

**Theme 1: Feminism and the Internet: A critical inquiry**

**Hindi Print Women Journalists' Experiences of Misogynistic  
Virtual spaces in Madhya Pradesh**

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**Abstract**

This paper examines the lived experiences of women journalists in four cities of Madhya Pradesh: Bhopal, Indore, Jabalpur and Gwalior. This research paper attempts to understand gendered hierarchies existing in Hindi print journalism and lived experiences of sexual harassment on virtual spaces. It also discusses experiences of sexual harassment on virtual media and how narratives of women journalists of these four cities identify Hindi print journalism of Madhya Pradesh as patriarchal and misogynistic.

I emphasize here in this paper that there is persistent fear of cyber-spaces and social media (social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter etc) among Hindi print women journalists.

“While many women are victimized online, what makes Indian women unique? Berdahl (2007) argues that sexual harassment is both motivated and made possible by the persistent and deep-rooted stratification of social status by sex which is repeatedly used to guard or enhance one’s sex-based social status. It recounts journalists’ experiences of varied forms of sexist-vengeful treatment on virtual media. Taking advantage of the socially vulnerable location of women, it traces narratives of how male-dominated workplaces turn into traps victimizing women. This is an effort to understand the culture of silence towards issues and incidents of sexual harassment in media, particularly in Hindi print journalism. The misogynistic mindset can’t accept a woman as an outspoken and speaking her mind, thus, a collective patriarchal attack like trolling on virtual space has become a pattern to vent rage against powerful women including journalists, academicians, and activists.

This study employs feminist research methodology using in-depth interviews of women journalists working in Hindi print journalism in four cities. This paper is based on my doctoral research work raising question of gender-based harassment of women journalists on virtual

spaces which operates through patriarchal character of the Hindi print media in Madhya Pradesh.

## 1.1 Introduction

There have been several reported incidents of sexual harassment in media workplaces. Sexual harassment is not about sex but rather about the execution of gendered power relations. Feminist theories argue that sexual harassment is the product of an organized gender system by dominant and normative form of masculinity (Uggen et al., 2004). Sexual harassment is a reality at workplaces where women have to negotiate their presence in a male-dominated profession like journalism. Berdahl (2007) argues that sexual harassment is both motivated and made possible by the persistent and deep-rooted stratification of social status by sex which is repeatedly used to guard or enhance one's sex-based social status.

The 2013 „Tehelka“<sup>1</sup> sexual assault incident has brought to the fore the loopholes in functioning within Indian media. The organization itself showed unwillingness to take up the issue and tried to brush it off in a very systematic manner. The “TarunTejpal”<sup>2</sup> sexual assault imbroglio has been revelatory at multiple levels, but perhaps most of all of the truth of Noam Chomsky's observations that for the powerful, crimes are those that others commit," writes Ayesha Kidwai in one of her articles.<sup>3</sup> This incident drew national attention to the neglected issue of sexual harassment, especially within media which is ironical in many ways.

This paper begins with an attempt to paper that there is persistent fear of cyber-spaces and social media (social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter etc) among Hindi print women journalists. Further, this reflects on the lived experiences of women journalists to understand workplace power hierarchies. It documents their journalistic work experience and nuanced acknowledgment of sexual harassment. How do these women define or identify incidents of sexual harassment in the virtual or cyber-spaces?

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<sup>1</sup> Tehelka is a news magazine known for its investigative journalism and sting operations.

<sup>2</sup> TarunTejpal is an Indian journalist, publisher, novelist and former editor-in-chief of Tehelka magazine. In November 2013, he stepped down as editor for six months after a female colleague accused him of sexual assault.

<sup>3</sup> Kidwai, Ayesha. (26th Nov, 2013) Needed: A 'Tehelkaa' in Tehelka, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 48, Issue No. 48. Retrieved from <http://www.epw.in/journal/2013/48/web-exclusives/needed-tehelkaa-tehelka.html> accessed on February 17, 2016.

This paper unravels the normalized forms of sexual harassment which are trivialized in the name of journalistic work-culture and journalists' experiences of varied forms of sexist-vengeful treatment at the work place. Taking advantage of the socially vulnerable location of women, it traces narratives of how male-dominated workplaces turn into traps victimizing women on cyber-spaces. Despite having Vishakha Guidelines by the Supreme Court of India, in the judgment on the Vishakha and others versus State of Rajasthan case in 1997 and more recently the The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace Bill (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, which seek to address sexual harassment at workplace, it is notable that media fails to ensure a healthy and safe workplace for women. This paper is an effort to understand the culture of silence towards issues and incidents of sexual harassment in media, particularly in Hindi print journalism and women journalists' presence on cyber-spaces.

## 1.2 Negotiating Virtual Presence

Increasing incidents of trolling over social media has extended the debate on misogynistic online-virtual spaces. The issue of women facing harassment on social media has revealed multiple sides of vengeful trolling world-over.<sup>4</sup> Internet companies have been experiencing difficult time as their response towards online abuse has been slow and less helpful due to censorship issues.<sup>5</sup> There have been much needed feminist initiatives to fight back against online trolling and abuse which actively work for gender digital rights in network society.<sup>6</sup>

Jesica Valenti, an American feminist blogger, writer and founder of Feministing blog (2004) got trolled on twitter for expressing her views on feminism. She received death and rape threats

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<sup>4</sup> WITW Staff. (2016, February, 28) [New project will document online harassment directed at women](http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/02/18/new-project-will-document-online-harassment-directed-at-women/). Women in the World, *New York Times*, retrieved from <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/02/18/new-project-will-document-online-harassment-directed-at-women/> accessed on February 2, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> WITW Staff. (2016, April, 14) ["Emotional violence" Women fight back against online abuse](http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/04/14/women-fight-back-against-online-abuse/). Women in the World, *New York Times*, retrieved from <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/04/14/women-fight-back-against-online-abuse/> accessed on February 2, 2017.

<sup>6</sup> Women's Rights Programme is run by Associations for Progressive Communications (APC), also as a network of women world-wide promoting use of technology for women's empowerment. <https://www.apc.org/en/about/programmes/womens-networking-support-programme-apc-wnsp> accessed on 2 February 2, 2017.

against her five-year-old daughter.<sup>7</sup> In her memoir „*Sex Object*“<sup>8</sup>, Valenti describes her personal narratives on how feminism was not a choice made by her but a stand point to analyse her enduring of psychological and emotional toll for being objectified for decades. Online misogyny is a global concern as women have been targeted with no limits often forcing them to be silent.

A news piece titled ‘*Why are India women being attacked on social media*’<sup>9</sup> reports that well known TV journalist Sagarika Ghosh stopped giving her views on Twitter after she was threatened regularly with gang rape and stripping. The same news piece reports about a prominent Delhi-based women rights activist Kavita Krishnan, who was also attacked on a leading website *Rediff.com* during a chat on violence against women. Meena Kandasamy, activist and writer quoted in the same news-piece believes that many Indian men react to posts that are critical of "caste and of Hindu nationalism". Quoting the views of K Jaishankar, who has been working on bullying, stalking and defamation of women online this news piece writes

“India’s patriarchal mindset has pervaded the internet space. Men don’t like women to talk back.

Public personalities who express strong opinions are trolled in a bid to force them off line.”

The well-known Indian TV journalist Barkha Dutt was trolled on social media, which indicates that social media too is misogynist. “As women who choose to work in the public eye and who have the audacity to hold opinions, Krishnan and Dutt are vulnerable to the attack of anyone with opposable thumbs and access to the internet.”<sup>10</sup> While critically writing, Yadav (2016) tries to raise core argument of such trolling mindset that “only in a culture so warped by casual

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<sup>7</sup>WITW Staff. (2016, July, 7) ["Unacceptable" Feminist writer Jessica Valenti quits Twitter after “rape and death threat” against 5-year-old daughter](http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/07/29/feminist-writer-jessica-valenti-quits-twitter-after-rape-and-death-threat-against-5-year-old-daughter/), *Women in the World, New York Times*, retrieved from <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/07/29/feminist-writer-jessica-valenti-quits-twitter-after-rape-and-death-threat-against-5-year-old-daughter/> accessed on February 2, 2017.

<sup>8</sup> Maloney, Alli. (2016, June, 3) “[Full disclosure](http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/06/03/jessica-valenti-lays-herself-bare-in-her-new-memoir-sex-object/)” [Jessica Valenti lays herself bare in her new memoir “Sex Object”](http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/06/03/jessica-valenti-lays-herself-bare-in-her-new-memoir-sex-object/) *Women in the World, New York Times*, retrieved from <http://nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2016/06/03/jessica-valenti-lays-herself-bare-in-her-new-memoir-sex-object/> accessed on 2 February 2, 2017.

<sup>9</sup> Arya, Divya. (2013, May, 8) *Why are Indian women being attacked on social media?*, *BBC Hindi*, retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-22378366> accessed on July 9, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Yadav, Neha. (2016, May, 19) “R\*\*di TV ki R\*\*d Anchor...”: Barkha Dutt, Trolls & Sexual Slurs, *The Quint*, retrieved from <http://www.thequint.com/women/2016/05/18/randi-tv-ki-rand-anchor-barkha-dutt-trolls-and-sexual-slurs> accessed on August 9, 2016.

misogyny does a troll’s psyche become clearer. Disagree with a female activist? Threaten to rape her. Don’t like a female political candidate? Accuse her of sleeping around. Find a female journalist annoying? Organise a mass campaign to circulate her number on the internet so you can call her a whore. Now that you have dragged her sexuality out into the world and made free with it, you have destroyed her personhood, because those two are clearly one and the same thing.”<sup>11</sup>The misogynistic mindset can’t accept a woman as an outspoken and speaking her mind, thus, a collective patriarchal attack like trolling on virtual space has become a pattern to vent rage against powerful women including journalists, academicians, and activists.

In another incident of sexual harassment, a team of women journalists of a rural newspaper „Khabar Lahariya“ had to face phone stalking, lewd harassment, threats of violence and later their phones“ where simcards were illegally locked by the stalker. When the complaint was registered, rural Uttar Pradesh police ignored it for nine months.<sup>12</sup>Such incidents present the misogyny prevailing in journalism which cannot find women expressing their minds and trying to suppress their voices where ever they are.

During interviews I have found there are two reasons first women have self-injected fear of losing the job, second the image-consciousness or character assassination which is again a social construct.

*Shivani: There was this senior woman news editor with a Hindi news daily around 2001 and had to stay late night to manage work and meet the deadline. Male colleagues used to mentally torture her and used to leave porn sites, pictures on her desktop. It maligned her image, which affected her. She had to hear ordering attitude even from peon of the office and at last she had to quit the place or perhaps the profession. Male journalists used abusive language behind her back just because she was holding a higher position and they had to work under her.*

*Men do not want and will not let any women journalist reach here to higher position at all.*

*These days there are numerous social networking applications (Apps) that are accessible on mobile phone, which directly bring porn and sexually explicit content to a user.*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. (2016, May, 19) “R\*\*di TV ki R\*\*d Anchor...”: Barkha Dutt, Trolls & Sexual Slurs, *The Quint*, retrieved from <http://www.thequint.com/women/2016/05/18/randi-tv-ki-rand-anchor-barkha-dutt-trolls-and-sexual-slurs> accessed on August 9, 2016.

<sup>12</sup>Choudhury, [Chitrangada](#). (2015, September, 9) Stalking the Messenger, *The Hoot*, retrieved from <http://www.thehoot.org/media-watch/community-media/stalking-the-messenger-8928> accessed on July 9, 2016.

*Receiving sexual jokes, obscene messages and more to trouble through smart phones is a common thing. Male colleagues don't leave any chance to take revenge through texting sexual jokes and other stuff. Social networking platforms are also used for harassment. If a woman chooses to quit such spaces she is also out of professional networking.*

Her narrative brings out the different forms of sexual harassment being executed in the official space or the workplace. It directly affects the mental peace of the victim, who is unable to share or bring it to notice. Reskin (et al., 1994) quoted in Welsh (1999) argue that sexual harassment is usually done to let the women know that they are not welcome in certain workplaces thus they are not respected members. Respondent indicated that women have to face professional boycott as well if they choose not to have their presence in such virtual networking it results into their loss of news sources and networking.

Their silence goes in benefit to maintain the dominant gender relations even at workplace. This silence basically indicates lack of legal consciousness about the sexual harassment and incidents related to it. Moreover, it demands identification of such issues which are systematically weakening negotiation of the women journalists in Hindi print media workplaces. The respondent mentioned about mobile phones and social networking platforms as another medium, which are used as a tool for sexual harassment. Interestingly, among the respondents, only few showed aversion towards social networking and most of them do not have a Facebook account. When I asked them that, „why you don't have Facebook account despite being in such profession of networking?“, they responded that it doesn't assure privacy and women do not feel safe there.

I emphasize here that the absence of these few women journalists on social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter does indicate the fear of cyber-spaces, which too have male-domination.

“While many women are victimized online, what makes Indian women unique? India is predominantly patriarchal and orthodox country and women who are victimized are mostly blamed and online victims are no exception” (Halder & Jaishankar, 2011a cited in Saha et al., 2014). Whereas Citron (2009, p. 374) critically argues “the harassment of women online is a pernicious and widespread problem.” Further, Citron (2009, p. 375) mentions that “Cyber harassment is a uniquely gendered phenomenon - the major individuals are women, and the abuse of female victims invokes gender in threatening and demeaning.”

In my research, during one particular interview with a senior woman journalist, I witnessed that at the meeting place she was howling on phone as the caller was troubling her through unknown calls and stalking her journalistic work. This incident was the beginning of the conversation with her and she said:

*Meenakshi: Don't worry! I have been experiencing such things from long back as I have been working for a longer period in this field. No life security for journalists and women are the easiest target for harassment. For such unknown abusers, women's life is not the cost but making them scared of their character and 'izzat' (honour) is the intention behind every act of rage through unknown calls, stalking, blackmailing and anything like this. They harass women more as they know women cannot be bribed unlike men. When I expose scam, crime such threats and stalking is part of my work experience.*

Meenakshi's narrative is important to understand the misogynist politics exists outside workplace as well and also while one is on the job away from the workplace station or on the field. It is a grave concern where women journalists are targeted because of their socially weaker position in the society. The respondent significantly mentioned that in this profession, harassing a woman journalist with a revengeful intention is simply to target „izzat“ and „character“, glaringly indicating rape threat to a woman. She mentioned here that as women are not or cannot be *usually* easily bribed, perhaps she meant unlike men, who work through nexus matters are settled through bribing. As per her narrative, it happens when a woman journalist engages in reporting such as investigative, exposing scam, corruption, crime or more, she has to face abusive, life threatening calls, basically rape threatening calls. Exposing scams and corruption are suppressed through rape-violence threats given to women journalists wherever these women emerge strongly speaking their mind. Here, political or institutional power added with patriarchal nature subjugates women, controlling their intervention, which go against the power-nexus. Conventional forces including state, police and administration many a times seems to suppress these voices, which show dissent and women journalists' freedom challenge these conventional forces' patriarchal character.

*Sangeeta: I do not feel so comfortable on social media, though I use it for professional purpose only and recently only I opened my Facebook account. It doesn't give a sense of security as one's information can be manipulated. Especially for women, social media doesn't ensure safety because women are targeted there too for expressing their free mind and views.*



Sangeeta's narrative suggests the nature of social media which doesn't allow women to feel safe and free. She also elaborates that use of social media is limited to professional purpose but a woman doesn't feel complete her presence belonging to her ownself. Fear of misuse of information indicates that women do not have freedom over their virtual presence, thus they refrain from social media. Also, when I asked the same respondent that what has been the restrictive factor that does not let women journalists to be there on the social media, she answered that fear of „image“ is one of the reasons because in a place like Jabalpur which is already a conventional city, thus, use of social media can be a professional compulsion but not a personal choice of a woman.

According to a news piece, “Fired for reporting sexual harassment”<sup>13</sup> reported by Geeta Sheshu, a woman journalist who headed the bureau of a television news channel IND24 in Raipur, Chhattisgarh, was fired for complaining against the channel head, who used to make suggestive remarks to her and recite poetry to her. She tried to get access of the CEO of the channel regarding receiving life threatening and abusive calls, but she was simply fired.

Sheshu in this report argues “this woman's story is an unnerving indicator of the extreme vulnerability of women who live and work in smaller cities and seek to redress their work grievances. What they often end up confronting is a powerful network-the police and administration, local politicians, the business community, and the media-that is ranged against any attempt to secure justice.” In the same report Seshu suggested that “that a complete audit of all news channels-their employee practices, funding sources, financial viability, codes of conduct-might be useful so that journalists know what they are getting to when they take up jobs with these channels. With so little information about them available in the public domain, it is near impossible for journalists to exercise caution.”<sup>14</sup> In small cities things are complicated as

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<sup>13</sup>Seshu, Geeta. (2015, August, 6) Fired for reporting sexual harassment, *The Hoot*, retrieved from <http://www.thehoot.org/media-watch/media-practice/fired-for-reporting-sexual-harassment-8847> accessed on July 9, 2016.

<sup>14</sup>Seshu, Geeta. (2015, August, 6)Fired for reporting sexual harassment, *The Hoot*, retrieved from <http://www.thehoot.org/media-watch/media-practice/fired-for-reporting-sexual-harassment-8847> accessed on July 9, 2016.

media houses do not have transparent accountabilities which make this complex due to lack of information for women journalists. Lack of professionalism function strategically with patriarchal mindset thus women cannot escape these structural hierarchies at workplace.

### **1.3 Conclusion**

This paper reveals that women journalists did not feel free and comfortable to discuss incidents of sexual harassment shows that they are dealing with more vengeful and patriarchal environment of small cities. It confirms Hindi journalistic workplace as patriarchal spaces having gendered power relations. It also revealed that small cities and their conventional atmosphere do not allow women express their dissent against incidents of sexual harassment. There is lack of any functional body at all media organization to deal with such incidents; there are only few newspapers which have gender sensitization cell. Negotiating with the physical workplace consists of unequal power-relations between man and women and the paper showed that sexual harassment exists in different forms. Misogynistic comments and sarcasm are form of attacking women professional presence both in the workplace as well as in virtual spaces like Facebook, Twitter and other social networking spaces. Bhopal and Indore demand presence of journalists on social networking for variety of professional reasons and women journalists have to face consequences of their presence in these male-dominated virtual spaces. Jabalpur and Gwalior have been found as the regressive spaces where women journalists are afraid of being on these virtual spaces where they experience threats akin to those in public spaces. Sexual Harassment has come as a reality of Hindi Journalism workplace which have embedded revengeful attitude towards any women who dares to show dissent or challenges the existing patriarchy in the journalistic profession.

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