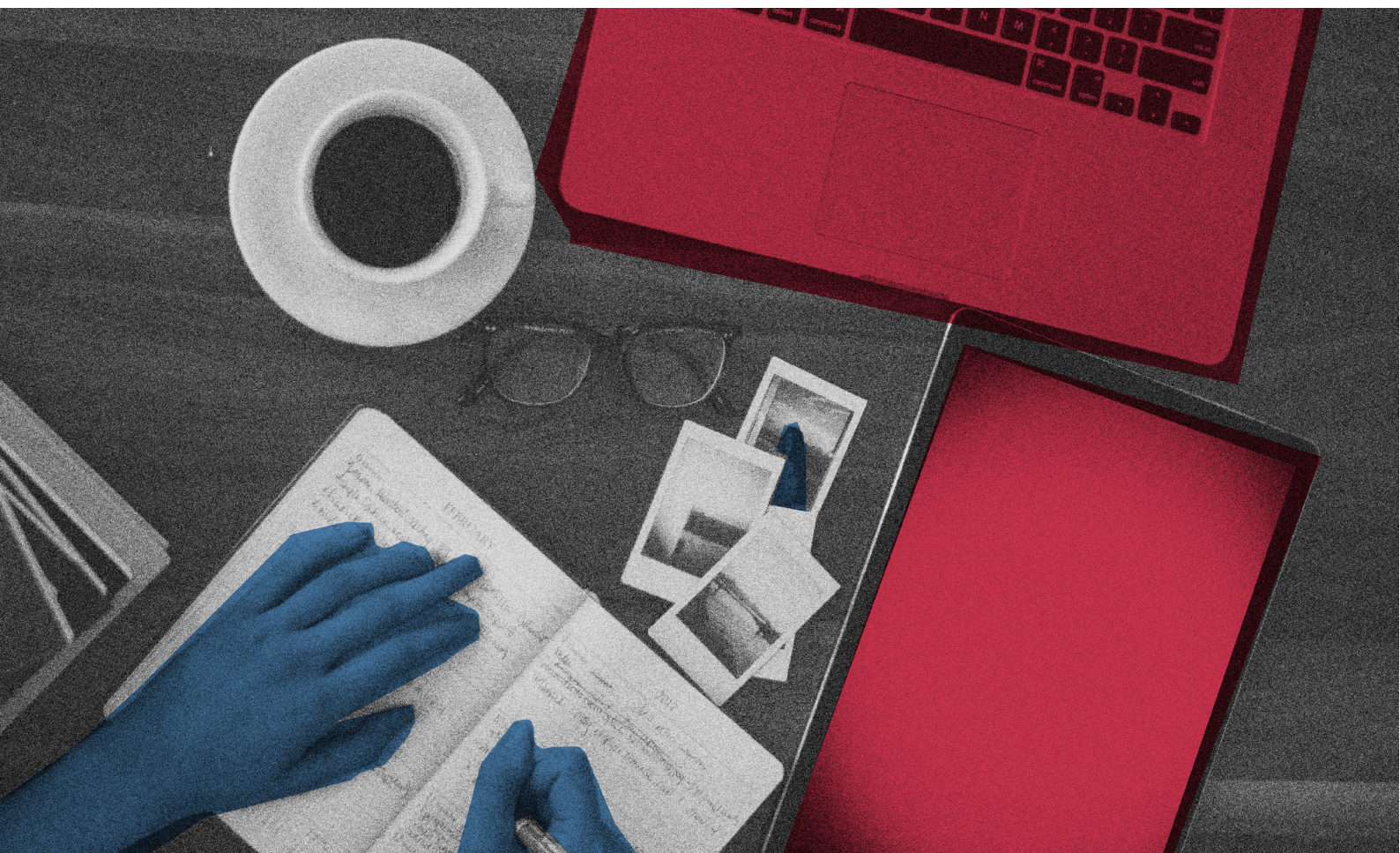


5Ws AND 1H OF ONLINE ABUSE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN INDIA

MASTERS RESEARCH PROJECT



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A Research Project 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



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NEW ZEALAND
MARCH 2021

Designed by Diego Ribeiro Barbosa

*“Name-calling, rape threats
have become a norm.”*

5Ws AND 1H OF ONLINE ABUSE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN INDIA



PREFACE

I started my day with a cup of coffee and chances are you would have too. For many women journalists around the world, however, the day begins with a barrage of unimaginably vile comments and sexually explicit abuse and threats swarming their social media timelines and inboxes.

While working as a journalist with a leading newspaper in India, I experienced first-hand the growing toxicity against strong women voices on social media platforms. Journalists have always had their fair share of critics, but I observed that the vitriolic online communications against women journalists often went beyond ‘criticising’ their work or views. Instead, the attacks targeted them personally, often in a sexually abusive manner, while some even involved rape or death threats.

The attacks enraged me. Why should women journalists have to face such abhorrent abuse for doing their job or simply for voicing their opinions? Why should *any* journalist have to work this way? What is being (and could be) done to quell this increasingly worrisome trend of online abuse against women journalists and the institution of the press as a whole? These questions would often run through my mind, and so when I got the opportunity to pursue my Masters, I decided to devote my postgraduate studies to finding some answers (and solutions) by exploring this phenomenon in depth.

Using India as a case study, I aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the 5Ws and 1H—the *Who, What, Why, Where, When, and How*—of online abuse against women journalists. I also hoped to compile some strategies found useful by the journalists based on their experiences as well as their suggestions for various stakeholders on countering this insidious problem. To do so, I conducted an online survey as part of this Research Project, and the topic clearly struck a chord with the participating journalists who left more than 150 invaluable comments including nearly a hundred recommendations for different stakeholders to make the online world a safer space for women journalists and women in general.

From the factors contributing to their online abuse to the ways in which the phenomenon could be combatted, this report presents a wealth of first-hand insights into the online abuse experiences of women working in the field of journalism in India. It also offers a brief overview of the Indian context and additionally provides a compilation of selected recommendations for stakeholders and resources for journalists from around the world.

This report will make a useful read for anyone who is interested in the subjects of press freedom, freedom of expression, gender equality, and mediated communication, including, but not limited to, journalists, journalism and communication students, media enthusiasts, feminist and cyber scholars, and essentially anyone who has experienced online abuse during their time on social media platforms. While it uses India as a case study, many of the findings as well as the suggestions for various stakeholders hold universal applicability.

This project is inspired by and dedicated to all the women journalists in India and around the world who continue to speak truth to power in the face of the most vicious attacks on them, both online and offline. It is my sincere hope that this study will highlight the need for collective action against online abuse so that all journalists can continue to tell their stories, freely and fearlessly.

“A woman with an opinion rattles many especially when it isn’t in line with one’s own ideas or ideology.”

5Ws AND 1H OF ONLINE ABUSE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN INDIA



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was made possible by the kind contribution of many people both in New Zealand and in India.

First, I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my Practical Supervisor, Gail for her unstinted guidance, motivation, and support to me at every stage of this Research Project (and beyond). Thank you for making Hamilton feel like home!

My humblest gratitude to my Theory Supervisor, Matthew for his constant guidance, encouragement, and insightful comments, which greatly helped refine my Research Project. I am also grateful to the faculty at the School of Media Arts, especially David, Gareth, Abby, and Sarah for their valuable feedback, and a special thanks to Dawn from the Library as well.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to my dear friends—Diego, for his continued support and offering help with designing this report, and Elizabeth and Kavita, for being constant sources of motivation over the course of this project.

Back in India, I am forever grateful to my guide and mentor, noted journalist, Mr Anupam Trivedi for his unwavering support, guidance, and feedback. My warmest gratitude also to journalists Tony R. and Rohit J. for their help with the project.

I am deeply indebted to my family—my grandmother, my parents and parents-in-law, my sister, and my husband—for being my pillars of strength from across the ocean, all through this extraordinarily challenging year. I am also thankful to my old friend, Malay for his unfailing support.

Above all, I would like to convey my sincerest gratitude and regards to all the amazing journalists who contributed their valuable time towards my survey and shared a wealth of personal experiences and important suggestions for various stakeholders—this study would just not have been possible without them!

*“Naming and shaming.
Mass reporting. There is
no good done in keeping silent.”*

5Ws AND 1H OF ONLINE ABUSE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN INDIA



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08

INTRODUCTION

5Ws AND 1H OF ONLINE ABUSE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN INDIA

INTRODUCTION

Journalism: A dangerous profession

As many as 2,658 journalists were killed around the world in the 30 years since 1990, and at least 235 were languishing in prisons in work-related cases at the end of the year in 2020 (International Federation of Journalists, 2020b). As threats to the freedom of the press continue to mount globally, journalists are increasingly working amidst multiple crises including threats of reprisals from populist regimes, attacks on their democratic rights to freedom of expression as well as physical safety, a growing mistrust of the media, and mass layoffs caused by an economic crisis in the profession—all of which were further amplified by the Coronavirus-induced public health crisis in 2020 (Reporters Without Borders, 2020a).

Yet, beyond the many *real* dangers that the journalists face in pursuit of their perilous profession, there is one disquieting menace that lurks around them 24/7, that plays out quietly in the *virtual* world but whose effects are felt very much in the *real* world—that of online abuse and harassment of journalists. With the digital transformation of the media, news organisations worldwide are increasingly working towards an online-only or digital-first approach. Journalists are now expected to be active on social media all the time (Silverman, 2015, p. 102), and they use platforms such as Twitter as professional tools to break news and “build their social capital” in journalistic communities (Swasy, 2017). Many are now also officially required by newsrooms to engage on social media, and their annual appraisals are tied to it.

The anonymity afforded by technology-mediated communication in the times of an increasingly online-dependent news media has in part contributed to a rise in online hostility against journalists who are exposed to abuse on social media platforms every waking moment of theirs and beyond. From vicious trolling to violent threats, the representatives of the press are maliciously attacked online by their antagonists for speaking truth to power. Avoiding social media, however, is not an alternative for journalists for whom these platforms have become indispensable for their work (Reporters Without Borders, 2018, p. 15). Journalists’ (as well as users’) increased dependence on social media platforms during the Coronavirus crisis resulted in further exacerbation of online abuse against journalists in the year 2020, with 20% of the journalists surveyed in a global study saying their online harassment experiences became “much worse than usual” during the pandemic (Posetti, Bell, & Brown, 2020, p. 5).

Women journalists at ‘triple risk’

For women journalists, who are already “disproportionately targeted” by gender-based violence (United Nations, 2020, p. 5) in addition to facing the wider professional risks like their male colleagues, online harassment has emerged as the “new front line” where sexualised abuse and threats are employed to humiliate and intimidate them (Posetti, 2020). As it is, women in the news media face what journalist Mindy Ran refers to as a “triple risk jeopardy”—the risk of violence as faced by all women, the same risks as those faced by the men in the profession as well as the risks affecting them because they are women journalists (Ran, 2018). These risks have been further compounded by the phenomenon of online abuse which has emerged as “one of the most reported sources of assaults and violations” for women journalists over the past years as per *What If...? The Safety Handbook for Women Journalists* by the International Association of Women in Radio and Television (Saady, 2017, p. 33).

In 2018, a global survey of women journalists by the TrollBusters and the International Women's Media Foundation found that 63% of the respondents had been threatened or harassed online at least once in relation to their work (Ferrier, 2018, p. 22). Two years later, another global study conducted across 125 countries by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the International Center for Journalists found that over 73% of the women journalists surveyed had experienced online violence in the course of their work (Posetti, Aboulez et al., 2020, p. 2). Finding a significant worsening of gendered online violence against women journalists over the past decade (p. 5), the survey report also highlighted that 30% of its participants had reported self-censoring on social media as a result of the online abuse (p. 3).

While men journalists are also targeted with online abuse, women journalists are attacked more frequently, more viciously, and in a language that is often highly sexualised (Ontheline Platform for Newsrooms, n.d.-b). Unlike their male colleagues who are generally attacked on professional grounds, attacks on women journalists often involve references to their bodies and sexual lives, and also frequently cross over into threats of violence (Network of Women in Media, India, 2016).

For many women journalists around the world, experiencing online abuse has come to be a part of their working lives, with attacks ranging from slut-shaming and sexual comments to graphic abuse and rape and death threats. While there may be differences in the socio-political and cultural contexts and the literal contents of abusive messages, what ties together such experiences across geographical boundaries is that online abuse is used as a tool to intimidate the reporting of women journalists and to “silence women’s voices and the stories they tell” (Ferrier, 2018, p. 6).

In essence, the toxic problem extends beyond the individual targeting of journalists, and it encompasses broader issues related to the freedom of the press and gender equality (Network of Women in Media, India, 2016). While online abuse affects each journalist differently and while not all incidents may be severe, many instances tend to leave long-term psychological impacts, lead to silencing of journalists, and result in digital security threats and even physical safety risks in the offline world, thereby ultimately threatening gender diversity in and through the news media (Posetti, Aboulez et al., 2020, p. 9).

The last one is of particular concern especially when there exists “a global glass ceiling for female news reporters”—only 37% of stories in newspapers, television, and radio were reported by women globally in 2015, a figure that had remained unchanged over the previous decade as per the last released report of the Global Media Monitoring Project that studies gender inequality in the world’s news media (Macharia, 2015, p.9).

Why this research

The goal of this Masters Research Project was to study women journalists’ experiences of gendered abuse on social media platforms with India—the largest democracy and the second largest internet market in the world—as a case study. Drawing from my personal experience as a journalist in India, this study intended to gain a deeper understanding of the 5Ws and 1H—the basic journalistic questions of *Who*, *What*, *Why*, *Where*, *When*, and *How*—of the online abuse experiences of women journalists in the country.

The findings of this study are based on the responses gained through an online survey of women working in the news media in India. As well as the factors contributing to harassment on social media platforms, the study focussed on examining what is (or is not) being done to address the issue by the key

actors, the strategies that have been found useful by the participating journalists for dealing with such instances, and, most importantly, their suggestions for various stakeholders for combatting online abuse against journalists.

The overall findings reveal a high degree of gendered abuse against women journalists on social media platforms in India and the need for key players to act, especially news organisations to better support their employees. Ultimately, the project hoped to learn from the valuable suggestions emerging out of the journalists' collective experiences, and so the purpose of the project lies in contributing to the ongoing efforts for combatting online abuse of women journalists, and by extension, to promoting the cause of gender equality and press freedom.

This report is to be read in conjunction with the Masters dissertation linked to this project that analyses the role of online misogyny in the attempts to silence women journalists through online abuse. No social media posts or abusive messages directed against women journalists were reproduced anywhere in this study as per the guidelines and instructions of the Wintec Human Ethics in Research Group which approved this study.

A note on 'online abuse'

A range of different terminologies has been used to refer to the spectrum of online attacks on women journalists. The most commonly used terms are 'online abuse', 'online harassment', and 'online violence', the last of which has been adopted by the United Nations and its subsidiaries to refer to the threats to women journalists in online environments (Posetti, Aboulez et al., 2020, p. 1) and has been defined as:

Gender-based violence against women online, and especially against women journalists who use information and communications technologies (ICTs) as tools for their work, includes any act of violence that is committed, assisted or aggravated in part or fully by the use of ICTs, such as mobile phones and smartphones, the Internet, social media platforms or email, against a woman because she is a woman, or that affects women disproportionately. (as cited in United Nations, 2020, p. 5)

PEN America (n.d.-a) as part of its *Online Harassment Field Manual* for journalists and writers defines 'online abuse' as the "pervasive or severe targeting of an individual or group online through harmful behavior". Along the same lines, the term 'online abuse' has been used primarily in this project along with the other terms to refer to any and all abusive messages and threats, whether text, image or video based, that are communicated to women journalists via social media platforms, the attacks ranging from sexualised invectives at one end to threats of sexual or physical violence at the other.

While there are different types of online abuse (see PEN America, n.d.-a), this study focusses on the gendered aspects of the abuse against women journalists who are doubly attacked because of their gender and profession, with their bodies often being the sites of attacks even though there are a range of factors contributing to their abuse.



THE INDIA STORY

In September 2017, senior Indian journalist Gauri Lankesh, a vocal critic of the right-wing Hindu nationalism in the country, was shot dead outside her house in South India. Prior to her murder, she had received death threats, both offline and online, that were never taken seriously (Romig, 2019). While her murder sent shockwaves across the country, for many of her industry colleagues, it was also a spine-chilling wake-up call—a stark reminder that the otherwise oft-ignored abusive threats communicated to them online were not *just* virtual but had the potential of turning very real!

Online abuse against women journalists

Like the rest of the world, journalists in India are working amidst growing attacks on the freedom of the press (see next section), and online abuse has become just one of the several ways in which they are targeted for reporting the truth. Over the past years, there has been a “significant increase of vicious online threats” against women journalists in the country (The Coalition For Women In Journalism, 2018), which reflects the “growing attempts on social media to silence vocal women journalists in India” (Network of Women in Media, India, 2020).

Facing “extreme harassment” online (see D’Silva Dias, 2016), many are “showered with vile threats” not just for talking about sensitive topics such as politics and religion but even for writing about seemingly innocuous subjects such as films (see Ghosh, 2019; Network of Women in Media, India, 2017). Some women journalists are abused simply “for voicing their opinions” (see Kathuria, 2018), while others have received rape and death threats on social media for their journalistic work (see International Federation of Journalists, 2020a; Khybri 2018). Some have also been targeted with concerted social media campaigns involving severe slut-shaming, sexually explicit language, and manipulated images and videos as attempts to silence them (see Ayyub, 2018).

Highly misogynistic, the abusive messages range from hostile gendered insults and name-calling at one end of the spectrum to sexualised abuse and threats of violence at the other. Spotting “What’s it like to get trolled all day long?” for outspoken women on Twitter, an analysis by *Hindustan Times*, a leading English newspaper of India, found around 5,800 abusive tweets that had been sent out to four prominent Indian women including journalists within the course of a week (Stevens & Aggarwal, 2017). The analysis, which revealed high volumes of shocking vitriol including sexist and racist slurs, violent threats, and tweets coloured by Islamophobia, was a part of the newspaper’s campaign against online abuse, “#Let’sTalkAboutTrolls”. And while there may be various factors including the political climate of the country and misogyny fuelling the abuse, “the subtext”, as noted Indian journalist Barkha Dutt (2017) wrote in her piece for the *Hindustan Times* campaign, “is always sexual”.

For some journalists, the online abuse has even had “physical repercussions” including attacks in the offline world (see Khybri, 2018). In fact, in 2018, a group of human rights experts of the United Nations called on the Indian government to protect a noted investigative journalist who had received a series of rape and murder threats following an online hate campaign against her that also made references to her Muslim faith (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2018).

Over the years, a growing number of women journalists has publicly highlighted—via their social media accounts and through the mainstream media—the incessant abuse they were targeted with, even as many have become “dangerously injured” to the online abuse which is so often employed by the abusers as a “weapon to silence women” (Dutt, 2017). The Coronavirus pandemic in the year 2020

led to further escalation in online harassment, and women journalists including those covering the public health crisis in India were “relentlessly harassed online” with an increase in gendered attacks (see Iftikhar, 2020).

Before we proceed further, let us first briefly examine the broader Indian context in which the instances of online abuse against women journalists in the country need to be viewed.

Threats to press freedom and journalists’ safety



As mentioned earlier, the spectre of online abuse is just *one* of the broader threats facing journalists in India at a time when their physical safety and the overall freedom of the press have increasingly been under attack in the country. With eight journalists murdered in 2020, India emerged as the world’s fourth most dangerous

country for journalists for the year as per the International Federation of Journalists (2021), the world’s largest organisation of journalists, which attributed this bloodshed to the “intolerance of hardliners”. In fact, between 1990 and 2020, more journalists (116) were killed in India than in the conflict-torn countries of Syria (96) and Afghanistan (93), putting it among the five most dangerous countries for the practice of journalism globally in the 30-year period, according to the International Federation of Journalists (2020b).

India also fares poorly in prosecuting retaliatory media killings and has featured multiple times in the Global Impunity Index—a list of countries with the worst record on this front released annually by the Committee to Protect Journalists, an independent organisation that works to promote press freedom. In 2020, India was placed 12th among the 12 worst performers worldwide that together accounted for 80% of the total number of unsolved murders of journalists globally between 2010 and 2020 (Beiser, 2020).

Threats to media freedom in the world’s largest democracy have also been spotlighted by the annual World Press Freedom Index in which India’s ranking has slipped each year since at least 2017. In 2020, it was placed at a dismal 142nd spot among the 180 countries evaluated for press freedom by the Reporters Without Borders (2020b), an international organisation that defends journalistic freedom. The country was down two spots from the previous year and six spots from 2017.



The rankings, however, were slammed by the country’s Information and Broadcasting Minister, Prakash Javadekar who claimed that the media enjoyed “absolute freedom” in India and vowed to “expose” the surveys that portrayed a “bad picture” of the freedom of the press in the country (“India Slips In Press Freedom Rankings”, 2020).



Contrary to the government's claims, however, press freedom violations were regularly reported in India, including the arrest of several journalists covering the farmers' protests against the country's controversial farm laws (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2021). International organisation Human Rights Watch (2021) in its *World Report 2021* underlined that journalists in India who were critical of the *Bharatiya Janata Party*-led government or its policies were "increasingly harassed, arrested, and prosecuted" in 2020 and that many of them also faced criminal cases, arrests, threats, and physical assaults for reporting on the Coronavirus pandemic. The International Press Institute (2020) also warned of a "rapid downward spiral" in press freedom in the country referring to the Indian government's bid to prevent independent media from reporting freely on the pandemic.

In addition to the 'external' threats, the Indian mainstream media itself appears to have been divided into two broad camps in recent years—one which "shines a critical light on the government" and the other which has "stopped asking difficult questions about the government and its policies" (Varadarajan, 2020). Moreover, trust in the news media has also been marred by growing concerns about false or misleading information being presented to the news audience. For instance, almost two-thirds (67%) of the Indian respondents in a global survey believed that a fair to great extent of "fake news" was prevalent in online news websites and platforms in the country (Ipsos, 2019, p. 27).

Together, the pro/anti-government media dichotomy and the faltering trust in the media have tended to further expose news organisations and their journalists to online attacks, which became apparent with many of the respondents to this survey indicating distrust in the media and their association with particular news organisations as factors fuelling online abuse against them.

Political climate

In India, a considerable section of the abuse against journalists can be traced to the country's highly polarised political climate, which is inextricably linked to another fault line in the nation's context—religion.

Journalists are routinely targeted by supporters from the entire political spectrum, and many who participated in this study particularly said they had been under attack from the "right-wing trolls" or supporters of the ruling Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* [English translation: Indian People's Party, abbreviated as: BJP] which has won two consecutive general elections in 2014 and 2019.

The right-wing supporters espouse the political ideology of Hindu nationalism, and some BJP members have even sought to redefine constitutionally secular India as a 'Hindu nation' (Sahoo, 2020, p. 12). It is to be noted that the "divide between secular and Hindu nationalist visions of national identity" (Sahoo, 2020, p. 10) is the central theme of polarisation in India where Hindus make up an overwhelming four-fifths (around 80%) majority of the country's one billion-plus population as against Muslims (roughly 14%) who constitute the largest religious minority group (Press Information Bureau, 2015).

The “right-wing trolls” tend to “attack anyone who appears to be against the government, the *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) or the nation” (p. 5), journalist Swati Chaturvedi (2016) noted in her investigative book *I Am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP’s Digital Army*. Chaturvedi found that Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself was ‘following’ many Twitter handles that regularly abused women journalists (including herself) (p. 16), and that those associated with the social media cell of the ruling BJP often used “vicious language, sex-filled imagery” as “weapons” against the journalists critical of the government, minority communities, and opposition parties (p. 139).

Following the murder of journalist Gauri Lankesh who was critical of the religious fundamentalism and right-wing politics in India, experts of the United Nations had specifically urged the Indian government to take “active steps to reverse a political climate that in recent years have become increasingly polarized and hostile, especially to the media” (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2017).

Noting the “unique characteristics” of online abuse in the country, a report on the atrocities against journalists and writers in India by the PEN International, which works to promote freedom of expression, observed that anyone who questioned policies on issues that the ruling BJP is “sensitive about”, such as religion and nationalism, is abused online by the government’s supporters (Kumar, 2018, p. 14). Notably, the “army of right-wing trolls” did not spare even the then Foreign Minister of India—a veteran BJP leader herself—who was relentlessly abused online after her ministry intervened to help a Hindu-Muslim couple in 2018 (Dutt, 2018).

Online abuse tends to be all the more vicious against journalists who belong to historically marginalised groups and religious minority communities. For instance, Muslim women journalists are known to have been disproportionately targeted with online harassment (see Committee to Protect Journalists, 2020a; Khybri, 2018).

Online abuse pervading the Indian virtual spaces reflects the overall socio-political dynamic as also prominently highlighted by many journalists who participated in this survey.

Women’s safety and gender equality

“...to be a woman online – just like to be a woman walking the streets of an Indian city, town or village – is to transgress an unwritten law of patriarchy; to cross over into a space that isn’t meant to be yours.”

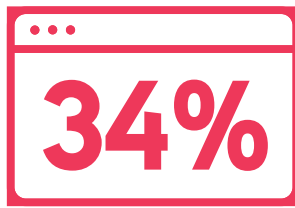
— (KOVACS ET AL., 2013, UNDER “IMAGES AND VOICES” SECTION IN THE “INTRODUCTION” OF ‘DON’T LET IT STAND!’, THE PIONEERING STUDY ON VERBAL ONLINE ABUSE AGAINST WOMEN IN INDIA BY THE INTERNET DEMOCRACY PROJECT)

The issue of women’s safety in India, both offline and online, reflects a grim reality in general. With 405,861 cases of crime against women including those of rape and murder reported in 2019, the country continued to exhibit a high rate of crime against women (62%, registered per 100,000 of women population), according to the National Crime Records Bureau (2020a, p. 195). Troublingly, the statistics also reflected a pendency rate of around 34%, meaning that over a third of the cases of crime against women remained pending investigation by the police at the end of the year (p. 225).



**cases of crime
against women
in 2019**

Source: National Crime Records Bureau (2020)



**cases of crime
against women
pending investigation**

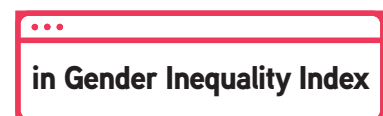
Source: National Crime Records Bureau (2020)

In a society where patriarchal norms and misogyny are culturally entrenched, offline attacks often transcend into the virtual world as misogynistic attacks and online abuse against women, which became even more pronounced during the Coronavirus pandemic in India. According

to a report by the UN Women Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, the volume of misogynistic social media posts as well as users' engagement with them increased by 168% in India during March to June 2020 (corresponding to the Coronavirus-enforced lockdown) as compared to the same period in 2019 (2020, p. 1). The research also found that many of the users who posted pandemic-related misogynist content in India "were also highly nationalistic, based on their user profiles and other tweets" (p. 4).

The online abuse is especially severe against women in public professions such as journalism and politics who are highly visible and vocal on social media platforms. For instance, a large-scale study by Amnesty International India (2020) found that women politicians in India experienced "substantially higher abuse" on Twitter than their UK and USA counterparts, with one in every seven tweets mentioning them being 'problematic' or 'abusive' in nature (p. 6). It also found that Indian women politicians who were Muslim or those who belonged to marginalised castes were targeted with significantly higher proportions of abuse than others (p. 6), which is also in line with women journalists' experiences.

Apart from working in a highly polarised socio-political climate where threats to press freedom abound, women journalists also face an "additional layer of risk" (Chocarro et al., 2020, p. 215) because of their gender. Online abuse against women journalists thus needs to be seen against the backdrop of the



Source: United Nations Development Programme (2020)

overall threats to the safety of women in India as well as the broader gender disparity prevailing in the country that ranks abysmally (123 out of 189 countries) in the global Gender Inequality Index (United Nations Development Programme, 2020, p. 363).

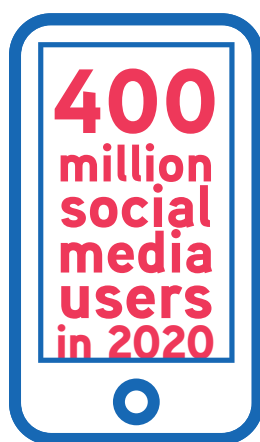
It is to be noted that just like in India as a whole—where women account for only about 21% of the total labour force (United Nations Development Programme, 2020, p. 363)—the Indian news media itself mirrors glaring gender imbalances within the industry. Women are underrepresented across the entire spectrum of the print, broadcast, and digital media in the country which "only serves to entrench patriarchal structures and prejudices", noted a report titled *Gender Inequality in Indian Media* (UN Women, Newslaundry, & Teamwork Arts, 2019, p. 4). The attempts to thus silence women journalists through online abuse threaten to further reduce the inclusivity and diversity of the news media in the country.

Growth in internet base (and cybercrime)

The spurt in online abuse against journalists comes against the backdrop of a dramatic growth in the country's internet user base over the past decade, which jumped from just over 15 million in 2009 (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2010, p. i) to more than 718 million internet subscribers at the end of 2019 (Telecom Regulatory Authority of India, 2020, p. 2)—currently the second largest in the world, only behind China.



Source: Telecom Regulatory Authority of India (2020)



Source: Kemp (2020)

With its rapidly expanding internet base, India also witnessed a proliferation of various social media platforms over the years, and in 2020 there were as many as 400 million social media users in the country (Kemp, 2020). Facebook—the most popular social media platform nationally and globally—alone had over 300 million users in India, making it the tech giant's biggest market in the world (Keelery, 2020).

For journalists working in the Indian news media—which has undergone a significant digital transformation through the years of the internet base expansion—this means that the news audience is now increasingly using online platforms in addition to the traditional media sources such as newspapers and television to access news. To illustrate, as many as 77% Indian respondents in a global survey said they were getting their news everyday through social media, which was significantly higher than the global average (59%) across the 27 countries studied (Ipsos & The Trust Project, 2020, p. 9).

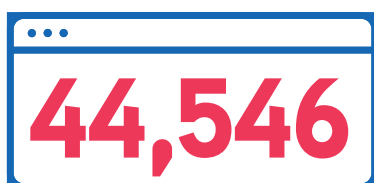
However, this growing interface between the audience and the journalists on social media platforms has also exposed the latter to higher amounts of online abuse over the years. This, in turn, is in line with the sharp growth in the volume of crime cases that are carried out using the internet—a by-product of the country's digital boom.

In the same decade as above, the number of cybercrime cases reported in the country surged from 696 in 2009 (National Crime Records Bureau, 2011, p. 4) to 44,546 cases in 2019 (National Crime Records Bureau (2020a, p. xiv). The 2019 figure itself recorded a “huge increase” of around 64% in the registration of cybercrime cases over the previous year, with ‘sexual exploitation’ being the second largest motive behind those cases (p. xiv).

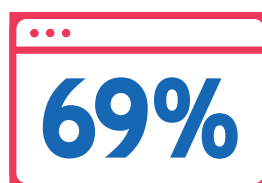
Linguistic diversity and climate of impunity

With more than half a billion internet subscribers, India's vast linguistic diversity and an often-sluggish response from social media platforms and police authorities present further challenges to journalists facing online abuse.

The country's linguistic diversity—there are at least 121 languages and 270 ‘mother tongues’ or dialects with 10,000 or more speakers (Office of the Registrar General, India, 2018, p. 6)—means that large volumes of content on social media platforms—for instance half of the tweets on Twitter (see Mandavia & Krishnan, 2019)—are in non-English languages.



cybercrime cases
in 2019



of cybercrime cases
pending investigation

Source: National Crime Records Bureau (2020)

In this context, when women journalists get targeted with online abuse in one (or a mix) of the several Indian languages, written in either Indic or Roman scripts, the abusive comments in the non-English languages “often escape the notice of” and go undetected by social media platforms (Network of Women in Media, India, 2020).

The magnitude of this issue was also reflected in the *Troll Patrol India* study which found that tweets in Hindi (the most widely spoken language in India) along with seven other regional languages of the country accounted for almost 70% of all ‘problematic’ or ‘abusive’ tweets mentioning Indian women politicians (Amnesty International India, 2020, p. 37).

Social media platforms are known to have refused action against the abusers of women journalists by citing that the posts flagged by the journalists did not violate their respective platform guidelines (see Isaac, 2020; Sharma, 2020) or to have simply replied with automated emails saying the journalists’ complaints were being looked into (see Network of Women in Media, India, 2017). In fact, there have been cases where action was taken by platforms against the journalists who highlighted the abuse instead. For instance, a noted Indian journalist was temporarily locked out of her Twitter account after she tweeted some abusive messages to highlight the sexually explicit content and rape threats that had been sent to her (Rocha & Kalra, 2019).

In addition to the dissatisfactory response from social media platforms, another factor that emboldens online abusers in India is the lack of action by the law enforcement agencies such as the police (see Isaac, 2020). Notably, more than two-thirds (69%) of the cybercrime cases reported in the country were pending investigation by the police at the end of the year 2019, according to the National Crime Records Bureau (2020b, p. 777) statistics.

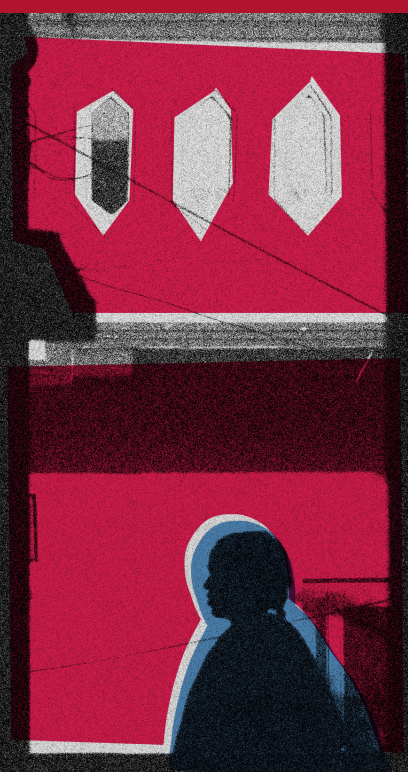
Many women journalists have faced delays and difficulties in getting their complaints of social media abuse registered with the police, and some have also had their cases of online abuse closed by the police as the abusive comments remained ‘undetected’ or the ‘culprits could not be identified’ (see Network of Women in Media, India, 2020; Sharma, 2020).

Overall, a climate of impunity created by a combined lack of adequate and timely action from the social media platforms and the police has further fuelled online abuse against journalists in India, as also highlighted by the respondents to this survey.

With this background in mind, let us now explore the 5Ws and 1H—or the *Who, What, Why, Where, When, and How*—of the online abuse experiences of the women journalists who were surveyed as part of this project.

20

5Ws AND 1H OF THE ONLINE ABUSE EXPERIENCES
OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN INDIA



5Ws AND 1H OF ONLINE ABUSE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN INDIA

5Ws AND 1H OF ONLINE ABUSE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN INDIA

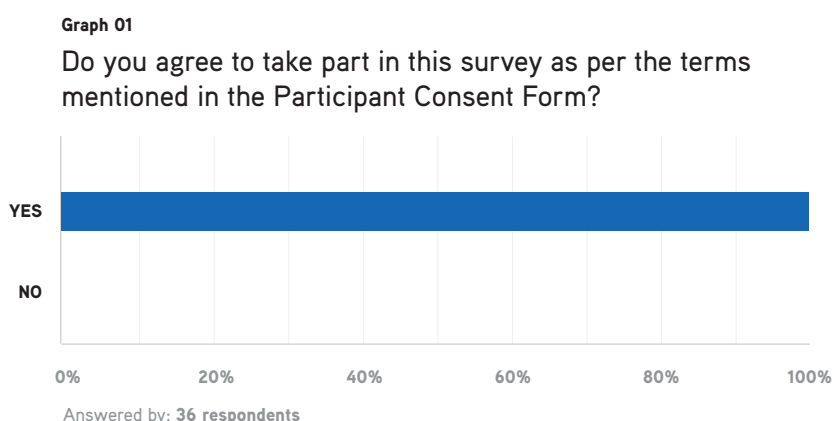
This chapter presents the findings of the online survey that was conducted as part of this Research Project to study women journalists' experiences of online abuse with India as a case study. It explores the nature of online abuse experienced by the journalists, the factors behind the abuse, the ways in which the journalists countered the abuse, and finally, their suggestions for various stakeholders.

About the survey

The first-hand information presented in this report was gained from Indian women journalists via an online survey by questionnaire hosted on the SurveyMonkey platform. Comprising 20 questions, the survey was designed with a mixed methods approach for collecting and analysing responses to both closed-ended (quantitative data) and open-ended (qualitative data) question. This Research Project was approved by the Human Ethics in Research Group of the Waikato Institute of Technology (Wintec).

Purposive sampling was used to identify and shortlist potential respondents in the form of Indian women journalists present on social media platforms. In order to ensure that the survey received only authentic responses, the prospective respondents were approached directly via Direct Messages on their Twitter accounts and/or their email addresses with a request for participation in the survey. Some journalists were also approached with the help of closed networks of professional journalists working in different Indian cities. The survey collector settings were refined to ensure that the survey could only be taken once from the same device to prevent duplicate entries.

Held in late 2020, the survey received a total of 36 responses from women journalists working in the Indian news media, with an overall completion rate of 69%. All the participants registered their informed consent for taking part in the survey (Graph 1).



Identifiable information such as the journalists' names or those of their news organisations was not asked as part of the demographic questions to encourage the respondents' candour. As part of an optional question at the end of the survey, the respondents were invited to share their email address if

they wished to be updated with the research outcome. A total of 17 journalists did so, and their contact information was later delinked from their responses to maintain confidentiality.

Overall, the survey received a wealth of qualitative data with as many as 152 comments being collected as answers to the open-ended questions and under the 'Other/Comment' fields of the closed-ended questions that invited the respondents to add options or to expand on their views.

Most of the questions were optional, and the survey design meant that the respondents skipped between different sections within the survey depending on the answers they selected in the previous section. Hence, the total number of responses received was different for each question. Many questions allowed the respondents to select multiple options as applicable and therefore the data does not necessarily add up to 100% in all the questions. All the findings have been expressed as percentages of the number of participants who responded to the respective questions, and the figures have been rounded off to the nearest whole numbers. Throughout this report, a combination of descriptors based on the respondents' answers has been used to refer to their responses. In very few instances, minor typographical errors in the comments received have been rectified for the sake of clarity.

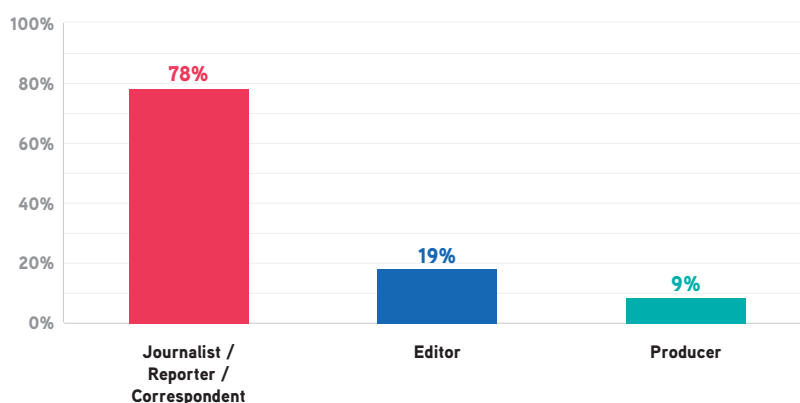
WHO were the respondents?

Role in the field

Most (78%) of the respondents worked in the field of journalism/media in the role of journalists, reporters or correspondents, while the rest as editors and producers (Graph 2). Three participants working as journalists further described their roles as that of 'travel journalist', 'news anchor' and 'anchor' in the 'Other' option. The respondents have been generically referred to as 'journalists' throughout this report.

Graph 02

What is your role in the field of journalism?



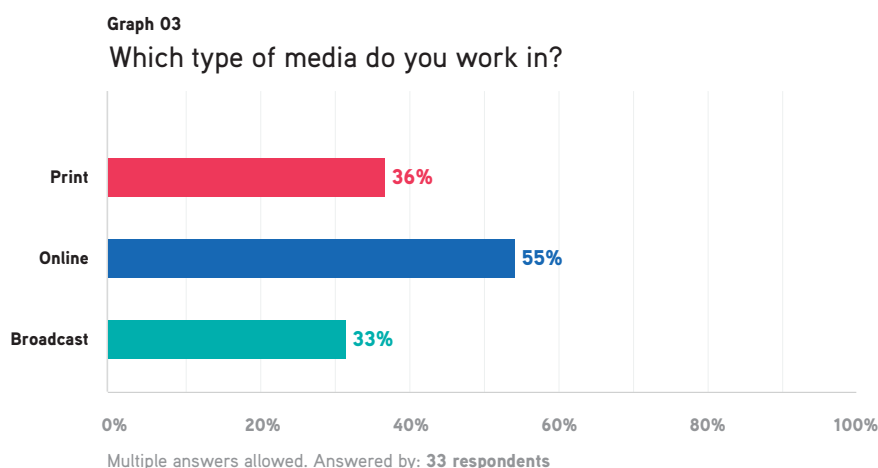
Multiple answers allowed. Answered by: 32 respondents

*All figures rounded off to the nearest whole number everywhere**

*All findings expressed as percentages of the number of participants who responded to the respective questions**

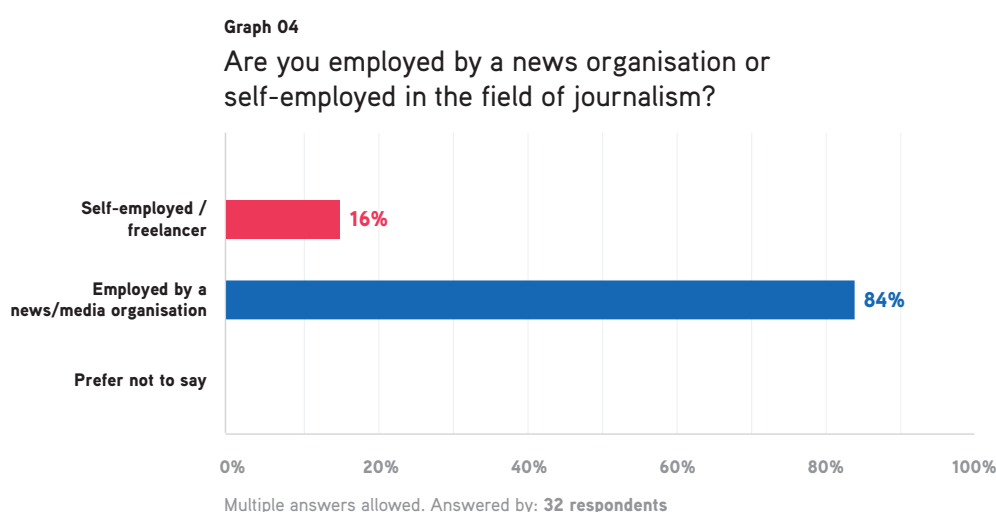
Type of media

More than half (55%) of the respondents to this survey worked in the online news media, followed by those working in the print (36%) and broadcast (33%) media (Graph 3).



Type of employment

Most (84%) of the respondents were employed by news/media organisations, and one participant described working as 'both-employed by a news organisation and freelancer' in the 'Other' option (Graph 4).



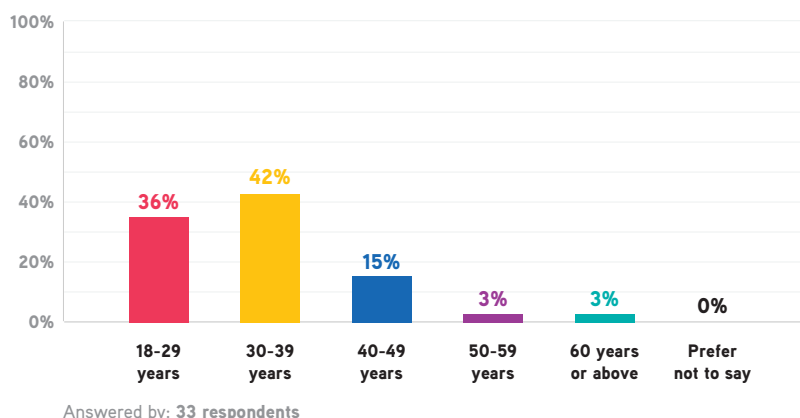
“This is disheartening and discouraging. Not only for us but for the women who would want to join this industry in future.”

Age

Most (78%) of the respondents to this survey were below 40 years of age (Graph 5).

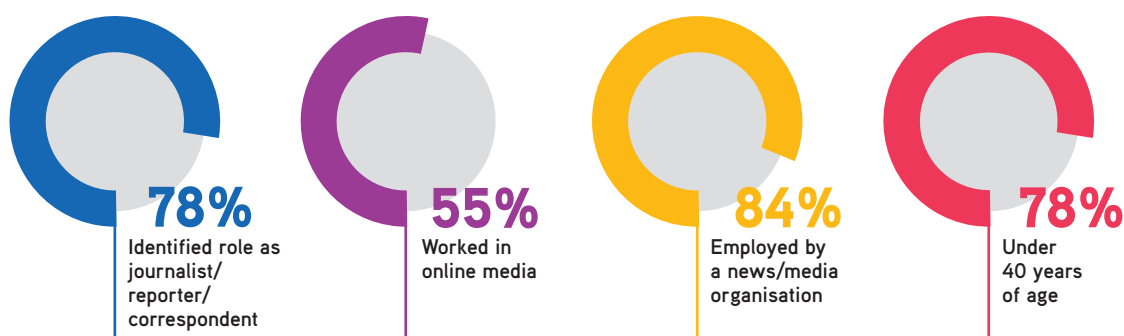
Graph 05

What is your age?



Key demographic differences

Graph 06



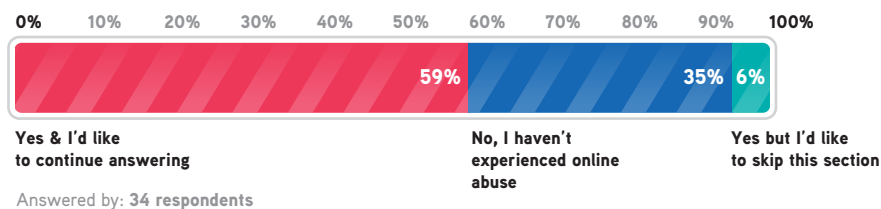
WHO experienced online abuse?

Preceded by a trigger warning, this question asked the respondents if they had ever experienced online abuse on social media platforms for their work as a journalist, and they had three options to choose from (see Graph 7). Overall, nearly two-thirds (65%) of the respondents to this question indicated they had experienced online abuse in the course of their work as journalists. While 59% of the respondents indicated willingness to answer further questions about the details of their online abuse experiences, a small segment (6%) wished to skip this section—this option was introduced for those who *did* want to report having experienced online abuse but at the same time wished to avoid any potential triggering as a result

of recalling their past experiences. The remaining 35% of the respondents said they had not experienced online abuse. All the options redirected the respondents to different sections within the survey.

Graph 07

Have you ever experienced online abuse on social media platform(s) for your work as a journalist?

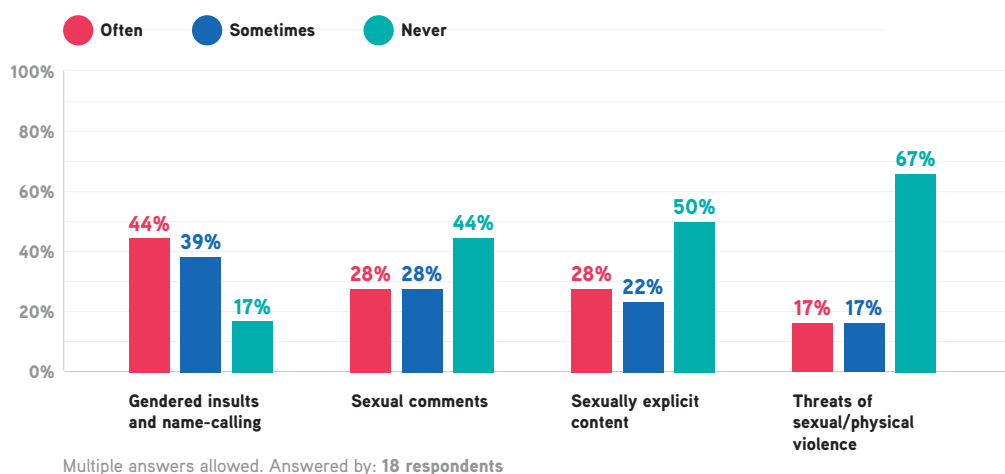


WHAT type of online abuse did the respondents experience and WHEN (how often)?

The respondents who had faced online abuse and were willing to attend the subsequent questions regarding the details of their experiences, were asked if they had ever been targeted with each of the four categories of gendered abuse viz. 'gendered insults and name-calling', 'sexual comments', 'sexually explicit content', and 'threats of sexual/physical violence' in relation to their work as journalists. They were also asked to indicate when they had experienced the abuse and could choose the frequency as 'sometimes', 'often', or 'never' (Graph 8).

Graph 08

How often did you experience the following types of online abuse in response to your work as a journalist?

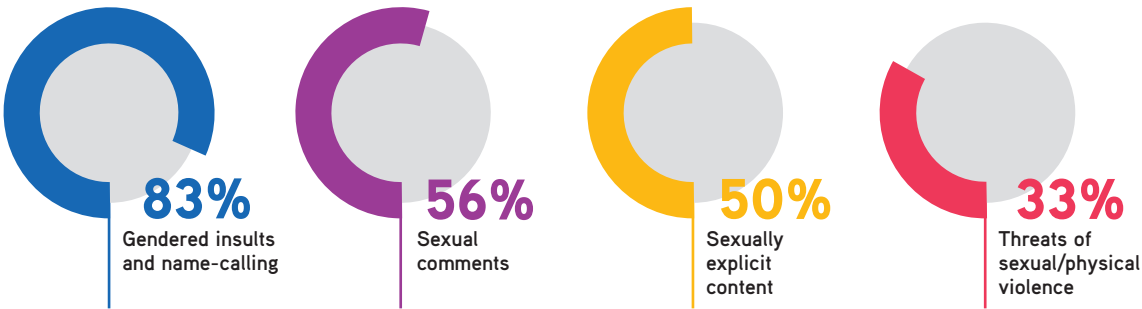


Overall, of the participants who attended this question, as many as 83% reported to have experienced gendered insults and name-calling at least 'sometimes', while more than half of the respondents had experienced sexual comments (56%) and sexually explicit content (50%). A third of the respondents (33%) had been targeted with threats of sexual or physical violence at least 'sometimes'

in relation to their work as journalists (Graph 9). The participants were also invited to share if they had experienced any other type of online abuse under the ‘Other/Comment’ option, and one of the respondents wrote, “Generally they have political overtones”.

Graph 09

Types of abuse experienced at least ‘sometimes’



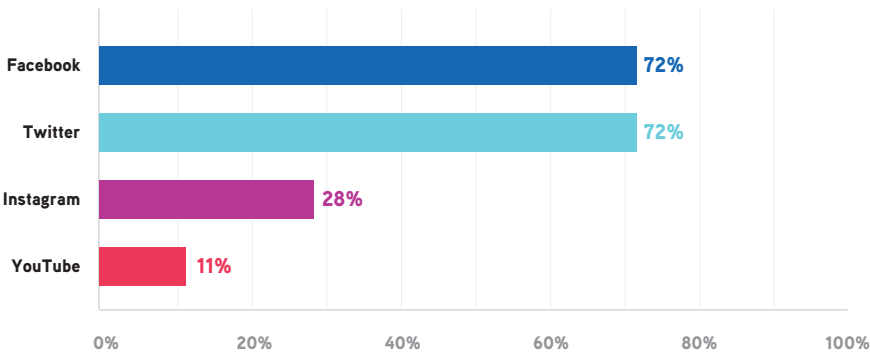
Multiple answers allowed. Answered by: 18 respondents

WHERE did the online abuse occur?

The respondents were asked to indicate the social media platforms on which they had experienced the above online abuse. Facebook and Twitter, each chosen by 72% of the respondents to this question, emerged as the most common platforms where the journalists had been exposed to online harassment, followed by Instagram and YouTube (Graph 10).

Graph 10

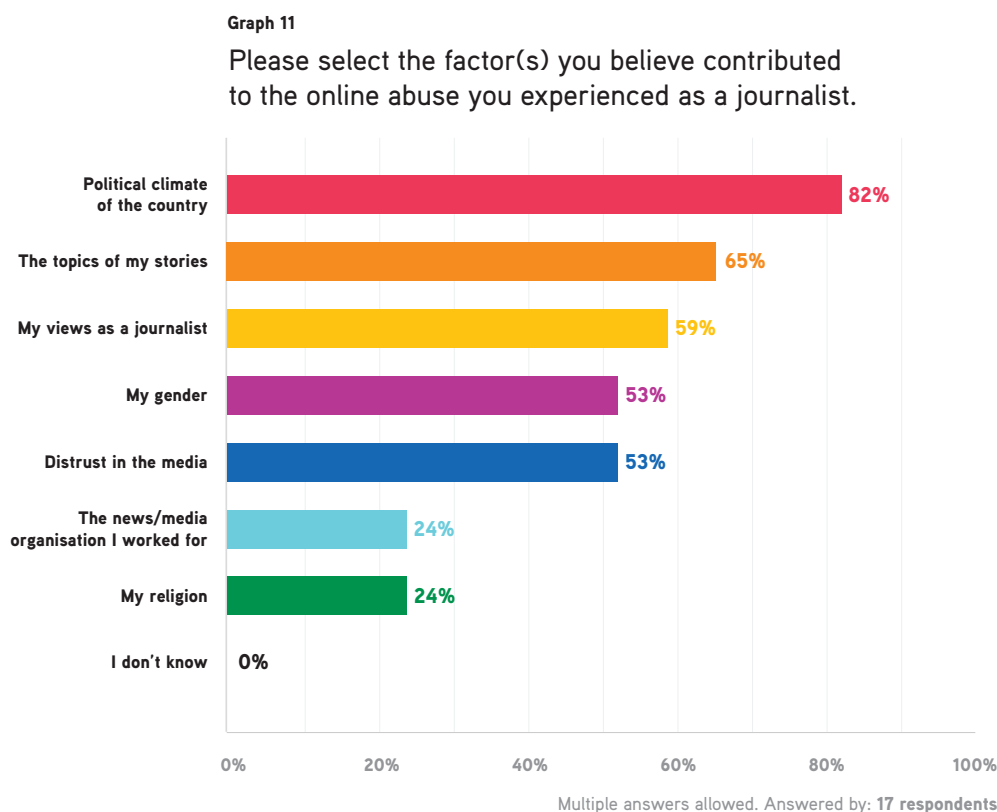
On which social media platform(s) did you experience the above online abuse?



Multiple answers allowed. Answered by: 18 respondents

WHAT were the factors behind online abuse?

The respondents were asked to select the factors they believed had contributed to the abuse they experienced online as journalists. ‘Political climate of the country’ was the topmost factor as indicated by 82% of the respondents who answered this question (Graph 11). Around two-thirds (65%) of the respondents said the ‘topics of their stories’ had led to online abuse against them, while 59% felt that their ‘views as journalists’ attracted the toxic onslaught.



More than half (53%) of the respondents each believed their ‘gender’ and ‘distrust in the media’ had contributed to the abuse they experienced online, while nearly a quarter (24%) of the respondents indicated their ‘religion’ and the ‘news/media organisation they worked for’ as contributing factors to the online attacks. Notably, one of the options ‘I don’t know’ remained unselected, suggesting that the journalists had a clear assessment of the reasons they believe had prompted the abusive attacks against them.

This question also received two comments where journalists wrote about having experienced online abuse for their religion and for their “personal choices” (more on this later).

WHY did these factors lead to online abuse?

Following up on the previous question, an open-ended question invited the journalists to share their views on why they thought the above factors led to online abuse against them. This question received 15 comments, with the participants citing a range of reasons that have been summarised below.

Overall, a large section of the survey participants believed that the growing political intolerance in the country was one of the primary reasons behind the online abuse they had experienced, with many specifically attributing the phenomenon to the “right-wing trolls” in India. Others saw the wider roles of misogyny, religion, caste, and of the social media platforms themselves, in the abusive messages and threats received by them, among other factors.

“People have strong political beliefs”

The highly politicised nature of attacks against journalists in India was evident with a vast majority (82%) of the respondents attributing their online abuse experiences to the ‘political climate of the country’. Many respondents said they were attacked online by the supporters of political parties if their (journalists’) work or views appeared to differ from the abusers’ political ideologies. A journalist working in the online media, who had often experienced all four categories of abuse including threats on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, said:

We are living in a very divided world. People, most of them, have strong political beliefs. They worship the leaders they support. If my news report or my political view is critical towards the party/leaders they support, they become aggressive. It seems like no one is interested in facts and when you give them factual reports, it makes them uncomfortable.

An editor from the print and online media mentioned that for her “most of the trolling had political overtones”, while a journalist who worked in an online news media organisation, said she had been targeted on Facebook and Instagram because of the “specific political inclination” of her harassers. Referring to “paid trolls”—or social media users who are ‘sponsored’ by political parties for targeting those who are not in congruence with their opinions—an editor working in the online media, who considered the political environment of the country as one of the factors behind her online abuse experiences, said:

As per my observation, paid trolls and half-informed people tend to sway opinions turning abusive when not met with validation. Paid users have made social media platforms a space for no tolerance.

A broadcast media journalist, who had experienced gendered abuse on Twitter and who identified political environment of India as one of the factors behind the abuse, highlighted the growing intolerance for opposing views in the country:

The polarised climate of the country over recent years has made people completely intolerant of contrarian viewpoints. . . . Of course, it becomes specific targeting when you don’t agree with the overall stance taken by a news organisation on a particular subject/issue.

“It’s mainly right-wing trolls”

While supporters from across the political spectrum target journalists who question their favourite parties or leaders, many respondents specifically attributed their online abuse experiences to the “right-wing trolls”, referring to the supporters of the ruling Hindu nationalist *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) which has been in power in India since 2014. Some said they had been targeted by “trolls” associated with the ruling BJP’s social media unit, popularly known as the “IT [information technology] cell”, when their work or views were critical of the party or its government.

A journalist-cum-editor, who worked as a news anchor in the broadcast media and had experienced all four categories of online abuse, said:

IT trolls, paid ones are indulging in targeted harassment if the political ideology is against the centre [the Union government]. Many have got inspiration from them and blindly join the movement. It's mainly right-wing trolls.

A journalist working in the print and online media, who had been targeted with gendered insults and sexual comments, said the journalists were being attacked as “anti-national” in the country’s highly right-wing atmosphere for doing their job of highlighting inconvenient facts as reporters:

We are working in an extremely right-wing environment where reporting the truth or having an opinion on the socio-political reality is considered anti-national by supporters of [Prime Minister] Narendra Modi.

A freelance journalist, who had experienced gendered insults and sexual comments on Twitter, indicated that the “right-wing trolls” were responsible for attacking a section of the media, especially when the commentator was a woman or where divisive religious issues were involved:

The (predominantly) right-wing trolls see left-leaning media as biased and/or false; in their view commentary about political issues shouldn't come from a liberal woman; political issues that are pegged to a policy that favours one religion over another does not, according to some, warrant backlash based on their (false) understanding of history.

A print media journalist, who had been attacked on Twitter, went so far as to saying that “all the abuse” she faced occurred when her work appeared to go against the dominant right-wing of the country which advances the political ideology of Hindu nationalism. This, she underscored, had happened even though, ironically, she herself was a Hindu by religion:

I'm a Hindu who tries to do her job with honesty and integrity. Since the current atmosphere in India has empowered the right-wing groups to abuse and bully journalists, especially women journalists, I think I've been just another target for such groups. All the abuse has only come while I'm covering stories that show the right-wing in the wrong light.

An online media journalist, who had experienced all four categories of gendered abuse on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, further contended that one could not expect the government to act against online harassers of journalists “as the IT cells run by the political parties, especially of the ruling parties, are themselves the culprits of online bullying and hate mongering”.

“A woman with an opinion rattles many”

The role of misogyny was another recurrent theme across the online abuse experiences of women journalists surveyed as part of this project. Regardless of the contributing factors, the abuse targeted at most of the respondents had attacked their gender in some way or the other in order to attack their work or views as journalists (Graph 8 and 9). A broadcast media journalist, who had been targeted with gendered insults, sexual comments, and sexually explicit abuse online, noted misogyny as one of the reasons behind the attacks:

To begin with, women are considered to be an inferior race by a largely patriarchal and misogynistic society, and hence it becomes easier to abuse women.

A print media journalist, who had experienced all four categories of gendered abuse on Twitter, pointed out that the society finds it hard to digest the views of independent and opinionated women who speak for themselves:

A woman with an opinion rattles many especially when it isn't in line with one's own ideas or ideology.

A journalist, who worked in both print and online media and who had experienced all four categories of abuse, referred to the wider role of prevailing gender stereotypes and misogyny behind the online abuse targeted at women journalists:

They just do not like young girls having a voice. . . . Like how 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. Sad.

This respondent further stressed that the abuse against women journalists did not necessarily come from men all the time and that journalists' age also played a role in the attacks experienced by them.

And it's not just men who trouble girls, it's also elderly women who try all toxic ways to exert superiority. Age plays a major role, the younger the journalist, the more challenging life is for her.

More than half (53%) of the respondents believed their 'gender' had played a role in the abuse targeted at them online (Graph 11). In an indication of how their profession and gender often intersected to result in abusive attacks on women journalists, a respondent working in the online media, who had experienced all four categories of abuse, asked rhetorically:

Name-calling, rape threats have become a norm. . . . Though the male journalists are also targeted, female journalists are more vulnerable. Do I need to explain why?

A freelance journalist, who had experienced all four categories of abuse, indicated how the deeply ingrained misogyny in the Indian society together with any criticism of the country's dominant pro-Hindu political ideology resulted in online abuse against women journalists:

Apart from general misogyny, all views that criticized Hindu supremacist ideas and policies are attacked.

Additionally, a print media journalist who had experienced all four categories of gendered abuse on Twitter, said she had been "attacked for my personal choices like interfaith marriage as well", highlighting the role of misogyny coupled with religious discrimination behind her online abuse experiences.

Attacks on religion and caste

The intersectional nature of online abuse was apparent with some journalists stating they had been attacked for other aspects of their identity in addition to their gender such as religion or caste, where the latter refers to a more than 3000-year-old Indian system of social stratification that divides Hindus into rigid hierarchical groups (see British Broadcasting Corporation, 2019).

Nearly a quarter of the respondents (24%) indicated 'religion' as one of the factors contributing to the online abuse targeted at them (Graph 11). A producer working in the broadcast media, who had experienced gendered insults on Facebook, further wrote, "Because of my religion I think I am being targeted."

A few open-ended responses also pointed to the prevalence of religion-based, particularly Islamophobic, abuse. A freelance print media journalist, who is a Hindu by religion, said she had

been particularly targeted by the “right-wing organisations” because her news stories highlighted the discrimination against Muslims in the country:

I am a Hindu, and few important stories I covered showed how few right-wing organisations wronged Muslims and Kashmiri Muslims. In response to my stories I got comments like: “It’s so bad that a Hindu is doing this to her people”, etc. I’ve also been bullied on Twitter due to such stories.

And it was not just news stories focussing on Muslims that had attracted such abuse: a broadcast media journalist said she had been targeted for “being married to a Muslim man”, further underscoring the Islamophobic nature of abuse.

A survey respondent also highlighted another important contributing factor in the form of deep-rooted discrimination based on one’s castes or rigid social categories in India. This journalist, who worked in the online media and had experienced all four categories of gendered abuse on Facebook and Twitter, said the online abuse directed at her was both “casteist and sexual” in nature and that she was harassed on social media mainly because of the caste system.

The online abuse I face is casteist and sexual in nature. The caste system that is prevalent inside the media and outside the media is one of biggest reasons that I am targeted for expressing my views.

Though outlawed since 1950, social discrimination based on the caste system continues unabated across various aspects of life in India and is also highly virulent in the virtual spaces in the Indian context. Besides the caste system, this respondent also attributed her online abuse experiences to the country’s political climate as well as her gender, the topics of her stories, and her views as a journalist.

Social media: “A comfortable tool”

In addition to the various factors the respondents believed had contributed to online abuse against them, they also felt that the social media platforms had turned into safe havens for miscreants to target journalists.

Referring to people with “strong political beliefs” who target journalists critical of the party/leaders they support, a respondent working in the online news media said that the “social media [has] become a comfortable tool for them to spit out their hatred.”

A print media journalist, for whom online abuse experiences had become a routine part of the job ‘to a significant extent’, said the anonymity afforded by the social media platforms together with the country’s political climate had further enabled the abusers to attack women journalists online with impunity:

The anonymity that social media provides emboldens such vicious attacks especially when the political environment is conducive of such language, spite & abuse . . . the confidence abusers get that they can go scot-free.

As the world’s largest democracy and the second largest internet market, India has presented itself as a perfect setting for the social media companies to flourish. These companies, however, were not taking any “social responsibility” for the abuse and hatred spread via their platforms, said an online media editor who had experienced gendered insults and name-calling on Facebook:

The platforms themselves have shrugged responsibility for the content being circulated because of the current political scenario. They exhibit/take no social responsibility for the mass opinion that is generated and spread thus only because of their platforms.

A freelance journalist, who had experienced all four categories of abuse on Facebook and Twitter, emphasised that while the abuse targeted against journalists online was not new in itself, the social media platforms had certainly led to its amplification:

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.

WHAT is the impact of online abuse?

The survey responses reflected how the instances of online abuse held the potential to cause varied and lasting impacts resulting in concerns among the journalists for their emotional, online, and physical safety, as well as self-censorship on social media platforms. The phenomenon was found to have become a routine part of their job for many, even as some said online abuse did not constitute a cause for concern for them.

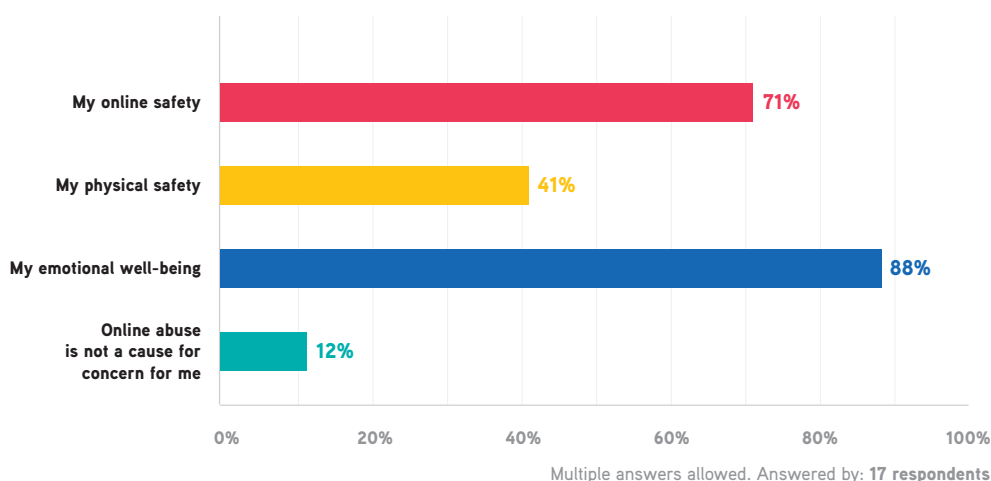
“Mental agony is very real”

The respondents were asked if and how they were concerned about their overall safety and well-being as a result of the online abuse they experience as journalists, and an overwhelming majority (88%) indicated being concerned about their emotional well-being (Graph 12). This speaks volumes about the emotional toll the instances of online abuse take on journalists, tending to pervade both their professional and personal lives.

More than two-thirds (71%) of the respondents to this question indicated being concerned about their ‘online safety’ as a result of the abusive attacks, which is perturbing as journalists nowadays are expected to spend a considerable amount of their time breaking and distributing stories online.

Graph 12

Are you concerned about the following as a result of the online abuse you experience as a journalist?



This question also received four comments, two of which shed further light on the kind of impact online abuse tends to have on even the most ‘hardened’ of journalists when the attacks are severe, pervasive, and persistent.

A freelance journalist, who indicated being concerned about her ‘emotional well-being’ and ‘online safety’, said she had toughened up following a prolonged exposure to such instances but that the abuse could still turn disconcerting at times:

I have learnt over the years to try and get thick-skinned but extreme abuse can still unsettle me.

A journalist working in the print and online media, who was concerned about her ‘emotional well-being’, ‘online safety’, and ‘physical safety’ as a result of the online abuse, said one tends to brush off the abuse on social media platforms in view of the graver “real” dangers facing women in the country even though it causes significant emotional harm:

In a country like India where women face real and physical abuse on a daily basis, one learns to brush away online abuse which is of a lesser degree. Yet, the mental agony is very real.

Not just virtual

Pointing to a significant perception of threat among journalists regarding the online threats turning real in the offline world, 41% of the respondents to this question indicated being concerned about their ‘physical safety’ because of the online abuse. Two journalists further wrote about the risk of online threats turning into physical attacks, especially in the light of the murder of senior journalist Gauri Lankesh which was preceded by abusive threats. A print media journalist, who had experienced all four categories of abuse and who was concerned for her ‘physical safety’ and ‘emotional well-being’ because of the online abuse, wrote:

Especially after the murder of senior woman journalist Gauri Lankesh, the threat of physical violence has increased multifold.

A freelance journalist, who was concerned about her ‘emotional well-being’, ‘online safety’ as well as ‘physical safety’ due to online abuse, referred to her fellow freelancers’ apprehension about the threat of online threats jumping offline:

I often hear freelance friends say “we’re not quite at the Gauri Lankesh level, but truthfully, how do you know? How do you know which neighbour will rat you out, or why or what will provoke someone?”

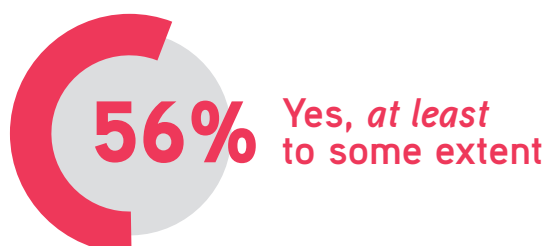
Twelve percent of the respondents said online abuse was not a cause for concern for them.

“Part of the job”

The respondents were asked if experiencing online abuse had become a routine part of their job as journalists, and more than half (56%) of those who answered this question agreed it had indeed become so for them (Graph 13). An equal number (28% each) of the respondents felt that online abuse had become a regular part of their job as a journalist to ‘some’ or to a ‘significant’ extent (Graph 14), indicating the scale and intensity of the harmful professional hazard.

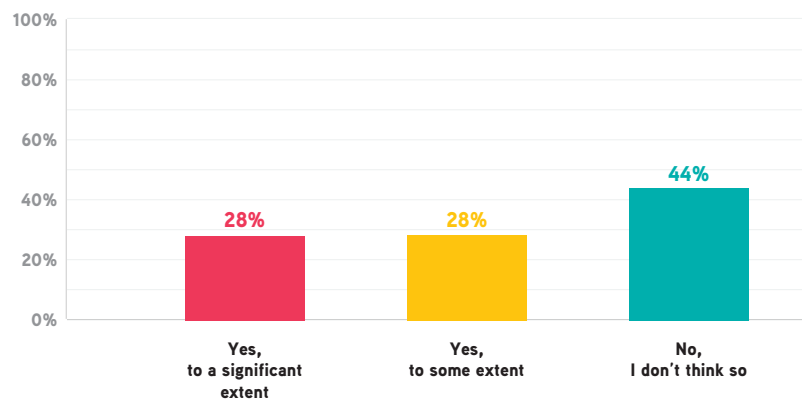
Graph 13

Would you say experiencing online abuse has become a routine part of your job as a journalist?



Graph 14

Would you say experiencing online abuse has become a routine part of your job as a journalist?



Answered by: 18 respondents

“I am silencing myself”

This question also received three comments, two of which further highlighted how online abuse was affecting the journalists’ freedom of expression, and by extension, the freedom of the press.

An editor working in the online media, who had experienced gendered insults and name-calling on Facebook, wrote about regulating her participation on social media platforms to keep away from online abusers:

I consciously stay away from social media to avoid abuse from trolls. Effectively I am silencing myself.

Echoing a similar sentiment, a print-cum-online media journalist talked about censoring her activity on Facebook and Twitter significantly because of the constant threat of harassment:

The threat of online abuse has become a routine part of the job but not the experience of it as I have censored my participation on social media to a great extent.

“Disheartening and discouraging”

Sharing her experience in response to a later question, an online media journalist, who had been targeted with all four categories of gendered abuse on social media platforms, said the abusive attacks were demoralising not just for the women currently working in the news media but also for those who might be contemplating a future in the field:

I have grown thick skin. But the hate and abuse do reach to me even if I don't take it seriously. On Facebook, it is by the upper caste men, on Twitter, it is the IT Cell. Right now, I don't see a way of it. It has become a routine that even before filing a report, I know which group is going to target me and what they are going to say. This is disheartening and discouraging. Not only for us but for the women who would want to join this industry in future.

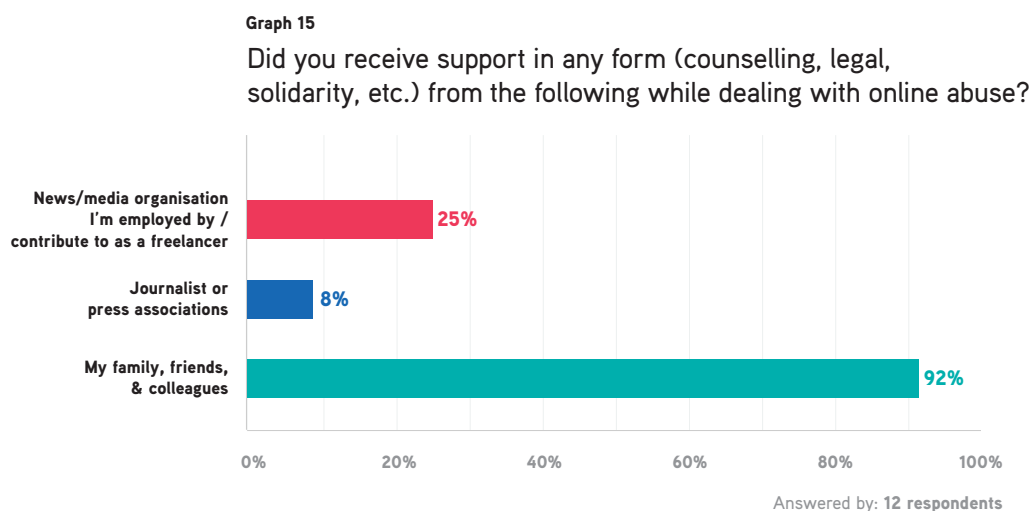
This reflects how the impact of online abuse against women journalists could travel far beyond its intended recipients to affect even those who may not be a part of the profession yet, potentially affecting gender diversity within the news media.

Altogether, it seems clear that rather than being *just* virtual, the impact of online abuse, which is increasingly becoming a part of the job for many journalists, is felt very much in the real world with wide-ranging consequences.

HOW were the journalists supported?

Few had received support from news organisations or journalist associations

The respondents were asked to indicate if they had received support in any form, such as counselling, legal, or solidarity from the given list of actors, and a majority (92%) of the respondents to this question reported to have been supported by their family, friends, and colleagues (Graph 15). By contrast, only a quarter (25%) of the respondents had felt supported in some form by the news/media organisations they were employed by or contributed to as freelancers.



This figure was even more dismal—just eight percent—when it came to the respondents receiving any backing from the journalist or press associations. This indicates that the journalists' support system was largely composed of personal rather than professional actors.

“Handled it myself”

This question also received seven comments, three of which emphasised that the journalists either “didn’t discuss” the incidents or had “never asked for any support” for dealing with online abuse from any of the above actors. A broadcast media journalist, who indicated being concerned about her ‘emotional well-being’ and ‘online safety’ as a result of the harassment, said:

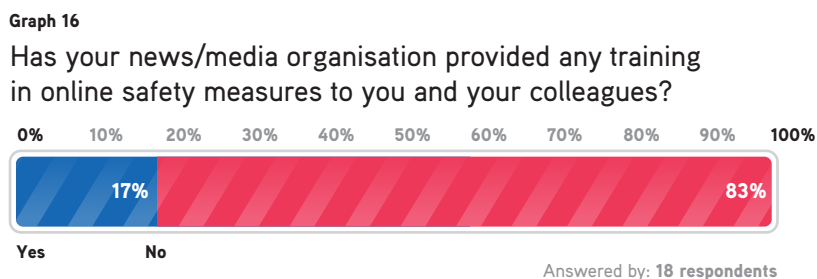
I’m so far not too perturbed enough to seek counselling/support. I’ve dealt with it/handled it myself.

A print and online media journalist said she had received support from “only some close friends”, while a freelance journalist mentioned that “none of the above” had provided support to her in any way.

In a promising revelation, a news anchor working in the broadcast media, who indicated having received the support of her employer, said that “my organisation helps quite a bit by reporting the abusers”.

Few had received online safety training

The journalists were asked if their news/media organisation had provided any training in online safety measures to them and their colleagues, and only a small section (17%) of the respondents to this question reported in the affirmative (Graph 16). This reflects how the media organisations of a vast majority (83%) of the respondents had not equipped their journalists with adequate training and resources required to deal with online abuse as well as to bolster their overall online safety.



None of the freelance journalists who answered this question reported having received any training from the news organisations they contributed to. This question also received a comment wherein a broadcast media journalist-cum-editor mentioned that there was “a certain direction given” by her news organisation to journalists for dealing with online harassment.

36

HOW did the journalists deal with online abuse?

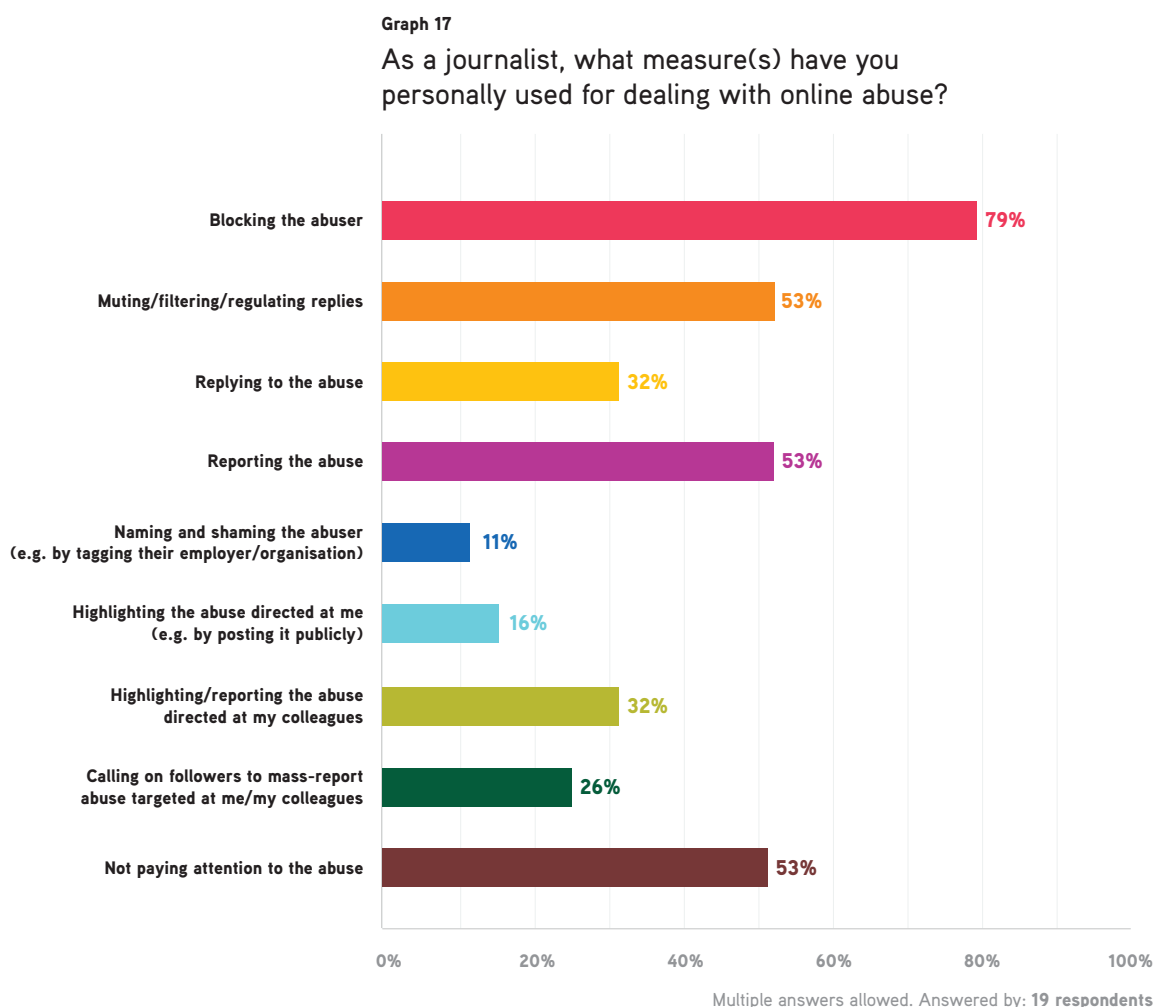
“Blocking is my best method”

The journalists were asked about the measures they had personally used for dealing with online abuse, and ‘blocking the abuser’ (79%) emerged as the most used option of the respondents to this question (Graph 17). Just over half (53%) of the respondents indicated having each used the options for ‘muting/filtering/regulating replies’ on social media platforms and ‘reporting the abuse’, while yet another 53% said they preferred ‘not paying attention to the abuse’.

Around a third (32%) of the respondents each had personally ‘replied to the abuse’ directed at them or ‘highlighted or reported the abuse’ directed at their colleagues.

Nearly a quarter (26%) of the journalists had ‘called on their followers’ on social media platforms to mass-report abuse targeted at them or their colleagues. Furthermore, around 16% of the respondents had ‘highlighted the abuse’ directed at them such as by posting it publicly, while 11% of the respondents had publicly ‘named and shamed’ their abusers such as by tagging the employers or organisations with which their abusers were affiliated.

This question also received a comment wherein a freelance journalist—for whom online abuse had become a routine part of the job ‘to a significant extent’—wrote, “As you can see, I have tried all methods. Blocking is now my best method.”



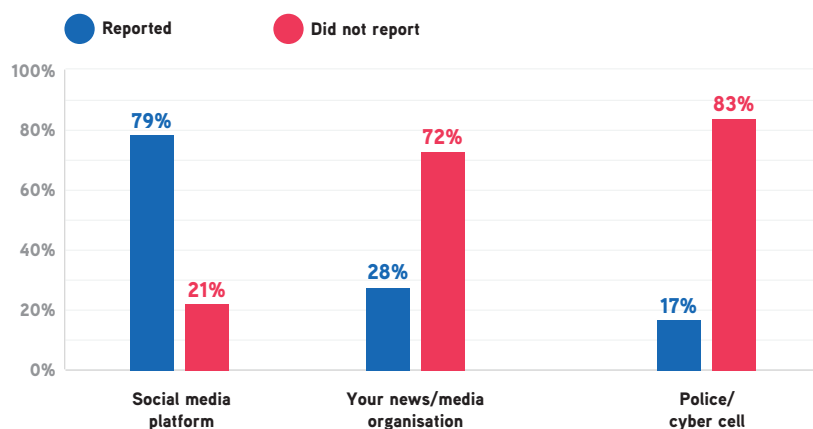
Reporting the abuse

Most had reported the abuse to social media platforms

The respondents were asked if they had reported the online abuse to the social media platforms, their news organisations, or to the police and whether they were satisfied with the action taken by the respective authorities. Overall, more than three-quarters (79%) of the respondents to this question said they had reported the abuse to the social media platforms on which the incidents occurred (Graph 18). By contrast, just over a quarter (28%) of the journalists had reported the abuse to their news/media organisations, while only about 17% had reported the online abuse incidents to the police or cybercrime investigation cells.

Graph 18

Please indicate if you reported the online abuse to the following and if you were satisfied with their response to your complaint.



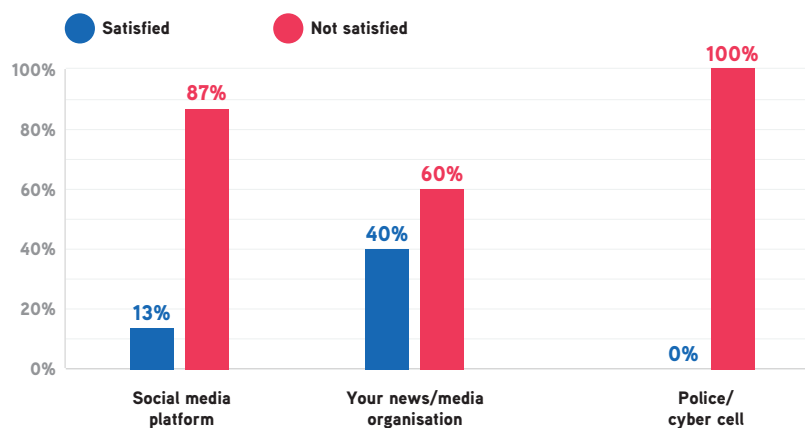
Answered by: 19 respondents

Most were not satisfied with the response

Regardless of the authorities to whom the online abuse incidents were reported, the journalists appeared to be largely dissatisfied with the response to their complaints. Among those who had flagged the abuse to the social media platforms for action, a majority (87%) of the respondents was not satisfied with the response of the respective platforms (Graph 19).

Graph 19

Whether satisfied with response*



* Expressed as percentage of those who reported the abuse to the respective authorities

Similarly, of those who had reported the abuse to their news/media organisations, as many as 60% of the respondents did not find the response satisfactory. None of the respondents who had complained to the police was satisfied with the response of the law enforcement agency to their complaints. This suggests a substantial gap in terms of the extent of action required by various authorities to adequately support the journalists in the fight against online abuse.

WHAT strategies have the journalists found effective?

The respondents were invited to share the strategies they had seen or personally found effective in countering online abuse against journalists. This question received a total of 16 comments which had the respondents talking about customising their social media account settings and the importance of ‘speaking up’ and exposing the abuse proliferating on social media platforms, among other points.

Customising social media settings

A freelance journalist, who had experienced gendered insults and sexual comments in the course of her work, said she had customised her account settings on Twitter and disabled private or direct messages (DMs) to fend off potential abuse including that emanating from freshly minted ‘troll accounts’ that are often set up specifically for the purpose of abusing.

I’ve just learnt to deal with it. I’ve edited my filters on Twitter so I don’t get notifications from ANYONE I don’t know unless they’re following me + are an established/older than a week account. No DMs. No email address in my bio.

Referring to a feature introduced by Twitter in the year 2020 through which users can choose to limit who replies to their tweets, a print media journalist said the option had proved helpful to some extent in trying to ward off abusive replies. Having experienced all four categories of gendered abuse on Twitter, she further added that overlooking abuse might not be an effective solution in the long run because of the impact it has on one’s emotional well-being:

I have found Twitter’s option of restricting replies to my tweets effective in handling abuse to an extent. It prevents abusers from leeching on to my timeline & feeding off of it. Ignoring abuse is also a means to cope but not a long-term solution since it takes a toll on your emotional & mental health.

“Report and block”

A print media journalist suggested blocking the abusers straightway, rather than engaging with or replying to them in any way. “It’s better to block them, than to reply back,” she said. A freelance journalist, who had often experienced all four categories of online abuse and had tried a range of different measures over the years, said:

I must honestly say I do not have an answer. I went through various phases to what I reached now which is to report and block. Whether the abuse is aimed at me or others.

“No good done in keeping silent”

As well as the measures or strategies used, the journalists stressed the importance of highlighting the instances of online abuse to raise awareness about the issue. A journalist working in the print and online media, who had experienced all four categories of abuse and had used ‘replying to the abuse’ as a way of countering it, said:

Never keep quiet. Always speak up against it. Politely, but firmly.

A broadcast media journalist, who had used a range of measures including ‘highlighting the abuse’ and ‘calling on followers to mass-report abuse’ targeted at her and her colleagues, said it was important to not keep silent:

Naming and shaming. Mass reporting. There is no good done in keeping silent. What doesn't bother your mental peace could break someone else down, so the idea is to stop it at whichever stage you can and in whatever manner.

“Ignore and carry on”

An online media journalist suggested that the phenomenon could in fact be an indicator of a journalist ruffling some feathers with their work or views, and so it might not be worth paying attention to it:

One way to counter it is to ignore and carry on.. the fact the people react to what you write or say shows that you have made an impact.

“Systematic intervention by organisation”

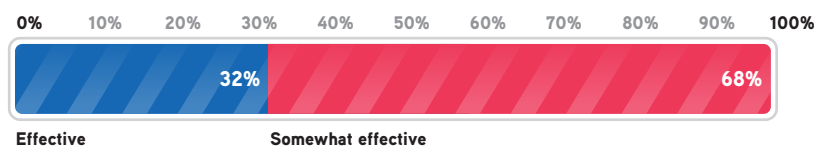
A broadcast media journalist-cum-editor, who had received support from her employer, emphasised that “systematic intervention by the organisation you work for works” in dealing with online abuse. Noting that this “research topic is good”, a producer working in the broadcast media who had not experienced online abuse personally, called on all media organisations to take some “hard steps” on the matter so that women journalists did not have to “suffer like this” because of the incessant harassment.

United on solidarity networks

The respondents were asked if they believed the formation of solidarity networks, such as journalists and other allies coming together to mass-report abusers, could be an effective way of countering online abuse against journalists, and all the respondents who answered this question agreed to it at to some degree (Graph 20). Around a third (32%) of the respondents believed such networks could be ‘effective’, while the remaining (68%) respondents felt that the networks could be ‘somewhat effective’ in taking collective action against online abuse. In an industry that is marked by fierce competition for ‘breaking news’ and ‘exclusives’, journalists appear to be unanimous, at least to some extent, about the need for rallying around and standing up for each other to counter online attacks on their industry colleagues.

Graph 20

Do you think formation of solidarity networks
(e.g. journalists & allies mass-reporting abusers) could be
an effective way of countering online abuse targeted at journalists?



Answered by: 19 respondents

Media: Looking within

While the journalists’ responses offered an exhaustive insight into their experiences of being targeted with online abuse, their comments were also interspersed with some sobering observations on the apparent role played by some members of the press and the news media at large in abetting online abuse against journalists.

“Journalists give impetus to online abuse”

A freelance reporter, who had experienced abuse on Twitter, drew attention to how some journalists were equally to be blamed for attacking and fuelling abuse against their industry colleagues, as had been the case with her:

I would like to point out that journalists who support the right-wing give impetus to such online abuse. In my case stories were written by journalists I know, who said that I was being antinational by writing stories that, according to these journalists, favoured the Muslims. Such stories further fuel the online abuse.

At a time when the Indian news media appears to stand divided along the pro/anti-government line, an online media journalist who had experienced all four categories of gendered abuse on social media platforms, noted that many within the profession itself were engaged in attacking each other because of the differences in their political opinions:

Journalists have become each other's enemies. Targeting and hounding each other for different political ideologies.

“Becoming the news”

While online abuse constitutes an attack on journalists and journalism, it may also be deflecting—in some instances—the focus away from the journalists’ work or views to the harassment they experience, thus turning the newsmen into ‘news’.

Pointing to how online abuse was being treated “as a badge” by some in the profession, a print and online media journalist, who had experienced gendered insults and sexual comments on Facebook and Twitter, said some women journalists were “becoming the news” themselves, something she had been very actively trying to avoid:

The profession has also become one where people wear online abuse as a badge and women journalists are vying for space on panels to discuss their experiences. The more abuse you share the more victimhood is created and the more awards you get. I have rigorously tried to stay away from becoming the news myself which restricts my field mobility.

Media to blame?

A broadcast media journalist, who had often experienced gendered abuse on Twitter, noted that besides systemic misogyny and the polarised climate of the country that had amplified intolerance for divergent viewpoints, the Indian news media itself had contributed to journalists turning into fair game for online abuse:

And as for news media, sensationalism and the agenda-driven nature of news in recent years, has made journalists convenient punching bags in general.

No wonder, as we saw earlier, more than half of the respondents believed that distrust in the news media had aggravated the abuse targeted at them on social media platforms, while just under a quarter thought that their association with particular news/media organisations had exposed them to further abuse online.

Before we move on to examine the journalists’ suggestions for various stakeholders, let us quickly glance through a summary of the key findings of the survey.

Summary of the key findings*

- Nearly two-thirds (65%) of the respondents had experienced online abuse on social media platforms in the course of their work as journalists.
- Of those who faced online abuse, a majority (83%) of the respondents had experienced gender-based abuse in the form of gendered insults and name-calling, while over half of them had experienced online abuse that comprised sexual comments (56%) and sexually explicit content (50%).
- A third (33%) of the respondents had been targeted with threats of sexual or physical violence on social media platforms in response to their work as journalists.
- Most of the respondents had experienced online abuse on Facebook and Twitter (72% each) among other social media platforms.
- A majority (82%) of the respondents identified the ‘political climate of the country’ as the topmost factor that contributed to the online abuse they had experienced as journalists.
- Other factors that the journalists believed led to online abuse against them included the ‘topics of their stories’ (65%), their ‘views as journalists’ (59%), their ‘gender’ and ‘distrust in the media’ (53% each), and their ‘religion’ and the ‘news/media organisation they worked for’ (24% each).
- Most of the respondents noted they had been attacked by supporters of political parties if their work or views as journalists were critical of the abusers’ political beliefs. Many specifically attributed their online abuse experiences to the “right-wing trolls”.
- Misogyny prevailing in the country’s “largely patriarchal society” was also held responsible for online abuse against women journalists.
- The intersectional nature of online abuse was apparent with some journalists indicating they had been attacked for various aspects of their identity such as gender, religion, or caste.
- Some responses also pointed to the prevalence of Islamophobic abuse.
- A section of the respondents felt that social media platforms had become a “comfortable tool” for the amplification of online abuse against journalists.
- A majority (88%) of the respondents indicated they were concerned about their ‘emotional well-being’ as a result of the online abuse they experience as journalists, while over two-thirds (71%) of the respondents said the online abuse incidents were a cause for concern for their ‘online safety’.
- A considerable section (41%) of the respondents indicated being concerned about their ‘physical safety’ because of the abuse they experience online.
- A section of the journalists mentioned they had censored their activity on social media platforms to stay away from online abuse.
- While some said they had become “thick-skinned” over the years, others talked about

learning to brush off online abuse as it was of “a lesser degree” than the “real and physical abuse” faced by women in India.

- The online abuse was “disheartening and discouraging” not just for the women in the news media industry but also for those considering a future in the field, a respondent noted.
- More than half (56%) of the respondents indicated that experiencing online abuse had become a routine part of their job as journalists.
- A majority (92%) of the respondents reported having received support in some form from their ‘family, friends and colleagues’ when dealing with online abuse. By contrast, only a quarter (25%) of the respondents had felt supported by the ‘news/media organisations’ they were associated with, while just eight percent reported having received support from ‘journalist or press associations’.
- A section of the journalists also pointed out that they either “didn’t discuss” or had “never asked for any support” for dealing with online abuse and had “handled it myself” instead.
- Most (83%) of the respondents said their news/media organisations had not provided any training in online safety measures to them and their colleagues.
- ‘Blocking the abuser’ (79%) emerged as the respondents’ most widely used measure for dealing with online abuse, followed by ‘muting/filtering/regulating replies’, ‘reporting the abuse’, and ‘not paying attention to the abuse’ (53% each).
- Around a third (32%) of the respondents had personally ‘replied to the abuse’ directed at them, while a smaller section of the journalists had ‘called on their followers’ to mass-report abuse targeted at them or their colleagues or had ‘named and shamed’ their abusers, among other measures.
- Over three-quarters (79%) of the respondents had reported the abuse to the social media platforms concerned, of which only 13% were satisfied with the response to their complaints.
- Only 28% of the respondents had reported the online abuse incidents to their news/media organisations, of which more than half (60%) were not satisfied with the response.
- Only 17% of the respondents had reported the online abuse incidents to the police or cyber cells, and none of them was satisfied with the response of the law enforcement agencies to their complaints.
- Journalists have found reporting and blocking the abusers and customising their social media account settings as effective strategies for warding off online abuse. They also highlighted the importance of not “keeping silent”.
- All the respondents agreed, to some extent, that the formation of solidarity networks of journalists and other allies could be an effective way of countering online abuse against journalists.
- A few respondents observed that some journalists were giving “impetus to online abuse” against their industry colleagues and that some in the profession were wearing online abuse as “a badge” and “becoming the news” themselves.

**All the findings are expressed as percentages of the number of participants who responded to the respective questions.*

WHAT are the journalists' suggestions for stakeholders?

As one of the most important goals of this Research Project was to learn from the journalists' shared experiences about what could be done on this issue moving forward, the respondents were requested to share the practical steps that they would like for various stakeholders to take for combatting online abuse against journalists.

Attracting 98 comments, this question evoked a palpable outpouring from the respondents who highlighted the ways in which multiple stakeholders including news organisations, journalist associations, social media platforms, police, government, political parties, and journalism schools, among others, could best address the phenomenon.

All participants, whether or not they had experienced online abuse personally, were invited to share their suggestions as part of this question.

News/media organisations

Even though they are the representatives of their news organisations, journalists often fight a lonely battle against online abuse with their employers "washing their hands of" the matter or "blaming" the journalists for the abuse instead.

The journalists who participated in this study set out a concrete role for the media organisations in creating a comprehensive ecosystem of support for their journalists experiencing online abuse.

In their suggestions, the respondents overwhelmingly spelled the need for the media organisations to take online abuse against their journalists seriously and "stand by their employees", to take due action on the journalists' complaints and extend all possible support to them, and to hold trainings on dealing with online abuse.

The respondents also suggested that the news organisations took legal action on behalf of a journalist if the latter decided to report a case to the law enforcement agencies, and put in place guidelines that enforced an anti-abuse approach.

- ☒ Prepare reporters to handle online abuse instead of washing their hands of it.
- ☒ Take the abuse more seriously, take it up with platforms.
- ☒ Stand by their employees.
- ☒ Take legal action and support the journalist.
- ☒ Stand by your staff and help them systematically handle abusers. My employer does.
- ☒ Listen to the victim, instead of blaming them. And take immediate and appropriate in-house actions.
- ☒ They should actively take the abusers head on and report them to the authorities/cyber cell.
- ☒ React and act on complaints.

- ✓ Guidelines, a message of solidarity, *something*.
- ✓ To train employees about social media use & safety features.
- ✓ Workshops on dealing with online abuse.
- ✓ Should be open to “listening” to their employees and should be more accepting and tolerant of young reporters, both girls, boys or other sexes in general.

Journalist associations

While the respondents wanted media organisations to take steps for supporting their employees, they appeared to seek a similar action—albeit with a much wider ambit—from journalist associations that represent all journalists including freelancers who do not have direct support of employing media organisations.

Apart from seeking the creation of solidarity networks, the respondents also wanted press associations to assist the journalists with resources for fighting cases of online abuse, to form solidarity networks for naming and shaming the journalists’ abusers, and to report habitual online harassers of journalists to the relevant authorities.

They also wanted press bodies to work on augmenting their online presence so that it became easier for journalists from across the country to approach them for help, among other steps.

- ✓ They should help the journalists facing online abuse with resources and guidance. They should also issue statements against the abusers and the organisations the abusers belong to.
- ✓ Publicly condemn these accounts and stand by the journalist.
- ✓ Make a registry of such abusers & report them to authorities on a regular basis. It’s difficult for individual reporters to do the same but associations can and more effectively.
- ✓ Flag such cases and investigate.
- ✓ Stand with women journalists and end the bias at their very level.
- ✓ React and act on complaints.
- ✓ To stand with and unite in such situation.
- ✓ Creating solidarity networks so abusers can be publicly named and shamed.
- ✓ To land solidarity.
- ✓ Stand by their fellow colleagues.
- ✓ Take the abuse more seriously, take it up with platforms.

- ✓ Need to be stronger in India with grassroots reach. Strengthen online presence for easy outreach.
- ✓ Be active in keeping tabs on promising young journalists and assign them mentors -- not from the same organisation...just somebody to take guidance from in tough times without fearing professional repercussions.

Social media platforms

As we saw earlier, the respondents were largely dissatisfied with the response of the social media platforms to their complaints against online abuse. No wonder the respondents demanded a much stricter and wider action from these platforms than “just reporting” the abuse to prevent the proliferation of abuse against journalists.

From taking complaints of abuse seriously and exhibiting zero tolerance towards habitual offenders, to enhancing the safety features of the platforms and not confusing abuse with the freedom of expression (FoE), the journalists wanted social media platforms to act stringently to fulfil their “responsibility” of keeping these online spaces safe.

Also crucial was a suggestion for the social media platforms to work on their language detection mechanisms for identifying abusive messages sent out in the non-English/regional languages of India, which go largely undetected by the automated systems of these platforms.

- ✓ Stricter actions be taken than just ‘reporting’ the abuse. A language detection for all abuses, regional, national and international should be introduced as well to identify such things at a larger scale based on which the company should itself be able to take action despite someone else reporting it and bringing it to their notice.
- ✓ Take note of repeat abusers and take action to suspend their IDs. Making SM [Social Media] safe for all is the responsibility of platforms. Abusive behaviour should have no space.
- ✓ Silence all pods. Have individual fact check teams that collaborate with media houses meeting international standards.
- ✓ Issue warning and then block them.
- ✓ Take reports seriously, do consider giving freelance journos “blue rocks”.
- ✓ Strict safety features and content control.
- ✓ Take reports seriously and stop giving toxic people always another chance.
- ✓ Block the abusers. Respond to the complaints. Take real action for a change.
- ✓ Suspend the accounts of abusers.
- ✓ To be sensitised about how it affects people.

- ✓ To not have double standards, have the same rules worldwide. And not confuse abuse with FoE.
- ✓ Taking complaints of abuse seriously without looking for nuance in the abuse.
- ✓ They should block the abusers.

Police/cyber cells

The respondents unanimously called for speedier action from law enforcement agencies including the police in investigating the cases of online abuse against journalists. Apart from demanding “immediate action”, the respondents also said the police should investigate the cases of online abuse without any “bias or pressure” and act against “paid troll armies” that carry out targeted harassment of journalists.

They also sought better sensitisation of the police authorities and suggested that they took the cases of abuse against journalists seriously when tagged on social media platforms.

- ✓ Act swiftly on complaints filed with them. It really isn’t difficult to track down online abusers. Crackdown on paid troll armies who engage in abuse & campaigns to malign a story or reporter.
- ✓ To take abuse of journalists seriously instead of playing political games.
- ✓ Get involved and help the victim. At the moment they’re absolutely not helpful.
- ✓ To act strictly when complaints are made, without any discrimination.
- ✓ They should do their jobs without bias or pressure.
- ✓ Take cognizance of all abuse and act swiftly by identifying people/parties/pods.
- ✓ Take immediate action against any such complaint. Should also take suo motu cognizance, if needed.
- ✓ Identify and penalise.
- ✓ Instead of saying, madam block that person, I think they should take strong action towards them.
- ✓ Content monitoring and strict cyber security laws.
- ✓ Be responsible. We count on you.
- ✓ When tagged by journalists in their posts, police should take it seriously.
- ✓ Take strict action against those who use social platform for abuse.
- ✓ Immediate action.

Government

The respondents clearly underlined the need for the government to bring in stricter laws for tackling the menace of online abuse and ensuring their proper implementation. A section of the respondents also suggested that India's *Bharatiya Janata Party* (BJP) government "should rein in their troll army", referring to the party's social media or "IT cell", many of whose supporters have been accused of attacking the journalists.

One of the journalists even went so far as to saying that expecting the government to act against online abuse of journalists was "a joke honestly", as in her experience many of the abusers had been "cultivated" by the ruling party's social media cell.

- ✓ Have a policy that filters abuse and anonymous accounts. Legislate policies that treat online abuse seriously & effectively. Understand the trauma caused due to cyber bullying.
- ✓ Allow executive to work and back them with loophole-proof, well researched laws formulated in consultation with subject experts irrespective of party affiliation.
- ✓ Enquiry and actions and strict rules.
- ✓ Have stricter laws for social media abuse, irrespective of gender.
- ✓ Support unbiased investigation.
- ✓ The BJP government in India should reign in their troll army rather than paying them money to go after critical voices online.
- ✓ That's a joke honestly. Most of the abusers are cultivated by the ruling party's IT cell in India.
- ✓ To recognise online abuse as a crime.
- ✓ To encourage a culture of tolerance.
- ✓ Least government inference the better.

Political parties

With the nature of online abuse against journalists being highly political in India, the respondents wanted the political parties to be held accountable for engaging in the harassment of journalists online.

For this, the respondents suggested that the political parties trained their leaders not to engage in online abuse and that they asked their members/supporters to refrain from abusing journalists if the latter were critical of the party's views.

A section of the journalists particularly called for the ruling BJP to be "made accountable", even as one of the journalists admitted she had "no hope" left on this front when it came to action by political parties.

- ✓ Make it a policy to discourage abuse by their own leaders. Train leaders to respond & interact without resorting to abuse online. Voters learn from leaders & they have a responsibility to show decency.

- ☒ To not themselves target (even if in non-abusive language) those that disagree with a party's stated views and stands.
- ☒ The BJP should be made accountable. Prime Minister [Narendra] Modi himself follows many of the trolls on social media.
- ☒ Bear responsibility for hate mongering, spreading untruths and destroying social fabric.
- ☒ They should train their online teams to be proactive in responding with facts than using abuses.
- ☒ Not to spread hate speech against journalist or to provoke their supporters to abuse journalist.
- ☒ Should make people learn about the consequences of online abuse on a victim, instead of keeping shut. Political parties need to appreciate difference of opinion and should also educate it.
- ☒ Not to target journalists on social media.
- ☒ To raise awareness and make laws about it.
- ☒ I see no hope here.
- ☒ Demand enquiry and justice.
- ☒ Campaign with real world issues in the centre like sexism.

Journalism/media schools

The respondents pronounced the need for journalism schools to train their students in dealing with online abuse and to make such trainings an integral part of their curriculum. Apart from preparing the future journalists to tackle online abuse which has become a routine part of the profession for many, the respondents also wanted media schools to extend “emotional support” to their former students working as journalists who are targeted with online abuse.

- ☒ Train students on handling online abuse & means of fighting them. Prepare students to address abuse with legal & other remedies.
- ☒ A practical chapter on how to deal with online abuse. No need to react or retaliate till absolutely necessary.
- ☒ Safe use of social media.
- ☒ Introduce online interactions as a subject.
- ☒ To incorporate it in their syllabus.
- ☒ There are courses for this, and I'm currently taking one, but I don't believe said courses are as widespread (and need to be)

- ✓ Teach cyber laws and law in general to all journalists. Take workshops on dealing with cyber bullies.
- ✓ They should provide emotional support to their alumni who join the profession and face such abuse.
- ✓ Educate about gender equality.
- ✓ To educate about online cultures.
- ✓ Prepare students for obstacles ahead.
- ✓ To teach their students to stand for their rights.
- ✓ Stop focusing on preparing students for tests...prepare them for their professional world...stop teaching them "History of.." a particular state but teach them how to make resumes and approach news organisations for jobs.

"This is a social problem"

Besides the above-mentioned stakeholders, the respondents also added schools, colleges, universities, and religious institutions as some of the other actors that could contribute in the larger fight against online abuse. Seeing it as a "social problem", one of the respondents indicated that the phenomenon could be best countered when dealt with collectively, especially with the participation of the youngsters.

Another journalist called for the need for people to be more accommodating of divergent viewpoints instead of hurling abuses at the journalists on their news reports or opinions.

- ✓ There is a social problem here. Which means all of us together. Schools, colleges. Explain to the young.
- ✓ People should be able to differentiate between a report and an op-ed. More so, they should learn about accepting everyone's view instead of seeking abuse as the only defense or the easy way out for such things.
- ✓ Schools and universities, religious institutions.

A note on the study

The respondents to this survey predominantly worked in the urban areas of north India and had varied degrees of visibility on social media platforms. The findings of this study, including the statistics presented, refer only to the responses of the journalists who participated in this survey and may not be representative of all women journalists' experiences. Further, because of the small sample, use of self-reporting survey as a tool, and inherent limitations of the sampling technique, the findings of the survey may not be strictly generalisable. The study did, however, gain a wealth of insightful comments from the respondents and may indicate some important trends surrounding the phenomenon of online abuse, both nationally and internationally. Future studies could benefit from using a wider sample that explores in further details the intersectional nature of online abuse against journalists and the measures being taken, particularly by the news media organisations, to support the journalists.

CONCLUSION

As the title suggests, this study explored the 5Ws and 1H—the *Who, What, Why, Where, When,* and *How*—of the online abuse experiences of women journalists with India as a case study. Based on their responses to an online survey, it found high levels of gendered abuse against women journalists on social media platforms and placed the phenomenon against the socio-political context of the country.

Though not generalisable per se, the findings of this study do point to some disturbing trends in terms of attacks on women journalists, and by extension, on the press as a whole in India, with wider applicability to worldwide journalism.

While the study focussed on the gendered nature of online abuse, many factors contributing to the respondents' harassment including the highly polarised political climate of the country may be equally applicable to other journalists irrespective of their gender.

Some findings, such as the high emotional impacts of online abuse, a growing concern among the journalists for their offline safety because of the online abuse, and dissatisfactory response from news organisations, are also in line with recent international studies including those by the UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (2020) and the TrollBusters and the International Women's Media Foundation (2018).

Most importantly, the findings of this study bring to light a substantial lack of institutional support available to the journalists, especially from their news organisations, at a time when online abuse appears to have become a routine part of the job for many in the profession.

While most of the respondents were taking active steps to deal with online abuse at their level, it is evident from their responses that rather than being a matter of an individual's safety, this pernicious phenomenon needs to be countered collectively with a wide range of measures being adopted by multiple stakeholders.

As the journalists' suggestions indicate, news and media organisations in particular have a crucial role to play firstly in acknowledging the problem as a serious work-related hazard and then in providing all the technical, psychological, and legal support possible to their employees as well as to the contributing freelancers in dealing with online abuse.

All political parties, especially the country's ruling party, need to publicly denounce the abuse unleashed by their leaders and supporters on the journalists critical of the parties' ideologies or the government's policies.

The social media platforms and law enforcement agencies need to ensure speedier and substantial response to the journalists' complaints. The journalists themselves need to stand in solidarity with their colleagues when attacked online. Finally, as one of the respondents noted, online abuse against women journalists is symptomatic of a broader "social problem" and can only truly be addressed when all of us take steps to highlight and counter it.

The valuable suggestions shared by the participating journalists—the pivotal part of this project—constitute a loud and urgent call to action to all the relevant stakeholders, in India as well as around the world. The measures and strategies found effective by journalists in their own experiences may also prove useful for those facing online abuse.

With its 24/7 pervasiveness, online abuse against women journalists holds the potential to cause long-term harm and needs to be called out both as an attack on the freedom of the press and as a form of gendered discrimination and violence.

By highlighting it as a problem requiring collective action from multiple actors, this project hopes to not only raise awareness about the phenomenon, but also to contribute to the larger efforts towards combatting online harassment of women journalists, ensuring safer and more inclusive online spaces, and advocating for press freedom and gender equality.

THE WAY AHEAD:

RECOMMENDATIONS AND RESOURCES FROM AROUND THE WORLD

As we have seen from the case study of India, countering online abuse against journalists is an issue that necessitates concerted action from a wide range of stakeholders.

Many organisations including those working to promote journalism, freedom of expression, and human rights among others, have over the years recognised the dangers presented by the phenomenon to women journalists and are actively working to address the situation.

For instance, the United Nations agency, UNESCO has launched a global study on good practices for tackling online harassment of women journalists, besides also launching capacity building trainings on the safety of women journalists in four countries including India (UNESCO, n.d.). It is also working to raise global awareness on the issue of online harassment of women journalists through its conference and publication titled “#JournalistsToo” (UNESCO, 2019).

The International Federation of Journalists (n.d.-a), the world’s largest organisation of journalists, together with the South Asia Media Solidarity Network, an alliance of journalist unions and related organisations working in South Asia, ran a campaign titled “#ByteBack” to raise awareness on the online abuse of women journalists in the Asia-Pacific region including India in 2017. Launched as a part of this campaign, the *Byte Back: A Journalist’s Guide to Combat Cyber Harassment in South Asia* (Seshu & Murthy, 2017) highlighted how women journalists were taking on their online abusers.

The Federation launched another campaign titled “#YouAreNotAlone” in 2019 to exhort media organisations and journalist associations around the world to support their female employees and members targeted with online abuse (International Federation of Journalists, n.d.-b).

In India, the UNESCO and research-based think tank, CMS India jointly conducted a series of webinars on the safety of women journalists in 2020 wherein experts discussed institutional and safety mechanisms for dealing with online harassment of journalists (CMS India, 2020). National bodies such as the Network of Women in Media, India (2020), a nationwide association of women working in the media professions, have been highlighting the instances of online abuse against women journalists in the country as they continue to press for action from relevant authorities in this regard.

Campaigns by media outlets such as “#Let’sTalkAboutTrolls” by *Hindustan Times* newspaper (2017), “Online Safety Summit for Women” by women’s channel *SheThePeople.TV* (2020), and “#DigitalHifazat” [English translation: Digital Safety] by intersectional feminist platform, *Feminism in India* (n.d.) have spotlighted the issue of online abuse including that against women journalists.

In 2020, a broader campaign titled “#IndiaAgainstAbuse” launched on petition website, *Change.org* demanded a “safe space” for women on social media platforms. It called upon Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram to “create an environment where threatening and abusing women is not celebrated and championed” (Breakthrough India et al., 2020). Amnesty International India (2020) through its study *Troll Patrol India* called upon Twitter to scale up its efforts towards addressing the toxicity faced by women on its platform.

Though not commensurate with the pace and scale of the abuse, social media companies have been taking steps to improve safety on their platforms. For example, in the wake of “disturbing instances”

of abuse against women on Instagram in India in 2020, the platform announced among other measures that it will “disable profiles and accounts that make severe rape threats when we are made aware of them” (Das, 2020), while in the same year, India became the first country where Instagram’s parent company, Facebook launched a profile locking feature that activates multiple privacy settings to reduce exposure to abuse (Das, 2020). Among other measures, Twitter (n.d.) as part of its Trust and Safety Council has collaborated with safety partners, including some in India, whereby it seeks experts’ feedback to improve online safety and to prevent harassment on its platform.

In February 2021, the Ministry of Electronics and Information Technology of the Government of India announced the new *Information Technology (Intermediary Guidelines and Digital Media Ethics Code) Rules 2021* that make it mandatory for social media platforms to appoint dedicated grievance officers who are residents in India and redress users’ grievances of abuse within 15 days of their receipt (Press Information Bureau, 2021). To ensure the online safety of users, especially women users, the social media platforms would also be required to remove any sexually explicit content or morphed images directed against individuals within 24 hours of the receipt of complaints, the new rules declared. It is to be noted that the wider rules, which also seek increased governmental regulation of digital news media, came under widespread attack including from the digital news publishers in India for infringing upon freedom of expression (see “New IT Rules”, 2021).

While only time will tell the extent to which these new regulations take effect in the country where the implementation of existing laws often leaves a lot to be desired, one can hope that it would be a step towards addressing online abuse on social media platforms against women in general and women journalists in particular.

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Some recommendations

In the light of the suggestions offered by the Indian journalists, let us now take a quick look at some of the recommendations by international entities that have called upon key stakeholders to contribute to the collective fight against online abuse of women journalists.

- A part of its “Safety of Female Journalists Online” or “#SOFJO” campaign, the Office of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Representative on Freedom of the Media in its comprehensive *#SOFJO Resource Guide* lays down a number of recommendations for key actors for ensuring safety of women journalists online, some of which include the executive and legislative branches of the government, judiciary, law enforcement agencies, media, intergovernmental and civil society organisations, internet intermediaries as well as the journalists. Among its recommendations, the guide suggests that the media organisations together with their women journalists carry out a regular assessment of risks and threats facing them (Chocarro et al., 2020, p. 216) and that the journalists’ organisations work on increasing “collective action and advocacy” to support the affected journalists (p. 181).
- In her report on *Combating violence against women journalists* submitted to the United Nations Human Rights Council, Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Dubravka Šimonović recommends that the Member States of the United Nations set up an “effective response to online gender-based violence against women journalists” and establish cooperation with the internet intermediaries, such as the social media platforms, for addressing the issue efficiently (United Nations, 2020, p. 19).

- The International Federation of Journalists (2019) in its *Guidelines for media and unions to combat online harassment of women journalists* makes a series of recommendations for media organisations and journalist unions to support their employees and members, respectively, in dealing with online abuse. For instance, it recommends that the media houses respond to the online abuse instances of their journalists publicly and in an official capacity and that the unions conduct trainings for all their members to help them better counter online abuse (pp. 1–2). The guideline was launched as a part of the Federation’s 2019 campaign against online harassment of women journalists titled “#YouAreNotAlone”.
- The UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists through their report titled *Online violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidences and Impacts*, call for “collaborative responses” from multiple actors and emphasise that women journalists should not be expected to be responsible for combatting the online abuse they experience (Posetti, Aboulez et al., 2020, p. 15). Among other measures, they recommend news organisations to set up “gender-sensitive procedures” for reporting and monitoring online abuse against their employees (p. 15).
- In its briefing paper titled *Online harassment and abuse against women journalists and major social media platforms*, British human rights organisation, Article 19 recommends that social media companies increase transparency on the workings of their complaints process as well as on their algorithms for detecting online abuse (Article 19, 2020, p. 4). It also recommends the social media platforms to improve their internal redress mechanism and consider collaborating with women journalists to work on practical solutions for combatting gendered abuse (p. 4).
- The Reporters Without Borders (2018), an international organisation that defends journalists, in its publication titled *Online Harassment of Journalists: Attack of the Trolls* offers 25 recommendations for various stakeholders including government, online platforms, and media organisations for addressing the issue of online abuse against journalists (pp. 30–32). It recommends, among other steps, that the journalists withdraw their publicly available personal information from the online platforms, run Google alerts for their names, and use two-factor authentication for online accounts to add an extra layer of security to prevent online abuse (pp. 33–34).

Some useful resources for journalists

Here is a compilation of some resources from around the world that may be useful for journalists targeted with online abuse and their news organisations:

- A step-by-step infographic by the TrollBusters (2017), a service dedicated to supporting women journalists and writers experiencing online abuse, guides the journalists on deciding the strategies for responding to incidents of online harassment depending on the type, intensity, and scale of the abuse. This flowchart can be accessed in English as well as in Hindi at <https://yoursosteam.wordpress.com/what-to-do-infographic/>. The TrollBusters offers several useful resources on its website including a free “Digital Hygiene Course” (TrollBusters, n.d.) with 16 lessons for journalists to bolster their online safety to prevent harassment (<https://yoursosteam.wordpress.com/digital-hygiene-course/>).
- The International Federation of Journalists and the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (2017) in their guide titled *Combating Online Harassment of Woman Journalists*, which was launched as a part of their “#ByteBack” campaign, list out various strategies for the journalists to follow when harassed online. Among other measures, they recommend the journalists to carry out a thorough

documentation of the online abuse targeted at them, to “name and shame” the abusers, and to “shout it out” to highlight the incidents of online abuse (pp. 1–2). The guide can be accessed at https://samsn.ifj.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/ByteBack_CombatingOnlineHarassment.pdf.

- The International Press Institute, a global association of media professionals, through its Ontheline Platform for Newsrooms (n.d.-a) programme offers a series of useful resources for journalists and media organisations to help them address online abuse which can be accessed at <https://newsrooms-ontheline.ipi.media/>. Based on best practices collected from 45 newsrooms, some of these resources include a comprehensive *Protocol for newsrooms to support journalists targeted with online harassment* (published by the International Press Institute in 2020), and video tutorials where experts discuss strategies such as basic countermeasures to help journalists depersonalise and manage the emotional impact of online abuse.
- The International Women’s Media Foundation, a global body representing women journalists, and online learning platform, Totem have developed free self-directed online courses titled “Know Your Trolls” (https://learn.totem-project.org/courses/course-v1:IWMF+IWMF_OH_EN+001/about) (2020a) and “Keep it Private” (https://learn.totem-project.org/courses/course-v1:IWMF+IWMF_KP_EN+001/about) (2020b) for the journalists to help them better deal with online abuse and amp up their digital security, respectively. The Foundation and its Coalition on Online Abuse partners (n.d.) also provide free one-on-one digital security consultations to women journalists experiencing online attacks at <https://iwmf.submittable.com/submit/6df9dbf3-e068-4fa1-ba8a-67be4e4a3486/one-on-one-digital-security-consultation>. The coalition of organisations provides collective support to journalists and news media bodies for building their online safety.
- The Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas in collaboration with the International Women’s Media Foundation (2020) offers a self-directed course titled *Online Harassment: Strategies for Journalists’ Defense* which can be accessed at https://journalismcourses.org/course/online-harassment-strategies-for-journalists-defense_self/. Through this free and comprehensive course spread across four modules, journalists can learn a variety of tools and measures for dealing with online abuse as well as for shoring up their overall online security.
- The Committee to Protect Journalists, an international organisation that works to promote press freedom, offers a series of useful tips for journalists on managing their online profiles (<https://cpj.org/2020/05/digital-safety-protecting-against-targeted-online-attacks/>) (2020b) and removing their personal data from the internet (<https://cpj.org/2019/09/digital-safety-remove-personal-data-internet/>) (2020c) to ensure their online safety. Among other tips, it recommends journalists to use separate social media accounts for work and personal use and to carry out regular reviews of their social media accounts to ensure that no personal data had been left exposed.
- The Rory Peck Trust (n.d.), which works to support freelance journalists worldwide, offers a compilation of best practices for dealing with online abuse at <https://rorypecktrust.org/freelance-resources/digital-security/social-media-trolling-and-doxxing/>. Among its suggestions, the Trust recommends journalists against engaging with their abusers online and calls for mobilisation of well-wishers for countering the journalists’ online abuse.
- PEN America (n.d.-b), a part of the PEN International network that works to promote freedom of expression worldwide, offers an *Online Harassment Field Manual* (<https://onlineharassmentfieldmanual.pen.org/>) for writers and journalists. The exhaustive manual comprises separate sets of strategies that can be used by journalists to protect themselves online, by their allies to support the targeted journalists, and by the employers to better support their journalists. It also lays down steps on reporting the online abuse to various social media platforms

including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, and offers “pro tip for journalists” looking to set up networks of online allies for solidarity against online abuse.

- The New York Times Digital Security Education Hub (2020) through its *Social Media Security & Privacy Checklist* for the journalistic community (<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1ud1ILFkIG0BeLX9jlzJMxCpm8-cSeqPjU60nkhUPYA8/edit>) offers a series of recommended settings to help journalists with a safer online presence on major social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.
- Access Now (n.d.), a non-profit organisation working to promote digital rights, provides free technical advice (to those at risk) as well as rapid response emergency assistance (to those already under online attacks) to journalists and media organisations worldwide, among others. The Digital Security Helpline service can be availed of by emailing at help@accessnow.org or by visiting their website at <https://www.accessnow.org/help/>.
- The Coalition For Women In Journalism, a non-profit that offers mentorship to women journalists worldwide, and the Reynolds Journalism Institute (n.d.) have launched *JSafe*, a mobile application which can be used by women journalists and journalists in general to document their online abuse incidents. More details about the app can be accessed at <https://womeninjournalism.org/jsafe>.
- Feminism in India, a digital intersectional feminist media organisation, offers a series of valuable resources including videos and tips on combatting and reporting online violence against women in India. Available at <https://feminisminindia.com/campaigns/digitalhifazat-campaign-combat-cyber-violence-against-women-india/>, these resources are part of the platform’s “#DigitalHifazat” campaign that advocates for online safety of women including women journalists in India.

Additional resources

Apart from reporting at the police stations, cybercrime cases such as those involving online abuse against women in India can also be registered at a dedicated cybercrime portal launched by the Government of India (www.cybercrime.gov.in). Though not specific to journalists, the following general resources may be useful for anyone who wishes to report online abuse in India:

- Nyaaya (n.d.), an India-based open access digital resource of legal information, offers a series of posts (<https://nyaaya.org/topic/online-abuse/>) on how to stop, block, or report incidents of online abuse in India.
- In its blog *A Handy Guide on How to Report Online Harassment of Women* (<https://ifflab.org/a-handy-guide-on-how-to-report-online-harassment-of-women/>), Incognito Forensic Foundation Lab (n.d.), an India-based private forensics lab, provides a summary of the cyber laws in India against online abuse and explains how to file an online abuse complaint and the information required for doing so.
- CYBER BAAP, short for Cyberbullying Awareness, Action and Prevention (n.d.), an India-based anti-bullying organisation, provides counselling on online bullying and harassment in India (<https://cyberbaap.org/cyberbullying/reporting/>).

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