“Tell Me Sister” – Social Media, a Tool for Women Activists in Tajikistan

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Abstract

Instagram is the world’s most popular social media tool among people under 29, including Central Asian youth. Despite the growing authoritarian grip on print and online media, more and more Tajik women are opening up on Instagram to counter the pernicious narrative that blames victims of sexual harassment and violence for speaking out against their harassers and abusers. So far, there is little research exploring the extent to which women Instagram bloggers are successful in influencing the wider female public’s perception of sexual harassment and violence. I seek to fill this gap by analyzing whether Tajik women’s exposure to information on social networks influences their awareness of sexual harassment and violence. The following article contributes to the growing body of literature discussing the transformative forces of digital activism in Central Asia by exploring empirical data gathered through a nationwide survey in Tajikistan. The results reveal the emancipatory potential of digital activism.

Keywords

Tajikistan – digital activism – Instagram – sexual harassment and violence – World Values Survey

1 Introduction

> ‘Rebyat, nam nuzhno govorit’ (Russian for “People, we have to talk”)! What is happening in our country [Tajikistan], and in Central Asia in general is not normal. It is ruthless and sickening that issues such as harassment, gender inequality and gender-based violence are common occurrences

> in our civilized 21st century society. We [women] are confronted with injustices daily and this is a tragedy![1]

On July 20, 2020, Farangis Davronova surprised her Instagram followers with the post quoted above, in Russian, which differed significantly from her usual content (such as reflections on vacations abroad, beauty parlor appointments, and friendship in Dushanbe). She spoke about sexual harassment and sexual violence in a tone that was not measured or customary. Her post seems to have struck a chord and was liked and shared by many of her followers.

Although Tajikistan ratified the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 1993 and its optional protocol in 2014 (UN Women), more than 20 percent of women and girls (aged 15 years and older) have experienced physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in Tajikistan (UNICEF 2017). The economic austerity in the post-Soviet world reinforced sexist gender stereotypes, significantly undermining the social and economic status women had gained during Soviet times (Kataeva and DeYoung 2017). A 2019 study on domestic violence in Tajikistan by Human Rights Watch found that discriminatory norms and practices, such as unregistered, polygamous, forced, and child marriages, are among the main drivers fueling violence and assault and impeding survivors from getting help. Moreover, rather than penalizing the alleged perpetrator, the trend in Tajikistan has been to blame the victims of sexual violence and harassment who dare to speak out publicly against their abusers and harassers (Mamadshoeva 2019; Khashimov and Swerdlow 2020).

The ongoing economic turmoil in the aftermath of the civil war led not only to a disproportionate decline in women's status and well-being (HRW 2019; Kataeva and DeYoung 2017), but also to a massive outflow of male labor from the country to other states, especially Russia. Today, the money sent home by émigrés is the country's main source of income, accounting for 35 percent of GDP (Aliyev 2020). Women rely heavily on their migrant husbands' allowance, and online communication tools increasingly play an influential role in connecting the diaspora with families back home (Reyaz 2019; Shafiev and Miles 2015).

In this paper, I argue that online messaging apps and social networks may serve not only as a reliable tool for borderless communication but also as a means for women to rethink their activism in Tajikistan. In line with previous studies (Dey 2018; Lokot 2018), I define digital activism as activities and

1 Farangis Davronova, "People we have to talk!" Instagram, July 20, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CC4LbagB5oC/.

protests organized in digital networks that seek to empower and give a voice to previously marginalized groups: in this case, women. Mobile phones provide women activists with easy on-the-go access to social media platforms where they can share and promote their alternative views to a wider audience, despite the growing authoritarian grip on news media in Central Asia (Kudaibergenova 2019). Inspired by #metoo and previous digital hashtag campaigns in the post-Soviet e-world, such as the #IAmNotAfraidToSayIt hashtag in Ukraine (Lokot 2018) and the #DontKeepSilent hashtag in Kazakhstan (Udod 2018), young female Tajik bloggers, such as Farangis Davronova and Elena Nazhmetdinova, are beginning to use Instagram to criticize Tajikistan's common practice of blaming female victims of sexual harassment and violence for speaking out against the perpetrators. By offering an anonymous platform for women to share their personal stories with a wider audience, the main goal of the Instagram collective @tellme_sister is to raise awareness and educate people about the prevalence and frequency of sexual harassment and violence against women in Tajikistan.[2] In doing so, they aim not only to destigmatize the reporting of sexual harassment and violence by female victims, but also to change the wider acceptance of these harmful practices in Tajikistan, and in particular the acceptance by the female population.

So far, there is no single, universal definition of the term "sexual harassment" (Pina, Gannon and Saunders 2009). In this paper, I align with previous scholarship that defined sexual harassment as a sexually charged unwanted, offensive, or unreciprocated behavior that is verbal or nonverbal (Ahuja, Padhy and Srivastava 2019; Herrera, Herrera, and Expósito 2018). Harassing behavior can range from unwanted sexual advances, stalking, whistling, and catcalling to verbal sexual assaults, and it occurs not only where it passes unnoticed, e.g. at work, but also in other settings, such as in the street, in taxis, and in restaurants. In this context, it is essential to disentangle sexual harassment from sexual violence. Harassment and trauma differ in the associated lived experiences, as well as the actions and motives of harassers and abusers (and the boundaries crossed). Harassment is not physical sexual violence.[3]

There is little research to date on how exposure to online information may affect Tajik women's awareness of sexual harassment and violence, mainly because connecting to mobile data in Tajikistan is "incredibly expensive" (Khashimov and Wood 2020) and state authorities regularly censor and block

2 Elena Nazhmetdinova, Telegram voice message to author, November 18, 2020.

3 Yet neither the World Value Survey country data file on Tajikistan nor the Instagram activists presented in this study clearly distinguish between sexual harassment and sexual violence. Therefore, the focus of this article is on both phenomena.

access to various websites and mobile messaging services (Freedom House 2021; Reyaz 2019). This study seeks to fill that void by examining whether Tajik women's awareness of sexual harassment and violence increases as a result of their exposure to information obtained on social media platforms. To that end, the present study employs the World Values Survey Wave 7 (Haerpfer et al. 2020) country data file on Tajikistan, which consists of survey data gathered in January and February 2020. This paper contributes to the emerging discussion about the transformative forces of digital activism in Central Asia by exploring empirical data gathered through a nationwide survey in Tajikistan.

Before looking at the two-step data analysis, the first part of this article will provide an overview of the broader scholarly debate on women's roles and family relationships in Tajikistan. It will demonstrate how the persisting patriarchal norms are the main impediments to Tajik women reporting sexual harassment and violence. The article goes on to assess the internet landscape of Tajikistan to understand and contextualize the role and impact of digital activism in shaping public perceptions and tolerance of sexual harassment and violence. Then, the employed methodological approach and some of its shortcomings are discussed. The article ends with a critical reflection on the empirical and theoretical contributions outlined in this paper by suggesting ways in which these may be furthered by future grassroots research.

2 Family Relations and Patriarchal Norms in Tajikistan

Like many post-Soviet nations, Tajikistan's independence in 1991 led to major transformations, including the redefinition of socio-economic and political values devoid of socialist content and propaganda. Nation-building efforts included the promotion of national, traditional values that sought to redefine the gender order established during the Soviet Union (Cleuziou and Direnberger 2016). The Bolshevik government was one of the first to grant women the right to vote and to study (Thibault 2018a). Unlike other post-Soviet Central Asian republics, Tajikistan experienced a civil war in 1992, which lasted until 1997 and "magnified the shock related to the collapse of the Soviet economy" (Thibault 2018b: 2810). The economic turmoil in the aftermath of the civil war led to an amplification of patriarchal norms and societal stereotypes in Tajikistan (Harris 2019). The gender and family dynamics in Tajikistan are therefore not solely influenced by the legacy of the Soviet female emancipation project, but also by the post-war economic uncertainties, which gave rise to a nationalizing agenda that primarily focused on healthy mothers as

the cornerstone for building a sound, independent Tajik nation and identity (Direnberger 2014; Roche 2016).

Traditional roles assign women to the domestic sphere, while men are regarded as the main breadwinners of each family (Harris 2019). Compared to most other non-Central-Asian post-Soviet countries, women in Tajikistan get married earlier, and unlike elsewhere, they are less educated than their mothers and grandmothers who grew up under the Soviet Union (Silova and Abdushukurova 2009). At the end of the Soviet period, more than 90 percent of women obtained a secondary education, but today, more than 25 percent of girls in Tajikistan leave school at the age of 15 (Kataeva and DeYoung 2017). Despite numerous governmental attempts to improve women's access to education, healthcare, family planning, and justice (Juraqulova and Henry 2020; Kataeva and DeYoung 2017; Roche 2016), women are more likely to suffer from unemployment and sex trafficking and enjoy less access to justice than men. Although Tajikistan's constitution emphasizes the equal status of men and women before the law, "without considerable support from their male relatives, women are unable to gain access to courts and justice" (Roche 2016: 214). Women's access to education and prospects of a career (Kataeva and DeYoung 2017), as well as their use of contraception (Juraqulova and Henry 2020), remain strictly controlled by their parents and later by their husbands and in-laws. This power imbalance, resulting from, and enhanced by, a family model that is characterized by both gender and age hierarchies (Harris 2019), leaves young women particularly vulnerable to many forms of harassment and violence.

Despite the adoption of a Family Violence Law in March 2013 that outlined the rights of survivors of gender-based violence to gain medical, psychological, and social help (access to legal advice, shelters, and so forth), there are critical defects in Tajikistan's law that continue to hinder female victims' access to justice in particular (Direnberger 2014). One of the major shortcomings of the Family Violence Law is its failure to criminalize violence by non-partners outside marriages (Human Rights Watch Report 2019). This is very problematic in the context of Tajikistan because, often, forced, child, and polygamous marriages are limited to a religious ceremony (called *nikoh* in Tajik) and remain unregistered with civil authorities because they are illegal (Thibault 2018b). However, these practices deprive women in unregistered marriages of protection from violence under the Family Violence Law and also their right to claim alimony, child support, and marital property from their husbands under Tajikistan's Family Code in the event that they divorce (Direnberger 2014). In view of these persistent harmful practices and the fact that women often have

no alternatives to their living arrangements (housing) and few possibilities to earn money and support themselves, they are impeded from reporting sexual violence. Moreover, Tajikistan has no law that criminalizes sexual harassment, and men's treatment of women in public spaces has not received much public attention in the country until very recently (Asia Plus 2019; Khashimov and Swerdlow 2020). In addition to the above-mentioned failings in Tajikistan's law, the societal and familial pressures that stigmatize victims who speak out against their harassers and abusers in public (Mamadshoeva 2019) are among the main constraints that hamper female victims of sexual violence and harassment from going public and seeking help.

3 Social Media: A Tool for Women Activists in Tajikistan

In this context, women Instagram bloggers' awareness-raising activities could be crucial in changing not only Tajik women's but also the wider public's perception and understanding of sexual harassment and violence against women in their society. Numerous studies on the Muslim Arab world have demonstrated the importance of digital women activists in forcing women's issues onto the public agenda in authoritarian, patriarchal societies (Beninger et al. 2016; Tahmasebi-Birgani 2017; Thorsen and Sreedharan 2019). In Egypt, social media activity was a "game changer" (Odine 2013: 4) in raising awareness about sexual harassment against women, encouraging parliament to take action and criminalize sexual harassment. In Saudi Arabia, where street protests and public expressions of dissent carry severe penalties, women activists set up a hashtag campaign (#IamMyOwnGuardian) on Twitter to call for reform of women's status (Thorsen and Sreedharan 2019). Their social media campaign gained momentum in 2016, forcing King Salman to review the existing law and end male guardianship of women in Saudi Arabia.

Social media platforms offer Central Asian women a safe place to discuss their concerns about discriminatory norms and practices against women in their societies, similar to the role of the equivalent media in the Arab world. Such platforms are a rich source of information that threaten hierarchical, patriarchal norms that govern social life.

Kikuta (2019), in her analysis of smartphone usage by Uzbek youth, finds that the opportunity to communicate privately and access information on social media platforms and text messaging apps helps young women not only to preserve and strengthen their position in their husband's family but also to expand their independence and self-determined lifestyle. For female Uzbek youth, mobile phones constitute an alternative source of information that

helps them to challenge the gender- and age-based hierarchy and the existing power balance in their families and society.

Following the digital hashtag campaign #IAmNotAfraidToSayIt in Ukraine in 2016 (Lokot 2018), Udod (2018) found that female Facebook users in Kazakhstan began to openly speak out against sexual violence and harassment, using the adapted hashtag #DontKeepSilent. The mass character of the #DontKeepSilent digital hashtag campaign has not only stressed the legitimacy of claims previously made by civil rights activists and feminists on the ubiquity and persistence of violence against women in Kazakhstan, but also drawn attention to the failure of the country's legislation and police to protect Kazakhstani women and girls from sexual abuse and harassment (Udod 2018).

In summary, social media platforms provide Central Asian women with alternative public spheres where they can make their dissident voices heard to government. Using these alternative spaces to set up digital awareness-raising campaigns enables women to transcend gender segregation and its persistent traditional culture of victim-blaming and stigmatization of the survivors of sexual harassment and violence. This illustrates the potential of digital campaigns to translate into "real-world activism" (Udod 2018: 75) that encourages real-world change. Previous scholarship on digital awareness-raising campaigns therefore offers a rather optimistic view of social media as a tool for women activists in Central Asian societies.

However, before we can assess the impact of digital awareness-raising campaigns on Tajik women's awareness of sexual harassment and violence, we must develop a better understanding of the scale of Instagram activism in Tajikistan. Who are these young Tajik female Instagram bloggers and what is their motivation to blog about sexual harassment and women's empowerment on Instagram? In this paper, I focus on two Instagram bloggers who have been engaging in online awareness-raising activities on sexual harassment and violence against women in Tajikistan since 2020 and who, despite the country's restricted access to the internet, have accumulated a sizable audience: Farangis Davronova and Elena Nazhmetdinova (known as @faradavronova and @why_elen, respectively, on Instagram).

4 Popular Female Instagram Activists in Tajikistan

Instagram was founded in 2010 as a mobile platform for image and video sharing. Today, Instagram is the fastest-growing social media platform worldwide, surpassing the combined total user base of Snapchat, Twitter, and Pinterest, and gaining 100 million subscribers every month (McCrow-Young 2020). It is

the most popular social media platform among people under 29, "with more than half of the platform's users worldwide below the age of 34" (McCrow-Young 2020: 3). Unlike text-centric platforms such as Twitter or Facebook, Instagram is picture- and video-based and operates around an "image first" logic (Ekman and Widholm 2017: 18).

Compared with Kazakhstan, where Instagram is "the fastest-growing mobile app" (Kudaibergenova 2019: 366) with an estimate of almost 3.3–4.3 million Kazakhstanis using the tool on a daily basis, only 490,000 people (out of 9 million) were on Instagram in Tajikistan in 2020 (Data Reportal 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Instagram users in Tajikistan has increased, so that by January 2022 more than 1,000,000 people had an Instagram acccount (Data Reportal 2022). Despite the relatively small user base currently reached by Instagram, it is the dominant platform for women activists in Tajikistan, reflecting the bloggers' age range, as well as internet trends. Mobile data providers in Tajikistan often offer unlimited data for specific social media platforms (Megafon 2020), which increases the incentive for bloggers to use Instagram for online activism.

In 2020, more and more young Tajik women have gone public and begun to speak out on Instagram against the persistent and discriminatory gender stereotypes in their country (Khashimov and Wood 2020). Instagram remains the dominant platform for social activism in Tajikistan not only because it allows the combined posting of visual and text content but also because previous reporting of sexual harassment and gender-based violence in print media has proven less successful. When the 25-year-old fashion designer Parvin Jahongiri revealed her personal experience of sexual harassment in the daily newspaper *Vecherny Dushanbe* (Russian for "The Evening Dushanbe") in August 2020, it was not her harasser who was fined for his actions – rather, the newspaper was fined for damaging the harasser's reputation by reporting Jahongiri's story (Khashimov and Swerdlow 2020). Nonetheless, Jahongiri's account went viral. It was widely shared by Facebook and Instagram activists and encouraged some people to speak out against sexual harassment and to side with Jahongiri.

For female Tajik Instagram bloggers such as Farangis Davronova (1602 followers), "Instagram is a very powerful platform that exerts an important influence on people's understanding and acceptance of sexual harassment and women's roles in Tajikistan's society."[4] In her hour-long podcast called *nam nuzhno govorit'* (Russian for "we need to talk") on Instagram TV, Davronova invites well-known activists and experts from various Central Asian countries to discuss stigmatized topics such as harassment, domestic violence, abusive

4 Farangis Davronova, Telegram voice message to author, November 19, 2020.

relationships, and the prevalent and problematic rhetoric of blaming victims of violence and sexual harassment in Central Asia. Her videos usually generate between 200 and 600 views. Despite being physically based in Dushanbe, none of her posts or podcasts are in the Tajik language. Having studied at a Russian-language school and university, Davronova feels more comfortable speaking and writing in Russian and aims to educate a Russian-speaking audience about women's issues, such as sexual harassment and gender-based violence, on her Instagram account. According to her, "there are very few Instagram users that consume information in Tajik online anyway."[5] In her very first and most popular podcast (more than 600 views) on July 24, 2020, Davronova interviewed Elena Nazhmetdinova to discuss her online Instagram project @tellme_sister, which provides female victims of sexual harassment and violence with an anonymized platform to communicate their stories to a wider audience, without fear of disclosing their identity.

Encouraged by her participation in an online marathon for bloggers organized by CABAR.asia media school, Elena Nazhmetdinova began to engage with the existing gender disparities in her country. However, Nazhmetdinova started to publish content about harassment on her personal account @why_elen (5,955 followers) only after she had watched a video on Instagram in which Tajik women spoke out publicly against street harassment, published by the Instagram collective known as @rulemakers on June 15, 2020: "Until then, I had always thought of harassment as unjustifiable behavior that no decent human could approve of."[6] Inspired by users' comments on the @rulemakers video, Elena wrote her first post about harassment on June 19, 2020.[7] The post (see Figure 1 below) was written in the form of a letter from the perspective of a male Tajik, who dictates to his sister(s) how they should behave, speak, and even dress in order to minimize their risk of becoming a victim of harassment. To Nazhmetdinova's surprise, this became the most shared, liked, and commented-upon post in her Instagram history. It was liked by more than 1,000 users – a large number, considering the small pool of active Instagram users in Tajikistan. However, Nazhmetdinova's story generated feelings of both solidarity and hate among her followers. Some people shared and criticized her post as "exaggerating the situation of harassment in Tajikistan." Others went as far as calling her a prostitute and saying that it was her own fault that she had experienced harassment. As a result, Nazhmetdinova saw herself forced to

5 Farangis Davronova, Telegram voice message to author, November 19, 2020.

6 Elena Nazhmetdinova, Telegram voice message to author, November 17, 2020.

7 Elena Nazhmetdinova, "Sister, please dress yourself more modestly, we live in a Muslim society!" *Instagram*, June 19, 2020, https://www.instagram.com/p/CBneELWBUUo/.

Figure 1 Elena Nazhmetdinova's post "Sister, please dress yourself more modestly, we live in a Muslim society!"

block, and in some cases report, comments containing abusive terms and *mat* (Russian for "obscene language").[8] Nonetheless, the emotions and reactions her personal post had triggered among her followers reinforced Nazhmetdinova's intention to speak out about sexual harassment and violence in order to raise people's awareness of the issue in Tajikistan.

Following previous digital campaigns such as #IAmNotAfraidToSayIt in Ukraine and #DontKeepSilent in Kazakhstan, the creation of a local hashtag for women in Tajikistan to speak out publicly against sexual harassment and violence seemed reasonable. However, "I had to revise my initial idea very early on, because people are still afraid of speaking publicly about these sensitive issues in Tajikistan."[9] In response to this dilemma, Nazhmetdinova created the Instagram account *@rasskazhimne_sestra* (Russian for "tellme_sister"). The project is headed by Nazhmetdinova, Farzona Saidzoda (@farzona.sd) and Nazokat Davlatshoeva (@nazokatdav). Davlatshoeva lives in Dushanbe and is responsible for the design of the posts on the platform, while Nazhmetdinova

8 Elena Nazhmetdinova, Telegram voice message to author, November 18, 2020.
9 Elena Nazhmetdinova, Telegram voice message to author, November 18, 2020.

and Saidzoda are residing abroad (in India and Kuwait, respectively).[10] @tellme_sister showcases anonymized stories of victims of sexual harassment as well as general pronouncements against gender-based violence and a shocking amount of incest committed by brothers against their sisters. As a result, the activists do not seem to distinguish between sexual harassment and sexual violence. The posts (see Figure 2 below) are mostly in Russian and characterized by "a social justice slideshow aesthetic with text-heavy posts, featuring pull-quotes from anonymous submissions arranged in a tall typeface and cool color scheme" (Khashimov and Wood 2020). Since its founding on June 22, 2020, @tellme_sister has published more than 215 stories from victims of sexual harassment and violence and has accumulated more than 7500 followers, mostly urban female Tajik youth.[11] Again, 7,551 followers represents a substantial share of a small pool of active Instagram users.

Elena Nazhmetdinova and her team are mindful of the small audience @tellme_sister reaches, but Nazhmetdinova also recognizes that her audience is large enough to get the attention of established institutions and key actors in Tajikistan's government and international organizations: "A campaign that

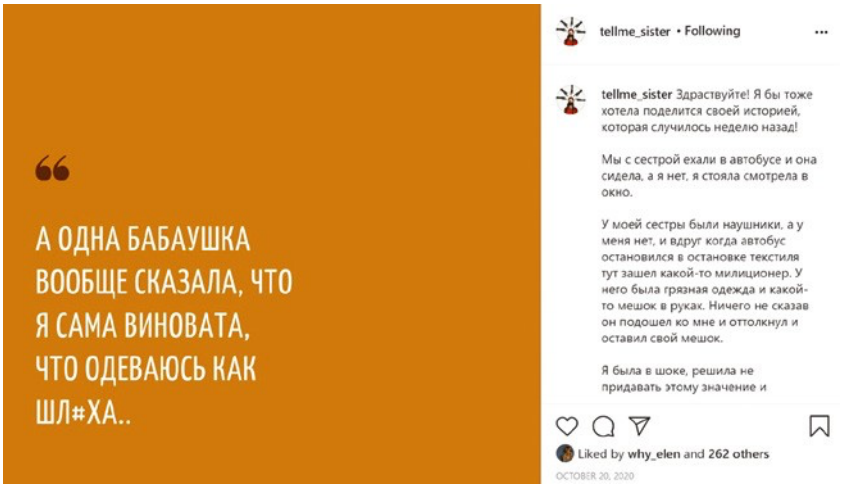

Figure 2 Victim's story on @tellme_sister: "A grandmother basically told me that it is my own fault [that I was sexually abused] because I was dressed like a prostitute"

10 The scale and frequency of posts by local women activists such as Davronova demonstrate that Tajik women residing in Tajikistan are not less active online than their counterparts living outside the country. According to the interviewed activists, women's online presence is constrained by their financial means, language skills, and educational background.

11 Elena Nazhmetdinova, Telegram voice message to author, November 18, 2020.

seeks to increase the wider public's consciousness of harassments needs to involve more people, such as journalists, staff of international organizations and people from the local government. These people have more tools, more financial power, and more authority."[12] The collective behind @tellme_sister has recently partnered with The Committee for Women and Family, under the auspices of the government of Tajikistan and the local office of United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) in Dushanbe, to set up a project that appeals to the wider non-Russian-speaking public. As part of the UNFPA's 2020 global campaign "16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence," UNFPA Tajikistan, in cooperation with the Committee for Women and Family, has set up a video storytelling series that recounts some of the personal experiences of victims of harassment and violence that are published on @tellme_sister. The stories

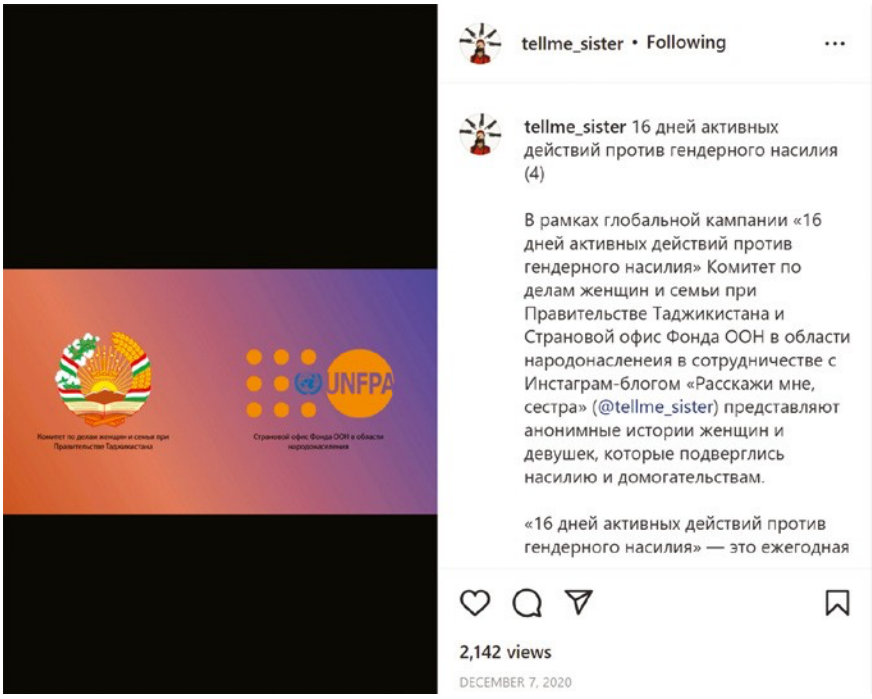

Figure 3 Screenshot of online videos for "16 days of activism against gender-based violence" illustrating the cooperation between @tellme_sister, UNPFA Tajikistan and The Committee for Women and Family, under the auspices of the government of Tajikistan

12 Elena Nazhmetdinova, Telegram voice message to author, November 19, 2020.

were read out by female celebrities, such as the famous Tajik actress Sabrina Nazir, who has more than 800,000 followers on her Instagram account @sabrinai_nazri_official, and the famous Soviet–Tajik actress Ërova Mokhpaĭkar. All videos were produced in Tajik and subtitled in Russian. All videos are available on the official UNFPA Tajikistan Facebook account (UNFPA Tajikistan) and on the Instagram platform @tellme_sister. See above a screenshot of one of these videos (Figure 3) illustrating the cooperation between @tellme_sister, UNFPA Tajikistan, and The Committee for Women and Family, with the support of the government of Tajikistan.

Despite Instagram activists' collaboration with local authorities and international institutions, the question remains: What is the extent to which female Tajik bloggers (such as Davronova or Nazhmetdinova) as well as digital awareness-raising campaigns (such as @tellme_sister) reach a wider public in Tajikistan? Only a very narrow slice of Tajikistan's society enjoys access to social media platforms (Data Reportal 2020, 2022). Furthermore, the government's "networked authoritarian" strategies (Reyaz 2019: 13; Shafiev and Miles 2015: 303) do not help digital awareness-raising projects either.

5 The "Networked Authoritarianism" of Tajikistan's Digital Landscape

Tajikistan is one of the poorest countries in Central Asia. In contrast to its neighbors, it lacks natural resources that could be used to bolster its war-torn economy. As a result, roughly 1.2 million Tajiks out of the country's population of 9 million go abroad to earn a living (Aliyev 2020). The remaining populace relies heavily on money sent home by migrant workers in Russia, so mobile internet, and in particular, social media, play an important role in linking the diaspora with families back in Tajikistan (Shafiev and Miles 2015). Poor fixed-connection internet penetration and a lack of infrastructure make mobile headsets and smartphones an easy on-the-go option to keep in touch with family members and to access information online (Reyaz 2019). Unsurprisingly, in January 2022, there were more than 10 million mobile connections registered in Tajikistan (Data Reportal 2022).

Yet Tajikistan's mobile internet speed remains one of the lowest in the world (Reyaz 2019). Compared with South Korea's mobile internet speed of 121.00 megabits per second, which was ranked the fasted in the world in September 2020, Tajikistan's network only allows users to download content at 13.08 megabits per second (Speedtest 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic,

the internet speed in Tajikistan further decreased, so that by January 2022 the mobile internet speed was only 7.57 megabits per second (Data Reportal 2022). Also, the number of internet and social media users remains low overall. In January 2022, the internet penetration in Tajikistan stood at 40.[1] percent and social media penetration was even lower at 14.5 percent (Data Reportal 2022). As if this were not enough, the government regularly impedes access to a wide spectrum of internet news and social media sites, including YouTube, Facebook, Radio Ozodi, the Tajik service of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, and other Central-Asia-specific sites (Freedom House 2021; Reyaz 2019). Often, the regime uses the prevention of another civil war and the political unrest in the Arab world to justify the blocking of online news outlets (Khashimov and Wood 2020; Shafiev and Miles 2015). In 2017, the government passed a law that enables the authorities not only to monitor citizens' online activities but also issue fines and prison sentences for people who voice their nonconformist views online and/or visit dissident websites (Freedom House 2021). As part of their cyber-surveillance strategy, authorities have also created troll factories to actively discredit dissident opinions online (Reporters Without Borders 2020; Reyaz 2019). This growing grip on information and communications technologies (ICT s) and increasing media regulation underpin Tajikistan's version of "networked authoritarianism" (Reyaz 2019: 13; Shafiev and Miles 2015: 303).

Of course, under those circumstances, it is a challenge for Tajik women to get online and access women activists' posts addressing the social taboo of sexual harassment and violence against women. In line with Kikuta (2019) and Udod (2018), Bobokhonov (2018) has shown how the use of digital communication technologies provides female Tajik youth with previously unknown but not infinite liberties. Thanks to ICTs, young Tajik women can communicate with whomever they want, away from the prying eyes of their parents, husband, and in-laws. Like Bobokhonov (2018), McCarthy et al. (2018), in their study on Tajik youth's attitude toward contraceptives, paint a rather optimistic picture of the emancipatory potential of information obtained from digital messaging apps. They found that young Tajik women are more likely than their male peers to adopt effective contraceptive methods after being exposed to content about contraception on their mobile phones. Thus, despite the obstacles to getting online in Tajikistan, the influence of online content on Tajik women's freedom and understanding of the world seems meaningful and therefore requires further investigation.

In short, the existing scholarship on the region indicates that Tajik women's consumption of online information encourages them to develop a better understanding of the existing gender imbalances in their society. I therefore agree with the cyber-optimists (Bobokhonov 2018; Kikuta 2019; Kudaibergenova

2019; Udod 2018) who argue that social media platforms such as Instagram not only shape consumption patterns and beauty standards but may also influence Central Asian people's understanding of gender identities and, more broadly, their worldview. This leads me to hypothesize that *the frequent exposure on Instagram to women's awareness-raising activities about sexual harassment and violence against women influences and even increases Tajik women's awareness of sexual harassment and violence in their community.*

6 Data and Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine and understand whether Tajik women's exposure to information on Instagram affects their awareness of sexual harassment and violence. The objective is to test whether frequent exposure to information on Instagram (the independent variable) affects Tajik women's awareness of sexual harassment and violence in their community (the dependent variable).

Data were drawn from the World Values Survey Wave 7 (Haerpfer et al. 2020) country data file on Tajikistan. Overall, the survey involved 1,200 respondents, but because the follower base of @faradavronova and @tellme_sister is mainly female (female Tajiks in particular),[13] I narrowed the sample down to focus only on respondents who identified as female and ethnically Tajik (a total of 540 respondents). The survey was conducted in interviewees' choice of Tajik or Russian by the local staff of the Research Centre SHARQ/Oriens in Dushanbe. The survey took place in January and February 2020 and covered all four provinces of Tajikistan: Gorno-Badakhshan, Sughd, Khatlon, and the Region of Republican Subordination, as well as the capital city of Dushanbe. Respondents included individuals aged 18 and older. The sampling procedure was designed to capture a representative sample of Tajikistan's adult population. The data were collected using a multi-stage stratified sampling method. The stratification was based on territorial-administrative units and rural and urban populations. Households were selected randomly within each stratum. The questionnaire items chosen to capture the dependent variable (Tajik women's awareness of sexual harassment) was: *How frequently does sexual harassment occur in your neighborhood?* The WVS defined sexual harassment as including either physical or verbal sexually abusive behavior or both.[14]

13 Elena Nazhmetdinova, Telegram voice message to author, November 18, 2020.

14 In both the Russian as well as the Tajik WVS survey, respondents were asked to assess how common verbal sexual harassment (*oskorbleniia*) and physical sexual violence

This is, of course, problematic because, as previously outlined, the stakes and costs to victims of sexual harassment and sexual violence are vastly different. That being said, this blending serves the purpose of the present study, mainly because the women activists introduced here do not draw a clear distinction between the two phenomena in their posts. Respondents' answers to this question were initially recorded in four categories (1 = very frequently, 2 = quite frequently, 3 = not frequently, 4 = not at all frequently). In order to change this ordinal four-point Likert scale into a binary variable, those respondents who said that sexual harassment occurred either *very* or *quite frequently* in their neighborhood were merged into the general category *frequent*, and the remaining responses were merged into the general category *not frequent*.

Additionally, the models included a variety of controls, reflecting the findings in the previous literature on women's perceptions of gender-based violence and sexual harassment (Ahuja, Padhy and Srivastava 2019; UNICEF 2017; Igarashi and Kumo 2016; Terpstra and Baker 1987). Variables consistently found in country analyses to be associated with women's concern about sexual harassment and violence include *age*, with younger women being more aware of sexual harassment because they are more frequently harassed than older women; *education*, with educated women being less likely to tolerate sexual harassment by their partners; *marital status*, with single women being more alert to sexually abusive behavior than married women, because they are experiencing higher levels of harassment in public space;[15] *religious*, with religious women displaying a greater acceptance of sexual violence; and *urban* and *class* with urban, working-class women being more sensitized to sexual harassment because they have experienced more instances of sexual harassment in public than middle- or upper-class women in rural areas.

In this study, the critical independent variable is Tajik women's exposure to information on Instagram.[16] To assess the information outlets and sources

(*domogatel'stva*) are in the area they live in [*Kak chasto v raĭone, gde Vy zhivete sluchaetsia sledyiushchee? Seksual'nye domogatel'stva ili oskorbleniia* (Russian). *To chĭ andoza zud-zud dar mahalli Shumo chunin hodisaho ruĭ medihand? Ta'kibi zhinsĭ* (Tajik)].

15 One line of reasoning is that the perceived "sexual availability" of single women (Thibault 2021: 407), which includes divorced, widowed, or unmarried women, increases their vulnerability to unwanted sexual attention. Ahuja, Padhy and Srivastava (2019) found single female employees in India to be the targets of sexual harassment due to the men's perception of their actions as a form of flattery or flirtation. Another line of reasoning suggests that single women are seen as social outliers and are less protected by traditional family structures and are therefore subjected to more harassment and violence than married women.

16 In this study, I chose to focus on women who identified themselves as ethnic Tajiks because I am particularly interested how the exposure to social media could challenge

respondents consume on a *daily*, *weekly*, *monthly*, and *less than monthly* basis (or *never* consume), respondents were asked to rate how frequently they obtain information from social media. Unfortunately, the WVS only allowed us to capture Tajik women's exposure to information on social networks more broadly and not specifically for Instagram; therefore, women's exposure to content produced by women activists on Instagram had to be conveyed by the general question about respondents' use of social media platforms. After, I changed the WVS respondents' answers into binary variables, with *daily* and *weekly* exposure to social networks combined into the category *frequently exposed* and the remaining ones into *not (frequently) exposed*. Another shortcoming which needs to be addressed here is that the WVS questionnaire did not include a question about what kind of information respondents are consuming on social networks. Nevertheless, my statistical analysis using the WVS data is valuable and necessary not only because it allows us to identify trends that can be investigated later in qualitative studies, but also because it is the first study to explore the extent to which female Instagram bloggers are successful in influencing Tajik women's concerns about sexual harassment and violence. Since there may be other factors affecting women's awareness and acceptance of sexual harassment and violence in addition to their demographic characteristics, as discussed above, two alternative explanations for respondents' changed perceptions of sexual harassment and violence were considered: whether a participant was an active member, an inactive member, or never a member of a women's group offline, and whether a participant was an active member, an inactive member, or never a member of a humanitarian or charitable organization offline. Both variables were measured by the WVS 7 with the following questionnaire: *Now I am going to read out a list of voluntary organizations; for each one, could you tell me whether you are a member, an active member, an inactive member or not a member of that type of organization? [women's group] [humanitarian or charitable organization]* I identified respondents' active and inactive membership in a women's group or humanitarian organization as a "game changer" (Odine 2013: 4) in increasing women's awareness of sexual harassment and violence in their society. I therefore merged active and inactive membership of these organizations into the category of *member* and the remainder into the category of *not member*. It seemed crucial to include these additional dependent variables in the case of Tajikistan because women's groups and humanitarian organizations such as

the Tajik cultural mentality that blames the victims of gender-based violence and harassment who dare to speak out publicly against their abusers. Any further reference to "women" refers to the subset of ethnic Tajik women.

the UNFPA, UN Women, United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) are actively engaged in women's development and rights programs in Tajikistan (Direnberger 2014; UN Women).

Some humanitarian organizations, such as the UNFPA and UNESCO, even actively support awareness-raising campaigns on sexual harassment and violence. As previously discussed, online women activists in Tajikistan are acquainted with the advantages of such collaborations and some of them, for instance the collective behind @tellme_sister, are already participating in awareness-raising projects funded by the UNFPA in partnership with the Tajik government. Moreover, Farangis Davronova17 works closely with the UNICEF "Upshift" program that seeks to help young people in Tajikistan, especially young women, develop skills for future employment (Sharipov 2019). Also, non-digital women activists are partnering with humanitarian organizations to promote their causes. For example, Nasiba Karimova and Manizha Babakulova, two graduates of the Digital Arts Academy in Dushanbe, received UNESCO funding to organize a unique art exhibition titled "Break the silence" (known as @breakthesilence.tj on Instagram) on violence against women. It presented portraits of survivors of abuse to a wider audience at various venues in Dushanbe in January 2020. The Digital Arts Academy is a two-year project funded by UNESCO. As part of its new global initiative "U40 Empowered," UNESCO seeks to promote young female cultural entrepreneurs in the digital creative industries (Asia Plus 2020). In short, given previous collaborative projects involving women activists and women's humanitarian organizations, it seemed crucial to explore the extent to which a Tajik woman's active/inactive membership in a women's group or humanitarian organization may shape her concerns about sexual harassment and violence in addition to her consumption of social media platforms.

7 Results

7.1 *Descriptive Statistics*

Prior to a presentation of the regression analysis, it is worth looking at how often women who participated in the WVS wave 7 in January and February 2020 made use of digital communication technologies to obtain information about events in their country and the world in general. Table 1 below illustrates the frequency of women's use of various technologies to access information

17 Farangis Davronova, Telegram voice message to author, November 19, 2020.

online. In line with previous research on ICT penetration in Tajikistan (Aliyev 2020; Bobokhonov 2018; Reyaz 2019; Shafiev and Miles 2015), for women, the device most frequently used to obtain information online is the mobile phone. Overall, more than 45 percent of respondents, irrespective of age, marital status, or educational or social background, make use of their mobile phone on a *daily* or *weekly* basis.

Furthermore, the fact that more than 70 percent of participants *never* utilize social media platforms to access information about global and national issues supports previous observations (Khashimov and Wood 2020) that found that only a very small portion of Tajikistan's population enjoys access to social media platforms such as Instagram. The results in Table 1 show that the overall penetration of social media among women remains relatively low (less than 30 percent). Overall, better-educated and socially well-off single women are using social networks slightly more often than their married, less-educated, and less-affluent counterparts. However, it is only among female youth that social media penetration is higher than 30 percent.

The findings in Table 1 support previous observations on cyberspace in Central Asia (Reyaz 2019) in highlighting that Russian continues to be the *lingua franca* for online news outlets in Tajikistan. The frequency of consumption of information on the internet and social media platforms differs largely between Russian- and Tajik-speaking female respondents. Whereas only 16.2 percent of Tajik speakers obtain information from social media platforms, more than 70 percent of Russian-speaking women access information on social networks on a *daily* or *weekly* basis. Even so, Tajik speakers seem to use their mobile phones more often for information purposes than Russian-speaking women. Compared with 46.7 percent of Tajik speakers who use their smartphone frequently to obtain information, only 28.6 percent of Russian-speaking women do so on a *daily* or *weekly* basis. One explanation for this is that mobile headsets and smartphones are the easiest option for the Tajik-speaking female population living in villages to access information online and to stay in touch with their loved ones, due to the poor internet penetration via fixed connections. In contrast to fixed connections, mobile networks covered 90 percent of Tajikistan in 2017 (Reyaz 2019). On the other hand, the findings seem to confirm Davronova's and Nazmethonova's assumption that there exists a "digital divide" (Dey 2018: 42), a so-called economic inequality, in opportunities to access social media between rural Tajik-speaking and the urban Russian-speaking women in Tajikistan.

In summary, the descriptive results suggest that women's awareness-raising activities on Instagram sway only a very marginal part of Tajikistan's society; the urban, university-educated, Russian-speaking middle class of Tajik women.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics on female Tajiks' use of various communication technologies to obtain information

	Internet users	Social media users	Mobile phone users
Frequency			
Daily	20.5%	12.8%	36.6%
Weekly	8.3%	5.5%	11.3%
Monthly	6.1%	4.3%	6.3%
Less than monthly	5.0%	2.8%	4.3%
Never	60.1%	74.7%	41.6%
Generation*			
18–29 years old	45.0%	31.4%	55.0%
30–49 years old	27.6%	17.1%	43.8%
50+ years old	18.0%	9.8%	47.3%
Language spoken at home*			
Tajik	26.8%	16.2%	46.7%
Russian	71.4%	71.4%	28.6%
Uzbek	13.3%	6.7%	13.3%
Marital status*			
Married	25.0%	15.4%	45.5%
Single**	38.9%	25.7%	54.9%
Education*			
University degree	42.2%	28.9%	42.2%
No university degree	26.4%	16.4%	48.9%
Class*			
Middle class	37.1%	24.2%	47.3%
Lower middle class	25.4%	15.4%	48.7%
Working class	22.8%	15.0%	47.2%
Area*			
Urban	40.8%	26.6%	47.9%
Rural	23.4%	14.5%	47.8%

* Use of ICT s on a daily or weekly basis

** Singles women, includes divorcees, widows in addition to females who have never been married

Although bloggers such as Elena Nazmethonova and Farangis Davronova are aware of this discrepancy, they sincerely believe that their campaigns have the potential to trigger a wave of discussion about sexual harassment and violence against women in Tajikistan. From the descriptive results so far, however, it remains an open question in 2022 whether women's attitude toward sexual harassment is related to their consumption of information on social media platforms. A systematic statistical analysis is required to examine the relationship between women's awareness of sexual harassment and their use of social media platforms to access information online.

7.2 *Regression Analysis*

Table 2 presents models designed to test the principal hypothesis of this paper, namely, that women's exposure to women's awareness-raising campaigns on social media, for which Instagram serves as a proxy in this study, has a positive influence on their perception of sexual harassment and violence in their community. The results of these analyses are presented in Table 2. Model 1 is a baseline model featuring the demographic control variables of *age*, *university education*, *religious*, *class*, and *urban/rural* and the critical independent variable of *social media user*. In contrast to previous studies on sexual harassment and violence, *university education, urban, age*, *marital status*, *religious*, and *class* are not associated with women's awareness of sexual harassment and violence. Further research is needed to understand this puzzle. Nevertheless, I suggest that the findings reflect the extent to which patriarchal values are embedded in Tajikistan's social norms so that these other traits do not correlate with awareness of sexual harassment and violence. Tajikistan is quite closed off, information-wise, and the power of "shame" or "honor" runs deep – so, even if a woman lives in the city and is college-educated, she is still bound by broader social norms (especially because her family probably stretches beyond Dushanbe).

Women's use of social media for information purposes is significantly and positively related to their awareness of sexual harassment and violence in their community (significant at the $p<0.5$ level). The finding suggests that women who are exposed to information on social media platforms, in this case Instagram, tend to be more alert to incidents of sexual harassment and violence in their communities than their counterparts who are not on social networks.

Given the active involvement of women's groups and humanitarian organizations in female empowerment programs in Tajikistan, it seemed crucial to examine the extent to which women's active/inactive membership in a women's group (model 2) or humanitarian organization (model 3) may shape their

Table 2 Regression analysis for the impact of social media use on female Tajik's awareness of sexual harassment in their society

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Intercept	−4.374 ***	−5.622 ***	−4.763 ***
	(0.968)	(1.213)	(1.012)
Age: 30–49	0.970	0.918	0.824
	(0.835)	(0.886)	(0.850)
Age: 50–91	0.046	−0.105	−0.134
	(1.019)	(1.044)	(1.035)
Single	0.105	−0.073	−0.073
	(0.791)	(0.836)	(0.822)
Not religious	0.586	1.156	0.871
	(0.676)	(0.751)	(0.722)
University education	0.196	0.138	0.177
	(0.774)	(0.793)	(0.765)
Lower middle class	−1.609	−1.587	−1.548
	(0.865)	(0.896)	(0.871)
Working class	−0.553	−0.315	−0.455
	(0.752)	(0.785)	(0.767)
Urban	−0.940	−0.930	−0.839
	(0.770)	(0.800)	(0.766)
Frequent social media user	**1.632 ***	**1.611 ***	**1.512 ***
	(0.658)	(0.701)	(0.664)
Member in women's group		**2.110 ****	
		(0.663)	
Member in humanitarian organization			1.210
			(0.654)
AIC	*120.650*	*111.845*	*119.493*
BIC	*163.566*	*159.053*	*166.701*
Log likelihood	*−50.325*	*−44.923*	*−48.747*
Deviance	*100.650*	*89.845*	*97.493*
Num. obs.	*540*	*540*	*540*

*** $p < 0.001$, ** $p < 0.01$, * $p < 0.05$

concerns about sexual harassment and violence in addition to their consumption of information on social networks. Both models (2 and 3) include the same control variables in addition to the critical independent variable of *social media user* as model 1. Active/inactive membership in a women's group correlates significantly and positively with women's awareness of sexual harassment and violence in their social circles. As model 2 in Table 2 shows, this correlation is significant at the $p<0.01$ level. Women who are or used to be involved in the work of women's groups in Tajikistan therefore tend to be more aware of sexually unwanted, offensive, or threatening verbal or physical behavior than their counterparts who have never been members of such groups.

Whereas membership in women's groups is observed to affect Tajik women's consciousness of sexual harassment and violence, membership in a humanitarian organization, such as UNICEF or UN Women, does not (see model 3 in Table 2). To some extent, this result seems to support previous observations (Direnberger 2014) on the limited success of awareness-raising initiatives – organized by humanitarian organizations in Tajikistan – on sexual harassment and violence against women.

Broadly speaking, the evidence presented here supports the hypothesis that Tajik women can be expected to develop a greater awareness of sexual harassment and violence in their society through frequent consumption of information on social media platforms in Tajikistan. Thus, women bloggers' awareness-raising activities on Instagram may indeed serve to increase consciousness of sexual harassment and violence for women who enjoy frequent (*daily* or *weekly*) access to social media platforms.

8 Conclusion

The findings of the statistical analysis show that frequent exposure to information on social media platforms does, indeed, have an impact on Tajik women's perceptions of sexual harassment and violence in their society. The reported findings suggest that women develop a greater awareness of sexual harassment and violence in their community through frequent (*daily* or *weekly*) consumption of information obtained from social networks in Tajikistan. These results are consistent with the results of previous regional studies (Kikuta 2019; Kudaibergenova 2019; Udod 2018), which showed that social media platforms such as Instagram may serve as tools for women activists to educate the female populace about women's issues, even in the "networked authoritarian" states of Central Asia.

Nonetheless, I am cautious in drawing any final conclusions from my findings. One specific reason for caution is that the statistical analysis did not reveal what type of information obtained on social media platforms affects Tajik women's awareness of sexual harassment and violence. Having established that the consumption of social networks contributes to shaping women's perception of or sensitivity to certain issues – in this case, sexual harassment and violence – it is difficult to identify a precise correlation, simply because we do not know the kind of content Tajik women consume on social media platforms. Moreover, the population of Tajik women who are using Instagram and specifically following these accounts of women's empowerment is not random but could be explained by some antecedent cause: a selection effect. As media outlets become increasingly diversified, individuals are getting more selective about the content they want to consume online. Thus, people who are already interested in women's issues can be expected to be more likely to follow these accounts in the first place. Furthermore, the analysis also showed that there could be other factors, such as membership in a women's group, which might influence a woman's concern about sexual harassment and violence, in addition to her exposure to content on social networks in Tajikistan. In this context, more research, such as in-depth interviews with a wider female public in Tajikistan, is needed to explore the type of content shared on social media platforms, and specifically on Instagram, which influences women's assessment of sexual harassment and violence. Such studies will also demonstrate whether it is Tajik women's random exposure or selective choice to engage with digital activism that is increasing their awareness of sexual harassment and violence against women in their society or whether their involvement in women's groups and humanitarian organizations is the decisive factor.

Finally, the reported findings in the descriptive analysis indicate that only a very marginal part of Tajikistan's female population enjoys frequent access to social media platforms and specifically to posts by Instagram bloggers such as Farangis Davronova and Elena Nazhmetdinova. The small number of Tajik women who are following and engaging with these digital women activists belong to the urban, university-educated, Russian-speaking middle class. For this type of digital activism to translate into "real-world activism" (Udod 2018: 75), activists need to look for new ways to reach wider parts of Tajikistan's female population. Future studies should go the extra mile and explore different strategies and media that can be used by women activists to educate the wider Central Asian public about sexual harassment and violence. Based on the statistical analysis above, as well as interviews with women activists in

Tajikistan, a possible strategy for digital activists to reach more people on all levels of society would be to engage in more offline awareness-raising activities about sexual harassment and violence against women, with the support of local women's groups or humanitarian organizations. Such collaborative projects will not only allow women bloggers to get through to those who do not have access to social networks and do not speak Russian but can also further the interests of international organizations. Alliances with local youth could help humanitarian organizations to overcome false assumptions and stop being labelled as foreign entities promoting Western conceptions of gender roles that are seen as a threat to Tajikistan's national culture.

Online women activists in Tajikistan are aware of the merit of such partnerships. And some of them, such as the collective behind @tellme_sister, are collaborating with local authorities and international organizations to make their online awareness-raising campaigns count in the "real world."

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