

ONLINE OPPOSITION TO GENDER EQUALITY

Understanding opposition to gender equality
and feminism in the virtual space



Australian Government

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade



Ministry of Gender Equality
and Family



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SUMMARY



- A qualitative study commissioned by UN Women examined men's groups on social media that oppose women's rights and gender equality in India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines. The analysis found both **common and country-specific oppositional narratives and tactics**.
- Dominant narratives spread by these online men's groups **portray men as victims of gender equality and disadvantaged by feminism**. They justify misogyny under the pretext of various religious, cultural and political ideologies.
- They use a range of tactics, such as attacking feminism and promoting men's issues, denigrating women's appearance and attacking individual women's rights activists.
- The research findings have **implications for legal, policy, programmatic, communications and advocacy actions** to counter online opposition and violence against women.

INTRODUCTION



In the Asia-Pacific region, more than 50,000 accounts on Facebook, each hosting thousands of followers, are launching online attacks against feminism and women's rights activists.¹ This is part of a global trend of networked misogyny on various social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Twitter, YouTube, and Reddit. These groups of men, commonly identified overall as the online "manosphere",² include the labels "men's rights activists",³ "men going their own way",⁴ "pick-up artists",⁵ incels,⁶ and religious conservatives.⁷ Their activities range from demands for fatherhood rights, to attacks against women's physical appearance and morality, hacking, violation of privacy, and stalking. Compared to the Global North, in the Asia-Pacific region these groups are less researched and understood in their specific socio-cultural contexts.

There is also currently only limited response in terms of international and national policies and laws and violence prevention programmes.

Thus, UN Women's Regional Office for Asia-Pacific commissioned Quilt.AI to conduct a study on online opposition to gender equality focusing on Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines. This brief summarizes the research, including its objectives, methodology and findings, and provides recommendations to tackle online opposition to gender equality and prevent harm.

Anti-feminist tactics and narratives online

Tactics are the different methods of attack used by men's groups to oppose gender equality. Narratives are the discourses they create and spread to discredit feminists and promote a patriarchal agenda. Figure 1 shows prominent narratives and tactics used in the manosphere globally, which resonated with findings of this study.

¹ According to an analysis by Quilt.AI in 2022.

² Groups of men who promote toxic masculinity, misogyny, and opposition to feminism.

³ Groups of men who believe that men are systematically disadvantaged in society.

⁴ Groups of men who abstain from relationships with women.

⁵ Groups of men who seek to have sex with as many women as possible.

⁶ Or "involuntary celibates": groups of men who identify themselves as unable to form intimate relationships with women.

⁷ These terms have a variety of geographical uses in the Global North and South.

Figure 1: Anti-feminist tactics and narratives ⁸

Tactics

Deflect:
Shifting the focus away from women's rights issues

Deny:
Denying the validity of gender equality and women's rights issues

Discount:
Minimizing the importance of gender equality and women's rights issues

Threaten:
Threatening to harm women and women's rights activists

Flipping the narrative:
Countering feminist claims with opposing narratives (positively) centering on men

Discredit:
Casting doubts on the legitimacy, motives and methods of women's rights activists

Divide:
Disrupting the unity between women's rights activists

Narratives

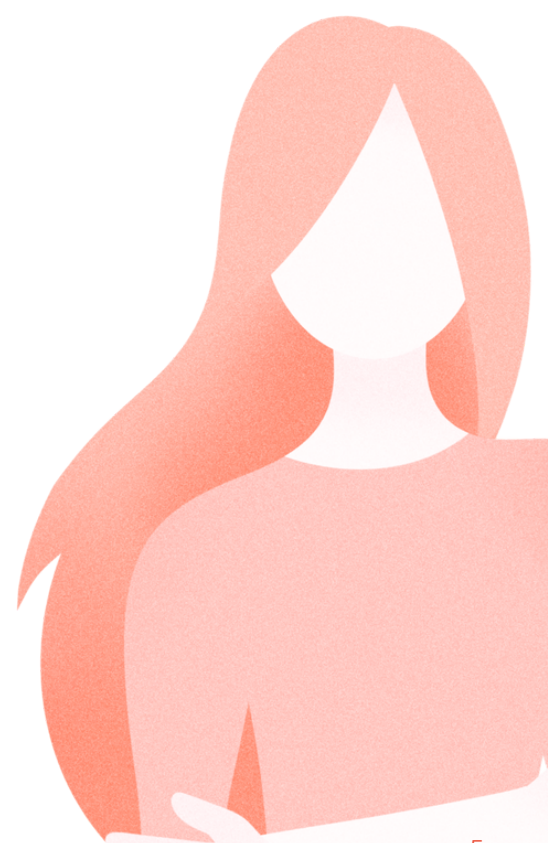
Justifying violence and hostility towards women

Justifying the belittling of women

Portraying men as victims of gender equality

Justifying the exclusion of women

Promotion of patriarchy and male privilege



⁸ Sources: Staples, L. (2004). *Roots to Power: A Manual for Grassroots Organising*. Praeger Publishers; Code, L. (2005). *Encyclopedia of Feminist Theories*. London: Routledge; Marwick, A. E., & Caplan, R. (2018). Drinking Male Tears: Language, the Manosphere, and Networked Harassment. *Feminist Media Studies*, 18(4), 543-559; van Valkenburgh, S. P. (2018). Digesting the Red Pill: Masculinity and Neoliberalism in the Manosphere. *Men and Masculinities*, 24(1), 84-103.

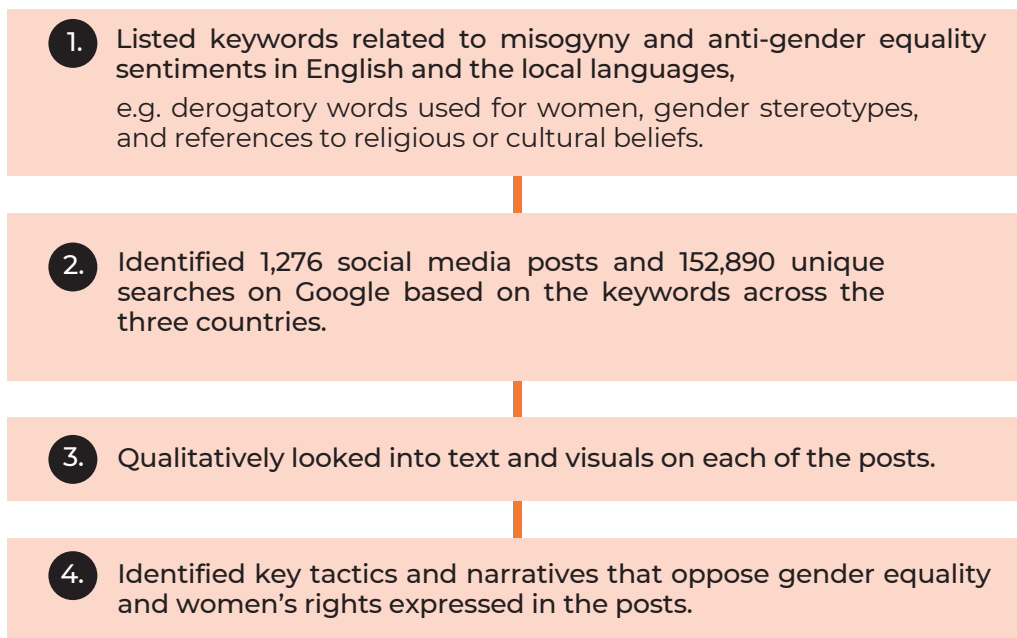
RESEARCH OVERVIEW



The research looked at anti-feminist and anti-gender equality content on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. It aimed to **unpack online tactics and narratives that are used to oppose gender equality and women's rights** in Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines. This involved systematically selecting a sample of oppositional men's groups with the help of Quilt.AI's proprietary artificial intelligence (AI) tool.

The tool identified relevant groups and pages on Facebook and extracted posts and videos on Twitter and YouTube using specific anti-feminist and anti-gender equality keywords.

Figure 2: The research process



The study does not capture oppositional activities beyond Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Furthermore, the study does not cover all demographics in each country due to the limitations of publicly available data.

However, the methodology, findings and analysis are sufficiently robust to provide an overall picture of key trends specific to the three countries. As the analysis below shows, **although some of these narratives and tactics mirror those used globally, they also take culturally specific forms that need to be understood in order to tackle them.**

Context of Bangladesh, India, and the Philippines



Bangladesh

- 25% of the population has access to the internet, and 45 million use social media.^{9,10}
- Topics such as “men’s rights activists”, “women belong to the kitchen”, and “are men and women equal” have increased in interest according to an analysis of Google search trends between 2020 and 2021.¹¹
- Alongside Bangladesh's advancement in gender equality, activists in the manosphere are also growing in number.
- The online manosphere attracts its followers by hosting weekly gatherings with guest speakers and sharing personal testimonials.



India

- 43% of the population are internet users.¹² 519 million use social media.¹³
- There are many momentous feminist campaigns online, such as #LahuKaLagaan,¹⁴ #Delhibraveheart,¹⁵ and #WhyLoiter.¹⁶
- According to an analysis of Google search trends, between 2020 and 2021, there was an increased interest in topics such as “feminazi”, “why men are better than women”, and “definition or meaning of misogyny”.¹⁷

- Activists in the online manosphere mostly use Twitter and Facebook.
- Their content often features slang in local languages, terms such as “fake feminists”, viral celebrity names and hashtags to attract followers. They also post news about women's crimes, reshare feminists' posts edited with anti-feminist sentiments, and organize online and offline events.



Philippines

- 50% of the country are internet users,¹⁸ and 78.5 million use social media.¹⁹
- 27% of online violence against women and girls happens on Facebook.²⁰
- Women use hashtags such as #HijaAko and #RhymeswithWrong to share their experiences of sexual assault.^{21,22}
- An analysis of Google search trends from 2020 to 2021 showed increased interest in topics such as “women belong to the kitchen”, “are men and women equal”, “gender equality problems”, and “feminism is bad”.²³
- Activists in the online manosphere use popular anti-feminist claims (e.g. that feminism destroys society) and denigrate women celebrities and journalists to reach many followers.

⁹ The World Bank. [Individuals using the Internet \(% of population\) – Bangladesh](#).

¹⁰ Datareportal. [Digital 2021 Bangladesh](#).

¹¹ Analysis by Quilt.AI in 2022.

¹² The World Bank. [Individuals using the Internet \(% of population\) – India](#).

¹³ Statista (2021). [Number of social network users in India from 2015 to 2020](#).

¹⁴ Translates to “tax on blood”. This campaign demands to remove sales tax from sanitary napkins.

¹⁵ Campaign in response to the [Delhi rape incident](#).

¹⁶ A movement to reclaim public places for women.

¹⁷ Analysis by Quilt.AI in 2022.

¹⁸ The World Bank. [Individuals using the Internet \(% of population\) – Philippines](#).

¹⁹ Statista (2021). [Number of social media users in the Philippines from 2017 to 2020](#).

²⁰ Foundation for Media Alternatives (2021). [Online gender-based violence in the Philippines](#).

²¹ Launched to counter a statement on rape by TV anchor [Ben Tulfo](#) who blamed survivors.

²² Started with celebrity Kat Alano who stated that she was raped by a famous celebrity.

²³ Analysis by Quilt.AI in 2022.

KEY FINDINGS



Dominant Narratives Opposing Gender Equality and Feminism

From the sample of social media posts studied, the following are the major narratives propagated within the online manosphere across countries and in each country:

Portraying men as victims:

- In India, more than half of the posts by activists in the manosphere claim that men have fallen victim to gender equality. They try to build solidarity around how women's rights are challenging men's rights. A significant number of similar posts are observed in Bangladesh.

For example, in Bangladesh, men's groups online claim that the country's laws protect only women from the impacts of extramarital affairs. They share personal testimonies of men and their children suffering physical and emotional torture and abuse after their wives had allegedly abandoned them. They post pictures of crying children to portray their victimhood.

Justifying patriarchy, male privilege, and exclusion and belittling of women:

- In the Philippines, most narratives justify misogyny based on culturally specific assumptions about gender and views about feminists.

These groups deploy and reinforce cultural assumptions about feminists as aggressive and man-haters, and idolize gender norms about man's superiority.

- A significant number of oppositional men's groups in India justify gender inequality to protect religious sentiments.

For example, some of these groups propagate gender-unequal ideas of what constitutes a "good woman" according to dominant religious beliefs and ideals in society. They target influential women on social media who do not conform to these norms, and demand they leave the country.

- In Bangladesh, supposedly nostalgic notions about patriarchy and male privilege are spread by oppositional men's groups online.

They share posts juxtaposing times "before" and "after" feminism to showcase how feminism has allegedly enabled women to play the victim and sidelined male privileges and rights.

Justifying violence and hostility against women:

- The manosphere across the three countries propagates narratives of victim blaming, jokes about rape, justification of attacks against feminists, and rallies behind political leaders who approve of sexism and violence.

For example, in the Philippines, political leaders who have joked about rape have garnered online support through misogynistic hashtags by men's groups on social media. Men's groups also used common justifications of sexual assault, e.g. "men can't control themselves" or "men are easily tempted". Another example of justifying misogyny and violence is using references from the Bible to emphasize the virtues of a "good Christian woman".

Key Tactics Used to Oppose Gender Equality and Feminism

The following are the key tactics used to cultivate and disseminate the dominant narratives:

Flipping the narrative:

- Online men's groups in India and Bangladesh challenge feminist demands to hold male perpetrators of violence and harassment accountable. They "flip" the call for justice by women's rights activists and instead ascribe victimhood to men.

Some of these groups regularly post news about crimes committed by women to highlight the injustices against men. Legal cases with rulings against women are celebrated as justice for all men.

Discount and deflect:

- In the three countries, activists in the manosphere aim to establish the superiority of a specific religious, cultural or political ideology above gender equality and claim that feminism is destroying traditional culture.

They share excerpts of religious texts and sermons from religious leaders to show how gender equality has led women astray and tarnished traditional institutions such as marriage, family and motherhood.

Discredit:

- In the three countries, the morality and motives of feminists and those vocal about women's rights are severely scrutinized and discredited.

These groups use tropes such as "feminazi" and "man-hater" to discredit feminists. Women journalists calling out sexism and rape culture are called "stupid" and "fake" and are discredited using trolls and fake news.²⁴

Deny:

- Manosphere activists in Bangladesh deny the validity of gender equality and women's rights by claiming women already have achieved sufficient rights and that feminist "demands" are baseless or unreasonable.

Through visuals such as memes, these online men's groups claim that the first and second waves of feminism have already achieved the right to vote, equal pay and respect for women. But contemporary feminism allegedly demands to "kill all men for being men". Through these claims, the manosphere activists deny the need for furthering gender equality and women's rights.

Threaten:

- In the three countries, there are direct threats against feminists, including journalists, influencers and celebrities, under the pretext of protecting religious, cultural, and political sentiments. These attacks include verbal abuse and threats of kidnap, rape or murder.

For example, Bangladeshi celebrities Pori Moni and Taslima Nasreen, who were vocal about women's rights, were subjected to online abuse and called "prostitutes" and "sluts". Online news website Rappler in the Philippines, which called out sexism and jokes about rape by political leaders, was ordered to shut down by the court, and the government regulator revoked its operating licence.²⁵

Divide and derail positive discourse:

- In the three countries, there are direct threats against LGBTQI+ communities, linked with feminism, under the pretext of protecting tradition, culture, and religion.

In the Philippines, discussions about religion often centre around homosexuality being deemed incompatible with religious teachings. In Bangladesh, online discourse criticizes feminism for allegedly promoting queerness, and expresses concerns that the progress of LGBTQI+ rights has allegedly influenced individuals to identify as gay or lesbian.

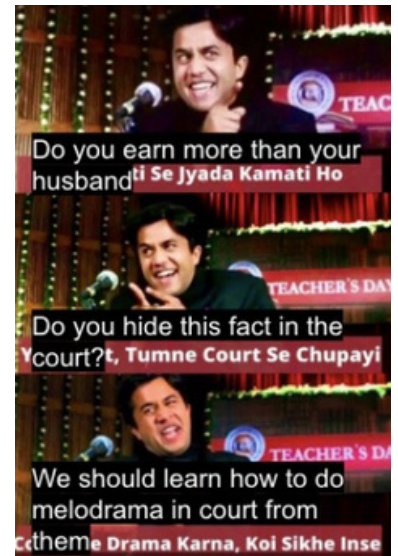
²⁴ Trolls are people who directly attack and bully others on social media and online platforms by posting derogatory, offensive, and vengeful comments.

²⁵ Johnson, H. & Mao, F. (2022, Jun 29). [Rappler: Philippines orders shutdown of Maria Ressa's critical news site](#). BBC News.

Examples from India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines

India:

A Facebook page by the Save Indian Family Foundation (SIFF) aims to fight gender-friendly laws, which they allege are misused and manipulated by women. For example, in one shared meme, a male character of a famous Bollywood movie delivers a humorous speech to a room full of men. Catchphrases of this meme ask women the following two questions: Do you earn more money than your husband? Do you hide this fact in court? The meme concludes with the following message to men: "We should learn how to do melodrama in court from them." This narrative portrays women as false victims who use melodramatic pleas to gain sympathy and favour and suggests that men should mimic this to win cases. This serves to discredit women who try to access their rights through the law.



Bangladesh:

The Facebook group Justice for Men, with around 20,600 members, uses terms such as "war" and "liberation" to demand justice for men who are constructed as victims of gender equality. In one of their posts, there is an image of a man getting crushed by the hammer of justice: He raises his hands, pleading to stop the attack against him. This implies that only women are now benefiting from laws and the legal system and that this is a form of violence against men. The mission statement of this Facebook group says: "In the present social and legal system, since the responsibility for all the misdeeds of the society has been placed only on the shoulders of men, the family is in disarray."



Philippines:

Numerous online movements of MGTOW (Men Going Their Own Way) aim to live their lives without any female contact. Their posts are mired in misogyny, sexism, and hatred towards women. They spread hatred against feminists, calling them "aggressive" and "man-hating". Some of their posts juxtapose images of "modest" versus "shameless" women, thus vilifying certain women. Sentiments of toxic masculinity are spread in these groups, where so-called "weak" men are contrasted with "strong" men. Images of women are also shared in these groups without consent — subjecting them to sexual objectification and derogatory language. Sexually assaulted women are blamed for allegedly "indecent" clothing and behaviour.



IMPLICATIONS



With the exponential growth in internet penetration and in a post-pandemic world, **online spaces are increasingly where many human interactions take place.** This is where we work, learn, connect with our loved ones, search for life-saving information, and find entertainment and comfort. Internet and social media platforms are widely accessible to populations in the three countries researched. However, these spaces are tainted with violence and are not safe for all women, men, or children.

This research shows that, in addition to widespread misogyny in online spaces, there are more organized, strategized, and targeted attacks against women's organizations, individual women and those vocal about equality and women's rights. Not only do these groups in the

so-called "manosphere" ruthlessly attack women, feminists, and gender-equality activists, but they also manipulate men, children, and sometimes even women to support their cause. This is an assault against hard-won women's rights and advancements in gender equality in societies where patriarchal systems remain dominant, along with attendant levels of violence against women.

Therefore, there is an urgent need to understand this online opposition to gender equality and feminism, the specific tactics and narratives used in each country's context, and how these link to regional and global trends to develop strategies to prevent this online misogyny and the violence it produces.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Based on the research findings, the following are key recommendations for policy, legal, programmatic and advocacy interventions to stop organized violence and opposition in online spaces:

Bring about legal change internationally and nationally to make online spaces safer for women, including through criminalizing online misogyny and violence.

Recognition and adequate legal provision are important to counter gender-based violence, hatred, and harassment perpetrated by the manosphere. UN resolutions are some of the legally binding international treaties on tackling all forms of violence against women and women's rights activists online and offline, namely the General Recommendation 35 of 2017 relating to the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, and UN General Assembly Resolution on Protecting Human Rights Defenders of 2013.²⁶

However, many countries are still to ratify these instruments, and others still need to domesticate their provisions into their national legislation. While several countries, including India, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, have domestic laws punishing stalking, sexual harassment and violence against women, these are primarily limited to in-person or offline incidences of violence and do not specifically include gender-based abuse online.²⁷ Domestic legislation against cyber-crimes is limited to identity theft, hacking, breach of privacy, transmitting sexually explicit content, and sending offensive messages; however, these fall short in gender responsiveness and do not specifically target gender-based violence online.²⁸

²⁶ Wilk, A. (2018). [Cyber violence and hate speech against women](#). European Parliament.

²⁷ Joseph, V. & Jain, M. (2020, Oct 01). [Anti-cyber bullying laws in India - An analysis](#). *Mondaq*; Madhukalya, A. (2022, Jan 15). [Are laws against online harassment enough?](#) *Deccan Herald*; Foundation for Media Alternatives. (2017, Nov 28). [Philippine laws on domestic violence and online gender-based violence](#). *Medium*.

²⁸ Madhukalya, A. (2022, Jan 15). [Are laws against online harassment enough?](#) *Deccan Herald*; Foundation for Media Alternatives. (2017, Nov 28). [Philippine laws on domestic violence and online gender-based violence](#). *Medium*.

Laws against sharing sexually explicit content and offensive messages are arbitrary and misappropriated for moral policing and arresting persons who express critical views about religious, social, and political issues and political leaders.²⁹ Thus, domestic laws need further development to include the specific forms of online stalking, bullying, harassment, assault, abuse, threats of abuse, hate speech, character assassination, usage of personal images and videos, and violation of privacy that target women.

Train and equip police and law enforcement agencies to handle complaints about online harassment effectively.

While domestic law-enforcement officials and the police may be aware of widespread abuse online, such as the circulation of intimate pictures and videos without consent and prank calls, they may require specialist training on the types of narratives and tactics used by anti-feminist men's groups. Such specialist training could help mitigate any technical and logistical challenges when investigating and preventing organized online violence against women. A successful example in Estonia has demonstrated the benefits of establishing a "web constables" unit in the police with specialist knowledge in tackling online hate speech and harassment.³⁰

Violence prevention and gender-equality efforts need to specifically target online and offline manosphere activities.

Violence prevention and response interventions can sensitize women and women's rights activists about the activities of men's groups in the manosphere and how to find safety and support online and offline. Furthermore, prevention interventions can target manosphere activists in order to clarify what gender equality is and why it is crucial for both women and men, their children and society.

Advocacy campaigns can communicate how gender equality contributes to healthy, safer families, economic growth, peaceful societies, environmental and climate sustainability, and income opportunities. Campaigns can convey how gender equality provides equal social status and protection from violence for women, men and their children.

Awareness of the identities of feminists that join across religions, cultures, political views, geographical locations, and professions is a necessary step to counter personal attacks against women's rights activists. Sharing stories of men who are feminists and gender rights activists can help to tackle toxic masculinities by highlighting alternative masculinities. These interventions need to be tailored to address specific harmful gender norms and narratives in the country and group context. They also need collaborative support from governments, women's rights and civil society organizations, and the private sector.

Response services need to be survivor-centred, trauma-informed and intersectional.

It is crucial to be guided by the lived experiences of survivors to shape laws and policies. An effective response to online violence and harassment requires looking beyond narrow models of criminal justice, and tailoring responses to survivors' practical situations and needs. The swift removal of illegal, harmful or non-consensual content may be among the priority responses that survivors ask for.

Private sector companies and online platforms need to identify, prevent, remove and address online misogyny and calls to harm women.

Private sector actors need to proactively prevent and address gender-based violence on their platforms, adopt gender transformative and safety by design approaches, which embed safety into the conceptualization, development and implementation of digital technologies and related policies. This includes identifying and removing threats, harmful content, and abuse.³¹

²⁹ Zaman, S.T., Gansheimer, L., Rolim, S.B. & Mridha, T. (2017). [Legal action on cyber violence against women](#). Dhaka: Bangladesh Legal Aid and Services Trust (BLAST) & BRAC University.

³⁰ Mijatović, D. (2022, March 15). [No space for violence against women and girls in the digital world](#). Council of Europe.

³¹ [Report on the Asia-Pacific Regional Consultation on the Priority Theme of the Sixty-seventh Session of the Commission on the Status of Women](#), Bangkok, Thailand, 8-9 February 2023.



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