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Digital Misogyny and Women's Political Participation in India: Challenges for Democratic Inclusion

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Abstract

The expansion of digital media has transformed the ways in which citizens communicate, organise, express political opinions and participate in democratic life. For women in India, digital platforms have created new opportunities to enter political conversations that have traditionally been shaped by male-dominated institutions and social structures. Social media has enabled women to engage in political discussion, build communities, participate in campaigns and feminist movements, and communicate directly with wider audiences. At the same time, these spaces have reproduced and, in some cases, intensified existing gender inequalities through trolling, sexualised abuse, threats, misinformation and other forms of digital misogyny. This paper examines how digital misogyny affects women's political participation in India and considers its implications for democratic inclusion. Drawing on secondary literature, academic research, institutional reports and policy documents, the study uses a qualitative thematic approach to identify recurring forms and consequences of online misogyny. The analysis finds that digital misogyny is not limited to offensive language but operates through gendered attacks on women's competence, morality, sexuality, appearance, caste, religion and personal identity. Such abuse can undermine political credibility, increase the costs of political participation, encourage self-censorship and restrict women's visibility in digital public spaces. The paper argues that the problem should therefore be understood not merely as online harassment but as a democratic concern because unequal conditions of political participation can affect whose voices are heard in public discourse. It concludes by examining the limitations of existing legal, institutional and platform-based responses in

India and proposes a more gender-sensitive approach to digital governance and political participation.

1. Introduction

Digital communication has become an increasingly important part of political life in India. Social media platforms allow citizens to access information, express political opinions, communicate with public representatives, organise campaigns and participate in public debates without depending entirely on traditional political institutions or mainstream media. For women, these platforms can be particularly significant because they provide alternative spaces through which political voices can be developed and made visible. Research on digitalisation and women's political participation in India has highlighted the possibility of social media creating new forms of political engagement, mobilisation and feminist counter-publics.[1]

The significance of these developments is particularly visible when considered alongside women's broader participation in Indian democracy. The Election Commission of India reported that women constituted 48.62 percent of registered electors in the 2024 Lok Sabha election, while female voter turnout was 65.78 percent, slightly higher than male turnout of 65.55 percent.

[2] These figures demonstrate that Indian women are not passive participants in electoral democracy. However, participation in democracy extends beyond voting. It also involves expressing political opinions, contesting elections, joining political organisations, influencing public debate and being able to participate in political communication without facing gender-specific barriers.

The digital sphere has therefore become an important part of this broader understanding of political participation. Yet the assumption that digital platforms automatically make political participation more inclusive is problematic. Earlier research on women's online participation in India had already identified the persistence of gendered inequalities in digital political

[1] Shipra Raj, Digital Media and Women's Political Participation in India, 14 Media Watch 366, 366–85 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/09760911231185975
[2] Election Commission of India, Atlas 2024: General Election to Lok Sabha 2024 (2025)

spaces. Sydney Anderson's study of political conversations on Twitter, for instance, found that only 7.72 percent of the sampled political tweets were posted by women, while men accounted for 46.15 percent. [3] Asha Gupta similarly argues that although digitalisation can create opportunities for women to enter participatory democratic spaces, the benefits of digitalisation are constrained by existing social inequalities and practices such as trolling. [4]

More recent research demonstrates that the problem extends beyond unequal participation. Women who do enter visible political spaces can become targets of gendered hostility. Digital misogyny may take the form of sexist insults, sexual objectification, threats of sexual or physical violence, attacks on women's morality and appearance, gendered misinformation, and attempts to undermine women's political competence. A major study of Twitter activity in India found that approximately 2 percent of tweets posted from India between 2018 and 2021 contained some form of misogynistic content, with sexual objectification and sexist abuse among the most common forms. [5]

The problem becomes particularly significant when women are politically visible. Amnesty International India's Troll Patrol India study analysed 114,716 tweets mentioning ninety-five Indian women politicians during the period surrounding the 2019 General Election. It found that 13.8 percent of the tweets were classified as problematic or abusive. Approximately one in five of the problematic or abusive tweets displayed sexism or misogyny. The study also demonstrated that abuse could intersect with religion, caste and other identities. [6]

This raises an important democratic question: what happens to political participation when women face a higher social and emotional cost for making their voices visible online? If women modify their political speech, reduce their online activity, withdraw from discussions or become reluctant to enter politics because of gendered online abuse, digital misogyny can affect not only individual women but also the inclusiveness of democratic discourse.

This paper therefore examines digital misogyny as a challenge to women's political participation in India. It focuses on the relationship between online gendered hostility and

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[3] Sydney Anderson, India's Gender Digital Divide: Women and Politics on Twitter, Observer Research Foundation Issue Brief No. 108 (2015)

[4] Asha Gupta, Towards Participatory Democracy: Can Digitalisation Help Women in India?, 65 Indian J. Pub. Admin. 897, 897–915 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1177/0019556119881842

[5] Nabamallika Dehingia et al., Violence Against Women on Twitter in India: Testing a Taxonomy for Online Misogyny and Measuring Its Prevalence During COVID-19, 18 PLOS One, e0292121 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0292121

[6] Amnesty International India, Troll Patrol India: Exposing Online Abuse Faced by Women Politicians in India (2020). The study analysed 114,716 tweets concerning ninety-five women politicians during March–May 2019

women's ability to participate meaningfully in political communication. The paper does not treat every instance of criticism directed towards women as misogyny. Rather, it distinguishes ordinary political disagreement from attacks that rely on gendered stereotypes, sexualisation, threats, humiliation or attempts to delegitimise women because they are women.

Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this paper is to examine how digital misogyny affects women's political participation in India and what this means for democratic inclusion.

The study has four objectives:

- To examine the major forms of digital misogyny experienced by women in Indian online spaces.
- To analyse how digital misogyny affects women's political expression, visibility and participation.
- To examine the intersection of gender with factors such as caste and religion in online political abuse.
- To assess existing legal, institutional and platform-level responses and identify areas for improvement.

Research Questions

The paper addresses the following questions:

- What are the major forms of digital misogyny affecting women in India's political and digital spaces?
- How does digital misogyny influence women's political participation and expression?
- How do caste, religion and other identities shape women's experiences of online misogyny?
- To what extent are existing responses adequate to address digital misogyny as a challenge to democratic inclusion?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Digital Media and Women's Political Participation

The relationship between digital media and women's political participation is not entirely negative. Digital platforms have lowered some traditional barriers to political communication by enabling individuals to communicate directly with political communities and audiences. Shipra Raj observes that Indian women have used digital platforms for political mobilisation, community building and feminist activism, including movements such as the Pink Chaddi campaign and #MeToo.[7] Digital media can therefore function as an alternative political space in which women challenge dominant narratives and construct feminist counter-publics.

Gupta similarly argues that digitalisation can potentially expand women's access to political spaces in India. However, she also recognises that digital environments do not automatically eliminate the patriarchal structures present in offline society. [8] This is important because digital participation is shaped by the social conditions in which technology is used. Existing inequalities can be reproduced through online interactions rather than disappearing simply because political communication has moved to a digital platform.

Anderson's study provides an early empirical indication of this problem. Her analysis of 23,250 tweets associated with Indian political trends found a substantial gender imbalance in political conversations. Only 7.72 percent of the sampled tweets were from women, compared with 46.15 percent from men. [9] Although the study is older and predates the present scale of social media use in India, it remains useful for demonstrating that the digitalisation of politics does not necessarily produce gender equality.

The literature therefore suggests a dual character of digital political participation. Digital media can provide women with new opportunities for political voice while simultaneously reproducing the inequalities that limit women's participation offline.

2.2 Understanding Digital Misogyny

[7] Raj, supra note 1
[8] Gupta, supra note 4
[9] Anderson, supra note 3

Digital misogyny can be understood as gender-based hostility directed towards women through digital technologies and online platforms. It is broader than isolated sexist insults because it can include harassment, sexual objectification, threats, gendered misinformation, coordinated attacks and attempts to shame or silence women.

Dehingia et al. provide one of the most useful empirical frameworks for understanding online misogyny in India. Their study identifies six overlapping forms: sexist abuse, sexual objectification, threats of physical or sexual harm, assertions of women's inferiority, justification of violence against women and dismissal of feminist efforts. [10] Their analysis of approximately thirty million tweets posted from India between 2018 and 2021 found that around 2 percent contained misogynistic content. The study also found increasing levels of misogynistic content during the COVID-19 period. [11]

This classification is particularly useful because it shows that misogyny operates at different levels. Some attacks directly target a woman's body or sexuality, while others seek to reinforce broader ideas about what women should or should not do. Political women can therefore be attacked not merely for their political positions but for violating expected gender roles by being visible, outspoken or authoritative.

2.3 Women in Political Spaces and Gendered Online Abuse

The relationship between misogyny and political participation becomes clearer when women enter highly visible political spaces.

Vincent and Kumari's analysis of misogynistic discourse surrounding the 2019 General Elections in India identified four broad patterns and eight sub-patterns of misogynistic discourse directed at women politicians. Their analysis demonstrates that electoral misogyny draws upon cultural and patriarchal stereotypes that question women's political agency and legitimacy. [12] The importance of this finding lies in the fact that online political attacks are not necessarily random. They can reproduce established social ideas about women's morality, sexuality, family roles and suitability for political authority.

Amnesty International India's Troll Patrol India provides particularly important evidence. The study examined tweets concerning ninety-five women politicians during the 2019 election

[10] Dehingia et al., supra note 5
[11] Id
[12] Aparna Vincent & Ria Kumari, Misogyny in Election Discourse: Analysing the 2019 General Elections in India, 34 Discourse & Society 636, 636–65 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1177/09579265231166239

period. Of the 114,716 tweets analysed, 13.8 percent were classified as problematic or abusive. Among such tweets, around one in five showed sexism or misogyny. [13] More visible politicians were also disproportionately exposed to problematic or abusive content. This suggests that political visibility itself can increase exposure to digital hostility.

Pillai and Ghosh's study of Indian female Twitter influencers similarly finds that gender trolling can move beyond offensive or disruptive comments into threats and more serious forms of harassment. [14] Their research is relevant because political participation increasingly overlaps with broader forms of public communication. Women who become influential online may become political actors even when they are not elected representatives.

2.4 Digital Misogyny, Misinformation and Political Credibility

Misogyny does not always appear as direct abuse. Another important mechanism is gendered misinformation. Ahmed, Masood and Bee Ting's 2025 study examines the relationship between social media use, sexism and belief in misinformation about women politicians in India. Their findings indicate that social-media news use is positively associated with belief in misinformation targeting women politicians, with hostile and benevolent sexism playing an important mediating role. [15]

This matters because political participation depends partly on political credibility. If false or misleading claims about women are circulated and accepted because they conform to existing sexist assumptions, women may face reputational damage that male political actors do not experience in the same form. Digital misogyny can therefore operate indirectly: rather than simply telling women to leave politics, it can weaken the credibility on which effective political participation depends.

The problem is especially serious in an environment where political communication is increasingly shaped by rapid circulation, visual content, short-form messaging and algorithmic amplification. Gendered misinformation can reach audiences before it can be corrected, and the damage to political reputation may persist even after false claims are challenged.

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[13] Amnesty International India, supra note 6

[14] Varsha Pillai & Munmun Ghosh, Indian Female Twitter Influencers' Perceptions of Trolls, 9 Humanities & Social Sciences Communications, art. 166 (2022)

[15] Saifuddin Ahmed, Muhammad Masood & Adeline Bee Wei Ting, Believing the Untrue: How Social Media, Sexism, and Structural Gender Inequality Influence Misinformation About Women Politicians, 102 Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly 450, 450–75 (2025), https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990251313756

2.5 Intersectionality: Gender, Religion and Caste

An important limitation of treating digital misogyny as a single category is that women's experiences are not identical. Gender intersects with religion, caste, class, political affiliation and other social identities.

The Troll Patrol India study found that Muslim women politicians received 94.1 percent more ethnic or religious slurs than women politicians from other religious groups. [16] Women from marginalised castes also experienced substantially more caste-based abuse than women from general castes. [17] This demonstrates that online misogyny can be intersectional. A woman may be attacked simultaneously because she is a woman and because she belongs to a particular religious or caste community.

This intersectional dimension is reinforced by Ahmed, Deng and Masood's 2026 study based on survey data from India. The study found that frequent political use of social media was associated with online harassment, particularly among religious minorities, with minority women experiencing the most intense effects. [18] It further connects online harassment with the perceived physical, social and emotional costs of political engagement.

The significance of this finding is that digital misogyny cannot be understood independently of India's broader social inequalities. The risks associated with political expression can be considerably higher for some women than for others.

2.6 Gaps in Existing Literature

The literature provides substantial evidence that online misogyny exists in India and can affect women who participate in public and political discussions. However, several gaps remain.

First, much of the research focuses on specific platforms, especially Twitter/X, even though political communication now takes place across Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, WhatsApp and other platforms. Second, a significant proportion of available research examines the nature or prevalence of abuse, while comparatively less research directly measures its long-term effects on women's political careers and political ambition.

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[16] Amnesty International India, supra note 6.
[17] Id.
[18] Saifuddin Ahmed, Ruolan Deng & Muhammad Masood, Compounded Marginalization in Social Media Politics: How Religious and Gender Identities Shape Online Harassment and the Cost of Political Engagement, New Media & Society (2026), https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448261430019

Third, research needs to pay greater attention to the difference between being present online and being able to participate freely online. A woman may technically have access to a political platform while simultaneously feeling unable to speak, respond or express controversial views because of anticipated harassment.

Finally, there is a need to connect digital misogyny more explicitly with democratic inclusion. The problem is not simply whether online abuse is harmful to individual women. The larger question is whether systematic gendered hostility changes who participates in political communication and whose voices remain visible.

3. Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, secondary-data research design. It does not involve primary surveys, interviews or quantitative data collection by the researcher.

The study draws upon academic journal articles, research reports, institutional publications, policy documents and official government sources concerning digital media, online misogyny, women's political participation and digital governance in India. The literature was selected based on its relevance to the central themes of the study, with priority given to sources that specifically examine India.

The collected literature was analysed thematically. Recurring themes were identified across the sources, including forms of misogynistic abuse, political visibility, self-censorship, misinformation, intersectional discrimination and institutional responses. Rather than treating individual studies as isolated findings, the paper compares their arguments to identify broader patterns.

The study is limited by its dependence on existing literature. Research on digital misogyny is also platform-specific in many cases, and available evidence does not always permit direct measurement of the long-term effect of online abuse on women's political careers. These limitations mean that the paper focuses primarily on identifying patterns and analysing their democratic implications rather than claiming a direct causal relationship in every case.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Digital Misogyny as a Gendered Form of Political Hostility

The evidence indicates that women in Indian political spaces are exposed to a form of hostility that cannot always be explained as ordinary political disagreement. Political criticism is a normal part of democratic debate. However, misogynistic attacks shift the focus from a woman's political ideas or performance to her gender, body, sexuality, morality or personal identity.

Vincent and Kumari's research shows that misogynistic electoral discourse draws upon culturally rooted stereotypes to undermine women politicians. [19] The Troll Patrol India findings similarly show that online abuse frequently involves sexism and misogyny alongside attacks based on religion and caste.[20]

This distinction is important for democratic discourse. Criticism of a politician's policy position contributes to political accountability. Telling a woman that she is politically incompetent because she is a woman, attacking her sexuality, threatening sexual violence or using her family status to delegitimise her does not contribute meaningfully to political debate. Instead, it creates an additional burden associated with being a woman in public life.

Digital misogyny can consequently be understood as a mechanism that regulates women's political visibility. Women entering political spaces are not simply expected to defend their political positions; they may also be required to defend their right to occupy the space itself.

4.2 Sexualisation, Threats and the Policing of Women's Public Presence

Sexualisation is one of the recurring features of digital misogyny. Dehingia et al. found sexual objectification and sexist abuse to be among the most common forms of online misogyny in their large-scale analysis of Indian Twitter content. [21]

For politically active women, sexualised abuse can serve a specific function. It shifts public attention away from political competence and towards the woman's body or sexuality. In doing so, it reinforces the idea that women in public life should be judged according to personal and sexual standards that are not applied in the same way to men.

Threats are an even more serious extension of this dynamic. Amnesty's research shows that online violence against women can include threats of physical and sexual violence, targeted harassment, doxing and the non-consensual distribution of intimate content. [22] Although not

[19] Vincent & Kumari, supra note 12
[20] Amnesty International India, supra note 6
[21] Dehingia et al., supra note 5
[22] Amnesty International, Toxic Twitter: Violence and Abuse Against Women Online (2018)

every abusive message produces physical harm, the possibility of escalation changes the meaning of online participation. The digital space cannot simply be treated as separate from the physical world when threats can reveal personal information, affect reputations or create fears about physical safety.

In this sense, digital misogyny can police women's public presence. A woman who anticipates sexualised abuse or threats may decide that participating less is safer than speaking freely. The resulting reduction in political expression may not be visible as formal exclusion, but it can nevertheless produce unequal participation.

4.3 Political Visibility and the Cost of Participation

One of the most important patterns in the literature is the relationship between visibility and abuse. Amnesty's Indian study found that the most-mentioned women politicians had a higher proportion of problematic or abusive content than less-mentioned politicians. [23] This creates a difficult contradiction: political visibility is necessary for successful participation, yet visibility can increase exposure to abuse.

This means that women may face a distinctive cost of political participation. To become politically influential, they need to communicate, campaign, respond to citizens and build public visibility. Yet each of these activities can create additional opportunities for harassment.

The 2026 study by Ahmed, Deng and Masood strengthens this argument by showing that political social-media use is associated with online harassment in India and that this relationship is particularly strong among minority women. [24] The authors also connect harassment with the perceived cost of political engagement.

The issue therefore extends beyond individual emotional distress. If participating in political discussion consistently carries higher social and psychological costs for women, then women and men do not enter the digital public sphere on equal terms.

4.4 Self-Censorship and the Silencing Effect

The democratic significance of digital misogyny becomes most visible when considering self-censorship.

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[23] Amnesty International India, supra note 6
[24] Ahmed, Deng & Masood, supra note 18

Research on online abuse has repeatedly documented women changing their behaviour in response to harassment. Earlier research by the Internet Democracy Project found that Indian women who were publicly vocal online developed strategies such as avoiding particular subjects, changing how they expressed themselves, using anonymity and, in some cases, withdrawing from online spaces. [25]

Amnesty International's research similarly found that online abuse can lead women to self-censor, limit interactions or leave platforms altogether. [26] These findings are significant because democratic participation depends not only on formal access but also on the ability to use that access meaningfully.

Self-censorship is difficult to measure because it involves speech that never occurs. A woman who decides not to publish a political opinion does not leave behind an obvious record of exclusion. Nevertheless, repeated exposure to harassment can change behaviour before a woman presses “post.”

This creates what may be described as a silencing effect. Digital misogyny does not necessarily need to remove women from a platform completely to affect democratic participation. It can succeed simply by making participation more cautious, less frequent or less politically substantive.

4.5 Misinformation and the Delegitimisation of Women Politicians

Digital misogyny also operates through information rather than direct abuse. Gendered misinformation can portray women politicians as immoral, incompetent, corrupt, sexually inappropriate or unfit for leadership.

Ahmed, Masood and Bee Ting's 2025 study demonstrates the relevance of this issue in India by examining how social media use and sexist attitudes shape belief in misinformation about women politicians. [27] Their findings suggest that misinformation becomes more powerful when it interacts with existing gender stereotypes.

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[25] Anja Kovacs, Richa Kaul Padte & Shobha S.V., “Don’t Let It Stand!”: An Exploratory Study of Women and Verbal Online Abuse in India (Internet Democracy Project 2013)
[26] Amnesty International, supra note 22
[27] Ahmed, Masood & Bee Ting, supra note 15

The democratic consequence is twofold. First, misinformation can damage the reputation of individual women. Second, repeated exposure to gendered misinformation can reinforce wider public assumptions about women's suitability for political leadership.

This is particularly concerning because political credibility is essential for representation. When attacks repeatedly frame women through their gender rather than their political positions, voters may be encouraged to evaluate women according to standards unrelated to public policy or political performance.

Digital misogyny can therefore function not only through direct intimidation but also through the gradual erosion of women's political legitimacy.

4.6 The Intersection of Gender, Religion and Caste

The Indian context also demonstrates that digital misogyny cannot be separated from other forms of social discrimination.

The Troll Patrol India study provides particularly strong evidence. It found substantially higher levels of ethnic or religious slurs directed towards Muslim women politicians and higher levels of caste-based abuse towards women from marginalised castes. [28] This indicates that online hostility is often directed towards the intersection of identities rather than gender alone.

The 2026 study by Ahmed, Deng and Masood similarly identifies minority women as particularly vulnerable to online harassment associated with political expression. [29] This suggests that the experience of political participation online is not uniform among Indian women.

The intersectional nature of digital misogyny has an important democratic implication. If women from already marginalised communities face greater risks when speaking publicly, then digital spaces may reproduce existing inequalities rather than functioning as equalising spaces.

[28] Amnesty International India, supra note 6
[29] Ahmed, Deng & Masood, supra note 18

The issue is therefore not simply "women versus men." It also concerns which women are able to speak, which women receive visibility and which women bear the greatest cost for political expression.

5. Policy and Institutional Responses

India already possesses several legal and institutional mechanisms that can apply to forms of online abuse. The Information Technology Act, 2000 contains provisions relating to privacy violations and the publication or transmission of obscene and sexually explicit material in electronic form. [30] The Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021 also require intermediaries to exercise due diligence and specifically recognise content that is invasive of privacy or insulting or harassing on the basis of gender. [31]

The Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, 2023 also contains offences concerning sexual harassment, voyeurism and related forms of harm against women that can become relevant where digital conduct falls within the relevant statutory definitions. [32]

However, the existence of legal provisions does not automatically resolve digital misogyny. One challenge is that digital misogyny is diverse. Some content may constitute a clear criminal offence, while other content may be deeply degrading, coordinated or intimidating without easily fitting into one legal category. A second challenge is enforcement. Online abuse can occur across jurisdictions, accounts can be anonymous or pseudonymous, and harmful content can spread faster than institutional responses.

Platform governance is therefore equally important. The IT Rules recognise gender-based harassment within intermediary due-diligence obligations, but the effectiveness of such provisions depends on reporting systems, moderation practices, transparency and timely remedies. [33]

There is also a need to distinguish between protecting women from abuse and suppressing legitimate political criticism. Democratic platforms must not treat all criticism as harassment.

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[30] Information Technology Act, No. 21 of 2000, §§ 66E, 67, 67A, India Code (2000)
[31] Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules, 2021, r. 3, Ministry of Electronics & Information Technology, Government of India
[32] Bharatiya Nyaya Sanhita, No. 45 of 2023, §§ 75–77, India Code (2023)
[33] Information Technology Rules, supra note 31

The objective should be to protect women's equal ability to participate while preserving legitimate disagreement and freedom of expression.

A more effective approach should therefore include four elements.

First, stronger platform accountability. Platforms should develop gender-sensitive mechanisms for identifying and responding to coordinated harassment, threats, doxing and non-consensual sexual content. Reporting mechanisms should be accessible and responsive.

Second, better transparency. Platforms should provide clearer information on how gender-based abuse is identified, how reports are processed and what actions are taken. This is especially important because the scale of digital misogyny is difficult to understand when platform data remain limited.

Third, institutional support for women in public life. Political parties, legislatures and civil society organisations should provide support systems for women facing sustained online harassment. Responsibility should not fall entirely on individual women to block, report and document abusive content.

Fourth, digital literacy and public awareness. Countering gendered misinformation requires citizens to become better equipped to identify manipulated, false or stereotypical content. This is particularly important because misinformation can reinforce misogynistic attitudes even when it does not contain explicit abuse.

The Election Commission's existing Model Code of Conduct already emphasises that criticism during elections should focus on policies and public work rather than candidates' private lives and unverified allegations. [34] While the Code is not a complete response to digital misogyny, its underlying principle is relevant: electoral competition should involve political accountability rather than gendered personal attacks.

6. Conclusion

Digitalisation has changed the character of political participation in India. Social media platforms have provided women with opportunities to communicate directly with citizens, organise movements, challenge dominant narratives and participate in political discussions

[34] Election Commission of India, Model Code of Conduct for the Guidance of Political Parties and Candidates, General Conduct

beyond traditional institutional spaces. However, the expansion of these opportunities has not eliminated the gender inequalities that shape political participation.

The evidence examined in this paper demonstrates that digital misogyny is a significant part of this problem. It operates through sexist abuse, sexualisation, threats, attacks on women's morality and appearance, gendered misinformation and identity-based harassment. Indian research shows that these forms of hostility are particularly visible during political and electoral activity. The Troll Patrol India study provides evidence of the scale of abuse faced by women politicians, while more recent academic research demonstrates the connections between political social-media use, harassment, sexism and the perceived costs of political engagement.

The central argument of this paper is that digital misogyny should not be understood simply as a problem of unpleasant online behaviour. Its significance lies in what it can do to political participation. When women reduce their online activity, avoid political subjects, alter their speech, withdraw from platforms or become discouraged from entering public life, formal access to digital spaces does not translate into substantive equality of participation.

This is particularly important for democratic inclusion. Democracy requires not only that citizens have the formal right to participate but also that different groups can exercise that right without facing systematic barriers because of their identity. If women have to bear a higher cost for political visibility than men, then the digital public sphere is not genuinely inclusive.

At the same time, the evidence cautions against treating all online criticism as misogyny. Democratic politics necessarily involves disagreement, scrutiny and criticism. The concern arises when political disagreement becomes gendered hostility that attacks women as women, uses sexualised or identity-based abuse, threatens violence or deliberately seeks to make political participation more costly.

India's challenge, therefore, is not to make digital political spaces free from disagreement but to make them equally accessible spaces for disagreement and participation. Existing laws and intermediary rules provide some mechanisms for responding to harmful content, but stronger enforcement, platform accountability, institutional support, better transparency and digital literacy are required.

Ultimately, women's political participation should not depend on their ability to tolerate abuse. A democratic digital space is meaningful only when women can use it not merely as users or voters but as political actors who can speak, organise, contest, criticise and lead. Addressing digital misogyny is therefore not simply a matter of making the internet safer for women; it is part of ensuring that India's expanding digital democracy remains genuinely inclusive.