

# Crafting A Sustainable Environment For Women Journalists In Arunachal Pradesh: A Way Forward

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## INTRODUCTION

India has always been referred to as being the flag bearer of democracy world over. And with the rising population and surpassing China as being the most populated country in the world according to the United Nations latest reports, India has failed miserably in the field of journalism in recent times. And for a country of such proportion and stature deserves a media that would be able to uphold the rights of the people to information through a system that is free of corruption, manipulation and most of all free of censorship. The Indian journalistic space has seen huge strides being taken in regards with the inclusion of women in the field of journalism. Technologically driven, the Indian media now have surpassed physical boundaries and with the digital media systems, have brought about profound changes in the nature and organisation of contemporary communications. However, India's press freedom dropped eight places from the previous year to 150 out of 180 nations in the 2022 edition of Reporters Without Borders' (2019) Press Freedom Index. These rankings of the nations are based on how well the media performed in five major areas: political context, legal framework, economic context, sociocultural context, and safety of journalists. India's performance in the category for journalist safety was the worst out of these five categories. According to the report, after 2014, the generally progressive media was severely harmed, which resulted in a surge in violence against journalists, politically partisan media, and concentration of media ownership, all of which points to the problem the Indian media is currently experiencing.

This current situation has created a space where the media personnel working in the line of duty are put under the magnifying glass by the “people in power” when reporting are found not to be aligned with their interest. Such scenarios have created hostile working environment where the functioning of the media is not deemed conducive enough to report the truth as it is. Also, due to the increasing polarisation within the media, such developments have created an environment where attacks on journalists have become a frequent event on whoever shows signs of dissent from stance taken by media houses which are either owned or have close ties to political parties. Such an environment

have raised several questions regarding the safety of the journalists and especially women journalists who have not only been subjugated to physical harm but also, sexual assaults on number of cases in the recent past. The most notable incident in recent memories would be of Gauri Lankesh and Shujaat Bukhari who were murdered for the work in the field of journalism, while in Arunachal Pradesh, Tongam Rina was shot at point blank outside her office premises and survived the attack on her life. And since almost every medium has gone online, women journalists have now become victims of internet trolls in the virtual domain as well which impacts massively in exerting their journalistic duties. Even in the physical space and the digital space, the vulnerability to harm and abuse are constant and ever evolving.

For many years, the safety of women journalist have been called into question with multiple cases of physical attacks often in the form of sexual abuse have been reported, while the same experience now has been spilled over in the virtual world as well. Media and its encounter with violence have been frequent and nothing new. From 2014 to 2019, more than 200 serious attacks on journalist have taken place in the country with 40 killing of which 21 have been confirmed related to their profession (Scroll, 2019). Sadly, since 2014, there has not been many convictions related to the attacks made towards journalists which were targeted for their investigative work. Subsequently, women journalist are also largely targeted and the number of attacks on them has seen exponential rise. While many have spoken out about the all-out harassment and attack campaigns taken out against journalist who are critical of the government, the government goes further by waging a guerrilla war of lawsuits against the journalists and media outlets (Reporters Without Borders, 2019).

Such circumstances and working conditions of journalists raises a lot of doubt and questions. Looking at the development that has taken place in regards with the safety of the journalist in the country, journalist have been put behind bars, put under detention, threatened and harassed for executing their job. Various independent reports found that 55 journalists were arrested, booked and threatened for reporting on COVID-19 during the pandemic which highlighted the poor conditions the centre had created due to mismanagement which led to high number of deaths (The Wire, 2020). Any reporting that is done which does not align with the centre's view of things are considered as being anti-national and anti-India. The perpetrators that the journalist have to jostle with include government agencies, security forces, political party members, religious sects, students' groups, criminal gangs and local mafias (The Wire, 2019).

## ARUNACHAL MEDIA

The journey of media in Arunachal Pradesh started out exactly a year after Arunachal Pradesh attained its statehood on 20th February, 1987. A pioneer in its own rights, Echo Of Arunachal was launched on 20th February, 1988 under the initiative of former PTI bureau Chief, P. B. Dasgupta, businessman Vijay Bothra, then IPR Director Lummer Dai as Editor and a well known social reformer and renowned journalist Pradip Kumar Behera. In 1999, after six years of its launch, Echo Of Arunachal became a daily newspaper. The first daily newspaper The Arunachal Times was launched on 6th June, 1989 with Vijay Kumar Nath as the Chief Editor and Taso Grayu as the Editor-cum-Publisher and claims to be the largest circulating newspaper in the state (Riba, 2020). Currently, the state has more than 25 publications listed with the Registrar of Newspapers for India (RNI), including daily, weeklies, and monthly publications that are distributed throughout the state in a variety of languages and dialects and act as the primary information sources for the local populations (Devi, 2021). Some of the prominent English dailies publishes from Itanagar are The Echo of Arunachal (1988), The Arunachal Times (1989), The Dawnlit Post (1998), Arunachal Front, Eastern Sentinel (2011), Independent Review, The Arunachal Pioneer, The Arunachal Age, Arunachal Observer (2017) and Arunachal Reflector (2019) and Arun Bhumi (2019), a Hindi daily newspaper.

The emerging digital media scenario of Arunachal is witnessing a huge surge in mushrooming of various news portals on Facebook, Twitter and Youtube. The digital media in Arunachal Pradesh can be separated into affiliated and non affiliated media houses and comes under the purview of Arunachal Electronic and Digital Media Association (AEDMA). Spearheading this digital revolution in changing mediascape of Arunachal Pradesh, ArunBhoomi launched on 8th August, 2018, boasts the largest number of followers on Facebook among the various digital media news portals. ArunBhoomi has around 2 lakh followers on Facebook and around 32 thousand subscribers on YouTube. Similarly, The Space which was launched on 9th November, 2020 has 1 lakh 49 thousand followers on Facebook and 24 thousand subscribers on YouTube. Some other prominent news portals found on various digital mediums like social media are Itanagar News (2019), Capital News (2018), Arunachal News 24X7 (2015), Arunachal News Live (2019), DMK News (2022), Pasighat News (2011), Arunachal First News (2020), ACTV News (2020), NewsZ (2021), Arunachal News Desk (2021), Aalo News Today (2021), NewsFY (2021), PP News ( 2022) etc.

## SOME INSTANCES OF ATTACK ON WOMEN JOURNALISTS IN ARUNACHAL

- ♦ Nyapi Bomjen and Appu Gapak, reporters from Eastern Sentinel were assaulted by an IRBn personnel while reporting on December, 2010.
- ♦ Tongam Rina, Deputy Editor at The Arunachal Times was shot at out side her office premises on July of 2012.
- ♦ Kunu Borang, a reporter with digital media The Arunachal First News was manhandled while covering a report in Seppa on April, 2022.
- ♦ Sange Droma, who is the head of channel at Arunachal Today, a digital media reported her Facebook account had been hacked and explicit content being posted from her account.

### **JOURNALISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES:**

The modern society dictates that we have an inclusive work space that is free of gender bias, providing an equal opportunity and competition to all. Disregarding the primitive traditional norms and roles based on gender that existed in the patriarchal society, the modern society has come a long way from what it was in the past. Journalism is one field where women has been provided with ample opportunities and many have excelled in it and broke barriers in its pursuit towards excellence in this field. While the field of journalism has come a long way from what it was in the past, especially now with the media systems going online, journalism as a whole has a new element to take into consideration while performing its journalistic duties.

Keeping gender aside for a moment, journalism as a whole is now recognised as one of the deadliest professions in the world (Carlsson & Poyhatri, 2017; Jamil & Appiah-Adjei, 2020). In last ten years, the killing of journalists around the world suggest that it is no longer a safe profession to be in as threats to journalist safety are seriously affecting the freedom of media in several countries with India being no exception (Jamil, 2019). Violence have been used against the journalist to deter them from reporting certain issues. Rape threats, murder and assault, online harassments, increased surveillance, impersonation, forced detention and other digital threats are certain scare tactics that are being used against journalist (Hicks, 2013; Jamil & Muschert, 2020; Reporters without borders, 2019; Sohal, 2020).

India is placed as one of South Asian region's poorest performers when it comes to safeguarding the freedom of speech and expression and protecting its journalists. The press freedom has been negatively impacted by a combination of social and political reasons, such as official sanctions of media control, police violence, pressure from criminal groups, and political unrest, according to a study published by Reporters Without Borders (2019). The draconian rules that are written in the Indian Constitution and the Indian Penal Code are used to target and silence journalists and media organisations they are linked with if the report raises questions about or highlights certain issues in relation to the government entity or people in power (Sohal, 2020).

Akhileshwari (1990) states that female work participation in India is among the lowest in the world. As the nation's media still reels under immense pressure, the opportunities that have been provided in the field of journalism point towards a bleak future for women in journalism. Arana (2015) pointed in its article titled "A mental health epidemic in the newsroom" that a 2001 study found that upwards of 85 percent experience work related trauma. Other similar research found 4 to 28 percent suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder over the course of their careers and up to 20 percent experience depression." A 2014 report of a global survey conducted on 1000 female journalists by International News Safety Institute found nearly two thirds had experienced violence in the work place in the form of intimidation threats or abuse while reporting. Ross (2001) observed that journalism mostly being a male dominated industry, low priority is given on coverage of women's issues which could very well be the reason why male dominated industry, could look away from such issues that plague women in journalistic field. Sohal (2021) also found, that laws protecting female journalists from sexual harassment in India are not effective enough to facilitate a safe working environment. Sadly, the Indian legal framework is not tough enough that it could combat the atrocities being meted out towards journalists especially towards women journalists.

What review suggests is that the safety of the journalists and the journalistic standards overall in the world and in India as well has deteriorated overtime in an alarming rate. The working conditions the journalists were exposed could no longer be considered safe which stands as an obstacle while performing their journalistic duties which ultimately affects the press freedom. On the other hand, women journalists while being exposed to the same challenges the male counterpart experience also had to deal with sexual harassment in the field and in the work place. If this trend continues, India could very well lose few more places in the Press Freedom Index in the coming years which puts a big question mark on the direction the nation's media is heading which acts as the fourth pillar of democracy.

## OBJECTIVES

- To study how women journalists, perform their journalistic duties while being subjugated to physical, mental and sexual harassments.
- To find out the challenges women journalist experience while reporting a story.
- To study the working environment, work pressure and work life balance among the women journalist.

## METHODOLOGY:

This particular research utilised survey method to collect both qualitative and quantitative data from women journalists working in Arunachal Pradesh. Purposive sampling method was used and structured interview schedule was implemented for gathering of information from women journalists working in both electronic and print media.

## FINDINGS:

From the analysis of the responses gathered through the use of survey, it is found that women journalist usually found it unsafe to venture out for reporting at night, mostly after 9 pm. It was also found that in circumstances when they do have to venture out at night for covering news stories, they are usually accompanied by a male assistance. Few other responses on what time they usually felt unsafe to go out for reporting included riots and bandh call.

The study indicates that majority of the women journalists (63.64%) fear for their physical security while reporting. It is also evident from the responses gathered that women journalist have been victims of both physical and verbal abuse while reporting from the field. In regards with sexual harassments that exist in the work place, a few responses mentioned how such experiences have led to abandonment of internship from the media organisation and the existence of sexual harassment while working in the field. Similar sentiments have been expressed when asked about obstacles and constraints one faces in their work environment. Majority of the women journalists talked about the constant barrage of verbal abuse and trolling that exist in the virtual space. Comments regarding the

appearances of the reporter, sexualization of the person taking precedence over the work, lack of trust and confidence on women journalist for covering hard news are among the few responses gathered. Most of the women journalist (63.64%) feels that they are more vulnerable to physical, mental and sexual attack than their male counterpart/colleague.

In regards with the establishment of a support system for the safety and security of women journalist by the media organisation or government, more than half (54.55%) of the respondents said that they are unaware of any support system while the rest mentioned about “SOFJO project” (Safety of Female Journalist Online) which is an online project launched for the working women journalists. Other support system that caters to the needs of women journalist and their safety has been put in place by The Arunachal Times in the form of Internal Complaints Committee (ICC) for their employees, which looks into the complaints of sexual harassments or other complaints pertaining to women in their work space. Arunachal Pradesh Union of Working Journalists (APUWJ) also established a Gender Council which also caters to complaints of women journalists in the work place. In addition to the Internal Complaints Committee and the Gender Council, Arunachal Press Club (APC) also held a One day interactive Mental Health cum Gender sensitisation programme and workshop with Psychologist exclusively for journalists for coping with stress and for better state of mind and mental health.

## CONCLUSION:

Media has an immense role to play. A nation's well being is directly connected with the way media functions. The nation, its independence and its democracy owes a lot to the media of the past while the present reels under immense pressure, put things into perspective in regards with the press freedom and the safety of the journalist, especially women journalist. In a field that is predominantly male, women successfully created a space for itself. In the context of women journalist in Arunachal Pradesh, this paper tried to study the challenges they go through while exercising their journalistic duties. Through this study, it can be pointed out that women journalists go through the same difficulties and obstacles as the male counterpart, but with the added element of sexual harassment both in the office and while reporting and now in the virtual world as well. Due to which, women journalists are restricted to certain time frame that they feel the safest while reporting out in the field. Though there are committees being established to tackle issues if it ever arises in regards with harassments and other work related complaints pertaining to women journalist, it is felt that more workshops needs to be organised on a regular basis to sensitise people on the etiquettes while interacting with women journalists in the field and in the office environment.

However, more extensive studies can be done to craft out a suitable environment for women journalist working in Arunachal Pradesh, as women journalists are not only targeted for being a journalist but also for being a woman.

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