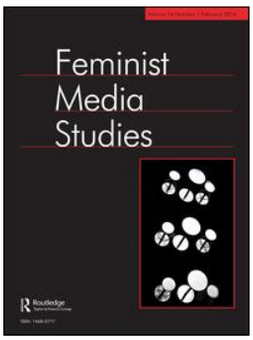

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Indian millennials define feminism

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Indian millennials define feminism

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Early feminist media research (1970 to mid-1990s), often described as the "embryonic" stage of the field (Margaret Gallagher 2001), focused on adding "women" to existing categories of social analysis. In that specific androcentric moment, asking the "woman's question" was indeed necessary. However, in the years since, the category of woman as a homogenous, monolithic identity has been critiqued by both Black and Transnational feminists. It was Jacqueline Bobo's book titled *Black women as Cultural Readers* (1995) that finally introduced

intersectional analysis to feminist media studies (Isabel Molina-Quzman and Lisa Marie Cacho 2013). However, as activist- academician Prof. Nivedita Menon (Department of Political Science, University of Delhi) reminds us, given the political engagement with multiple identities during anti-imperialist struggles, women's movements in the Global South have always taken cognizance of the complexity of the category of women (Nivedita Menon 2015). She defines feminism as the recognition of the multiple structural inequalities, in addition to gender, that underlie the social order, and notes that resistance to such oppression must take place at multiple levels and in various contexts (Nivedita Menon 2012).

In India, after the brutal gang rape of Jyoti Singh, a paramedical student in New Delhi in December 2012, feminism re-entered the realm of the "popular" in both media and other spaces of public discourse, with renewed attention to issues of representation and reception, begging a series of questions on the possibility of newly emergent "feminist publics." The widespread media coverage of the rape case did help mobilize the middle classes, as witnessed by internationally recognized American feminist Eve Ensler, who was in India to raise awareness about the campaign One Billion Rising (against violence against women). Ensler remarked in an interview at the time,

> This is mind-blowing … To see men and women coming to the streets to demonstrate against rape is a breakthrough in terms of human consciousness. I cannot think of a country in my lifetime where this has ever happened including the United States…(Danish 2013).

However, the portrayal of the rape and its aftermath has been criticized by activist-academics in India, who point to the problems in the framing of the incident and the various actors involved. Notably, Flavia Agnes (2015) argues that the media's dubbing of Jyoti Singh as "Nirbhaya" (*fearless*) ultimately perpetuates the patriarchal more of dying to "defend one's honor." In a searing critique titled, "Why India loves Nirbhaya, hates Suzette," Agnes remonstrates that India loves Nirbhaya because she does not live to tell the tale of her violations but hates rape survivor Suzette Jordan who lived to speak about her own experience of sexual violence. Jordan, a vociferous woman's rights activist from Kolkatta, was gangraped by five men who had offered to drop her home from a night-club near Park Street. Rejecting the law-conferred anonymity and the silence expected of rape "victims," she spoke of her experiences on national television. But she was forced to keep the shame and stigma of rape alive when the media continued (even after her death caused by Encephalitis in 2015) to call her "the Park Street rape victim" despite her emphatic rejection of the label (Agnes 2015).

Krupa Shandilya (2015) critiques the media's construction of "Nirbhaya" as an everyday, upper caste, middle-class woman, and their push for legal reforms for a "normative subject," ignoring the experiences of those outside the above-mentioned categories, and invites feminist media scholars to engage with these issues. It must be mentioned here that the Justice Verma Committee, a three-member committee constituted after the gang rape in December 2012 to study the context of gender-based violence and recommend measures to tackle it, did not just recommend that the legal provisions for sexual violence must account for violence against sexual minorities and marginalized groups but also unequivocally stated that it is the responsibility of society to refrain from situating sexual violence within the framework of shame and honor (see Rajesh Talwar 2013 for a detailed analysis of the report).

Despite the internalization within feminist studies of the nuanced nature of gender politics, much of the media discourse in the wake of Nirbhaya suggests that, in the Indian context, the popular understanding of the term "feminism" continues to be stuck within a simplistic inclusion frame. Following Radhika E. Parameswaran's (2006) exhortation to

"resuscitate" the feminist audience studies approach, we believe it is important to understand how people make sense of feminisms, and to fathom what may be a widespread view (therefore a "*popular*" version of feminism), by asking what people—particularly young people—think about the content and expected outcome of feminisms. This is not to dismiss analyses of the kind of feminisms that pervade popular media/culture, but to underscore the need to understand how feminism is understood and interacted with *on the ground*. Although there is considerable research on media portrayals of feminist movements in the West (Debra Baker Beck 1998; Rebecca Ann Lind and Colleen Salo 2002; Kaitlynn Mendes 2011; Toril Moi 2006) there is little systematic analysis of the media and the Indian feminist movement *and its popular understanding* other than that reported by Radha Kumar (1997), Radhika E. Parameswaran and Sunitha Chitrapu (2011), and Shilpa Phadke (2003). Much of the Indian scholarship across disciplines (barring media studies) occupies legal and economic frames rather than referring to feminism per se. While no doubt such work is crucial to the feminist project, it is important to balance this analysis with what people think about feminism and where they get these ideas, particularly given the fractured nature of contemporary political and social life.

In 2016, the first author conducted a series of focus group discussions with millennials (men and women, aged 18–25) in the south Indian city of Hyderabad, as a part of her doctoral research (supervised by the second author) which looks at how young people understand and experience gender politics. Most participants defined feminism as "women's rights," "equal rights for women," "equal pay for women," and "for women." What emerged was a startlingly singular view of feminism as being "for women and of women," with only a few pointing out that it is about equality of all genders.

Talking about when and where they had heard or read about feminism, participants responded that it was either (1) in the context of the December 2012 gang rape in Delhi; (2) through social media; or (3) in newspapers or textbooks. When participants were asked if they could name some feminists, two Bollywood actors, Deepika Padukone and Priyanka Chopra, were high on the list. This mainstreaming of feminism as a "salable" idea is not lost on audiences, though, as expressed by one participant: "We have to credit it to media, because the media has … made people aware of it." Another remarked, "Frankly, [the media] has not done a great job at it. And it is just promoting what sells, … what's trending, but can definitely do a lot better."

While most participants agreed that, "We should encourage women," there also appeared to be an insistence on how feminism is invoked for everything and by everyone, as one participant put it:

> but people these days ... you ask any actor about this thing they are, "Yeah, I am a genuine feminist," they don't think twice to make a comment like that …. Everyone is using it whether they are following it or not. That's why people are not taking it seriously like they should.

As can be seen through this admittedly preliminary analysis, whether respondents say, "I think media portrays feminism as something that is women are superior to men. We are Nazis now for some people," or that media's portrayal is "positive, a good thing, but everybody is saying 'feminism feminism,'" the fact remains that young people see feminism largely as something that is the concern of women alone.

In the present political climate in India, and amid the concomitant global rise of right-wing politics, it is crucial to understand how feminism is made visible and valorized, especially how it is co-opted and circulated by the state and the market because if feminism is thought of as just adding and "showing" women and not about acknowledging and foregrounding multiple intersecting oppressions faced by the marginalized, then it may indeed seem like "feminism is everywhere"—and therefore, nowhere.

In this regard, it is of value to balance media analysis with reception analysis to get a glimpse of popular feminism, and for feminists everywhere to reach these newer publics (newly literate, newly urban, often online sphericules, as in Todd Gitlin 1998; Stuart Cunningham 2001) with more nuanced ideas because, as one participant put it, "This discussion needs to cross this wall and go out to general public."

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Trans responses to Adichie: challenging cis privilege in popular feminism

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In recent years, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, author of several award-winning, bestselling novels has gained recognition for centering a strong African feminist perspective in her work. In 2012, Adichie gave a TED talk, "We Should All be Feminists," which articulated an accessible feminist manifesto that vividly recounted her own experiences with sexism in Nigeria (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie 2012). Beyoncé famously sampled selections from Adichie's talk on her self-proclaimed feminist track "Flawless" in 2013, cementing Adichie's place within popular feminism. When asked, in a March 2017 interview for Britain's Channel 4, whether it mattered "how you've arrived at being a woman" and whether a trans woman is "any less of a real woman" Adichie responded, "trans women are trans women" and their experiences differ from those of "regular" women:

> [I]f you've lived in the world as a man, with the privileges that the world accords to men and then sort of changed, switch gender, it's difficult for me to accept that then we can equate your experience with the experience of a woman who has lived from the beginning in the world as a woman, and who has not been accorded those privileges that men are. (Channel 4 2017)

Her answer elicited a fierce debate on social media, with many trans activists decrying her commentary as transphobic. I engage these responses to Adichie's comments to scrutinize the ways in which popular feminism remains a contested terrain that continues to privilege certain feminist subjectivities over others, particularly cisgender over trans women.

Adichie's comments imply that trans women are not "real" women because, she assumes, trans women all grew up with and benefitted from male privilege. Echoing the essentialist feminism of Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists (TERFs), Adichie defines womanhood purely by a specific set of experiences under patriarchy that presupposes a definite correlation between biological sex, gender identity, gender expression, and perception. But the vast majority of trans women's experiences dispel Adichie's contention that they have universally benefitted from male privilege: trans women, particularly those of color, remain disproportionally impacted by poverty, discrimination, harassment, and violence (see Sandy E. James et al. 2016). In fact, 2016 marked the deadliest year on record for trans people in the US (Casey Quinlan 2017). Trans actress Laverne Cox responded to Adichie in a series of tweets questioning her reliance on the gender binary and the problematic narrative that neatly demarcates trans people's lives into "pre" and "post" transition. Reflecting on her own experience growing up in Alabama, Laverne Cox (2017) noted, "patriarchy and cissexism