



**Gender, Politics and Press Freedom in India:**

**Violence Against Women Journalists**

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## Abstract

This study aims at analysing press freedom in India - particularly through the lens of women journalists facing violence. Women journalists in India stand at an unsteady intersection of caste, religion, political inclination and gender discrimination within the already male-dominated media and journalism industry. The findings of the research suggest that public institutions such as society, the government and corporate systems are one of the primary causes of the violence faced by women journalists - the majority of threats and harassment that Indian women journalists are subjected to are a direct or indirect result of state politics and majoritarianism. A multitude of reasons including physical appearances, religious and caste backgrounds and the discrimination they face due to systemic patriarchy and misogyny dictate the form and extent of violence they face. Unlike studies performed in the West, the violence Indian women journalists face depends very minutely on the beats they report within. While women journalists are underrepresented in several beats, their subject of reporting doesn't alter their exposure to violence (both online and offline); however, the beats have a significant impact on the intensity of violence they face. The study also finds that the response of the state in helping these women journalists is lax at best. Additionally, the stigma attached to the reporting of cases of violence against women in this country creates an insufficient and inaccurate database for studying the exact number of cases of violence against women journalists in the country. Similarly, it was also found that the experiences of women journalists reporting in vernacular media are difficult to trace due to language barriers and their side-lining from mainstream media which is accessible to common people as well as international media organizations.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

The Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) in its India Report for 2020 found that the numbers for women in media - both in news-making capacities as well as reporting capacities - are on the decline. It found that the only form of media where women are more visible than men is the television and Twitter; even then, their overall presence in these spaces has only been 23% (Shaw, 2020). There has been a significant decrease in the proportion of female journalists between 2015 and 2020, going from 43% to 13% for print and from 60% to 52% for television. The study claims that the reason behind having more women journalists visible on TV (52%) instead of print (13%) or radio (20%) is that broadcasting channels attract audiences by employing 'attractive younger women' on visual media (Joy, 2021). While the report did not mention any causes for this decline, many journalists have speculated that it could be due to the violence and discrimination female journalists face - in terms of gender parity, freedom to report stories, workplace harassment, exposure to online violence and threat to life (Sachde, 2023).

For decades, women journalists have been subjected to sexism, misogyny and discrimination in the workplace. An already male-dominated media industry makes it hard for women to ascend in the corporate hierarchy and assume positions of power. The advent of social media and its subsequent use for journalism left a lot of women journalists exposed to criticism and harassment in the form of online trolls, degrading comments, invasion of privacy and much more. The anonymity and accessibility of information on the Internet have made it easier for women journalists to be targets of both online and offline violence (Byerly, 2013). While violence against women journalists has resulted in a string of lawsuits against them, attempted murder and assassinations in this country, most organisations within and outside India claim it to

be a professional hazard. However, violence against female journalists in this country is not an occurrence exclusive to the profession of journalism. It is both a cause and an effect of systemic patriarchy, communal violence, caste discrimination and the recent rise of hyper-nationalist politics.

Women journalists in India are at a disadvantage - neither are their experiences manifestations of nor do they reflect those of women journalists in the West. Cases of violence against women journalists are often written out of the media in India because they aren't deemed important enough to write about and are left out of studies performed on women journalists in the West because the Indian mediascape is too layered to study. Therefore, pushing for the designing and implementation of policies to protect Indian women journalists from violence has been difficult for scholars, lawmakers and activists. The dearth of information also reflects in the number of cases that go unreported due to a multitude of reasons. In a country with a rampant communal attitude of 'victim blaming,' Simões et al., 2021 find that 'avoidance' is the primary coping mechanism employed by women journalists to counter violence.

This report highlights the experiences of 14 women journalists and one women-led media organisation with online and offline violence through a thematic analysis of four key aspects of the violence they experience(d).

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

United Nations Special Rapporteur in its report on the Promotion and Protection of Rights to Freedom and Expression, 2010, stated that “gender equality and freedom of expression are inextricably linked” (Newslandry & UN Women, 2022). Violence against women journalists persists all over the world - in different forms albeit. Cases of sexual violence against women journalists - perpetuated by both, employers, colleagues and co-workers as well as interviewers, audiences and subjects - have become common in the contemporary world. As will be mentioned further in this paper, misogyny, discrimination, political and religious barriers etc. play an important role in understanding the attitude behind the perpetrators’ actions and the society which allows for this harassment to take place.

When localised to the Indian subcontinent, violence against women journalists becomes further layered. Caste discrimination - a practice that is rampant in all spheres of Indian society - is visible (and hardly subtly) in newsrooms as well. Additionally, women occupy very few positions of power within the Indian media industry; this creates a dearth of data on women’s participation and the problems faced by them within this ecosystem. A recent study found that within both Hindi and English (the two languages in which newspapers are most widely published), 87% of editors of proprietors are males as opposed to a measly 5% of women editors and proprietors (Newslandry & UN Women, 2022). A combination of caste, religious and gender discrimination poses a significant threat to the right to freedom of speech of journalists, more specifically, women journalists.

To understand the magnitude of the violence against women journalists in India, it is crucial to establish the underlying historical context which must be kept in mind throughout this

paper. For centuries, women - all over the world - have been denied several rights and one such right is the freedom of speech. In fact, several countries today still practice the primitive laws of not allowing women the right to free speech.

A lot of violence/attacks faced by women journalists are highly embedded in gender prejudices and stereotypes which are more systemic than contemporary (Simões et al., 2021; Posetti & Storm, 2018). In addition to this, Byerly, 2013 believes that the 'ownership and control of new media is male-dominated, and globalisation is the evidence that it is gendered and has put women at disadvantage'. Furthermore, Costa, 2022 suggests that countries with higher democracy indices have increased cases of violence against women journalists because the freedom of speech is high but the regulation is low.

Why do women journalists become targets for violence and trolls?

*The Chilling*, a report by the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) emphasises 'platform capture' which occurs as a result of 'the weaponization of social media by bad-faith actors, in combination with the structural failures of the platforms' business models and product design, and the virtual entrapment of many news organisations and journalists into platform dependency' (Posetti et al., 2021).

A report by Chen et al., 2018 found that women are more frequent targets of online violence than men. This already places women at a disadvantage because of the amount of violence they encounter online and being a journalist in the public eye only increases visibility. Posetti & Storm, 2018 state that the media industry has historically been male-dominated. This places women journalists at an unfair disadvantage of having to constantly claim their space and prove their expertise. The report also states that a negative externality of the industry being



male-dominated is that opinions of cis het males are perpetrated and have now come to be accepted as the norm; not only do men sit in front of the camera, but they're also the ones whose expertise we see on various issues. This creates an impediment for women journalists to both, be journalists as well as have the space to voice their opinions on mass media. In addition to this, women journalists are both less visible and more vulnerable when it comes to online and offline violence.

While one would assume these women journalists' employers to be supportive of legal and public action to counter this violence, in most cases, the violence is perpetrated by colleagues, fellow journalists, male editors etc. (Posetti & Storm, 2018). Furthermore, most media organisations have normalised the violence and hate speech that journalists face; it is considered a part of the job description to be able to deal with abuse and hate speech online (Costa, 2022).

Another direction women journalists face violence and harassment from is the state. Representatives of the state - in the capacity of ministers, politicians, bureaucrats and policy-makers - are often the perpetrators of violence against these journalists. Their public comments against women journalists often trigger ripple effects which can be damaging and violent for the journalists. Chen et al., 2018 found that women journalists are also more likely to be targets of attacks when they report on issues that are stereotypically male-dominated like automobiles, finance, technology etc.

Rego, 2018 also states that an additional threat of violence and abuse emerges for women journalists in online spaces because of the anonymity, ease of communication, wider reach and most importantly - loose law enforcement giving agency to trolls and attackers to get away with abusive and often discrediting hate speech. This also gives rise to the pile-on effect which is the

spiralling of spam accounts that replicate the abuse and harassment online (Posetti & Storm, 2018).

Most importantly, however, the gendered violence against women journalists is a direct reflection of centuries of misogyny and deep-rooted gender inequality within societies across the world (Simões et al., 2021; Posetti & Storm, 2018; Posetti et al., 2021). Carole Cadwalladr, the British journalist who broke the Cambridge Analytica story was targeted online for being a ‘mad cat lady’ for being middle-aged and childless. Maria Ressa, a Filipino American journalist had abuses hurled at her online because of her ethnicity and for being a woman (Posetti et al., 2021).

## Motives for attack

### 1. Political

A report by Ramaprasad, 2016 found that about 22% of Indian journalists report on the political beat and that is only within mainstream English publications. Political polarization and ideological extremism contribute a significant amount to an unstable political environment in most countries and one that most journalists are required to report on. A report by UNESCO titled *The Chilling: Global Trends in Online Violence against Women Journalists* found that out of several factors, publishing stories against majoritarian regimes was a major reason why women journalists face violence. In addition to being a woman, the journalists’ political leanings and opinions are significant factors in determining both the type and extent of the threat they face (Posetti et al., 2021).

Julie Posetti in the book *Insights on Peace and Conflict Reporting* finds that a trend targetting women journalists in ‘disinformation wars’ has emerged perpetrated by state and corporate actors (Orgeret, 2022). Since the media is both an active participant and onlooker

within the political ecosystem of a country, any major political drift within the social structures exposes them to backlash, attacks and abuse by bringing the media actors' political orientations, cultural politics and religions into the public discourse (Rego, 2018).

Within India, the Sedition Law is routinely used to sue journalists who publish opinions that don't align with state politics and majoritarian views. Not just journalists but public speakers including stand-up comics and student activists have been sentenced to jail and arrested without warrants. While journalists like Rana Ayyub have international visibility and support which makes it difficult for the government to charge her with criminal lawsuits, most other reporters in India do not have access to this visibility and support which makes them easy and vulnerable targets of these laws. Citing the Unlawful Activities Prevention Act (UAPA) - a law implemented to curb terrorist activities amongst civilians - Ellis-Peterson & Hassan, 2021 wrote that it has 'routinely been used by the Modi government to detain those deemed critical of the government, from lawyers and activists to journalists, priests, poets, academics, civil society members, and Kashmiri civilians.'

## 2. Religious

In a country like India, where politics and religion are almost too hard to separate from one another, political and religious polarization and extremism quickly snowball into a socially hostile environment. Women journalists become targets because of the long history of religious ostracization of women within Indian society and this ostracization transcends the boundaries of caste and faith in India. A report by Costa, 2022 noted that the 'populist right' and its ability to taint women's careers by making public comments and discrediting women's work often snowballs into an abysmal amount of hate speech against journalists.

It is also important to note that research within this realm is limited mainly to the lack of research in the Indian context. Religion within the ambit of Indian society is broader and much more multi-dimensional than religion in the West and therefore, it is inaccurate to use data and findings collected in the West and replicate them in the Indian mediascape (Simões et al., 2021). Several reports have been published aiming to understand the role of journalists in reporting gendered violence through the lens of religion in India but no reports exist so far on understanding the discrimination and violence women journalists in India face due to their religious beliefs. Rana Ayyub, an Indian journalist and a follower of Islam is one of the very few journalists who have written about their experience with violence as a Muslim woman journalist in a Hindu-majority country like India. There is a gap in the existing literature about religious violence in India which doesn't take into consideration women journalists who aren't Hindu.

### 3. Physical appearance

Outrageous as it sounds, more often than not, women journalists are attacked, targeted and abused because of their physical appearances. As has been mentioned earlier, a lot of violence faced by women journalists is in great parts to be blamed on the generational discrimination and oppression of women in society. Women journalists facing abuse because of their appearances are further evidence to prove the aforementioned. In fact, for a lot of women journalists, their physical appearance becomes the sole reason for male audiences to follow them (Chen et al., 2018). A study found that the keywords that abusers used against women journalists online include 'slut' and 'whore' (Posetti & Storm, 2018). This not only undermines their professional expertise but also accounts for misogyny and sexism. Chen et al., 2018 define this as hostile sexism which is overt, negative comments about women journalists' bodies and appearances.

Engaging with their audiences online comes under the job descriptions of most journalists in today's world; conversations about politics, religion, culture and almost all other spheres of public life have shifted to social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Facebook. However, most times, apart from hurling abuses at women journalists on their public pages, attackers and trolls (mostly men) send lewd and pornographic content to the journalist's personal email ids, social media inboxes etc.

This violence based on journalists' physical appearance is also a result of the stereotypes and misogyny that exist within Indian society. As Shaw, 2020 found, broadcast networks tend to hire female news anchors for prime time and other TV shows to lure audiences with women's 'attractiveness.' That is why 52% of journalists on TV are women; the only medium within which men are at a disadvantage - or are women?

#### Forms of attack

##### 1. Online

The Internet is by far, the biggest platform where women face abuse. It is also increasingly the largest platform where journalists are required to be active and engage with their audiences. One of the biggest downsides of the hypervisibility that comes with being on social media is the inability to track abuse, threats and attackers. Online violence can occur in various forms (Posetti et al., 2021) -

- a. Identity spoofing - replicating (illegitimately) the social media accounts/handles of women journalists to post content that can be detrimental to their profession and harm their reputation

- b. Trolling - women journalists are targeted by trolls in online forums. The trolls post provocative content to draw attention to these journalists and then use their platforms to agitate the crowds into making extremist remarks or inflammatory comments about the women journalists
- c. Doxxing - many attackers identify and make public personally identifiable information like home addresses, office addresses, spouse's name, schools their children attend etc.
- d. Cyber-misogyny - as the name suggests, misogynistic behaviour that transcends society and presents itself - in the most inappropriate and filthy manner - online by attacking women journalists based on their gender and sexuality
- e. Astroturfing - several times, bot accounts post information that discredits journalists while claiming to be government-sponsored to make the readers believe its legitimacy
- f. Bullying - women journalists in the US and Brazil reported being threatened to financially extort money and even disclose sensitive information. Bullying can also look like driving a journalist to quit their profession/move countries/change beats/alter the way they report or refrain from engaging with their readers online and even surveillance
- g. Threats - from rape threats to messages threatening their families, women journalists are always at risk of being threatened by their attackers (13% of women journalists reported being threatened by violence against someone close to them). Threats directed at women journalists also stem from a highly hegemonic patriarchal structure that places men in a place where they have the agency to make these threats and also, in rare cases act on it
- h. Unsolicited content - lewd and inflammatory personal messages/emails, delivering products like worms, pesticides etc., photoshopping pornographic content onto the women journalist's faces/bodies

## 2. Offline

Women journalists do not face threats from attackers on online platforms alone, but also out in the world when they walk back home, when they sit at restaurants to eat, when they're out with their families etc. (Posetti et al., 2021). While these are rare occurrences, sometimes, the harassment women journalists face online transcends the boundaries of virtuality and manifests into physical attacks, stalking and in extreme cases, attempts to murder them.

An article in *The Sunday Times* titled 'Men's problem with women in sports just won't go away' elaborates, and almost justifies how men are allowed to have a 'problem' with women in sports (Walsh, 2021). In 1990, Lisa Olson, an American sports journalist, was sexually harassed by three players of the New England Patriots in the locker room (Antunovic, 2018). Another form of offline violence includes the delivery of inappropriate and dangerous items to these journalists' homes (Posetti et al., 2021).

One of the most dangerous beats of reporting within journalism is war and conflict. While women journalists are rarely ever assigned to this beat, when they are, they are at significantly higher risks than men journalists because of several reasons that include a lack of training in dealing with combat situations, lesser safety equipment and lack of support from their media outlets (Rehman, 2019).

### Response to attacks

*The Chilling* found that 'women journalists are both the primary targets of online violence and the first responders to it.' Owing to an increase in cases of abuse both online and offline, many women journalists - as instructed by their organisations - have begun self-censoring what they

put out on online platforms (Posetti et al., 2021). The same report also found that increasingly, many employers have either resorted to policing their journalists' speech online or victim-blaming women journalists. Not only does this further the abuse and violence that these women journalists face but it also undermines the professional agency of the journalist and hinders their ability to do their job. This undermines the freedom of the press in general (Simões et al., 2021). While one would assume that the organisations that employ journalists would be the first responders to this abuse, it is rarely true.

In some cases, women journalists have been forced to quit their jobs and move to different cities, states and even countries to escape the violence and abuse (Posetti et al., 2021). An additional layer of threat emerges in cases of independent and freelance journalists as they lack the legal representation to take matters to court - many outlets that publish these journalists' pieces do not have any redressal mechanism to help when violence emerges (Posetti et al., 2021).

A lot of women journalists also collectivise to form communities and groups both online and offline to help fellow journalists deal with this abuse and violence better. Michelle Ferrier, for instance, founded the website Trollbusters which is a robust system that tracks and deletes/reports comments and hate speech that is derogatory or offensive in nature. She created the website after struggling with online harassment as a journalist for several decades (Ferrier & Garud-Patkar, 2018).

In 2016, Just Not Sports created a video titled #MoreThanMean featuring Julie DiCaro and Sarah Spain to address the hate speech that women journalists are targeted for daily online. The video featured Spain and DiCaro reading out the hate messages they received from random men followed by the men's reactions to the same. The video created a stir in online communities and triggered fierce debate among media organisations, stakeholders and journalists alike



(Antunovic, 2018). However, Antunovic, 2018 emphasises the issue of men still being the locus of this campaign.

Violence against women journalists affects the way they interact with their audiences and more often than not, their agency as journalists as well (Simões et al., 2021). As has been mentioned previously, for most journalists, engaging with their audiences comes under their job descriptions, and increasingly so with conversations shifting online. However, many times, interactive discussions turn into lewd debates and cause physiological and mental trauma to journalists.

While all aforementioned research has contributed manifold to the study of violence against women journalists all over the world, the current knowledge pool falls short of the accounts and experiences of women journalists in the Indian subcontinent. While racial disparity plays a significant role in understanding the violence against women journalists in other parts of the world, the parameters for the same research would change drastically in the Indian context. Caste, religion and India's long history of intersectional discrimination would have to be factored in to measure the extent of violence against women journalists in India.

There is also a lack of research analysing the intersectionality between gender roles within religion and their manifestation in the professional lives of women journalists in the Indian context. Furthermore, in India, women journalists occupy only 2.7% of the positions within mainstream media as opposed to the United Kingdom (45%) and Germany (40%) (Chen et al., 2018). The colossal gap in gender parity within the media industry contributes to the lack of research and the consequent lack of implementing policies to regulate violence against women journalists in India.

This paper aims to contribute to the existing literature by documenting accounts and cases of violence - both online and offline - against women journalists in India between September 2017 and September 2022.

### Chapter 3: Methodology

A UNESCO article wrote that violence against women journalists leads to ‘self-censorship, thus impoverishing the global information landscape.’ In a country like India, where women journalists are at a disadvantage not just because of their gender but because of all other variables that form their identity, studies such as these become unprecedented in understanding their struggles. It is important to study the violence faced by Indian women journalists because apart from being underrepresented in international communities, their experiences with violence dictate the way their audiences receive all other stories of gender-based violence within the society. Guilherme Canela, the Chief of the Section for Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists at UNESCO wrote that the safety of women journalists is beyond a gender violence concern - it is a 'freedom of expression concern.' 'We need their voices to be represented loud and clear. It is the responsibility of employers, platforms, governments and the international community to ensure they can do their work safely,' Canela wrote (UNESCO, 2022). This research aims to deconstruct the violence Indian women journalists face by attempting to answer the following questions -

1. What are the different forms of violence women journalists face in India; and what are the motives behind these attacks?
2. Who perpetrates violence against these women journalists?
3. Do state actors - governments, politicians and ministers - play any role in this violence; if so, how?
4. Do the beats women journalists report affect the violence they face?

The research objectives of this research are as follows -

1. To understand the various forms of violence faced by women journalists in India
2. To understand the motives and extent of this violence

The study analyses the cases of 14 women journalists in India and one women-led media organisation over a period of five years - from September 2017 to September 2022. For the purpose of this paper, the definition of a journalist has been narrowed down to only reporters and journalists; not columnists, editors, authors, writers, ex-reporters and professors. It employs thematic analysis to study the four key aspects of violence faced by women journalists in India namely:

1. *Institutional systems* and how they put women at a disadvantage as well as their involvement in perpetrating this violence in the first place. Within institutional systems, the paper analyses three key systems -
  - a. Societal systems - Violence perpetrated by audiences, readers and common people.
  - b. Political systems - Violence perpetrated - either directly or indirectly - by people of power associated with political machineries such as the government, bureaucracies, local governments and supporters of these institutions.
  - c. Corporations - Violence perpetrated by and within the organisations that employ women journalists.
2. *Socioeconomic backgrounds* of women journalists and the extent to which they interfere and determine the intensity and kind of violence the journalists' experience. These include caste, religious and political diversity.

3. *Types of violence* faced by women journalists in India are analysed under two broad categories namely -
  - a. Online violence - Violence that begins and is within the bounds of the Internet and social media platforms.
  - b. Offline violence - Violence that physically impacts these journalists and is beyond the scope of the internet and social media platforms.
4. *Response of the State* to protect or bring these journalists to justice.

The women journalists studied are

1. **Gauri Lankesh** - Daughter of renowned journalist P. Lankesh, was born into the Lingayat caste (marginalised caste) in Karnataka. Lankesh was the editor of her own publication, *Gauri Lankesh Patrike* where she would write about Adivasi and tribal rights and vocally oppose hyper-nationalist Hindutva politics. She was assassinated by three men on 5th September 2017 outside her home in Bangalore.
2. **Rana Ayyub** - One of the most renowned and trusted woman journalists in the country and a Muslim, Ayyub began receiving backlash and threats after publishing her book *Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover Up* in 2016 about the Gujarat Riots (2002) and Modi's involvement in the event. She has been charged with money-laundering cases by India's Enforcement Directorate.
3. **Barkha Dutt** - One of the most controversial women journalists in India, Dutt gained popularity and became infamous for her coverage of the Kargil War in 1999. She made the news again after she was involved in the Niira Radia controversy for lobbying for

politicians. Currently the founder and editor at Mojo, Dutt continues to face online and offline violence.

4. **Faye D'Souza** - Currently an independent journalist, D'Souza routinely faces online violence and harassment. Initially a TV reporter with Mirror Now, she was forced to resign after she aired an episode critiquing the government's decision to abrogate Article 370.
5. **Priya Ramani** - Currently the Editor at Juggernaut Books, Ramani was slapped with a defamation case by MJ Akbar (ex-Member of Parliament) for accusing him of sexual harassment publically during the #MeToo wave in India. She faced severe criticism for her decision to fight the legal case and won in 2021.
6. **Nidhi Razdan** - Currently an independent journalist, Razdan was associated with NDTV as its Consulting Editor until she quit after Adani bought out the media outlet. Born and brought up in Kashmir, Razdan faces cyber attacks and online threats frequently.
7. **Sandhya Ravishankar** - Currently a freelance journalist from Chennai, Ravishankar was subjected to threats over the phone, online harassment and physical attacks after she published a story on illegal sand mining by the state government in Chennai.
8. **M Suchitra** - An environmental journalist from Chennai, Suchitra was subjected to threats over the phone, online harassment and physical attacks after she published a story on illegal sand mining by the state government in Chennai along with Sandhya Ravishankar.
9. **Sahasini Haidar** - Currently the Diplomatic Affairs Editor at The Hindu, Haidar has previously faced lewd comments, and misogynistic remarks and has been subjected to sexual harassment due to her physical appearance.

10. **Dhanya Rajendran** - A journalist with Newsminute, Rajendran was subjected to online violence by the fans of a Tamil movie actor Vijay after she published a review of a movie and made a comment which wasn't in favour of one of Vijay's movies.
11. **Sanna Irshad Mattoo** - A Kashmiri photojournalist, Mattoo was denied permission to fly to the United States by the Immigration Office in India to receive a Pulitzer Prize for her coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic. She is the target of communal violence - both online and offline.
12. **Anna Marie Mathew Vetticad** - A film critic and journalist, Vetticad was subjected to online harassment by Akshay Kumar fans after she published a review which wasn't in favour of one of his movies.
13. **Emy Ci Lawbei** - Initially with News18, Lawbei was physically assaulted by the police force at the Assam-Mizoram border in 2018 when she was covering a border conflict in the region.
14. **Patricia Mukhim** - The Editor of Shillong Times, Mukhim's home was attacked with a petrol bomb by her stalkers in 2019.
15. **Khabar Lahariya** - The only Dalit women-led media outlet in India, Khabar Lahariya operates in several hundred villages in Uttar Pradesh. They face physical, sexual and caste-based violence on the field, at home as well as from their audiences and sources.

While the study has tried to represent the geographical and socio-economic and political diversity of the country in its sample, the lack of information and language barriers have made it difficult to do so. The limitations of this study are as follows:

- The lack of availability of primary data from the sources in the form of interviews. Personal experiences with violence - in any form or mode - are sensitive topics for many journalists. The lack of interviews with these women journalists could result in a lack of nuance in their experiences. However, the author has tried her best to refer to the information published by the journalists themselves or by reports through which the journalists' stories have been narrated.
- The lack of representation of women journalists from the vernacular media: While the author has tried her best to shed light on and gather data from the accounts of as many women journalists as possible, the author's language barrier, as well as the dearth of information and accounts of women journalists who report in regional languages amounts to a lack of representation of the accounts of these journalists. The majority of the case studies are of women journalists who report primarily in English.
- As has been mentioned earlier, the inability to trace the exact number of women journalists who have faced different forms of violence due to the lack of reportage of these cases. Many women journalists including the ones living in smaller cities and towns, the ones who do not have access to social media or the means to report their experiences, and the ones who avoid filing cases due to fear of ostracisation or unnecessary media coverage have not been studied in this paper.



## Chapter 4: Analysis

Women journalists face discrimination and the threat of violence based on several factors. There are several motives for the attack which can be categorised under the broader umbrellas of - institutional systems, the socioeconomic background of the journalist, the types of violence and the response of the state. This chapter aims to study the cases of the above-mentioned journalists through the lens of the aforementioned criteria.

### - Institutional systems

Much like most women in our country, women journalists face various forms of censorship and discrimination at all levels within various institutions. As has been previously mentioned, women journalists - much like women in any other profession - are at a disadvantage when it comes to equality in all aspects of their professional careers. The advent of the Internet and the subsequent requirement for women journalists to make themselves visible on it exposes them to violence and harassment from all members of society. However, within society, systemic patriarchy pushes women journalists into a corner. This section analyses three institutional entities - societal systems, political systems and corporations - that women journalists function within and the impact of each of those institutions in the form and extent of violence they are subjected to.

#### *Societal systems*

Our country is made up of institutions and Indian society is one of the biggest ones. It is the underlying foundation behind the values and functioning of all institutions that operate within it.

Gauri Lankesh, a Bangalore-based journalist and the editor of *Gauri Lankesh Patrike* was assassinated outside her house in the city in September 2017. After her murder, a string of social media posts calling for similar killings of Sagarika Ghose, Arundhati Roy, Shobha De, Kavita Krishnan and Shehla Rashid for being ‘anti-nationals’ followed and were subsequently removed from Facebook and Twitter (Kathuria, 2018). Only women journalists’ names being included in this list of ‘anti-nationals’ is telling of the state of their safety reporting in a country like ours.

While *The Chilling* found that certain beats gather more violence and visibility for women journalists in the West, case studies of Indian women journalists do not reflect that finding (Posetti et al., 2021). Dhanya Rajendran, a reporter at The Newsminute was subjected to online trolling and rape threats because she wrote a comment critical of a Tamilian actor, Vijay’s movies (Kathuria, 2018). Similarly, Anna M.M Vetticad, the Editor at The Newsminute faced online threats after publishing a review of an Akshay Kumar movie which commented unfavourably upon the actor’s film (Kathuria, 2018; NWMI, 2021). Journalists like Nidhi Razdan and Barkha Dutt are routine targets of online threats and harassment for reasons beyond their reportage.

As has been previously mentioned, women journalists more often than not face violence and harassment not for being journalists but for being women. The larger question of the safety of women *journalists* cannot be addressed without addressing the discrimination faced by *women*. Suhasini Haidar, the Diplomatic Affairs Editor at The Hindu said, “They get targeted for being women, their voices, their faces, the way they look, the way they spoke instead and that actually is the core of the problem,” in a conversation with SheThePeople (Gupta, 2016).

### *Political systems*

In countries like the United States, reports have found that one of the major threats faced by women journalists is questions about their credibility raised by bureaucrats and politicians. In the United Kingdom, a journalist was publically called out on Twitter by a Minister which led to a significant increase in threats received by her (Posetti et al., 2021).

Similarly, Indian politicians regularly take to social media platforms to discredit journalists they do not agree with or who hold them accountable. Women journalists face increased amounts of threats due to the systemic and historic patriarchal institutions that form the backbone of Indian society. Sandhya Ravishankar and M. Suchitra are two journalists based in Chennai. A story they did, exposed illegal mining in some regions of Tamil Nadu. The report led to right-wing leaders - who were named as contractors behind the mining - taking to social media to harass and contest what Ravishankar and Suchitra had written. The tweets led to a witchhunt of the journalists; with them being harassed online, subject to trolls and even receiving death and rape threats (IFJ, 2017).

Rana Ayyub's book, *The Gujarat Files: The Anatomy of a Cover Up* on the Gujarat Riots, for instance, also drew the ire of Hindutva right-wing (especially BJP) supporters and politicians. A primary reason for her facing the extreme form of violence that she does is because of a ripple effect that began by branding her reportage as skewed based on her religious association - she has a religious association with Islam (Cadwalladr, 2022). In October 2022, India's Enforcement Directorate filed charges against her under the anti-money laundering laws. The charges alleged that she has used more than Rs 2.69 crore raised as public funds for personal use; she publicly denied any wrongdoing (Mai, 2023). Ayyub isn't alien to threats and legal charges but the money laundering charges drew the ire of many others - beyond the political machinery.

Even before the case was filed, Ayyub was barred from leaving the country to deliver a speech in London about online violence against female journalists organised by the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ). In March 2022, she was stopped at the Mumbai airport and prohibited from boarding the flight.

### *Corporations*

Women face discrimination within the workforce; from a widening gender pay gap to a lack of employment opportunities. Women journalists are often forced to self-censor, transfer from certain beats, leave their jobs and even quit journalism in extreme cases (Posetti et al., 2021). In India too, many women journalists are routine targets of different forms and intensities of violence from within their organisations.

Faye D'Souza, a Mumbai-based journalist was forced to resign from Mirror Now after she aired an episode contesting the abrogation of Article 370 which granted special status to the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The move led to her being pushed out of the media outlet because the managerial team decided to support the revocation of J&K's special status (Ayyub, 2020).

Barkha Dutt gained popularity after her reportage of the Kargil War, and soon after became infamous due to everyone's suspicions of her information on the secret military operation helping Pakistan (Shinde, 2022). She also got a lot of flak for her involvement in the Niira Radia scandal of 2008 and 2009. Dutt is known to be among the top three journalists in India that face online violence - especially on Twitter (MP, 2019). In March 2019, four people were arrested for sending death threats to her.

It becomes especially difficult for women journalists who freelance. Due to their inaccessibility to legal representation from the publications they write for, they are left to fight

defamation and other lawsuits against them on their own. The publications neither support their costs, nor their reportage.

- Socio-economic backgrounds of journalists

One of the biggest reasons journalists are harassed in India is their socioeconomic backgrounds - religion, caste and even class backgrounds. While *The Chilling* highlights the harassment faced by journalists from different ethnic and racial backgrounds within the United States, it fails to include violence faced by Indian women journalists who are targeted based on their religious, caste and class backgrounds (Posetti et al., 2021).

Rana Ayyub's experience with violence and attacks have spiralled out of proportion owing to her religious background. She is a follower of Islam and religious diversity is a breeding ground for communal violence in the country. After being wrongly cited in a text on April 20, 2018, independent journalist Rana Ayyub received threats of gang rape and murder. It claimed that Ayyub supported child rapists and that Muslims in India were no longer safe. Violence against her - both online and offline - began after her book *Gujarat Files* was published in 2016 (Mai, 2023). While Ayyub did file an FIR against the false accusations, she was not granted any police protection (Kathuria, 2018). The violence against her became so severe that international organisations made statements condemning the state of press freedom in India and expressing solidarity with her and other journalists in India. She has also faced severe backlash from hyper-nationalist bureaucrats within the political system who have made it difficult for her to practice meaningful journalism. Similarly, Sanna Irshad Mattoo, a Kashmiri photojournalist was denied permission to fly to the United States of America to receive her Pulitzer Prize for her

coverage of the Covid-19 pandemic in October 2022. The immigration authorities in India stopped her from travelling; the incident was also not the first of its kind (BBC News, 2022).

A movie about *Khabar Lahriya*, a Dalit women-run media outlet in Uttar Pradesh was nominated for the Oscars in 2019. The documentary revolves around their story of creating and running this organisation. Dalits are the lower-most castes within the Hindu caste system (Girish, 2021). These women stand at an unsteady intersection of caste and gender, which disables their agency and right to free speech. And even with those challenges, while they have managed to create a trustworthy outlet, they continue to face threats and harassment as journalists in that region. Journalists who work with the outlet - most self-taught - are not only breaking caste stereotypes but also gender stereotypes within a community which doesn't support either.

Gauri Lankesh, who was assassinated by two men who were later identified as Hindu right-wing nationals belonged to the Lingayat community - a marginalised caste in South India. Her writings and opinions - which she was very vocal about - were anti-caste. She wrote profoundly and personally about the abolition of caste, its pitfalls and her experiences with it. She drew the ire of the Hindu right-wing because of her vocal left-wing opinions as well as her caste background (Mondal, 2017).

#### - Types of violence

Indian women journalists as well as women journalists who report in India are at the receiving end of a gruesome variety of violence - from creating bots to discredit them to photoshopping images of journalists on obscene content to lewd public comments to stalking and even murder. In this section, the violence they face has been classified into two broad categories:

### *Online Violence*

The anonymity of online platforms makes it hard for most women journalists to track their perpetrators and abusers. Almost all women journalists in India - especially the ones mentioned in this study - have faced online violence either in the form of trolling, abusive personal messages or publically defaming statements.

In July 2018, Nidhi Razdan tweeted about receiving death and rape threats as personal messages on Facebook. Razdan was the consulting editor at NDTV until quitting in 2022, following the buying out of the media organisation by the Adani group. Razdan has been vocal about her experiences with online threats and harassment (Kathuria, 2018).

Priya Ramani faced online violence, trolling and harassment when she spoke out publicly against MJ Akbar and accused him of sexual harassment during the MeToo movement in 2018. Not only did her confession draw the ire of many supporters of the ex-MP, but Akbar also filed a defamation case against her for her statement. A civil lawsuit followed which ended with Ramani winning in 2021 (Express News, 2022).

Barkha Dutt, Faye D'Souze and Rana Ayyub are some of the most widely known journalists in India. They have publicly spoken about their experiences with online harassment. Barkha Dutt's opinion piece in The Washington Post titled *A new investigation in India reveals an old truth about silencing women* sheds light on her experience of being at the receiving end of online harassment (Dutt, 2022).

Sandhya Ravishankar and M Suchitra faced online threats for their reportage about illegal mining in Chennai. Priya Ramani faced severe backlash and criticism over her accusation of MJ Akbar assaulting her; social media users trolled her and she received death threats as well as rape threats online. Suhasini Haidar has been subjected to online trolling and misogynistic comments

on online platforms. Dhanya Rajendran and Anna M.M. Veticad were subjected to online trolling and verbal abuse by the fans of Vijay and Akshay Kumar respectively for writing critical movie reviews of famous actors. Journalists that work for Khabar Lahariya, even within a small community of readers face sexist and casteist slurs online. Every journalist that has been part of this study has faced some level of violence and harassment online. While other reports by international organisations such as *The Chilling* have written about the experiences of some of these journalists, the vast majority of them remain unreported.

### *Offline Violence*

Women, as a group have been easy targets for all types of physical violence ranging from sexual violence to stalking. Women journalists become easy targets for physical violence as well due to their visibility - on social media, print and the internet.

Although not a part of this case study analysis, Teresa Rehman's book *Bulletproof* highlights instances of her experience with physical harassment by the North-East police (Rehman, 2019). The North-Eastern states have always been disputed areas both, for governments as well as the locals living there. Perhaps, because of the Northeast's invisibility as a state, only a few of the many instances of cases of violence against journalists become headlines in the rest of the country. Women journalists are routinely censored, discriminated against and charged with legal cases merely for doing their jobs. Emmy Ci Lawbei, a reporter with News18 at the time, was physically beaten by Assamese Police while reporting on the conflict at the Assam-Mizoram border in early 2018 (Pisharoty, May 2018). Patricia Mukhim, the editor of *Shillong Times* has been targeted for her reporting in the Northeastern state of Meghalaya. In 2019, a petrol bomb was thrown into her house (Pisharoty, April 2018).



Neha Dixit, now an independent journalist and professor at Ashoka University in Noida was stalked in Delhi for three months before she reported the suspects to the police after they attempted to break into her house.

As has been mentioned earlier, Gauri Lankesh, a renowned journalist, editor of *Gauri Lankesh Patrike* and daughter of the famous journalist P. Lankesh was murdered outside her home in Bangalore in September 2017.

- Response of the State

While the Indian judiciary is known to be slow to clear cases, it is even more so when addressing cases that have to do with journalists and the violence they face. Additionally, there have been instances when local authorities/ the police have refused to lodge cases by women journalists due to the obscurity of the details or perpetrators. For this reason, many women journalists tend not to report instances of stalking, violence or threats they face to the legal authorities altogether. Neha Dixit, for instance, held off on reporting instances of being stalked and threatened with rape and acid attacks until her stalkers finally attempted to break into her home in Delhi (Staff, 2021).

Rana Ayyub has filed several FIRs with the cyber cell against users online who have threatened her, photoshopped her face on obscene content and so on (Mai, 2023). However, none of these people have been presented in court; while the charges against them remain as they are, no legal action has been taken against them. The result is continued threats and online harassment faced by women journalists.

Gauri Lankesh was brutally murdered by two men outside her house in Bangalore despite the state being aware of the attacks and threats she was facing. The two men were later identified as right-wing activists, who were part of a larger ring of hyper-nationalists (Staff, 2017).

In the case of Sana Irshad Mattoo, a Pulitzer Prize-winning photojournalist from Kashmir who was denied permission to leave the country to receive her award in the United States, the political state's response was perhaps, at par with one seen in authoritarian regimes (BBC News, 2022). Mattoo's case seems to be an example the state wanted to set for citizens and journalists alike from the disputed territory. In 2018, the home of the editor of *Shillong Times*, Patricia Mukhim was attacked with a petrol bomb. While FIRs were filed and the state government provided her with two armed guards, no arrests were made. Multiple reports and statements made by Press Alliances in the country have mentioned the Northeast as a dangerous place to report. Due to the government's reliance on militia in the area, increasing tribal involvement etc. women journalists are especially at risk of being physically harmed. Tongam Rina, the associate editor of *Arunachal Times*, was shot right outside her office (Saikia, 2018). Teresa Rehman, a journalist from Nagaland, in her book *Bulletproof*, sheds light on her own experiences as a woman journalist in the region.

The Northeast is one of India's most disputed regions. The haywire state of administration, the special agreements with the Indian government and tribal and Adivasi conflicts in the area affect the news generated in and reported from the Northeast. In addition to it being unsafe for normal citizens to reside in, it is unsafe for journalists to report in as well. That is one of the reasons, very few journalists report in those regions and very few news organisations send reporters to these regions (Kabi & Nayak, 2019). Furthermore, for journalists from outside of the Northeast, reporting is not easy - networking, having people to talk to etc. are

all dependent on the reporter's ability to communicate with the population in their local languages. Therefore, not only do very few journalists report from the Northeast but even fewer are willing to. Within this already limited pool of journalists, women journalists who work in organizations are rarely sent to cover stories in the area due to safety concerns and the cost of extra security for women journalists to be in that area (Rehman, 2019).

In all of the above-mentioned cases, the state has been imperceptive in taking action to arrest or fine the individuals that are accused of harassing these journalists.

The severe lack of reporting on violence against women journalists in vernacular media creates a rift in both, the quantity as well as the quality of data being analysed to determine the extent of violence against women journalists in India. A result of this dearth of information is further discrepancies in studies that attempt to advance the research about violence against women journalists in India (Rao, 2018).

## Chapter 5: Conclusion

Theoretically, the subject of violence against women journalists aren't completely understudied; several studies and surveys have been conducted by international organisations such as the Committee to Protect Journalists, UNESCO, Women In Media etc. However, the experiences of women journalists from the Indian subcontinent have been left out of these studies. The analysis of case studies of 14 women journalists and one women-led media outlet has resulted in findings - some of which agree with international statistics and some that don't.

The study found that a direct form of harassment faced by women journalists who publish politically controversial opinions and reports is one perpetrated often by the State in the form of a strenuous process of legal battles that takes years to resolve. Rana Ayyub, for instance, keeps getting charged with criminal lawsuits. Not only is this a tactic employed to silence women journalists but also journalists who publish against the majoritarian state (Soni, 2019; Suresh, 2023). Several reports and articles shed light on the process by which the Indian government uses legal action as a tool to silence journalists and others who speak out against the regime (Ellis-Peteson & Hassan, 2021; Suresh, 2023). While many Western countries have legal processes that work in favour of the journalists, India doesn't and therefore, the agency of journalists to take punitive action against the government vanishes.

The study also found that the beats women journalists report do not significantly impact the violence they face - it does, however, impact the intensity of said violence. The analysis cites examples of women journalists who faced online harassment for reporting on subjects as non-controversial as movie reviews to investigate reports about government-sponsored illegal

activities. While the kinds of violence these journalists face may differ, there are sufficient examples to ascertain that they face violence irrespective of what they write about.

*The Chilling* found that many women journalists in Latin America and America either quit their jobs, move to different locations, or begin self-censoring by transferring to different beats or issuing apologies publicly - all of which threaten the ethos of journalism (Posetti et al., 2021). However, most reports in India - written by women journalists themselves as well as the ones written about them - cite the inability of these women journalists to switch professions or even relocate. The coping mechanism of Indian women journalists is primarily to avoid conflict, and confrontation as well as engagement with their perpetrators and audiences (Simões et al., 2021).

In addition to the above, the study also finds that women journalists in India are identified as women first and journalists later. This propagates the patriarchy that keeps women within the boundaries of their gender roles which discourages them from voicing their opinions in public.

The indifference of policymakers and lawmakers in solving the issue of violence against women journalists reiterates the indifference towards the problem itself. It appears that women journalists are the only people who actively engage in conversations about the violence they face as professionals. This creates an exclusive ecosystem which makes it difficult to create and implement legal policies to better their condition.

Violence against women journalists is a multi-faceted problem that cannot be dealt with solely based on better laws and implementation of laws. As has been mentioned earlier, women journalists aren't at risk of harassment only from political systems but also from corporations they work with and the institutions that employ them. They also face violence from different directions - on social media platforms, within their places of work, at their homes, in public and

so on. The aftermath of this extensive violence is a lot of women journalists' self-censoring or even quitting the profession. In addition to journalism and media being dangerous professions in India, it is even more so for women journalists due to the misogyny and patriarchy that drives almost all public institutions in the country (Staff, 2021).

It is imperative to mention here that the above conclusions are drawn from the case study of a pool of considerably middle and upper-middle-class and upper-caste women journalists from mainstream English publications. It would not be a stretch to assume the existence of many other women journalists who do not report their experiences for the fear of media coverage or the ones who do not have access to legal representation to help fight lawsuits or the ones whose stories are inaccessible to the world because of language barriers.

To counter and address the problem of violence against women journalists in India, an institutional change would have to occur; committees to protect journalists in the country would have to be given more autonomy and extremist right-wing politics would have to be curbed. Rehman, 2019 mentions in her book *Bulletproof*, that academic institutions could spearhead the development of knowledge on the safety of and for journalists. Enabling women journalists with the information they need to deal with the violence they face on the field and in organisations would have to be taught at Journalism Schools and training camps. Perhaps, a first step could be treating women equally and the press as the democratic organ that it is - the fourth estate.

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