

FACEBOOK AS A GENDER INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACE: PERSPECTIVES FROM FEMALE USERS IN PAKISTAN

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ABSTRACT

Facebook is a free online space that is open to everyone without gender discrimination. This is a study of selective female of Facebook between age 20-60 years from Pakistan. They were asked to share their perspective on gender inclusion on Facebook as well as about the issues and challenges that they are facing as female users of Facebook. The respondents have been selected because of long-term online interaction as Facebook friends of one of the researchers. Those female users were selected who were visibly active on Facebook. A total of fifteen respondents were interviewed to collect the data for a deeper understanding of the context of their Facebook usage. The findings revealed that Facebook has provided them with a voice and an opportunity to become visible in this online public space. They mentioned that they are not fully availing the potential of Facebook by using all its features being females. They fear bullying and harassment as Facebook is dominated by the male users. They are partially using Facebook. They carefully post, comment or share on Facebook because of the fear of judgement, bullying and harassment. Technically and structurally Facebook is open to all genders but the social and cultural context in which Facebook is used has a significant role.

Keywords: Social Networking Sites, Social-Media, Facebook, Public Sphere, Gender Inclusion,

INTRODUCTION

Facebook is one of the leading social networking sites (SNS) that offers to create an account for free to interact with millions of other global users[†]. Anyone with a valid email address or /and a phone number can create an account on it. The technical structure of Facebook makes it an open and inclusive cyberspace where the users can create an account and interact without gender discrimination. While creating an account a user can mention one's preferred gender and pronouns to be addressed on Facebook. A user can also limit or restrict the public display of one's gender identity through account setting options. This built-in structure of Facebook makes it an open and gender inclusive space. As an online community[‡] Facebook promotes and encourages inclusion and diversity[§] as stated in the mission statement of company. To ensure privacy, safety, and security of the users Facebook has established different community standards. The users can report to the company if someone on Facebook violates these community standards^{**}. They also have an option to block or unfriend the other user on Facebook.

In Pakistan there are different government organizations and non-government organizations are serving to protect the rights of the internet users. Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA)^{††}, Federal Investigation Agency (FIA)^{‡‡}, and Prime Minister's Citizen Portal (PMCP)^{§§}, are the three main government organizations responding to the online complaints by the citizens of Pakistan. PTA has a dedicated online complaint cell specially to report cybercrimes. PTA is also promoting gender inclusion in Information, Communication and Technologies (ICTs) through various services. PTA is promoting

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† <https://www.statista.com/statistics/272014/global-social-networks-ranked-by-number-of-users/>
<https://www.statista.com/forecasts/1136383/facebook-users-in-pakistan>

‡ <https://www.facebook.com/community/>

§ <https://www.facebook.com/community/diversity-and-inclusion/>

** <https://www.facebook.com/help>

†† <https://www.pta.gov.pk/en>

‡‡ <https://complaint.fia.gov.pk/>

§§ <https://citizenportal.gov.pk/>

the gender inclusion with the hash tag #HerDigitalPakistan on various social media forums, especially during the women march week. There are also a few non-government organizations and online forums that are promoting digital rights and highlighting the issues related to cybercrimes.

In the backdrop of the above-mentioned sketch of the possibilities, technical and legal support available to the users this study is an endeavor to understand the Facebook usage by the female users in Pakistan. It aims to explore that how Facebook is promoting gender inclusion and visibility of the female users in the online public space. For this study active female users were selected after careful observation of their active presence on Facebook. The respondents are friends of one of the researchers on Facebook and they also know each other personally. This close online and offline interaction helped in deeply understanding the cultural context of Facebook usage.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of literature was conducted to understand the relevant concepts for a deeper understanding of gendered usage of social media and Facebook. Aksar et al., (2020) noted that primary focus of social media research in the developing countries is on political and social use. There was less attention on the impact of social media on health, education, and gender in the conservative cultures. They emphasized to research on the female users in their social and cultural context. They have addressed this research gap by conducting a study on digital experiences of Pakistani women. They noted that Pakistani women face patriarchal norms and attitudes online. Boulianne (2015) also noted that research on social media is in infancy stage and there is much need to study the social media usage by the female users in their socio-cultural context. Wilson et al., (2012) reviewed the research conducted on Facebook in social sciences and they noted that Facebook has had a massive expansion across the world. They suggested that behaviors of people can be studied on Facebook, and it has created a new public sphere where people interact and express their ideologies.

Caers et al., (2013) wrote a comprehensive review on the research on Facebook published between 2006-12. They noted that the primary focus of those studies was on the economic and psychological domain of Facebook users. These studies were about the motivation of the users to join Facebook, characteristics of the users, online community building on Facebook and information sharing. In conclusion they suggested that there is need to study who uses Facebook and what is their purpose of Facebook usage. They further suggested that most studies have been conducted in the Western context therefore more studies should be conducted in the Non-Western context. Malik & Haider (2019) studied the role of Facebook in fostering active citizenship by Pakistani user. They argued that Facebook is promoting active citizenry by the users through political discussion and civic engagement.

Facebook is an online platform that serves as a public sphere for debates and discussions that ultimately translate into social and political development. In a review essay Duellund (2010) explained that the theory of public sphere by (Habermas, 1991) is based on the concept of public reason that developed outside the influence of the hierarchical governance and this public sphere became the medium for the formation of opinion. Public sphere promoted social participation where the individual had a pivotal role. In Pakistan's context women cannot participate in public sphere due to cultural reasons. There is a visible boundary between public and private places. Home is referred to as a private space where domestic activities are performed, and family institution works whereas public is the place where the political and legal institutions serve.

Walby (1990) traced the historical development and changes in the public and private spaces and patriarchy in the British context. With the advent of social networking sites, the boundaries between the public and private has blurred and now the users can join public space by staying in the private domain. It has opened new avenues of global interaction and communication. In the last three to four decades women participation in the public sphere received attention by scholars especially feminists who offered analyzed public and private distinction; and its historical development in the Europe (Gavison, 1992; Hansen, 1987; Klein, 1995; Landes, 1984).

Gender and technology studies is a significant area of research investigation in social sciences. Bray (2007) argued that Feminist Technology Studies has developed a coherent and vibrant school in gender and technology studies. Digital Divide is a core theme in debates around gendered discrimination in accessing technologies. Due to the increase of digital technologies and computers in the society the term digital divide is not now limited to physical access to the computers and the internet, but it also requires attention to the social, cultural, and psychological adoption of the internet. (van

Deursen & van Dijk, 2011). These debates around the access and fullest use of technology can help in building a theoretical understanding of women's use of technology.

Conceptual Framework

In this study various concepts helped in theoretical understanding. Habermas (1991) traced the history and development of public sphere and discussed its role in shaping the politics. Theory of public sphere by Habermas helped in understanding the online public sphere of Facebook. Castells (2010) discussed the rise of network society and provided historical evidence in the rise and spread of the internet and digital technologies that translated into the growth and expansion of a networked society where information technology-based communication has a significant role. The concepts on a networked society helped in analyzing different themes of this study. Walby (1990) debated on the history and distinction of public and private patriarchy that helped in analyzing the data about public patriarchy.

METHODOLOGY

The respondents of this study are Facebook friends of one of the researchers. All of them are above 18 years and they are national of Pakistan living in different areas of the country. They have been on the friend list for at least for the previous three years. Total 15 female active Facebook users were selected through judgmental sampling based on the frequency of their posting and active visibility. There is no definition of an active user available. Therefore, for this study we defined active users as those users who post or share on Facebook at least once a week. The respondents were selected after observing their daily Facebook usage by following their timeline. They were marked as close friends on Facebook to receive notifications of their Facebook activities. To ensure anonymity and privacy of the respondents their names have been changed and the friend list has been concealed on Facebook.

All the respondents are literate, and they know the main usage of Facebook like posting, commenting, reacting, sharing, and adding friends. They were explained about this study and written consent was obtained from each respondent. They were also informed about the privacy settings of their Facebook account if they do not know it previously for any reason. All the respondents were aware of the privacy setting of their Facebook account; and they permitted to use any of their public data for this study. All of them use Facebook primarily on mobile phones and they have full access to the internet on their devices, as they explained during the interviews. The interviews were conducted by audio or video calls with prior appointment from the respondents at the time of their convenience.

The respondents were asked the following questions for a deeper understanding of their Facebook usage in their respective contexts. They were asked about their general experience as Facebook users and how it has evolved over the period. What features and tools do they use and what type of content they generally post or share on Facebook. How much time do they spend on Facebook and who are their intended audience and what are their criteria to add someone as Friend on Facebook. Finally, they were asked about their understanding of Facebook as a gender inclusive space for the female users in Pakistan.

All the responses were recorded with the prior permission of the respondents. The interviews were conducted in Urdu and some of the respondents were fluent in English as well. These interviews were transcribed to generate themes and sub themes for analysis. The data for this study was collected during 2020-22. During that time there were frequent lockdowns in the country and the offices and schools were closed to stop the spread of Covid-19. The students, teachers and office employees worked from home during that period through the internet. This factor increased internet and social media usage as per general observations of the researchers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The following sections are the responses from the respondents that help in understanding gender specific experience of Facebook. In the first section the possibilities of gender inclusion that emerged due to Facebook will be discussed and then the challenges that the female users are facing on Facebook.

A). Gender Inclusion in Public Sphere through Facebook

In this section individual experiences of the female will help in understanding the new opportunities and possibilities of gender inclusion that have emerged due to Facebook.

Inclusion in Businesses and Marketspace

Females in Pakistan, especially in the rural areas are sometimes reluctant to use Facebook or other online forums with their original name and profile. They prefer to use pseudo names and random pictures to stay invisible due to patriarchy (Aksar et al., 2020). They further limit their visibility on

Facebook by sometimes locking their profile or limiting it to friends only. This is also because of the religious and cultural factors as they explained in their interviews. Those who observe veils do not share their photos on Facebook. However, they actively use Facebook to interact with the other users. Some female users are actively using Facebook with their photos in veil. They do not consider it as a hinderance but as a mark of their religious identity. One of the respondents of this study is Iqra (age 38) who observes veils, and she has been actively using Facebook for more than ten years with her pictures in veil. She is a spiritual healer and trained clinical psychologist. She teaches in different universities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad as a visiting faculty.

Iqra shared that veil is her religious identity and it is not a hindrance for her as a professional. She posts her photos in veil on Facebook and on other social media forums as well. She shared that Facebook has provided her with more opportunities of participation in public. It has provided her with more clients as a Psychologist, Palmist and as a Spiritual Healer. She calls her Facebook friends clients. During the Covid-19, she volunteered counselling and collaborated with other professional psychologists to promote awareness of mental health. She joined Facebook broadcast as a guest speaker.

As a working woman she thinks that a photo or a video with a veil is not a hindrance in using social media. Facebook is helping her to find clients with whom she provides psychotherapy and counselling being a clinical psychologist. She further added that profile picture and the cover photo reveal about the personality type of a user through non-verbal communication. She has uploaded a cover photo in which she is receiving an award of excellence from a senior psychologist. This is her favorite photo, and she considers it as the summary of her professional accomplishments.

Iqra is using Facebook primarily for professional purposes and even considers her Facebook friends as potential clients. Previously she was much conscious of accepting friend request from male users but in the recent three to four years she has started accepting requests after basic scrutiny of their profiles. She discussed that based on her experience as an active Facebook user she can easily recognize fake accounts. She doesn't accept friend request of a newly created Facebook account of a male user with a lot of female friends. She discussed that profile picture; cover photos and the type of content also help in getting idea of the personality type of a user. Iqra also discussed that as a female user she is much careful about her public image, safety, and security before posting or sharing on Facebook. Facebook is now her primary source for free marketing of her services. She regularly updates her professional accomplishments on Facebook and uses it for professional networking.

Online Safety and Privacy

On Facebook female users have created women specific groups and pages. These are moderated by female users who carefully monitor the group discussions, posts, and comments to provide the female users a secure and safe place of online interaction with other users. They also use Facebook for online shopping and merchandise of their home-made products. Ayezah (age 45) works for a development organization. She is using Facebook to highlight several social issues and moderate a group about archeology, history, and culture. Ayezah considers that Facebook is an inclusive space, and anyone can join it since there is no age restriction or gender discrimination regarding account creation on Facebook. She further added that there are also women specific groups and pages on Facebook where they post and discuss issues specific to the women. "Scary Ami" is a women specific group to share the issues related to parenting.

"Soul Sisters" is another woman specific group on Facebook. All the members are females, and it is moderated by the female users. In such groups the women talk and discuss about women specific issues and receive advice from other members. These women specific group are comparatively a safe place for female users. Facebook has also created new opportunities for online businesses and marketing of home-made products. Now the women are earning as well through Facebook groups. They are also participating in political debates, discussions, and online political surveys. Female politicians are becoming more popular on Facebook because of the attention by the male users. It is ultimately helping them in their political campaigns to reach a larger audience. Facebook is helping women to get insight of the national and international politics.

Inclusion of Transgenders

There are also transgenders on Facebook who have become visible, and they publicly discuss the issues and challenges of their community. Recently in Pakistan Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act (2018), has been approved by National Assembly of Pakistan. There are often heated debates about it by Facebook users. Transgender people also share videos of violence against them. They talk about their rights as citizens of Pakistan. They have become visible through Facebook. Kashish (age 54) is a

transgender woman who is extensively using Facebook for the rights of the transgender persons in the society. She contested in the national politics and is also running a shelter home for the transgender people. She works as a make-up artist and runs a Radio show as a host on a local FM channel. She posts videos to highlight the hate and violence against transgender people. She thinks that Facebook is helping her to create awareness on these issues which are not reported in the mainstream electronic and print media. Facebook has given voice to transgender people. She shares videos of everyday life activities of transgender people on Facebook. She considers that it is helping public to understand the lives of transgender community. She responds to the comments of other Facebook users on her Facebook page.

Kashish thinks that Facebook is not a safe place for transgender people because of online harassment. They are not educated and most of them are professional dancers. They post videos of their performance to attract more customers. Kashish is running a welfare organization to support her community. She has created a page Trans News where she posts about different activities and events for the welfare of the transgender community. She responds to the queries of the other users about the life and culture of transgender community. She considers Facebook as a useful forum to highlight the issues and challenges of marginalized communities like transgenders.

Inclusion of elderly women

Yasmeen (age 58) is a housewife who is living in Rawalpindi with her unmarried daughter. Her married children are living in other cities. She is using Facebook for entertainment and recreation in her leisure time. She is an expert cook and often uploads videos of her cooking on Facebook which are admired by other users. She found Facebook a good source of entertainment and interaction for the women of her age. She thinks that Facebook is helping elderly women to spend their free time without boredom. She also suggested that young girls should use it for learning purposes and for information. If they post their persona photos, then their head must be covered. Parents should trust their daughter and allow them to use Facebook.

The expansion of social media and mobile internet usage also expanded over time. The internet services improved and due to the market competition prices of the smart phones and data packages have decreased ultimately increasing the usage of the internet, it is worth mentioning that due to the Covid-19, there had been frequent lock downs by the government to restrict mobility of the public to prevent the spread of Corona virus.

Participation in online demonstration for Women's Rights

Aurat March is an annual Women's Day public demonstration that is celebrated in the big cities of Pakistan. On this day women hold placards and chant slogans for their rights. For the previous few years these slogans have become part of heated debates in electronic, print, and social media. Shabnam also criticized these slogans and call some of them are not cultural appropriate and go against the teachings of Islam. She thinks that being a Pakistani Muslim she has all her due rights. She thinks that holding placard with bold statement which are not culturally appropriate is an effort to look modern and elite by the middle-class working women. They are not addressing the real issues and challenges of women living in the rural areas.

Asia (age 41) is a full supporter of Aurat March. She thinks that due to Facebook the Aurat March got public attention. She appreciated that Facebook is politically mobilizing women. It has resolved the issue of mobility. Now they can do online sale and purchase. Samia (age 26) thinks that Facebook is a male dominant space like real world. Here many men have created fake accounts to approach women. Unlike feminists I have different approach towards women rights. They demand social rights whereas awareness of the political rights comes first than the social rights.

Fahmida (age 45) has done PhD in Sociology, and she teaches gender studies to university students. She thinks that Facebook is also a space of resistance. The users especially female users can highlight their social issues to bring the attention of the authorities. She shared her concerns about the slogans of Aurat March. She criticized the tone and language of those slogans as harsh. She thinks that rigid and rough language can damage the cause. She shared that instead of "Mera Jism Meri Marzi (My body, my choice)" they may choose "Meri Shakhseeiat Meri Marzi (My Personality, my choice)"; or My Body Should Be Respected. She emphasized that the choice of words is critically important. She regretted that by such controversial messages have damaged the ideas of feminism in Pakistan. The public has started misinterpreting it as a Western agenda.

B). Challenges for Female Users on Facebook

In this section the responses from the female users will provide an insight into gender specific issues and challenges faced by the female users of Facebook.

Fear of Harassment and Bullying

On Facebook a user can send a friend request to the other user. One can accept the friend request or ignore or decline it. Similarly, a user can unfriend any other users who have previously been added as friend. These options help the users to manage and control their social network on Facebook. A question was asked from the respondents of this study to understand their criteria to accept a friend request from the other users. All the respondents mentioned that they are careful in accepting friend requests. They told that before accepting friend request from a male they carefully read the introduction, education, profession, city, profile picture, cover photo, photo album and the cover especially when they receive a friend request from a male. The best criteria that all of them mentioned was to see mutual friends.

Ghazala (age 30) thinks that although Facebook is a gender inclusive space where anyone can create an account without gender discrimination, but women cannot equally participate openly as the men can do. The female users must be careful before commenting on public posts. On Facebook and other social media platforms men have dominance and they harass female users as they do in the real world as discussed. Similar views were expressed by Shamim (age 38) who works for a social research organization. She thinks that due to male dominance on Facebook the female users hesitate to talk and to participate in the political and religious debates. Female users have more fear of being judged by other users especially by the male users. She added that the male users intrude in the inboxes for personal chatting. By reading comments by male users, she fears them as potential rapists because of their misogynist comments and opinions. Female users must be careful on Facebook especially by adding unknown people and sharing before sharing their personal information, especially photos. Shabnum (age 50) is a university teacher in Rawalpindi. She actively participates in discussion in Facebook groups for the rights of the teachers. She advises her daughters and female students to use Facebook carefully by respecting the norms and traditions of the society. They should be careful if the male users in Facebook tries to become frank with them.

Abida (age 30) thinks that girls hide their original identities on Facebook because of the fear of exploitation as it is a male dominated space. Ghazala (age 30) thinks that although Facebook is a gender inclusive space where anyone can create an account without gender discrimination, but women cannot equally participate openly as the men can do. The female users must be careful before commenting on public posts. Sajida (age 45) who lives in Islamabad. She thinks that Facebook is an open opportunity for all, but it is not a gender inclusive space in the real sense. Gender Inclusion on Facebook has different understandings among each female respondent of this study. They consider inclusion as the opportunity to join this online public. However, all of them responded that they are using it partially and they have certain limitation being females.

Shabnam (age 50) considers that the female must use Facebook carefully because here they interact with the strangers. She is a mother of two young daughters and ask them to be careful while using Facebook especially if a male Facebook user tries to become frank on Facebook. She is a university teacher, and she has male colleagues in her friend list as well. She thinks that Facebook has resolved the issue of female mobility. Now they can learn new skills and shop online through Facebook. She thinks that Facebook is helping young girls to learn about lifestyle and new fashion. It is helping them in personality development. Women can also do online business through Facebook by selling home-made products. She indicated that Facebook has given voice to the women, and they highlight their issues on Facebook which was otherwise not possible.

Shabnam mentioned that not all female users display their original photos on their Facebook account because they observe veil to hide their faces. Facebook is an open place, but it is not secure for female users. As a female user she hesitates to actively participate in political and religious debates because of the fear of negative comments, bullying and harassment. Therefore, she carefully posts and comments on social and political issues. She prefers to post about education and employment opportunities. She is a member of different groups of university and college teachers. She actively participates in discussions in those groups about the issues related to their field. Shabnam considers Facebook as an open and public medium as compared to Twitter which is difficult to use as compared to Facebook. She appreciated that transgenders have also become visible on Facebook. She has seen their live broadcast where they discuss the issues and challenges in their lives.

Fahmida (age 45) has done PhD in Sociology, and she teaches gender studies to university students. She believes that there are different shades of gender that she often discusses on Facebook to educate others. She thinks that Facebook is not a gender inclusive space. There are more male users of Facebook and even some have created fake accounts as these accounts get more attention by the other

users. Women are readily housebound, and they do not have some public space for the catharsis. The space for women on Facebook is also shrinking. She mentioned that on Facebook women are harassed especially through private messages in the inbox and they do not report it. Sometimes they receive nude and inappropriate messages. Female users are more harassed in the public comments if they do not accept the friend request by the males. She wishes that Facebook should be a safer place for female although it has community standards but still it can further improve to protect the women. She discussed that the male users post and comment without fear or caring that there are also female users. They even use impolite and inappropriate language in the comments.

Fahmida mentioned that if a woman discusses the issues of gender and sexuality on Facebook then the male users start criticizing her and even harass her in comments and in the private messages. She has now started exposing such male users by sharing their private messages. She discussed that visibility of females in the public space is still an issue in Pakistan. Young girls and women avoid posting their original photos as their profile pictures. They post photos of their children, husbands, or some random image. She criticized that it is again a dependency and female users should present themselves with their own identities and photos.

Due to the digital and gender divide number there are more male users of Facebook than the female that make it a male dominant online public space in Pakistan. The urban-rural divide, access to the internet and smart phones and affordability of the data packages are a few of the factors that limit the usage of social media of female users in Pakistan. Other than this there are various cultural regions and family norms and traditions that do not permit young girls to use Facebook or other such online public forums because of the family honor. Married women are more confident in using Facebook. They share photos of their husbands and children in the profile picture. They show their marital status in their introduction as well and sometimes link the mention the name of their husband. It gives them a kind of confidence and protection. It also helps them to feel safe in the online space. They use it for their professional networking and for online discussions on social and political issues.

Partial inclusion due to limited participation

In the rural areas access to mobile phones by young girls is an issue. They have either parental check or they are under continuous surveillance by the male members of family and relatives. They are either partially using Facebook or they post reluctantly and express their opinions and ideas due to the presence of male members of their family and relatives. They are partially using Facebook as compared to the male users of Facebook. Although they have access to the technology but there are limitations being females. Female users are partially included, and they are unable to fullest potential of this opportunity.

Following are a few responses from the respondents to understand the way they feel themselves included in an online public space. Sonia (age 26) is a university graduate living in Multan who has been using Facebook for the previous five years. She discussed her Facebook usage and consciousness being a female user. Sonia discussed that initially there were restrictions from her family to create a Facebook account. Later, her elder brother permitted her to create an account. Before posting or commenting on someone else's post she thinks carefully as the male members of her family are also on Facebook. They notice her Facebook activities. She prefers to post the cultural content instead of engaging in heated debates as it is the safest way to stay visible on Facebook being a female user. She thinks that she is partially using Facebook although it has given her freedom to connect with the global audience but due to family concerns and cultural matters, she is not using Facebook like the male users.

These respondents shared that Facebook is partially open public space for the female users as compared to the male users. Young girls and unmarried women use Facebook more carefully because any of their comment or post can reflect bad about their personalities that may harm them in future after their marriage. Shazia (age 32) and Abida (age 27) discussed that unmarried girls think that it might have effect on their marriage proposal. The content that they post, share or comment on Facebook remains there. They are concerned about the misinterpretation of their Facebook usage and the circulation of their content. Shazia mentioned that she does not discriminate the friends based on gender although she lives in a village in the Southern Punjab which is a conservative area of Pakistan. Before accepting a friend request on Facebook, she sees the personal details and type of the content that person is sharing or posting on Facebook. The type of content like memes, travel photos, check-ins, political and religious perspectives help to get an overview of one's personality. The timeline of a user reveals a lot about one's personality and interests, she explained.

Shazia added that in her village the young girls hesitate to create accounts on Facebook because of family pressure. They create anonymous accounts to use Facebook without sharing their personal photos and details about their location. In villages the young girls do not have personal mobile phones. They share a common mobile with their mothers or any other family member. They use Facebook by scrolling down to see the posts and reading the comments by the other users on some posts. They follow news about the actors and actresses.

Another major concern is about the presence of relatives who keep a check on Facebook activities. They judge and sometimes become critical. Gul (age 48) and Gulshan (age 45) both work in the development sector in Islamabad. They criticize the undue continuous surveillance and monitoring by the relatives. They shared that although there is not any kind of restriction in their families regarding using Facebook, however, they avoid adding relatives on Facebook because of the fear of their judgmental comments and remarks.

Fahmida (age 45) has done PhD in Sociology. She has keen interests in gender studies as a university teacher. Although she holds a critical opinion about gender inclusion on Facebook but at the same time, she considers Facebook as a useful media to promote awareness on social issues. It has given voice to ordinary people unlike the electronic and print media. Now a common individual from society can reach hundreds of people. She shared one of her experiences as an active Facebook user. She told that once she was invited as a guest to talk on social issues through Facebook live by the moderator of a popular Facebook page. This broadcast was watched by ten thousand Facebook users. She realized that Facebook can be a helpful medium for social advocacy. She thinks that women should create Facebook account and learn new skills and opportunities. This is free and open media for all. The women should understand its privacy features for better usage. Fahmida considers herself a responsible citizen and she is using Facebook to highlight social issues to create awareness. She has some concerns about state surveillance as well. She said that she does not discuss religious issues and the issues concerning the military for her own safety.

Although Fahmida thinks that Facebook is not a gender inclusive space, but she considers that it has resolved the issues of female mobilities. She mentioned that now women can do online shopping, learn new skills, and attend educational live broadcasts while staying at home. Fahmida posts the live coverage of the any academic or educational activity for other women who are living in the rural areas, and they do not have such opportunities. She thinks that this is her moral obligation to share the resources and opportunities with the rural women who do not have access to such opportunities.

SUMMARY

The findings revealed that Facebook has created opportunity of participation in the public debates for the female users. However, they are not using Facebook fully because of fear of harassment and bullying. They know and understand that there are different forums by the government or by the non-government organization, but they prefer to use Facebook carefully. They avoid commenting openly and critically because of the fear of the bullying and harassment by the male users. They sometimes face that the male users try to become frank with them or try to approach them through the private messages in the inboxes. Female users limit the view of their posts by limiting it to Friends circle or some time they lock their profiles. They block the users on Facebook. For their personal safety they primarily rely on the features and tools by Facebook to limit their visibility and circulation of the digital content that they share on Facebook.

Facebook has many features like going live for a live broadcast. The female users living in the urban areas or professionals sometimes avail these advance features of interaction but those living in the rural areas do not avail these features and tools of Facebook. Female users are partially using Facebook as compared to the male users. But, collectively all the respondents of this study consider Facebook as a good opportunity for the female to participate in public space. They engage in political discussions and debates and learn from the perspectives of other users. There are women specific groups and pages where they feel more secure and safe. They share their problems and issues their and find suggestions and solutions from other female users. Those who observe veil can also use Facebook with their veiled identity. Elderly women find it as a source of recreation and entertainment in their leisure time. Transgenders became visible and they started highlighting their community specific issues. Teachers and students found it a source of learning and sharing. They got an opportunity to spread awareness on social issues.

CONCLUSION

Facebook has opened new possibilities of participation in public spaces for women but there are gendered based limitations. Female users fear online harassment and rarely report it through there are governmental support system is available. They do not comment on public posts and prefers to avoid political discussion because of bullying and abusive language by the male users. They prefer to block or unfriend the users who bully on Facebook instead of reporting to the government institution or some NGO because of the fear of defamation. They are more expressive and vocal in women specific groups and pages on Facebook. Technically Facebook is supporting participations of the users without gender discrimination, but female users hesitate to use full features of public interaction. They are partially using Facebook. At the same time Facebook has given visibility to transgenders in the public space as fellow citizens. The women who observe veil can use Facebook with their veiled identity and they can do social networking and promote their business.

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