Navigating Online Hostility: Gendered Trolling of Indian Women Journalists, Legal Interventions, and the Role of Media Literacy

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Abstract

Indian women journalists have been vocalizing their encounters with gender trolls on social media and public platforms through interviews, deliberations, and continuous writing, for over a decade. They seek attention to their plight on national and international platforms like the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), and the Editors Guild of India (EGI). While numerous media reports have documented the severe trolling faced by women journalists, these instances, despite gaining traction in public discourse, often go unreported and rarely result in legal action. This qualitative study seeks to provide a comprehensive analysis of the perspectives of women journalists on the effectiveness of legal recourse as a potential remedy for trolling, as well as the role of media literacy training in enhancing their legal awareness and empowerment. Insights derived from interviews suggest that three key factors contribute to the underreporting of online harassment: (1) legal knowledge deficit, (2) inadequate emphasis on media literacy training, and 3) the dismissive stance of law enforcement agencies and organisations. Moreover, the anticipation of enduring physical, emotional, and financial distress serves as a deterrent. The study contends that the normalization of trolling within the realm of professional online discourse compels women journalists to downplay its impact, leading them to prefer non-legal strategies over formal legal interventions. It recommends the integration of legal education into media literacy training at the organizational, governmental, and educational levels to challenge the normalization of online incivility and foster greater confidence in the legal system as an effective mechanism to combat online harassment.

Keywords: Gender trolling, Indian women journalists, legal recourses, online harassment, online violence, legal awareness, media literacy.

1. Introduction

The proliferation of social media platforms has significantly facilitated women in articulating their dissent against gender-based violence and discrimination within their respective communities, positioning these digital spaces as catalysts for societal transformation (Gurman et al., 2018). Media literacy plays a pivotal role in facilitating the effective use of social media for advocacy by enhancing women's awareness, critical thinking skills, and ability to navigate digital platforms strategically (Tamuli, Mishra, 2022). Media literacy extends beyond merely recognizing the advantages of digital platforms; it also encompasses the ability to critically assess and mitigate the potential risks associated with their use. While many women have garnered substantial support and recognition for their courage in voicing their concerns online, they have also become targets of hostility from segments of society that resist strong, opinionated female voices. Thus, despite

serving as a conduit for unrestricted expression, inherent gendered nature of internet becomes evident through the manifestation of male hegemony, notably exemplified by the phenomenon of gender trolling (Plan International, 2019). This aligns with existing research indicating that the affliction faced by women on online platforms is an expression of inequality (Norris, 2018). Thus, digital platforms have evolved into an extension of the offline world for women, where they are compelled to confront misogynists and patriarchs in order to forge ahead (Ghosh, 2020; Rego, 2018). Within this context, the role of media literacy becomes even more critical, equipping women with the skills to recognize, resist, and respond to online harassment while fostering a more inclusive and equitable digital environment.

Feminist scholars have also related the phenomenon of online harassment by contextualizing it within the framework of identity-based aggression (Jane, 2014; Vera-Gray, 2017). The nomenclature "gender trolling" was introduced by Mantilla in her work entitled *How Misogyny Went Viral,* wherein she defines it as a systematic onslaught of gender-based insults or threats, articulated in offensive language relentlessly at a woman in a well-coordinated manner (Mantilla, 2015). The overarching objective of gender trolls, according to Mantilla, is to assert male dominance within online spaces by undermining and subverting feminist voices.

Due to their gender and professional roles, female journalists are also facing online violence. They are constantly under attack by negative online actors commonly known as trolls. Underlining the motivations of miscreants, a survey by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) highlighted that "Online violence against women journalists is designed to: belittle, humiliate, and shame; induce fear, silence, and retreat; discredit them professionally, undermining accountability journalism and trust in facts; and chill their active participation (along with that of their sources, colleagues and audiences) in public debate" (Posetti, 2021: 6). Another survey conducted by UNESCO-ICFJ (International Center for Journalists) revealed that a staggering 73 % of women journalists have been subjected to severe online trolling while performing their professional duties (Posetti, 2020).

Notable personalities such as journalist Gauri Lankesh, who encountered persistent trolling even after her death, Rana Ayyub, who faced a barrage of abuse, sexist slurs, and threats, along with Sagarika Ghose, who is constantly targeted by trolls, sometimes dragging her family into the harassment, and Patricia Mukhim, who received death threats on Facebook and had her house petrol bombed, serve as poignant examples. Ayyub's experience extended beyond verbal attacks, with trolls manipulating her images onto the bodies of pornographic actors and disseminating them on social media platforms, amplifying her distress and embarrassment. While delivering the keynote address at IJF 22 at Perugia, Rana recounted how her trolling has resulted in panic attacks and severe depression. The toll on her personal life was not insignificant, as she expressed a sense of responsibility for endangering her family due to her chosen profession (Basu, 2022). Similarly, Patricia Mukhim in an interview for a report shared "they write such awful things about me. Of course, they don't target my children. But they'll write such awful things about me that the children automatically feel enraged" (Dutta, Sharma, 2022: 27). In an article, CPJ awardee Neha Dixit recounted waking up to text messages discussing her being raped. She also noted an alarming increase in the frequency of incitements to stone pelting, accompanied by pictures of her family members and her residential address on social media platforms (Dixit, 2021). While these women refuse to succumb to the intimidation posed by trolls, it is essential to acknowledge that many others, lacking the same fortitude, opt for silence or withdrawal from online public discourse. Instances of effect of hostility on self-expression have been documented earlier as well (Jane, 2015). Such hostility is widely regarded as a direct attack on an individual's right to freedom of speech and expression. When individuals refrain from exercising their fundamental rights, it is not merely a personal loss but a societal one (Schauer, 1978 as cited in Ferrier, Garud-Patkar, 2018), and in case of a journalists, self-censorship impacts operation of free press. One contributing factor to this phenomenon is the variation in media literacy among individuals. Despite the rapid expansion of internet access in India, media literacy training has not been implemented with the same intensity. As a result, individuals with higher media literacy are better equipped to defend themselves against online harassment, while those lacking such skills often become more vulnerable to digital threats. Moreover, media literacy also enables them to leverage digital platforms for knowledge acquisition and staying informed about their rights. However, in the absence of adequate media literacy training, a significant proportion of journalists are unable to

harness the full potential of digital platforms and are often reluctant to pursue legal recourse against online perpetrators.

National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) report (The National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) annually publishes data on reported crimes throughout India. The statistics provided above represent the total number of registered cases and are not exclusive to crimes reported by women journalists) for the year 2022, states a total of 423 cases were officially registered under Section 66E of the Information Technology (IT) Act, 2000, pertaining to the infringement of privacy. The ambit of cases expands to include 1931 instances, with 34 originating from Delhi, specifically under Section 67A of the IT Act, 2000, specifically targeting the publication or transmission of material containing sexually explicit acts. However, the report raises concerns, as 469 cases were registered nationally, under Section 469 of the Indian Penal Code (IPC) and the Indecent Representation of Women Act, which encompass crimes related to defamation and morphing. Strikingly, none of these cases were registered within the jurisdiction of Delhi. Furthermore, Section 354D of the IPC was invoked in 1471 cases, specifically addressing instances of cyberstalking or bullying directed towards women or children (NCRB, 2023). The discernible pattern in these statistics suggests a disconcerting discrepancy between the number of registered complaints and the actual incidence of trolling incidents. This incongruity underscores the need for a comprehensive examination of the factors contributing to underreporting.

Thus, it is evident that despite facing threats and humiliation, internet users, including journalists, often hesitate to pursue legal remedies, instead opting to endure online trolling (Gudipaty, 2017; Yadav, Jonjua, 2022). This study argues that a deficit in media literacy plays a significant role in this reluctance, as media narratives heavily influence how users interpret online harassment. Thus, study underscores the importance of media literacy training in enabling women journalists to distinguish between legitimate criticism and targeted abuse, ultimately fostering critical awareness, ethical engagement, and responsible digital behavior along with greater trust in legal mechanisms as a means of protection.

2. Materials and methods

This qualitative study employs in-depth interviews with twenty women journalists working in different media outlets in Delhi NCR, print (3), electronic (8), and digital (9)(independent journalists interviewed for the study are associated with digital platforms) media platforms. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, to address five fundamental inquiries:

1. What are the perceptions of women journalists regarding the phenomenon of trolling?
2. How do women journalists in Delhi view existing legal frameworks as potential solutions for addressing trolling?
3. To what extent are women journalists cognizant of laws pertinent to online harassment, and what role does this awareness play in the reporting of trolling cases?
4. How does the perceived attitude of law enforcement agencies, particularly the police, towards trolling influence the inclination of women journalists to seek legal redress?
5. What is the potential of media literacy training as an intervention strategy to address trolling?

(Note: To safeguard participant privacy and confidentiality, they are referred to as Case 1, Case 2, etc., in the study).

The sample for this study was selected using the purposive sampling technique within the non-probability sampling framework. Women journalists were approached through various channels, including Twitter, email, and personal contact numbers, to inform them about the research and encourage their participation. All interviews were conducted in October 2024, with each session lasting between 40 minutes and one hour. (Refer to Table 1 for a summary of the respondents' profiles.)

The research employed thematic analysis method to systematically scrutinize the amassed data, focusing on two overarching themes derived through an inductive approach. These themes were delineated as (1) Unveiling the Gendered Web: Insights into How Women Journalists Perceive Online Trolling and (2) Decoding Hesitation: Unveiling the Journalists' Rationales Behind Legal Inaction Against Trolls. Maxwell (Maxwell, 2014: 480) has articulated that "the use of numbers is a legitimate and valuable strategy for qualitative researchers when it is used as a complement to an overall process orientation to the research."

Table 1. Disaggregated data of interviewees

Gender/ Case Numbering	Age Group	Professional Designation	Experience as Journalist in Years	Followers Count (Twitter)	Engagement on Twitter (Avg. Per day)
Female Case 1	35–40	Senior Correspondent (Digital Platform)	12 +	80K	5-7 Tweets
Female Case 2	40–45	Managing Director/ Anchor	20+	9K	1 Tweet
Female Case 3	35–40	Independent Journalist	15 +	91k	1-2 Tweets
Female Case 4	25-30	Correspondent (TV News Channel)	4+	106K	7-8 Tweets
Female Case 5	35-40	Founder of News Website	13 +	155K	3-4 Tweets
Female Case 6	30–35	Anchor (TV News Channel)	12+	13K	2-3 Tweets
Female Case 7	30-35	Correspondent (TV News Channel)	9+	37K	2-3 Tweets
Female Case 8	40-45	Founder and Managing Editor (E-Magazine)	15+	6K	1-2 Tweets
Female Case 9	25-30	Correspondent (Magazine)	8 +	113K	1-2 Tweets
Female Case 10	30-35	Anchor (TV News Channel)	11+	107K	4-5 Tweets
Female Case 11	30-35	Principal Correspondent (Print)	10 +	46K	1 Tweet
Female Case 12	30-35	Principal Correspondent (Digital Website)	9 +	5K	1 Tweet
Female Case 13	25-30	Correspondent (Print)	9+	5K	1-2 Tweet
Female Case 14	35-40	Independent Journalist	13+	55K	1-2 Tweets
Female Case 15	30-35	Anchor/ Sr. Correspondent (TV News Channel)	11+	100K	3-4 Tweets
Female Case 16	35-40	Associate Editor (TV News)	16+	77K	3-4 Tweets
Female Case 17	35-40	Independent Journalist	14+	114K	3-4 Tweets
Female Case 18	35-40	Independent Journalist	14+	67K	2-3 Tweets
Female Case 19	25-30	Digital Journalist	3 +	13.5K	3-4 Tweets
Female Case 20	35-40	Anchor (TV News Channel)	12 +	55K	3-4 Tweets

Thus, in this study also numerical data was incorporated into sub-themes identified through thematic analysis to bolster the credibility and validity of the findings.

3. Discussion
The narratives emerging from interviews with 20 women journalists provide critical insights into the prevalence of gender-based trolling and the available legal remedies. The first research question explored women's perceptions of trolling in journalism. The findings highlight the deeply

gendered nature of online spaces in India and the dismissive societal attitude toward this form of harassment (Claesson, 2023). Women journalists often experience what has been described as "double prosecution" (CFWIJ, 2021), wherein they are targeted not only for their journalistic work but also for their gender. Trolls extend beyond the confines of the comment section, frequently infiltrating direct messages where they send explicit content, solicit sexual favours, and subject individuals to derogatory remarks, all without apprehension. The alarming trend of women journalists being subjected to abuse, objectification, and even "auctioning" on online platforms underscores the severity of the issue. Such harassment has a direct impact on psychological well-being (Henry, Powell, 2015; Posetti et al., 2021) and job satisfaction (Carlson, Witt, 2020). Additionally, consistent with findings from a UNESCO survey, factors such as caste and religion intersect with gender identity, influencing the likelihood and severity of trolling (Posetti et al., 2020). According to Waisbord (Waisbord, 2020), "the safety of [female] journalists is one of the most formidable challenges for press freedom and democracy around the world." Despite growing scholarly attention to this issue, the normalization of gendered online violence remains a troubling trend. Furthermore, organizational indifference plays a pivotal role in the precarious conditions faced by journalists, corroborating Claesson's (Claesson, 2023) findings that restrictive newsroom environments limit opportunities to address online violence effectively.

The second research question examined how women journalists perceive the legal framework as a potential remedy for trolling. Despite acknowledging the adverse effects of gendered trolling, most respondents preferred to ignore misogynistic comments rather than pursue legal recourse. It was found women journalists are frequent internet users (Gudipaty, 2017), yet they possess limited knowledge of relevant cyber laws. A majority of participants expressed a lack of confidence in existing legal frameworks, as current laws fail to adequately address severe cybercrimes against women (Bhangla, Tuli, 2021). Consequently, women facing online abuse often choose to endure the prevailing culture of harassment to preserve their agency rather than seek institutional support (Gurumurthy et al., 2019).

The third research question directly addressed the role of legal awareness in reporting online abuse. The findings reveal a pervasive lack of awareness, leading many journalists to remain silent or attempt to handle incidents independently. Instead of seeking legal recourse, immediate coping measures such as reporting, blocking, comment moderation, restricting direct messages, disabling comments, and utilizing the mute function on social media platforms are commonly employed (Pillai, Ghosh, 2022). These strategies, however, only provide temporary relief rather than long-term solutions.

The fourth research question focused on the perceived attitude of law enforcement agencies toward gendered trolling. Respondents reported delayed police responses, noting that authorities typically act only when a case garners significant public attention, involves a well-known victim, or is escalated by higher authorities. Moreover, women journalists frequently face secondary victimization when interacting with police, as they are often blamed for the harassment they experience, particularly when addressing sensitive topics on social media. These experiences align with Ghosh's (Ghosh, 2020) observation that Indian women are frequently held responsible for the trolling they endure. To circumvent harassment, women journalists are often advised to ignore online abuse or temporarily disengage from social media, discouraging them from formally reporting incidents. Additionally, respondents perceived the legal process from filing a complaint to attending court proceedings as exhaustive, time-consuming, and emotionally draining. The pursuit of justice is characterized as a spiral of suffering, requiring substantial time, financial resources, and emotional investment.

The fifth research question examined role of media literacy as an effective intervention strategy to address trolling. Dame Adjin-Tettey (Dame Adjin-Tettey, 2022) suggests that media literacy fosters critical thinking and self-expression, empowering individuals to exercise their democratic rights. The findings reveal that media literacy training integrated with legal education helps women understand existing cyber laws, complaint procedures, and law enforcement responsibilities, enabling them to seek justice more effectively. Thus, study recommends organising mandatory media literacy trainings at organisational and educational level.

The findings indicate that in case of being trolled women journalists feel compelled to exhibit resilience in such situations, choosing to deny trolls the attention and entitlement they seek. Many fear that seeking legal assistance could not only signal vulnerability to their harassers but also negatively impact their professional standing within their organizations. Notably, most media

organizations lack formal mechanisms to support journalists facing online abuse, aligning with Zviyita and Mare's (Zviyita, Mare, 2023) observation that newsroom safety measures remain inadequate for women journalists. Instead of offering institutional backing, superiors often advise journalists to ignore trolling and focus on their work. In response to this organizational neglect, women journalists have increasingly turned to "alliance networks" (Bhat, 2023), forming peer support systems to help navigate online harassment.

The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma has documented the serious psychological toll of online violence, emphasizing that even in the absence of immediate physical threats, such harassment can create stressful, disruptive, and invalidating work environments. In severe cases, these pressures can impair journalists' ability to perform their duties effectively (Dart Center, 2014, as cited in Ferrier, Garud-Patkar, 2018). Given the detrimental impact of trolling, it is imperative to sensitize newsroom leadership to this issue. The tendency to dismiss trolling as either a consequence of journalistic success or as inconsequential is neither an appropriate response nor an effective strategy.

Furthermore, there is a critical need for targeted media literacy training sessions to enhance legal awareness among journalists. Instead of viewing legal action as a burdensome process, journalists should be empowered to see digital media as a viable tool for protection and redress. On the level of law enforcement, structured training programs including media literacy education should be implemented to equip police personnel with the necessary knowledge, skills, and sensitivity to address online violence against women journalists effectively (Sati, 2023). Addressing these gaps in organizational and legal support structures is essential to ensuring that women journalists can work in a safer and more equitable digital environment.

4. Results

The online wilderness: unmasking gender trolling through women journalists' eyes:

In a parallel progression to the overarching digitization of various societal facets such as finance, education, healthcare, entertainment, and government services, this study discerns the digitization of patriarchy. In this contemporary context, patriarchal forces seek to assert dominance over women by subjecting them to offensive and disgraceful language (Dutt, 2017). It is argued that women journalists' encounter online trolls owing to their gender, work, and visibility in the digital sphere. The thematic analysis of the 20 interviews conducted for this study is encapsulated in Table 2, delineating the emergent sub-themes that illuminate the multifaceted dimensions of the trolling experiences encountered by women journalists.

Table 2. Women Journalists' Perception of Trolling

S/N	Sub-theme	In-depth Interview No. of Participants (n = 20)
1.	Ideology enforcement tool (Derailing discourse, disagreement, discrediting)	12
2.	Misogynistic (Sexist, character assassination)	20
3.	Silencing tool	12
4.	Virtual violence (Direct personal attacks, Targeting, attacks on vulnerable groups, threats of physical assaults)	19
5.	Psychopaths act (Inflicting pain, venting anger, nihilism, sadist)	11

Source: authors

Use of trolling as an ideology enforcement tool: all the journalists interviewed for the study have acknowledged their experiences with trolls. These experiences vary from uncomfortable comments to orchestrated attacks. As defined in Table 2, a majority of respondents, constituting

60 % (12 individuals), perceive trolling as a tool employed for the enforcement of ideological perspectives. This encompassing ideology manifests through various tactics, including the derailment of discourse, discrediting, and expressing disagreement using offensive language. Case 17, an independent journalist, provided insights into this phenomenon, stating, *"If trolls disagree with something, even if it holds factual veracity, their approach involves diverting attention from the content by discrediting journalists or propagating false claims."* The assertion aligns with prior research by Buckles et al. (Buckles et al., 2014), which posited that trolls aim to hijack online conversations, steering focus away from the main topic and resorting to personal attacks.

Prevalent misogyny: "society does not celebrate a vocal woman": 75 % (15 respondents) of respondents asserted that they face gender trolling, while 25 % contended that trolling is a gender-neutral phenomenon. Although they denied the notion that trolls target individuals based on their gender, there was consensus that the trolling of females is inherently gendered. This resonates with the observations of Kovacs et al. (Kovacs et al., 2013), who argued that assertive women frequently face denigration through sexist remarks targeting their gender and physical attributes. Trolls undermine them by casting doubts on their loyalty and intelligence, aiming to discourage women from active participation in online discussions and fostering a broader climate of sexism. This underscores that interviewees perceive trolling as an inherent cost of their online presence, intricately intertwined with the patriarchal structures prevalent in the offline world. Unequivocally it is demonstrated that, while online attacks affect journalists across genders, female journalists bear the brunt of this menace due to factors such as their gender, and professional standing. The Managing Editor of a digital magazine (Case 8), noted, *"society does not celebrate a vocal woman. Their trolling is much nastier and more personal."* Echoing this sentiment, Case 12, a principal correspondent at a digital platform, emphasized, *"the way a woman is trolled on social media immediately becomes very sexual, reflecting the societal norms we navigate."* This differentiation in the trolling experiences of male and female journalists is substantiated by the research of Trionfi and Luque (Trionfi, Luque, 2020).

Case 3 further expounded on this perspective:

"Males are called 'corrupt' and 'paid media' but when a female journalist gets trolled, she is called 'slut' or 'sex worker', so, that is the difference. When a woman is labelled as a sex worker, others immediately start to question her character and intent, attempting to stigmatise her presence and passing moralistic judgments on her. I have been subjected to hate campaigns on multiple occasions, where trolls abuse me and discuss ways to rape me."

Similarly, when elucidating the misogynistic dimension of trolling, Case 11, a principal correspondent, remarked, *"women are denied agency even in trolling. They drag our partners into the fray and assail them for not reining us in or permitting us the liberty to express our thoughts."* In this context, there is minimal disparity between the challenges encountered by women in the offline and online realms.

Trolling as silencing tool: In the intricate landscape of gender-based aggression, misogynists and patriarchal entities employ a myriad of techniques to stifle women's voices, with trolling emerging as a prominent tool in their arsenal. As articulated by Case 19, *"being a woman, the responsibility falls upon us; if we dare to write, we should also be prepared for the consequences."* She further elucidated, *"I have encountered aggressive campaigns, much like many of my colleagues. This is orchestrated to silence us by either depicting us as 'bad women' or instilling the notion that our perspectives lack merit."*

Lumsden and Morgan (Lumsden, Morgan, 2017) have highlighted the ascension of "lad culture" in society, wherein sexist and misogynistic language is not only tolerated but also celebrated, with trolling serving as a mechanism to propagate this culture on online platforms. Women often find themselves accused of "narcissistic victimhood" (West, 2015), with additional harassers mobilized for coordinated attacks (Jane, 2016; Owen, 2017). In cases of sustained trolling, women are often compelled to abandon online platforms altogether (Blum, 2018) or resort to self-censorship to mitigate potential repercussions (Feiner, 2019; Yadav, Jonjua, 2022; Zviyita, Mare, 2023). Case 1 illuminated the broader impact of such experiences, stating, *"It's not just me who suffers. My partner and parents advise me to refrain from engaging on social media because they are emotionally affected and apprehensive about my safety."*

Trolling is virtual violence: A noteworthy parallel surface between virtual violence and the daily challenges encountered by vulnerable groups. Female journalists contend with a heightened degree of virulent trolling in comparison to their male counterparts, a phenomenon rooted in the perception of

their supposed vulnerability and presumed susceptibility to silencing. This ideology is encapsulated in the fourth sub-theme, wherein an overwhelming 95 % (19 respondents) characterized their experiences with trolling as synonymous with 'virtual violence.' Minorities, spanning gender, religious, or ethnic dimensions, disproportionately bear the brunt of reduced representation on social media platforms, becoming frequent targets of troll attacks (Gardiner, 2018).

Drawing from her personal encounters, Case 5, the founder of an online media platform, remarked, *"often, when women express their opinions on social media, they are reduced to their gender identity. Any derogatory language can be directed at them, and if the woman hails from a marginalized community, the intensity amplifies."* Case 20, a national channel anchor, echoed similar sentiments: *"in the case of male journalists, their religion and ideology become targets, whereas female journalists are subjected to rape and death threats."* Such threatening messages aim to instil fear and make them nervous for their safety. In many cases it results in self-censorship or toning down the content. This indicates, while social media platforms assert a commitment to fostering free speech, for women journalists, it becomes an additional battleground to exercise their constitutional rights.

Psychopaths act: A substantial majority of respondents, constituting 55%, associate trolling with psychopathic traits. Their motivations, as articulated by Case 15, stem from a desire *"to inflict pain on others."* Adding to this perspective, Case 9, an anchor at a mainstream Hindi news channel, characterizes trolls as *"mentally disturbed individuals who exhibit erratic behaviour when confronted with differing opinions."* The sentiments are encapsulated further by Case 7, who contends *that "their intention is to harm targets physically or psychologically."* These perspectives align with the conclusions drawn by Golbeck (Golbeck, 2014) that trolls possess dark tetrad personality traits and can go to any extent to get a response.

The persistent threat of trolling and doxing has rendered Twitter a precarious space for female journalists, introducing an element of constant risk. Despite the escalating nature of the problem, concrete solutions remain elusive. Existing countermeasures, though documented on paper, have failed to instil trust among the affected individuals. The ensuing themes delve into women journalists' perspectives on legal recourse, endeavouring to bridge the existing gap in this domain and media literacy as a possible way of empowerment.

Journalists struggle with legal knowledge deficit:

One pivotal inquiry addressed in this research pertains to the level of awareness among women journalists regarding laws related to online harassment. The findings revealed a dichotomy, with 30 % of respondents asserting awareness of laws, while a substantial 70 % acknowledged a lack of clarity concerning the procedures involved in filing complaints related to trolling. This uncertainty extends to determining the applicable laws and sections for filing a complaint or First Information Report (FIR) in cases of gender trolling. Participants also highlighted the confusion about whether to approach the cyber cell exclusively or also consider the nearest police station when trolled. Case 6 candidly admitted, *"even as a journalist, I don't know which kinds of trolling on a regular basis amount to cyberbullying."* Others asserted their awareness of the issue but admitted to a limited understanding of the relevant laws. Intriguingly, these individuals, despite claiming awareness, have never approached a cyber cell or the police to file a complaint.

Case 3, voicing discontent, stated that there has been no effort made to clarify the legal processes involved. In contrast, Case 8 while acknowledging authorities' responsibility to act in such situations, emphasizes a broader societal lack of awareness. She contends that *"as journalists, there is a tendency to underestimate the impact of trolling."* It can be deduced from above perspectives that in addition to lack of legal awareness, journalists lack motivation and acceptability of problem. Such scenarios prompt journalists to overlook instances of abuse rather than proactively seeking legal recourse.

"I don't want to be a liability in office": compulsion of managing the professional image:

Engaging in a legal battle poses a formidable challenge. Within the Indian context, where the judiciary grapples with an existing burden, seeking redressal becomes an intricate challenge for victims of online harassment. A substantial 50 % of participants emphasized that initiating the process of filing a First Information Report (FIR) demands a significant investment of time, energy, and financial resources. These factors emerge as primary deterrents, discouraging victims from pursuing legal action against the trolls. Case 5, who has personally experienced character assassination, abuse, sexist slurs, and threats, expresses*, "I am acquainted with the laws, but motivation eludes me. It's an everyday ordeal for me and I don't have time and energy for it."*

Adding to this sentiment, Case 12, notes, *"filing a complaint creates another mental tab for me, adding to the already demanding responsibilities of stories and other work."* It can be deduced from foregoing quotes that journalists perceive the prospect of pursuing legal action against trolls as an additional burden, further complicating their multifaceted responsibilities. The implications extend beyond the psychological realm, impacting the professional domain, as filing an FIR entails visits to police stations and court hearings. In the competitive landscape of journalism, where journalists are constantly engrossed in chasing stories, allocating time for legal procedures risks missing out on valuable and significant journalistic opportunities. There is a constant danger of framing oneself as unreliable and self-centred. Case 4 explains, *"As women, we find ourselves compelled to go the extra mile in showcasing our capabilities. Despite facing the gender trolling, I am determined not to request time off specifically to file a complaint. Such a request might raise concerns with my superiors. I don't want to look like a liability, it is imperative for me to maintain a professional image."*

The severity of trolling experienced by journalists varies significantly, ranging from mild to severe. Case 3, who contends with severe trolling on a regular basis, raises pertinent question, *"How many complaints shall I register? Because if I keep on following those 300 threats, even 30 every day, when will I do my work"?*

Intersection of social media into traditional media has undoubtedly brought about positive outcomes for the media industry. However, the absence of adequate support mechanisms and trainings when confronted with the negative aspects of digitization has left journalists somewhat hesitant about its extensive use. At a time when there is constant discussion over providing a safe online environment for female journalists worldwide (Chen et al., 2020; UNESCO, 2021), Indian newsrooms ought to be proactive, at least, to ensure the safety of their female journalists. Unfortunately, Indian newsrooms have not been very successful in this regard. Respondents share that organizations appear reluctant to support employees facing such challenges, viewing them more as liabilities than assets to the editorial and managerial echelons. In discussing the issue of organizational support, Case 13 posits, *"if journalists receive adequate organizational support, I am confident that the reporting of trolling cases will witness a significant increase."* This underscores the crucial role that organizational backing plays in empowering journalists to address and confront incidents of online harassment.

"No precedent that could serve as a deterrent to trolls":

When inquired about the effectiveness of existing laws in combating trolling, a mere 20 % of respondents (4 out of 20) suggested that current laws suffice to address the menace, while 80 % asserted the necessity for more robust and stringent legal frameworks. The prevalent sense of impunity among trolls, who are emboldened by the absence of significant repercussions, was identified as a key factor fuelling their online harassment activities. Trolls, motivated by a desire for attention, remain fearless in their pursuits, leveraging the inflammatory nature of their actions to elevate their status in online spaces (Chamorro-Premuzic, 2014).

Highlighting the perceived inadequacies of the legal landscape, Case 14 remarked, *"who would take the pain? Our cyber system is ill-equipped to handle such complaints, and the procedural intricacies make it even more difficult."* This sentiment was echoed by respondent 14, who emphasized, *"our legal system lacks strength. Can anyone cite an instance where a troll is currently incarcerated? People harbour scepticism regarding the efficacy of cyber cells; there's no precedent that could serve as a deterrent to trolls."*

There is no legislative framework to directly address the trolling cases. Nevertheless, codified laws within the Indian Penal Code, 1860, and the Information & Technology (IT) Act, 2000, can potentially be utilized to prosecute trolls. But ambiguity surrounds them. Impunity, coupled with the absence of specific legislation addressing trolling incidents, stands as a compelling factor contributing to the proliferation of trolling phenomena. Case 2 a managing Editor of a mainstream media channel expressed her concern that *"the existing laws lack appropriateness and stringency to address the issue adequately. Despite ongoing discussions, a tangible resolution has yet to materialize, contributing to a pervasive apprehension among journalists about engaging in the redressal process".* Respondents recommended a re-evaluation of legislative interventions by national policymakers to effectively tackle this pressing issue. Case 18 suggests, *"it's high time, government should come up with strict laws to protect us from online humiliation."* *"Strengthening the existing laws and their application will definitely help",* added Case 13.

Calls for prompt action from intermediaries were also voiced, Case 10 decried *"the laid-back approach of tech giants in responding to complaints about threatening and gendered comments portrays them as a facilitator of discrimination, where one gender holds an advantage over the other."* While new IT rules have sought to delineate the roles of social media platforms, the translation of these regulations into tangible implementation remains elusive, further underscoring the challenges and gaps within the current legal landscape.

Law enforcement lapses:

While some laws are in place, their efficacy relies heavily on the actions of enforcement agencies. A substantial 70 % of respondents expressed dissatisfaction with the police's approach to trolling incidents, contending that they are often perceived as dismissive and fail to treat the matter with the seriousness it warrants. Notably, five interviewees recounted personal experiences with the police, shedding light on the challenges faced. Case 5 whose website voice the concerns of marginalized section of society emphasized the reluctance to initiate FIRs. She stated, *"I receive so much abuse that technically, I could request the filing of an FIR for all of them. However, I refrain because registering an FIR is akin to winning a war."* Sharing her disheartening encounter, she revealed, *"when attempting to register an FIR against trolls for using caste slurs, the police immediately refused. They were willing to file a complaint but not an FIR."* Eventually, she resorted to utilizing social media to voice her struggle and disappointment, leading to the registration of her FIR. Case 1 echoed a similar narrative, experiencing both doxing and gender trolling. Reflecting on her ordeal, she questioned:

"How much time can one devote to registering a single complaint? When you are working, it becomes impractical to visit the police station every day. Knowing that they won't register your complaint in a single day, and understanding the likelihood that they won't investigate it, you eventually grow tired and abandon the idea of registering a case."

Both journalists' experiences underscore the dismissive attitude of the police toward trolling incidents. Establishing contacts within the police department becomes a requisite for filing a complaint, and in some cases, even this is insufficient. This sentiment resonates with the perspective of Case 18, who aptly notes, *"they might take swift action in the case of a celebrity or minister, but not for the common man or a small-time journalist."* In a similar vein, Case 16 articulated, *"I refrained from seeking police assistance as I knew it would be futile."* However, leveraging media literacy to amplify awareness and engage a broader audience emerged as an effective strategy. Utilizing digital platforms to tag relevant Twitter handles and authoritative entities ensures that grievances are publicly acknowledged, thereby reducing the likelihood of authorities disregarding complaints. This approach streamlines the redressal process, making it more accessible and efficient.

While Case 14, hailing from minority community differs in her viewpoint, stating that she has had positive experiences with the cyber cell, noting, *"I have registered multiple complaints, and they not only registered them but also acted by tracking and summoning the culprit to the cyber cell to explain themselves."* She, however, clarified that while she had successfully registered complaints, filing an FIR is a much more complicated process. Police often exhibit a lack of awareness regarding the severe consequences of cyberviolence on the victim, perceiving it as an unnecessary complication imposed by individuals on themselves and the police force. This tendency to attribute blame to victims for the trolling further acts as a deterrent for female journalists contemplating legal action (Ghosh, 2020). As articulated by Case 19, *"the first thing they ask you is, why did you write? Then they advise you to stop writing and ignore the trolls."*

While 30 % of interviewees expressed sympathy toward the police, acknowledging their existing workload, a significant 70 % of respondents articulated expectations from cyber cells and the police to demonstrate increased responsibility. They emphasize the need for setting examples through swift action to instil trust among the populace and fear in trolls.

The role of empathy, awareness, and proper training:

Insufficient expertise among frontline officers remains an acknowledged challenge in addressing cybercrime (Dodge, Burruss, 2019). Brown (Brown, 2015) asserts that a lack of confidence in police effectiveness serves as a deterrent for victims to report incidents, thereby hampering an efficient response. The Indian police force grapples with a staff shortage, and with limited resources, registering a case for online intimidation proves to be a challenging endeavour (Duggal, 2017). The severity of cybercrime often eludes the understanding of the police, compelling

women complainants to navigate resistance and ignorance to secure the registration of a cybercrime (Khybri, 2018).

In the realm of policing, a lack of empathy can be classified as an inadequacy (Inzunza, 2013), and ineffective responses from the police serve as motivation for cyber offenders to persist in their offensive online activities (Holt et al., 2019). Sensitization, the cultivation of social skills such as empathy (Bloksgaard, Prieur, 2021), and systematic training of police personnel encompassing the correct procedures, technical knowledge, and understanding of the personal elements of trolling are crucial for improvement. Victims also require proper guidance on reporting cybercrimes (Curtis, Oxburgh, 2020; Holt et al., 2019).

The determination of journalists to report the incident and the commitment of the police to register and investigate the case may send a stern message to trolls. Consequently, the credible threat of prosecution will act as a deterrent, discouraging trolls from exercising their toxic masculinity on the digital landscape.

The scope of media literacy trainings:

Livingstone (Livingstone, 2004: 18) defines media literacy as the "ability to access, analyze, and evaluate" messages, emphasizing its role in fostering critical thinking. While respondents in this study acknowledged the importance of media literacy in navigating digital spaces, they reported a lack of formal emphasis on such training at both organizational and individual levels. Some participants suggested that integrating legal education into media literacy training would enhance their understanding of cyber laws, thereby equipping them with the necessary tools to address online harassment effectively.

Given the pervasive nature of trolling in journalism, there is a pressing need to incorporate cyber law education into media curriculum. This will help media students in understanding intricacies of media literacy for their benefit rather than just having surface level information. Moreover, not all trolling incidents necessitate legal intervention; some can be managed effectively through a deeper understanding of social media platforms. Media literacy training can enable journalists to leverage platform policies, report abusive content, and advocate for improved moderation mechanisms. Case 15, an anchor, stressing on the importance of media literacy suggested pre-emptive measures before resorting to legal action, *"advocating for actions such as blocking or muting trolls"*. Dove tailing her views, Case 2 shared her focus on self-empowerment through media literacy. She said, *"I prefer to block and report them than rounding up the police station. Understanding of platforms reduces my dependency on external support."* Thus, in response to trolling, women journalists often prefer adopting these self-help measures rather than seeking legal intervention.

The overall sentiment among respondents highlights the critical need for media organizations, educational institutions, and government bodies to integrate media literacy training into professional development programs. Specifically, journalists should receive structured guidance on managing their digital presence, countering harassment, and engaging with audiences constructively while mitigating the risk of escalating conflicts.

The emphasis on media literacy extends beyond a basic understanding of digital tools to the development of skills that enable individuals to leverage this knowledge for empowerment. This perspective underscores the role of digital confidence in enhancing self-efficacy and improving women's lives. By equipping journalists with the ability to navigate online spaces safely and effectively, media literacy training fosters both professional resilience and broader societal empowerment.

5. Conclusion

This study sheds light on three crucial findings. Firstly, it establishes that women journalists are indeed confronting gender trolling, with trolls not only seeking to silence them but also attempting to assert dominance by dictating the narrative and topics women journalists should address. Fuelled by toxic masculinity and regressive beliefs, trolls aggressively target women journalists, believing that they can be easily intimidated into stepping back to preserve their 'modesty.' The ethnicity of a woman further becomes a trigger for trolling, highlighting the intersectionality of online harassment. Secondly, despite enduring unwelcome experiences in the digital realm, women journalists often choose to overlook instances of trolling. Fearful of jeopardizing their professional standing, they are compelled to ignore these experiences. The lack of support mechanisms within organizations, coupled with a dismissive attitude from superiors,

further contributes to forced ignorance. The prevailing advice given to everyone is often, 'Don't feed the trolls.' Thirdly, the study underscores the significant factor of legal unawareness leading to the underreporting of trolling incidents. Both women journalists and the police require proper training to handle online trolling complaints effectively. Participants with firsthand experience with the police and trolling reveal the demotivating experiences of overcoming resistance within enforcement agencies to register cases. Consequently, awareness programs focusing on safe internet usage and existing laws for all sections, including online users and agencies, are crucial to address the problem more effectively. The current situation calls for strengthening mechanisms by imparting media education at the individual, legislative, and organizational levels. It is imperative to recognize that online violence is a risk faced by every internet user, making it a societal concern that demands comprehensive solutions.

Media literacy serves as a crucial tool in mitigating the problem of online trolling by fostering critical awareness, ethical engagement, and responsible digital behavior. Thus, to address this issue comprehensively, there is an urgent need to enhance media literacy and legal awareness among online users. Organizations can contribute by integrating media literacy and legal awareness workshops into their safety protocols, ensuring institutional support for affected journalists. Moreover, the government must play a proactive role in launching media literacy campaigns to promote usage of digital platforms for legal awareness among citizens. Recognizing the gravity of the situation, the government of India has introduced the Digital India Act, 2003 emphasizing the need for stringent laws to combat online harassment. The proposed law sets to replace Information Technology (IT) (Amendment) Act, 2008 and aims to create a safer online environment, free from fake news, trolling, gaslighting, and abuse (Chauriha, 2024; Som, 2022). While these initiatives hold promise for the future, the current sentiments of the interviewees reflect a pervasive lack of faith in institutional support, with many preferring non-legal strategies over legal recourse. Bridging this trust gap will be crucial for fostering a culture of accountability and empowering victims to come forward and report cases of online harassment.

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