

From Digital Silence to Digital Control: Why Women's Mental Health, AI Governance, and Youth Unemployment Are One Crisis — Not Three

In 2018, when mental health discussions were hushed whispers in India, I launched an initiative on social media named 'You Are Not Alone.' In those following thirty minutes, everything I knew about my journey of being a leader began to change. Almost 250 to 300 people responded in a few minutes, asking for someone who could hear them without judging. It wasn't that there had been a spike in mental distress; it was more like the realization of something that had already happened.

As the initiative moved forward through community gatherings and peer-to-peer conversations, one thing became abundantly clear – mental health issues were not just the result of individual problems. Social stigma, cultural stigma, economic dependence, and government indifference contributed to the development of this problem. In due course, these conversations led to case studies, research questions, and policy concerns. Eventually, I had to understand that the problem of women's mental health issues was not a health problem anymore in India but a digital governance problem.

Invisible Wounds, Visible Consequences

It is through You Are Not Alone that I have come into contact with many women who have been wrongly diagnosed as morally weak and spiritually deficient. A very well-educated young woman who suffers from chronic depression was forced by her family to visit a faith healer because they were convinced that she was 'possessed' and not sick. There was also an incident of a married lady being belittled by her husband and scorned by her entire family whenever she asked for assistance with her depression. In another instance, a young lady was dumped by her husband and disowned by her parents in a bid to protect their family honor. Our organization stepped in to provide legal aid, employment and mental health services to her.

Men whose problems with mental well-being were ignored also came under my purview. One young man suffering from suicidal thoughts managed to stabilize his condition through conversations with his peers. Another young man who once tried taking his life later decided to dedicate his life to assisting others.

From Clinical Depression to Structural Depression

As my research progressed, I found that there was a distinction between clinical depression and structural depression. Clinical depression is a medically recognized ailment. Structural depression is created through sustained contact with inequality, unpaid care work, gender-based violence, precariousness, lack of agency, and silencing.

In the case of women living in India, trauma arises due to compulsory or repetitive pregnancy, domestic abuse, lack of mental health services, and social pressure to sacrifice. Framing such trauma as merely an individual illness strips accountability away from families, media, platforms, and the government. It is impossible to heal in solitude with oppressive institutions still intact.

Digital Platforms as Amplifiers of Harm

This period is particularly perilous because of the involvement of digital platforms. Racial harassment, bullying, and misogynist narratives in regional languages often escape detection in AI moderation systems. The woman who reports sexual harassment is routinely informed that “there was no violation.” Headlines in viral media outlets shame mothers and blame women’s decisions while exonerating structural failings. The problem of media framing is that it translates structural violence into personal responsibility.

In the course of my research, I received numerous testimonials from women and young people about the anxiety induced by online hate speech related to marriage and education, trauma caused by online narratives that celebrate violence, and withdrawal from public participation for fear of retribution.

When Youth Unemployment Turns into Digital Control

There exists a convergence problem in India at present. Nearly 40% of the educated youth are unemployed or underemployed. It is not only an economic problem; it is a governance crisis, which poses serious implications in terms of women's freedom and security.

In the lack of work, purpose, and accountability, there exists a void. The void is being filled by cases of digital vigilantism and gender restriction movements. Organized groups in regional social media platforms call for restrictions on access of mobile phones to girls, taking out girls from educational institutions, and imposing "limits" on women's freedoms as cultural practices.

Young boys who have to face unemployment and lack of opportunities tend to take out their anger on their freedom. Control comes to be seen as empowerment. Restrictions through digital technology act as false claims of power. We can see this trend manifest itself in various online glorifications of honor killings, inter community threats to women, and mass harassing of women claiming their rights.

Media Failure as a Public Mental Health Issue

The Indian state has failed to realize the role played by narratives in the media and cyberbullying as determinants of collective mental health. Sensationalism in reporting turns personal disputes into issues of morality, opening the door for community shaming and sexism. Media headlines tend to blame the woman without taking into account postpartum depression, lack of reproductive rights, domestic violence, or the total lack of male responsibility.

This framing of violence in terms of “community sentiments” is a form of psychological conditioning of women into submission.

Why Laws Alone Are Not Enough

India is not without its laws, but what it lacks is enforcement in cyberspace, gender-sensitive policing, accountability for online platforms, and consideration of the effects on mental

health in policymaking. Inaction by the state at an early stage leads to violence going beyond rhetoric to reality.

There can be no digital equality when basic rights vanish on the internet.

What Digital Leadership Must Do Now

This is a time where action needs to be taken structurally, and not through mere campaigns. The following should constitute part of the digital leadership:

- Responsibility-based digital governance on platforms for their role in perpetrating harm through regional languages
- Assessment of mental well-being consequences in relation to viral content and media reports
- The acknowledgment of online gender threats as a form of physical threat
- Policies around youth unemployment which incorporate social responsibility and accountability

Without doing so, the situation where unemployment metastasizes to a state of control will persist.

Why Women Must Lead This Shift

It is not because there is a lack of empathy in society; it is rather due to the delayed reaction from institutional structures. This project proves that true leadership does not start with having means at your disposal. It starts with having responsibility.

Building trust through digital channels can only come about when there are women leaders who understand how all these factors interplay, because, after all, we bear the consequences of it first and foremost.

The mental well-being of women in our society is not a collateral problem of the digital revolution. It is a test of whether the digital transformation is humane, inclusive, and fair. Control will soon become culture if the authorities do not take any action.

Short Bio

Dhara Patel is an India-based mental health advocate, researcher, and digital policy voice. She is the founder of *You Are Not Alone*, a grassroots initiative addressing mental health stigma, gendered violence, and digital harm. Her work bridges community-level evidence with global policy conversations on AI ethics, media accountability, and women's rights. Dhara has presented research at international conferences, contributed to global publications, and engaged with UN platforms on youth mental health and gender justice. She focuses on structural causes of psychological harm and advocates for gender-responsive digital governance.