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Vains of Ink and Blood: The Cost of Truth for Fearless Women

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Abstract: ***In a world where information holds the power to change reality, mass media and journalists play a crucial role in uncovering the truth and upending the power system. Among them, women journalists stand out not only for their journalistic prowess but also for their courage in the face of challenging circumstances. Women journalists bring diverse perspectives to the newsroom, which ensures more comprehensive coverage of a news story that helps highlight issues that are often overlooked or underrepresented such as gender-based violence, human rights abuses, and social inequalities. Despite their significant contributions they have to face gender discrimination in the workplace, unequal pay, limited opportunities, and even have to sacrifice their life to reveal the truth. The primary objective of this research paper is to examine the tragic incidents such as murder or harassment of women journalists and discuss the case study. Based on existing secondary data a qualitative analysis will be conducted on this paper. The findings of this exploratory study will highlight the critical role journalists play in exposing corruption, violence or injustice. In order to maintain press freedom and protect individuals who challenge power systems, this study will shed light on the need for their security as well as the protection of journalists, especially women.***
Keywords: Women journalist, security, murder, protection, human rights, injustice

I. INTRODUCTION

Journalism, the fourth pillar of democracy responsible for providing accurate, and timely information. Journalists serve as the watchdog of society, hold power to account, expose wrongdoing, and bring light on uncovered stories. By keeping the public informed they foster transparency and accountability. They dig deep into the operation of major organizations such as government as well as corporations and reveal malfeasance that could have an impact on society as a whole. They have the medium to give voice to marginalized underrepresented communities and highlight their struggles and injustice. Through the most influential medium, media persons question poverty, discrimination, human rights, and abuse advocate social changes and encourage policy intervention that can improve people's lives. Even though they play a crucial role, they have to encounter numerous challenges, and threats while chasing the truth such as political pressure, online harassment, and even physical violence. With the risk of life, they cover sensitive topics that sometimes lead to murders like journalist Shubhranshu Choudhary's case. The digital age added more obstacles to their list, particularly spreading fake news and misinformation. It is more difficult for women to cope with because, in addition to the countless issues that come with being a woman, being a journalist and looking into serious misconduct is more difficult. The advancement of society depends on the participation of women in journalism, particularly when it comes to promoting women's rights. Women journalists have been at the forefront of reporting on human rights violations, gender-based violence and social inequalities. They frequently conduct risky investigative reporting in areas of conflict and political repression. They are often targeted by cyberbullying, which can range from sexism to misogynistic comments, including murder and rape threats. This online assault has taken heinous forms in India, where images of female journalists have been altered to resemble the bodies of porn stars, and their phone numbers and addresses have been made public. Because bullies can remain anonymous online, it's hard to find and prosecute them. According to a recent UN survey, 72% of female journalists reported experiencing bullying and harassment simply doing their daily jobs. The risk extends beyond the digital sphere, like every other sector, women media persons have to deal with discrimination in the workplace such as less remuneration, and limited career advancement, based on their gender socially as well. Deep-rooted prejudices and preconceived beliefs about women's capabilities may be passed over for important assignments, promotions, and leadership positions. A woman journalist usually makes less money, even in roles that are similar to men's; this discrepancy can be demoralizing and contributes to inequality across many industries. Media houses mostly force women to cover soft news topics, such as lifestyle or fashion, rather than hard news like politics, crime, or international affairs. But there are so many prominent female reporters, who tackle their job efficiently and work on politics, crime and other hard news beats. Working in conflict zones or investigating corruption and crime are at high risk of physical violence for them.

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Violent attacks are frequently directed towards Indian women journalists on social media, including Arfa Khanum, Rana Ayub, Neha Dixit, Bhasha Singh, Barkha Dutt, Sagarika Ghosh, Saba Naqvi, and Nidhi Razdan. The murders of journalists such as Gauri Lankesh in India and Daphne Caruana Galizia in Malta exemplify the dire risks facing those challenging powerful interests. In particular, digital media has served as a platform for criticizing female journalists for their pursuit of the truth. However, the more violence they inflict, the more the women come forward with increasingly significant and groundbreaking narratives. Sujata Madhok, General Secretary of the Delhi Union of Journalists (DUJ) shared *"The situation of women in Indian Media is paradoxical. On the one hand, there are far more women in the media than ever before…Yet their very success makes them targets of attack, particularly on social media."*

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVE

The problem statement and the importance of the studies have guided the paper's objective. The main objective of the study is to discuss what are the challenges women journalists have to deal with while uncovering the truth, and sometimes it takes their lives.

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Dhiman (2023) discussed in his study *"Role of Women Journalists in the Development of India"* the significant and increasing presence of women in the field of journalism, particularly in India. Women play a vital role in influencing society's consciousness through their work in a variety of media outlets, including print, television, radio, and online journalism. As well as their experiences and viewpoints on determining how topics, such as women's rights, are discussed and comprehended. The researcher also highlighted the few most famous women journalists, Prabha Dutt, a trailblazing journalist in India, who broke barriers by becoming the first woman chief reporter for a major national newspaper, the Hindustan Times, in 1964 and her daughter Barkha, who now a prominent journalist herself, working across various media formats. Prabha Dutt demonstrated that talent and drive are more significant than gender when she insisted on being employed and went on to succeed, opening opportunities for women in the media industry. Homai Vyarawalla, Sucheta Dalal, and Pratima Puri were a few other inspirational examples of efficient women in the field of journalism.

Rajeev, S, & Chembukkavu (2019) in their paper *"Work and Life of Women Journalists: A Study with Special Reference to Kerala"* explored the challenges faced by women media professionals in Kerala, India. The study focused on the personal and professional challenges imposed on female journalists, including physical, psychological, and security issues, as well as legal support systems and wage disparities. Women journalists face both physical and psychological challenges in their profession. Oral harassment is a common issue faced by female journalists, with most respondents reporting experiencing it in the workplace. Female media professionals face gender discrimination in news production, with important beats often assigned to men. They are aware of legal systems to enhance their profession but often do not receive support from their institutions. Although they are aware that legal systems might help them in their career, but they frequently do not receive support from their institutions. They are sometimes considered incapable or insufficient for challenging assignments due to their gender. Many media industries reject women at the time of recruitment, the management needs to decide the ratio of male and female workers.

Posetti, Shabbir, Maynard, Bontcheva, & Bontcheva (2021) analyzed in the Research Discussion Paper *"The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists"* the global problem of online violence against women journalists, using the cases of Maria Ressa and Carole Cadwalladr to illustrate the issue. Online violence against them is highly gendered, with sexist, misogynistic, and explicit abuse being common. Racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic abuse also intersects with misogyny. Attacks are often designed to undermine the journalists' professional credibility and public trust in their reporting. Disinformation tactics are frequently used. High-level political leaders and other state actors are identified as major instigators of the attacks. Social media platforms, especially Facebook, are the main enablers of online violence, despite their stated commitments to enhancing journalists' safety. The sustained online violence creates an enabling environment for offline harassment, including legal threats and attacks. It also has significant psychological impacts on the journalists. Both Ressa and Cadwalladr are high-profile investigative journalists who have reported extensively on disinformation, political scandals, and the role of social media platforms in enabling the spread of false information. Typical slurs included labelling her a 'liar' or claiming she is talking 'crap', 'bullshit', or 'bollocks' to insinuate her journalism is not to be trusted. Many interviewees discussed feeling compelled to adapt their offline movements and increase their physical security in response to serious online threats. Some have even moved multiple times with a significant impact on their families.

Pain (2021) in her journal *"'It's Hard. It's even Harder when You Are a Woma'n: Indian Women Political Journalists in Print and Online Media"* explored the experiences of Indian women political reporters, looking at how they deal with organizational and gender restrictions at work due to the deeply patriarchal nature of newsrooms and newsgathering experiences.

It also examined the part gender plays in covering a difficult story in journalism. Gender discrimination in Indian journalism has led to misogyny and gender harassment, as well as organizational constraints preventing women from speaking out. Women journalists are rarely considered good enough to run the department and the political leadership has encouraged a patriarchal mindset. Corruption and gender inequality are rampant in India. Gender-specific issues are rarely highlighted, and women journalists face scrutiny and bias in their work. Social expectations and norms further hinder their progress, and they often face biased reporting and unequal treatment. The lack of women in leadership positions and the influence of large corporations in the media industry contribute to these challenges. Women are trolled online, especially when they cover politics, and organizations offer little protection. This has created a shrinking space for dissenting voices. Organizations need to develop policies to address this prejudice, as the mere presence of women is not enough.

Sivakumar (2018) discussed in his study *"Women and journalism: commitment and challenges"* how women journalists are often targets of threats, intimidation, physical violence, and even murder because of their reporting. There are a lot of young women working in traditional media systems, but there is still no clear path for development and progression. Although this issue has been debated for more than a generation, the facts indicate that many Western countries are strongly averse to change. Male ownership of private property in society transforms women's social labor into labor for an individual and ultimately into service capital. The relationship between feminism and the media is covered in this study, along with how the media may contribute to gender sensitization. The glass ceiling in journalism academics, the availability of women at cheaper salaries, and the perception of women as being better suited for mothering tasks are all reasons for the rise in female representation in the news media. By examining the current gendered organizational structure, gender-related components of the curriculum, training methods provided, and the attitudes of journalism educators and graduates, the researcher examines the role of journalism educators in producing gender-sensitive journalists.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This exploratory research paper followed the qualitative method to analyze 3 cases of women journalists from India. The following are the selected cases,

1) Soumya Vishwanathan
2) Malini Subramaniam
3) Gauri Lankesh

V. CASE ANALYSIS

A. Soumya Vishwanathan

Soumya Vishwanathan was a promising 25-year-old news producer at Headlines Today (India Today). Born on April 30, 1983, Soumya was known for her dedication, passion, and journalistic integrity. On the night of September 30, 2008, her life was tragically cut short, sparking a case that highlighted the dangers journalists, especially women, face in urban environments. That night she was returning home after her late-night shift around 3:30 AM and was driving her Maruti Suzuki Zen towards her home in South Delhi. Around 3:45 AM, her car was found by a passerby on Nelson Mandela Road in Vasant Kunj, she had been shot in the head, and her car had veered off the road, coming to a stop after hitting the divider. Delhi Police's preliminary investigation has said that death could be the result of a car accident. However, a closer examination revealed a bullet wound, indicating that she had been shot and murdered. Nearly a year later, in September 2009, the Delhi Police apprehended five men connected to a string of high-profile crimes in the city, marking a significant development in this murder investigation. The suspects—Ravi Kapoor, Amit Shukla, Ajay Sethi, Baljeet Malik, and Ajay Kumar—were found to be part of a criminal gang responsible for several murders and robberies. And during interrogation, Ravi Kapoor confessed to shooting Soumya Vishwanathan. According to the confession, this group was instigated for carjacking and robbery in Delhi. They were looking for potential targets to rob, spotted Soumya driving alone, and decided to follow her. When Soumya did not stop her car despite their attempts to intercept her, Ravi Kapoor fired a shot at her. The legal proceedings of this case were long and arduous. The case went through several stages, with the accused frequently attempting to delay the process. The Delhi Police charged the five men under various sections of the Indian Penal Code, including charges of murder, robbery, and criminal conspiracy. In 2023, after a prolonged legal battle spanning nearly 15 years, a Delhi court finally delivered its verdict. Ravi Kapoor, Amit Shukla, and Baljeet Malik were found guilty of murder, while Ajay Sethi and Ajay Kumar were acquitted due to lack of evidence. The court sentenced Ravi Kapoor and Amit Shukla to life imprisonment, while Baljeet Malik received a lighter sentence for his lesser involvement in the crime, which was later suspended and granted bail by the Delhi High Court. The murder of Soumya Vishwanathan had a profound impact on the journalistic community in India and beyond.

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It highlighted the vulnerabilities faced by journalists, especially women, and underscored the need for better safety measures for those working late-night shifts.

B. Malini Subramaniam

The renowned journalist Malini Subramaniam, who was attacked and harassed for her work, was renowned for her courageous reporting on violations of human rights. Her reporting was based in Chhattisgarh, India's conflict-ravaged Bastar region, and frequently brought attention to the crimes done against the native Adivasi populations by state and non-state entities both. She worked for the independent news portal Scroll.in, primarily on human rights violations, state excesses, and the socio-economic struggles of marginalized communities in Bastar. Her articles exposed the harsh realities faced by the Adivasis at that time, including police brutality, illegal detentions, and the exploitation of natural resources. Other journalists who reported on these issues, especially those who criticized the government's actions, frequently become targets for harassment and violence. So, she was subjected to constant police surveillance. Police frequently visited her home under the pretext of maintaining law and order, clearly intended to intimidate her. The police were allegedly involved in the social boycott that was planned against her by members of a local vigilante group known as Samajik Ekta Manch. They gathered support from the locals to shun her and accused her of being a Maoist sympathizer. On February 7, 2016, her home was attacked, stones were thrown at her house, breaking windows, and pamphlets were distributed in her neighbourhood, labelling her an enemy of the state. This physical intimidation was a direct threat to her safety and an attempt to drive her out of the region. The escalating threats and lack of support from local authorities left her in a precarious position. Despite her attempts to seek justice and protection, the hostile environment forced her to leave Bastar. This was a significant blow to press freedom, as it silenced a critical voice reporting on human rights abuses in one of India's most conflict-ridden areas. Malini's work and the threats she faced received recognition from several international bodies. She was awarded the International Press Freedom Award by the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) in 2016 for her courageous reporting. Despite being forced to leave Bastar, she continued her advocacy for human rights and press freedom. She has been vocal about the challenges faced by journalists in India, particularly those covering sensitive issues in conflict zones.

C. Gauri Lankesh

Gauri Lankesh, a prominent Indian journalist, and editor, was an outspoken critic of right-wing extremism, social injustices, and communal politics. Her fearless journalism and unwavering commitment to secularism and social justice made her a beloved figure among progressives and a target for those she criticized. She was the editor of "Gauri Lankesh Patrike," a Kannada-language weekly known for its bold and critical stance on various socio-political issues. On the evening of September 5, 2017, Gauri Lankesh was returning home to her residence in Rajarajeshwari Nagar, Bangalore. At around 8:00 PM, she parked her car outside her home and began walking towards her front door. Two assailants on a motorcycle approached her. One of them, armed with a 7.65 mm country-made pistol, fired multiple shots at her. The Karnataka government swiftly formed a Special Investigation Team (SIT) to probe the murder. The SIT, headed by Inspector General of Police (IGP) B.K. Singh began its investigation by analyzing CCTV footage from Gauri's residence and surrounding areas. A member of the Hindu Yuva Sena, Naveen Kumar was arrested in February 2018. His interrogation provided leads that helped the SIT identify other suspects. A former convener of the Hindu Janajagruti Samiti (HJS), Amol Kale was arrested in May 2018. He was believed to be one of the masterminds behind this conspiracy. Arrested in June 2018, Waghmare was identified as the shooter who fired the shots at Gauri Lankesh. Sucheth Kumar, Rajesh Bangera, Amit Degwekar, and Ganesh Miskin were arrested for their alleged involvement in providing logistical support, firearms training, and planning the murder. The trials attracted significant media attention and highlighted the broader issues of press freedom and the safety of journalists in India. Gauri Lankesh's murder highlighted the increasing dangers faced by journalists in India, particularly those who challenge powerful political and ideological interests. The case brought attention to the urgent need for stronger legal protections for journalists and more robust institutional mechanisms to safeguard press freedom and hold perpetrators of violence accountable.

VI. CONCLUSION

However, a media person's work often comes with significant risks, including harassment, discrimination, and violence, they play a critical role in shaping public discourse, uncovering hidden truths, and speaking for people. Women journalists, especially those investigating sensitive topics, should have access to personal security measures. Media organizations should provide comprehensive training on risk assessment and management to them. Journalists should be equipped with the skills to evaluate threats and take appropriate precautions to ensure their own safety. And establishing clear emergency protocols is crucial.

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They should be aware of whom to contact and what steps to take in case of immediate danger. Media organizations should have contingency plans for evacuating journalists from high-risk areas. With the rise of online harassment and cyber threats, women journalists must be trained in cybersecurity best practices. Besides governments should enact and enforce laws specifically targeting harassment and violence against media professionals, this includes both online and offline threats, with severe penalties for perpetrators. Law enforcement agencies must be trained to handle cases involving journalists with sensitivity and urgency. Perpetrators of violence and harassment must be held accountable through swift legal action. With that ensuring equal opportunities for career advancement is essential. Media organizations should take responsibility for implementing policies to promote gender equality in promotions, leadership roles, and prestigious assignments. Also, the safety and well-being of women journalists are paramount for a free and fair press. Ensuring their physical and digital security, providing robust legal protections, and offering comprehensive support systems are essential steps toward creating a safer and more equitable environment for all journalists.

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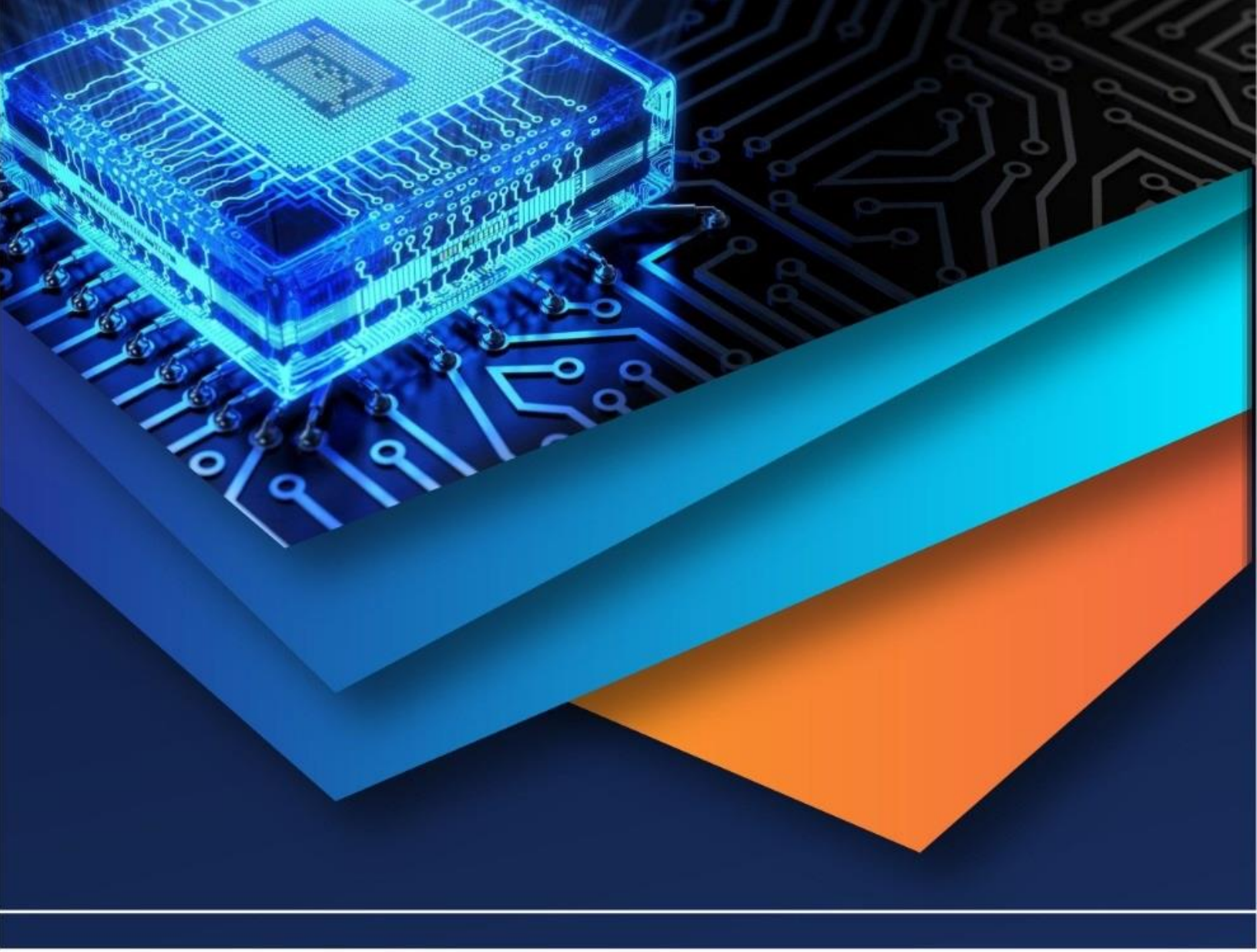
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