General Assembly

Human Rights Council
Fifty-fourth session
11 September–13 October 2023
Agenda item 2
Annual report of the United Nations High Commissioner
for Human Rights and reports of the Office of the
High Commissioner and the Secretary-General

Written statement* submitted by World Muslim Congress, a non-governmental organization in general consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[21 August 2023]

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* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.

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Online Gender-Based Violence

In the modern digital age, the Internet has offered incredible opportunities to mankind for connectivity and empowerment. However, it has also brought forth a darker side of technology – online gender-based violence. The online harassment of women who are vocal on social media platforms, app-based stalking, trolling, cyber-bullying, intimidation, and doxing are all common examples of gender-based violence. Unfortunately, online abuse and misogyny are becoming more accepted day by day, which reflects as well as reinforces the structural injustices.

The evidence from around the world shows that the dangers or threats that women face online are in effect a reflection of the situation offline. According to a 2019 study conducted in the United States of America, racial and ethnic-related physical hate crimes were more prevalent in cities with higher rates of discriminating and xenophobic tweets. The same is the case with Indian-administered Jammu and Kashmir the women who dare to raise their voices online have to meet with a disturbing wave of online harassment. And this gained momentum when India's ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) legislators, like Vikram Singh Saini from Uttar Pradesh, openly pass scornful and beyond-the-pale remarks like terming the Indian government's unilateral move to scrap the special status of Indian-Administered Jammu and Kashmir as an appalling opportunity for the ruling party workers to "marry fair-skinned women from Kashmir valley."

The women of Indian-Administered Jammu and Kashmir, like their counterparts across the globe, have increasingly turned to digital platforms to voice their opinions, advocate for their rights and engage in public discourse. However, this vocalization has rendered them extremely vulnerable to online violence. The act of speaking out against suppression, shrunken political space, societal norms, cultural expectations, or atrocities by government agencies often leads to severe harassment, ranging from abusive comments to doxing.

India has used a variety of tactics, including internet blackouts and controversial media policies, to silence Kashmiri voices protesting against the unrelenting tyranny. With the development of social media, Kashmiris were able to communicate their plight to the outside world on a much-needed forum for free expression. Pages dedicated to Kashmiri support grew in number and discussions about the Kashmiri cause went online. This newfound independence, nevertheless, did not continue for very long. Under pressure from the Indian government, social media giants like Twitter and Facebook started deleting active accounts and pages relating to Indian-Administered Jammu and Kashmir. It's no more a secret now that social networks are actually supporting anti-democratic forces by removing text and media exposing repression of Indian machinery on the one hand and suspending the accounts of Kashmiri activists and NGOs on the other.

Vocal women in Indian-Administered Jammu and Kashmir face a unique challenge, as their online activism can attract the ire of not only individual harassers but also organized groups with differing agendas. "Bulli Bai" and "Sully Deals" were two such insidious online harassment campaigns that emerged as a concerning issue, disturbing the lives of countless women. More than 100 Muslim women, including Kashmiri women, had their images uploaded for an auction on these open-source applications. Although there was no actual sale in either instance, Muslim women — many of whom have been vocal against the rising tide of Hindu nationalism under Prime Minister Narendra Modi — were meant to feel degraded and humiliated. The list was created with the intention of tormenting and demeaning Muslim women in India, where anti-Muslim prejudice and criminality have already increased alarmingly.

The impact of such incidents is far-reaching. Women, who might otherwise contribute to public discourse and activism, often withdraw due to the fear of facing online harassment. This silencing effect stifles diversity of thought and reinforces a culture of self-censorship. The cumulative impact of such harassment is detrimental not only to individual women but to society at large. The complexity of the conflict in Indian-Administered Jammu and Kashmir adds another layer to the issue. The region's ongoing political turmoil amplifies online harassment, as it is often employed as a tool to suppress dissenting voices.

Women who engage in activism or express their views on the conflict frequently become targets of online harassment in an attempt to deter them from advocating change. These threats often lead to self-censorship, silencing the very voices that strive to bring about positive change.

In the case of Indian-Administered Jammu and Kashmir, Indian security forces also play a vital role in intimidating women into submission. Women from all walks of life, including photojournalist Sana Irshad Mittu sharing photos online to journalists like Quratul Ain Rahber producing write-ups against patriarchy and hatred based on religion to the college students finding fault with the government for its high handedness in their social media posts are summoned by the police, intimidated and asked to be careful about what they post online.

The impact of online violence extends beyond the digital realm. As vocal women are attacked and threatened online, they are at risk of physical harm, reputational damage, and emotional distress. The fear of such consequences often leads to self-censorship, stifling their agency and preventing them from contributing fully to societal discourse. The digital world should be a sanctuary for diverse voices, enabling constructive discussions that pave the way for progress. By recognizing the challenges faced by these women and taking decisive steps to counter online violence, we can reclaim digital platforms as spaces for empowerment, expression, and positive change in the lives of Kashmiri women.