

GENDER EQUITY FOR WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN THE NEWS MEDIA INDUSTRY – AFAR CRY

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Abstract

News media organizations across the Globe have increasingly been criticized for not only gender insensitive environment but also discriminating against women with equal or more qualification and experience than their male colleagues in terms of wage parity and choice of beats. The issue has been on the front burner of many national and international professional associations and academia. The augmentation of digital media, especially social media platforms have only seen a steep rise in misogyny, hate-mongering and abusive trolls against many women journalists who cover hard beats, especially politics and other critical beats. No country has any specific policy to address the menace. The UN General Assembly in 2017 has exhorted its member nations to make policies in this regard.

Key words: Gender-discrimination, Media, Misogyny, Women-journalists Trolls, Policies.

Introduction

Like any other industry, one has seen a surge in women's employment in the media industry also. When looked at carefully, women may be visible, but not necessarily in substantive editorial positions, decision-making positions and on hard beats, when compared with their male colleagues. More and more women are assigned soft beats like culture, education, and fashion. Very few can be seen covering politics, economy, international relations, and wars and insurgency. Not many women are invited as panelists in news channel discussion as the news media by and large remains a male bastion. When we look at the extent of space women get in the content, there is a huge misrepresentation, under representation and worst of all, inappropriate portrayal in both the regional and the mainstream media discourse.

The media office spaces are not necessarily gender sensitive. The #Me Too movement that rocked the media industry including the news media sector in India in 2018 tells in no uncertain terms that there is more than meets the eye. Despite laws, women continue to suffer gender-based stereotypes and sexual violence at work place. A number of women journalists opened up about the alleged misdemeanor of once a celebrated editor and at the time of controversy, a cabinet minister. The fall out of this was that he resigned voluntarily or was asked to resign. He went to the court filing defamation suit against a journalist denying the allegations. The court cases take unusually long and often the onus of proving the crime is left on the victim.

Ammu Joseph, a senior Indian journalist and an expert on gender issues had this to say on the movement, ‘I personally think the #Me-too in media moment that made waves in mid to late 2018 was perceived as a thunderbolt mainly because of its high visibility thanks to social media, which is where much of it was concentrated. We’ve known about the prevalence of SHW in media workplaces for a long time...These experiences certainly taught us that there is no short-cut to justice, in fact, we’ve seen that justice has been elusive in most cases.’ⁱ

In the same interview, on asking why the media houses in general were not interested in ensuring gender equity, Joseph said that a few at least were “trying harder” than others to create such policies, but they were in minority, while others were either not convinced on the need for gender justice, or spoke of meritocracy without any gender bias. The other reason according to Joseph could be that these media houses had not introspected enough on the subject as others did.ⁱⁱ

Pursuing journalism is not like any other job. Journalists in general face threat to their person and life from those who feel harmed by their writing. Some studies suggest that journalists covering politics, insurgency, and corruption have faced more threat to their life or have lost their lives in the line of their duty than those covering other beats. Women reporters who cover these beats, often find themselves at a double disadvantage—being reporters and women—when they take on a public role, reporting on issues and events that fall in the male bastion.

Many empirical studies the world over suggest that women journalists are discriminated against vis-à-vis their male colleagues on various counts, including in terms of wage parity, choice of beats, and in decision making positions, besides facing sexual harassment. The various research studies that are in the public domain prove it without any doubt that the issue of gender sensitivity has not made much resonance within the media houses, journalists’ associations and trade unions.

Almost half of the women journalists around the world say they experience sexual harassment at work.ⁱⁱⁱ Gender insensitive environment and sexual harassment is the bane of various workplaces and the media industry is no stranger to that. Abetted by technology, women journalists now face online attacks, especially trolling. This may result in women reporters, with some exception, either leaving the job or declining to take up challenging assignments. In order to address the issue, the International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF) financially supports an NGO that works to track digital harassment of women journalists.^{iv}

International Media Support (IMS), an independent group working for the rights and safety of women journalists based out of Denmark, in a report “*The Safety of Women Journalists: Breaking the Cycle of Silence and Violence – An Overview of Nine Countries*” has addressed the issue. The report was commissioned by IMS to ‘assess the question of how women in media are being targeted and how journalism is impacted by gender specific harassment and violence.’ The Study aims to inform, debate and take stock of ‘actions by media owners and editors, policy makers, press freedom organizations and journalists.’^v

The report identified many challenges that repeatedly came up in the nine countries, most of which broadly encompassed the following areas.

- *Physical security:* Women journalists are more often targets of sexual violence than male journalists. There is a need for more gender-specific preventative resources, such as training and risk assessments.
- *Verbal threats and abuse, particularly online:* Women journalists are subject to a particularly damaging brand of vitriol that includes, in high volume, explicit threats of sexual violence, personal insults, and circulation of private information or demeaning images.
- *Sexual harassment, workplace, and social inequality:* Gender inequality is entrenched within the media sector and societies, and manifested in unequal pay, low numbers of women being able to advance to the decision-making levels, and a tolerance or lack of protocols when it comes to sexual harassment by colleagues, sources or interviewees. Social pressure against women joining professional ranks or family obligations also disadvantage women in the field.^{vi} The report covered nine countries including Afghanistan, Colombia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Nepal, Pakistan, the Philippines, and Somalia.^{vii}

In a groundbreaking Global report on the Status of Women in the News Media by the International women’s Media Foundation (IWMF) that evaluated 500 media houses in over 60 countries, some foreseeable facts emerged. Men occupied majority of the management jobs and reporting positions in most countries; 73 per cent men were in top management compared with 27 per cent women. Among reporters, men occupied two-thirds of the jobs compared to 36 per cent held by women. However, among senior professionals’, women were almost nearing parity in reporting, editing, and writing jobs.

The IWMF commissioned the research to study gender equity in the news media around the world, and inform the development of a formal Plan of Action to improve the status of women. Released in 2011 after a painstaking work of two years, the global study looked at women in the workforce, pay differences, terms of employment, and pro-equality policies in newsrooms.^{viii}

When it comes to Asia and Oceania, the study reported men to women ratio of 4:1. The region covered 10 nations comprising Australia, Bangladesh, China, Fiji, India, Japan, New Zealand, Pakistan, the Philippines, and South Korea. In all, the research covered 82 news companies employing 47,000 people that included less than 10,000 women (p.213).

Some of the highlights of the study include that women comprised only about 1/5 (21.6 per cent) of those in board of directors and just about 9 per cent in top management. At senior and middle levels, women were found in just over 13 per cent positions each. The percentage increased to 32 per cent in jobs associated with reporting and editing, but men dominated here as well. The study, unlike elsewhere, reported “strong” job security for women in this region. Women were also seen as “greater beneficiaries” of regular part-time employment, holding about 65 per cent of such positions.^{ix}

The study reported that not all companies provided data on wages, but based on partial data that the researchers were able to get, the findings revealed that women’s salary and average high salaries were ‘often lower than those of men’s in this region, particularly in governance, where men made nearly five times the average high salary of women.’^x

When it came to gender-related policies, the study reported it as “encouraging” in the region as a whole with 89 per cent newsrooms appearing to have policies guaranteeing maternity leave and 57 per cent paternity leave, and 55 percent media houses assured women got back to their jobs after availing of the leave, if they so wished. Two-thirds (67 per cent) of media houses prohibited sexual harassment, but 51 per cent had ‘some broader policy guaranteeing gender equality’ (p.14).

Highlights of India Study

Seventeen Indian news companies participated in the study – 10 newspapers, 6 television stations, and 1 radio station. Together, these companies employ approximately 13,000, including 2,405 women and 10,518 men. Men outnumber women in these companies by 4:1.

The gendered pattern in these companies was one of women’s under-representation across occupational categories. Women did not rise higher than around a fourth in any of the various levels, and their participation drops to the single digits in two.

Both governance and top management levels of Indian companies seemed to be occupied by few select individuals. In the case of the first, women’s participation is approximately one-fifth (21%) of those in governance, which denoted roles on company boards of directors. Some company executives interviewed during data collection indicated that

women's place on governing boards was often determined by their membership in families owning the company (i.e. mothers, wives, daughters, daughters-in-law, etc.), rather than their ability to secure these positions through advancement.

At the top management level, which included publishers, chief executive officers and others responsible for running the company, women were exceptionally low at only 13.8%.

In junior and senior professional levels, which included the largest numbers of the journalistic workforce, women were 25.5% and 28.4%, respectively. Such low participation by women in these junior and senior writing, editorial and news producer ranks raises questions about women reporters' ability to influence overall news content.

A support category in which women sometimes dominate in other nations – sales, finance and administration – sees women holding only 11.4% of the positions in the Indian companies surveyed.

A few companies surveyed indicated that it has not been customary to hire women into some jobs, e.g., where they might be the only female with a fairly large group of male colleagues, or for certain kinds of reporting, namely beats with violence or other danger associated with them.

In both senior and top management levels, women are paid substantially less both at the average low and average high ranges. Only in one occupational level – sales, finance and administration – did women's pay noticeably exceed that of men. (pp. 233–235)

The UNESCO-UN Women International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) report of 2015, *Inside the News: Challenges and Aspirations of Women Journalists in Asia and the Pacific*, states that although the number of women professionals in media has doubled in the last two decades, it is still at only 28.6 per cent in Asia and Pacific and the men to women ratio is a dismal 4:1.^{xi}

Many academics, researchers and other institutions have undertaken studies on the state of women journalists for over a quarter century or so in India. To say that it is only the media sector where women suffer inequities would be far from truth. Women, in general, face the same issues in all the sectors and news media is no exception. News Media in India is more or less a private enterprise, where a lot of issues remain dormant. It is a well-known fact that the terms of appointment, promotion, and salaries and increments remain a confidential affair in the media industry. Colleagues often do not know each other's salary and perks.

In India over 300 universities and institutes of higher learning impart education and training in journalism. Thousands of young girls join these courses and subsequently the profession, but there is enough empirical data to suggest that after joining, not many are able to sustain

their jobs for a long time. The reasons are not far to seek; the various factors include striking a balance between home and work, lack of job satisfaction, lack of wage parity, and by and large a general lack of gender sensitive policies and environment at workplace contribute to the phenomenon.

According to the Press Information Bureau (PIB) data for 2020, out of 2516 accredited journalists in India, there are only 320 women. Interestingly the agency that gives accreditation, i.e. PIB, seems to allot accreditation to quite a few retired information officers/directors of the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting. Age seems to be no bar as quite a few accredited journalists are in their 70s and 80s. In all, women comprise about 15 per cent of the total number of accredited journalists.^{xii}

In order to be eligible for accreditation, reporters or cameraman need to have five years' experience and for freelancers, an experience of 15 years is required. Only print and television journalists are eligible for accreditation.

A year-long study by a Delhi-based Media Studies group released in 2012 reiterates the findings of many other studies on the dismal state of women journalists. Getting data vide the RTI (Right to Information Act) of 14,278 accredited journalists across 255 districts in 28 states representing 40 per cent of country's total districts, women journalists only represented 2.7 per cent of journalists at district level, while six states and two union territories had no women journalist at the district level. Interestingly Andhra Pradesh had the maximum number of women journalists (as many as 107) at the district level, while Sikkim and Meghalaya had 17 per cent each of women of the total number of journalists. Bihar and Chhattisgarh had about 10 per cent and over 9 per cent respectively. Surprisingly the national media did not perform better than districts, where women journalists' accreditation was found to be no better in regional and local newspapers. The study revealed that only two freelance women journalists were given accreditation at the district level, of which one was a photo journalist.^{xiii}

When there is a talk about media and gender, it broadly means the relationship of media and gender and how gender is represented in media. As more and more women join media, the issues relating to a general lack of level playing field in appointments, wage parity, their say in the decision-making, and the presence of gender-sensitive environment are important areas for empirical research. All these areas were included in the baseline survey undertaken in all the nine countries in South Asia including Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Pakistan, Maldives, Myanmar, Nepal, and Sri Lanka.^{xiv}

The SWAN (South Asian Women's Network) seminal study, that was supported by UNESCO until 2018 and included financial support for research in a few South Asian countries, reveals ominous data from the baseline survey. ***Women for Change: Towards building a gendered media in South Asia*** as the project was titled was taken in tandem in all

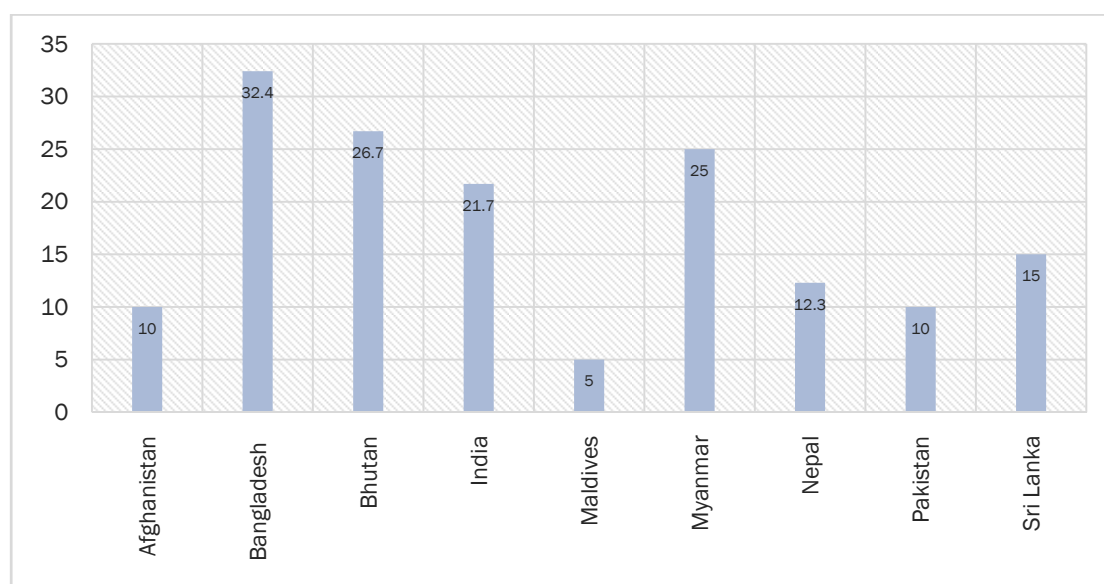
the countries referred above with common research indicators for the baseline survey and the following key objectives:

1. To address the vulnerability of women journalists in south Asia: advocate equal rights for women working in the media;
2. To strengthen the gender sensitivity of the south Asian media, including on portrayal of women in media content and through advertising; and,
3. To engage with stakeholders, including advocacy with governments, to bring about gender equality in and through the media.

Research Highlights: Findings and Insights

Women's participation in media organizations across the nine South Asian countries is significantly low in substantive positions.

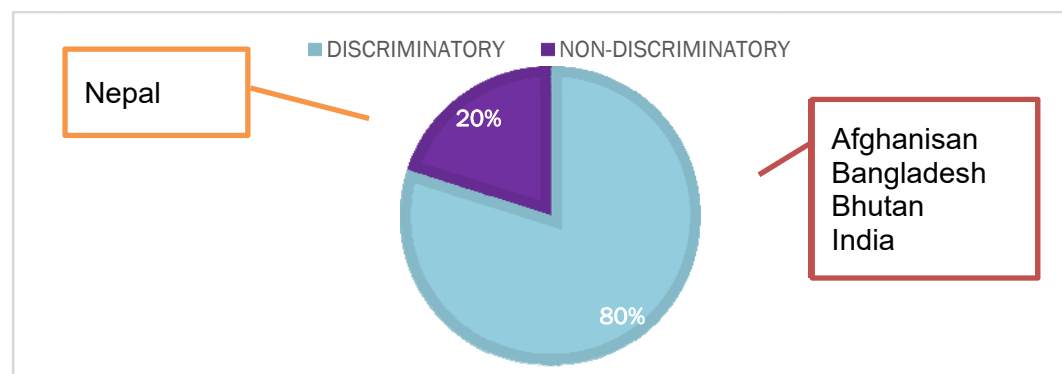
Table 1: *Women in Leading Positions in Media in South Asia (in Per Cent)*



Source: Swan Report

Low Job Security for Women in the Media Workforce

As may be seen in the pie chart below, only two countries, Nepal and Sri Lanka, reflect non-discriminatory job security for women in news media.

Table 2

Source: SWAN Report

Wage Disparity/Discrimination

Wage disparity is a vexed issue in countries like Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. In Afghanistan, for instance, women are often paid less than men (earning less than US\$ 250 per month). They are also not entitled to annual increments, bonus or medical allowances.

In Bangladesh, some media channels were accused of wage disparity and unequal opportunities for women journalists. In India, women journalists were mostly recruited and employed on contractual basis, denying them wage board scales. One of the allegations against women journalists in the Maldivian media as brought out in the country research report is that women demanded higher wages and this often became a reason for media organizations for not hiring more women. In contrast, Nepal has rarely reported cases of discrimination either about wage disparity for women journalists or in terms of distribution of opportunities. The Nepal Working Journalists (First Amendment) Act, 2064 (2007) further endorses minimum salary for media professionals. Sri Lanka also reported an equal distribution of wages with no known cases of gender bias, especially when it comes to sending women on foreign training and scholarships.

Ambiguous Leave Policies

Women in almost all the nine countries faced discriminatory leave benefits. India has a law in place to safeguard at least the maternity leave benefits for women employees, which also covers the media industry. The issue of maternity leave policy is of utmost concern among women media professionals in Afghanistan. In Bangladesh, maternity leave is often sanctioned depending on the in-house policies of various media organizations and the personal equation of women employees with authorities. Bhutan has similar concerns.

Safety and Sensitivity at Workplace

The findings from all the nine countries reflect gender insensitive environment at work places. The #Me Too movement in India in 2018 indicated that there is a lot than meets the eye in the media houses, where women journalist face unsafe environment. In Afghanistan, women even face threats from Taliban.

Socio-cultural Barriers

Women journalists in Afghanistan, Bhutan and Myanmar mostly face socio-cultural barriers, which prove to be a hindrance in their professional careers. Bhutanese women generally report having heavy domestic responsibilities, which often pose a limitation to their progress in the media-related professions. The case of Bhutan further revealed that despite support from the family and spouse, women's involvement in household management and care work seems to present substantial challenges for their participation in the media.

In retrospect, when we look at a study about the state of women working in the Indian news media industry, for the National Commission for Women conducted by women journalists led by Pamela Bhagat in 2004, it is quite evident that in the last over one and a half decade, things may have only got worsened due to the proliferation of social media.

The survey with a response from 410 women journalists from among 3500 journalists who were sent the questionnaire encompassed a wide range of issues such as recruitment and job segregation, promotions and work conditions, training and development to childcare and maternity facilities, sexual harassment, union involvement, superannuation and freelancing.

An important concern that emerged from the study pertains to job insecurity. To quote from the study, 'journalists were employed like daily wage labor, signing a muster at the end of the month to get a pittance of Rs 1500 to Rs 3000 as wages; contract system of employment; neglect of maternity and child-care provisions and sexual harassment.'

More than 20 per cent respondents said that women were discriminated against in promotions. Another 46 per cent felt that this was because of their sex, while some felt it was because of age. The data suggested that more than 8 per cent women journalists were forced to leave their jobs due to discrimination in promotions. About 38 per cent respondents shared that having children carried a misperception that women would not be able to work late hours. Similarly, over 29 per cent felt that having children impacted their promotion.

It came out in the research that although most of the respondents had not deferred marriage or pregnancy due to job insecurity, about 57 per cent of those with children had availed of maternity leave and another 11 per cent had availed of unpaid or part maternity leave.

Interestingly, over 17 per cent respondents were not aware of the existence of any such facility in their organization. Over 54 per cent women journalists who did not have children said that they would avail of maternity benefits in the future, if such a provision existed.

In personal interactions with respondents as a part of the qualitative survey, some upsetting facts emerged. About 23 per cent respondents said they had faced sexist remarks or gestures and sexual harassment in their work environment and professional associations of which they were members. Of those who faced such ignominy and discomfiture, over 31 per cent said that this had 'seriously undermined their confidence and affected their work.' Over 24 per cent said it mildly affected them, but more than 41 per cent that such issues had no impact on them, which is encouraging because such women did not let their self-esteem and confidence suffer because of gender insensitive environment at their workplace, but went about with their work.

The study found that the level of awareness about key issues was very low among women journalists. Out of the total sample, 31 per cent were not aware if any equal employment policy existed in their organization; 29 per cent did not know if women were targeted for filling vacancies in their organizations; about 20 per cent did not know whether formal appeal procedures or mechanisms for handling grievances existed in their organization, while over 50 per cent were sure of no such facility; 10 percent were not aware of any formal training programme in their organization, while over 42 per cent said that no such facility was provided; and, about 88 percent were not aware of any superannuation scheme or believed that it did or did not apply to them.^{xv}

In an ethnographic study of women journalists, a research study studied 50 women journalists from both mainstream and regional newspapers who worked in the media in the 1970 and 1990s. Some interesting findings include the following:

Women joining the profession of journalism mostly come from educated and upper middle- and middle-class families. Most women interviewed said that their parents encouraged them to study and take up the profession. Of the fifty women, majority of them were married and spoke of by and large supportive families; the apprehension generally was on their long working hours and returning home late.

The research reflected that women generally were not discriminated at the time of appointment, but mostly when it came to distribution of beats and the existence of gender stereotype among seniors and male colleagues. Women were 'sidelined, into soft news reporting and sub-editing.' This, however, could not be generalized as in some English newspapers, some women were found working on hard stories including economic journalism. The feature section in both the English and vernacular newspapers is considered

largely to be a female domain. One hardly found a man in this section. This section is generally known as “deadline free zone” as this section is weekly and the content is soft in nature. The research found that many women preferred working in the Features department to balance their home and work responsibilities. The newsroom of the newspaper organizations, the research found out, was less favourable to women journalists when compared to the features section. The study found the number of women journalists being almost equal to men in the English newspapers, but in the regional ones, the number of male journalists was dominant. Compared to the features section and newsroom, the reporting room is almost male dominated, with rarely a woman covering politics, war and defense.^{xvi}

Yet another study about women journalists in Kerala reflect that the findings are not very different. Gender discrimination in the choice of beats and stereotyping of women roles were found to be the common complaint by women journalists. The study found that hardships existed, from wage disparity to even lack of basic facilities like separate toilets and restrooms for women.^{xvii}

A study on working women journalists conducted by Akhileshwari (2013) revealed that English media persons received better wages when compared to the regional press. Women journalists were allotted soft beat news only. A study conducted by Devender Bhardwarj (2014) on women journalists revealed that women's family and social responsibilities were a major hindrance in the way of women journalist to continue with their jobs.^{xviii}

There are enough misogynists and gender insensitive people in the society and newsrooms are no exception. Ammu Joseph in an interview said, “It can’t be removed from newsrooms in isolation from the rest of society. But I think a declared policy ‘of active commitment to gender equality and equity, and zero tolerance for gender-based discrimination and harassment, would help media organizations lead the way towards more gender just institutions and, ultimately, a more just society.’^{xix}

When we analyze the findings of various studies, some exploratory and others seminal research work over a period of time, one thing is common in the findings: a general discrimination of women in the news media industry in areas of wages, work distribution, and near absence of gender insensitive environment in both the developed and the developing countries.

In an ongoing research study funded by the ICSSR on the news media industry, the initial findings reiterate the past research studies on the state of women in the Indian news media industry, especially on wage disparity and an overall gender insensitive environment that led many women journalists to change their career early on or mid-way.^{xx}

Women Journalists Face the Tirade from Misogynists and Hate Mongers on Social Media

The news media in India over a period of time is overtly divided on ideological lines. Being a journalist in current times and to top it, being a woman journalist is a double whammy, especially for those covering politics and other critical issues. Women journalists covering such kind of hard beats are often trolled, abused, their characters assassinated by a virulent discourse, which at times also includes morphing their pictures to present them in a bad light—the ultimate weapon in the sick minds of misogynists to disgrace women. One has not seen any women commission or the government taking a *suomoto* cognizance of this inhuman and criminal campaign against women journalists, the trolling often being on perceived ideological lines. Some brave hearts fight the battle on their own either by taking the trolls sometimes head on and at other times by ignoring them when it becomes too hard to handle or by lodging a complaint with the Cybercrime cell.

A 2018 survey by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) reflected that 64 per cent women reporters have experienced online abuse. The online harassment takes various forms, the report says, ‘including death or rape threats, insults, the devaluation of work, sexist comments, being sent obscene images, cyberbullying, cyberstalking and account impersonation.’ Of the women who faced online harassment, 47 per cent did not report the abuse; if they did it was done only internally to their management, said 40 per cent of respondents. The fall out of these attacks had its impact on the victims. Sixty-three per cent said the attacks had psychological effects, 38 per cent went into self-censorship and 8 per cent lost their jobs. Mindy Ran, the co-chair of IFJ Gender Council, commented that the survey highlighted that online harassment was the growing forms of gender-based violence against women journalists. The survey also pointed out a near absence of support mechanism, laws, and a general failure on the part of national governments to implement international treaties.^{xxi}

Harry Stevens and Piyush Aggarwal in a thought- provoking, and probably one of its kind exercise followed the twitter account of some of the well-known woman journalists in India for a few days in April 2017 to analyze the tweets to find what kind of trolls these four Indian women journalists received and prepared a day’s account on which they received the maximum reaction within that timeline. The journalists short-listed for the study were BarkhaDutt, Rana Ayub, Madhu Kishwar and Tavleen Singh, all known for their candid and outspoken views.

The researchers shared their findings in their dispatch “***What’s it like to get trolled all day long?***” on the digital platform of a mainstream newspaper.^{xxii}

To say the least, the outcome is demeaning, insulting and outright criminal against women, at least against two of these feisty women journalists, BarkhaDutt and Rana Ayyub.

The abuses and expressions were categorized under the following themes, *Violent, Sexual, Racial, Religious, Political, and Other*.

According to the findings, it was found that BarkhaDutt was hurled with ‘sexist, racist slurs and violent threats.’ Trolls accused Dutt of being ‘skill for political causes, typically left-wing ones.’ Some of the words, the researchers say, were not necessarily meant to be abusive ‘in and of themselves,’ like “Pakistani” for example, which is a nationality, but this term was often used for her pejoratively. For Rana Ayyub, a Muslim, the researchers commented, ‘hateful tweets were often colored by “Islamophobia.”’ The trolls liked ‘to pretend Ayyub as an agent of Pakistan’s Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI)’ and to demand she “return” to Pakistan. ‘Any criticism of India or its government, however, reasonable or constructive, may be deemed traitorous,’ the report pointed out.

Tavleen Singh, the team commented, who has been perceived as being more “right-wing” than Dutt or Ayyub was also accused of being a “Pakistani propagandist” and an anti-national, ‘the harassment directed at Singh pales in comparison to that received by her more “left-wing” counterparts,’ the researchers noted.

Singh received 195 tweets that the researchers tagged as being potentially abusive during the entire week that began Monday, April 10 and ended Sunday, April 16—that were fewer than Dutt or Ayyub received on any given day throughout the week. Moreover, the hateful tweets sent in reply to Singh were often directed at people other than Singh herself.

AboutKishwar, the team commented, “like Singh, the hateful tweets she receives are generally directed at people other than her. Rather, trolls try to dissuade her from even engaging people with whom they disagree”.

When oneanalyze the trolls at a micro level, these were more vicious to Ayyub and Dutt—during the week beginning Monday, April 10 and ending Sunday, April 16.As many as 2,582 abusive tweets mentioning Ayyub and 3,020 mentioning Dutt were tagged, when compared with Kishwar and Singh, which had lesser number and were not as vicious personally.

The terms often included “Presstitute,” “Terrorist,” “Anti-national,” “Pakistani” (in a pejorative sense), and “Mulli” (for Ayyub). Sample some of the tweets for Ayyub.^{xxiii}

As if offensive tweets were not enough, her twitter handle, Ayyub's was morphed and the statements which she said in a media interview, she never gave, were ascribed to her that were shown on the morphed twitter handle of a mainstream English television channel.^{xxiv}

The Washington Post quoting Ayyub wrote, 'The threatening or disparaging messages come via voice call, text, WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. They are often sexual in nature, though they also accuse Ayyub, who is Muslim, of being anti-Hindu.' The paper commented that in a year, she changed 52 SIM cards in an effort to divert trolls who were stalking her over the phone. This seemed like a 'coordinated social media campaign' intended to intimidate her out of continuing her job as a freelance journalist.^{xxv}

In a column in the *Hindustan Times*, Ayyub wrote, 'I have no right -- none whatsoever -- to demand fairness from social media, not even from alleged intellectuals who profess neutrality and accuse me of being biased and communal.'^{xxvi}

The Delhi Union of Journalists (DUJ) Gender Council condemned unending trolling of Rana Ayyub in a press release issued in April 2018. Concerned about the growing number of sexist attacks on women journalists 'who are being singled out for intimidation and harassment,' the DUJ demanded that the complaint filed by Ayyub with the Delhi cyber-crime cell be looked into at the earliest.^{xxvii}

Barkha Dutt, who came to light during her coverage of the Kargil war, has been a role model for many aspiring journalists. She has also been the inspiration behind the role of a journalist essayed by mainstream actors in a number of popular Hindi movies.^{xxviii} Dutt suffered the maximum trolls as per the study. Her coordinates were shared by a misogynist in a troll that resulted in 1000 more trolls, all vituperative and abusive to her. She wrote to Twitter against that but nothing substantive came out of it.^{xxix} In a story in *The Quint*, reporter Swati Bhattacharya wrote that in order to "name and shame" her perpetrators, Dutt publicly announced the numbers which were sending her hateful messages and 'released the content of these messages on Twitter – including dick pictures they sent,' tagging Delhi Police and Twitter CEO and requesting him to take action against such men who 'threaten women and subject them to such disgusting behavior.'^{xxx}

In an opinion column in the *Hindustan Times*, Dutt wrote, 'I have been married off to men who either don't exist or who do but have had no romantic connection to me. Even my Wikipedia profile is routinely edited (despite formal complaints to them) to describe me as married to these men. The tweets about my fictional husbands have underlined that the men were Muslim by way of explaining my secularism — which, of course, is a word used as a slur. When I started publicly rebutting the rumors, with anger, humor and exasperation, the internet entries were amended to say I was "twice divorced."^{xxxi}

Discussion

The many research studies on the state of women journalists in various countries including India, make it clear that gender equity and gender sensitive environment within the workplace and in the overall ecosystem is still a far cry. The social media probably has done the utmost damage to women journalists, who by and large seem to be fighting lone battles. Internet/social media is the least regulated medium. In spite of many women commissions and a law against sexual harassment of women, there is no *suo moto* cognizance by these bodies on protecting the fundamental and human rights of some of the spirited women journalists who are trolled, abused and made fun of. These journalists who are in a watchdog function, working in extremely challenging environment, deserve protection from the misogynists and hate mongers who often hide behind the anonymity of trolls.

Another point worth debating is the different treatment meted out to male vis-à-vis female journalists when their writing hurts the powerful and their supporters who stalk and troll such writers. When a male journalist offends them, he at best would be called names for being ambitious or be hurled with certain expletives to be toying a certain ideology, but for women it is always character assassination. When a man is abused, the very abuses end up being disrespectful to women only! Taking a dig at people who played “victims”, as Madhu Kishwar, put it, who herself is trolled, she had this to say for fellow women journalists being trolled in her column, as a part of Hindustan Times’s campaign, ***Let’s Talk About Trolls***: Quoting Barkha Dutt who said “online abuse (is) a modern-day weapon to silence women”, Kishwar commented, “it sounds bizarre coming from a woman who is hyperactive on social media, who writes regular columns for leading national and international dailies, has been the prima donna of TV journalism for decades, is invited to speak at countless Lit fests and other high-profile public events on a regular basis. If this is proof of her “silencing”, one wonders how much more talking she wants to do! This is not to justify or condone rape threats or obscene posts that Barkha has been receiving. But she and others of her persuasion do not care one bit when those who oppose her brand of journalism receive such threats or are victims of real murderous attacks as I have been.”^{xxxii}

There probably is no country in the entire world that has adopted any specific provisions for the protection of journalists from online harassment. Recognizing the online threats to journalists, especially women journalists, the United Nations General Assembly in 2017 issued a resolution on their safety and the issue of impunity addressing violence, intimidation and harassment of journalists, especially female journalists, online and offline. The General Assembly called upon states ‘to create and maintain, in law and in practice, a safe and enabling environment for journalists to perform their work independently and without undue interference.’^{xxxiii}

In Finland, the media industry joined to create a “Journalist Support Fund” to counter online harassment. The fund is yet to get active as of September 2019. Besides, the Union of Journalists of Finland has issued a guide for active journalists with advice on what to do if they are the target of a hate campaign. At the same time, it also called upon journalists to return to “fact-based” journalism.^{xxxiv}

The initial idea of the internet meant *informational liberalism* that was led by a vision of networked computing as a public property that served the general interest. All this, however, changed too soon. Now, a large part of the web is dominated by a few leading players, almost all of them based in the US, who have consolidated their dominance over the last decade or so. The issues of cultural diversity and the plurality of voices in the current digital and global environment are raising new challenges beyond those already identified in the context of migration from classical media to the internet galaxy.^{xxxv}

The GAFAM (Google, Amazon, Facebook Apple and Microsoft) dominate the digital markets, making them not only the most valued companies, but also ones who control the information flow. The social media proprietors cannot get away from their responsibility of addressing the issue of hatred, misogyny and trolling against women journalists. Complaints by some Indian women journalists to social media platform owners met with indifference and no response.

As the social media is getting only more irreverent to people with a dissenting voice or supporting a different perspective on issues, it is only in the fitness of things, that our government addresses the issue head on in the context of women in general and women journalists in particular. The Ministry of Women and Child Development, the Ministry of Information & Broadcasting, the Press Council that has representation of media and opinion makers and TRAI need to debate the issue and advise media owners on making gender sensitive policies within the media outlets. Similarly, the government in consultation with various stakeholders must come out with stringent regulation against hateful and revengeful trolls against women journalists.

Many women journalists leave the profession due to insensitive work environment and an unsupportive eco system. The spirited women journalists who continue to work and express their opinion on issues, institutions and powerful people are now an endangered species in the media world; they need all the support from the society and policymakers, and the perpetrators of indecent troll deserve the strictest punitive action.

References/End Notes:

ⁱ<https://feminisminindia.com/2019/11/06/ammu-joseph-metoo-media-moment/>; accessed on 5.8.20.

ⁱⁱIbid.

ⁱⁱⁱSource: IWMF report on “Violence and Sexual Harassment Against Women in News Media: A Global Report.”

^{iv}<https://www.iwmf.org/issues/safety/>; accessed on 7.8.20.

^v<https://www.mediasupport.org/publication/the-safety-of-women-journalists/>

^{vi}Ibid. p5.

^{vii}Ibid.

^{viii}http://www.unesco.org/new/en/member-states/single-view/news/global_report_on_the_status_of_women_in_the_news_media_launc/ Full report is also available in PDF at <https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/IWMF-Global-Report.pdf>; accessed on 18.8.20.

^{ix}Ibid. (pp14-15).

^{xx}Ibid.

^{xi}<https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20eseasia/docs/publications/2015/06/inside-the-news-final-040615.pdf?la=en&vs=3403>; accessed on 25.8.20.

^{xii}<http://pibaccreditation.nic.in/acrindexallphoto.aspx>; accessed on 25.8.20

^{xiii}<https://www.hindustantimes.com/delhi/women-journos-number-just-2-7-at-district-level-says-survey/story-sdlkSovLvdOPDr3zJPt3NJ.html>; accessed on 22.8.20.

^{xiv}URL links for accessing full reports.

https://www.academia.edu/42175130/WOMEN_FOR_CHANGE_Building_a_Gendered_Media_in_South_Asia_REPORT_ON_THE_STATUS_OF_WOMEN_IN_MEDIA_IN_SOUTH_ASIA_Vol_I

https://www.academia.edu/42175129/WOMEN_FOR_CHANGE_Building_a_Gendered_Media_in_South_Asia_REPORT_ON_THE_STATUS_OF_WOMEN_IN_MEDIA_IN_SOUTH_ASIA_COUNTRY_RESEARCH_REPORTS_Vol_II

The current author is the co-editor of both the volumes of the SWAN Report; part of the SWAN-UNESCO research and one of the two coordinators for research in all the nine countries.

^{xv}<http://ncwapps.nic.in/pdfReports/Status%20of%20Women%20Journalists%20in%20India.pdf> accessed on 1.8.20.

^{xvi} 13_chapter 5.pdf Shodhganga. Accessed on 4.8.20.

^{xvii} Priyanka Rajeev, Midhila.M.S, Karthika.C, “ Work and Life of Women Journalists: A Study with Special Reference to Kerala”, International Journal of Innovative Technology and Exploring Engineering (IJITEE) ISSN: 2278-3075, Volume-8 Issue-7S2, May 2019.

^{xviii} Devender (2015), “Status of working journalists (women) Delhi,” PhD thesis submitted to Manav Rachna International University, Sector -43, Faridabad, Haryana, India, reflected in the Shaik Mohammad Shameer & Prof.V.Sathi Reddy WORKING CONDITIONS OF JOURNALISTS AS A RESEARCH FIELD: REVIEW LITERATURE. Available at: WORKING_CONDITIONS_OF_JOURNALISTS_AS_A_R.pdf

^{xix} <https://feminismindia.com/2019/11/06/ammu-joseph-metoo-media-moment/>

^{xx} The author’s fellowship research is on “Wages and related issues in the news media industry in India- a critical appraisal” in which she is also looking at the gender perspective in the area.

^{xxi} <https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/article/ifj-global-survey-shows-massive-impact-of-online-abuse-on-women-journalists.html>

^{xxii} <https://www.hindustantimes.com/interactives/lets-talk-about-trolls/whats-it-like-to-get-trolled-all-day-long/> Accessed on 19.8.20

Count of categories (some tweets have more than one), per half hour

12a1a2a3a4a5a6a7a8a9a10a11a12p1p2p3p4p5p6p7p8p9p10p11p066- for Barkha Dutt.

The researchers collected the tweets on the evening of April 17, making use of Twitter’s free REST API. The team collected as many tweets as possible for all the four journalists, then selected the day with highest minimum tagged tweets among the four. It came out to be 14 April that had the maximum tagged tweets, Dutt mentioned in 520 tagged tweets, Ayyub in 433, Kishwar in 117 and Singh in 56 tagged tweets. The terms were shortlisted after going through hundreds of tweets to see which were the ones often used and used in abusive context. The list of terms the researchers say is not exhaustive.

^{xxiii} The term “Presstitute” was first used by Gen V K Singh former Chief of Army and cabinet minister in NDA government , in 2015. Story at <https://www.indiatoday.in/india/story/vk-singh-calls-media-presstitutes-twitter-djibouti-247635-2015-04-08>; accessed on 25.8.20.

^{xxiv} Ibid.

^{xxv} <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2018/05/26/an-indian-journalist-has-been-trolled-for-years-now-u-n-experts-say-her-life-could-be-at-risk/>; appeared on 26 May 2018. Accessed on 20.8.20.

^{xxvi}<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/let-s-talk-about-trolls-women-are-molested-virtually-on-a-daily-basis-rana-ayyub/story-ehKczykSQcnhHe60eAujvN.html> accessed on 20.8.20.

^{xxvii}<https://thewire.in/media/delhi-journalists-body-condemns-relentless-trolling-of-rana-ayyub> accessed on 20.8.20.

^{xxviii} In war film Lakshya, Priety Zinta did a Barkha Dutt in Kargil, including in looks.
<https://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/journalists-on-screen/article18201304.ece>

^{xxix} It is not uncommon for social media to be overactive in blocking users at the behest of the powers that be, who may write anti-government posts, but when it comes to women being abused and trolled, it turns a Nelson's eye. So much for business interests!

https://twitter.com/BDUTT/status/1097705446809522176?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1097705446809522176%7Ctwgr%5E&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.idiva.com%2Fwork-life%2Fbalancing-act%2Fjournalist-barkha-dutt-abused-and-harassed-on-twitter-and-whatsapp-for-reporting-kashmirs-pulwama-attack%2F17079350

^{xxx}<https://www.idiva.com/work-life/balancing-act/journalist-barkha-dutt-abused-and-harassed-on-twitter-and-whatsapp-for-reporting-kashmirs-pulwama-attack/17079350>

Accessed on 22.8.20.

^{xxxi}<https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/let-s-talk-about-trolls-trolling-is-a-weapon-to-silence-women-barkha-dutt/story-A9X3fAuRwZiwVrhYQnKbYL.html>

Accessed on 22.8.20.

^{xxxii}<https://www.inuth.com/india/narrative-of-right-wing-troll-infested-social-media-is-a-manufactured-phobia-madhu-kishwar/>

^{xxxiii}<https://www.loc.gov/law/help/protecting-journalists/compsum.php> Ruth Levush a Senior Foreign Law Specialist in a Comparative Summary of laws and policies in some countries September 2019.

^{xxxiv} Ibid.

^{xxxv} Francisco rui cádimas, 2017. PDF can be accessed at:https://www.researchgate.net/publication/320992499_Media_diversity_and_globalisation_in_the_digital_age