



Workshop on Feminist Information Infrastructure

Event Report

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Introduction

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The Centre for Internet and Society (CIS) organised a workshop on feminist infrastructure in collaboration with Blank Noise and Sangama, on 29th October, 2018. The purpose of the workshop was to disseminate the findings from a two-month long project being undertaken by researchers at Blank Noise and Sangama, with research support and training from CIS. A group of five researchers, one from Blank Noise and four from Sangama, presented their research on different aspects of feminist infrastructure. The workshop was attended by a diverse group of participants, including activists, academics, and representatives from civil society organisations and trade unions.

Feminist infrastructure is a broadly conceptualised term referring to infrastructure that is designed by, and keeping in mind the needs of, diverse social groups with different kinds of marginality. In the field of technology, efforts to conceptualise feminist infrastructure have ranged from rethinking basic technological infrastructure, such as feminist spectrum¹, to community networks and tools for mobilisation². This project aimed to explore the imagination of feminist infrastructure in the context of different marginalities and lived experiences. Rather than limiting intersectionality to the subject of the research, as with most other feminist projects, this project aimed to produce knowledge from the ‘standpoint’³ of those with the lived experience of marginalisation.

Campus uprisings: a retrospect of the past decade (2008-18)

The first presentation was made by Aditi Mazumdar from Blank Noise. Her project explored the infrastructure available for physical protests as a means to feminist campaigning and political mobilisation for college students across India over the past decade. The first stage of the project looked at protests against sexual harassment and gender discrimination on campus, and the next stage is scheduled to expand to study other goals of mobilisation. The methodology for research was discourse analysis of English-language media reports and publicly available social media posts, for twenty two student-led protests across the country regarding sexual harassment or gender-based discrimination. In addition, the researcher also documented eighteen instances of sexual harassment on campus that did not lead to protests. Publicly available material was taken as an account of public memory of a protest. The research also analyses newspaper reportage to identify trends in reporting about protests. Newspaper reportage and social media posts were compared to identify the types of protests that entered or were excluded from mainstream discourse.

The research questions explored by the project include:

- What kinds of bodies and identities have access to resources that enable physical mobilisation?
- What kinds of goals translate into mobilisation and physical protest?
- How do different variables, such as the cause behind the protest, nature and timeline, compare across the protests?

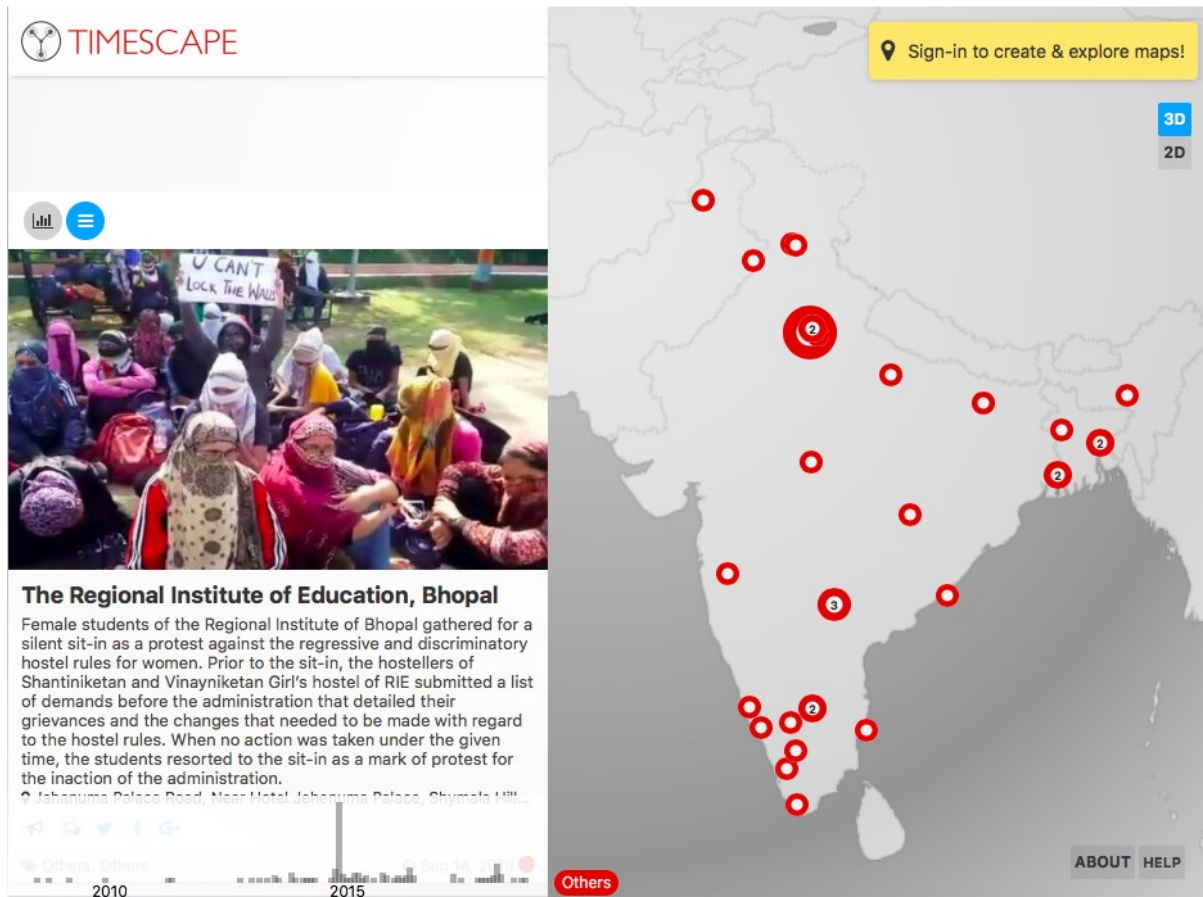
¹ Zanolli, Bruna (2017). ‘Podcast Feminist Spectrum and Infrastructure’. *GenderIT*. Available at: <https://www.genderit.org/feminist-talk/podcast-feminist-spectrum-and-infrastructure>

² Fossatti, Mariana (2018). ‘A Technopolitical Approach to Online Gender-Based Violence’. *GenderIT*. Available at: <https://genderit.org/articles/technopolitical-approach-online-gender-based-violence>

³ Harding, Sandra (2003). *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader: Intellectual and Political Controversies*. Routledge.

- Did an avenue for due process within the university (for instance, an Internal Complaints Committee for sexual harassment) or outside the university (complaints to law enforcement) form a potential resource in the protest?
- What can be assessed about the difference between the series of events that led to events and those that didn't? In other words, were there key certain similarities or differences between instances where sexual harassment led to public demonstrations and those where it didn't?

These variables were then mapped visually on 'Timescape', and made publicly available on the Blank Noise website.⁴

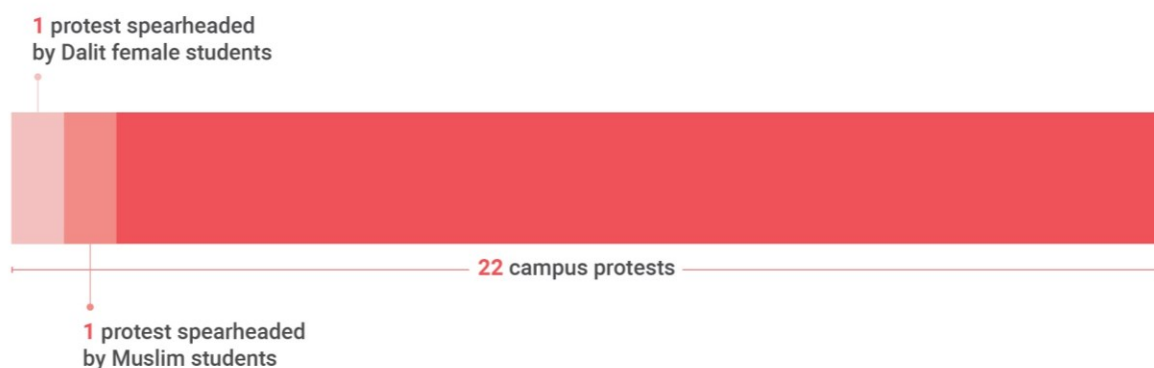


A Visualisation of Protests Against Sexual Harassment on Campus, 2008-2018

These were some of the findings of the project:

- Out of the twenty two campus protests analysed, only one was spearheaded by Dalit female students, and one by Muslim students. Both these protests were of a significantly smaller scale than other protests. This then brings up the question of the absence of voices from lower castes and minority religions, and whether marginalised groups face difficulties in accessing resources to mobilise on campus.

⁴ Blank Noise (2018). *Home*. Blank Noise. Available at: <http://www.blanknoise.org/home>



- In eight instances, the public demonstration was in response to cases of harassment of students by members of faculty or other staff. In one case, the cause was a case of harassment of a student by another student, and in two others, harassment of students by men not affiliated with the college. Five were a result of a series of assaults and cases of harassment rather than a specific instance. Five others were a result of gender discriminatory rules in the hostel or college. In public demonstrations against sexual harassment, twenty one were protests against instances of females being assaulted by males, and one of the protests was responding to the harassment of male students by their male hostel warden.



- Due process at the university was seen to be inadequate across campuses: activists preferred reaching out to law enforcement over the Internal Complaints Committee in university.
- Even in instances where sexual harassment did not lead to public demonstrations, there was an expression of *some* level of outrage, but it did not translate into public protests or mobilisation. An additional factor that existed in the instances that led to mass outrage in a number of cases (although not all) was victim-blaming by authorities on campus.

Participants at the workshop raised questions regarding the diversity of protests addressed by the project. It was asserted that the exclusion of other movements on campus, such as mobilisation following suicides by Dalit students on campus, leads to the obfuscation of caste in the public memory of student-led political mobilisation. This is especially given the multiplicity of such protests

that took place during the time period that the project was seeking to document. Another participant argued that the most vulnerable identities on campus are those of the invisibilised contractual workers and cleaning staff, whose access to social and economic capital, and protection by due process within or outside the university, is much lower than most students. It then becomes the prerogative of projects seeking to study marginalisation on campus to surface the needs of this group of bodies using campus infrastructure. Another participant recommended that vernacular language media should be brought within the scope of the project going forward, given that a vast majority of protests that are ignored by English-language reportage might be covered by regional vernacular media.

Exploring the use of social media and dating apps by sexual minorities

The second session, conducted by Megha Malnad from Sangama, presented a project studying the use of social media and dating platforms by gay and trans men, including sex workers, in Chikkamagaluru in rural Karnataka. To start off with, Megha explained that he felt pride in undertaking a research project, which is in his experience the domain of individuals with postgraduate academic qualifications. This is exacerbated by the status of gay men (coming from the lived experience of being a gay man) in his district, as he hasn't "seen or heard of any person from the community taking up research work". Megha conducted 30 interviews over the course of the month-long project, examining the experiences of gay and trans men on dating and social media platforms. The apps under consideration included Grindr, Blued, Jack'd, WhatsApp, and Facebook, all of which are quite popular in the community.

Megha went over the interview questionnaire used in the project, which put forth the following questions to each respondent:

- Personal details: name, sexual orientation, mobile number, date and place of birth, place of residence;
- Details of mobile usage: Period of use, type of mobile (basic, feature, smart);
- Details of social media and dating platform usage: Name of platform(s) being used, period of usage, type of service being availed (e-commerce, messaging, audio and video calls); and
- Perceived and lived benefits and risks of using social media and dating apps

After asserting the importance of the study for bringing out the experiences of a largely invisible social group, he briefly went over the findings of the project. He found that compared to low levels of mobile phone use by cisgender women in his experience, a majority of respondents from the trans community were found to be using smartphones. It was found that respondents found dating apps to be a reliable and accessible form of finding partners in the absence of other accessible public spaces. This was also the case with social media platforms such as Facebook, which were used widely due to their features that enable private and public group chat.

It was also found that there are significant risks faced by the respondents on dating platforms. For instance, it was found that users are often perceived as female on the app due to their birth names, and the discovery of their identity as trans men leads to violent encounters. Respondents, including sex workers using the app, recounted instances of being robbed or beaten due to other users discovering

their gender status. The privacy afforded by dating apps then becomes a risk for transgender users, as they are unable to verify users before meeting them, leading to instances of harassment or violence.

Conversely, it was found that platforms that allow users to have friends and broadcast content, such as Blued (a social networking app aimed at gay individuals) put the respondents at risk of being outed to their family by users on their friend list. The respondents further recalled instances of their partners broadcasting sexual activities to their friend list without consent. This can result in intimate videos being non-consensually uploaded to pornographic websites or otherwise circulated. In one case, this caused enormous backlash for the respondent, leading to the social ostracism of their family. These instances were used to support the argument that for gay men living in communities with regressive social norms, the risk of being outed or facing violence increases by using social media platforms, especially those with public-facing features.

After NALSA: Access to identification by trans people

The third session was held by Deepa Krishnappa from Sangama, whose project studied the barriers to access official documents for transgender persons in Kolar, Karnataka. Deepa began by affirming the importance of official documentation for protecting the civil and economic rights of the trans community, including access to education and employment. A large part of the community remains without official documentation despite the legal recognition accorded to them as ‘the third gender’ by the Supreme Court in 2014, which also legalised self-identification for transgender individuals⁵. Deepa explained that the expectation of greater protection of rights following the judgment has not translated on the ground, and a majority of transgender persons still remain without documentation. Any official documentation the respondents had access to was from before their sex reassignment surgery, making such documentation largely redundant to access services following the surgery.

She also detailed her own experience of trying to procure an Aadhaar card, which is mandatory to access welfare schemes, open a bank account, and acquire a SIM card, among other essential services. Government officials had often refused to give documentation that identified her as a woman, insisting on certification as a man. This was in coherence with other experiences of marginalisation she had faced within her village, which she eventually had to leave for lack of acceptance. Upon leaving home to join a community of transwomen, she found that the only categories of work a large majority of members have access to are begging and sex work.

The methodology for her project involved conducting 35 semi-structured interviews with three types of social groups - transgender women, Maraladis, and transsexuals. The Maraladis live as trans women opting not to undergo sex reassignment surgeries. Her interview questions were aimed at gauging respondents’:

- Access to documentation: Number of identification documents the respondent could get access to, among the Aadhaar card, ration card, voter ID, and passport;
- Access to financial services: Whether respondents could open bank accounts;
- Access to healthcare: Whether respondents could easily access affordable public or private healthcare, including for sex reassignment surgeries.

⁵ National Legal Services Authority vs. Union of India and Others 1 (2014) 5 SCC 438.

The findings of the project were:

- It was found that none of the respondents were able to get official documentation as their reassigned or self-identified gender.
- Among those who had documentation which listed their sex at birth, the Aadhaar card and voter ID were relatively easier to acquire, while none of the respondents were able to acquire a passport.
- As with Deepa's own experience, regressive attitudes and lack of acceptance for sex reassignment among government officials was perceived to be the largest barrier to acquiring documentation.
- Interviewees who were transwomen detailed their inability to access gainful employment and government benefits due to lack of identification.
- Lack of acceptance from families and communities also proved to be a major barrier, as respondents were unable to acquire their documentation from homes or schools after being ostracised from their communities.
- Interviewees from the Maraladi community were able to access identification and other services as males. Their personal identification as females was confined to private spaces, as a negotiating strategy to access education and employment without social ostracism.
- Transgender women respondents highlighted the poor quality of service providers who perform reassignment surgery. Some physicians cited lack of knowledge about the procedure, and also refused to provide care following the surgery.

Implications of mobile phone use by sex workers

The fourth and fifth sessions at the workshop were conducted by Parimala and Nagina, both studying the impact of mobile phones on sex work in different parts of Karnataka through semi-structured interviews. Both researchers reflected on their own positionality within the project as active members of the Karnataka Sex Workers' Association. Through their roles, they each worked towards protecting the rights of workers by dealing with issues regarding health, harassment and violence, organising work, etc. In her presentation, Nagina also explored her own experience of societal marginalisation and structural and physical violence.

In their interviews, they explored both personal and professional implications of using mobile phones for sex workers. It was found that all respondents were using minimum basic phones, which served to enhance safety in particular contexts, while also making them more vulnerable to other forms of harassment and abuse. Most respondents were illiterate, and used calling and voice notes rather than text based functions on their phones.

Some respondents detailed shifts in the process of solicitation, as they were able to exchange numbers with established clients rather than physically soliciting on roads and other public spaces. This was especially advantageous for workers who were employed or self-employed in addition to sex work, allowing them to schedule appointments for sex work for short periods during the day. Mobile phones also allowed them to maintain pseudonymity and protect themselves from facing harassment in the process of solicitation and sex work.

However, phones then also made workers vulnerable to harassment and abuse. Clients often circulated their numbers, leading to frequent calls and messages which could turn abusive. If clients had their

phone numbers, respondents were also found to be blackmailed as clients took photos and videos which they threatened to circulate among the families and communities of the workers. These images were also often monetised by clients without knowledge of the workers. Respondents, in some cases, aimed to counter this by frequently changing SIMs, which would also often be tracked down by clients who were stalking them. The non-consensual sharing of images and videos had then posed barriers to gaining access to other kinds of employment as employers find evidence of sex work.

They found that some respondents dealt with these risks by not circulating their numbers, using their phones for maintaining personal relationships rather than for professional use. They also inform partners or family members of their whereabouts during appointments as a safety mechanism, or during other emergency situations such as when law enforcement conducts raids to 'rescue' workers and put them in shelter homes. Nagina also spoke about the possibility of organisation through phones, as union workers use phones to keep in touch with dispersed workers and their husbands. She also asserted that in her capacity as a community advocate, she finds that workers are now more aware and equipped to deal with the threats they face because of the use of phones. This was also reiterated by other participants at the workshop, who discussed digital tools to combat abuse - such as recording video or audio to keep evidence of abuse by clients, or using the broadcasting feature on Facebook to enhance police accountability while interacting with law enforcement.

Conclusion

The workshop was aimed at engaging with projects that explore different aspects of public and digital infrastructure by different marginalised groups. What emerged were locally situated knowledges about barriers to access to certain public infrastructure for females and sexual minorities, such as due process for complaining against sexual harassment, tools for mobilisation, and official documentation. The use of digital devices was found to facilitate personal relations and communications, as well as enable organisation and mobilisation. At the same time, some of the projects traced a pattern of abuse enabled through technology and digital infrastructure. In projects working with trans women and sex workers, respondents were facing abuse as a result of their identity, ranging from a spectrum of physical to technologically-enabled abuse. Future research in the area could explore tools and strategies available to, or envisioned by, marginalised communities to negotiate the risks of using information technology and other public infrastructure.