RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hate speech against women on social media: Case study analysis in Asia

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ABSTRACT

Social media has become a critical environment for the proliferation of gender-based hate speech, deeply influenced by cultural norms and systemic inequalities. This study examines hate speech against women in China, Japan, and other Asian countries through a comparative case study approach, focusing on legal, cultural, and technological factors. Findings highlight inadequate legal protections, normalized misogyny, and weak platform governance as key contributors. Cases such as the "pink-haired girl" in China and Shiori Yamao in Japan demonstrate the psychological and social impacts of online hostility. The study calls for gender-sensitive policies, public awareness, and platform accountability to foster safer digital environments.

Keywords: Hate speech; Gender inequality; Social media; Digital environments; Asia

1. Introduction

It is evident that hate speech and terrorist activities are widespread and closely connected. Initially these activities spread their message through social media platforms such, as television, radio and newspapers. Additionally, online social networking sites like Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube are now being used for the purpose. Language serves as a tool for conveying ideas, beliefs, emotions and various other forms of information from one person to another [1]. Since 2014 there has been an increase in discussions about hate speech. This indicates a growing recognition of the effects of hate speech with instances rising from 42 in 2013 to 162 in 2018. The heightened focus on hate speech research is linked to its increased presence in media coverage and prevalence on social media platforms and the internet. This simultaneous rise in attention and occurrence underscores the impact of hate speech, on societies where it exists[2]. "Hate speech" refers to expressions that degrade or encourage violence, against a person or a group due, to their gender, race, language or other traits safeguarded by agreements[3].

The rise of the internet has made it easier, for hate speech to spread targeting religions, people and communities. According to Del Vigna et al. (2017) argues that social networking sites (SNS) are ideal systems for net users to maintain get in touch with, share images and video clips, and engage in other forms of data. Facebook, Twitter, Red, and Weibo are often cited as the most preferred SNS[4]. However, there are some issues with SNS, such as the leakage of private information and cyber-violence because of the surge of

hate speech. Such assaults are commonly guided at people and might include racial or sex discrimination. Moreover, it was observed that specific projects might draw in a substantial number of people who obtain enjoyment from participating in unfriendly discussion, which might periodically culminate in other or physical types of physical violence. Chetty and Alathur identifies instances in which gender-based or sexualized expressions are utilized to prompt hostility and violence [1]. The targets of this form of hate speech are typically women and girls. Due to societal perceptions of gender identity, there is a prevalence of hate speech directed towards women that is sexist in nature, which further intensifies the fear and distrust that women and girls feel towards the wider society. Social media has become a significant environment for societal discourse, but it has also amplified harmful phenomena such as gender-based hate speech. This study focuses on China and Japan, where cultural, legal, and technological dimensions intersect to create unique challenges in addressing this issue. Despite existing legal frameworks, enforcement remains inconsistent, especially regarding gender-specific hate speech. Through a comparative case study method, this paper identifies gaps in legislation and cultural attitudes and provides recommendations for mitigating the prevalence and impacts of online hostility towards women.

2. Materials and methods

In this study, we use a comparative case study of Asian states (namely China, Japan, Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand) to analyze gender-based hate speech on social media. Drawing on qualitative data from academic literature, legislation, and case reports, the study examines the socio-legal and technology-related dimensions of this phenomenon.

This analysis revolves around three fundamental dimensions:

1. Legal Context: The article explores existing laws that deal with hate speech and cyberviolence, with an emphasis on how they apply in cases of gender-based threats. Specific laws include China's Digital Security Act, Japan's Anti-Hate Speech Law and legislation in Bangladesh and Indonesia. Focusing specifically on gaps and inconsistencies in these legal frameworks that would undermine their utility against misogynistic hate speech.

2. Societal attitudes and cultural norms: The study examines the role of deeply entrenched patriarchal attitudes and traditional views about gender stereotypes in shaping the occurrence and acceptance of online hate speech towards women. In Bangladesh, for instance, there's stigma attached to reporting harassment, while in Japan, deep-seated gender discrimination permeates socio-political structures.

3. For more, read on: Platform governance: This study examines the responsibility of social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Weibo in moderating and tackling gender-based hate speech. It exposes the differences in how community guidelines are enforced and how algorithmically boosted content creates fertile ground for online belligerence to thrive."

Case studies include high-profile incidents such as the "pink-haired girl" in China, cyber harassment of Japanese female politicians like Shiori Yamao, and documented misogynistic abuse faced by women activists in Indonesia and Bangladesh. This approach offers an integrated perspective on the structural impediments and the socio-cultural fabric of the region that has facilitated the entrenchment of gender-based hate speech by marrying cross-state and state-level policy analysis through in-depth case studies.

3. Literature review

The hate speech term is employed in a multitude of ways, and it should be used to refer to a type of speech that is sufficiently harmful to be regulated. This simply means that hate speech must cause a

sufficient degree of harm to its target to be regulated. Such speech is a subordinate act. The presence of structural inequalities within the context of the speech itself serves to classify the target group, those subjected to hate speech, as inferior. Furthermore, hate speech legitimizes discriminatory acts against them and disenfranchises them. The difficulty encountered by the target group in fighting back through their own counter-speech is compounded by the fear of reprisal or the inability to conform to the expectations of the perpetrators of hate speech[5].

Social media platforms are particularly conducive to the dissemination of hate speech due to the specific characteristics of both social media platforms and social media users. Firstly, social media platforms facilitate the development, connection and organization of hate groups on a national and international scale. Furthermore, the formation of hate clusters within these platforms facilitates the spread of hate speech across different platforms [6]. While most of the online hate speech is directed towards race and nationality, there has been a noticeable increase in cases of incitement to hatred based on gender and sexual orientation. This is due to the potential for digital media to exacerbate existing patterns of gender-based violence and introduce new patterns of abuse [7]. A review of the legislation in China and Japan reveals that there are few laws that address hate speech directed at women. Even within the social and cultural context, women are not accorded the respect they deserve.

Most of the articles discussed hate speech based on race. However, East Asian countries did not prioritize addressing the issue of hate speech against women. For instance, China classified it as "cyber-violence" rather than hate speech. Additionally, while Japan had relevant laws in place, they lacked the capacity to effectively prosecute perpetrators of such violence. In East Asian cultures, women are afforded a diminished level of respect and social status.

3.1. Female hate speech in China

In China, gender-based hate speech is usually classified under a broader term known as "cyberviolence," which dilutes the conversation from the distinctive harms that women face. Although the Constitution of the People's Republic of China prohibits discrimination on the basis of sex, the enforcement of these laws is often inconsistent, and gendered hate speech is not directly regulated within the legal system [8]. Meanwhile, current policies mandate Internet Service Providers to operate filters over harmful content, but emphasis is still and always is on sustaining state security rather than on reducing, tilting sexist discourse [8].

Academic literature shows that hate speech must cause sufficient harm to be regulated and that hate speech functions largely to reinforce structural inequalities. There are also social inhibiting factors that women face in fighting against hate speech — this was reported [5]. As opposed to political comments, in China, misogynist comments are common on Weibo yet censors do little to curb such content, reflecting a deadlocked cultural bias which puts state security ahead of individual harm[10].

There are specific cases of how serious this problem is. I blogged about this in 2023, and the "pink-haired girl" then became a target of online malicious accusation after she posted about her acceptance to post-graduate studies. This flame is often fanned by gender-based hate speech, which has become so normalized that perpetrators do not feel afraid that their actions will bring consequences [11], let alone lose their lives because of that hate, as was the case for Mary; in true form then, her life was not only tragically cut short in February this year, it had also been ruined by the harassment she has received throughout her entire life. Moreover, a 2023 report which analyzed over 3,400 academic articles relating to cyberbullying in China concluded that the online violence gendered dimension is still not fully explored, in spite of its prevalence [9].

It is also the cultural context which sustains gendered hierarchies of online interaction [12]. Women are frequently required to take on apologetic or deferential tones at the same time as the men monopolize assertive or aggressive speech [13]. Digital spaces also privilege male voices through social media platforms that reflect and reinforce patriarchal norms [14]. Friday's ruling illustrates the societal and legal changes needed to protect women in the digital sphere.

3.2. Female hate speech in Japan

Japan also struggles to address gender-based hate speech effectively, as existing legislation does not provide adequate protections. The Anti-Hate Speech Law, which was implemented by the laws of 16 September 2016, mainly focuses on nationality or ethnicity– as discrimination has not been defined for hate speech based on gender and lacks effective penalties [15]. This legal loophole leaves women open to online harassment, which is endemic to Japan's patriarchal cultural norms.

The normalization of misogynistic speech is reflected in high-profile cases. For instance, female politicians like Shiori Yamao have been called out with sexualized hashtags #Sexoline and #Despicoline which delegitimize them and further solidify gender stereotypes (Fuchs & Schäfer, 2021). Again, the attacks exemplify the way hate speech can help silence and erase women from public life [5]. Publicly visible discriminatory incidents, like Yoshiro Mori's sexist comments at the summer 2021 Tokyo Olympics, are examples of the way institutionalized gender bias permeates Japanese society generally[16].

The literature shows that social media platforms compound the problem. Since users are mostly anonymous on these platforms, user-hostile actions are taken without consequence; this creates a more permissive space for gendered-based harassment. In comparison to the global context, where hate speech is prevalently directed toward race as well as nationality, East Asia has notably seen the growing trend of hate speech targeting gender, illustrating the presence of steadfast patriarchal values in the region [7]. Dalton (2017) discusses the way this failure to design the political system in a way that will facilitate the integration of gender-specific protections into the country's legal framework makes Japan unable to address these challenges effectively[17].

Cultural attitudes in Japan also demonize women. Sexual harassment and discriminatory actions are often normalized, or treated as a matter of custom, effectively shutting down public conversation about the severity of these matters [17]. Studies classify how institutional access/content are being influenced and determined by hate speech, thus show its importance towards gender equality reform [17].

We need improved legal framework where we have gender-specific laws, make society conscious of the harmfulness of misogynistic hate speech, and make social media companies responsible for preventing the creation of hostile environments. Such actions are vital to fostering safer and more equitable digital environments for women.

3.3. Female hate speech in other countries in Asia

In the rest of Asia, a rise in online hate speech and cyberbullying — especially in the context of gender equality and women's empowerment — has been documented. The outbreak of the Corona Virus Disease 2019[18] and the power of the blockades saturation which occurring in most of the world, lead to the increasing shift towards online space and at the same time report on the increase of sexism and hate speech on social media. In **Table 1** a review of relevant data from Bangladesh, Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand highlights some specific examples of misogynistic speech and cyberbullying against women in those countries [19].

Table 1. Overview of search behavior on hate speech and misogyny.

	BANGLADESH	INDONESIA	THE PHILIPPINES	THAILAND
General Search	Gender: Male(72%) Age: 18-24 (48%) Volume: 84%	Gender: Male (59%) Age: 18-24 (40%) Volume: 95%	Gender: Female (62%) Age: 18-24 (57%) Volume: 94%	Gender: Male (65%) Age: 18-24 (32%) Volume: 89%
Help Seeking	Gender: Male (88%) Age: 18-24 (41%) Volume: 12%	Gender: Male (84%) Age: 45-54 (35%) Volume: 2%	Gender: Female (55%) Age: 25-34 (31%) Volume: 5%	Gender: Female (52%) Age: 25-34 (35%) Volume: 4%
Perpetrator	Gender: Male (78%) Age: 18-24 (46%) Volume: 4%	Gender: Male (61%) Age: 18-24 (40%) Volume: 3%	Gender: Female (55%) Age: 18-24 (50%) Volume: 1%	Gender: Male (51%) Age: 25-34 (34%) Volume: 7%

Also, the hate speech against female workers is often rooted in the misogynistic behaviours ingrained in the patriarchal norms of the Bangladeshi society. For instance, in 2021, the renowned photojournalist and activist Shahidul Alam faced online harassment for making comments criticizing the mistreatment of female journalists. During the SAR-CoV-2 virus pandemic time, female healthcare personnel claimed to have faced sexist comments and allegations of immorality for having gone to work [20]. According to a survey by ActionAid Bangladesh, 62% of the Bangladeshi women had experienced a kind of online harassment with Facebook being the most popular platform of all [21]. The Digital Security Act 2018 was intended to address the issue of cybercrime but has faced criticism for being abused in way that curb dissent as opposed to protecting women from online violence [22].

In Indonesia, where the nature of online hate speech is influenced by both gender and religious vectors, we examine the way in which online hate speech manifests in this context. For example, in 2020 the feminist musician and activist Kartika Jahja [23] also received death and rape threats for her work advocating for gender equality and sexual health education. Another was Indonesian pop singer Inul Daratista[24], who received a barrage of thousands of nasty comments on social media -- for allegedly being 'un-Islamic.' According to a 2021 report titled Cyberbullying against women in Indonesia[25]: Legal protection for victims and the role of women in countering cyberbullying by the Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network (SAFEnet), 35% of Indonesian women stated that they experienced hate speech when using the internet, and the majority of incidents were related to gender roles and religious discussions[26]. While the Electronic Information and Transactions Act (EIT) provides a legal framework, it too is undermined by vagueness of definitions of hate speech and selective enforcement[26].

In Bangladesh, hate speech against women on social media often mirrors the stick-tight patriarchal values prominent in the country. By way of example, online trolling was launched against the esteemed photojournalist and activist Shahidul Alam in 2021 after he criticized the mistreatment of female journalists. Reports have surfaced that during the time of the pandemic due to Covid-19 crisis, healthcare professional women have been facing sexist comments as well as moralistic accusations for going out for work. A study by ActionAid Bangladesh found that 62% of Bangladeshi women had experienced online harassment in some form, most commonly on Facebook. The intent of the Digital Security Act 2018 was to counter

cybercrime but instead has been criticized across various critiques for its misuse to silence dissent rather than protect women from cyber violence.

The nature of online hate speech is strongly influenced by the intersection between gender and religion in Indonesia. For instance, feminist musician and activist Kartika Jahja received death and rape threats in 2020 due to her activism for gender equality and sexual health education. In a separate episode, Indonesian pop star Inul Daratista was the target of death threats and thousands of virulent social media comments deemed "un-Islamic." According to a 2021 report by Southeast Asia Freedom of Expression Network [26] 35% of Indonesian internet-using women encountered hate speech online, with many of them related to issues of gender and religion. While the Electronic Information and Transactions Act (EIT) defines a legal framework to tackle the problem, the act doesn't cut it — it is rarely enforced effectively and relies on a vague definition of hate speech[27].

4. Discussion

The majority of countries in Asia have legal provisions in place that prohibit hate speech and discrimination. These are typically enshrined in their constitutions or criminal and civil laws. Nevertheless, the definitions, legal provisions and levels of implementation of these provisions vary considerably across the region[28]. The findings highlight systemic challenges in addressing gender-based hate speech. In China, the lack of specific provisions for misogynistic hate speech within broader cyber-violence laws results in insufficient enforcement. Cultural norms further trivialize online harassment, undermining progress. Similarly, Japan's anti-hate speech law excludes gender-specific issues and lax enforcement mechanisms, reducing its impact. These countries in Asia face challenges with social media platforms, where inconsistent moderation and engagement-driven algorithms exacerbate the issue.

These findings underscore the need for multi-dimensional strategies to combat gender-based hate speech. Legal reforms should include explicit definitions and enforceable penalties for misogynistic hate speech. Public awareness campaigns are critical to challenge cultural norms that normalize misogyny. Additionally, social media platforms must enhance content moderation policies, ensuring greater transparency and accountability in addressing harmful behavior.

5. Conclusion

This study reveals the interplay between legal, cultural, and technological factors in perpetuating gender-based hate speech on social media in China and Japan. Addressing these issues requires a coordinated approach, including gender-sensitive legal reforms, public awareness campaigns, and improved moderation by social media platforms. Future research should expand to include other regions and explore the psychological impacts of online hate speech on women. This does not train woman-hating speech, however, to only Asia. The view of hate speech in the territory is affected by a mix of religious, legal and cultural elements. This article uses a select group of countries as examples of the broader Asian landscape. It just goes to show how this problem of hate speech against women is not being addressed in Asia.

Conflict of interest

Declare conflicts of interest or state "The authors declare no conflict of interest." Authors must identify and declare any personal circumstances or interest that may be perceived as inappro-priately influencing the representation or interpretation of reported research results.

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