Online abuse and women journalists

By Shobha S V[1]

"A woman's opinion is the mini-skirt of the Internet."
Laurie Penny, contributing editor, The New Statesman

If you are a woman with an opinion on social media and vocal about it, rest assured, it wouldn't be an uncommon phenomenon for you to have experienced abuse. Women journalists are no exception to this unfortunate global phenomenon. Dealing with online abuse is now an occupational hazard for many female journalists in a news media universe that is increasingly turning digital.

According to the [Digital News Report- Asia Pacific](#), a study conducted by Reuters Institute for the study of journalism, news media is going digital and people are increasingly consuming news on social media. This necessitates the journalists to have an active online and a social media presence as a job requirement.

Traditionally, reporters have been the most visible of all journalists, but things have changed with the advent of social media. It has brought attention to a lot of journalists irrespective of their work profile within the organisation, especially the ones that are opinionated- either through their work or through their comments on social platforms.

While digital media has given journalists an opportunity to hear directly from their readers, it has also come with a fair share of problems. With the increasing digitisation of news all over the world, journalists have been particularly vulnerable to online abuse. Women journalists face a double whammy! Not only do they receive abuse for doing their job- covering stories, they also face abuse for being a woman.

This is corroborated in a [study](#) in 2016, in which UK based daily *The Guardian* researched its own comments section and found that articles written by women journalists and writers receive far more abuse than their male contemporaries. The study showed that even though most of the opinion writers were men, they were not the ones that received maximum abuse.

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[1] A discussion paper presented at the IFJ-FES Gender Equity Meeting in Kathmandu, Nepal in November, 2016.

How do women journalists deal with it?

Despite the commonality of online abuse, women seldom report wanting to go to the police. Taking legal action against the abusers meant engaging with the police, which few wanted because they anticipated more harassment and victim blaming. So while the legal route is avoided, women resort to non-legal strategies to help themselves. Some of the common strategies that people usually adopt include ignoring, muting, blocking and naming and shaming the abuser on social media.

According to an India-based study conducted by Internet Democracy Project, Do not let it stand most women who are active online (that also included some journalists) never went to their family in times of need, especially when they were attacked online. It was their virtual friends and an online community that came to their assistance. When an Indian photojournalist took to blogging to share her experience sexual harassment by Manik Katyal, the founder-editor of Emaho magazine, many others followed suit. That's because Katyal was a repeat offender. A Facebook page along with more women coming forward with their stories, which were strung together through a hash tag-#BoycottManikKatyal. The overwhelming number of women coming forward sharing their stories put pressure on a photography festival that decided that he should step down from his post as one of the organisers.

Social media also came to the assistance of Dalit women journalists of *Khabar Lahariya*, a Hindi newspaper in India that is circulated in rural areas of the state of Uttar Pradesh. When a founding member of *Khabar Lahariya* wrote a disturbing account of how a man named Nishu repeatedly harassed her and her team for eight months! Faced with shocking police indifference, when she finally wrote about her experience in Ladies Finger, a feminist website, the story became viral. It finally prompted the chief minister of the state to intervene putting pressure on the local police to arrest the harasser. The brave journalists from marginalised communities, in the face of multiple vulnerabilities continued working despite the danger posed by the harasser. They ask a simple question: *When we spoke to the DGP (Director General of Police)and others, we pointed out that they would never have made the arrest if our story hadn't been published. I think this case would have remained cold if it hadn't come out in the media. But what about other women, who don't have that many resources?*

Women journalists have found themselves very vulnerable especially because offline abuse often transcends into the online space and vice versa. For instance, conservative outfits in Bangladesh are now using the route of social media in order to threaten the freedom of their women journalists. In October 2015, a banned outfit called Ansarullah Bangla team threatened the safety of those female journalists that didn't wear purdah

because according to them they were violating the Sharia law. Popular blogger, Shammi Haque, a Bangladeshi blogger is currently living in exile in Germany. Popular for her posts on atheism, she had to flee the country after she co-organised a 'Kiss of love' event on Valentine's day in Dhaka. According to Shammi, a fundraiser was planned in Bangladesh to sponsor an air ticket so that someone can be sent across to rape her!

While name calling and abuse are common on social media, what is also on rise are cases of doxxing. Doxxing refers to a phenomenon where personal details of a woman is circulated in online forums making the woman journalist vulnerable to threats, violence and abuse. Barkha Dutt, a famous Indian journalist had her personal contacts being shared widely on social media prompting her to file a police complaint.

How are the platforms making a difference?

With repeated cases of online abuse coming to the fore followed by justified criticism, social media platforms are taking baby steps towards addressing this issue. Twitter has started a Safety council, an initiative in conjunction with academics, non-governmental organisations, women's groups etc. to work with them to make the platform safe for women. As a part of this initiative, they have launched a series of new features including a report abuse option in every tweet, mute feature that helps mute misogynistic words, phrases and conversations, quality filter etc. Facebook has also started collaborating with women's groups in addition to launching a safety section on their website that helps educate women and other groups susceptible to abuse about various features on the platform to deal with online abuse as well as other related issues. Other social media platforms including Instagram, Snapchat etc. have also introduced safety features to deal with this menace. However, it remains to be seen how effective these measures are to curb online abuse against women.

Virtual spaces are not unlike physical spaces. They often mirror the same structural inequalities that limits the agency of women in physical spaces. Just as initiatives like 'Take back the night' -where women populate the streets- are often used to reclaim women's right to public space, similar initiatives are needed for the online space. Online abuse can drive away women journalists from public arena of journalism. It is journalism's huge loss. Women journalists should forge alliances with other groups and collectively involve themselves in online initiatives that reclaim their right to online public spaces. Quitting the internet is not optional. Putting up a fight is essential. Our collective action now will pave way for the future generations to experience the Internet to its full potential. We owe it to them!