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Months After Indian Muslim Women Were Featured 'Deals of the Day,' Nothing Has Happened

New Delhi — “I was angry, but not surprised,” said Nabiya Khan, a 25-year-old activist and poet. In early July, she signed onto Twitter and saw a tweet mentioning her and linking to an open-source app called “Sulli Deals.” There, she found photos of herself, stolen from her public social media profiles, up for online auction.

“Sulli” is derogatory slang that targets Muslim women, and the app mockingly staged Khan and other Indian Muslim women for auction by creating fake profiles of them using available information online. Rather than hosting actual transactions, the sole purpose of the app was to humiliate its subjects.

More than 80 women had their names and pictures posted without their consent on the app’s “deals of the day.” GitHub, the web platform that hosted the app, immediately shut it down following swift online condemnation.

Khan filed a complaint with Delhi Police, but she said she hasn’t received any response from the authorities. **Complaints** by other women have also been filed, and while a **First Information Report (FIR)** — a document prepared by the police when a victim lodges a complaint of any cognizable offense — was eventually filed by the Delhi Police against unidentified persons (and only after considerable **social media furor**), no further action has been taken. Senior officials of the Cyber Cell division have **reportedly** sent GitHub requests for information about the users, creators, and owners of the app to no response. Meanwhile, they have not narrowed down any names.

While Muslim women face regular online harassment, the “Sulli Deals” app took it further by singling out leading professionals within their respective fields.

Khan believes that she was attacked because of her outspokenness about how the Muslim community in India has been consistently targeted for violence by right wing groups since 2014 — the year that India’s current ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) rose to power.

The app, she said, only further proved her point.

Normalized Islamophobia

Since 2014, incidents against minoritized communities have increased, including against Muslims. From cases of **lynching** to Islamophobic laws like “**love jihad**” and the **Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)** — which were introduced by the BJP — Muslims have been habitually targeted because of their identity.

And Muslim women are especially targeted due to their gender.

“If one takes a closer look, the humiliating scenario of ‘Sulli Deals’ has targeted those with a voice — activists, social media influencers, or highly-qualified professionals with an active social presence,” said Dr. Malini Saba, a cybercrime expert and human rights activist.

Khan agreed, adding, “the vocal Muslim woman is the highest level of threat. They feel like they need to neutralize us by sexual violence.”

“I think Muslim women are more vocal on Twitter,” said Afreen Ali, a 22-year-old student and activist in Delhi, who was also a target of the app. “The perpetrators might think that when they attack us, the men from the community will get scared, so they’ll go quiet.”

“They [right wing trolls] have blatantly put forward the narrative, ‘We will sell your women and you won’t be able to catch us,’” Tahini Bhushan, a Delhi-based lawyer who has taken up cyber-related cases, told *Women Under Siege*. “To me, this looks like a very well-funded, sophisticated plan.”

“It’s not surprising coming from the Hindu right wing ecosystem; you’re always surrounded by misogyny,” said Khan. “But this was literally an app where any random person can come and make their ‘deal of the day.’ That can translate into real sexual violence.”

Dr. Saba explained that online environments like Twitter encourage **echo chambers**, many fostering negative perceptions of particular groups stemming from a one-sided perspective. “Unlike a [real-world] conversation, it has no one to challenge it,” she said. “[This] has its ramifications, and one such example is ‘Sulli Deals.’”

Muslim women in India have long felt polarized, and threatened, within society, but the pervasiveness, and persistence, of the harassment is porous between their online and offline lives.

Weak political will to protect Muslim women

Under Section 66E of Indian cyber law, if a person captures, transmits, or publishes private images of another’s body without their knowledge or consent, that person faces imprisonment of up to three years, a fine of up to 2 Lakhs in Indian Rupees (roughly \$2,700), or both.

But applying the law in practice has been uneven.

“Basically, the law is there, but the implementation is weak,” said Bhushan, rendering the law “toothless.”

According to Bhushan and other experts, the Cyber Cell lack of the training and seriousness to respond to appropriately to cyber crimes, much less gendered ones. “The Indian system of policing and criminal investigation is still stuck in the old ways of information gathering and beating out a confession from the suspects,” **wrote** Partha Misra of Mumbai-based Agnihotri & Jha Associates on an online legal resource site. “The police force are completely untrained on modern methods of criminal investigation, which requires skills for managing and operating highly sophisticated technologies.”

As far as legal action against GitHub to cooperate with the Delhi Police investigation, Bhushan said that no meaningful action can be taken without a mutual legal assistance treaty (MLAT), an agreement between two or more countries to gather and exchange information to enforce public or criminal laws, which India does not share with the United States.

“GitHub is based out of a country where India does not have a MLAT, [so] the government cannot take legal action,” said Bhushan. “Twitter is still a relatively free platform, but GitHub has this jurisdictional factor.”

Since the case broke, Rekha Sharma, chairperson of the National Commission for Women, has **formally written** to the commissioner of Delhi Police seeking a detailed action report with the number arrests; the charges against suspects; any action against the makers of the app; and the number of complaints related to the app reported to date. But it is unknown if the report was ever produced. The National Commission for Minorities has also **inquired** with the police commissioner about the status of the case.

Delhi Police did not respond to our request for comment on the status of the case, but sources close to the police said that no further action has taken place.

Bhushan said that **the lack of arrests** two months after the fact directly reflects the lack of concern for crimes committed against Muslim women. “In India, Muslim women, and women from marginalized communities, are at the bottom of the [list].”

Support has also been difficult to find elsewhere, said 23-year-old Shabnam Nafisa, a social activist and freelance journalist who was also targeted by the app.

“None of my non-Muslim friends have commented on the issue,” she said. “I have not received calls or messages from them asking me if I was fine. People are calling this app an example of misogyny, but the reality is that the app only had photos of *Muslim* women, and the reason for that is their identity. We cannot deny that part.”

Without the political will to acknowledge the unique violence Muslim women face — much less to protect from against it — victims of the “Sulli Deals” app are left to deal with the consequences on their own, including sustained harassment they continue to face on social media.

Said Ali, “The humiliation of seeing my picture on social media, along with the rate I would be auctioned off, is something that will haunt me for a long time.”

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