THE IDENTITY-ORIENTED: ANALYSING THE POWER OF #MEETOO IN INDIA'S GENDER JUSTICE SOCIAL MOVEMENT

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Abstract
This study examines the #MeToo movement in India as a form of digital activism advancing gender justice. Despite legal reforms such as the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act and the POSH Act (2013), institutional protections for women remain insufficient, particularly within informal sectors. Employing a descriptive qualitative approach and drawing upon secondary data, the research utilises Melucci's theory of new social movements and Hunt and Benford's identity-oriented framework to analyse how the movement constructs collective identity, fosters emotional solidarity, and mobilises moral commitment. The findings reveal that #MeToo in India enabled survivors to transform personal experiences of sexual violence into a shared collective narrative, using digital platforms as both spaces of testimony and resistance. The movement exposed structural inequalities, particularly caste- and class-based exclusions, while simultaneously disrupting dominant narratives through acts of online solidarity and public accountability. However, challenges persist in ensuring intersectional inclusivity and bridging the gap between digital mobilisation and institutional change. Theoretically, this article contributes to scholarship on social movements by highlighting how digital platforms facilitate identity-based mobilisation in contexts of legal and structural deficiency. In conclusion, the study demonstrates that the Indian #MeToo movement illustrates both the emancipatory potential and the structural limits of digital feminist activism in advancing inclusive gender justice.

Keywords: #MeToo, digital activism, gender justice, collective identity, India

INTRODUCTION

Social movements are forms of collective action aimed at promoting change and creating a better societal order than the one that currently exists (Sukmana, 2016). One analytical approach within social movement studies centers on non-state or non-dominant actors, such as civil society, as focal points of attention. One notable example is the #MeToo movement. Originating on the social media platform MySpace around 2006 - 2007, the movement was initiated by American activist Tarana Burke in response to the prevalence of sexual violence against women. Burke initiated the campaign with the aim of empowering survivors through empathy, aiming to support survivors in reclaiming their voice and dignity (Ohlheiser 2017). The movement gained massive traction in 2017 when public figure Alyssa Milano shared her own experience of workplace sexual harassment using the hashtag #MeToo on Twitter (Seales 2018).

Since then, the use of the #MeToo hashtag surged, catalysing a global discourse on the various forms and intensities of sexual violence faced by women in their everyday lives (Fileborn 2019). The movement aims to raise collective awareness, encourage survivors to speak, and advocate for structural change. On social media, particularly Twitter, the hashtag #MeToo has been used over 12 million times, demonstrating its far-reaching global resonance (Mendes, Ringrose, and Keller, 2018). It has become a platform for advocating justice for victims while pushing for inclusive and gender-sensitive policy reforms.

A pivotal moment in India's engagement with the issue of gender-based violence was the brutal 2012 gang rape in New Delhi, widely known as the "Nirbhaya" case. This tragedy sparked a nationwide wave of protests and intensified public demands for legal reform. In response, the Indian government enacted the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act of 2013, which broadened the legal definition of rape and imposed harsher penalties for sexual violence (Government of India Ministry of Home Affairs 2024). That same year, the government also passed the Prevention of Sexual Harassment (POSH) Act, targeting gender-based violence in workplaces (Pundir 2019).

Despite these reforms, significant challenges persist. Data from the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) indicate a 12.9% rise in the rate of crimes against women in India between 2018 and 2022, measured per 100,000 female population. In 2022, this rate reached 66.4, up from 58.8 in 2018. This upward trend may be attributed to several contributing factors, such as an actual increase in incidents, enhanced systems for

reporting crimes, and a heightened readiness among women to disclose their experiences with violence (Ansari 2024).
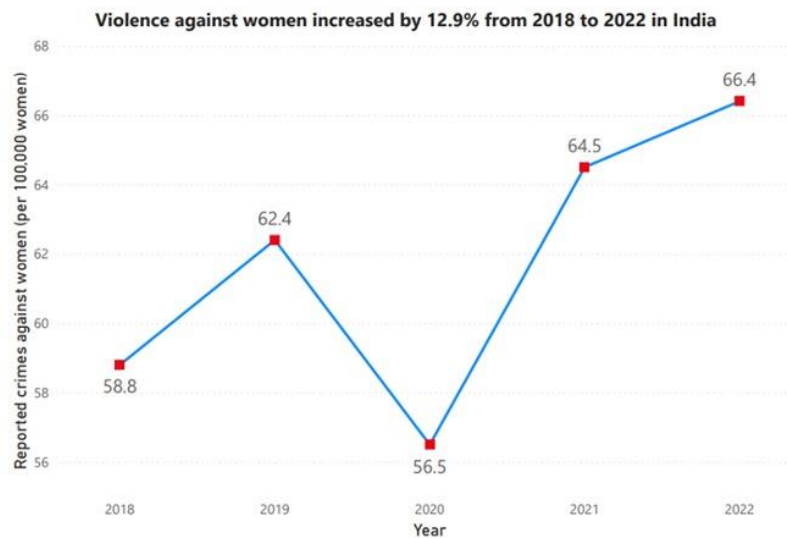
Source: (Ansari 2024)

Figure 1. NCRB Rate of Crimes Against Women in India 2018 – 2022

According to Sharma, "India has demonstrated a strong commitment to women's safety through the gradual enforcement of strict legal measures." Nevertheless, NCRB records show that despite the introduction of the Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act in 2005, the most frequently reported crime against women under the Indian Penal Code remains cruelty by husbands or their relatives (31.4%). This is followed by cases of kidnapping and abduction (19.2%), assaults intended to violate a woman's modesty (18.7%), and incidents of rape (7.1%) (Ansari 2024).
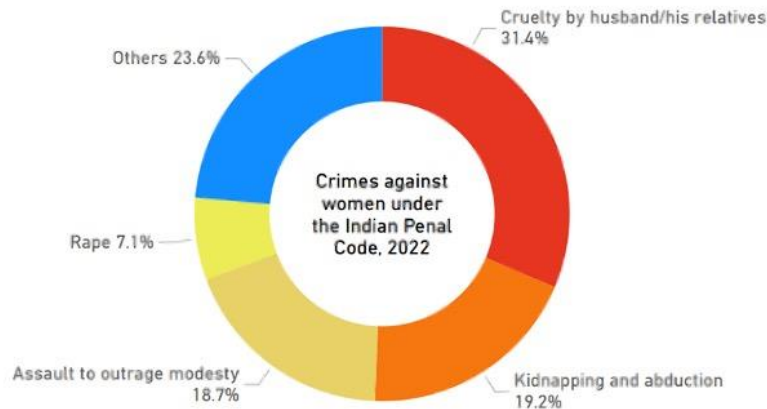
Source: (Ansari 2024)

Figure 2. NCRB Record State of Crimes Against Women Under The Indian Penal Code 2022

Against this backdrop, the #MeToo movement began to take root in India in late 2017, sparked by an anonymous post from law student Raya Sarkar who published the "List of Sexual Harassers in Academia (LoSHA)," naming prominent academics accused of sexual misconduct (Pan 2023). This post generated widespread debate across public and institutional spheres. The movement gained further momentum in 2018 when Bollywood actress Tanushree Dutta publicly accused senior actor Nana Patekar of sexually harassing her during a film shoot in 2008 (Naik 2020). This momentum encouraged women from various sectors, including media, the arts, sports, journalism, and higher education, to share their stories. One of the most high-profile cases involved journalist Priya Ramani, who was sued for defamation by former Minister M. J. Akbar after accusing him of sexual harassment. In February 2021, the Delhi High Court acquitted Ramani, affirming that women have the right to speak about their experiences of sexual violence as a form of self-defense (John 2020). This ruling became a symbolic milestone in the fight for freedom of expression and the rights of survivors.

The #MeToo movement also had tangible impacts within the formal sector. Data from ComplyKaro 2019 showed a 14% increase in reports of workplace sexual harassment among companies listed on the Bombay Stock Exchange between 2018 and 2019 (Bhattacharyya 2019). In the film industry, the state of Kerala led the way by establishing the Hema Committee, an independent body that investigated systemic abuse

and recommended structural reforms (Pandey 2024). In the sports sector, national athletes such as Sakshi Malik and Vinesh Phogat led protests against Wrestling Federation of India President Brij Bhushan Singh, who was accused of harassing young athletes (Pan, 2023).

Nevertheless, the Indian #MeToo movement has not been without criticism. Structural factors such as class, caste, and geography shape who can speak and who is heard. Research by Panda and Das highlights how dominant narratives have primarily come from urban, educated, middle-class women. At the same time, voices from Dalit, Adivasi, and working-class communities are often marginalised or excluded from digital public spaces (Panda and Das 2024). Digital platforms, though seemingly egalitarian, are far from neutral. They often amplify upper-caste, Hindi/English-speaking users while systematically filtering out or devaluing content from Dalit and Adivasi individuals. Empirical research shows that Dalits on Twitter encounter online harassment, including casteist slurs about skin tone or "not looking Dalit," and are frequently dismissed or obscured in discussions on sexual violence (ISS Blog Bliss 2025). Caste in India is best understood not as a personal moral failing but as a deeply embedded system of social ordering that allocates access to power, resources, and legitimacy based on inherited status (Bajpai 2020). Miranda Fricker's concept of *epistemic injustice*, where individuals are discredited as knowers, is essential for interpreting the caste-based silencing of Dalit and Adivasi voices in India. Their testimonies are often dismissed, undervalued, or obscured due to both testimonial and hermeneutical injustice (Sinclair 2025). This highlights the importance of intersectional approaches in understanding and promoting solidarity within the movement. Social media has played an ambivalent role. On the one hand, it serves as a space for collective mobilisation and cross-border solidarity. On the other hand, it facilitates backlash through digital misogyny. Studies by Sonkar, et al (2025) emphasise the role of social media in raising collective awareness and enabling digital activism (Sonkar, Soorma, and Akanksha 2020). However, Roy et al. (2023) document a significant rise in gender-based hate speech and threats against women who spoke out publicly, demonstrating the severe digital backlash that accompanies such disclosures (Roy et al. 2023).

Within this landscape, a collective identity, defined as a shared understanding of common oppression, emerges as a unifying force (John, 2020). Public disclosures by survivors do more than recount individual experiences; they expose the structural nature of sexual violence. A commitment to institutional transformation is increasingly evident

in demands for transparency, anti-harassment policies, and gender education (Sanyal 2023). Symbolism and narrative framing also play pivotal roles in reinforcing the movement's messages. Phrases like "time's up," "survivor," and "I believe her" function as collective symbols that foster horizontal trust among participants. The narrative framing that links personal experiences to broader social structures has expanded public support and deepened the movement's reach.

Within this empirical context, it is crucial to understand not only the socio-legal dimensions of the #MeToo movement but also the theoretical implications for studying social movements in the digital age. While existing research on #MeToo often emphasises survivor testimony or institutional outcomes, less attention has been given to the transformative processes of identity formation, solidarity, and collective action that are central to *new social movements* (NSMs) (Melucci 1996).

This study positions itself within the discourse of NSM theory and digital activism, drawing specifically on Melucci's theory of collective identity and Hunt and Benford's identity-oriented framework. By examining the #MeToo movement in India, this article argues that digital platforms are not merely tools for mobilisation but also arenas where new forms of collective identity, emotional solidarity, and moral commitment are constructed and contested. In particular, the Indian #MeToo movement exemplifies how digital activism can both empower survivors and expose persistent structural inequalities, especially for marginalised communities (Hunt and Benford 2007). Thus, this article aims to bridge the gap in the literature by examining how digital activism influences collective identity in the Indian context, thereby advancing scholarly debates on the evolution of social movements in the digital era. By situating this analysis at the intersection of NSM theory and digital activism, the research highlights both the promises and limitations of digital platforms in achieving inclusive gender justice.

This study, therefore, raises the following research question: *How does the #MeToo movement in India construct collective identity, foster solidarity, and drive social commitment through digital platforms, particularly in the context of gender justice?* To address this question, the research aims to examine the role of digital activism in shaping collective identity among survivors of sexual violence in India, with a specific focus on the mechanisms of solidarity and moral commitment as theorised in identity-based social movement frameworks. The study also aims to evaluate the extent to which the #MeToo movement addresses intersectional exclusions within its discourse and structure, particularly in relation to caste, class, and geographic disparities.

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METHODS

This research employs a descriptive approach, a type of study that aims to portray various phenomena, whether natural or resulting from human interactions. These phenomena include activities, characteristics, changes, relationships, similarities, and differences between events (Sukmadinata 2005). The objective of this approach is to address research problems based on the data collected. The data used in this study are secondary in nature, obtained through library research, a systematic activity involving the collection, reading, documentation, and management of information from written sources (Zed 2004). These secondary data consist of scholarly articles, journals, books, official government and organisational reports, as well as prior research findings, all of which serve as the conceptual foundation for understanding the issue under investigation (Sarwono 2006). The researcher then conducts observations and analyses of relevant data to answer the research questions.

The theoretical framework employed in this study is based on Alberto Melucci's theory of new social movements and the identity-oriented theory proposed by Hunt and Benford.
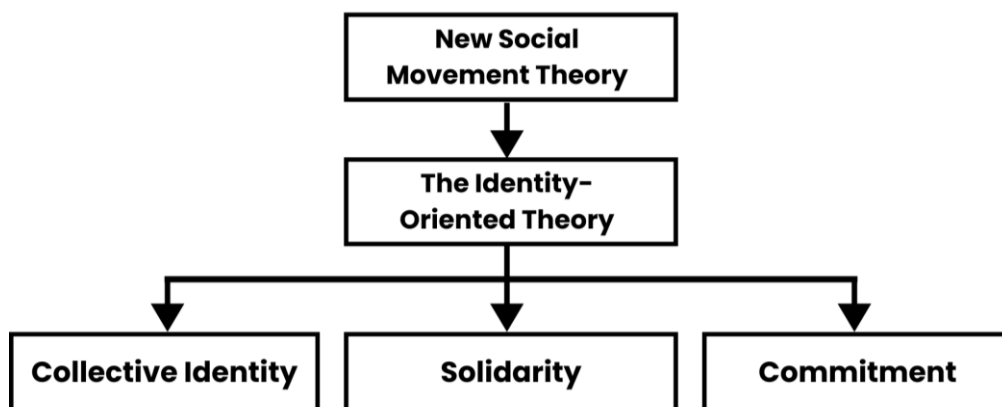
Source: Writer, 2025

Figure 3. The Synthesis of Thought

Melucci views new social movements as a form of implicit resistance against the instrumental rationality of dominant society (Sukmana 2016). These movements arise in response to modern conflicts closely tied to everyday life, involving symbolic codes, identity demands, personal, and emotional expressions (Sukmana 2016). In this context,

social movements serve to convey messages that reflect resistance and various forms of social expression, emphasising the personal, spiritual, and expressive dimensions of modern life. Melucci also highlights the significance of free spaces between the sphere of political power and everyday life, which allow social actors to construct collective identity through mechanisms of representation and participation (Sukmana 2016).

Meanwhile, the identity-oriented theory underscores the human drive for identity, autonomy, and recognition (Rusmanto 2013). Hunt and Benford explain that many studies on new social movements reveal that collective action is deeply rooted in collective identity (Hunt and Benford 2007). They emphasise that collective identity, along with concepts such as solidarity and commitment, are key elements in understanding and further developing the study of new social movements. Collective identity refers to a shared sense of awareness within a group, shaped by common values, goals, and emotions. This identity is expressed through cultural symbols such as group names, clothing, rituals, and distinctive narratives, and it is continuously formed through social interaction. Solidarity reflects loyalty and emotional attachment among members, motivating active participation for collective well-being, as expressed in the slogan: "An injury to one is an injury to all." Solidarity fosters a sense of shared purpose and destiny. Meanwhile, commitment refers to an individual's involvement in collective action as part of their self-identity. This commitment arises from the alignment of personal values with the movement's goals and is reinforced by connections to leadership, ideology, community, and social environment. These three elements—collective identity, solidarity, and commitment form the fundamental basis for the formation and sustainability of social movements. Together, they constitute a systematic foundation and comprehensive theory synthesising perspectives from psychology, social psychology, and macro-sociology (Hunt and Benford 2007).

The theoretical frameworks of this study are particularly relevant in understanding how the #MeToo movement in India emerged and sustained itself. These theories emphasise that modern social movements are driven not merely by political goals, but by shared meanings, identities, and emotional connections among participants (Hunt and Benford 2007; Melucci 1996). In the Indian context, the #MeToo movement was fueled by a collective recognition of gender-based oppression, particularly in professional environments such as media, academia, and entertainment. Survivors who once felt isolated found resonance in each other's experiences, which fostered a shared sense of identity as "survivors" rather than victims. This shared identity became the emotional and

symbolic foundation for mobilisation. The movement thus exemplifies how identity formation, public solidarity, and moral commitment can serve as catalysts for collective action, especially in societies where institutional mechanisms often fail to address the needs of marginalised groups (Papacharissi 2014).

While the theoretical framework draws primarily from Alberto Melucci's theory of new social movements and Hunt and Benford's identity-oriented theory, it is important to situate these insights within broader feminist thought that emphasises intersectionality, performativity, and structural injustice. For instance, Judith Butler's theory of performativity reveals how gendered identities are socially constructed through repeated acts and discourses, making public testimony a performative act of resistance that disrupts heteronormative and patriarchal structures (Butler 2021). Nancy Fraser's work on recognition and redistribution highlights the necessity of integrating cultural justice with socioeconomic redress, which is especially relevant in analysing how caste, labor, and gender intersect within India's #MeToo discourse (Fraser 2009). Similarly, Bell Hooks's emphasises that feminism must address the interconnectedness of race, class, and gender, pointing to the systemic invisibility of marginalised women in mainstream feminist movements (Hooks 2000). These perspectives help deepen the theoretical grounding of this study by highlighting the epistemic exclusions that persist even within emancipatory digital movements.

This research applies qualitative data analysis techniques, which involve the systematic organisation of secondary data to produce valid and accountable findings. Qualitative research seeks to explore meanings, understandings, concepts, characteristics, symptoms, and symbols inherent in a phenomenon. This approach is diverse, naturalistic, and holistic, emphasising data quality through the use of flexible methods. The results of qualitative research are typically presented in the form of a scientific narrative (Sidiq and Choiri, 2019). The collected data are analysed in accordance with their original meanings through processes of presentation, reduction, and discussion, ultimately leading to a comprehensive and in-depth conclusion.

This study is best categorised as descriptive qualitative research based on library research (literature study). While the methodological orientation has been outlined, further clarity is needed to emphasise the selection criteria for secondary sources, including relevance, credibility, and thematic alignment with the research objective. Moreover, the data analysis technique should be explicitly explained using a systematic

process such as data collection, reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing, in line with qualitative research standards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

RESULTS

1. The POSH Act Gaps and Informal Sector Marginalisation

Although the *Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (POSH) Act, 2013* was enacted to protect working women, it often failed to reach its intended victims. A Right to Information (RTI) query revealed that by 2018, less than 30% of Indian districts had constituted Local Committees as mandated by the Act (Ungender Blog Team 2022). The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, known as the POSH Act, mandates companies to establish an Internal Complaints Committee (ICC). The ICC is tasked with receiving and addressing complaints of sexual harassment in the workplace and is envisioned as a core institutional mechanism to operationalise the goals of the POSH Act in ensuring a safe and equitable work environment for women (Chachra 2017).

Compliance Category	Percentage	Main characteristics
ICCs Not Formed (Indian Companies)	36%	Failure to establish Internal Complaints Committees despite legal obligation
ICCs Not Formed (MNCs in India)	25%	Lack of implementation among multinational companies with Indian branches
ICC Members Not Legally Trained	50%	Half of surveyed companies admitted that their ICC memepred or untrained ICC members

Source: (Chachra 2017)

Table 1. IndiaSpend Analysis of Indian Companies

However, only 36% of Indian companies and 25% of multinational corporations have functional ICCs. Many ICCs that do exist lack proper legal or gender sensitivity training, making them ineffective (Chachra 2017). Beyond the issue of institutional formation, the quality and capacity of existing ICCs also came under scrutiny. The same study reported that approximately 50% of companies acknowledged that their ICC members lacked adequate legal training. This shortfall
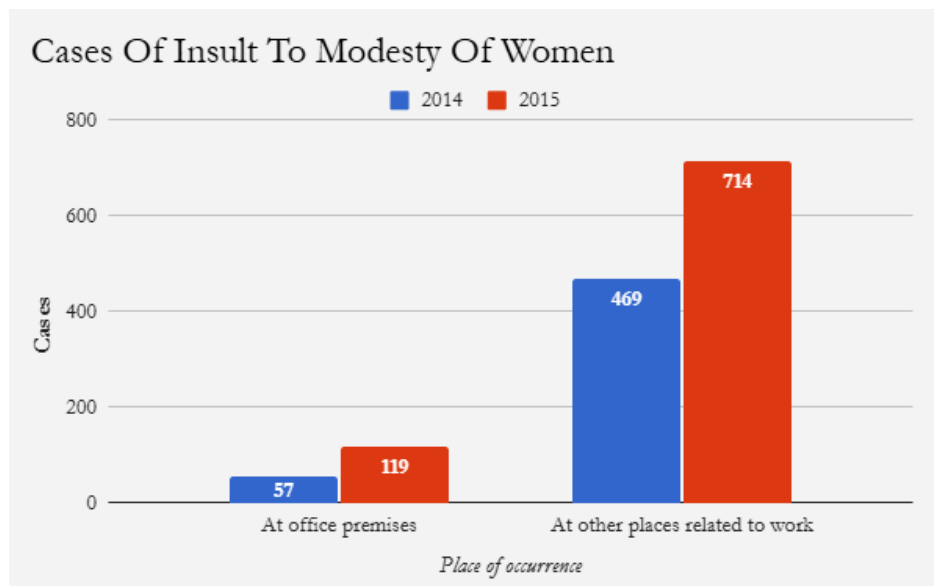
raises serious concerns regarding the ability of ICCs to provide fair, sensitive, and legally sound redressal processes to survivors of workplace sexual harassment (Chachra 2017).

Survey Group	Awareness of POSH Act	Access to Complaint Mechanism
Informal Sector Workers (n=20-50)	<30% Aware (<70% Unaware)	<5% Used Mechanism

Source: (ISS Blog Bliss 2025)

Table 2. Data Survey of Informal Workers Unaware of the POSH Act

Table 2 shows data from surveys of informal workers who are unaware of the POSH Act, as provided by a paper titled, *"Assessing the Effectiveness of the POSH Act in Addressing the Challenges Faced by Interstate Women Migrant Workers"* by ISS Blog Bliss (2025), published via SSRN, critically evaluates the implementation of the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013 or POSH Act, within the context of interstate women migrant workers in India. Despite its progressive legislative framework, the study argues that the POSH Act has largely failed to protect one of the most vulnerable segments of the workforce: women engaged in informal, migratory, and precarious employment. Drawing on empirical field research conducted across Kerala, Karnataka, and West Bengal, which involved surveys of 20–50 migrant workers per region, the study reveals significant implementation gaps. Over 70% of respondents were unaware of the POSH Act, and fewer than 5% had accessed or attempted to access its complaint mechanisms. These findings point to deep-seated barriers such as linguistic difficulties, lack of permanent residence, informal work arrangements, and bureaucratic complexity issues that leave migrant women exposed to daily sexual harassment without viable means of recourse. The POSH Act holds promise legally, but its failure in implementation, especially among unorganised or informal interstate female workers, highlights structural and institutional barriers. Systemic reform and proactive measures are crucial (ISS Blog Bliss 2025).

Cases Of Insult To Modesty Of Women

■ 2014 ■ 2015

[Bar chart showing cases of insult to modesty of women by place of occurrence. At office premises: 2014 = 57, 2015 = 119. At other places related to work: 2014 = 469, 2015 = 714. Y-axis labeled "Cases" ranging from 0 to 800. X-axis labeled "Place of occurrence".]

Source: National Crime Records Bureau

Figure 4. National Crime Records Bureau Data of Cases of Insult to Modesty Of Women 2014-2015

Between 2014 and 2015, workplace harassment cases rose from 57 to 119, while general sexual harassment cases (outside of work) increased from 469 to 714. 70% of working women in India do not report workplace sexual harassment due to fear of losing their jobs, facing social stigma, or damaging their careers. This reluctance stems from deeply rooted societal and structural fears, including the threat of job loss, potential damage to career prospects, and the fear of social stigma. These fears are magnified by a patriarchal workplace culture that often places the burden of proof and consequences on the victim rather than the perpetrator.

The data also reveal a growing trend in reported incidents, albeit one that still underrepresents the actual scale of the problem. Between 2014 and 2015, official records show that the number of workplace sexual harassment cases nearly doubled, from 57 cases to 119. In the same period, general cases of sexual harassment (not limited to the workplace) also rose markedly, from 469 to 714 cases (Chachra 2017). This rise may reflect both an increase in awareness and reporting mechanisms, but it also underscores how pervasive sexual harassment is across both professional and public spaces.

2. #MeToo: Exposing Abuse via Social Media

The #MeToo discussion began to gain traction in India in 2018 when Indian

actress Tanushree Dutta publicly accused veteran actor Nana Patekar of sexually harassing her during a film shoot. This incident acted as a catalyst, sparking widespread conversations on social media, particularly Twitter, about sexual misconduct in the workplace, revealing that such issues were more pervasive among working women in India than previously acknowledged (Sharma 2024). However, sexual harassment has long been a silenced topic in India. Discussions on this issue have typically remained restricted from public forums, primarily due to deep-rooted cultural taboos, victim-blaming, and fear of reputational damage (Nigam 2014). This silence has historically contributed to systemic underreporting, with survivors often left without recourse or support. The #MeToo movement disrupted this silence by offering a digitally empowered platform for survivors to share their stories publicly. In India, where patriarchal norms heavily influence societal structures, this digital activism challenged existing power dynamics. It enabled survivors to bypass traditional gatekeepers, such as media houses, legal institutions, and HR departments, many of which had failed to protect them. Instead, find solidarity and validation from an online networked community.

This moment was pivotal in breaking the long-standing taboo surrounding sexual misconduct in the Indian entertainment industry. Social media platforms, particularly Twitter, have become key arenas where survivors share their stories without censorship or institutional filters. The use of the hashtag #MeToo enabled individuals across the film industry, including actors, journalists, producers, and assistants, to name perpetrators, share their experiences, and express solidarity (Gupta, Fatima, and Kandikuppa 2021).

What makes #MeToo moment significant is the exposure of how power was used coercively and protectively, where influential men were shielded by silence and women were pressured into complicity. Survivors who had long been silenced by fear of career loss or reputational damage began to speak up. Prominent voices, such as Vinta Nanda, Sandhya Mridul, and Chinmayi Sripada, brought public attention to both individual cases and the culture of impunity that protected offenders.

#MeToo India
Oct 10, 2018 - Oct 16, 2018

Media Exposure
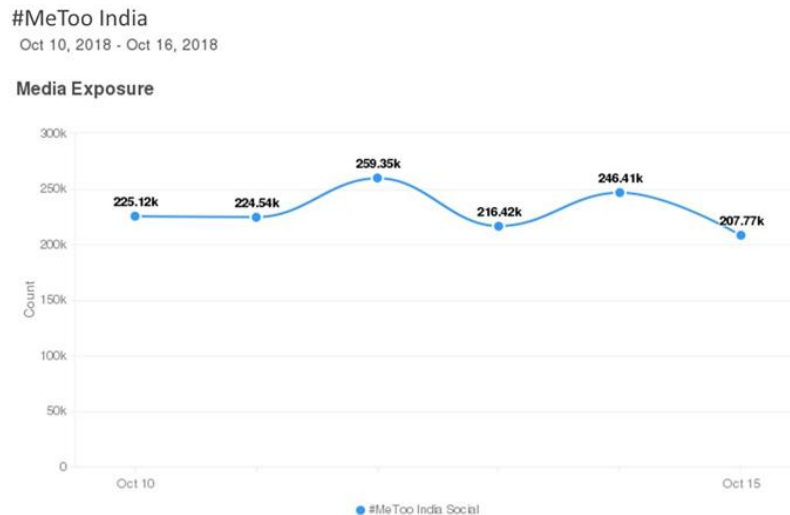
Source: The Week News India

**Figure 5. Graph of the #MeToo Mentions in Social Media October 2018 -
Meltwater**

Following the surge of women sharing their personal stories of harassment, the global media monitoring company Meltwater analysed both media and social media activity related to the #MeToo movement. Their findings revealed that in the past month alone, #MeToo was mentioned 17,500 times in editorial news, with 95% of those mentions occurring within the last week. On social media, the momentum remained strong, with over 2.5 million global mentions of the hashtag in just one week. Notably, India emerged as a key focus, with the term "India" appearing alongside #MeToo in 46,000 instances. Additionally, other frequently associated topics included 'sexual assault' (29,000 mentions) and 'sexual harassment' (27,000 mentions), highlighting the broader themes of gender-based violence gaining traction in the global digital conversation (The Week 2018).

From a sociological perspective, these patterns of digital engagement invite a deeper inquiry: are these expressions of solidarity merely reflective of a viral trend, or do they signify the formation of what the paper titled "*Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*," published by Oxford University, conceptualises as *affective publics*? Digitally networked communities that coalesce around shared emotional expression and political engagement? The recurring emotional resonance and collective outrage encoded in the #MeToo discourse suggest that these publics may not only amplify awareness but also mobilise affect as a form of sociopolitical agency (Papacharissi 2014). Hence, the massive online

visibility of #MeToo in India may represent more than fleeting virality; it may reflect the emergence of affective, issue-driven publics whose digital participation functions as both testimony and protest.
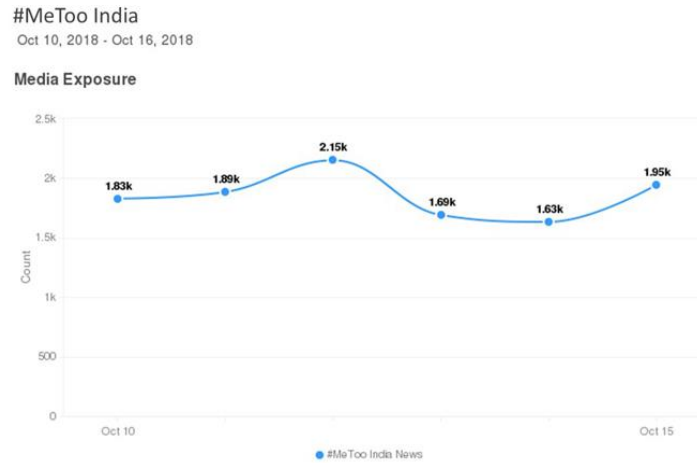
Source: The Week News India

Figure 6. Graph which shows the #MeToo Mentions in News October 2018 - Meltwater

Data from Meltwater, a global media intelligence firm, reveals that India emerged as the most vocal country in the global #MeToo conversation, contributing to 25% of the total online discourse related to the movement. This indicates a significant level of engagement and public interest in the issue of sexual misconduct within India. The United States followed closely, accounting for 22% of the global discussions, reflecting the movement's American origins and continued relevance. China and Canada ranked third and fourth, respectively, showing that the movement had resonated across various cultural and political contexts.

In addition to discussions on sexual harassment, the hashtag #MeToo also became associated with political discourse. The word "vote" appeared in connection with #MeToo over 66,000 times on social media and 25,000 times in news coverage globally. This trend is primarily attributed to the heightened political climate during the lead-up to the U.S. general elections on November 8, where issues of gender justice and accountability were central to public debates. The intersection between #MeToo and political engagement illustrates how the

movement evolved beyond social reckoning to influence broader conversations about leadership, representation, and civic responsibility (Meltwater)

However, while the digital amplification of #MeToo narratives signaled a rupture in long-standing silences, it also exposed the uneven terrain of voice and visibility in India's social hierarchy (Panda and Das 2024). According to Miranda Fricker's theory of *epistemic injustice*, marginalised individuals are often denied credibility as knowers when their accounts are not believed or taken seriously, when structural gaps prevent their experiences from being understood or articulated (Fricker 2007). In the Indian context, the #MeToo movement has been primarily dominated by urban, upper-caste, English-speaking women, whose digital literacy and social capital have enabled them to participate prominently (ISS Blog Bliss, 2025). *Mobilising against Patriarchy and Caste on Twitter: How Women in India Use Digital Spaces to Speak up against Gender-Based Violence*). In contrast, Dalit, Adivasi, and working-class women who disproportionately face gender-based violence have struggled to find the same epistemic legitimacy (Panda and Das 2024). Their stories are often discredited, overlooked, or systematically excluded from dominant digital spaces. As such, the movement's affective publics risk becoming exclusionary, reinforcing epistemic hierarchies rather than dismantling them. This critique underscores the pressing need for intersectional strategies that acknowledge and address epistemic injustice as a fundamental barrier to inclusive gender justice (Fricker 2007).

DISCUSSION

1. From Silence to Solidarity: #MeToo Collective Identity in India

The #MeToo movement initially began on the social media platform MySpace in 2006, initiated by American activist Tarana Burke (Burke 2017). It was initially intended as a grassroots campaign to support survivors of sexual violence, particularly women of color from underprivileged communities. However, the movement gained widespread global attention in 2017 when American actress Alyssa Milano shared a post on Twitter revealing her own experience of workplace sexual misconduct. In her tweet, she encouraged others who had been sexually harassed or assaulted to reply with "#MeToo," aiming to show the magnitude of the issue (Seales 2018). This single tweet triggered a

massive online response. The hashtag #MeToo quickly went viral and ignited a global conversation about sexual violence, power dynamics, and gender inequality in both professional and social environments. As a result, the hashtag was used more than 12 million times on Twitter within just 24 hours, marking an unprecedented digital movement that exposed the scale of sexual harassment across various industries and countries (Mendes et al. 2018).

One of the studies of Computer Science's study from Cornell University analysed tweets shared between October 2017 and January 2020. These more than 47.1k individuals had either disclosed their own sexual abuse experiences on Twitter or engaged in discussions about the movement (Roy et al. 2023). Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook served as vital platforms for building solidarity. Consciousness-raising emerged organically through shared testimonies, retweets, and likes, creating what researchers refer to as hashtag feminism (Drewett, Oxlad, and Augoustinos, 2021). The #MeToo movement in India has not only relied on individual storytelling but has also utilised digital infrastructure to organise, amplify, and archive survivor narratives. One notable development in this regard is the creation of a dedicated X (formerly Twitter) account, @IndiaMeToo, which serves as a central platform for documenting testimonies, sharing updates, and providing solidarity to survivors. The account plays a crucial role in curating and amplifying stories that may otherwise be overlooked by mainstream media or silenced by institutional gatekeeping.

Prior to the rise of #MeToo in India, institutional responses to sexual harassment were largely dismissive or hostile, characterised by bureaucratic red tape and a culture of silence. Many survivors found themselves isolated, with no platform to share their experiences or seek justice (Baxi 2014). The movement disrupted this silence, as women began speaking out often publicly on platforms like Twitter sharing personal stories that resonated widely. Through this act of naming and narrating, individuals moved from being isolated victims to part of a shared identity: survivors. According to Melucci's (1996) conception of collective identity, this process of "recognising oneself in others" is fundamental to the formation of a movement. In India's #MeToo moment, storytelling became a form of identity work, transforming individual pain into political belonging (Drewett et

al. 2021). Based on how the movement formed it can be described using the identity oriented theory.
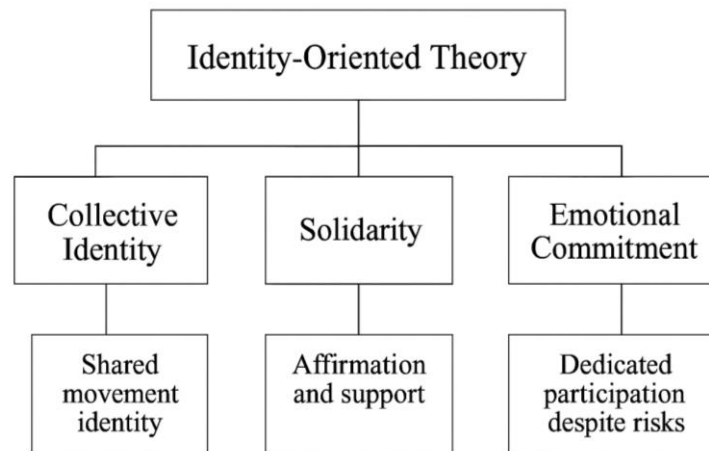

Figure 7. Identity Oriented Analysis of the #MeToo Movement in India

The identity-oriented approach to social movements views activism not just as political protest but as a profoundly personal and cultural process, where individuals come to **see** themselves as part of a collective "we" with shared goals, emotions, and experiences. According to theorists such as Alberto Melucci (1996), James Jasper (1997), and Francesca Polletta (2001), the process of identity-building can be analysed through three main dimensions: Collective Identity, Solidarity, and Commitment. The first dimension of Identity-Oriented Theory is collective identity, which refers to the process that occurs when there is an interactive and shared definition; individuals recognise their experiences as connected to others in similar positions and begin to identify with a broader group or movement (Melucci 1996). This process transformed women's personal stories into a collective memory and narrative, making harassment not just a personal grievance but a social problem with structural roots. Using the hashtag #MeToo makes thousands of women reframe their isolated experiences of sexual harassment and assault into a collective injustice.

The second element, solidarity, refers to the emotional, moral, and affective bonds that unite members of a movement. Solidarity becomes an act of moral alignment and emotional bonding, where participants give each other affirmation, not only the truth of others' pain, but also the legitimacy of the

political claims associated with it (Polletta and Jasper 2001). In the digital space, the #MeToo movement is based on solidarity performed through retweeting and resharing survivor stories, Public Affirmations, Naming Perpetrators, and creating a database of abusers, as reported by The Times of India. This online environment helped create a safe space where women who feared retaliation could still witness and participate, contributing to what (Papacharissi 2014) calls *affective publics*, digitally networked publics formed through emotion and connection, not just rational debate.

The final pillar is commitment, which involves the emotional, psychological, and often a risky decision to continue participating in a movement, even when facing backlash or personal loss. When it comes to commitment in identity-based movements, it stems from a moral sense of obligation, not just a strategic interest (Polletta and Jasper 2001). In India's #MeToo wave, many participants endured legal threats, online harassment, career damage or job loss, victim-blaming by media and institutions. Especially the Bollywood actress who speaks up and brings #MeToo to the table, such as the high-profile figure journalist Priya Ramani, who was sued by former minister M.J. Akbar for defamation and later acquitted, demonstrated moral conviction and long-term dedication to feminist advocacy. The #MeToo movement in India empowered individuals, especially women, to transition from isolated victims of harassment to members of a collective survivor identity. By sharing stories and supporting one another through digital platforms, participants built a movement grounded in collective identity, solidarity, and emotional commitment (Melucci, 1996; Polletta & Jasper, 2001). This identity-oriented model helped bypass restrictive institutional mechanisms and demanded justice through public pressure and cultural change. India's POSH Act (2013) aims to address sexual harassment in the workplace, but has been widely criticised for its structural limitations, including weak implementation, biased complaint committees, and a lack of protection for informal sector workers (Baxi 2014; Gupta et al. 2021). It places the burden on individual women in formal employment settings, ignoring systemic issues like power imbalances and social stigma. Before the #MeToo movement, many women, especially those in informal sectors or smaller organisations, were unaware of their rights under the POSH Act. When women publicly named harassers, especially in professional contexts such as media,

academia, and film, it sparked national debates about what qualifies as workplace harassment, what rights women have, and what mechanisms (Internal Committees, Local Committees) are required by law. Following the #MeToo movement, Google searches for the 'POSH Act' spiked across India in late 2018 (Shroff, 2020).

2. #MeToo's Social Impact on Survivor Visibility and Support

The #MeToo movement has garnered significant attention in the digital realm, becoming a global symbol of resistance against sexual harassment and violence. Its viral nature has brought widespread awareness, particularly in countries with high rates of gender-based violence, India being one of them. In 2018, India was ranked as the most dangerous country for women, according to a Thomson Reuters Foundation poll involving 550 global experts. This ranking was supported by government data indicating an 83% increase in crimes against women between 2007 and 2016 (Goldsmith 2018).

In the same year, the #MeToo movement found resonance in India when Bollywood actress Tanushree Dutta publicly accused actor Nana Patekar of sexual harassment on a film set. Her revelation acted as a catalyst, sparking a digital outcry and opening the floodgates for similar disclosures across social media platforms, particularly Twitter (Sharma 2024). What followed was not merely a celebrity scandal but a wave of digital activism where Indian women, especially those in professional environments, began sharing their own experiences of workplace sexual misconduct. This digital dimension of #MeToo in India highlights the movement's role as a form of online activism. It empowered individuals often silenced by fear, stigma, or institutional inaction to speak up and form a collective voice. Through hashtags, retweets, and viral narratives, survivors bypassed traditional gatekeepers of justice and mainstream media, instead using digital platforms to reclaim their agency, build solidarity, and demand accountability. In a society where discussing sexual harassment remains taboo, the internet became a powerful tool for social change, amplifying voices that had long been marginalised.

The emotional and symbolic support fostered through hashtags like #TimesUp, #BelieveSurvivors, and #MeTooIndia created what scholars call

"affective publics", communities that coalesce around shared emotions, stories, and political urgency (Papacharissi 2014). These communities not only offered validation but also created a form of justice through recognition, especially for those who had been failed by legal frameworks like the POSH Act, which often excluded informal sector workers or those without institutional support (Gupta et al., 2021). This movement significantly transformed the landscape of how survivor stories are told and received. Through platforms like Twitter and Instagram, thousands of individuals, primarily women, began sharing deeply personal narratives of sexual harassment and assault. These public testimonies disrupted the longstanding silence that had surrounded such experiences, particularly within influential institutions such as the media, academia, and the film industry. Survivors who had once remained invisible, either by choice or coercion, found strength in collective storytelling. Their voices were amplified not only by hashtags but also by networks of support, recognition, and outrage. In this sense, the movement did not merely expose individual cases. It challenged the very culture that normalises silence and disbelief.

Another perspective on the #MeToo phenomenon can also be observed in other countries such as Russia. Jiva Saccid, a student at RUDN University in Moscow, also shared his views on the matter. Long before #MeToo gained global traction, Russian-speaking women launched their own movement against gender-based violence. In July 2016, the hashtag *#яНеБоюсьСказать* (#IAmNotAfraidToSpeak) went viral on Russian Facebook, inspired by a similar Ukrainian campaign. Women shared personal stories of abuse, marking one of the first large-scale feminist protests in Russia. Unlike traditional activism, this movement was entirely driven by women, shifting the narrative away from victim-blaming (Strakhovskaya 2021).

Despite its impact, #IAmNotAfraidToSpeak did not spark the same institutional changes as #MeToo in the West. Russian media extensively covered the campaign, yet systemic reforms never followed. When #MeToo emerged globally, it did not take hold in Russia as strongly, partly because the country already had its precedent. Some Russian outlets even framed #MeToo as merely an "American version" of their earlier movement. The activism continued in 2019 with hashtags #янехотелаумирать (#IDidntWantToDie) and #мне_нужна_гласность (#INeedPublicAttention) on Twitter. The campaign

demanding stricter laws against domestic violence and strengthening protections for survivors, which is a pressing need after President Vladimir Putin signed a controversial law decriminalising certain forms of abuse. Russia's deeply patriarchal society perpetuates alarming rates of violence against women. Official government figures cited by the U.K. in 2015 reveal that at least 40,000 women suffer domestic abuse annually, with 12,000 dying at the hands of their partners. This fatality rate is 20 times higher than that of the U.S. Thus, these numbers likely underestimate the crisis, as many cases go unreported (Sedysheva 2020).

Moreover, a pervasive victim-blaming mentality persists, exemplified by the adage, "If he beats you, it means he loves you." Mari Davtyan, a family lawyer, notes that Russian society often holds women responsible for provoking abuse through "improper" behavior, while gender-based violence is rarely treated as a systemic problem (Bennett 2019). There are notable similarities in how India and Russia have responded to waves of gender-based social movements and sexual violence, particularly in the prevalence of victim-blaming mentalities and the deeply rooted patriarchal structures that hinder the progress of the #MeToo movement in both countries.

The comparative insights between India and Russia's #MeToo movements underscore how collective identity, solidarity, and commitment are shaped not only by personal testimonies but also by the broader socio-political environment in which they emerge. In India, digital platforms enabled survivors to construct a shared identity as part of a moral community of "survivors," amplifying emotional solidarity and public commitment despite institutional shortcomings. Meanwhile, in Russia, although similar digital disclosures occurred through hashtags like *#яНеБоюсьСказать*, the absence of an institutional response and the prevailing victim-blaming culture weakened the consolidation of a collective identity and limited the formation of affective publics. This contrast supports Hunt and Benford's (2007) assertion that identity-based movements thrive when emotional resonance, cultural legitimacy, and sustained engagement intersect. Therefore, the success of identity formation and movement sustainability is not merely a function of digital expression but also of how such expressions are received, validated, or silenced by dominant social structures.

CONCLUSION

The comparative insights between India and Russia's #MeToo movements underscore how collective identity, solidarity, and commitment are shaped not only by personal testimonies but also by the broader socio-political environment in which they emerge. In India, digital platforms enabled survivors to construct a shared identity as part of a moral community of "survivors," amplifying emotional solidarity and public commitment despite institutional shortcomings. Meanwhile, in Russia, although similar digital disclosures occurred through hashtags like *#яНеБоюсьСказать*, the absence of an institutional response and the prevailing culture of victim-blaming weakened the consolidation of a collective identity and limited the formation of affective publics. This contrast supports Hunt and Benford's (2007) assertion that identity-based movements thrive when emotional resonance, cultural legitimacy, and sustained engagement intersect. Therefore, the success of identity formation and movement sustainability is not merely a function of digital expression but also of how such expressions are received, validated, or silenced by dominant social structures.

Commitment was evident in the participants' willingness to persist despite facing legal threats, online harassment, and reputational risks. The bravery of women who spoke out, such as Priya Ramani and Tanushree Dutta, became a symbol of feminist resistance and inspired a broader cultural reckoning across sectors like journalism, academia, and entertainment. However, the movement also exposed the exclusionary dynamics of digital spaces, where caste, class, and geographic inequalities limited participation for marginalised voices. This underscores the need for a more intersectional approach in future advocacy efforts and institutional reforms. In conclusion, the Indian #MeToo movement, while not a solution to all forms of gendered violence, represents a pivotal moment in the country's gender justice trajectory. By creating new avenues for collective expression and disrupting the culture of institutional silence, it has redefined the meaning of justice, not only as a legal outcome, but also as recognition, solidarity, and shared identity. The movement's ability to sustain itself through digital platforms reflects the power of identity-based mobilisation in a digitally connected society, while also pointing to the urgent need for more inclusive, structural change.

Theoretically, this article contributes to the existing literature by integrating identity-oriented theory, which explains how the #MeToo movement in India was formed based on an identity-oriented approach through Collective Identity, Solidarity, and

Commitment, thereby offering a nuanced understanding of how emotional expression and digital connectivity interact to build sustainable collective action. Unlike previous studies that often emphasised either the legal dimensions of POSH or the communicative aspects of social media activism, this analysis foregrounds the interplay between identity construction, emotional engagement, and political persistence as key mechanisms of mobilisation. In doing so, it advances the understanding of digital feminist movements within the global South context, where structural inequalities and institutional apathy often constrain conventional advocacy.

As a policy recommendation, this study urges Indian institutions—particularly those tasked with implementing the POSH Act—to expand the scope of their mechanisms to include anonymous digital disclosures, extend outreach to informal sector workers, and mandate intersectional training for Internal Complaints Committees (ICCs). Furthermore, there is a pressing need for government bodies to partner with grassroots digital feminist networks to bridge the gap between online mobilisation and offline institutional reform. By recognising digital storytelling as a legitimate form of evidence and engagement, policymakers can more effectively respond to the lived realities of survivors, thus reinforcing justice as both a legal and social imperative.

For future research agenda, this study invites further inquiry into how **epistemic injustice**, as theorised by Miranda Fricker, operates within digital feminist movements, especially regarding the silencing and marginalisation of Dalit, Adivasi, and working-class women. Future research should examine the internal dynamics of exclusion within "affective publics," interrogating whose voices are amplified and whose are filtered out. Comparative research between countries in the Global South could also enrich our understanding of how cultural, linguistic, and technological factors shape digital mobilisations. Ultimately, a more in-depth examination of the long-term institutional impact of digital movements like #MeToo, beyond their moments of virality, is essential to assess their sustainability as agents of structural change.

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