How can the concept of online misogyny be used to explain the attempts to silence women journalists through online abuse that targets their gender to attack their work?

A dissertation submitted to the School of Media Arts at the Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec) in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Communication

Theory Supervisor: Dr Matthew Bannister

Neha Pant

School of Media Arts

Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec)

New Zealand

March 2021

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Abstract

This dissertation analyses how systemic misogyny existing in the real world transcends into the online world and contributes to abusive attacks including sexualised comments and threats against women in general and women journalists in particular on social media platforms. It explores how new media and the resultant online culture have led to the proliferation of abusive behaviour online, providing a virtual breeding ground for cultural misogyny. It then looks at how online abuse—a manifestation of online misogyny—is used to attack women journalists who are doubly targeted because of their gender and profession. Using India as a case study, this essay also presents some first-hand comments from women journalists about their experiences of online abuse, as gained via an online survey. Ultimately, it situates the attempts to intimidate women journalists through sexually violent comments or threats within the broader context of gender equality and press freedom.

Introduction

While traditional media has long played its part in the reinforcement of patriarchal norms or "in mediating misogyny" (Vickery & Everbach, 2018, p. 8), new media that facilitates communication using the internet technology has over the years presented newer avenues for the expression of hostility towards women. This dissertation contends that misogyny prevailing in the offline world is perpetuated in the online world when women are attacked on social media platforms through abusive messages or threats, which are often sexualised in nature and involve references to their bodies (Dhrodia, 2018, p. 381). As the virtual spaces get "increasingly intertwined with our lived reality" (Silverman, 2015, pp. 347–348),

technology-mediated communication appears to have emerged as a vector to the abuse that was otherwise visited upon women in the offline spaces. On the one hand, mediated communication has provided a fast and simple way to communicate across time and space (Hardaker, 2010, p. 223), but on the other hand, it has also enabled an environment where anonymity and distance embolden users to engage in aggressive behaviour against others online (Hardaker, 2010, p. 238). Abusive messages transcend geographical borders to reach a multitude of audience at an incredibly fast speed, often with a high level of impunity (Henry & Powell, 2015, p. 759). The affordances of new media and internet technology (more on this later) provide a conducive milieu for the existing forms of misogyny to breed, and the harassment thus targeted at women online is aimed at preventing them from occupying and participating freely in the online public spaces (Mantilla, 2013, p. 569). For journalists, who use social media platforms as both a source and medium (Silverman, (2015, p. 108), readers' direct access to them on online platforms has resulted in the amplification of the amount and severity of 'criticism' they had always been accustomed to receiving as a part of their profession. In the case of women journalists, their gender constitutes an "additional layer of risk" (Chocarro et al., 2020, p. 215) to the challenges faced by all journalists, and studies have shown that they are increasingly experiencing online attacks that are misogynistic in nature due to their professional role (Ferrier & Garud-Patkar, 2018, pp. 322–323). However, with a strong pressure to engage with their audience online, many journalists often feel they have no alternative other than facing online harassment (Chen, Pain, & Chen et al., 2018, p. 1).

This dissertation will begin by analysing the concept and manifestations of online misogyny as described in extant scholarship, followed by exploring how the

development of new media and the resulting culture have contributed to abusive behaviour online. It will then map the manner in which offline misogyny travels to the online spaces and is reflected in the form of hostility towards women on social media platforms. Thereafter, the essay will look into the ways in which women journalists are targeted with abuse online in the course of their work, which will also be illustrated by comments received from journalists via a survey that was conducted as part of this Research Project. Next, it will show the effects of online misogyny, as manifested through abuse and harassment online, on women journalists, followed by a summary of suggestions for combatting the issue. This essay does not seek to suggest that all abuse faced by women journalists online is misogynistic in nature, rather it analyses how it might contribute to the abuse. This dissertation is to be read in conjunction with the Final Research Project Report that explores the online abuse experiences of women journalists working in the news media in India in detail. Let us begin by examining the definition and manifestations of online misogyny.

Online Misogyny and Its Manifestations

Misogyny can be defined as the "hatred of, aversion to, or prejudice against women" (Merriam Webster, n.d.) which is socially expressed through ways in which people behave with each other (Gilmore, 2009, p. 9). By extension, 'online misogyny' can essentially be understood as a phenomenon when this hatred of women is expressed in the virtual worlds which are defined as "places of human culture realized by computer programs through the Internet" (Boellstorf, 2008, as cited in Moloney & Love, 2018, p. 3). Barker & Jurasz (2019) define online misogyny as the "manifestation of hostility [towards women because they are women] communicated through online platforms, particularly social media and other participatory environments" (p. 96). Such cases of hostility towards women in the digital

environment show high levels of similarity with regard to their “reliance on profanity, ad hominem invective, and hyperbolic imagery of graphic—often sexualized—violence” (Jane, 2014b, p. 533). Various interconnected, though not necessarily interchangeable, terminologies have been used in scholarship to discuss the ways in which misogyny is manifested in the cybersphere. Some of these terms include ‘gendered vitriol on the Internet’ (Jane, 2014a, p. 558), ‘gendered e-bile’ (Jane, 2014a, p. 558), ‘gendered cyberhate’ (Jane 2018a, p. 7), ‘gendertrolling’ (Mantilla, 2013, p. 563), ‘technology-facilitated sexual violence and harassment’ (Henry & Powell, 2015, p.759), ‘online sexual harassment’ (Megarry, 2014, p. 47), ‘cyber gender harassment’ (Citron, 2009, p. 378), and ‘cyber violence against women and girls’ (United Nations Broadband Commission, 2015, under “Highlights” section). The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women uses the term ‘online violence against women’ which has been defined as:

> Any act of gender-based violence against women that is committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of ICT [Information and Communication Technology], such as mobile phones and smartphones, the Internet, social media platforms or email, against a woman because she is a woman, or affects women disproportionately. (as cited in United Nations, 2018, p. 7)

Jane (2018a) uses the terms ‘gendered cyberhate’, ‘gendered e-bile’, and ‘cyber violence against women and girls’ to refer to the “material that is directed at girls or women; that involves abuse, death threats, rape threats, and/or sexually violent rhetoric; and that involves the internet, social media platforms, or communications technology” (p. 7). In addition to the above, misogyny is also manifested online in the form of ‘Rapeglish’ which involves text as well as image based sexualised abuse

(Jane, 2018b, p. 664). Instead of a form of hostile online communication directed at women, Lewis et al. (2017) locate the phenomenon within the wider umbrella of behaviours involving violence against women and girls (p. 1465). Mantilla (2013) refers to the "misogynist variants of trolling" (p. 563) as 'gendertrolling', the signal characteristics of which include its organised nature, gendered insults, vicious language, plausible threats, persistence of attacks over long periods of time, and that they most often occur as a response to women speaking their mind (pp. 564–565).

For the purpose of this dissertation, I will be using the broader concept of online misogyny to refer to any of the above behaviours that stem from a hatred of women, involve gendered insults or abuse towards women (whether text, image, or video based), cause or threaten to cause harm to them in any way—physical, psychological, personal, professional, reputational and so on—and are communicated via the online medium, particularly on social media. Here, the term 'women' refers to persons who are born as or identify themselves as female, while 'social media' includes social networking sites such as Facebook, microblogging sites such as Twitter, and content sharing sites such as YouTube and Instagram. This dissertation will avoid using the term "trolling" for referring to "negatively marked online behaviours" (Hardaker, 2010, p. 224), for it is arguably too ambiguous to convey the severity of the online attacks on women. It is pertinent to mention here that while men are also targeted with abuse online, anecdotal evidences and empirical studies suggest that women's experiences of online harassment involve comparatively higher and more severe levels of violent sexualisation than those faced by men (Jane, 2018a, p. 10). Before moving into further details, let us first examine how the emergence of the new media and the consequent online culture

have created democratic opportunities for communication for all, but not without enabling the propagation of abusive behaviour.

New Media, Old Misogyny

The rise of new media—which makes use of the internet technology for communication—has over the years transformed the ways in which communication was carried out via the 'old' or traditional media such as newspapers, television, and radio. Essentially, the forms of new media such as social media have built upon the decentralising power of the internet to remove some of the barriers of traditional media, resulting in accessible spaces for communication for all. Chaffee and Metzger (2001) note that the contemporary media through the use of the internet has allowed for a much wider transmission of a far greater volume of information as compared to what was historically carried out by the traditional forms of mass communication. The transmission model has shifted from one-way communication to a two-way, interactive exchange between senders and users. The new media has also removed the barriers of high cost and that of rigid control over the media by the elite groups (such as media owners) and professional gatekeepers (such as journalists and news editors, in turn empowering millions of average users with the opportunity to conveniently and affordably contribute their own content (pp. 369–372). Traditional media hierarchies have been broken down and replaced by networks, which though not free from systems of power, are not hierarchical (Levina, 2014, as cited in Levina, 2017, p. 127). As opposed to traditional media such as print and broadcasting, computer networks such as the internet have facilitated the "convergence of production, distribution (communication) and consumption of information" (Fuchs, 2014, p. 43), combining all the three processes in a single tool. Further, online platforms such as social media—which can be defined as a "group of

Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61)—have made it possible for users to post content without necessarily requiring them to have high levels of technical knowledge or qualifications (Highfield, 2016, p. 15). Thus, unlike in the past, when people had to contend with just being "consumers" of messages distributed by the (old) media, they are now actively contributing to the communication landscape by "shaping, sharing, reframing, and remixing media content" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 2) within their wider networked communities, thus enabling the spread of the content far beyond their geographical locations.

Together, these facilitations of new media technologies and their active embrace by users has led to the emergence of what media scholar Henry Jenkins calls the "participatory culture" which can be defined as a "culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement . . . . in which members believe their contributions matter, and feel some degree of social connection with one another" (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 3). Such a collaborative culture, wherein a variety of groups engage in producing and distributing media to "serve their collective interests" (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 2), has resulted in several benefits including bringing like-minded people across the globe together through online communities and social media where they actively interact, create, and share content. This has fostered opportunities for the development of new knowledge, shared learning, and diversified cultural expression (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 3). However, with lower barriers to communication and "no established set of ethical guidelines" (Jenkins et al., 2006, p. 17) in casual online settings, such a culture also appears to have abetted the proliferation of abusive behaviour in online spaces. For instance, pointing

to an apparent downside of the participatory culture, Fuchs (2014) notes that when "right-wing extremists" or "fascist communities" come together online, they actively engage in attacking, harassing, and threatening others, thereby replicating their dominant ideologies (p. 60). Similarly, digital media platforms are used by misogynists to easily and swiftly find others of their ilk—as well as more women to target—and then carry out coordinated attacks against those opposed to their views (Vickery & Everbach, 2018, p. 17). The Gamergate controversy, where a number of women associated with the gaming industry were targeted with intense online harassment including rape and death threats in 2014, could be seen as an example. That the perpetrators can be anonymous and can communicate in an asynchronous fashion further emboldens the tenor of their interactions online which often exhibit no semblance of restraint (Gurumurthy et al., 2018, p. 2).

While misogyny is not engendered by the internet in and of itself, its technology and the surrounding "cultural norms of internet communication" have tended to enable, support, defend, and even value such misogynistic behaviours (Shaw, 2014, p. 275), resulting in what Phillips (2015) notes is nothing but an amplification of the "ugly side of mainstream behaviour" (p. 168). Barker & Jurasz (2019) remind us how the internet and social media have become a "new medium" for the mushrooming of old misogyny and gendered discrimination:

> Misogyny and violence against women perpetrated online are emanations of pre-existing, structural discrimination against women. . . . As such, online spaces, especially social media platforms, have become a new medium through which such attitudes are expressed, where forms of gender-based violence are perpetrated, and where patriarchy finds an opportunity to thrive. (p. 103)

In short, new media and internet technology, together with the manner in which people make use of their affordances, seem to have provided a safe haven for cultural misogyny to proliferate in the cybersphere. From this vantage point, I now proceed to show how an “offline-online continuum” (Gurumurthy et al., 2018, p. 2) exists between the misogyny and abuse directed against women in the real world and that permeating the online world, post which I will demonstrate how this continuum holds true for and affects women journalists in particular.

Misogyny: From Offline to Online

The internet has paved the way for development of new prospects through communication for women (Youngs, 1999, p. 63), but online attacks have equally marred the experiences of women who use the digital platforms to voice their opinions. While a study detected 2.9 million tweets consisting of gendered insults within a week or 419,000 sexist slurs per day on an average on Twitter (Felmlee et al., 2020, p. 16), a global survey of 8,109 young people across 180 countries found that more than half (52%) of the female respondents had experienced online abuse, and 68% of the online harassment had taken place on social media platforms (World Wide Web Foundation & World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, 2020). Another survey of 4000 women across eight countries found that almost half (46%) of the respondents who had experienced online abuse at least once, said their harassment was misogynistic or sexist in nature (Amnesty International, 2017). A survey by feminist platform, Feminism in India, of 500 social media users in the country (of which 97% were women), reported that more than half (56%) of the respondents from among those who faced some sort of online aggression had received insulting comments on their gender or appearance (Pasricha, 2016, under “Survey Results” section).

These contemporary manifestations of misogyny have one thing in common—they all seek to employ harassment of women online to patrol the traditional gender boundaries and to drive the women away from domains that are traditionally viewed as male turfs (Mantilla, 2013, p. 568). In the early days of the internet, Bell and de la Rue (1995, as cited in Shade, 2002, p. 80) pointed out that online harassment in the form of "open hostility towards women seems to be analogous to the experiences of women entering traditionally male-dominated professions" (p. 80). These words still ring true more than two decades later when online misogyny continues to be used for dominating, silencing, and controlling women (Moloney & Love, 2018, p. 8) in the cyberspace. In essence, this phenomenon encompasses what Jane refers to as "an (new) articulation of (old) sexualising misogyny" (Jane, 2014a, p. 559)—something which is symptomatic of the age-old hatred of women that believes they are subservient to men and should be taught a lesson if they attempt to venture into the public sphere (Jane 2016, p. 287). Vickery (2018) sees a parallel between the abuse of women online and a "longer trajectory of misogyny and sexism" (p. 44) that has existed through the history of women venturing into traditionally male-dominated spaces. Online misogyny often seeks to "put women in their place" through attacks that are sexualised in nature, similar to the manner in which threats of sexual violence, such as rape threats, are employed to intimidate women in the real world (Filipovic, 2007, p. 302). Chemaly (2016) equates the digital spaces with public streets in that the former has recreated the same old "dominant hierarchies of sex, race, and sexuality" (p. 125). It thus becomes a case of misogyny embedded in the society operating in tandem with the new media and internet technology to "augment, amplify, and polarise contemporary gender politics" (Ging & Siapera, 2018, p. 522).

Most often, the manifestations of online misogyny are marked by attacks targeted on women's bodies. Citing a series of such examples from the #mencallmethings Twitter campaign, Megarry (2014) points out that it is not just women's departure from the traditional norms of femininity, but that men are repulsed by women themselves (p. 50). The resulting attacks, as Citron (2009) contends, are "unique to women":

> Cyber gender harassment invokes women's sexuality and gender in ways that interfere with their agency, livelihood, identity, dignity, and well-being. The subsequent injuries are unique to women because men do not typically experience sexual threats and demeaning comments suggesting their inferiority due to their gender. (p. 384)

While many men do receive equally vicious homophobic abuse, for most others it may not be a common occurrence to be called a 'slut' or a 'whore' or to be threatened with graphic descriptions of sexually violent acts such as those routinely received by women on social media. In this light, British journalist Laurie Penny's (2011) words "a woman's opinion is the mini-skirt of the internet" mirror the experiences of numerous women worldwide who use social media as a platform for expression. In short, online abuse seeks to further entrench the male domination of networked spaces by "eliminating and muting women's voices from the internet" (Citron, 2009, p. 391). Now that it has been demonstrated how offline misogyny is re-inscribed in the virtual spaces, let us look into how this phenomenon is experienced particularly by women journalists, for whom the usage of online platforms such as social media constitutes a part of their daily work and who already face several risks and threats just like their male counterparts.

Threats as Journalists

Across the world, journalists, who can be defined as persons involved in "collection and dissemination of information to the public through any means of communication" (United Nations, 2020, p. 3), are functioning amidst an increasingly hostile environment including threats to their physical safety, imprisonments, and murders. In addition to these risks, online harassment has emerged as the "latest danger for journalists" (Reporters Without Borders, 2018, p. 3) wherein abuse and threats are deployed in the online environment to intimidate and silence them. Journalists use social media platforms to find, break, and distribute news stories as well as to engage directly with their news audience (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 2018, p. 155). Unlike in the past with traditional media, the news audience on social media platforms such as Twitter is now able to respond to the journalists and hold them to account soon after the publication of a news article online (Murthy, 2013, p. 55). While many online comments may encompass constructive criticism or feedback, the "democratising potential of comments" (Gardiner, 2018, p. 594) is often marred by comments that are 'abusive' or 'dismissive'. However, engaging with the online audience has turned into a necessity for journalists in the growing race for capturing their attention (Chen & Pain, 2017, p. 882). This, together with the faltering trust in the media—almost two-thirds of the participants in a global survey perceived "fake news" to be prevalent in online news websites and platforms (Bridges, 2019)—has exacerbated the online abuse against journalists, especially when news media organisations are increasingly switching to an online-only or digital-first settings. The year 2020 witnessed further escalation in the harassment of journalists online, thanks to the remote newsgathering induced by the Coronavirus crisis. As per a global survey,

journalists became more dependent on social media than before for distributing their news stories as well as for engaging with the audience during the pandemic (Posetti, Bell, & Brown, 2020, p.21), and a fifth of the journalists surveyed said their online abuse experiences became “much worse” (p. 16) as compared to the pre-pandemic times.

Why so Much Hate for Women Journalists

While both men and women journalists face threats in relation to their work, women journalists are “disproportionately targeted” by gender-based violence and sexual harassment both off- and on-line for being highly visible and opinionated and also because of their work (United Nations, 2020, p. 5). As per a survey of 977 women media workers by the International Women’s Media Foundation and the International News Safety Institute, almost two-thirds of the participants had experienced intimidation, threats, or abuse in the course of their work (Barton & Storm, 2014, p. 7). Over the years, the overall threats to women journalists have been compounded by online abuse, which is often distinctively misogynistic, sexualised, and gendered in nature (United Nations, 2018, p. 8) and has been recognised by a growing number of bodies internationally, including the United Nations and its subsidiaries, as a cause necessitating urgent intervention. A survey of 901 media workers across 125 countries conducted by the UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists in 2020 revealed that as many as 73% of the women survey respondents had experienced online violence as a result of their work (Posetti, Aboulez et al., 2020, p. 2). Further, almost half (47%) of the women journalists surveyed identified their work or views on gender issues as the topmost trigger for online abuse, “highlighting the function of misogyny in online violence against women journalists” (p. 8). A global survey of 597 women journalists by the

TrollBusters and the International Women's Media Foundation found that nearly two-thirds of the respondents had been threatened or harassed online at least once as a result of their work (Ferrier, 2018, p. 7), whereas an analysis of 2 million tweets discovered that women journalists had received almost thrice the amount of abuse than that received by their male counterparts (Demos, 2014). Another survey covering 102 women technology journalists based mainly in the US and the UK found that many journalists had been attacked for "trespassing on men's territory" (Adams, 2018, p. 863). In other words, social media has turned into a convenient platform for "misogynists to tell women they don't belong", notes Everbach (2018, p. 140) who studied harassment of women sports journalists in the US.

Though men journalists are equally exposed to online abuse, the attacks experienced by women journalists often transcend a mere criticism of their work and are instead directed towards their gender or sexuality (Chen, Pain, Chen et al., 2018, p. 1). A large-scale study analysing block rates in 70 million comments left by readers below online articles of the UK-based newspaper *Guardian* found that articles written by women drew a significantly higher proportion of 'dismissive' or 'abusive' comments that were later blocked by the newspaper moderators, as compared to those written by men journalists (Gardiner, 2018, p. 600). The same study through a survey of the *Guardian's* journalists further revealed that more than half (57%) of the women journalists had experienced abusive comments which focussed on their body, private life, or sexuality, as opposed to only 17% male journalists (Gardiner, 2018, p. 601). Similarly, a global survey by the International Federation of Journalists (2018) found that online abuse against women journalists was "mainly based on their gender" which was not the case with the online harassment faced by their male counterparts (p. 1).

Martin (2018) notes that women journalists experience online abuse not only as a result of their work "but also due to larger structural forces of gender bias" (p. 76). British journalist and activist Caroline Criado-Perez (2016), who was targeted with an aggressive online harassment campaign after she called for women faces to be depicted on banknotes, asserts that the key reason behind online attacks on women journalists are "men who find women with a public voice such a terrifying prospect that they need to shut them up with the most graphic and detailed threats of violence" (p. 14). At the same time, online misogyny against women journalists in the form of online abuse is "not *"just"* [emphasis added] a gender discrimination issue" but also one that affects their freedom of speech (Milivojević, 2016, p. 32). Such instances of online hostility towards women journalists constitute a direct attack on their freedom of expression—both as women and as journalists—and are employed "with an intent to silence women's voices and the stories they tell" (Ferrier, 2018, p. 6), a ploy which unfortunately succeeds in its malicious objective at times. Highlighting this 'silencing effect' of online abuse, the UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists found that 30% of the women journalists studied as part of their global survey had responded to online harassment by self-censoring on social media (Posetti, Aboulez et al., 2020, p. 3). Online abuse thus appears to have turned into a "modern-day weapon of patriarchs; an attempt to control, intimidate and eventually silence women, all of us who think for ourselves", writes Indian journalist Barkha Dutt (2017) in her piece for the "#Let'sTalkAboutTrolls" campaign by *Hindustan Times* newspaper. Dutt is among the women journalists who experience one of the highest amounts of online abuse in the country.

India: A Case Study

Journalists in India are working amidst growing threats to the freedom of the press which was reflected in the country's continued slip in the annual World Press Freedom Index rankings where it was placed at a dismal 142nd spot among 180 countries in 2020 (Reporters Without Borders, 2020). The media in the world's largest democracy remains "under grave threat" through increasing harassment of journalists both off- and on-line including arrests, attacks, killings, censorship harassment, and misuse of law (International Federation of Journalists-Asia Pacific, 2020). In this light, online abuse has added yet another threat to all journalists. That India has traditionally been a patriarchal society has meant that women journalists in particular, like women working in other public professions, find themselves negotiating the same risks as their male colleagues as well as the deep-rooted cultural misogyny that is also markedly virulent across the virtual spaces in the Indian context. For instance, a large-scale analysis of tweets found that one in every five of over 1 million 'problematic' or 'abusive' tweets mentioning 95 women politicians in India was sexist or misogynistic in nature (Amnesty International India, 2020, p. 6). Together with the country's rapidly growing digital market—India has more than 718 million internet subscribers (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2020, p. 2)—this has resulted in a significant rise in the amount and intensity of gendered abuse of opinionated women online, in this case, of women journalists. From being called names such as "presstitutes" (D'Silva Dias, 2016) and being harassed online simply "for having opinions" (Kathuria, 2018) to receiving violent rape and death threats (Khybri, 2018), women journalists in the country are facing the worst of online abuse at a time when women are already underrepresented in the Indian media (UN Women, Newslaundry, & Teamwork Arts, 2019, p. 4).

It is also crucial to recognise the “highly politicised nature” of online abuse in the Indian context (Kovacs et al., 2013, under “Trolling or abuse” section in “Introduction”) where a significant amount of abuse permeating the digital environs has political motivations. The situation appears to have further deteriorated with the rise of the right-wing in the country ever since the Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* [English translation: Indian People’s Party, abbreviated as: BJP] swung to power in 2014, notes a report by Feminism in India (Pasricha, 2016):

> The rise of the Bharatiya Janata Party, which came to power in the 2014 general election and espouses Hindu nationalism, has been accompanied by an increase in online abuse against a range of targets, from “liberal and secular” journalists to activists and women from historically marginalized caste groups. (under “Media cases” section)

Indian journalist Swati Chaturvedi (2016), who investigated India’s “right-wing trolls” following her own experiences of facing online abuse, found a link between them and the social media cell of the ruling BJP (pp. 52–53). Chaturvedi writes in her book *I Am A Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP’s Digital Army*:

> There was a base quality to these attacks, a hateful sexism that I had never encountered in all my years of being a reporter. . . . And I am not alone. Several other journalists, especially women, who have liberal political opinions and question government policies are routinely at the receiving end of violent, often sexually loaded, abuse from right-wing trolls. (pp. 4–5)

In this socio-political context, online abuse of women journalists has come to be such a grave concern in the country that in 2018, human rights experts of the United Nations called on India to protect one such journalist, Rana Ayyub after she

was attacked with graphic rape and death threats in an online hate campaign (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2018). The experts were particularly concerned because another Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh, a vocal critic of the country's right-wing politics, had been shot dead in September of the previous year following a series of online death threats against her.

Regardless of the motivations behind them, most instances of online abuse against women serve to remind them that "their voices are unwelcome, and that their presence in public domains–both online and offline–can be reduced to their gendered bodies", note Kovacs et al. (2013, under "Conclusion" section of Chapter 5) who conducted in-depth interviews with 17 Indian women including journalists as part of an exploratory study of verbal online abuse of women in India. Similarly, a study based on interviews with 15 female journalists working in South India noted that sexist overtones were apparent in the kind of harassment targeted at "women in a patriarchal society like India" (Gudipaty, 2017, p. 304), while another, which analysed 40,000 tweets surrounding 31 original tweets by three Indian women journalists, pointed to how sexual abuses, name-calling, condescending terms, and belittling language had all been used as "ways to silence the assertive women" (Rego, 2018, p. 483). To gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of online abuse of women journalists in India, I carried out an online survey as part of my research and will now be presenting some comments from among the responses received.

‘A Woman With an Opinion Rattles Many’:

What Women Journalists are Saying About Online Abuse

This dissertation is part of my wider Research Project aimed at studying the experiences of women journalists in India who are targeted with gendered abuse on social media platforms. In this dissertation, I explore how systemic misogyny crosses over into the cyberspace and manifests itself in the form of online abuse that attempts to silence women, in this particular case, women journalists. I will now be quoting from some first-hand comments which were gained from women journalists in India through an online survey using the SurveyMonkey platform. While there are various types of online abuse (see Seshu & Murthy, 2017, p. 8), I specifically focus on the gendered nature of the attacks to understand how, regardless of the factors behind the abuse, women journalists are often targeted for their work or views through attacks on their gender. The survey received responses from 36 women working in the field of journalism and media in different roles who have been generically referred to here as ‘journalists’. Twenty questions were asked of the participants, ranging from if and how they had experienced online abuse, the strategies they found useful in dealing with the harassment, and their suggestions for various stakeholders for combatting online abuse of journalists. Overall, of the participants who reported to have experienced online abuse, around 83% had experienced gendered insults and name-calling, followed by sexual comments (56%) and sexually explicit content (50%), while 33% of the respondents had experienced threats of sexual/physical violence in relation to their work as a journalist. Additionally, over half (53%) of the survey respondents identified their gender as one of the contributing factors to the abuse they had experienced online alongside a range of other factors including the political climate of the country, their work and

views as journalists, religion, distrust in the media, and the news organisations they worked for. It is to be noted that this survey did not aim to be representative, rather it hoped to gain insights from the perspectives shared by the respondents. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will be focussing specifically on some of the open-ended comments of the respondents regarding their online abuse experiences.

Highlighting the role of misogyny, many respondents noted how they were attacked simply for being public voices on social media platforms. A print media journalist, who had been targeted with gendered insults, sexual comments, sexually explicit content as well as threats of sexual/physical violence on Twitter, wrote: “A woman with an opinion rattles many especially when it isn't in line with one's own ideas or ideology”. A broadcast media journalist noted that the “polarised climate of the country” together with women being “considered to be an inferior race by a largely patriarchal and misogynistic society” had turned journalists into “convenient punching bags in general”. She had experienced gendered insults, sexual comments, and sexually explicit content on Twitter. Another journalist, who worked in the print and online media and had often been targeted with sexually explicit comments on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, felt she was attacked because “they just do not like young girls having a voice”. In an indication of larger gender stereotypes at play, she further referred to how just like “most people think girls can’t park cars as precisely as guys, most seniors in the community think a girl shouldn’t have to be so vocal.” A journalist working in the online media felt that the kind of abuse targeted at women journalists was “disheartening and discouraging” not just for the women currently working in journalism, but also for those “who would want to join this industry in future.” This survey respondent had experienced gendered insults, sexual comments, sexually explicit content as well as threats of

sexual/physical violence on Facebook and Twitter. The 'intersectional' nature of online abuse was also apparent with some journalists indicating they had been attacked for multiple aspects of their identity including gender, religion, and caste. "Intersectionality" is a term which was coined by legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989 to explain how "various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other" (Crenshaw as quoted in Steinmetz, 2020).

Many respondents said they had experienced online abuse because their work or views were not in congruence with those of the ruling right-wing of the country. The nature of the abuse, again, remained misogynistic by way of the sexualised vitriol and threats through which it was delivered. Referring to the supporters of India's ruling Hindu nationalist BJP, a broadcast media journalist-cum-editor, said she had been harassed online in a targeted manner when her stories or views were regarded as reflecting a "political ideology against the centre [government]". This respondent had faced all four categories of gendered abuse on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube. A freelance journalist, who had experienced gendered insults and sexual comments on Twitter, pointed to a potent concoction of misogyny and political attacks by noting how "the (predominantly) right-wing trolls" believed that "commentary about political issues shouldn't come from a liberal woman". Another freelance journalist felt she had been "just another target" for the right-wing groups who actively "abuse and bully journalists, especially women journalists". A freelance journalist working in the print and online media attributed the online abuse of women journalists to a combination of "general misogyny" and criticism of "Hindu supremacist ideas and policies". In what appears to mirror an earlier point made in this essay about virtual spaces enabling fresh grounds for manifestation of hostility towards women, this journalist further

underlined, “I must add that such abuse began before the invention of social media, by letters and then comments below articles and columns and official email ids. Social media of course amplified the abuse.” Her experiences of online abuse on Facebook and Twitter ranged from gendered insults and sexual comments, to sexually explicit content, and even threats of sexual/physical violence.

An online media journalist stated that name-calling and rape threats had “become a norm” for the journalists if their news reports or views were critical of the political parties or the leaders whom the abusers followed. In an indication of how their profession and gender intersected to result in vicious personal attacks on women journalists, this respondent, who had experienced all four categories of gendered abuse, further asked, “Though the male journalists are also targeted, female journalists are more vulnerable. Do I need to explain why?” Two journalists—one each working in the print and broadcast media—also mentioned they had been attacked online for being married outside of their religion, further reifying just how women going against the conventional norms of the society catch the ire of the patriarchs of social media.

The ‘silencing effect’ of online abuse was also palpable in the response of some survey participants. A journalist who worked for the print and online media, and had been targeted with gendered insults and sexual comments on Facebook and Twitter, admitted that she had censored her participation on social media “to a great extent” because of the threat of online abuse. Another respondent, an editor who worked in the online media, said she had made the conscious choice of keeping away from social media in order to protect herself from online abuse. “Effectively I am silencing myself,” she said.

Having gained a deeper perspective into the online abuse experiences of women journalists and the way misogyny contributes to it, we will now briefly look at some of the wider effects of this phenomenon.

The Chilling Effect

Turning off social media platforms is just not—and should not have to be—a choice for women who wish to or need to engage on the online platforms (Dhrodia, 2018, p. 385), and this is especially true for women journalists for whom social media is a tool for their work. As we have seen from the comments of women journalists, online misogyny in the form of harassment on social media platforms tends to have a chilling effect on their right to express their thoughts freely both as journalists and women. In a brief titled *Investigating online harassment and abuse of women journalists*, British human rights organisation Article 19 (2020) notes that when online abuse becomes too much to handle, women journalists drop out of engaging on social media or choose to engage in self-censorship, which affects their freedom of expression (p. 6). Underlining the broader impact of online abuse on gender diversity in the news media, the *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Global Report 2017/2018* notes: “for women journalists especially, misogynistic cyber harassment has continued to be a significant threat, potentially silencing journalists and hindering media pluralism in terms of gender diversity in media production” (UNESCO, 2018, p. 134). Despite experiencing online harassment, many journalists tend to feel the need for continuing on social media platforms as there is “little alternative otherwise” (Lewis et al., 2020, p. 1064), especially when doing so constitutes a part of their job. Additionally, the “tough-minded industry culture” of journalism often results in such online abuse against journalists being “dismissed as unimportant” (Binns, 2017, p. 183). With its pervasive

toxicity and highly sexualised nature, online abuse tends to take a long-term psychological toll on women journalists—around a quarter (26%) of the journalists surveyed by the UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists said they had faced mental health impacts as a result of their online abuse experiences (Posetti, Aboulez et al., 2020, p. 2). Besides causing emotional distress, such gendered abuse online also forces women to put in additional time and efforts in safeguarding their participation in the online platforms (Vickery & Everbach, 2018, p. 16). In all, the overall harms of online harassment are very much "embodied, real and tangible" (Henry & Powell, 2015, p. 760). At a time when gender inequality continues to exist within the news media, normalisation of such a hate-filled discourse against women risks making both off- and on-line cultures less inclusive and civil (Jane, 2014b, p. 542). With the potential to cause such varied and long-term impacts, this problem calls not for stopgap solutions, but for concerted and sustained efforts by all stakeholders, as we will now discuss.

Online Misogyny: The Way Ahead

At a time when the global internet access gap continues to reinforce prevailing gender inequalities—men still remain 21% more likely to be online than women (Iglesias, 2020)—the abuse of women online in general, and of women journalists in particular, needs be tackled with a sense of pressing urgency worldwide. While women journalists are determinedly 'taking the fight back' by calling out the blatant misogyny and disinformation campaigns of their perpetrators (Seshu & Murthy, 2017, p. 2), many organisations around the world are working to highlight the issue of the online safety of women journalists. For instance, the Office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Representative on Freedom of the Media calls for a "gender-responsive, multi-stakeholder approach" (Chocarro et al., 2020, p. 29)

to address online abuse against women journalists. In her report to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Dubravka Šimonović calls for prohibition and criminalisation of all forms of gender-based violence against women journalists including those facilitated through the online medium (United Nations, 2020, p. 18). Martin (2018) stresses that ultimately it is all about acknowledging the issue of fighting gendered online violence against journalists as a "collective social responsibility" instead of seeing it as a matter of personal and professional safety (p. 84). Munoz (2016) emphasises the need for journalists to raise awareness about the online harassment directed at them as well as to stand up for their colleagues in similar situations (p. 29), a sentiment also echoed by Milivojević (2016) who suggests that unless publicly highlighted and challenged, online harassment targeted at women journalists will continue to remain a "private problem not a public issue" (p. 32). Seeing a wider societal role here, Criado-Perez (2016) advocates that the problem of online abuse faced by women journalists could only be truly addressed when more and more women spoke in public and when boys were brought up in a way they did not view themselves as the dominant sex (p. 14). Approaching the problem from the angle of a "broader social issue involving issues of gender equity" (2014a, p. 566), Jane suggests combining the collectivist and individualist approaches of the second and third wave feminists for addressing the issue of gendered cyber harassment (Jane, 2016, p. 285). Ging and Siapera (2018, p. 518) pronounce the need for undertaking "transnational and culturally sensitive approaches" not just in studying but also in terms of reacting to online misogyny depending on the specific contexts. To sum it up in the words of academician and former journalist, Michelle Ferrier—who converted her own experience of off- and on-line harassment as a journalist into TrollBusters.com, a

support service for women journalists facing online abuse—it has now become more critical than ever to ensure that women "can persist online and tell the story, and not become the story" (Ferrier, 2016, last para).

Conclusion

In sum, this dissertation makes the case for these "new articulations of misogyny" (Jane, 2014a, p. 566) as manifested in gendered online attacks on women journalists to be viewed with the wider lens of gender discrimination and attacks on the freedom of the press. As we have seen over the course of this essay, systemic misogyny has found a convenient platform for proliferation in the online spaces where it is often deployed as an instrument to silence women. For women journalists—who use social media platforms as a tool for their work and who already face numerous challenges like their male colleagues as part of their profession—this results in them being doubly attacked on account of their work and gender. With India as a case study, we witnessed how gendered insults, sexual comments, sexually explicit materials, and threats of sexual and physical violence are frequently used to target women journalists. Overall, this phenomenon threatens to silence the voices of women in the profession and needs to be dealt with urgently by multiple stakeholders.

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