



THE POLITICS OF SHARING AND CARING: SRI LANKAN WOMEN'S GROUPS ON SOCIAL MEDIA

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INTRODUCTION

Social media has become a crucial platform where individuals maintain communities with like-minded, similarly-placed people. Groups maintained by women, for women, devoted to motherhood and homemaking are an identifiable example of such groups. These groups claim to support women, (and in some case, mothers) give advice and share experiences related largely to the domestic sphere. Although blogs and websites devoted to these purposes were prevalent in the west from the early 90's onwards, the visibility and the prevalence of such on-line communities in Sri Lanka became more apparent with the advent of Facebook and other social media.

Although blogging as a medium never became a trend in Sri Lanka, (Kottegoda, 2012) social media groups dealing with motherhood and topics traditionally associated with women such as housekeeping, family life, cooking and other domestic arts etc. are quite popular.

For the purpose of this study, I hope to observe a few prominent social media groups found on Facebook identifiable as Sri Lankan which are purportedly devoted to housekeeping, mothering and other aspects which are in traditional "gender-speak", commonly thought of as appealing to women. (Godakanda, 2019) (Siriwardhana, 2018) (Sri Lankan Mums, 2020) I hope to question the ways in which these posts impact women reading them. My objective in this study would be to question how women in Sri Lanka negotiate their identities as women and sometimes as mothers within these social media groups in a backdrop of global neoliberal and post-feminist trends.

I intend to observe these social media groups as repositories of advice and communal knowledge, especially in their capacity to exchange advice among their members. Globally, Research in the field of women's groups on social media is fairly recent and is developing rapidly. One sees the research in this domain encompassing areas such as digital intimacies, postfeminist identities as well as celebrity cultures in social media groups. In the context of Sri Lanka, where women's groups on social media are a recent phenomenon, no research has been conducted, to date on these groups as "intimate publics" within the digital media.

METHODOLOGY

I would like to engage in a qualitative analysis of a selected number of posts shared on or published in three selected groups on social media. In my initial investigation, I have observed recurrent patterns in the posts which were converted into themes, allowing me to do a discourse analysis.

A key question I hope to raise is whether the issues and challenges related to women and domesticity are seen as political and socially relevant or whether they are perceived as non-political and personal.

I would be employing, as my theoretical framework, the premises suggested by a host of researchers working within women's intimate digital cultures, the notion of intimate publics, and postfeminist sensibilities.



THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Informed by the work of Akane Kanai and Amy Shields Dobson on women's intimate digital cultures, (Kanai, 2017; Dobson, 2015) I seek to relate their speculations about young women's digital communities to the Sri Lankan women's groups that sparked my interest. I would also be looking at instances where these groups, in their capacity as repositories of advice align themselves with the promise of a "good life" to women. I am deeply interested in Laurent Berlant's theorizations about the workings of an affective culture which promises a so-called "good life" to women. (Berlant L. , 2011) My theoretical stance is also anchored in the concept of "intimate publics" developed by the same theorist . (Berlant L. , 2008) I also hope to engage with the theorization(s) of Angela McRobbie (Notes on the Perfect: Competitive Femininity in Neo Liberal Times) (McRobbie, 2015) and Rosalind Gill (The Affective, cultural, and psychic life of post feminism) (Gill R. , 2017) with particular focus on their discourse on the notion of the "perfect" within the lives of women occupying postfeminist cultures. Seeking to relate their speculations to my research area, I would argue that the notions of optimism and individualization that are constantly touted by these groups on social media intersect with the post- feminist insistence on perfectionism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The research that is presented in this study focuses on the advice and solidarity demonstrated in these groups. In these groups women "confess" the difficulties they face in their daily routines related to housekeeping, maintaining work-home balance or childcare while the other readers respond to these queries with sympathy and understanding and give advice on how to manage. The notion that the experiences narrated in these groups are "common" experiences among mothers is evident in their responses. Akane Kanai's suggestion that belonging in this type of female digital spaces is often expected to be achieved through aspiring to conform to a feeling of "sameness" is relatable to my proposed study (Kanai, 2017) However, it also becomes clear that many members see these as problems that should be resolved personally by women. For instance, In the case of sharing challenges related to childcare experienced by working mothers, many similarly placed members advice against enlisting formal paid day care reminding the community of the dangers it entails and advice the new mothers to depend on their own mothers for help. Some members actually relate their own personal experiences where they had to quit work as satisfactory day care arrangements could not be found. This transfer of responsibility to the woman and the mother resonates with what critics such as Michaels and Douglas (Michaels and Douglas,2004) claim about neoliberal, post-feminist cultures disregarding structural inequalities (such as inadequate childcare options) in their perception of problems related to women. In *Mediating Neoliberal Capitalism: Affect, Subjectivity and Inequality*, the authors explore this further and suggest that women are encouraged to achieve perfection and to achieve miracles through personal sacrifices (Gill & Kanai, 2018). As far as Sri Lankan women's groups on social media are concerned, it could be said that the tendency to view problems related to women, work and childcare as "personal" problems indicate a degree of depoliticization that is worthy of investigation.



CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Offering both expert and inexpert advice, these women's groups on social media invest in strong affective cultures and language and it is very rarely that the general solidarity and affection with which any support is seen to be given, any knowledge is seen to be shared, is disrupted. From the most practical "tips" on how to clean one's kitchen floors, to the more emotionally charged discussion around returning to work after insufficient maternity leave, to the dialogues on divorce, custody or sexual harassment, the veneer of solidarity and support is unshaken. However, in this collective quest to strive towards better living conditions for women in such groups, I propose that the insistence on individual success, hard work, organization and "optimism" (critics have discussed the discourse of optimism as a factor deviating attention from structural deficits) (Gill & Kanai, 2018; Cabanas & Illouz, 2018); certain "ground realities" such as fundamental inequalities, insufficient infrastructure support, and flawed or delayed enactment of laws tend to be glossed over. Women are seen as (to use another popular term in the discourse of these communities) "super moms" or "super women" through of their individual endeavors, and individual striving is constantly upheld in the posts of these communities as exemplary and heroic.

Knowledge and advice are not culturally neutral terms, and within the Sri Lankan women's online communities, it would be interesting to study further as to how women affect and are affected by the advice-giving, and the knowledge-giving features of these groups. Although the advice and the knowledge shared in these groups straddle many areas related to women and their rights (among other things) it is intriguing that terms such as "feminist" or "women's rights" are often avoided.

It could be suggested that this is due to a certain reluctance to openly appear as espousing for the cause of feminism and women's rights due to cultural and political reasons affecting Sri Lankan (or South Asian) women. To be seen to openly "fight" for a cause could possibly have negative cultural implications which could associate a woman with a stereotyped image of an "aggressive feminist" an "eccentric activist" or both. This sticking point provides a researcher with many interesting avenues for exploration. For instance, how do women who believe that they have specific problems that need to be resolved around domesticity, motherhood, civic and political lives address these issues in these online communities while avoiding, for the most part, politically conscious feminist activism? This is where the affective culture surrounding these groups can be examined in the context of the discourse of individualization that is familiar to the neoliberal, post-feminist subject. Individual, often extraordinary feats of women are highlighted, while the structural deficits which create the inequalities these women daily face are toned down, ignored or glossed over.

While research has been done on Sri Lankan women, women's organizations and the usage of social media, (Kottegoda, 2012) (Wijewardene & Samuel, 2015) no research at all has been attempted on Sri Lankan women's digital communities related to maternity, the domestic sphere or women's experiences. Evaluating women's performances, commitments, and engagements, both collective and individual, on social media is of paramount importance, as this is a medium which has radically changed the world as we know it. How women engage with communities of other women has vital implications as far as feminist thought and practices are concerned. Discerning connections with research done in other communities while observing how women of different cultures



attempt to seek solidarity or draw strength from online women's spaces amidst current socio-economic circumstances will enrich our understanding of women's daily struggles and triumphs in a world dramatically altered by social media.

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