

## Challenges Confronting Women in Media

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### Abstract

*The present times demonstrates that media is losing its ability to express freely without fear and freedom of speech is under repression. Journalists are facing threats and attacks constantly for doing their job. In these attacks on media personnel, do gender role have any implication? How do women in the media perceive their role? Do they face any threats or challenges while trying to compete equally in the male dominated profession? This paper is an attempt to comprehend the complexities of their job and the motivating factor for women journalists to continue with zeal and enthusiasm in spite of being confronted from different spheres.*

**Key words:** Women, Gender, Media, Challenges, Journalists

### Introduction

Media, the fourth pillar of democracy provides a platform for opinions to be shared in a democratic manner without fear or intimidation. It strengthens democracy by playing the role of a watchdog or guide of the state and its citizens. Media informs and educates, it also shapes public opinion to help make a sound decision. That's why it is also considered as a common man's university. But what we are witnessing around us in present times demonstrates that media is losing its ability to express freely without fear and freedom of speech is under repression. Journalists are facing threats and attacks constantly for doing their job. The brutal murder on September 5, 2017,

of Gauri Lankesh, the 55-year-old publisher and editor of the Kannada tabloid who took on political activism is a reminder of how journalists are under attack for their uprightness and courage to expose corruption. She is one among the hundreds who have paid with their life for upholding the fourth pillar of democracy because of her belief in secularism and her left-wing ideology. In these attacks on media personnel, do gender role have any implication? How do women in the media perceive their role? Do they face any threats or challenges while trying to compete equally in the male-dominated profession? This paper is an attempt to comprehend the complexities of their job and the

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motivating factor for women journalists to continue with zeal and enthusiasm in spite of being confronted from different spheres.

### **Status of women in media**

An increasing number of women have entered journalism in the recent past and their presence is marked in all forms of media be it the print, television, radio or the internet (International Federation of Journalists [IFJ], 2015). Women in the media industry are found to be higher in some parts of Europe between 50 to 80 percent whereas in the South Asian region (in countries like Bangladesh, Pakistan and Indonesia) it is less than 20 percent. Majority of them are deployed in reporting celebrity news and only a small fraction actually cover politics, government and the hard news (Milivojevic, 2016). Despite the notable presence of reputed media women professionals, they continue to be under-represented according to the Global Report on the status of women in News Media that covered 500 media companies in almost 60 countries. Globally, about 65 percent of the total media workforce comprised of men and women made up for just one third (International Women's Media Foundation [IWMF] 2011). The National Federation of Press Women (1993) in the United States revealed that women in the higher strata in journalism has been increasing only by one percent in a year and if this trend continues, it would take another three decades to balance the gender gap in top media positions (Gallagher, 2001).

The scenario is even worst in African countries like Nigeria where women's participation is far less and minimum, citing amidst many reasons the lack of skills of women media personnel to handle leadership positions. Women are considered as intruders and they are hardly employed in media establishments leaving a very low percentage of women seen in the journalism field (Oyinade, Daramola, & Lamidi, 2013).

Similarly, in Afghanistan, Bangladesh and Pakistan the condition of women journalists is alarming as they are not permitted to express their views openly against the Government or any human rights violations. They faced opposition not only from the security personnel but also faced threats from their own families. According to International Federation of Journalist freedom report of South Asia, more than 100 cases of violence against female journalists have been registered for threats, verbal abuse, physical assault and sexual harassment. Owing to the high levels of gender discrimination, many of the women journalists work without any salary or for meagre amounts (Murthy, 2016).

Media situation in the Asian and Pacific region is dismal where the ratio of men and women is 4:1 across the region. In India, the majority of women journalists are found in the middle and lower positions, while few of them have risen to the higher levels on the basis of education, caste or class (UNESCO, 2015). It is just not the representation of

women in different positions in media firms that raise concern but other issues such as job safety, wages not in commensuration with their male counterparts and discrimination in varied forms despite being qualified and skilled in their profession.

According to Parekh (2001), a senior journalist who is the Director of Women's Feature Service, there exists a glass ceiling in India that women journalists are yet to break. Though women have entered the profession late compared to men, not a single mainline newspaper has a Woman chief editor. In two newspapers, women have managed to hold the top positions as managing editor and executive editor but they are again establishments owned by their family. Yet, they had to compete and reach these positions.

A study on the ethnic women journalists in Northeast India exposed the fact that there were only 35 tribal women employed in the print media in the region. Though they represented societies that were democratic in nature because of the traditional and customary norms that were quite liberal towards women, they did not enjoy equal power status as men in decision-making process. The women felt respected in their organisation and considered that the profession had enhanced their self-confidence. Poor salary package was the only demotivating factor that inhibited married women to continue with journalism as a career (Kabi, 2014). However, for the past two decades, women journalists in India have

successfully advanced in the print and electronic media which is commendable depicting that they are focussed, serious and adhere to the professional ethics (Bhagat, 2004).

### **Challenges on the job**

It is a challenge to choose journalism as a career for women these days owing to the increased levels of threats and obstacles that are lined up in their nature of work. It can be ascertained that journalists as a whole irrespective of their gender are targeted for their reporting, especially when they are into investigative journalism. When journalists are on their duty in the field to report on any corruption or illegal activities such as sand mining, stone quarrying and police brutality, they are under attack, threatened or even mercilessly killed. The motive for the attack is mostly professional, based on the stories they were investigating. Reporting on politics and corruption have been the two most common reasons for attacks on journalists (Seshu, 2017). For women journalists, they face additional threats on the job. This section discusses the varied issues that pose challenges for women media personnel.

The challenges they face are enormous, covering a range of issues, such as discrimination in allotment of work, sexual harassment, stalking, disparities in salaries and less scope for promotion or advancement in job positions (Murthy, 2016). Even the difference in salaries between male and female journalists is

based on the type of assignments given to them. Here again, it is observed that women are not assigned 'hard news' such as politics or conflict reporting and given tasks pertaining to human interest stories or entertainment. Due to this gendered allocation of work assignments women miss out on promotions as the organisation considers them to be less ambitious, focussing only on 'soft news' (Gallagher, 2001) and independent functioning becomes impossible (Goswami, 2016).

In this growing media industry, women strive hard to break all stereotypes and barriers and make their voices heard amidst strong opposition. As a result, they continuously confront obstacles that dampen their spirit and soul (IFJ, 2015). Despite these challenges, one can see them at the forefront, reporting on conflicts, corruption and illegal activities, and also taking up issues relating to the marginalized sections and plights of villagers and so on (Murthy, 2016).

Malini Subramaniam, a journalist, was forced to leave the place as she was reporting about the nexus between vigilante groups and the police. In spite of what she went through, she was firm not to give up reporting as desired by those who attacked her. In order for democracy to survive, she believes in the freedom of the press to emerge stronger than the repressing forces (Ananya, 2016; Murthy, 2016; Seshu, 2017). This indomitable spirit is to be hailed and appreciated.

Another journalist who almost paid with her life for doing her work was

Tongam Rina from Arunachal Pradesh, a state in Northeast India. Undaunted by the death threats and intimidation, she kept writing on corruption, high-handed politicians, hydropower and the dam projects, all of which were risky and controversial issues in the state. She was sprayed with bullets by unidentified armed men outside her office that left her critically injured. She questions the freedom of speech in the country stating that anyone who reports on contentious issues is branded anti-national or seditious. Undeterred, she continues to uphold the truth and stand up against atrocities (IFJ, 2015; Ananya, 2016). Gauri Lankesh who succumbed to the bullets fired at her refuses to die as her views for what she stood for continues to live as seen in the solidarity expressed condemning her death. Her unfaltering faith in constitutional values was strongly reflected in her work (Kumar, 2017).

According to Patricia Mukhim, a senior journalist and a Padma Shree recipient from Northeast India, media is both a challenging and a demanding profession. With a positive outlook, she states that journalism as a profession has given her the visibility and recognition within the state, country and even internationally and also boosted her confidence (Kabi, 2014).

The threats female journalists' faces are mostly sexual in nature ranging from sexual harassment in the workplace to rape threats in the field. A UNESCO (2015) study revealed that 34 percent of

journalists in Asia and the Pacific had witnessed sexual harassment at work, with 17 percent personally being a victim. In 59 percent of the cases, the perpetrator was a supervisor. Sexual harassment is certainly a critical issue across all regions in the media industry.

According to Neha Dixit, who faced repeated threats of violence for her work, male journalists do not face the kind of backlash female journalists endure as they are not sexually abused. When a story is published, the discussion regarding the female journalist is not about the story she writes but about her sex life (Ananya, 2016). Some of their characters have been maligned when they were trying to protect themselves from unwelcome advances made by either their male colleagues or supervisors (Goswami, 2016).

Journalists are now becoming the target of online harassment and abuse where campaigns are aimed at smearing their reputation, malign them and even challenge them to retaliate (Mallapur, 2017). Threats in the digital media on women journalists are misogynistic, seeking to silence, scare or stop them from expressing their views. The anonymity of the internet makes it more advantageous for trolling, suppressing free speech and harassing journalists irrespective of whether the perpetrators are individuals or the State. Unlike other forms of harassment where the victims can generate support to handle it, online abuse becomes a very lonely place where the victim has to fight alone or with none to stand up for them (Munoz, 2016).

In conflict situations, journalists irrespective of gender play a crucial role as they shape the audience's perception of what is happening in a war zone. A study based on interviews with female reporters who have covered conflict in their home countries and outside, have emphasised that the challenges they face are more or less the same whether it is a man or a woman. The thumb rule for all was to prepare well before travelling to a war zone. As a female, one cannot complain about the availability of food, water or separate ladies rooms as war is war and no special treatment can be rendered to women journalists (Orgeret, 2016). Hence, gender doesn't play much importance as the task is to investigate in a deep manner and be grounded on the core values of professional journalism which is accuracy, balance and responsibility (Lloyd & Howard, 2005).

Women are efficient in covering conflicts or any violence as men do. They have an additional advantage as they can reach out to female victims with much ease and make them feel comfortable talking to a woman reporter which can elicit the truth, especially in culturally sensitive and conservative areas. A female journalist considers working in conflict zones a humbling experience. Interaction with women victims and understanding their strength, resilience and their contribution to preserving their community identity has been an enriching experience as a conflict reporter (Hardjono, 2001). There is this element of compassion for the suffering of women

and children which brings out a different perspective from women reporters (Jose, 2005).

Female conflict reporters can face the same risk in a war zone as their male colleagues but there are additional risks involved and they are easily exposed. There have been reports of sexual assault on women journalists in particular conflict areas which brought about a situation that discouraged women from going to those places (Chicago, 2014). In spite of the challenges and hurdles they face, they most often refrain from complaining about it as they would be considered less capable than the male colleague and thus silently bear with the situation (Orgeret, 2016).

Sadly, most people who go through such abuse do not speak out in public fearing shame and embarrassment, losing the job, or facing further victimisation in the process of taking recourse to law and seeking justice. Empirical data states that only a small fraction of five percent had complained to a gender or sexual harassment committee and 11 percent to the unions. The majority had preferred sharing or confiding about the incident to their friends or colleagues (IFJ, 2015). Many of them who are traumatized by these experiences take a lot of time to come out of it and speak out, thereby delaying action against the perpetrators. But there are also many incidents where the victim has come out boldly against sexual harassment in the media industry by supervisors or employers and their perpetrators have been apprehended.

Therefore, support and action is possible if they are willing to speak out and seek help.

### **The way forward**

Women journalists have made significant progress in the industry but in order to attain equal positions as their male counterparts, there is still a long road to traverse (Parekh, 2001). Amidst strong opposition and harassment women journalists' face in their profession, they continue to deliver because journalism is their calling and passion. According to one female journalist in Pakistan, being able to share the table with 20 men and creating a space for her voice to be heard is what keeps her going in spite of the risks involved in her work (Zahidi, 2014). Female journalists do have power, the power of the pen which is sharp as a knife to defend oneself. What keeps them going strong and undaunted is the hope that their reporting can influence lives and bring change somewhere in some way or the other. Setting aside their issues, they focus on the larger picture where the social concerns related to the afflicted, marginalised and downtrodden are brought to light in search of the solution (Ananya, 2016).

Yet, it is sad when there is no solidarity expressed by the industry to defend their fellow colleagues who are victims of harassment. In many instances, the international media has addressed issues occurring in India whereas the media in the country remains silent.

Individuals and organisations should generate peer support networks to support their fellow victims, and facilitate legal action to expose the perpetrators (Munoz, 2016).

Presence of fragmentation and polarisation within the industry has led to the absence of any cohesive response from the fraternity during the attacks on media personnel. Freelancers have no support system to fall back on when they are facing online harassment. The Committee to Protect Journalists Special Report in 2016 strongly states that journalism, as well as journalists, are in danger from failure to stand up for the press. They have fragmented themselves and fail to speak out on the attacks in one voice. It is crucial that journalists are united and cohesive in their efforts to build a network where all the information can be documented so that it's easy to devise multipronged action plans. The discriminations within the profession also need to be addressed to move forward (Ramakrishnan, 2017).

Legal aid or advice should be available to advise journalists who are targeted for the stories they write or report

on. Gender policy to bring about equality within the industry is to be introduced in all media organisations (UNESCO, 2015). Importantly, the safety of women media personnel, especially the regional reporters who are posted in rural or remote areas should be taken as a priority as they are the focus of most of the attacks on journalists. Safety, transport, medical and life insurance especially to independent reporters are of immediate concern which shall ensure an enabling environment for women to work and compete equally with their male colleagues (Ananya, 2016). The organisation shall maintain a zero-tolerance policy on sexual harassment, provide gender perspective training for all and establish a committee to address issues and concerns related to incidents of harassment of its staff. Media serves as a watchdog of the political class, a vehicle for the marginalised to express their voices and stand up for constitutional values that deepen democracy. This can be realised only when there is support from the Government and a strong shift in stereotypical gendered attitudes take place in the country (VonDoepp, & Young, 2012).

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