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Youth and ICTs in a 'new' India: exploring changing gendered online relationships among young urban men and women

Shannon Philip

ABSTRACT

Like many countries in the global South, the rise and widespread accessibility of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in India have profoundly changed the lives of young people and impacted the dynamics of their gendered relationships. Millions of young people in India now have access to new opportunities and novel ways of communicating and interacting that a previous generation of Indians did not. From the perspective of gender justice and gender equality, these changes have led to many positive developments between women and men. However, they have also led to the reproduction of patriarchal social norms within ICTs and, in some cases, to a further reinforcement of gendered inequalities. This article explores these dual and contradictory shifts caused by the widespread access to ICTs among young middle-class people in India, and considers how while ICTs in India are providing new and important opportunities for young people to interact freely across genders in more egalitarian ways, they can also lead to greater online misogyny.

Comme dans de nombreux pays de l'hémisphère Sud, l'essor et l'accessibilité accrue des technologies de l'information et des communications (TIC) en Inde ont profondément modifié la vie des jeunes et eu un effet sur la dynamique de leurs rapports sexospécifiques. Des millions de jeunes en Inde ont désormais accès à de nouvelles opportunités et de nouvelles manières de communiquer et d'interagir dont la précédente génération d'Indiens ne disposaient pas. Du point de vue de la justice et de l'égalité entre les sexes, ces changements ont donné lieu à de nombreuses évolutions positives entre les femmes et les hommes. Cependant, ils ont également abouti à la reproduction de normes sociales patriarcales dans le cadre des TIC et, dans certains cas, à un renforcement des inégalités entre les sexes. Cet article examine ces évolutions doubles et contradictoires provoquées par l'accès généralisé aux TIC parmi les jeunes de classe moyenne en Inde, et se penche également sur le fait que, même si les TIC en Inde donnent aux jeunes, tous genres confondus, des opportunités nouvelles et importantes d'interagir librement, ce de manière plus égalitaire, elles peuvent aussi entraîner une misogynie accrue en ligne.

En India, como en muchos países del Sur, el uso y el acceso general a las tecnologías de información y comunicación (TIC) han cambiado la vida de los jóvenes, incidiendo en la dinámica de sus relaciones basadas en el género. Actualmente, millones de jóvenes indios tienen acceso a nuevas oportunidades y a maneras novedosas de comunicarse e interactuar que no tuvieron las generaciones anteriores. Desde una

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perspectiva de justicia de género e igualdad de género, estos cambios han generado muchos avances positivos en la relación entre mujeres y hombres. Sin embargo, también han posibilitado la reproducción de normas sociales patriarcales en el ámbito de las TIC y, en algunos casos, el reforzamiento de las desigualdades de género. El presente artículo analiza este cambio dual y contradictorio provocado por el acceso general de los jóvenes de clase media de India a las TIC, comprobando que, si bien las mismas brindan oportunidades nuevas e importantes para que los jóvenes interactúen libremente y de manera más igualitaria, sin distinción de género, también pueden dar lugar a casos de misoginia, ahora en línea.

Introduction

The spread of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in India is vastly uneven. More than 70 per cent of India's population lives in rural areas, yet over 77 per cent of all internet users come from urban areas (Rao 2009). Two major Indian cities alone, Delhi and Mumbai, account for more than one-third of all internet users in the country, hinting at the great regional imbalances in the spread of ICTs in the country (GSMA 2015). This digital divide is further complicated by class relations; within Indian cities, it is the middle classes and the wealthy who have regular access to ICTs, and the urban poor are largely unconnected. Given the fact that the Indian government has been pushing for further growth in the ICT sector through higher investment, improved training, and infrastructure, and has a dedicated Ministry for Information Technology, such an uneven spread of ICTs is deeply troubling (Gurumurthy 2004).

In terms of employment and the economic benefits of ICTs, there are concerns that growth in ICTs, although now forming a much larger share of the total Indian GDP, is only benefiting the technically skilled part of the workforce, doing very little to help solve widespread unemployment in the country (*ibid.*). The ICT sector is considered to be one of the sectors that contributes to 'jobless growth' in India, as it is a sector where the large majority of low-skilled and under-educated workers are unable to get jobs because of the high skill and capital required (McCartney 2009).

Within this uneven distribution of ICTs in India, girls and women have an added disadvantage in terms of access to ICTs. Women are reported to comprise less than 29 per cent of total internet users, with a 42 per cent point digital gender gap in the country – significantly worse than the global average (UNICEF 2017, 49). This disparity is mirrored in mobile phone ownership statistics, where there are 114 million fewer women than men who own mobiles phones (GSMA 2015, 74). Furthermore, of the women who own and use mobile phones, only 24 per cent have the confidence and ability to use the internet on their phones without assistance, and only 17 per cent report having made the decision of purchasing mobile handsets themselves (GSMA 2015, 75).

These gendered disparities in the access and use of ICTs in India are also mirrored within social media usage. Statistics show that India is the second largest base for Facebook in the world, with a total membership of 125 million users (GSMA 2015, 30). However, men dominate the social media space and, as a result, there only around 27 million female

users on Facebook in India, making the ratio roughly three men to one woman, considerably below the global average (*ibid.*).

Qualitative studies from India also reveal how several social and cultural factors shape the uneven spread and access of ICTs in terms of gender. In India, men often control public internet spaces, like cybercafés, which have been a prominent feature in many developing countries. Women's access is heavily curtailed because of the overwhelming presence of men in such places, who often use the space to watch pornographic material and spend leisure time with other men, making the space hostile for women (Nisbett 2009).

Similarly, the 2017 UNICEF report cited earlier explains that negative and controlling social norms, particularly with regard to young unmarried women, have meant that women's use of ICTs are considered dangerous on a social level and are thus restricted within many local communities. For example, one village governing body in rural Rajasthan stated that girls were not to use mobile phones or social media, and another village in Uttar Pradesh banned unmarried girls from using mobile phones altogether (UNICEF 2017). Nonetheless, the growing use of and access to ICTs means that India is not just one of the largest global ICT hubs in the world (Nisbett 2009), but that even with the gender-biased levels of access, new forms of social interaction between women and men are becoming possible.

It is within this context that I approached my ethnographic study of youth, gender, and ICTs in India, and sought to explore the changing nature of gendered relations among Indian youth.

My research aims and methods

As part of my doctoral research, over the course of 14 months between August 2014 and April 2016, I used ethnographic data from ground-level fieldwork primarily obtained from eight middle-class, urban, educated young men in New Delhi, who were all between the ages of 21 and 27. These young men are a part of the generation of Indian youth that scholars have labelled 'Liberalisation's Children' (Lukose 2009) because socially they are upwardly mobile, educated, have access to smartphones and social media apps, have pocket money for leisure and pleasure, and broadly form a part of India's positive development growth story. The eight young men belonged to the same regional parts of South Delhi. All were unmarried, Hindu, and from the middle or upper castes. Some were students and some were working.

This group served as my pool of key research informants, with whom I had repeated interactions across various sites and spaces over the 14 months. This allowed for a very detailed and nuanced study of their lives over time. My research design focused on their everyday social development, and their experiences of changing gender norms, from a social and cultural anthropological perspective. In addition, beyond this group of key research informants, I carried out 46 semi-structured interviews with other young men, 12 semi-structured interviews with young women, and two youth

demographic surveys. I also interviewed 27 activists, academics, and development practitioners for a macro-level analysis of gender and youth in India.

I collected ethnographic data from my key research informants through systematically spending time in 'deep hanging out' with them, analysing their social and cultural worlds by being closely engaged with them over a long period of time. This is a method that anthropologists have effectively used to gather detailed and nuanced accounts of the everyday social lives of their subjects by immersing themselves into the lives of the young people they are researching (for examples, see Gooptu 2013). Such a method allows for rich and detailed descriptions of life, often through vignettes, and provides a space to explore and bring to the surface the complex social realties that conventional interviews do not allow for (Banks 2001). In order to do justice to both the positive and negative aspects of ICTs in India, simply asking young people questions in an interview style would ignore the deeper, more complex, and often contradictory, social dynamics that I sought to uncover. One of the advantages of long-term ethnographic fieldwork is that informants begin to stop trying to impress researchers (something which often occurs in short interactions) (Banks 2001) and, as a result, young men would often not just tell me of their achievements, but also talked to me about their anxieties, vulnerabilities, and fears.

Positioning myself within the research

Given my position as a young, British-Indian, and queer male researcher, my point of departure was a critical Indian feminist position on issues of gender, youth, and sexuality (John and Nair 2000). Even though I spent over a year in close contact and doing fieldwork with young men who were heterosexual, their patriarchal attitudes towards women and their homophobia often meant that I was critical, but nonetheless empathic, to their gendered perspectives. My personal sexuality was never a point of discussion among my research participants, and although I never hid it from my participants, I equally did not 'reveal' it because of the illegal status of homosexuality in India. This tension allowed me to have a critical perspective on the social norms and gendered expectations from young Indian men.

I was in the same age group as the young men I researched, and I spoke Hindi fluently (as well as the local dialect and slang), making it relatively easy for me to integrate into the group. In like manner, I was easily able to navigate the class and power dynamics of our interactions because I was considered to be from the same class and social background as the participants. Thus, I was considered as being 'brothers' with the young men. Nonetheless, I constantly sought their consent for my research and kept reminding my informants of my research priorities.

My position as a young man meant that my access to interviewing women was largely through my male research participants. Over the course of several months, having become close to my male research participants (both the eight key informants, and the wider group alluded to above), I was able negotiate access to their girlfriends and female friends, and could carry out interviews with them to get their perspectives.

Exploring my findings

Obedient Indian sons?

Flicking through various photos of women on his mobile phone, Aman, a young man in Delhi, talked to me about his 'favourite' girls. Aman and I were on one of our regular tea and cigarette meetings after his day in the office. On that evening, as we sat and chatted, Aman showed me his smartphone which had several dating and social applications, and through which he communicated with multiple women at the same time. 'She is a modern type of a woman, more fun and out going', Aman told me as he showed me photos of a young Indian woman in jeans and a t-shirt. Then he moved on to another set of photos of a different woman in a traditional Indian *salvar kameez* and explained, 'But this one is more homely and marriage type, I like her more'.

When talking about these women, Aman explained to me that he had met both of them through Facebook, and that he had been chatting with them online ever since. He explained that the 'marriage type' woman lives at home with her parents and cannot meet him very often, because her parents are very strict. Aman excitedly explained that she nonetheless sends him selfies of herself, and chats to him via text messages late into the night when her parents are asleep. On the other hand, Aman showed me several photos he had taken with the 'modern' woman on their dates around the city. They pose together in various cafes and malls and, he explained,

> She lives in a working women's hostel in Delhi, so it is easier to meet her, her family is not in Delhi, but I don't want to marry her, she is too modern I think, she will go with anyone. (Interview, Aman, 12 October 2016)

The lives of both young men and women in India are greatly controlled and monitored by their families. Aman, for example, is 24 years old, has a job at a bank, and is broadly part of the middle class in India who have benefited from the recent economic growth the country has experienced. Nonetheless, like many men in similar circumstances, Aman is deeply dependent on his family for economic, social, and cultural support. He lives at home with his parents and expects to do so until he is married. He completed a degree in accounting on the insistence of his father, who felt that this would lead to higher chances of employment in a developing India. However, the reality was that Aman struggled to find work in such a a highly competitive job market, and only managed to get his current job when his father used his social networks to help him. Aman candidly explained to me once that,

> In India, no education and degrees can help, because thousands of people apply for one job, you need to know people inside to get a job. (*Ibid.*)

This dependence of young men is further compounded by familial control over sexuality. Throughout his education, Aman went to a boys' school, and then an all-male college for higher education. Aman's parents do not allow him to have any girlfriends, and try to make sure that he only spends time with male friends. In this way, his access to women is highly controlled and 'policed' by his family. Having a girlfriend or engaging in sex

before marriage are seen as taboos. When I was interviewing him at home, Aman's father explained:

> It is good for Aman to have good [male] friends, I don't mind that, but if he falls in bad company then he will go astray, do bad things like sex and drinking, so we have to protect him. (Interview, 1 September 2016)

Thus, even as middle-class families like Aman's have become materially wealthier and have more opportunities, they are bound by strict social norms. Young men like Aman have to behave like obedient sons who will respect the authority and regulations of the family, by only marrying a woman through the arranged marriage system, and from within the expected caste structure and religious community. Scholars researching Indian masculinities have argued that, from a young age, boys are socialised to follow the authority of their fathers, and that later, as young men, they remain subordinate to the authority of a patriarchal generational and gendered social system (Osella and Osella 2006).

Another young interviewee, Raj, who also worked in Delhi and lived with his parents, described his family's expectations of filial obedience, and in particular the authority of his father, as stifling. For him, spending time outside the family home, on social media and with other young male friends in 'modern' spaces, became his escape. He preferred going to these spaces, not just because they were trendy and fashionable, but also because they often provided free WiFi – which allowed him to escape further into an online world where he was not monitored.

In this space, Raj enjoyed being part of private conversations on mobile phones through social media platforms and apps. Such an activity became an important means by which young men like Raj and Aman felt they could express themselves, and perform their versions of masculinities away from the direct control of their families. Researchers exploring social change in India have argued that the emergence of such new spaces of leisure and pleasure, as well as their corresponding lifestyle ideas, consumption practices, and opportunities, define the dynamics of a new and globalising India (Brosius 2010). This new India represents the social, cultural, and economic shifts within the concept of what it means to be young. However, as scholars point out, this new India does not replace the 'old' India; rather, both coexist side by side (*ibid.*).

These major shifts present a generational tension for young men like Aman and Raj who, on the one hand, are very eager to be part of a modern new way of life, but at the same time are dependent on – and closely connected with – their families, who expect obedience. While spending time with Raj, he once explained to me that,

> India has changed a lot now, but my parents have an old mindset. I know they love me, but they don't understand these things and sometimes it gets too much. They will never allow me to smoke or go out on dates with girls, but I like it and I have to do it without them finding out. (Interview, 13 December 2016)

On the one hand, Raj is tempted by a 'modern' way of life in this new India, yet at the same time he is powerfully controlled by an older set of norms.

These findings are in line with what researchers refer to as the 'two personalities' of young men (Rogers 2008, 79): they are modern outside the house, but equally have to appear to be obedient and asexual sons, and in obedience to the older social norms within the home.

Love in a 'new' India

It is in this context that social media now serves as a space for young urban middle-class Indian women and men to meet on an shared platform to connect, date, and love, in the 'new' India. The emergence of mass ICT connectivity creates a social space for interaction among young people, away from the watchful eyes of their parents and patriarchal authorities who often attempt to control and restrict such cross-gendered interactions. As Kartik, a young student who met his girlfriend online, explained to me,

> With Facebook and snapchat and WhatsApp and all, it's really easy for me to meet girls and talk to them. When I was younger in school, it was really difficult to meet girls, but now with mobile phones and internet, I can sit in my room and talk to girls, and my parents have no idea. (Interview, 1 August 2016)

In this way, social media and mobile phones have become one way in which young men can subvert the patriarchal power of their families within the household, and exert a sense of control and agency over the expression of their gender and sexual lives online.

These findings are in line with what academics, like Nicholas Nisbett (2009), also show – that instead of meeting random men and women at bus stops or on street corners, an overwhelming number of young people in urban India now use social media, chatrooms, and ICTs to communicate and meet each other, making it much easier for them to interact and connect. Nonetheless, Kartik's relationship with his girlfriend, which began online, has to remain secret from his family because they would never approve of it. As a result, young men like Kartik engage in careful planning and management of how they interact, meet, and chat with girlfriends, as well as deception, so that they do not get caught.

This desire to meet and talk with women online means that young men now spend a lot of time, energy, and effort creating a profile image, and invest in learning how to date and talk to women, as well as how to behave in their company. By displaying the right kinds of photos on Facebook and WhatsApp, young men like Kartik hope to attract women and create social bonds with them. These profiles and online lives take place away from the gaze of their families, who are often unaware of their existence.

Through college networks, work, event pages, and other cultural groups, young men send 'friend requests' to random women with whom they seek to connect. In turn, the young women judge these young men, based on their profiles and photos, and decide whether or not to initiate further contact with them. Through such online interactions, courtship begins, photos can be exchanged, and many conversations can take place, with comparative ease and lack of economic cost.

Very often, through such online contacts, young men are able to transfer their online friendships into social realities, and take women on dates to places like cafes, malls,

clubs, and cinema multiplexes, where dating and being with women are accepted practices of a modern social order. On these dates, they take photos and selfies of themselves as a couple, ensuring that they are wearing fashionable clothes and are in fancy places, and upload them on to Facebook, for their friends to see and like. Hence, in this process, ICTs play an important role in not just facilitating such secret encounters, but also in validating these experiences of modern life in a new India.

Challenging gender stereotypes online

> If boys don't talk to girls, how will they respect them? (Interview, Raj, 21 August 2016)

Such online interactive spaces also create and instill new expressions of gender dynamics between women and men. Raj told me that his family did not understand or approve of modern things like dancing, selfies, cafes, or clubs. However, Raj personally enjoyed singing the latest Hindi songs, and liked posting videos of himself online for his friends to watch and comment on. He felt that young women were often impressed by his talents, and regarded him as a sensitive and fun young man, which was something he appreciated. Raj felt that such openness allowed him also to build better relationships with women. Through talking to them online and being able to discuss emotions, desires, pleasures, and anxieties with them, he explained that he broke free from his misconceptions about girls and women being 'silly' or 'dumb'. However, he had to be very careful that his family never saw his Facebook account or its contents for fear of being punished,

> My family don't like my singing and fashion and all. But girls like it and my friends like it so I can be open and free with them only … When you talk to girls online, you start to understand what they like and what they don't like [and] you can become friends with them and you can start thinking about them … so we can have a close friendship … Earlier it was not like that, you couldn't talk to girls … my parents [would not] allow it. (*Ibid.*)

ICTs open up spaces for new forms of self-expression and communication that have not existed before, and allow young men to relate to women through these interpersonal interactions in a context where such interaction has been heavily restricted. Social media, in particular, has opened up a whole new world of connectivity that had not existed before, creating the potential for greater gendered expression and understanding.

ICTs and gender-based violence

> I saw the Soch [think] campaign on women's safety on Facebook and it was really good, I thought. It made me think about how I talk about girls and how I should change my behaviour. Everyone should watch that video on Facebook because now I have changed my thinking. (Interview, Raj, 21 August 2016)

Following the infamous December 2012 gang rape of a young woman on a moving bus in Delhi, which caught the attention of the international media and brought in a range of national-level campaigns around 'women's protection' in India (Chamberlain and Bhabani 2017), there was a sharp increase in online campaigns and responses promoting

gender equality (Krishnan 2014). Among the young men I worked with, this event and the campaigns around it had also brought about a shift. Although it is difficult to measure the degree to which men's attitudes towards issues of gender inequality have changed, such campaigns about respecting women, or that address violence against women, are popular and promote positive messages about gender justice among young men.

Interestingly, Raj explained that young men need to understand issues of gender through online platforms, because young women are demanding this from them. He felt that if he was aware of some of the campaigns and issues that affected women's lives, his personal chances of attracting women, talking to them, and building meaningful relationships with them would also increase. In Raj's opinion young Indian women themselves encourage and positively appraise young men who are aware of these gender justice online campaigns, and take part in them.

Participation in these online campaigns and conversations also marks an important shift within young men, breaking the silence which has suppressed the discussion on issues of gender-based violence in India. Topics that were earlier considered 'unspeakable' (John and Nair 2000, 3), given the heavy policing on gender and sexuality issues, have now begun to come to the fore in powerful and challenging ways. Silence around these topics has now broken, as information and ideas reach new audiences through ICTs. In turn, this is influencing the ways in which young men think and act.

The emergence and wide accessibility of ICTs opens up many possibilities for development practitioners working within the field of gender equality. Deep-seated social norms around segregation and difference can be reduced through ICT connectivity, enabling more social contact and productive interaction among young people. Furthermore, conversation topics that were once taboo are now explored and scrutinised in online public discussions, leading to a change in attitudes and behaviours among young men who are exposed to these messages.

These are overwhelmingly positive developments that mass access to ICTs have brought to Indian youth and their gendered interactions, and they highlight the potential for the positive evolution of future relationships among young people in India.

Online misogyny

Despite the positive developments through greater use of ICTs in India, there are also new problems that have emerged. Although young men can now interact with women more freely through online applications, through their use of ICTs they can also recreate and perpetuate gendered stereotypes about women. In Aman's description of the 'modern' and 'homely' women on Facebook, for example, we see these biases playing out. He ascribes different values to the women depending on their appearance in online photos, and categorises women as suitable for marriage or not, depending on their physical looks.

Thus, the deep-seated gendered biases around women's virtue and honour, linked to their marital worth (which is traditionally regarded as the ultimate achievement for women), are reproduced in new ways online. These sentiments were also echoed in a focus group discussion I conducted with young men, who unanimously felt that 'good'

girls and 'bad' girls are recognisable through their visual appearance, pose, posture, and dress, in online photographs. In many ways, through social media, the image of the young woman has become the sole marker of her character and morality.

The young men collectively labelled women in 'traditional' Indian clothes as respectable, and admired them as being 'good women' (*achi ladki*), because their clothes and images were seen as markers of their suitability for marriage. In contrast, photos of women in jeans, short-sleeved tops, or more 'western' clothes marked them out as 'modern' women. Such women instilled a sense of desire as well as anxiety among the young men.

For example, Aman liked taking photos and going on dates with his 'modern' girlfriend in trendy places, yet, on the other hand, he also felt threatened by the very 'modernity' his girlfriend embodied. Aman explained that this young woman can meet with him with ease because she is not strictly policed by her family, and that this makes it easier to develop a romantic bond and turn their online friendship into a social reality. However, at the same time, the fact that the young woman is available to meet and interact freely also creates a fear of her being 'too free'. In such a case, just like the traditional clothes are the mark of the moral and honourable 'good girl', the 'modern' woman potentially becomes a sexual and social threat, as she is considered 'difficult to control'.

Such anxieties and feelings of threat were reflected in other informants too. Raj, for example, once talked to me about a fashionable young woman he had recently connected with on Facebook, who was not warm and responsive in her messages to him. In a frustrated, but convinced tone, he explained that,

> She will go with anyone, you can tell from her photos, so I don't care that she is not replying. (Interview, Raj, 4 October 2016)

Her rejection of Raj and lack of response was framed not as a personal inadequacy on Raj's part, but rather was framed as a breach of gendered norms on the part of a 'modern' woman.

Hence, on the one hand, the wide access to ICTs amongst middle-class youth has allowed for new conversations to emerge amongst young men and women. But, at the same time, the deeper norms and inequalities around gender and women's sexualities have not been adequately addressed. Young men still try to dominate and control women's online presences by controlling the gendered power of labelling women as 'good' or 'bad', and this continues to fester misogynistic attitudes online as well as offline.

Performing gender online

Similarly, the 'hidden' nature of ICTs when used for love and romance amongst young people – away from the gaze of the family – puts a particularly high burden on young women. As feminist scholars in India note, social norms mean that women already face the pressure of balancing modern and a traditional or good feminine identity (Krishnan 2014). Yet, at the same time, for young men to be attracted to women's online profiles, these women feel pressured to create attractive images of themselves which are well

groomed, stylish, and sexy, even when wearing traditional Indian clothes. These women not only have to hide their Facebook profiles and online conversations from their parents, but they are also required to create a 'sexy' and 'modern' profile image, while maintaining an appropriately 'feminine' ideal that does not breach the traditional notions of female respectability.

In addition, these requirements of women to present passive and traditional images of themselves on social media reinforce young men's self-perceptions of themselves as active and hyper-masculine men.

In this context, women are devoid of a sexually active self, but are cast as bodies on whom sexuality is acted upon by young men, both online and offline. The conventional offline patriarchal gender norms of sexually active men and sexually passive women are further recreated and affirmed online. Although young men actively reflect on their attitudes and the changes in the gender order that have emerged in India, much more needs to be done to shift the deeper-rooted inequalities among young men and women, as well as addressing the stigma attached to an active unmarried female sexuality in the Indian context.

Concluding thoughts

What emerges in this article is a complex picture showing the profound role of ICTs in changing gender relations among young people in India. On the one hand, more positive attitudes and spaces are developing amongst young men and women, creating new spaces to express themselves, interact freely across gendered lines, and form new social relations that have not existed before. In this context, young men learn how to interact with women and build greater respect and understanding towards women, something not easily possible within their offline social contexts where interactions with women are heavily curtailed. Thus, ICTs are an important resource for young men and women, allowing an escape from the conventional policing of their families and broader society.

However, on the other hand, social media also reproduces some of the paradoxes and biases of patriarchal Indian society online, which are particularly misogynistic. In this way, both new positive shifts in gendered relations and new (as well as old) forms of misogyny are emerging and being perpetuated through ICTs. Thus, rather than taking a simplistic and binary attitude that ICTs are simply good or bad, the crucial question is about taking into consideration both of these realities and determining how to act to improve further the possibilities for more gender equality through ICTs.

Recommendations

From this research, some recommendations emerge for development policymakers and practitioners. First, there needs to be more ICT development, and the unevenness of ICTs across regions and genders needs to be addressed through interventions and developments around increasing access, capacity, and affordability, in order to level the infrastructural playing field for both women and men, as well as across social and economic lines. Second, along with these infrastructural changes, development practitioners and

policymakers need to address the deeper sociocultural issues of gendered inequality within the society by acknowledging the everyday interactions between young men and women and the gendered norms expressed, as these norms continue to be expressed and perpetuated within the digital and virtual world. Third, more online campaigns that encourage men to think critically about both personal and structural power will open up spaces for more behavioural and systemic change within gender relationships. The trend of engaging men and boys through online campaigns is very welcome, but this can go further by critically dealing with issues of power and addressing imbalances from the root. If harnessed properly, ICTs hold great potential and power to bring about positive change for gender justice.

Notes on contributor

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