, she is ridiculed and harassed by many on twitter. This furthers the process of delegitimization.

We conclude that the opportunity to express ideas and political ideology on Twitter should not be allowed to be compromised by use of invective, objectification, name-calling and harassment. Social media platforms need to be more stringent on trolls, and they should not be allowed to deny women politicians their right to express themselves freely on Twitter. Moreover, it should also be noted that slander and scandalizing ultimately leads to disempowering women since rumors and scandals spread like fire in today's world.

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