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'It's Hard. It's even Harder when You Are a Woman': Indian Women Political Journalists in Print and Online Media

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> No matter how hard you work, you will always be judged for your gender. It's almost as if being a woman, covering politics, is a crime. (Personal Interview 2016)

Introduction

Starting from the early days of the Indian independence movement, the press in India remains the main venue of articulation for issues of social justice and different societal concerns (Rao & Mudgal 2015). Unlike the West, battling shrinking audiences and trust in the media, India's dynamic media scene is 'driven by a growing middle class [..].'[1] and a symbiotic relationship with civil society, each gaining from and strengthening the other. The print press, described as one of the most influential in the developing world (Merrill & Fisher 1980) shows that […] newspaper circulation has risen, and new titles compete with established dailies.[2] Indeed, India has over 80,000 newspapers.[3] Since the mid-1990s, post the liberalisation that broke state monopoly over broadcast news and allowed private players

in, trust in the media has grown. Media and entertainment industries have registered growth of over 11 per cent in 2013 and trade forecasts predict annual growth rates at 14.2 per cent in 2018.[4] The country has a flourishing alternative media scenario as well, although its role is relatively insignificant when compared to the mainstream, business-based press available in English and numerous vernacular languages (Thomas 2011).

This sheen hides the fact that, in terms of content, the press in the world's largest democracy is only partially free.[5] India ranks at 136 out of 180 in the 2017 World Press Freedom Index released by Reporters Without Borders. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists (2016), until 2016 nearly 70 journalists have been killed in their line of work. 96 per cent of these cases remain unsolved. Although the Indian news media is among the largest in the world and has a varied history of exposing corruption and public atrocity (Relly & Schwalbe 2013) media ownership patterns and state actors with criminal intent have left journalists vulnerable to extreme harassment, threatened with unemployment and even death threats (Barry 2017). The 2016 murder of Gauri Lankesh, a feisty woman journalist, editor and activist, is only a recent example.

Despite the fact that women began moving into mainstream reporting in the 1940s and 1950s, soon after India's independence in 1947 (Joseph 2005), journalism in India remains a male-dominated profession, especially in the area of political news reportage. These, among others, are some of the reasons that keep women away from journalism, in general, and the political beat, in particular. While recent statistics on the number of women journalists are not available, a 2008 study estimates that only 2.7 per cent of India's mainstream journalists are women (Rao 2008). No statistics document the number of women covering politics. In a 2001 study on women in Indian-language journalism, Robin Jeffrey concluded that 'their numbers [are] scant, the jobs few and the prejudices against them formidable.' (Jeffrey 2001)

Ammu Joseph's face-to-face interviews with 200 women journalists, (Joseph 2005) Pamela Bhagat's 2004 survey on women journalists in the print media, and R. Akhileshwari's (2014) study of 133 respondents are among the few comprehensive studies that document the working conditions and professional constraints under which women journalists operate in India. A 2017 analysis on women in the media and their work environment, focused on the southern region of Andhra Pradesh, found 'no major gender bias' but underlined significant issues in terms of job insecurity and non-implementation of specific provisions for women, especially wage

board rules, which essentially meant that women were not being paid the salaries legally provisioned. Their analyses have emphasised that, despite growing participation of women reporters, little has changed since Jeffrey's 2001 seminal work.

Drawing on the theoretical lens of Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) hierarchy-of-influences model and qualitative, in-depth interviews with 50 women journalists, this essay explores the experiences of women who cover politics for India's mainstream print media, examining how they negotiate gender and different organisational and societal constraints on the job. The journalists also discuss what it means to be a woman political reporter online and ponder their social media experiences. In the process, they also talk about the various strategies they use to stay empowered and be impartial purveyors of information. This is an effort not just to parse out the nuances of gender on beat reporting but also to understand how gender plays a role in covering, perhaps, one of the most complex beats in journalism.

Political systems and gender in India

India is the world's largest democracy based on the number of eligible voters in the country (Chandhoke & Priyardashi 2009). But its growing global economic influence often hides the violence and social and political conflicts that are gradually becoming key characteristics of the poor systems of governance in the country. For example, corruption is rampant. In 2017, Transparency International found that India was the most corrupt country in Asia. Dangerous Pursuit*,* a 2016 report by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), showed that politics and corruption were among the most dangerous beats in the country.

Furthermore, India has a rank of 105/136 in 2013 on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index (GGI), and there is no denying that the country has a deeply patriarchal mindset. The Constitution guarantees the right of equality and freedom from sexual discrimination and although women represent little over half the population of the country, they have little voice in decision-making (Relly & Schwalbe 2013). Yet, paradoxically, India has had a woman prime minister and various women in influential positions in the political system. The government also has certain reservations in place to encourage more women to run for various public offices.

Across age-groups there are more working women than men, but inequalities restrict access to opportunities, including basic economic facilities,

making access to higher incomes extremely difficult (Arora 2012). Women are generally paid less than men in the private sector as well as the unorganised labor sector. In the public sectors, salaries are more equalised. United Nation statistics show that for every 100 men employed, only about 34 women are employed in India as compared, for example, to 88 in Thailand and 59 in Sri Lanka. Employment outside the home rarely exempts women from labor in the home, which is often then divided among other women, especially daughters.

Women and the Indian media

Such gender inequalities seep into the professional sphere of journalism as well. In 1996, The Working Paper on a National Media Policy submitted to the Indian government by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting made no specific recommendations relating to women as participants, consumers of media or in terms of media representations of women.

Indian women journalists face the general threats that come from reporting on a beat as contentious as politics as well as unrelenting misogyny and gendered harassment. These findings underlined Bhagat's conclusions (2004: 31), in which 410 respondents emphasised that women in the profession had to be '[…] twice as good as their male counterparts just to get their foot in the door. Others report that the stress of working hard to keep up standards, and to forestall any negative expectations, can be debilitating.' An oft-cited complaint against successful women in the profession was that they used their 'sexuality' to get ahead. The role of the media organisation in keeping them from real progress was also stressed. Respondents, especially senior participants, reported that organisational constraints and norms prevented women from being as outspoken and professionally proactive. However, the study also showed that women journalists had a very 'hopeful and positive attitude' towards the profession (Bhagat 2016). Despite their comprehensiveness, these two studies did not explore the specific challenges associated with explicit beats.

Over time, women have become an obvious and integral part of the profession, especially on television. Women in Indian journalism usually head and work in features departments. Journalists may be senior, but they are rarely considered good enough to lead departments. Only a few women head political, crime or sports beats and the management, in most organisations, seems oblivious to this lacuna (Pain 2017). Reporting on politics comes with its own share of misogyny which can often be very ugly and public. A recent episode (2015), in which India's Minister of State for Exter-

nal Affairs, General V. K. Singh, called journalists who had criticised him for an earlier comment 'presstitudes', is a case in point. Since then, this viciously gendered and chauvinistic taunt has become a popular term of insult for journalists in India, for both women journalists and journalists in general.

Political leadership in the country does precious little to empower women journalists. In 2015, Rajyavardhan Rathore, then Minister of State for Information and Broadcasting, in a discussion of different challenges faced by women journalists, ranging from work hours and environment to areas like sports, battlefields, vulnerable areas, Maoist-infested areas,' concluded that women's skills can be better used in analysis ('from whichever location you are in with the technology that you have') rather than field reporting. Furthermore, the current right-wing government in power, led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi, is encouraging a deeply feudal and patriarchal mindset to flourish in the country. The gender ramifications are already being felt. A 2017 Pew survey[6] showed that women were critical of Modi's policies, specifically his handling of rising prices and communal tensions. As newsrooms are becoming more technologically advanced, using social media to interact with and attract new audiences is gradually becoming routine. For journalists, this is an extension of identities into territories yet unmapped. In India, the online sphere has become a new and the latest source of gendered abuse.

Online abuse

Journalists today are required to have social media profiles and most in India do. Crowdsourcing ideas, asking audiences to participate in polls or to react to certain stories are commonplace. Most newspapers have an online presence. While government statistics estimate that 10.1 per cent of the population in India currently have access to the Internet, Gallup research shows that men dominate user statistics (61 per cent), as opposed to a mere 39 per cent of women who get online. India is a relative newcomer to the idea of online commenting and using social media to drive traffic to news sites. Gendered online abuse of women here is rampant (Chen & Pain 2016). Most journalists, independent of the medium they work in, usually post stories on social media like Twitter and Facebook. Feedback to such posts are often reactive and abusive, especially if the story has been done by a woman journalist. A compilation of tweets sent to prominent female journalists in 2017 found that Barkha Dutt, a veteran journalist, received 3,020 threat/abuse tweets, while Rana Ayyub, another

prominent journalist, received 2,580 threating and abusive tweets. Dutt's book, *This unquiet land*, was deemed 'worse than toilet paper.' Her political views have earned her threats of rape and other abuse.

Similarly, in 2016, Neha Dixit, a freelance journalist published an investigation into child trafficking with a popular magazine, titled 'Operation #Beti Uthao.' This led to an eruption of hashtags on twitter with handles like @Neha_DickShit, @Neha_EatsDick and @NehaDipShit. When Gauri Lankesh, senior journalist and editor of *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*, was murdered, groups on Facebook and Twitter exulted in her death and promised copycat murders of other journalists. Senior reporter A. R. Meyyammai was trolled and threatened on Facebook after her story, 'Girls in puberty stage paraded half-naked, offered to deity for a fortnight', for the daily *The Covai Post* (24 Sept. 2017) was published. Her editor got threatening calls. Rosamma Thomas, a correspondent from Rajasthan, was threatened on WhatsApp for a story she wrote about the BJP government (17 Sept. 2017). Trolls threatened that she would face a similar fate to Lankesh if she wrote against the RSS or Prime Minister Narendra Modi again. New media came with a promise of opening up news spaces for journalists and the public to share information and interact in, but unrestrained sexist abuse has marred this potential.

Gender and the newsroom

The question of how the presence of women in the newsroom influences content is a contested one. Studies have pointed out that perspectives from women journalists provide alternative viewpoints which can have a very positive influence on the ways news narratives are framed, researched and presented (Rodgers & Thorson 2003). It is argued that women in journalism will bring noteworthy changes in the way newsrooms operate, helping to blur lines between 'hard' and 'soft' news, leading to news agendas more closely aligned with 'human interest' news (Higgins, Shah & Friedman 1997). It is believed that a key aspect of women's representation in the media, especially political representation, can be positively mediated by female media producers (Adcock 2010). Matters of resources, labour, and content are never gender-neutral (Riordan 2002). In the professional arena of journalism, is the presence of women enough to change the status quo and address the issues of gender bias and misogyny? It is here that Byerly and Ross's (2004) argument about the importance of analysing women's position in media industries, ownership patterns and the content produced

resonates. Scholars, too, are also skeptical of the positive claims a woman's perspective may bring to news.

There is little research examining gendered notions of labor in the newsroom from this viewpoint in India. But as feminist researchers have argued, the incorporation of women journalists into a traditionally male profession often has the effect of normalizing what are essentially male-identified concerns and a male-directed agenda. In male-dominated newsrooms, masculine conceptions dictate newsworthiness (Ross & Carter 2011). Women are recruited into the profession, especially into traditionally masculine areas like sports and politics, where daily news routines force them to believe over time that male perspectives are the norm and that masculine views are unproblematic and without value judgments (Komter 1991). But even a cursory glance at the data gathered by previous studies show that newsroom experiences of most women journalists in a newsroom culture that masquerades as a neutral space works around a 'professional journalism ethos' that for most practical (and ideological) purposes, is organised around a man-as-norm and woman-as-interloper structure (Byerly & Ross 2004).

Organisational influences

Besides, organisational stances, both political and social, and organisational norms have discernable influences on content. Shoemaker and Reese's (1996) hierarchy-of-influences model explains that news content is ultimately the product of individual, routine, organisational, extramedia, and ideological influences. The five levels are not entirely self-contained nor are they mutually exclusive (Liebler & Moritz 2013). The individual level refers to personal beliefs, characteristics and experiences of individual journalists. The routines level focuses on how 'patterned, routinised, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs' (Shoemaker & Reese 1996: 105) affect how news is constructed. The organisational level assesses the impact that the structure, demands, and goals of media organisations have on both content and routines. The extramedia level includes factors external to the organisations, such as news sources, social institutions and means of earning revenue like advertising. Ideology is the last level, which Shoemaker and Reese define as 'a symbolic mechanism that serves as a cohesive and integrating force in society' (ibid.: 212). Embedded within organisational procedures and news routines are social norms, especially related to gender, and gender perceptions (Shoemaker & Reese 2013). All these interact as 'part of a wider social system' (Reese 2001:

179). This means that political (or non-political) influences on the media need not always be direct. Overall, this study agrees with what Jane Arthur (2003) postulated in her discussion of the televisual industry in Britain, namely that 'More women in the industry is not enough: there need to be more women with a politicised understanding of the ways in which women's subordination is currently reproduced, and with the will to change it' (Arthur: 2003).

Methodology

This paper uses data from 50 interviews with women journalists based in different Indian cities of Kolkata, New Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai and Chennai, conducted in 2015, 2016 and 2017. Interviews with a focus group of six journalists were conducted in Kolkata in 2016. The focus group participants were also a part of the individual interviews. The snowball sample was obtained through referrals requested from colleagues and requests for participation posted on social media.

All participants worked with various Indian print publications. Their ages ranged from 23 to 45 years, while their work experience varied from three to 15 years. All of them said that they covered mainly politics, but also wrote on other issues. An average interview lasted for 45 minutes and was conducted either in person or over the phone. The questionnaire for in-depth, open-ended interviews was adapted from the 'Working, watching and waiting—women and issues of access, employment and decision-making in the media in India. Women and media: international perspectives' study conducted by Ammu Joseph (2005) and focused on typical routines, organisation support and ways in which women negotiated gender at work and on the political beat as well as online. Questions specific to their beats were also asked. For example, the study asked participants if they had experience covering other beats and if covering politics felt significantly different. The interview responses have been kept anonymous because the participants are active journalists and part of different mainstream media organisations.

Each interview as well as the focus groups were explored for themes. They offer rich data about the scenario of women in the Indian press today and of female journalists covering politics in particular. The dominant themes that emerged focused on their professional experiences, negotiations of gender online and offline with organisational roles and routines running throughout as recurring threads.

Professional experiences

All the participants underlined how deeply patriarchal their newsroom and newsgathering experiences were. Women as journalists were not taken seriously, almost as a given. Organisational and news routines also foster this bias. Shoemaker and Reese have defined news routines as patterns of newsgathering that repeated over time become a part of the way journalists work and have underlined their importance and influence on news construction. These norms by nature are patriarchal and lean towards a masculine culture. Few women are encouraged to or trained to take up leadership positions. As one participant put it, 'It's hard. It's even harder when you are a woman.' (2016)

Most women journalists are consigned to the features department and their desire to be a part of daily news is often met with scepticism. As the participants reported, because of this lack of encouragement, scarcely any women emerge as feminists or as active mentors. Women have little support in other women and often have to 're-invent the wheel' (2017) to start reporting, usually having to expend valuable time and resources. Also, successful women in the media tended to downplay their success. For example, during one interview, two respondents who recently had two important stories on health and maternity care in the country published, readily shared credit with everyone who had helped them with sources and talked at length about supportive office staff while hardly referring to the weeks they had spent pursuing the story.

Furthermore, there seems to be no encouragement to highlight gender specific issues. Earlier, most newspapers would have dedicated sections to highlight issues important and specific to women. Nowadays, such articles are rare. As one participant said, 'Stories about women's empowerment and issues are often met with cynicism […] men who are often in charge of news rooms feel they are frivolous content.' (2017) Women rarely make news nor are news or issues ever interpreted from a gender perspective. One respondent pointed out that, 'Women may be an important audience for advertisers, but they certainly aren't for the media. We will write about women only when something sensational happens.' (2016) For example when a self-styled godman was convicted of rape and arrested, Hindi language newspapers did not use the word 'rape' in their headlines. A Hindi newspaper reporter had broken the story, being among the first to investigate and expose the fraud and abuse perpetrated. A research study conducted using Media Cloud—an open-source, media analysis platform developed by the MIT Media Lab and the Harvard Berkman Klein Centre—shows

that reporting on women's issues is episode driven and relies on the blame game response.

Few editors and supervisors speak up about encouraging or enabling women to try new beats or to go after investigative stories. This is especially true of bureaus in the smaller towns and cities of India. Social norms that believe that women should not have professional identities seep into the workplace and are spread, as participants emphasise, 'like an invisible web' that influences important aspects of news reporting such as the assigning of stories, deciding on sources and the framing of reports. Participants reported that they are often 'not allowed' to do night shifts or take up stories that might shake existing power balances. Organisations are often reluctant to provide mandatory support like transport for working late. Their story pitches are often scrutinised much more than their male counterparts' and their news judgement questioned.

Interview participants reiterated that their choice of sources was dissected with clear aims to intimidate and reject. One senior reporter said: 'I was going to do a piece on tax slabs and the budget. The editor had so many questions about the people I was to interview. My major sources were people from think tanks and economic professors ... people generally deemed to be objective.' (2016) Women journalists' selection of story ideas was often deemed frivolous. Participants from organisations where women were seemingly in decisive positions referred to the 'benign patriarchy' (2016, 2017) that was prevalent. Overwhelmingly, 60 per cent of the respondents from mainstream English news media referred to this. As one participant said, 'It's almost as if they are indulging a child and not a professional journalist. We are the decorative concessions.' (2017)

Journalism is often touted as a 'dangerous' profession for women. The respondents said they were encouraged to treat it as a nine-to-five job and perform as such. Specialisation for women journalists is viewed as problematic. As one participant said, 'A woman with an interest in sports, someone who actually knows the game and can cite statistics is treated as an aberration.' As the participants emphasised, their gender was an ever present and often times negative factor in the newsroom and outside. They were expected to dress conservatively and behave as such too, 'stifling voices even before they had begun to be formed.' (2017) One participant explained that a woman talking loudly, pushing ahead to get a story or interview an elusive source is deemed pushy whereas a man will be seen as a go-getter. This is especially true for younger women who are at an early stage of their careers. Labor, as the participants' report, is deeply

gendered and women are often paid less than men, as a norm. These differences are even more stark in beats like politics and crime.

Politics as a beat is tough and women here are treated as typical interlopers. As participants pointed out, it is extremely male dominated and not just in the newsroom. Most politicians and heads of political bodies are men. Women may have entered the profession relatively early on, but the numbers of men were and continue to be larger, especially in supervisory positions. At the same time, politics as a beat is considered influential; as one respondent put it, '[…] proximity to the biggest names is considered a personal perk.' Organisations do not like giving political assignments to women. A majority of the participants interviewed said that they had to cover other issues and anything else the editor might assign their way. Only 11 among them were full time focused on issues of governance and covering politics alone. All had to answer different variations of the question, 'Why do you want to do politics? What kind of journalism can you possibility do?' (2015)

Women aspiring to be political journalists are usually encouraged to be opinion writers and write edits on political situations, doing mostly theoretical work rather than hard hitting stories. Scoops by women journalists often elicit comments about how sexuality might have furthered the cause. As one participant said: 'Men are often reluctant to help. If I figure my way through, then clearly someone has helped me because I am a woman. It is never about my resourcefulness.' (2017) Participants reported that battling these assumptions and still having to perform at levels higher than male colleagues is exhausting and debilitating, especially on the political beat. As one respondent pointed out, 'To be an effective political journalist takes time and effort to build contacts and gain access to insiders. Men can do it in ways we can’t.' (2016)

Social expectations and norms can alter the ways in which women reporters go about their work, often affecting very negatively their political reporting aspirations. Women may be successful professionals, but in India a larger part of labour in the personal space also falls on them. Attending to different needs often makes late night shifts impossible. As participants reported, for male reporters to meet sources after work for drinks is a given, but this is a 'near impossible' situation for women.

Politics in India is complex. India’s diversity of language and political parties often means working in towns and villages where women journalists are a complete oddity. Few politicians from such areas are women. Male leaders are not used to women in the public space, especially 'asking ques-

tions […] the questioning women so to say', as one participant said. The country's current right-wing government also exacerbates feudal notions about women. As one participant said, 'We are trying to cover politics when at the helm is a man whose constituency reports low enrolment of girls in schools and high malnutrition rates among female children.' (2015) A news report in *The Guardian* corroborated her view.[7] In such a situation, a woman questioning the government's actions is bound to be seen very negatively and this viewpoint is sanctioned by the state. Government workings are rarely transparent and India, with its corrupt political system, poses certain unique challenges. These include, as participants put it, 'nameless, faceless players' who are difficult to access, but whose presence is important for stories, especially for investigative journalism. Having access to personal contacts and building relationships over time is important. Women, especially those entering the profession, need support, and male journalists who are usually their predecessors are often reluctant to help. Bureaus in smaller cities and towns have little support mechanisms in place.

As the focus group revealed, main offices located in the cities are no better either. Women are not trained to understand nuances and to operate effectively in such beats. Few get opportunities to shadow male senior reporters. Male reporters make it clear that they would rather mentor other men than women. As one participant, describing her experiences as a new journalist, said, 'I was intimidated, and my male colleagues made it worse. They were brusque with me when I asked questions and would not share sources. Yet I had to ask them, these men who made it clear that they did not like me, because I was the first woman who explicitly wanted to cover politics.' (2017)

When women are sent to profile other women politicians, it is assumed that gender will provide an intimate connection. The focus group emphasised this belief, calling it 'ridiculous' (2016). Two participants shared how they had been sent to interview, in separate incidents, one party chief and another ministerial candidate. Their reports, focusing on policy and plans for state development, were criticised as lacking 'a womanly touch.' One respondent said: 'My report had some solid material on how women's health in the state needed more structuring and my editor said that we actually needed more matter on how the minster was at home; more details on how she managed her private and public life.' (2017) Professionally, as the respondents emphasised, women politicians do little to favor women journalists. Yet as the participants said, at press conferences or in most

organisations, men usually tended to be in senior positions. Politicians who want to generate positive press coverage usually are polite to the press. Since it is those in decision-making positions who can actually put stories about them in the press, it may look like politicians favour male journalists over female reporters.

Images of women in politics, participants argued, were often not improved by having women journalists cover them. Even if women filed the story, male editors with fixed ideas of what women could and should do, whether as politicians or journalists, ultimately took decisions about the story. Male reporters too could be biased against women politicians. The journalists referred to the coverage of a woman chief minister in a southern state of India where a raid revealed a huge amount of clothes and jewellery besides a silver throne. Certain high profile male journalists wrote very disparagingly of her shoes and jewellery forgetting that before becoming a chief minister, the lady was an eminent actress in a state that is known to worship its film stars, besides electing them to office. Participants pointed out that this was the kind of biased reporting women politicians faced rather commonly.

One journalist who was made to redo a story three times, each time to ensure that a more 'personal' image of the politician emerged, said that she had never heard a male colleague being asked to incorporate such details. She explained: 'Men too are asked for more details. My male colleagues are often asked to redo their work too. But it’s the nature of re-writing that often differs. They are asked for more meat on policy and other relevant details. We are asked to fluff up pieces.' (2016)

Issues of this kind also percolate into the stories they do. Participants clearly said that they often avoided doing stories of depth because they were not given the time or support they needed. They tried to do stories that would highlight issues without being too controversial. As two participants were quick to underline, 'not all stories have to be controversial…a story with substance takes time and effort […]' (2017). Participants in the focus group reflected on how their writing rarely interpreted policies or focused on hard questions of administration. They wanted to do more stories especially focused on interpreting policy for women.

The participants agreed that perhaps the lack of women at the helm was what prevented other women from entering and staying in the field. But, as respondents agreed, for more women in top positions, journalism as a profession would need to be less male-oriented, both in terms of editorial directorship and direction. The change will have to come from within the

organisation where women will have to be encouraged to report on complex issues and seemingly 'hard' fields like politics. Additionally, clear organisational support will have to be provided. As one respondent said, 'Directives must be made clear; that it is the duty of newsrooms to include and encourage women.' (2017)

However, as Shoemaker and Reese have pointed out, individual and organisational norms both influence news content. In an increasingly right wing-oriented government, where large corporations own sizeable stakes in certain mainstream media, news, especially political news, tends to be unobjective and unbalanced. The Indian media market is oligopolistic in character. For example, the capital Delhi has 16 English daily newspapers. The top three are the *Times of India*, the *Hindustan Times,* and the *Economic Times*. The Times group owns the Times of India and the Economic Times accounting for over three-fourths of the total market for all English dailies. There are no restrictions on how much a company or group can own; the same company can control print, television and online platforms. Thus, for women reporters there is little option to pursue. As one participant explained it, 'A story unacceptable or hard to print in the print version will not find a home online. The same people control both.' (2017) This shows how entwined online and print sections are. In India, in mainstream newspapers, online versions offer only what the print version has. Only breaking news is updated online.

Negotiating gender: online and offline

Since most newspapers have an online presence, most news can be found online with bylines and other details of the journalists. Participants underlined that gender was not an issue restricted alone to newsroom and beats. The nebulous online sphere was another addition. Women journalists are trolled mercilessly online and this, perhaps, as the respondents argued, is worse when a woman covers politics. One journalist, who covered a negative story on a certain politician in a small town in India, was threatened with rape online. She said, 'They said they knew which school my daughter went to. They threatened her with […] abuse as well. My daughter is only five.' (2016)

Journalists being threatened for stories is not new but as the previous examples prove, women journalists are at risk online and gender is an important factor. Instead of creating a space to empower marginalised voices, social media has provided a new platform for harassment. The journalists interviewed said that the online space was another area where

women could be abused, especially, 'women with an opinion.' (2017) Groups on Facebook and Twitter exulted when Gauri Lankesh was murdered in 2016. On Twitter she was called a 'bitch' for her critical views and investigative work. India's corrupt political structure exacerbates the situation and much of the trolling is found to have been state sponsored. The present Prime Minister Narendra Modi has been found to follow some of the most vicious trolls online.[8]

Organisations do little to help. The participants said they were mostly asked to block trolls out but, '[…] how many do you block?' (2017). Journalists are encouraged to bring in new audiences and interact with readers, building communities around the topics highlighted in the news, but they have little to offer in terms of protection to beleaguered journalists. The participants were clear that social media with its relentless trolling of women in general and female journalists in particular, is today abetting the shrinking of spaces for dissenting voices in the country.

Strategies and more

As the participants underlined in the interviews, working as journalists was a role of great responsibility and they did their best to overcome obstacles in their way. Like Bhagat's (2004) study that showed how positive the journalists were about their profession, the respondents here too valued being a journalist and were hopeful that '[…] someday change will come.' (2017) All the participants felt great personal and professional fulfilment in their jobs in spite of the gender-based discrimination and the lack of professional opportunities. The participants unanimously agreed that reporting on politics opened up new avenues of knowledge and provided chances to report in-depth on issues they otherwise would not have considered. One respondent said that political reportage helped her appreciate better the democratic workings in a country as diverse as India. Another said it gave her new insights into how power worked and showed her how some very corrupt people can also do great good for the people. The women interviewed said that they were working to ensure that women had more support in the workplace, irrespective of whether organisations supported them or not. Social media, while being a space of abuse, was also a space where issues could be shared and discussed. Some of the respondents said that they had joined closed groups online because, as one participant said, 'Sometimes it is hard to even understand that bias is happening. These groups help me identify discrimination and work accordingly.' (2017)

Indian women journalists have no specific unions but have organisations like the Network of Women in Media that feature among its members women journalists from different medias. They have taken up issues regarding their members and often effectively speak out against them. For example, protests against the 'presstitudes' remark brought forth an apology. The idea of starting support groups at workplaces was an oft repeated one. The participants wanted to be more integral and effective members of such societies and ensure that women as journalists were better represented in organisations with all due recognition.

Newsrooms today are not unaware of the issues of gender in the online and offline sphere. While they may not be vocal about empowering women in the workplace, some initiative is being taken about the issue of trolling women online. The Hindustan Times, a major national mainstream newspaper, launched a "Let's Talk About Trolls" campaign in 2017, aimed at focusing attention on online abuse and bullying. In a 2017 campaign celebrities and journalists also changed their profile pictures to show support. However, trolls used those photos to spread their own messages of hate.

Discussion and conclusion

There was deep awareness among the participants that there was little negotiation about gender, whether it was in the newsroom or online. Gender is a hugely contentious area. Social and professional biases against women, in general, and journalists in particular, led to situations where women had to work harder than men to convince superiors about the value of their work as well as to perform their work. As Shoemaker and Reese underlined, organisational norms influence the way journalists work, while organisations are shaped by social and ownership patterns. But this bias has larger ramifications on the content produced. Women in the Indian print media are not encouraged to cover politics, an important and integral aspect of any functioning democracy. Thus, newsrooms lack diversity and news lacks perspectives from women news reporters. Women's voices are being suppressed at the basic level of production. Institutional norms, influenced by social measures, ensure that women reporters are not viewed as important parts of the news production arena. Besides, as the 2017 study showed, legally, overall rights were denied to women and they were not being paid fairly (Akhileshwari 2014).

Newsrooms remain deeply gendered, thus ensuring a professional acculturation where women and their ideas are not deemed important and where access to beats is controlled purely on the basis of gender. Little is done to

encourage women to participate in beats like politics and sports, bring in new perspectives, and encourage diversity of voice and opinion. As the participants mentioned, the prevailing masculine culture ensures that even the few women in decision-making roles cannot emerge as champions for other women.

By comparison, the online sphere seems to offer no better conditions. Journalists are required to use social media in their work. Bedsides newspapers have online homes; the stories they do are automatically found online. Although there is greater awareness about trolling issues and online bullying, organisations are still ill-equipped to effectively protect their female staff while using the many benefits of the internet to grow and interact with audiences. The presence of women journalists may not mediate the representation of women in the media. But in India this is a question that evades an answer, especially in the area of politics, since so few women reporters work this beat. Women have been active journalists since the country's independence, but they still do not have their choice of beat reporting. Their story ideas and source choices are questioned, and softer feature stories expected. That is a norm and wanting something different is considered an aberration that is not encouraged.

India's profitable and growing media scenario is crucially closed off to women's voices especially on issues of governance. More women, today, may be a part of the media scenario, but a lot more needs to be done to ensure professional empowerment. The onus falls on media organisations. Societal demands and assumptions may take years to change, but organisational structures can be altered to establish policies that will help counter these formidable prejudices (Jeffrey 2001). The mere presence of women, without educating newsrooms on the importance of diversity and inclusion, will not ameliorate the situation. As Jane Arthur (2003) pointed out, there is a need not just for more women, but rather for women who recognise bias and know how to engage women in meaningful roles in the profession. The role of journalists in any democracy is a crucial one but in India's well-developed and vibrant media scenario, issues of access are still contested.

Endnotes

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