



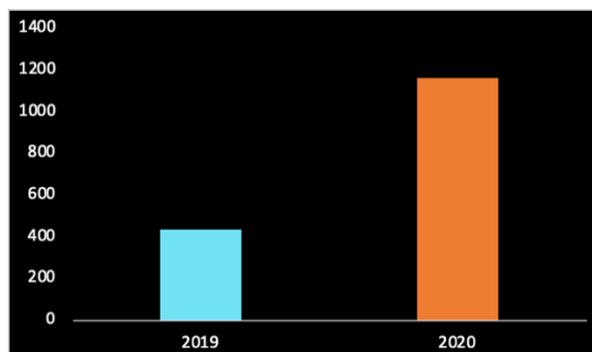
# SOCIAL MEDIA MONITORING ON COVID-19 AND MISOGYNY IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC



Since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, violence against women and girls has intensified globally.<sup>1</sup> Analysis of social media suggests that the same is true for online misogyny and hate speech directed at women in South and South-East Asia. As COVID-19 lockdowns and other movement restrictions push more people online, digital platforms and online spaces are being increasingly used to spread sexist, inaccurate, and dangerous rhetoric about women, inciting hatred and potentially provoking violence – online and offline. This brief examines the links between the COVID-19 pandemic and online misogyny and hate speech directed at women in South and South-East Asia for the period of March – June 2020. It is based on the findings of research conducted by Mythos Labs for UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

## **VOLUME AND INTEREST IN MISOGYNY CONTENT INCREASED DURING COVID-19 LOCKDOWNS**

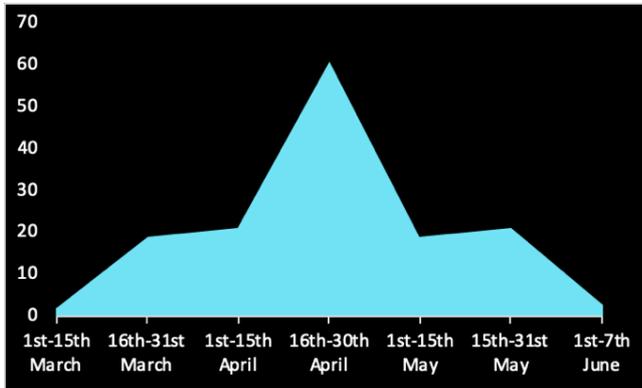
As much of South and South-East Asia were under lockdown from March until June 2020 in a bid to stem the spread of COVID-19, a disturbing trend emerged: The volume of and interest in misogynistic online content increased. Data from India, Sri Lanka, and Malaysia showed that both the volume of misogynistic Facebook posts and tweets, as well as individuals' engagement with them, including likes, comments and shares, spiked during COVID-related lockdowns in that period, with a 168-percent increase from the same period in 2019.



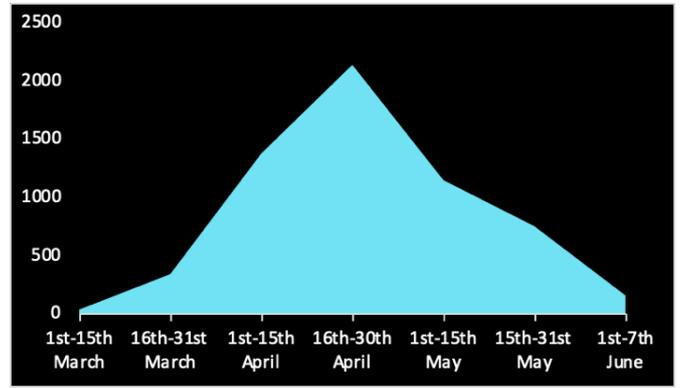
*Total number of misogynistic Facebook posts across three countries captured by this research in the same period in 2019 vs. 2020*

<sup>1</sup> See UN Women (2020), COVID-19 and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, available at <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2020/issue-brief-covid-19-and-ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-en.pdf?la=en&vs=5006>

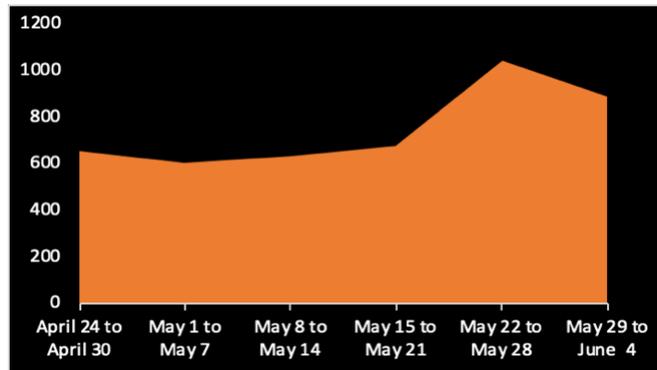
Similarly, in Sri Lanka, India, Philippines, Malaysia and Indonesia, Google Trends analysis showed spikes of 25% or higher in relative search volumes for misogynistic profanity, including terms such as “bitch”, “slut”, and “whore” and similar slurs in local languages. In Indonesia, in addition to an increase in misogynistic profanity, the search volume for misogynistic narratives, such as “feminazi” and “misandry”, also increased. In India, an increase in search volume for misogynistic profanity, narratives, as well as misogynistic organizing, such as terms like “incel”, “men going their own way” and “men’s rights”, also increased.



Total number of COVID-related misogynistic Facebook posts, captured in this research, from March 1 to June 7, 2020.



Total engagements with COVID-related misogynistic Facebook posts captured in this research, March 1 to June 7, 2020



Total number of COVID-related misogynistic tweets captured in this research, from April 24 to June 4, 2020.

More than 50 percent of COVID-related misogynistic tweets captured from India expressed COVID-related misogynistic narratives (detailed more below) and were originally posted by leaders or self-declared members of misogynist organizations, such as Men’s Day Out, Men’s Welfare Trust and others. In the Philippines, the clear majority of tweets examined for this research expressed COVID-19 related profanity, often using misogynistic terms such as “puta” (bitch) to describe either COVID-19 lockdown restrictions or to vent their frustration at authorities. Indonesia saw a small but consistent number of COVID-related misogynistic tweets every week, peaking in May when Security Minister Mohammad Mahfud MD repeated a joke comparing efforts



Cartoon inspired by an Indonesian minister’s comparison between the COVID-19 virus and a “wife”, by Yuyun Narrachman, Tempo Magazine 2 June 2020.



A meme commonly shared in India among individual Facebook users identified for this research, April 2020

to control the pandemic to controlling a wife.<sup>2</sup> This led to a rise in misogynistic tweets from Indonesia, inspiring tweets of approval and memes showing wives as more dangerous than COVID-19.

With the easing of lockdowns from June 2020, the number of misogynistic posts and tweets decreased dramatically. This decline could be due to COVID-19 social media fatigue i.e. social media users' unwillingness to repeatedly discuss the same topic, as well as COVID-19's influence on day-to-day life becoming slightly less commanding.

### SEXIST ORGANIZATIONS ARE SPREADING NEW COVID-RELATED MISOGYNISTIC NARRATIVES

Sexist organisations, particularly in India, were active in disseminating COVID-related misogynistic narratives. The majority of tweets expressing misogynistic narratives examined for this research came from India, and more than 90 percent of those tweets from India which were examined were originally shared by self-proclaimed members of misogynist organizations.

Researchers categorized tweets and Facebook posts into categories based on the most salient message conveyed in the post. 'Men are the real victims of domestic violence during COVID' was a recurring theme, as was the notion that the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the alleged 'hollowness' or 'worthlessness' of feminism. Users posting such content often exploited recent news stories to make their case. For example, Twitter users in India were quick to exploit news stories about two women in different parts of the country who had allegedly murdered their husbands during lockdown to stress the narrative that men are the real victims of domestic violence.



Post by a men's rights organization highlighting perceived 'gender biased laws', India, April 2020

Most popular COVID-19-related misogynistic narratives on Twitter

| Narrative                                       | Example   | Country            | % posted by men |
|---|---|--------------------|-----------------|
| COVID-19 has exposed the hollowness of feminism | Feminists have a sick mindset that equates staying at home with domestic violence                   | India, Philippines | 97%             |
|   | CNN naming Greta Thunberg a COVID-19 expert proves feminism is used by women as a way to get famous |                    | 100%            |

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/indonesian-minister-slammed-for-saying-coronavirus-is-like-your-wife>

|  |   |                    |      |
|--|---|--------------------|------|
| COVID-19 proves that men are the real victims of domestic violence | The rise in domestic violence during COVID-19 is a myth being spread by feminists   | India, Philippines | 100% |
|  | Hashtags indicating women committing violence against men, such as:<br>#husbandburning<br>#domesticviolenceonmen<br>#lockdownspecial “एक महिला ने अपने पति को जिंदा जला दिया। वारदा... (A woman burned her husband alive) | India              | 89%  |
|  | Feminists using hashtags such as #coronavirusindia to spread their agendas was already predicted, now we'll see a surge in #FalseCases of domestic violence   | India, Indonesia   | 97%  |
| Laws and rules are discriminatory against men                      | Facebook is deleting accounts that stand up for men, proving that feminism is a global conspiracy   | India              | 89%  |

The three most popular narratives expressed on Facebook and Twitter were “COVID-19 is exposing the ugly truth about women,” “Women are more dangerous than men during COVID-19”, and “COVID-19 is highlighting gender-biased laws that disadvantage men.”

This research also included within its scope tweets and posts expressing COVID-related misogyny against women migrant workers, however no statistically significant trends emerged. This should not necessarily be taken to mean that such misogyny was not present during the monitoring period, but simply that it was not captured in the relatively limited scope of this research.

### MISOGYNISTIC ACCOUNTS ARE HAVING A SIGNIFICANT AND DISPROPORTIONATE IMPACT ON THE OPINIONS OF THEIR FOLLOWERS

Users posting COVID-19-related misogynistic tweets are causing other users in their Twitter network to become, on average, 22 percent more misogynistic, according to a model employed in this research which factors in each account’s ‘misogyny score’, tweet frequency and network connectivity (i.e. the myriad ways in which a misogynist account’s tweets can end up on the timeline of another user through various intermediary accounts in the same network). The impact of misogynist accounts on the opinions of their followers is disproportionately higher than that of others in the network.

Many of the users who tweeted COVID-19-related misogynist content in India and Sri Lanka were also highly nationalistic, based on their user profiles and other tweets. A common narrative among such users, especially in Sri Lanka, was that “COVID has exposed the hollowness of Western ideals, so why trust a Western concept like feminism?” This suggests an intersectionality between nationalism and misogyny among social media users and merits further investigation.



Articles decrying a feminist march in Spain were commonly shared in Sri Lanka, April 2020

## RECOMMENDATIONS

As we celebrate the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of UN Security Council resolution 1325, we must also recognize that trends in the digital sphere have also undermined the very goals the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda has sought to realize. This absence of security online hinders women's participation in the public sphere, governance and leadership roles, especially in the context of conflict prevention and in promoting social cohesion. Should this deficiency in women's engagement online in the region continue, the status quo is sure to be preserved, maintaining influence in the hands of the very powerful few, and stalling the transformative change that the WPS framework envisages. Thus, women's digital engagement and use of technologies are at a critical juncture with regards to the achievement of the WPS agenda. The following recommendations are targeted towards governments, development organizations and researchers in South and South-East Asia:

**1. Build the capacity of women in South and South-East Asia to identify, report and block hateful content, as well as for men and women on social media literacy and countering disinformation**

As the region witnesses increased volumes of misogyny and hate speech targeting women online, it is crucial that women users of social media are aware of how to protect themselves. Likewise, misogynist tweets and Facebook posts, especially in South Asia, are often based on news stories that are fake or taken out of context. This suggests that increased levels of social media literacy among both men and women would limit the efficacy of such posts in spreading their hateful agendas.

**2. Pass legislation that criminalizes cyber harassment and cyber stalking**

Although States often have existing laws that prohibit stalking or harassment, these laws are sometimes inadequate to criminalize harms that happen online. Thus, specific laws to address cyber harassment and stalking can close this gap.

**3. Monitor and remove misogynist content on social media platforms**

Social media companies have increasingly sought to regulate what content is publishable on their platforms, banning everything from election misinformation to photos depicting violence. However, no ban against misogyny, particularly violent misogyny has yet been introduced, which affects the safety and free speech of women users.

**4. Produce and disseminate gender empowerment-themed content targeted at men**

The overwhelming majority of COVID-19-related misogynistic content is posted by male users, across platforms and countries. One way to tackle the root of these gender biases and prejudices is by developing localized and engaging counter-narrative content. This could entail enlisting the participation and support of local entertainers and influencers who have large followings and using content styles and formats that men are likely to engage with.

**5. Research the scope and impact of online misogyny on closed social networks such as WhatsApp, private Facebook groups, and Telegram**

Investigating the prevalence of online misogyny on closed platforms and private groups would allow a comprehensive understanding of the full extent of online misogyny in South and South-East Asia. Closed social networks can provide greater anonymity, allowing for greater incitement to violence and hatred with impunity.

**6. Research potential links between nationalism and misogyny among social media users in Asia**

The suggested intersectionality between nationalism and misogyny among social media users outlined in this brief merit further investigation and validation. In an age of growing nationalism across the region, examining potential linkages between nationalism and misogyny among online users would provide relevant insights into the root causes and consequences of online misogyny.