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Virtual Civil Society as a Platform for Gender Advocacy: Exploring the Role, Effectiveness, and Influence on Facebook

Harshit Kumar Kushwaha

School of Humanities and Social Science, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, India.

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to examine the role of virtual civil society on Facebook as a platform for gender advocacy, focusing on its capacity to advocate for gender equality, assess the effectiveness of online advocacy strategies, and explore the potential for virtual civil society to and shape public opinion on gender issues. Through qualitative methods and analysis, this study provides insights into the dynamics of virtual civil society, its impact on gender advocacy, and the opportunities and challenges it presents for promoting meaningful change in society. This study also explores the role of virtual civil society on social media platforms, especially on Facebook, as a platform for gender advocacy. Utilizing netnography, as a research method, the study also observes the participation and engagement of individuals. By examining the effectiveness of online advocacy strategies, the influence on policy discourse and public opinion, and the opportunities and challenges faced by virtual civil society groups, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of how digital spaces can advance gender equality. The study concludes with such virtual civil society groups and their practices, which advocate women's empowerment. The findings offer insights for activists, policymakers, and organizations working towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society.

INTRODUCTION

"Prior to social media, the main ways in which people communicate are either through broadcasting or one-to-one conversation." (Wang, 2016) Social media platforms have emerged as powerful advocacy and social change tools in recent years. "It is useful to think of Facebook as an ongoing database of social activity with information being added in real-time." (Robert E. Wilson, Sam D. Gosling, Samuel D. Gosling, Lindsay T. Graham, 2012) Within this digital landscape, e.g., Facebook, virtual civil society has gained prominence as a platform for organizing, mobilizing, and advocating for various social causes, including gender equality. Among these platforms, Facebook stands out as a widely used and influential space where virtual civil society groups engage in gender advocacy. Facebook has roughly 2.8 billion active users in the first quarter of 2023 (Shewale, 2023) and it has more

than 5 billion downloads from Google Play Store till June 5, 2023.

"Gender inequality exists when men (or women) enjoy a disproportionately large share of some valued good such as political power or long life." (Shawn F. Dorius, Glenn Firebaugh, 2010) Gender inequality remains a persistent challenge globally, affecting various aspects of individuals' lives, opportunities, and rights. Online spaces, including Facebook, have provided a new avenue for addressing these gender disparities and fostering inclusive "social change", but "how" remains the subject to inquiry. Understanding the role, effectiveness, and influence of virtual civil society on Facebook in advocating for gender equality is crucial for advancing women's rights, challenging gender norms, and promoting social justice.

The main objective of this qualitative research is to explore the role, effectiveness, and influence of virtual

*Corresponding Author: Harshit Kumar Kushwaha

Address: School of Humanities and Social Science, Indian Institute of Technology (IIT), Mandi, Himachal Pradesh, India.

Email ✉: harshitkrk@gmail.com

civil society on Facebook as a platform for gender advocacy. Specifically, the study aims to investigate the presence of virtual civil society on Facebook and how virtual civil society groups on Facebook contribute to advancing gender equality, assess the effectiveness of online advocacy strategies employed by these groups, and examine the potential influence of virtual civil society on policy discourse and public opinion regarding gender issues. This study holds significant importance for several stakeholders involved in gender advocacy and social change. It utilizes netnographic study to observe those societies. It provides insights into the nature and functioning of virtual civil society on Facebook, shedding light on these groups' strategies, activities, and initiatives to advocate for gender equality. This knowledge can empower virtual civil society organizations, activists, and advocates to optimize their efforts and engage in more impactful advocacy work. Understanding which practices yield the most significant outcomes in raising awareness, mobilizing support, and effecting change can guide future advocacy efforts on and off social media platforms. Exploring the influence of virtual civil society on policy discourse and public opinion is crucial for understanding the broader societal impact of these online spaces. Recognizing the potential of virtual civil society to shape policy agendas and public attitudes toward gender issues can inform policymakers, institutions, and the wider public about the significance of engaging with these digital platforms and incorporating them into broader gender equality initiatives.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Gender equality is United Nation's fifth sustainable development goal out of seventeen goals. (Goal 5 Gender Equality, n.d.) "Collective efforts at achieving gender equality in peacebuilding processes are further undermined by the widely held perception that women and civil society groups can best deliver the gender aspects of projects." (GWINYAYI DZINESA, JOYCE LAKER, 2011) The role of civil society is crucial in advocating for gender equality in peacebuilding processes by challenging the perception that women and civil society groups should solely address gender aspects. "Gender equality means equal access for women and girls to healthcare, education and jobs and equal participation in political and economic decision-making." (Columbia Center on Sustainable Investment (CCSI), UNDP, UN, Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and World Economic Forum, 2016) Civil society plays a vital role in promoting inclusion, fostering dialogue, and influencing policy to ensure that gender equality is integrated into all aspects of peacebuilding initiatives. But, prior study lacks to elaborate the impact of social media and its popularity led virtual civil society, which may have several practices to achieve the sustainable development goal of gender equality.

"New forms of virtual civil society provide more significant opportunities for meaningful social interactions and are more functionally equivalent to participation in traditional social groups." (Miki Caul Kittilson, Russell J. Dalton, 2008) The concept of virtual civil society refers to the formation of online communities, groups, and networks that engage in social and civic activities, including advocacy for gender equality. "We find that virtual activity is most clearly linked to a participatory style of citizenship, first through the participatory norms of engaged citizenship." (Miki Caul Kittilson, Russell J. Dalton, 2011) Virtual civil society on platforms like Facebook provides a unique space for individuals to come together, exchange ideas, and mobilize for collective action. But the prior study lacks to clarify the potential of virtual civil society in addressing gender issues by promoting awareness, amplifying marginalized voices, and fostering solidarity among advocates. They have explored the characteristics, formation, and activities of virtual civil society groups but couldn't explain their utility toward gender advocacy, emphasizing the role they play in promoting social inclusion, empowerment, and social change.

Advocacy strategies employed within virtual civil society on Facebook are essential for promoting gender equality. Online advocacy strategies include campaigns, petitions, hashtag movements, and digital storytelling. Scholars have examined the effectiveness of these strategies in raising awareness, mobilizing support, and influencing public attitudes towards gender issues. They have explored the use of social media platforms as tools for disseminating information, building online communities, and engaging with diverse audiences. Studies have also examined the potential of online activism to challenge traditional power structures and amplify the voices of marginalized groups, contributing to a more inclusive gender advocacy landscape.

The role of ICT or information communication technologies are already countered and scholars found it useful to promote gender equality. "ICTs can amplify women's voices, and help to publicise women's experiences and perspectives." (Gurumurthy, 2006) But they haven't discussed virtual civil societies. These can also significantly influence policy discourse and public opinion regarding gender issues. Scholars have investigated how virtual civil society groups engage with policymakers, institutions, and decision-making processes to shape gender-related policies. They have explored the strategies employed by these groups to advance their advocacy agendas and the impact of their digital activism on policy outcomes. Additionally, one study (Beissinger, 2017) examined how virtual civil society's role may provide an effective basis for challenging autocratic regime. The ability of virtual civil society to generate public support, shape narratives, and create social change through online platforms is a critical aspect of understanding its influence on gender advocacy.

The literature reviewed gives a question mark if the growing recognition of virtual civil society as a powerful platform for gender advocacy. Scholars have emphasized the importance of understanding the characteristics and dynamics of virtual civil society groups on Facebook, the effectiveness of online advocacy strategies for promoting gender equality, and the potential influence of these groups on policy discourse and public opinion. By building upon this existing body of research, this study aims to contribute further insights into the role, effectiveness, and influence of virtual civil society on Facebook as a platform for gender advocacy.

Research methodology

To conduct this research, netnography is applied as research methodology for observation and primary data collection. "Netnography is ethnography adapted to the study of online communities." (Kozinets, 2002) Netnography uses qualitative research methods to study online communities, interactions, and cultural phenomena. The study includes qualitative and quantitative data to prove the claims.

Virtual Civil Society and Gender Advocacy on Facebook

Virtual civil society groups dedicated to gender advocacy on Facebook are formed through the voluntary participation of individuals who share a common interest in promoting gender equality. Gender advocacy refers to efforts and actions taken to promote and advocate for gender equality, rights, and justice. It involves raising awareness about gender issues, challenging discriminatory practices and beliefs, and working towards creating a more inclusive and equitable society for people of all genders. These groups often emerge in response to societal challenges, aiming to create a supportive space for discussion, awareness-raising, and collective action. The characteristics of virtual civil society on Facebook include diverse membership, backgrounds, and geographic locations. These groups provide opportunities for individuals to connect, share experiences, and collaborate towards the common goal of gender equality.

"It is content rather than the platform that is most significant when it comes to why social media matters." (Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan, 2016) As shown in table 1, Virtual civil society on Facebook excels in mobilizing and engaging members in gender advocacy efforts. These engage in a range of activities and initiatives to advocate for gender equality. These activities include sharing educational resources, empowering for entrepreneurship, organizing online campaigns and events, conducting discussions and debates, promoting gender-sensitive policies, and amplifying the voices of marginalized groups. Virtual civil

Table 1: Gender advocacy groups on Facebook

Serial Number	Virtual Civil society Groups on Facebook	Number of Group members
1	Society for Women Engineers – SWE Group	8.4k
2	Women Success Society	1.6k
3	Guanacaste Women's Beach Society	1.6k
4	Women's Entrepreneur Society and Referral Networks	223
5	महिला समाज सेवा झुन्झुनू	32
6	नारी शक्ति महिला मंच	30.5k
7	भिलाई नगर महिला देवांगन समाज	1.4k
8	विज्ञानवादी महिलाएं/Scientific Women	11k
9	महिला उद्योग विकास (Maharashtra)	31k
10	वसई विरार महिला उद्योग समूह	10k
11	महिला सशक्तिकरण(women empowerment)	13k
12	The Wholehearted Women's Society	163

society groups utilize multimedia content such as videos, posters, and articles, which are often used, to disseminate information and raise awareness about gender-related issues. They also provide platforms for storytelling and personal narratives, enabling individuals to share their experiences and challenge societal norms and stereotypes. Through the platform's interactive features, such as groups, and posts, virtual civil society groups can mobilize individuals to participate in online or offline activities. Members are encouraged to contribute their perspectives, share resources, and take part in advocacy campaigns. Virtual civil society fosters a sense of belonging and empowerment, motivating members to become active agents of change and advocates for gender equality.

Virtual civil society recognizes the power of collaboration and alliance-building in advancing gender advocacy goals. These groups actively seek partnerships with like-minded organizations, influencers, and individuals to amplify their impact. By building alliances, virtual civil society on Facebook can access broader networks, pool resources, and leverage diverse expertise, enhancing their capacity to drive meaningful change and influence public opinion on gender issues. The role of virtual civil society in gender advocacy encompasses the formation of inclusive spaces, engagement in a variety of advocacy activities, and the mobilization of members. Understanding these aspects is crucial for comprehending the ways in which virtual civil society on Facebook contributes to the promotion of gender equality.

Accessing sample virtual civil society groups on Facebook, I claim these online advocacy strategies within virtual civil society on Facebook are not always as effective as usually expected. The virtual civil society

group number seven "*Bhilai Nagar Mahila Devangan samaj*" in Table one aims to empower local women through the virtual group. While, most of the posts are not related to gender advocacy but generic posts and male users are posting at most. Examining case studies of successful online advocacy campaigns within virtual civil society on Facebook provides valuable insights into effective strategies and best practices. By analyzing the posts on those virtual civil society groups, I argue that they contribute to successful social change using strategies such as compelling storytelling, strategic use of visuals (e.g., Poster encouraging women empowerment), effective mobilization of supporters, and targeted messaging. Understanding the factors that contribute to successful online advocacy campaigns can guide virtual civil society groups in designing and implementing effective strategies for gender equality advocacy on Facebook. While online advocacy strategies offer numerous opportunities for gender equality advocacy, they also come with challenges and limitations. The risk of echo chambers, limited perspectives, and the need to balance online and offline activism.

The influence of the Virtual Civil Society

Virtual civil society plays a significant role in shaping public opinion on gender issues on Facebook. Through their activities and campaigns, these groups challenge societal norms, raise awareness about gender inequalities, and promote inclusive perspectives. By utilizing Facebook's features such as posts, videos, and live discussions, virtual civil society groups can reach a wide audience and engage in meaningful dialogue on gender-related topics. They use compelling narratives, personal stories, and data-driven arguments to influence public attitudes, challenge stereotypes, and foster empathy and understanding. The collective voices and testimonies shared on Facebook contribute to changing societal perceptions and building support for gender equality.

Virtual civil society on Facebook often collaborates with traditional civil society organizations to amplify their impact and influence on gender advocacy. In many cases, groups on Facebook have the same civil society which is working on the ground level (e.g, *Mahila samaj Sewa Jhunjhunu*, listed in table 1). The influence of virtual civil society on Facebook on policy discourse and public opinion is significant in promoting gender socio-economic equality. By engaging with policymakers and institutions and shaping public opinion, virtual civil society groups on Facebook contribute to advancing gender advocacy agendas and effecting positive social change. Understanding the dynamics and outcomes of these influences is crucial for enhancing the effectiveness of virtual civil society as a platform for gender advocacy.

Opportunities and Challenges in the Virtual Civil Society

Online platforms allow individuals from marginalized communities to share their experiences, challenges, and aspirations without the traditional barriers they might face offline. Virtual civil society provides a supportive environment where these voices can be heard, validated, and amplified, leading to increased visibility and recognition of intersectional gender issues. This opportunity to empower marginalized voices is essential for fostering social harmony and addressing diverse communities' specific needs and concerns.

Virtual civil society gender advocacy must navigate the challenge of balancing online and offline activism. While online platforms provide a convenient and accessible space for advocacy, it is important to complement rather than replace offline efforts. It is also crucial to recognize the limitations of online activism and the importance of real-world engagement, including grassroots organizing, face-to-face interactions, and community mobilization. Balancing online and offline activism ensures that advocacy efforts are grounded in the lived experiences of individuals and communities, enabling a comprehensive approach to addressing gender inequalities. Empowering marginalized voices, addressing online harassment and safety concerns, and striking a balance between online and offline activism are crucial aspects that need to be explored and addressed. By acknowledging and addressing these opportunities and challenges, this virtual civil society can better advocate for gender equality and contribute to positive social change.

Discussion and Findings

The research findings demonstrate that virtual civil society on Facebook is an effective platform for gender advocacy. Through various activities and initiatives, virtual civil society groups have been successful in raising awareness about gender issues, mobilizing individuals, and promoting inclusive policies. The platform also helps to raise voices against social evils such as a dowry system through Facebook posts, sharing posters and videos to related content. The use of multimedia content, such as videos and posters, has proven to be effective in disseminating information and engaging a wider audience. Additionally, the formation of diverse and inclusive virtual communities has empowered marginalized voices and amplified their perspectives, contributing to a more inclusive and intersectional approach to gender advocacy. Through the strategic use of "social media" tools and campaigns, they have successfully influenced public opinion on gender issues. By sharing personal stories, data, and evidence, virtual civil society on Facebook has challenged societal norms, increased awareness, and fostered empathy and understanding. The collective voices and testimonies shared on Facebook have helped shift public attitudes and generate support for gender equality.

This research has identified several opportunities and challenges within virtual civil society gender

advocacy on Facebook. The opportunities include women empowerment, amplification of marginalized voices, and the potential for broad reach and engagement. The findings of this research highlight the effectiveness of virtual civil society on Facebook in gender advocacy, its influence on policy discourse and public opinion, as well as the opportunities and challenges it faces. Several Facebook groups (e.g., fourth number group in Table 1, Women's Entrepreneur Society and Referral Networks), run by virtual civil society, empower women in the context of entrepreneurship. These findings contribute to a deeper understanding of the role and impact of virtual civil society in advancing gender equality. The recommendations provide valuable insights for virtual civil society groups, policymakers, and stakeholders to enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of virtual civil society as a platform for gender advocacy on Facebook.

Exploring the role, effectiveness, and influence of virtual civil society on Facebook as a platform for gender advocacy. The findings reveal that virtual civil society plays a crucial role in promoting gender equality through various activities and initiatives. People voluntarily join such groups to really participate in such practices (e.g., women join women empowerment groups, LGBTQ+ people join relevant virtual Facebook groups) for the feeling of belongingness. Virtual civil society on Facebook also influences public opinion by challenging societal norms, raising awareness, and fostering empathy. The research highlights the formation and characteristics of virtual civil society, its activities for gender equality advocacy, mobilization and engagement of members. The implications of this research are significant for gender advocacy efforts. The findings underscore the effectiveness of virtual civil society on Facebook in raising awareness, mobilizing and aware individuals. By understanding the strategies and approaches that have proven successful, gender advocacy groups can leverage virtual civil society as a powerful platform for amplifying their voices and advancing their agenda. I argue, these virtual groups not always claim to run by virtual civil society but I say on the basis of their activities and practices. The findings also emphasize the importance of intersectionality and inclusivity in virtual civil society, ensuring that the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities are at the forefront of gender advocacy efforts.

Conclusion

Virtual civil society on Facebook serves as a powerful platform for gender advocacy, with its role, effectiveness, and influence evident in shaping policy discourse, influencing public opinion, and mobilizing individuals for gender equality. Social media users usually voluntarily join such virtual groups as per their interest and actively share relevant posts or contents in those groups. The findings of this research have implications for gender advocacy efforts,

emphasizing the importance of inclusivity and strategic use of online platforms. Future research should focus on assessing long-term impact, exploring intersectional dynamics, and addressing ethical considerations within virtual civil society. By harnessing the potential of virtual civil society, we can foster a more equitable and inclusive society for all.

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