

Online violence against women with disabilities

Hi, my name is Srinidhi and I work with Rising Flame. I'm here to speak a little bit about online violence and the kinds of violence that disabled women face in online spaces. So it was earlier this year that we saw the TikTok challenge become popular all around us.

It sounds innocent at best, but it's hard for some deep-rooted biases and ignorance. So let me just explain. The TikTok challenge is a challenge where parents introduce their children to their supposed teachers, but instead of showing their children a photo of the teacher, they ended up showing their children a photo of a disabled woman.

And this was intended to scare or have a laugh with the child. So many of these videos have the parent laughing in the background after the child's shocked face. The photos being used were, many of the photos being used were of Melissa Blake and Lizzie Velasquez, both women who live with disabilities that affect their facial structure.

This wasn't a new experience for either of these women. Using their photos as comic relief or to scare was part of the online culture they inhabited. In many instances, these videos and others like these also used photos of children with Down syndrome to stir a laugh or to shock and mock.

These experiences of women with disabilities where their disabilities are weaponized and used against them in the online space is one type of violence that disabled women face. Many women with disabilities who have different facial structures or facial scars have been trolled heavily on Twitter and YouTube. These experiences involve not just using their images, but leaving wild comments about their appearance.

And in the case of Lizzie, even naming her the world's ugliest woman. These experiences seem like outliers, but are in fact very common for disabled women and children, where society's understanding of beauty and normal is used to harass and isolate those who don't fit into these boxes. Another form of violence that we see often is with, is women who live with such social disabilities and are public about their conditions.

Many individuals use this knowledge of their disabilities to ostracize and abuse disabled people in public platforms. In many ways, this language is used to dismiss their political opinions or their opinions about everything, right? Calling them mad, crazy, psychotic. These words are used to silence women with disabilities online.

Say a disabled woman posts a photo of herself as on social media. And if her bio has details about her psychosocial disability, then a lot of the comments that come afterwards are often around the disability, calling her mad, saying this is why she posts photos like this, et cetera. So this kind of behavior of weaponizing the individual's disability in everyday existence of sharing photos of their faces, et cetera, is very common for women with disabilities.

For many women and young people with disabilities, online spaces are a way to connect with the world, but also to speak about their experiences openly, honestly, and with vulnerability. These experiences of violence make it harder for them to explore freedom of expression in terms of self and has deep-rooted impacts on how they see themselves.

Additionally, one of the major hurdles of online spaces is with regards to inaccessibility of these spaces.

You might wonder what does inaccessibility have to do with violence? Say someone takes a photo of a well-known blind woman activist and morphs her face onto an ad or a meme or a pornographic image. The chances of the disabled woman finding this image online with image descriptions just floating around the internet is very low. So she needs to be alerted about it through another individual who spotted it.

And in many ways, these aspects of how the disability is used in a way to delay the response of the disabled woman in even identifying that an act of violence has been done is in many ways the subtle ways in which inaccessibility plays into deepening or worsening acts of violence. For many of us disabled people who inhabit online spaces, we repeatedly and often and very often encounter hate, ignorance, and ableist language around disability just only at home. Organizations, individuals, media persons all use language like I'm spineless, this comment is so delusional, we are little OCD, don't be so psychotic.

But these statements make existing in the online space very hard and triggering because of the implications of these statements. I mean, we have one option, which is to tell every single person who is saying these things to call out all these people who are saying it, but it is so common that it becomes really hard for us to invest that kind of energy. And the implications of these statements on our everyday lives is often very, it's too much, right? Because what are we implying when we make these connections, right? When we say, say, for instance, that this government is so delusional, we are saying that the disabled people at the government or disabled people and non empathetic people, when we say like this person is so deaf to our issues, or this person is so blind to the concerns, we are saying that these people, disabled people, and people who have no empathy, people who are violent or cruel government, that disabled people and these entities have something in common, right? You are in many ways dehumanizing the disabled people in the process of using this and they are very much all of these languages, especially when you speak about blind people who are spineless, or you say our communities are spineless, or you are so deaf to these issues, you're situating disabled people with an act, right? And this kind of like subtle violence that is so omnipresent, that is everywhere can be very hard to navigate when all we encounter in online spaces is this language, right? So many disabled people might not inhabit online spaces in the same ways in which the non-disabled people, right? Because the space itself can be far more alienating than it is for non-disabled people.

And between the subtle forms of violence and the overt forms of violence that online spaces often mimic, offline spaces or physical spaces, just in the ways in which they harm or discriminate against disabled people, they are such a reminder for us that these spaces don't actually imagine or realize or make room for our existence. And that can be not easy for any of us to navigate in accepting the reality that the space was not made for you. And that the violence tends to continue in the experience of the space.

So I think that seeing or situating both overt and very trivial forms of violence versus the subtle underlying forms of violence becomes essential to understanding the kinds of violence that disabled people face in online spaces and especially women and trans people. Thank you.