

SPOTLIGHT: ONLINE ABUSE OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS

*The Threats begin. Anonymous calls today calling me a M****F****G B**** on, "Afzal lovers Gang" whose family should die. 'Nationalists'?*

- Tweet by Indian television anchor and journalist, Barkha Dutt, March 4, 2016, following her coverage of the students' protests in Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), Delhi, India.

'Self-professed supporters of Narendra Modi and Subramanian Swamy specialise in abusing what they call "paid media". For them, "whore", "bitch", "Congress pimp", "Muslim-loving whore", "Congress-funded media" are all in a day's work... the daily invective and defamation by hundreds of Twitter handles speaks of an organised campaign.'

- Sagarika Ghose, journalist and television anchor, India, who coined the term 'Internet Hindus' to refer to right-wing Hindu trolls

"I'm not afraid of any threat. But this is an organised crime by right wing groups."

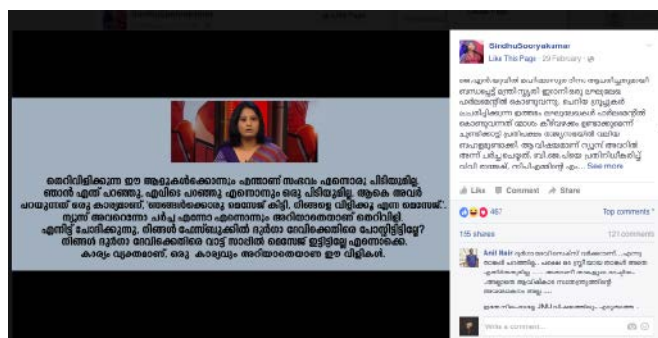
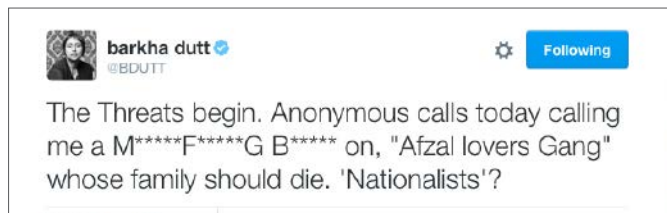
- Television anchor and Asianet News Chief Coordinating Editor Sindhu Sooryakumar who got over 2000 phone calls threatening and abusing her and circulating her phone number on Whatsapp groups and Facebook posts, after a programme on the speech delivered by India's Union Human Resources Minister Smriti Irani in Parliament

"They are asking women journalists to leave their jobs and stay at home. It seems that they are on the path to issue identical diktats to all working women in Bangladesh. They want the women to stay at home as puppets."

- Shammi Haque, a Dhaka blogger, who has received several death threats from the Islamists and now lives under police protection, following an email issued by the banned Ansarullah Bangla Team (ABT, which has claimed the killings of six bloggers in Bangladesh) to media companies in Bangladesh to stop employing women.

"This abuse started the day section 66A was repealed. This anon handle came up with this ridiculous and complete slander that I'm stalking an SPG protectee. Because I am a woman...let's see... how do you attack me? You can't attack me professionally, so you go after my character"

-Delhi-based journalist Swati Chaturvedi who filed a police complaint against an anonymous Twitter account that had unleashed a malicious campaign against her. The account changed its handle twice after the complaint.



JOURNALISTS WHO HAD HITHERTO BEEN ACCUSTOMED TO TROLLS AND ABUSIVE COMMENTS ON SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, EITHER IGNORING OR BLOCKING PERSISTENT TROLLS, HAVE NOW FOUND THAT STALKING AND DIRECT THREATS OF ATTACK HAVE INCREASED, FORCING THEM TO SEEK RECOURSE TO LEGAL OR POLICE PROTECTION.



↑ The steady increase in the number of women media workers in Pakistan has assisted with the growth of a diverse media, yet social and cultural stereotypes still impede on their work.

Credit: Women Media Center, Pakistan

From rejecting the soft assignments that earlier pigeon-holed women journalists, chipping away at the seemingly unbreakable glass ceiling, confronting and calling out sexual harassment at the workplace, women journalists have not left any stone unturned to forge ahead and make an indelible mark on journalism in South Asia. But the digital age has brought other challenges, of online death and rape threats and abuse, putting immense pressure on their freedom to speak out.

As more women in South Asia go online and as women journalists, writers and bloggers speak out on a plethora of news sites and social media platforms, the threats have steadily increased, becoming more organized and more vicious. Journalists who had hitherto been accustomed to trolls and abusive comments on social media platforms, either ignoring or blocking persistent trolls, have now found that stalking and direct threats of attack have increased, forcing them to seek recourse to legal or police protection. In the last year alone, there are numerous recorded instances of online abuse in all the countries of South Asia, with journalists filing complaints with police as the threats have increased to dangerous, life-threatening levels.

The world over, there has been intense discussion about the specific targeting of women journalists. In 2015, the IFJ's Gender Council focused on the 'damaging and rapidly increasing incidents of cyber-bullying and threats of women in the media and the ways women journalist are targeted – often for simply being women in the profession' at the annual UN campaign to eliminate violence against women. Recent research shows that it often takes the form of threats of sexual violence and even extends to members of their families'.

In February 2016, the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) report 'New Challenges to Freedom of Expression: Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists', said that women journalists bloggers and other media actors are 'disproportionally experiencing gender-related threats, harassment and intimidation on the internet which has a direct impact on their safety and future online activities'.

In 2014, when journalist and food writer Amanda Hess documented her own experience, and that of other women, with stalking and harassment and said 'these relentless messages are an assault on women's careers, their psychological bandwidth, and their freedom to live online', the response was overwhelming, with more than 5.1K shares of her article.

Interestingly, while both women and men use the internet equally, Hess points out that women bear the brunt of online abuse. She quotes from a 2005 report by the Pew Research Center, which states that 'the vilest communications are still disproportionately lobbed at women'. Hess believed that online threats must be prosecuted as 'bias-motivated crimes', by which law enforcers would investigate them more forcefully and offenders would face stronger penalties.

The signs of this intolerance, which has degenerated into full-fledged misogyny, were there to see much earlier. In 2011, US journalist and author Laurie Penny said, in an article in *The Independent*, 'A woman's opinion is the mini-skirt of the internet' and in a book that followed, she recalled "a time, not so long ago, when nerds, theorists and hackers, the first real colonisers of cyberspace, believed that the internet would liberate us from gender."

A FACEBOOK PAGE CALLED 'ISI' IN PAKISTAN . . . HOSTS PHOTOGRAPHS OF PROMINENT HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS, MANY OF THEM WOMEN, AND TELLS FOLLOWERS TO RAPE AND MURDER THEM!

INDIA: TACKLING THE TROLLS

In India, internet trolls have had a free run for at least five years now. In 2010, television anchor Sagarika Ghose compared internet trolls to a swarm of bees and said that the 'Internet Hindus' as she termed the right-wing bloggers and Twitter account holders, were organized in their attacks as well as their targets. A year later, Harini Calamur, formerly head of Zee News Digital, was also attacked for her tweets and accused of sleeping with a Congress minister (she preferred to use the term 'Internet Lumpens' instead of 'Internet Hindus', since the latter term could also denote abuse to a number of Hindus like her, who were on the net but wouldn't behave like right-wing trolls). Meena Kandaswamy, Dalit writer and poet from Tamil Nadu, India, experienced harassment and rape threats for expressing her views on Twitter in 2012.

In April 2013, the Internet and Democracy Project (IDP) based in India, carried out a qualitative study of online abuse amongst a range of women – from media celebrities, bloggers, writers, journalists and internet users in the public domain. The extent of abuse their survey unearthed and the effect on the women who were targeted was revealing. The project also looked at strategies for combating harassment, both legal and extra-legal, and the danger for free speech from arbitrary provisions of the law.

When the threats become too dangerous to ignore, women journalists have been forced to take recourse to the law, despite their misgivings about how the law is framed and doubts about whether law-enforcing agencies can ensure speedy and sensitive investigation. In the last year alone, there have been at least five complaints lodged by women journalists against online abuse.

BANGLADESH: BLOGGERS ANONYMOUS

Bangladesh is witnessing an online battle that mirrors the confrontation in the public sphere between religious extremism and secular and rational perspectives. As the atmosphere in the country gets more polarized and free thinkers are punished with violence, the online space too has become dangerous for those who express their views on gender rights, religion or human rights, even if they do so under pseudonyms.

Young female journalists and bloggers in Bangladesh who attended an IFJ workshop on gender equity in Dhaka in November in 2015 said that they usually blog under aliases. This, however, does not prevent them from getting threats of sexual violence, rape and mutilation. Any mention of women's rights, or critiques for example of the religious diktat prohibiting women from attending college unless they are veiled, provokes a barrage of extremely misogynistic threats. Complaining to the police is usually not an option, they

say, since the blogger will then have to disclose her identity and address in order to register the complaint. The level of polarization and mistrust is so high that the law enforcers are also not seen as neutral. Families are not a refuge either, since they might not support their daughters' views on religion or gender rights or rationality. At present, the female bloggers or Bangladesh seem to prefer the security of anonymity, relying on an online community for support and encouragement.

PAKISTAN: PROMOTING SAFETY ONLINE

In Pakistan, as more women use online media, the familiar story of harassment acts to curb their freedom of expression. Nighat Daad, a pioneering digital rights activist in Pakistan and founder of the Digital Rights Foundation in Pakistan, pointed out that women journalists are particular targets of trolls. She said:

"There's a stereotype in some parts of rural Pakistan that the internet isn't for women. It's where people watch bad stuff or make illegitimate relationships. In a conservative Muslim society, women are not supposed to be online. Many women choose to use the internet in secret, so their family members – especially men – don't know about it. And that's one of the reasons why women in some areas don't feel safe online. They feel threatened in the same way they do offline. I've seen blackmail, photoshopped pictures, hacking of personal accounts and rape threats. Women activists and feminists are trolled and targeted as "unethical western agents". Nearly half of reported cyber crimes are connected to the harassment of women on social media.

Daad, who was named one of TIME magazine's 'next generation leaders', for her role helping Pakistani women fight online harassment in 2015, is an adviser on Amnesty's Technology and Human Rights Council. She conducts 'safe online workshops' across Pakistan to encourage women to go online and learn how to use the internet.

Apart from women journalists, human rights activists and even Pakistan's film actors face the brunt of social media trolls. In May 2015, prominent human rights activist Sabeen Mahmud was killed shortly after hosting an event on Balochistan's 'disappeared people' on April 25, 2015, in Karachi. She was the director of T2F (The Second Floor), a café and arts space that has been a mainstay of Karachi's activists since 2007 and was an outspoken human rights advocate.

The killing sparked an outpouring of grief, anger and condemnation on social media in Pakistan. In retaliation, barely a week later, there were dangerous threats and calls for attacks on those who tweeted or expressed support for Sabeen Mahmud, prompting many of those targeted to go offline.

Is there institutional support for online harassment and even killings? According to the report in *Dawn*, a Facebook page called 'ISI' (the commonly used acronym for the Inter Services



↑ Bangladeshi blogger Shammi Haque was threatened with rape in September 2015, by Islamist extremists for her writings and blogging. Shammi has said that she lives in constant fear and is regularly threatened over social media and by SMS.

THE EMAIL SAID: "SINCE THE ISLAMIC SHARIA VIEWS WORKING OF WOMEN OUTSIDE THEIR HOMES WITHOUT PURDAH AS [A] PUNISHABLE OFFENSE, THEIR EMPLOYERS ARE GUILTY TO THE SAME DEGREE. WE ARE URGING THE MEDIA TO RELEASE THEIR WOMEN FROM THEIR JOBS."

Intelligence, the premier military intelligence organisation in Pakistan), hosts photographs of prominent human rights activists, many of them women, and tells followers to rape and murder them! The page has over 34,000 followers. While the military has dissociated itself from these pages, human rights activists believe that pages such as these do get covert state support and this worsens when the media stifles progressive voices but freely airs extremist voices.

In August 2015, a well-known Pakistani actress Mawra Hocane, was fiercely attacked on Twitter by a fellow actor who used a hashtag #BanMawra just because she tweeted that she would give an opinion on Indian actor Saif Ali Khan's film *Phantom*, only after seeing it. Mawra Hocane, who was then shooting for a Bollywood (Indian) film, found her patriotism and loyalty to Pakistan questioned. The film itself was banned in Pakistan for allegedly suggesting that a terrorist character in the film was a Pakistani national. Mawra Hocane finally took to Facebook to post a detailed response, which was shared and supported by leading Pakistani actors.

In a discussion centered around the attack, Nabihah Mehr Sheikh of the Pakistan Feminist Watch, said pertinently that, in the #BanMawra campaign, insults were "hurled at the woman's body which was being used as an analogy to national honour. The woman's body had become a site to abuse, a tool

to denigrate someone and a way of mocking the enemy, in this case, India".

Speaking in the same discussion, Susan Benesch of The Berkman Centre for Internet and Society at Harvard University and Director of the Dangerous Speech Project, described three categories of attacks directed at women on the internet – personal attacks that target women with threats of rape, killing or even 'doxing' (publishing personal information); campaigns to demean women as a group (calling them 'feminazis', for instance) and reflexive misogyny where people expressed themselves in a misogynistic way without the intent of being misogynist. Like several free speech campaigners, Benesch advocates counter speech to hate speech.

Clearly, while the internet and online media does provide a more democratic platform for interaction and sharing of a plethora of news and views, the 'dark matter' of the internet also perpetuates all the discrimination and invisibility that women have experienced from traditional media. While it mirrors and magnifies the discrimination faced by women in society, the impact of abuse or online harassment can be devastating as more and more peoples' communication is mediated in an online world.

It is time to organise to confront and challenge this harassment and abuse.

FIGHTING BACK

Swati Chaturvedi: On March 24, 2015, when India's Supreme Court struck down Sec 66 (a) of the Information Technology Act, 2000 for being unconstitutional, an anonymous twitter handle called @LutyensInsider started making defamatory comments about senior journalist Swati Chaturvedi, that she was stalking a political figure. Chaturvedi, who was the *Statesman's* first woman chief reporter, initially tried ignoring the tweets and laughed it off. But the tweets became more and more abusive, even calling her a nymphomaniac. "Because I am a woman...let's see... how do you attack me? You can't attack me professionally, so you go after my character," she said. On June 11, she decided to file a complaint with a police station near her residence in Delhi.

The police registered a case of stalking under Section 354 (D) of the Indian Penal Code. The anonymous twitter handler promptly changed the twitter handle to @gregoryzackim and deleted all the tweets. But Swati Chaturvedi is determined to pursue the case and said she "refused to be bullied off Twitter".

The complaint immediately drew support from a number of women journalists, including Sagarika Ghose, Meena Karnik and Seema Goswami, who promptly tweeted their support. The Delhi Union of Journalists (DUJ) commended Chaturvedi for boldly taking on the twitter trolls. DUJ and its Gender Council said that the anonymity of the net must not be abused and misused to personally slander individuals, particularly women in public life.

Barkha Dutt: On March 6, 2016, the well-known television anchor and former managing editor of NDTV filed a police complaint at Greater Kailash police station in South Delhi against an unidentified caller who threatened to kill her for her reportage on the JNU row. She stated that the caller threatened her thrice before disconnecting the call and gave no answers when she asked for his name. He threatened her with rape, sexual abuse and even shooting. Dutt has been a target of trolls for a long time and had successfully managed to deal with the vitriol. In 2015, Dutt posted a tweet: "Dear Trolls, your bile, your threats, your abuse & your promise to parcel me to Pakistan - none of it working. Think of something new". But this time, angered by the persistence of the caller as well as the direct threats to kill, she reported the matter to the police following which a case under Section 354 D (stalking) was registered. At the time this writing, police were still trying to track the number and trace the IP address of the caller.

Neeta Kolhatkar: A blogger called 'Dynastycrooks' targeted Mumbai-based columnist Neeta Kolhatkar after she wrote a column in August 2015, about the Congress vice president's new look and support for students on strike at the Film Institute in Pune, India. In a blog-post entitled 'Presstitute Neeta Kolhatkar is orgasming for real', the anonymous blogger attacked her for her column but after she lodged a complaint with Mumbai police's cyber crime cell, the blogger appears

to have taken down the post. Kolhatkar is determined to find the identity of the blogger and bring the blogger to book. Kolhatkar was targeted again in February 2016 on Twitter and threatened that she would be "gangraped" after she uploaded photos of the protest march to condemn the attack on journalists in Patiala House court in New Delhi. She filed an FIR with Mumbai police and a case was registered against a person with the Twitter account 'Amendra Kumar Singh'.

Preetha G: a blogger who wrote in Malayalam and who has more than 24,000 followers on Facebook, found that her Facebook page was blocked and taken down temporarily in August 2015 after abusive comments and reports that her identity could not be verified. As women who report abuse find out, social media companies drag their feet instead of taking prompt action. In some instances, instead of taking action against abusers, they end up penalizing the women who do report abuse. Malayalam writer and blogger Inji Pennu who took up cudgels on Preetha's behalf, also found herself the target of abusive comments and her Facebook page was also taken down.

When complaints to Facebook didn't work, Inji Pennu initiated a campaign called the 'Nameless Coalition' and over 75 organisations and groups across the globe, including Access, Global Voices Advocacy, Electronic Frontier Foundation (EFF), Digital Rights Foundation, ACLU, The Internet Democracy Project, ForabetterFB Campaign, Take Back The Tech, One World, Human Rights Watch, CDT, and Point of View, have come together to protest at Facebook's policies (see the campaign's Facebook page (#forabetterFB)).

Pennu said that social networking sites like Facebook are adapting archaic laws from the traditional world and effectively relegating women and sections of indigenous and ethnic minority communities, LGBTQ people, and internet users into oblivion. Facebook's poor language sensitivity meant that reporting abusive comments and even basic dictionary sexual or misogynistic words in languages other than English simply didn't elicit any reaction. Facebook first assured the coalition it would change its policy. However, this is yet to be done.

V P Rajeena: In November 26, 2015, Rajeena, a sub-editor with Jamaat-e-Islami's Malayalam daily, *Madhyamam* put out a Facebook post alleging sexual abuse of minor boys and girls by *madrassa* (schools run by Islamic religious bodies) teachers. She gave a graphic account of her life as a student in a *madrassa* more than two decades ago. She described how young students were sexually exploited by *ustads* (*madrassa* teachers) in those days. The post immediately elicited a virulent response, with a number of abusive messages on her page, forcing her account to be temporarily shut down. Three days later, Rajeena filed a police complaint with the Kerala state cyber crime cell.