

# Performing Gender, Doing Politics: Social Media and Women Election Workers in Kerala and Tamil Nadu

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## ABSTRACT

Women political workers adopt a range of tactics to navigate the hyper-masculine space of electoral politics in South India, both offline and, increasingly, online. Using interviews and observations over three months of election campaigning, we examine women's outreach work in online and offline adversarial spaces through the lens of Michel de Certeau's, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, which examines the "tactics" through which people negotiate change and everyday challenges in daily situations. We find that the everyday logistics of election work have changed significantly, and that these bring up two important ways in which "tactics" framework is helpful - first, in the changing ways in which representations need to be managed, as political work requires an interactive digital public face, and second, in ways that which online interactions need to be managed as new and increasingly demanding forms of communication are necessitated for effective voter outreach.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• **Human-centered computing** → **Empirical studies in HCI**.

## KEYWORDS

Politics, Women, Social Media, India, HCI4D, ICTD

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Election outreach is a difficult, involved process that requires ground workers to persuade voters through a range of formal and informal means. In India, this outreach process is aimed at voters across the wide spectrum of urban and rural voters, across lines of religion, caste, class, and gender. India has had universal suffrage since its first post-colonial general election in 1950, and traditionally, women election workers have been a small, but integral part of the campaign process, despite their relatively low presence in the leadership [38]. Often, the primary form of direct outreach to women voters, other than what they can access through their family members, is through female election workers, making them a force of increasing importance in the Indian political context.

Women play a range of roles in elections - as voters, candidates, champions, volunteers, and campaign workers. Campaign work includes door to door canvassing by field staff, also referred to as election workers, who are temporarily hired by parties during an election. In many parts of India, women may find patriarchal and traditionalist social restrictions placed on their public lives, limiting the kinds of interactions, choices, and work they are able to engage in. Thus, women who work in election outreach must effectively construct and maintain a public persona while working within and navigating the constraints of these social restrictions.

In recent years, much has changed in the campaign management process, particularly as it relates to public outreach. The relationship between technology and public engagement in the context of elections is complex. On one hand, there exists a widespread discourse around how technology has enabled low-touch political activism [34], which arguably allows certain forms of engagement in public spaces that are otherwise inaccessible. Further, in a hyper-masculine space of electoral politics, it is often argued that women are generally unwelcome, but women have always historically employed various tactics to both contest their way into, and sustain their engagement in the male spaces of electoral activism [38]. The work and practice of women politicians have been studied [5, 12, 41] but women political workers' contributions to the electoral process and their work has received negligible scholarly attention despite evidence from around the world that women's political work is fraught and often has high risk of violence [29].

In this paper, we provide an in-depth account of women's political work, and of their interactions with technology and digital

media as they do this work - drawing from interviews, on the ground accompaniment, observations, and our notes with women political workers at the state, district and ward levels during the 2019 general elections in the cities of Madurai, Tamil Nadu and Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. We use the conceptual understanding of space and tactics in the work of French scholar Michel de Certeau to frame the gendered nature of online political spaces and the tactical methods and practices that women across caste, religion and age groups adopt to create a space for themselves and others.

We also interrogate the democratizing claims of the digital technology, particularly as they relate to gender and access to political activism. We find that technology has not 'enabled' women to engage in campaigns, it has simply changed some of the pathways through which they can participate in the process. This in turn has brought about new forms of publicness, networking, and interaction which require new ways of navigating and succeeding in this work.

Through this work, we contribute an examination of the specific tactics that women workers use to navigate masculine and patriarchal structures, and the ways in which these tactics are aided and abetted by the advent of digital media and technology into their daily practice. We specifically look at the tactical actions that legitimize their presence in the political space and the tactical functions that require a gendered-performance online and offline. We further aim to complicate current understandings of gendered performance in online and offline spaces, particularly in the political sphere of the Global South. The discussions that emerge through our study contribute to the ICTD community, one by adding to the literature on feminist HCI by taking stock and outlining the unequal institutionalisation of online spaces and two, by re-emphasising the need for ICTs to be consciously designed as equitable and inclusive spaces, and to take into account dominant non-western aspects of the Global South such as caste, class and gender. Here, we refer to ICTs as internet accessibility, use of communication technologies like mobile phones and social media, and surveillance technology and privacy.

## 2 RELATED WORK

There has been a long discussion regarding the creation of spaces for women within the Indian political sphere, and scholarship on the spaces for women in mass struggles [45] and non-party based civic action [16]. While India has had a female head of government well before most Western democracies, it has been argued that women in Indian politics (as elsewhere in the South Asian region) have achieved positions of importance not due to support of movements but due to their individual relationships with powerful men. Therefore, there has been to some extent a neglect of women's collective identity as a discriminated group, which has been cited as a reason for their lack of success in making and holding space in electoral politics [4]. Basu attributes the lack of recognition of women's collective identity by parties to the distance maintained by the autonomous women's movement led by urban feminist in the 1970s from electoral politics to retain its radicalism [4]. However, while this may be the norm, plenty of individual exceptions exist - politicians who have come up through the path of grassroots

work or via party organizational structures to carve out voices for themselves in the legislature [9].

There have been two countervailing trends in the past two decades - one of political parties attempting to work with grassroots organisations and non-Governmental organisations (NGOs), and the second of women's organisations attempts to work with the state and political parties. Both of these have increased the visibility of women in the public, particularly around electoral events. While this has impacted women from across class, religious, and caste lines, structures of power and identity are by no means monolithic, since these competing identities give women differential access to political and social resources. Indeed, some scholars have suggested that not recognising these difference between women leads to the co-option by elite women, to the detriment of other marginalized groups [11, 32, 42].

In India, 2014 general elections witnessed a rise in the number of women election campaigners [40]. However, several studies show systematic exclusion of women from a range of political activities [14], in party systems and cultural spaces that are largely patriarchal [48]. Even in a state like Kerala, typically touted for its relatively higher levels of education and gender equity compared to the rest of the country, there have only been 11 women MPs in 15 general elections held since 1957 [3]. Nonetheless, women continue to be a critical vote bank. As this vote bank increases in importance, and as voting patterns within families give way to more independent, free-thinking female voters, groups that do direct outreach to women voters - often, women election workers - have likewise grown in importance. This paper, informed by the practices and attempts of women to create and hold space in a hypermasculine environment, seeks to interrogate the tension between the individual and collective identities of women political workers. We investigate the influence of this tension on worker's attempts to legitimize their positions, gain respect, and navigate gender performance and reception in the electoral space.

**The gendered online political sphere.** In the past two decades, a large body of work has examined ways in which women are at risk of various forms of misogynistic attack and harassment [20], including cyberstalking [2], bullying [15], doxxing [6], revenge porn [43], digital misogyny [46], as well as forms of offline violence enabled by the internet [22]. The decision to have a public persona online can be fraught. In addition to various forms of harassment online, the intersection of cultural strictures, privacy compromises [27], and the lack of legal safeguards [21] exposes women to various forms mental health risks [24, 37] or risk of physical violence [48] in certain geographical or cultural settings, for doing the things that may be commonplace elsewhere in the world [23]. In addition to a range of public initiatives to counter such violence against women online, there is a growing body of work that examines strategies adopted by women in public life to tackle various types of online verbal abuses.

With the increasing importance of online political outreach, some of the same issues of safety and respectful work environments that have traditionally impacted women's ability to conduct electoral outreach have now moved online. In India, various forms of online abuse have taken center stage as ways in which women are attacked for political work in an increasingly polarized political

sphere. Work by Swati Chaturvedi, describing the inner workings of troll armies, first brought to fore the range of ways in which women are attacked online, in particular highlighting how the law fails to protect victims of online harassment [7]. Furthermore, social media platforms either lack the ability or intent to implement community guidelines to protect woman users when they are abused [25].

Women political workers belonging to various political and social locations are increasingly expected to conduct party business online. As a result, they must both navigate their identities as gendered beings online, and perform as effective public figures in the interest of presenting a face for their parties among voters. To do this, women adopt a range of tactics to navigate the hyper-masculine online space of electoral politics. Building on the work of Michel de Certeau in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, we explore the act of space creation among women political workers through tactics that they employ - as they operate from within the system, while attempting to rework, sidestep, or even take advantage of its biases. de Certeau distinguishes between two ways of operating, strategies, which are the purview of the strong, and tactics, which are the 'art of the weak' [8]. While strategies can be used by groups that already have agency and power, to an extent,

*"[A tactic] takes advantage of 'opportunities' and depends on them, being without any base where it could stockpile its winnings, build up its own position and plan raids. What it wins it cannot keep. This nowhere gives a tactic mobility, to be sure, but a mobility that must accept the chance offerings of the moment, and seize on the wing the possibilities that offer themselves at any moment. It must vigilantly make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers. It poaches them. It creates surprises in them. It can be where it is least expected. It is a guileful ruse"*

In his work, de Certeau [8] offers a theoretical framework towards understanding the production of urban space through the experiences of everyday practices of the urban inhabitants. In the places or institutions of politics, which have been forcibly and exclusively rendered masculine by their inhabitants, this production of space manifests in the daily practice of the female political worker. She constructs a space within this existing space, and attempts to legitimate this construction and performance in the eyes of existing patriarchal values, as well to herself and for other women. Thus, the very presence of these women contributes to redefining and reconstructing the space at large. In this case, the use of tactics, and the construction and propagation of said tactics, are crucial to the woman worker's survival, legitimacy, and daily practice.

Further, in both Tamil Nadu [17] and Kerala [18], the sites of our work, there have been a number of documented cases of cyber violence experienced by women. However, little academic work has examined in depth the everyday online practices of women in non-metropolitan Indian cities to cope with social and professional lives online. Our work aims to bridge this knowledge gap, and document and analyze the acts of resistance and tactics of change that allow these women to survive and thrive.

### 3 METHODOLOGY

We engaged in an ethnographic study with the objective of understanding the way women political workers interacted with internet based technology used for election work. The two locations, Madurai, Tamil Nadu and Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala were picked as both researchers are local to the respective regions and have been associated with political mobilization work, though not directly in the specific locations studied. As cultural insiders in our field sites, we had a relatively better understanding of the social, lingual, religious variations in practice of patriarchy in our home states. During our time in the field, we conducted interviews, attended party meetings, and made observations at poll events such as public gatherings, and accompanied workers for door-to-door outreach.

Apart from shadowing our respondents while they were on duty, we were also invited to their homes and engaged with them and their family in their personal spaces. We observed both locations from November 2018 through the respective date of polling in May 2019. Interviewed persons including party leaders (8), party IT cell members (4), party activists such as post holders or booth committee members (33), and journalists (2). We recruited interviewees from across the political spectrum and ensured that we met with representatives of all the major parties contending in each constituency - while in Kerala this was primarily the Indian National Congress (INC), Communist Party of India - Marxist (CPM), and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), in Tamil Nadu, the national parties worked in partnership with local parties, as is traditional in the state - thus the CPM worked in poll agreement with the state party Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the BJP worked with the All India Anna Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (ADMK), and a number of smaller state parties were in the fray.

The situation in Tamil Nadu is significantly different than in Kerala. Kerala tends to have cadre based election workers due to the communist legacy - i.e., the workers often have a fixed party affiliation and often do outreach work on a consistent basis throughout the year. In Tamil Nadu, election workers are typically employed around elections and only paid to work in that period. Election workers may change parties.

Election workers are selected by parties through existing members or based on their own past work, or through local institutions such as film fan clubs, youth groups etc. Typically core workers bring in their contacts through referral. They are typically paid a daily stipend, but for the workers, there are also clientelist drivers - workers may be rewarded through access to jobs, contracts etc. Workers are monitored in a pyramid style - the candidate typically has a core team, which oversees all the workers, and smaller groups organized at the aggregated booth level, with leaders keeping track of expenditure, outreach etc.

There are also technologically mediated means of monitoring workers such as apps that keep track of worker movements and bar-coded pamphlets that can record the literature distribution by workers. In Tamil Nadu, the deaths in 2018 of two long-serving political leaders also led to the creation of new parties and churning among election workers. Importantly, both states have a historically weak presence of the national hegemon, the BJP, though this election saw a major thrust in investment and organization from the party.

Our observations included planned activities and prepared individual interactions such as voter verification visits, or canvassing at voter's homes and group activities such as road shows or small home-based gatherings (*Kudumbayogam*). Since we accompanied the election workers on daily activities, we also observed ad-hoc activities such as interactions at street junctions, which are an important part of the political process since the candidates or party workers need to be prepared to perform their roles as proselytizers of their program at any given moment. In addition to all of these, we also observed party committee planning and strategy meetings, and were able to interview party functionaries on their management of the process - such as media material creation, booth worker surveillance, management of influencers such as party patrons, teachers, residence association chairpersons etc.

The interactions we had with respondents (and each other) influenced the framing of the interview schedule. The interviews were recorded and then transcribed verbatim, translated when required and analyzed through a grounded theory approach. The two primary researchers read each others' interviews, and coded them, and the coding schema was polished over several hours of iterative white boarding. The high-level thematic areas that surfaced in the initial interviews were further used to align the interview questions in the later part of the fieldwork.

In both locations, we sampled our respondents through a mix of connections through party offices and journalists, and snowballed interviewees through these initial connections. While the parties in the two locations are identified in this research, we anonymize all the respondents and candidates in line with research confidentiality. For the purposes of this research, we use the depth of our work, but focus particularly on the experiences of women who dealt closely with party politics through party posts or work in councils. We filled out an IRB for our study; all interactions were held in accordance with it and the participants were fully informed of the purpose of our study.

## 4 FINDINGS

We primarily start by setting the socio-cultural context for electoral politics and highlight the position of women across the various cleavages of caste and class in the parties at the grassroots level. It brings forward, the prevalence of traditional ideas of femininity such as Self Help Groups [1] and their usage by political parties to legitimise women's participation in the grassroots political work online and offline. Women are therefore expected to adhere to such a dominant idea of femininity in a political space which we suggest is not simply male-dominated but has gendered spatio-temporal routines and rhythms of work both offline and online. We find that such an adherence also has implications for the division of labour within the party and women's futures in the party, and by extension, in their political life.

Secondly, we draw on de Certeau's distinction between strategies as tools of the dominant sections and tactics as tools of the oppressed to make space to visibilize women's responses to patriarchal practices encountered in their everyday lives online and offline, at home and at work. We label their representations and interactions on social media as tactical because they do not fundamentally question women's positions in society, the party or in de Certeau's

words, "without any base where it could stockpile its winnings," but they are evidence of women using "the chance offerings of the moment" to "build up its own position and plan raid" or as a means to make space for themselves on social media. Thereafter we examine the manner in which women represent themselves and their interactions to understand how different women negotiate with the tensions that arise due to their participation in this work.

### 4.1 Spaces of Political Actions and Gender

**Informal Associations.** Gayatri Spivak [35] presents the development-gender conundrum as 'violent shuttling which is the displaced figuration of the "third-world woman" caught between tradition and modernization', which is the negotiation women are faced with in choosing employment, especially one that requires a public facing image. In this choice, women have to shuttle between spaces private and public, and in doing so address claims of being 'mannish' and the graver insinuation of moral decline - of greed, sexual promiscuity and irresponsibility towards the home in their rejection of femininity.

However, examining Kerala, J Devika and Binitha Thambi [10] argue, in the state's framing of self-help groups and micro-finance models of women empowerment as a means for the welfare and upward mobility of the family, women's employment in public spaces was linked to housewifely altruism. It was an acceptable extension of female spatial mobility into public spaces as these women's groups were within the bounds of a domestic neighbourhood space, confined to interactions with the same gender and subject to social surveillance. This created a suitable mix of conditions for local political leaders to recruit women into political activities using membership in institutions such as women's Self Help Groups (SHGs), which came to represent independence and empowerment of women in public that they carved out for themselves. In Kerala, Kudumbashree - a popular poverty alleviation and women's empowerment welfare programme which literally translates into 'prosperity of family' is used as a means to legitimise women's presence in electoral politics [1]. This Kudumbashree program, which is strongly tied in with the state's development discourse, acts as a natural channeling mechanism into public life. These served primarily as a way of convincing their families and inviting women into a semi-public space of neighbourhood networking and a training ground of administration under the watchful eyes of respectable elders in the community-both men and women.

*"Women who become famous through Kudumbashree become candidates. It is a way into politics. Party promotes them and brings them into politics. This is very pronounced across Kerala. There are very few women who come in through party politics. Women usually don't like politics. Very few enjoy it and come into politics. Usually party would bring in wives of party workers. Women are very enthusiastic about Kudumbashree level work. They work in the area and become prominent and have hold in the area. Then the party selects them as candidates."*

— Anu, 27 years, Councillor, Ernakulam, Kerala

We see in this quote several presumptions about gender and the intent to be politically active. Service work through Kudumbasree is presented as legitimate, compared to service work in the interest of political ambition. The left's methods in Kerala involved old fashioned mass mobilization, without any technological intervention. Groups like Kudumbashree acted as a natural extension to the left's networking mechanisms to reach the poorest classes into grassroots politics.

This notion of access to space and the gendered performances in these spaces are reflected and socially enforced online as well. The social surveillance by men or elder women is not restricted to the mobility of women in public spaces but also to the new digital public spheres of WhatsApp group discussions as the quote below points out.

*"Kudumbashree was a way of entering public life. Otherwise we are confined to our homes. Councillor energized our Kudumbashree activities, even on the WhatsApp group. He encouraged us to help with political work."*

— Mini, 33 years, booth worker,  
Thiruvananthapuram

WhatsApp messaging directly from a male councillor to individual women in the party would otherwise be socially circumscribed, but using the social context of Kudumbasree, as well as the affordance of a "group" the councillor is able to communicate directly with individuals without the awkwardness of individual messaging across gender lines. Yet, specifics of how one used WhatsApp, even on seemingly benign metric such as time of use, could be problematic.

*"We message within 10-11pm in the night. After 12am if they see any women online (status visible on profile in WhatsApp), she is considered a bad woman. Men can hang around on social media at any time and be visible there. As developed as Kerala is, there is no change to concepts like these. What's wrong if you see a woman on Facebook or WhatsApp at night? So women go offline by 11pm. Men might drop messages at 2am. We might see it in the morning."*

— Binitha, 33 years, booth worker,  
Thiruvananthapuram

The work of communicating constantly was a central part of the political process across both sites covered. A political worker needed to be available for instructions, feedback, and outreach. But WhatsApp as a site of surveillance laid rules for what women were able to do. As Mudliar notes in her work on spaces and gendered mobility around WiFi hotspots, 'Concerns about visibility and mobility were part of everyday life for the women who pointed to the undesirability of attracting any kind of "talk" based on people surveilling their movements' can be observed here as well [36].

*"Even my husband, although he does all the progressive talk, he is not okay with basic minimum things like women should get back before night-fall. Even if they say all progressive things, a woman should remain a woman. Because he is a*

*political worker, he is okay with me being in politics. They know things...that's one problem for women in politics - people are always monitoring us-where are they going? When are they going? Who are they going with? Spread rumours about them even if they are genuine workers. They use their imagination and create all kinds of stories."*

— Mini, 33 years, booth worker,  
Thiruvananthapuram

Apart from the gendering of public spaces and time, gendered responsibility of performing reproductive labour constrict women from engaging in political discussions and strategizing meetings. In discussions with women workers who were married, we found that the general expectation, if both the woman and man of the household were active in politics (as was frequently the case), during post-work hours the man would check WhatsApp for party messages, or just in general, while the woman would typically access the phone after housework - post-dinner chores, for instance.

**Social Location.** Engagement on social media is not just with colleagues but extends to strangers, especially, in election work, as a public person. Women must also negotiate their other identities, and public or private comments around those. Election workers from Dalit communities report have to encounter casteist abuse as well. Importantly, social media tends to be dominated by the middle classes, typically 'savarna' (upper-caste Hindu), and there are smaller numbers of Dalit and tribal populations online. Caste identities form an intersectional layer, since caste can often be identified from names, or hearsay. Women from oppressed classes consequently found themselves undermined publicly not only on gender, but also for caste - successes were attributed to these identities and reservations (affirmative action) around them than competence. These attacks could also come from within the caste communities. Anu recalls that:

*"On social media there was (gleeful) chatter about how I won't be able to go about in cars anymore after the council was dissolved. I am from a certain community. Such opportunities (of political leadership) are rare for me. I have no intention of going around in cars. Among the party also, they keep saying I should know my place. They have to establish the woman is incapable. These men have been around for so long, waiting for their turn, and when women get positions because of reservation, they are naturally jealous"*

— Anu, 27 years, Councillor, Ernakulam

Women's caste and class positions could also allow relaxations from domestic duties. Consider the case of Annapurni, the head of a state Mahila Morcha (Women's Platform) of a national party who uses her class position to delegate domestic responsibilities:

*"I have a personal assistant for office work and a maid for all household work. You need money to pay for them and to manage them. I don't enter into kitchen. My maid comes at 5:30am. My husband is an entrepreneur, he is also busy. My personal assistant will attend parent's meeting*

*on my behalf in my sons' school or college. I won't be able to pamper neither my kids nor husband. They are taking care of themselves. I have dedicated myself to politics"*

— Annapurni, 45 years, State Secretary,  
Tamil Nadu

When we talk about women politicians, it is no way a homogeneous category, but a group of women who identify with diverse social locations of age, gender, religious faith, caste, class, ability or even skin colour, the intersections of these identities are tied to the tactics that are available to them. In the quote above, the politician is able to actively leverage her class privilege to support her gendered claim to power. However, even here a woman over a man is expected to be responsible for ensuring that the tasks that are traditionally the woman's would not be undermined. In this case, a hired assistant and a domestic worker filled in. This choice might not be available to grassroots political workers who have to juggle their labour in politics and at home.

**Division of Labour.** The space of risk was not just an outward facing challenge from the general public, but central to the experience of organizational culture. Mala, a 35 year-old political worker who is the district IT wing secretary for one of the newer political parties in Tamil Nadu and an employee of a major IT company in India pointed out that the rules of the electoral space were very different from other professional spaces. Such different 'rules' implied she wore a saree - a symbol of dominant idea of respectable femininity - when working for the party. Mala's experience working in an IT company was central to her understanding of the differences between work cultures. While there were clear rules of engagement over gender and harassment issues at her workplace - including a committee and legal recourse against offenders, complaining of inappropriate behavior within a party would be unthinkable, and invariably lead to victim-blaming as well as a likely dead-end to one's career within a party. Tactically aware of the risks of party offices and the power equations in these, Mala voluntarily chose IT wing secretary post as she would stay at home, interact less with male party members, work with the well-regarded "knowledge" function of running technology for the party, and yet create impact.

The gendered spatio-temporality of grassroots work is evident in the fact that group meetings would happen within the locality during 'respectable hours' with the understanding that women would have the time to then return home to their domestic duties. At the end of polling, after the data on voting was tallied by the women, the men returned to the booth offices to discuss the day's events, prepare reports for the party superior offices while the women began to depart to their homes. Most women did not actually interact with the senior party members who only emerged at party offices late in the evenings. During our fieldwork, the author was permitted to sit through local party meeting after hours, at which a male political workers mentioned - "*can you imagine one of our women sitting amongst us at this hour?*" While the author, as a highly educated researcher and an outsider to the village as well as the class context of the party workers, were offered the privilege of transgressing gender lines by being in the room, it was nonetheless

pointed out that the exclusion of local party women would be socially enforced.

The clash between expectations from femininity and the spatio-temporal aspects of work influenced the division of labour. Women were assigned desk duty during election day, counting potential votes, providing polling station information to voters, whereas men walked about between booths or visited homes to mobilize voters. Men's full time engagement with politics, allowed them to undertake managerial positions and leadership status while Women were assigned tasks instead of being in a leadership role of delegating them. Nonetheless, women's work was critical, both because of outreach to other women, but also because of the unique importance of the data work they did. In a technology-mediated election in which very granular data on voters and their preferences was available to parties, women, who often sat at desks outside polling booths, played a critical role of keeping track of which voters came through the booths and who did not. This is vital information when someone was known to be a supporter of the party, since it becomes the booth desk worker's job to keep track and message out that a certain voter had not shown up, and that they needed to be rounded up.

In the next 2 sub-sections we separate tactics of representation and interaction based on an understanding that representation is a one-way process whereas interaction is a two-way process. Even though, in practice representation invites responses from the public and engagement is dependent on various factors. Separating representation from interaction allows us to visibilize the tactics shaping the decisions that go behind making representation one-way and interactions two-way. This distinction also helps us to understand how interactions shape decisions of representation and vice-versa.

## 4.2 Tactical Representation

**Profile Name and Picture.** Many other times women like Parvathi changed their patronymic, essentially her husband's name, as a means of publicly underlining the affiliation inherent in her newly adopted political family. The colonial, patriarchal practice of being given one's father's or husband's name was creatively used by Parvathi to eliminate misogynistic interactions online, and also to underline the primacy of the party as part of her identity. Parvathi's tactical choice also pushes at the edges of what is culturally acceptable as a wife or daughter, but herein lies the tension between loyalty to one's family and to one's political cause. By reinforcing the norm of patriarchal guardianship in her tribute to her leader, she makes it clear that an affront to her would indirectly be aimed at the leader himself:

*"On my twitter profile, I changed my name to include the initials of my party leader as a prefix to my first name. Ever since then, the sexist harassment has significantly reduced"*

— Parvathi, 36 years, District Secretary,  
Madurai

Social media is used as a platform to self construct and present identities for politicians - for women politicians this representation would have to incorporate a sense of morality, modesty often regional cultural imaginations. The saree is a widely accepted attire

of the respectable middle-class, cultured, educated working woman. Adhering to practices of respectable femininity, as conceptualized by Smitha Radhakrishnan [39], dress helps accrue symbolic capital which may then translate into political capital for politicians. Veteran women politicians would often coach younger recruits in their sartorial choices to look authoritative, respectable and to avoid unwanted attention. But these choices could not be extravagant either, lest you invite allegations of corruption and greed.

In contrast, male politicians' pictures often included pictures of crowds, signifying the politician's popularity or being a "peoples' person" or pictures of them in public - meeting people, doing social service work, or taking part in protests. In essence, the key to the male politician's online persona is his ability to appear effective in public, whereas for a female politician, her effectiveness as a private citizen requires reinforcing online. Indeed, women needed to be particularly selective about how even a mugshot profile photograph may appear. One of our respondents spoke about how a popular women politician received trolls not just online, but from a journalist at a press event, who asked her why her hair was not properly oiled and tied. In response, the politician stated, "*Had I been a woman at home, I would have tied my hair properly. But I work for the party all the time. So it is natural that I am a paratai (woman with unkempt hair)*". The respondent was inspired by the spontaneous response of the women politicians and stressed on the need to take lessons on tactical crisis management from senior women leaders.

**Content Creation and Sharing.** In July last year, a video of a woman clad in a traditional Kerala saree, seated cross legged on the floor started making the rounds on social media platforms in Kerala. In the video she is seen reciting verses from the Ramayana, a Hindu epic and religious text. The domestic frame of the woman reciting Hindu scripture in the glow of a traditional lamp as the man returns home at dusk- is an oft romanticized gendered image in regional cinema.

In this story, the virality of the video is owed to the political identity of the woman - a legislator from the Communist Party of India (Marxist) from the state of Kerala, a party that traditionally flaunts its atheist credentials. An image like this would have limited potential for newsworthiness in a traditional mainstream news context. But on social media, an image like this can be promoted by the party and its supporters alike for its symbolic representation. Social media affordances have provided a unique platform for politicians to curate their public selves by highlighting information, events, opinions, images that construct a personal identity which aligns with what they see as appealing to their constituents [33]. In this, they share the same medium on which the constituents build their identities, blurring the lines of perception between what is personal and political, public and private. While this personalization of politics allows some leeway in constructing their digital political selves, and yet the gendered continuum of acceptable optics find new ways of reinforcement online. Conversations with women politicians in Kerala, detail how self-portrayal on social media involves exhibiting the masculine template of leadership traits while projecting themselves as appropriately feminine:

*"When men are in politics, administrative positions, it is good, it is natural. When women are in administrative positions, it is bad. The panchayat president before me was a woman, when it's a woman, they evaluate their calibre every moment, they are waiting for her to make a mistake"*

— Sreeja, 40 years, Councillor, Ernakulam

The presentation of self and its gendered implications becomes crucial with the individualization of politics, a trend exacerbated by social media laying stress on the political individual within the collective [13]. Our interactions with the respondents point to how personalization is impacted by party/candidate centred politics and the presence or absence of strict organizational/ideological control in leftist and centrist populist parties in the state. In the Strategic Stereotype Theory [31] explains the gendering of political selves by politicians on Facebook to appeal to their vote banks and the general public in the run up to the 2019 elections. The showcase of the tactics available to politicians whose legitimacy on virtual media and on the ground is bound by their social locations of caste, class or religion intersecting with their gendered selves:

*"When I was part of the students' wing of the political party, I used to add party name. when I reached mainstream party politics, I didn't need it anymore. People knew me. I didn't receive a lot of sexual abuse. Maybe others might have. I didn't use to respond to messages."*

— Dhanya, 40 years, Councillor, Thiruvanthapuram

### 4.3 Tactical Interaction

**Tactics for Colleagues and Public.** Additionally, seeking 'permission' to access public spaces - both physical and virtual - was 'approved' when they are part of a group solely comprised of women. Therefore, women use conference calls as a way to build friendships that they can lean on since the presence of other women is seen as making the online and offline 'safer'. Several women pointed out the ways in which female community-building kept them feeling safe and supported within the larger context of their political work:

*"Three of us are in a similar age group. We three are good friends. We don't feel bad about each other's growth or success. We can maintain friendship only with people with whom you are working. I am in touch with my school or college friends. But, I won't be able to talk for longer with them. But, I can talk for hours with these people. I share my personal stories with them. I do a conference call once every three days, we all are that close. Last time when our party head came to Madurai, he only saw me, he didn't see them. So we were pulling each other's leg. We are so friendly"*

— Mala, 35 years, District IT Wing Secretary Madurai

Mala pointed out that women who were less urbane than her and did not have as much support of other women and their experiences often struggled to formulate tactics of their own. Part of her urban experience included familiarity with digital tools as well as social networks of people who likewise understood and used a wide range of digital tools - on different devices. Therefore she identified knowledge of social media platforms, awareness of strategies of identifying and dealing with various situations on social media as part of her strategy of being admissible online.

Women draw from their experiences in the offline in trying to proactively safeguard themselves online. This is evident in the way women perform online and navigate normative cultures by tactically appropriating behaviour and maintaining legitimacy. For instance when they anticipate unwelcome gestures from male members of the party which are a form of harassment which even when in rumor form, may harm their reputation within and outside the party and create all forms of distress. They pre-emptively and very commonly use a tactic of creating fictive familial bonds as a means to set the tone for their interactions:

*“I call every one Anna (older brother). If someone calls me over the phone, I will pick up the phone and say, “sollunga anna,” (please tell me, brother) I use this word 100 times. Even if he have any bad thoughts in their mind, when he comes to know that I am seeing him like my brother, there will definitely be a change in his character. I use this like a tool.”*

— Bhavani, 32 years, Booth Worker, Madurai

Bhavani's tactic at once tells the caller he is in the 'brother', but also performs for any other listener that she accords that relationship. Apart from linking their political identity and authority to their respective parties, women workers look out for party affiliation reflected by party symbols in the profiles of the men who send them friend requests or initiate conversations. The party acts as a community, thus the norms - fictive or real, are called out to when it is used as the marker for a relationship. Such filter mechanisms allow them to weed out 'unnecessary' conversations as well as have the option of holding the party leadership accountable in the event that the man misbehaves online.

*“I accept the friend request of only the people whom I know on Facebook. I accept friend's request, if their DP has party logo. If they have a party logo, I will be able to question them when they misbehave. This is a tool which I use to protect myself.”*

— Vanitha, 32 years, Booth Worker, Madurai

The characters of women in politics are often subjected to negative connotations of sexual excess as a result of their public presence and engagement. However, social media provides a platform [19] for calling out misbehavior and asking for accountability publicly. Ernakulam party-worker Anu called out an IAS officer for a misogynistic statement in which he cast aspersions on a woman councillor's character through a sexual insinuation:

*“The secretary (IAS officer) said all the bills in Thrikkakara municipality are written in hotel rooms. I wasn't at the meeting otherwise I would*

*have said something then and there. Later, I called him out and wrote a Facebook post. He could be an IAS officer, it doesn't matter. we are women and we do all kinds of nonsense? I asked him to respond, correct his statement and apologize.”*

— Anu, 27 years, councillor, Ernakulam

The sarcastic jibe that the councillor goes to a hotel room for her business insinuates a sexual relationship between her and those paying the council bills. That this comes as a brazen public statement from an IAS officer, the top central government bureaucrat in the region underlines not only the depth of misogyny, but also the fact that coming from a position of authority, these things can easily turn into accepted fact. Unlike with Mala, who choose to ignore statements online or public aspersions cast, that this came from a person in authority meant Anu had to respond. Her tactic was to address it publicly on Facebook, and appeal to the moral position of her party members to force the issue.

However, unlike when the outrage comes from is an external force that a party can get behind, when harassment and misdemeanour is from *within* the party, it may not be called out publicly, lead to victim blaming, and have adverse career implications. In such cases, women use the platforms that will not air the case to the general public, but which will allow them to shame such male party workers. Internal WhatsApp groups are a case in point – since phone numbers are visible, women have tactical agency to fight back. In response to sexual harassment faced on WhatsApp, Mala messaged the wife of the man who harassed her and reported the incident after this his messages stopped.

Now Mala interacts with her male counterparts only in WhatsApp groups, rather than on individual messages, and only in discussions related to political work. Additionally, she has downloaded WhatsApp Business, which she uses with a separate number exclusively for party work upto 10pm. She attributes her ability to shield herself from harassment in this way to her location in a city. Unlike her, she knows of women who are harassed on WhatsApp by male counterparts. She also requested us to inform WhatsApp to not disclose personal details of a group members to the rest of the group members without their consent.

**Tactical Silence.** During publicly speaking, in one instance, when Mala gathered the courage to speak at one such event, the video of her talk was posted on the social media and it went viral. She was in a bind because she did not want the video to be deleted because it made her popular across the district within an hour and it was a way to build her political career. At the same time, that attention meant that she had to avoid draining her energy by responding to unnecessary comments that such exposure garners:

*“Not only our party members, but the general public are also part of this group. I am so afraid... So many people commented on the video. Mostly people gave positive comments. But one person commented, sarcastically. I can view this comment in a positive way also. But, for some unknown reason, I was not comfortable with the comment. So, I didn't respond to any of the comments. I didn't respond even to positive comments.*



*I do this to protect myself from unnecessary problems.”*

— Mala, 35 years, IT Wing Secretary, Madurai

Her tactic of silence on comments and commenting on social media should be read along with her repetitive expression of gratitude to her supportive husband who prepares hot cooked meals for when she comes home late after tiring election campaigns, takes equal responsibility in nurturing their children. At once, she was keenly aware of the potential benefits of social media to her political career and the damage to her public image which ensured support of her husband. However, some women respond to abuse, hate or even attention by continuing to self-present on social media but not publicly engaging with comments as a way to preserve energy and take the moral high ground. Men dominate the sonic space at party public meetings.

27 year-old political worker Anu from Ernakulam whose negative experience on social media due to abusive comments led her to leave social media platforms to maintain her reputation. So she ceased to use social media. However, she uses her husband's account to keep up with the developments:

*“My husband is also part of these groups. So I check on them and get information through these. Otherwise I have to deal with so much nonsense and fight with people. They would say things like, ‘I want to see how she goes about doing things’. Then I get angry and respond. Then they might use abusive language! To think I have to use sub-standard language to respond to that. These are people we might know. So, I stopped using these platforms. I don't want to end up using bad language.”*

— Anu, 27 years, councillor, Ernakulam

## 5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Framing through Michel de Certeau's [8] theorizing of concepts of space and tactics helps making sense of the daily practice of political organizing and outreach by women in the hypermasculine space of Tamil Nadu and Kerala politics. The patriarchal characteristics of the party system, and the larger social milieu in which these characteristics exist, define a complex construction of gendered space, navigated in different ways by women workers to achieve legitimacy, representation, respect, and safety in their daily practice. Avoiding these spaces is not an option, online or offline - digital political communication is now a central part of campaigns, and women must engage with them, and the intersection of digital and physical space highlights the norms of engagement as set by the current social context. One can no longer engage in political publics in the absence of men and retreat in their presence, digital identities carry their own permanence through a campaign and long after.

Women in active political work often have to highlight to their constituents, the ways in which they fight for gender equity and respect in political and social spheres. This work shows how their own practice as professionals is itself undercut by the inherently unequal institutions in which they operate. The experiences highlighted here are from non-metropolitan party structures, where constituents often know each other for generations, and which have

been slow to deal with gender issues. Urban women's autonomous movements that engaged much in the activity of making space for women by engaging with the judiciary and bureaucracy have also not engaged with mainstream political parties. [4, 9],

Parties themselves do not generally abide by the redressal mechanisms in place which any private organisation with a minimum of ten members is expected to have according to Indian law under the Vishakha Guidelines [28]. The experiences of the political workers particularly highlight how the lack of protection within the institutions as well as the cultural milieu in which these exist lead them to employ their own tactics to cope, and often thrive within the system. Political workers' ability to enact agency has moved from one form of public action to another, as the 2019 election worker, Anu, takes to shaming political oppressors online. Further, in a digitally driven election, women doing election work in a vastly male space are at the vanguard of confronting not only daily workplace misogyny, but also online harassment, given the new impetus to maintain an online presence.

However, while patriarchal norms are reinforced in women needing to present profile pictures with families, or opt for desk work, women are also able to use the same surveillance mechanisms that seek to control them against harassers online. As a large body of recent HCI work has shown, misogyny and harassment online is widespread across the global south, and many of the challenges of being a public person seen by political workers are extremely similar to those faced by women irrespective of their professional practice online [27, 44, 47]. In response to networked misogyny and resultant discriminatory spaces online, the way women handle these spaces complicates our association of neutrality with online spaces. While we act towards changing these systems - online and offline, to be inclusive and intentionally so, an enumeration of 'feminist methods under constraint' that our informants and we ourselves perform to survive and thrive are valuable to the design community. We see in these experiences with social media use, that notions of body and virtue are central to the patriarchal gaze and are easily transferred online, and that the tactics employed by women use confrontation and deflection within the norms of party and culture than outside it. The story of the political workers seen here extends beyond politics to experiences of women online broadly.

Yet, the affordances that at once seek to undermine women's participation in the election process can be tactically deployed to confront a broken system. The persistence of exclusionary structures and practices that prevent enthusiastic participation of women workers, have contributed to women resorting to tactics-everyday practices or creative solutions to sustain in the political structure and in small ways reworking it with their actions. However, these tactics which maybe confrontational transgressions as opportunities arise, or conforming practices that enable them to survive, are often individuated in nature.

In the personalized platform that social media affords to political actors, the individuation of online practices are further reinforced. EA Jane [26] in her paper argues that 'calling out' perpetrators on an individual basis can not be a universal approach for tackling online harassment. She not only demands an institutional intervention for addressing the structural gendered cyber-hate, but she also insists on the need for developing, "hybrid activist strategies which

involve temporary allegiances between various theories, tactics and feminist generations.” This may be particularly necessary as we ask questions around who has access to online discourse at all, and the deep intersections between caste, class, and gender in online and offline political spaces. A ‘call-out’ as such may be far less effective from certain women workers than others, based on their identities and existing agency, and addressing these inequities requires a streamlined and concerted effort.

However, without disregarding the centrality of institutional support, we caution against writing off tactics as simply individual due to their lack of “tactical mobility” or ability to directly influence institutional or structural change. Because these tactics “make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary powers” and reveal the contradictions produced which at once individualise but also hold the potential for transformation. Therefore, with the awareness of such contradictions, it is essential to ask, how can such tactical subversion be mobilised into collective action [30].

## 6 FUTURE WORK

Our work contributes to the understanding of gender and online spaces, and the implications of cultural complexities in such work in influencing design insights. This will be a piece of a deeper ethnographic project being conducted into political workers who engage on digital platforms, specifically the experience of women in politics and the challenges they face in a digital work space. As ICTs have enhanced the visibility and accessibility of women in the public sphere, these questions of tactics, strategies, and preserving agency are brought to the forefront of considerations around design and dissemination of ICT technology. This work adds to the voices that are calling to attention the need to include hyperlocal content and an understanding of regional social embeddedness, due to complications of caste, class, and gender norms outside of the Western context, and we hope to continue probing these questions as we take this work forward.

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