

Feminist Media Theory and Women Journalists: Obstacles and Opportunities in Tamilnadu Regional News Media

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Abstract

Journalism played a significant influence in democratic nations like India. Journalists from all over the world have utilized the power of the pen to effectively address both local and global issues. Although gender equality is a fundamental human right that was brought to light when the media played a significant role in society. However some studies have found that the media is one of the business sectors where women experienced the highest level of gender inequality (IWFMF, 2011; GMMP, 2020). Based on this, the current study focused on gender issues in Chennai's regional media industry from the perspective of feminist media theory. This study primarily focuses on the challenges faced by women journalists and their progress. The researcher employed a mixed-method approach including a survey and in-depth interviews to collect data. Journalists of both genders made up the study's sample.

Keywords: Women Journalist, Feminist media theory, Gender issues and Women rights.

Introduction

Media is the one of the booming industry in India, according to FICCI, the Indian Media & Entertainment industry has been hitting new milestones and has stepped onto a matured phase at a growth rate of 12% CAGR. The purpose of the media is to facilitate communication among people by providing information, education, and entertainment. In the field of information, the news media plays a significant role in educating, raising public awareness, and entertaining the public. The general public has been of the mind that the news medium promotes transparency and democracy in governance; News media can change society; and the people who are involved in the news and current affairs may be very knowledgeable, and their news, views, and perspectives are very accurate and trustworthy. This is how common people believed about the news media.

With that intention, people have attractions on the media industry and youngsters more interested with media industry especially on news, which increasing students' strength in journalism programs all over the country. In the last two decades, more female students have been enrolling in journalism courses and enter the field as well. Yet their identity and representations are quite limited. So the goal of the current study is to determine, the nature of the women journalist profession and also discusses the role of women in the news as well as their sustainability in the field.

Background of the study

In India, during British period, there were lot of women journalist wrote for the periodicals, and news

papers. Several Indian women edited women's journals since 1850s and their role had been nothing but exemplary. These journals emerged from several cities and editorials reveal many unknown historical facts regarding the long journey towards freedom. Hemant Kumari Devi was the first women journalist in Hindi (1988), the editor of Journal for women 'Sugrihini' which was published from Allahabad. The opening lines of here editorial in the first issue of her journal Sugrahini, had a particular message that was "O my dear sisters, open your doors & see who has come to visit you. This is a sister of yours called Sugrihini. She has come to you because you are oppressed and illiterate and in bondage..... Welcome her & bless her. May the mother help you and Sugrihini..." (SARCAJC, n.d).

SARCAJC (n.d) noted an event, that honoured women journalist who is worked in British period. "Asian Age (31/3/2009) carried a photograph with a caption- 'Somnath with achiever'. It goes on to elaborate - "Lok Sabha speaker Somnath Chatterjee with Vidya Munshi, the first women journalist of Kolkota, after giving her the women achiever's award during a programme organised by FICCI Ladies Organisation in Kolkota. It's good to honour a veteran journalist like Vidya Munshi, but she was certainly not 'first woman journalist of Kolkota". There were numerous women journalists in Kolkota before VidyaMunshi. To cite a few, in April 1870, Mokshodayani took out the first issue of BangaMahila which was stood up for women's rights and pledged it would fight for women's causes. Swarnkumari Devi was the sole editor of Bharti from 1885-1905, 1909-1915. Her daughter Sarla Devi was also involved in this venture... (SARCAJC, n.d).

In India, Women entering mainstream of reporting during 1940s and 1950s as well. Some of the women started a journal especially for women. When compare with past, in the last two decades, national literacy rate is increased, and in the area of higher education, women enrolment was very high (AISHE, 2021). As well as women forces were involved in all sectors including media industry. Even in the 21st century, a lot of changes in the gender status of education, and the journalism in India is still predominately a male-dominated field, particularly in the field of news reporting.

There are some study exposed that there were a gender inequality presenting in the media industries in all over the world. According to a study in global level survey by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF, 2011), mentioned that only 32% of the full-time journalism employees in the 522 companies surveyed are women. The study also revealed about the gender inequality in the region of Asia and Oceania which includes 10 nations such as Australia, Bangladesh, China, Fiji, India, Japan, New Zealand, Pakistan, Philippines and South Korea. The study mentioned that in those countries, women's absence is seen most profoundly at the top of companies in the key policy and decision-making positions. Women are only around a fifth (21.6%) of those in governance (i.e., boards of directors), and barely present (9.2%) in top management (i.e., publishers, chief executive officers and chief financial officers). Women's representation is also minuscule (13.4%) in senior-level management, where decisions about hiring, story assignments, story content and other important decisions related to who will occupy journalistic positions are made. Women are similarly under-represented (13.1%) in middle management, where senior editors and chiefs of correspondents are found. The highest percentages of women in the region's newsrooms are found in the occupations associated with reporting and editing, namely senior-level (32.1%) and junior level (24.3%) professional positions. But even here, men dominate. And most newsrooms (89%) appear to have policies guaranteeing maternity leave, and just over half (57%) also allow paternity leave. About half (55%) of the companies assure women will get the same jobs back after maternity leave. Two thirds (67%) of companies prohibit sexual harassment, but only about half (51%) have some kind of broader policy guaranteeing gender equality.

The study also mentioned that there is considerable variation among nations. For example, Bangladesh and Chinese companies have adopted few policies to establish gender equality. By contrast, Fiji, Australia, India and Japan have made strong strides in adopting gender policies (IWMMF, 2011).

According to another study Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP, 2020), found that the global situation is gradually getting better. The statistics, however, portray American media as a beacon of inclusivity and equality. The proportion of female news sources and subjects climbed from 16% to 24% in newspapers, 15% to 24% in radio news, 21% to 26% in TV news, and 25% to 27% online between 1995 and 2020, across 120 nations.

The way the pandemic was covered in publications like The New York Times and USA Today was particularly shocking, with WMC claiming that women made up only 5% of the professionals in the fields of science, technology, engineering, and maths.

The recent study in India, conducted by Bhatia, Chawla, and Kumar (2021) and team on gender representation in Indian newsrooms is evident for the under representation by women in the news room. This study found that, only one in five panellists across prime time debates in English is a woman. Half of the debates have male-only panellists. Across newspapers, three in every four news articles are authored by a male journalist. Gender representation of women is far better for online portals as compared to newspapers or television debates. Women author less than a fifth of all articles on Sports. Majority of articles with a gender focus are written by women. There are some criticism on the number of women representations in the news room are meaningless. Minic (2007) criticized that increasing the number of women in the media without making more room for subjects of particular importance for women is one kind of compromises when we talk about feminism.

GMMP (2020) mentioned in their study that “whether the gender of the reporter matters for the gender quality of stories is an often-debated issue. In 2015 and 2020, we have seen a clear gender difference in source selection; there is greater gender diversity of sources in stories by women than in those by men reporters. Story quality from a gender perspective tends to be marginally higher in the output of women journalists, in terms of likelihood to clearly challenge gender stereotypes to raise gender (in) equality issues and to make reference to legislation or policy that promotes gender equality or human rights. Even with the gender difference, it is important not to lose sight of the overall decline or stagnation across time on these indicators in the output of all journalists, women and men alike”.

According to Tomar (2011), now media is all about electronic and visual production media. When news organizations ignore and stereotype women, they contribute to continuing misunderstanding and conflict in the world. News organizations include women but fail to pay attention to cultural differences and specific contexts. The hierarchical media structure can make its victim both male and female but female journalists are at the most vulnerable end.

Tomar (2011) also mentioned in his study that while studying the job insecurity as contract system prevails makes circumstances so volatile and in favour of the media-houses. Contract system snatches all liberty to negotiate for rights as a worker that put women journalists as in more vulnerable end. The language divide is vast between Hindi and English print media. Hindi journalism is taken inferior to English print media that affect the status of women journalists also. The same study found that sexual harassment is part of work culture in media organizations but women do not know how or, for a wide variety of reasons. Choose not to do anything about it. As organizations have no functional body to deal with these incidents. According to the researcher arguments, if the media organization cannot work to abide by guidelines then its credibility is in danger.

Rattan,A., Chilazi,S., Georgeac,O., & Bohnet,I. (2019) also mentioned in their article that around the world, women are far less likely than men to be seen in the media. As subjects of stories, women only appear in a quarter of television, radio, and print news. In a 2015 report, women made up a mere 19% of experts featured in news stories and 37% of reporters telling stories globally. As behavioral scientists studying women's underrepresentation in the workplace, we know that this gender-imbalanced picture of society can reinforce and perpetuate harmful gender stereotypes. It is clear that the media must change how it reflects the world.

That changes started from BBC, according to Rattan,A et. al, (2019), Journalists and producers across the BBC have been tackling the gender representation issue by rethinking whom they put in front of the camera, with the goal of achieving 50:50 gender representations every month. In order to understand how the 50:50 Project worked and what its effects have been, they conducted over 35 hours of interviews with more than 25 journalists, producers, presenters, and top leaders at the BBC. They've found three key lessons that are relevant for any manager or leader aiming to shake up the status quo and improve diversity, equality, and inclusion in their organization.

Previously BBC trained journalist for not only gender sensitivity including for diversity and equality. Minic (2007) mentioned that in her study, the BBC often appears as a paradigm of public television and its journalists are invited to train activists and journalists in their (Belgrade) region. Media Diversity Institute (MDI) is also very active in their region through seminars on media diversity. As well as Minic mentioned that 'The BBC guide for journalist's lists under-representation, stereotyping and offensive terminology as problems that are shared by all groups historically discriminated against. Obstacles to the improvement of representations of these groups involve restrictive measures repressing offensive representations as well as measures encouraging broader and more diverse representation. All of these guidelines refer to women too, but representations of women are additionally regulated in sections on 'Taste and Decency' and 'Violence'. When it comes to under-representation of women, the guide specifically states that older women are very scarcely represented in the media, and that non-sexist language is one of the ways to avoid supporting the attitude that certain activities are only reserved for one of the sexes. Guidelines on 'Taste and Decency' and 'Violence', furthermore, demand non-stereotypical representations of female and male sexual behaviour, the same standards in portraying female and male nudity, and paying particular attention to representations of violence against women. Guidelines warn that programmes that contain representations of violence against women and children require great care and that it is forbidden to encourage the idea that women should be exploited or degraded through violence, or that women are, except in exceptional cases, willing victims of violence' (Minic, 2007).

Feminist Media Theory:

Feminist media theory relies on feminist theory. It addresses power. Feminist media theory takes gender seriously – as a factor that structures identity and experiences – without assuming permanent or static gender differences. An assumption that long dominated feminist media theory was this: if women controlled media production, content would be different and better. Intersectional theorizing on sexuality has largely ignored women of color, sexual minorities, and people marginalized by physical or cognitive (in) ability. Feminist media theories and the entire field of feminist media studies are increasingly explicit about the importance of international and multidisciplinary work seriously addressing media convergence and globalization (Steiner, 2014).

According to Zoonen (1998), women embrace a different ethics: Female journalists feel they show more respect to their readers and their readers' needs than do their male colleagues. They also scorn the detachment and insensitivity in many of their male colleagues, believing they are hiding behind the idea of objectivity to exclude all compassion and humanity that one should bring to journalism. (Zoonen, L., 1998, p. 36 cited in Steiner, 2014).

Feminist media activism:

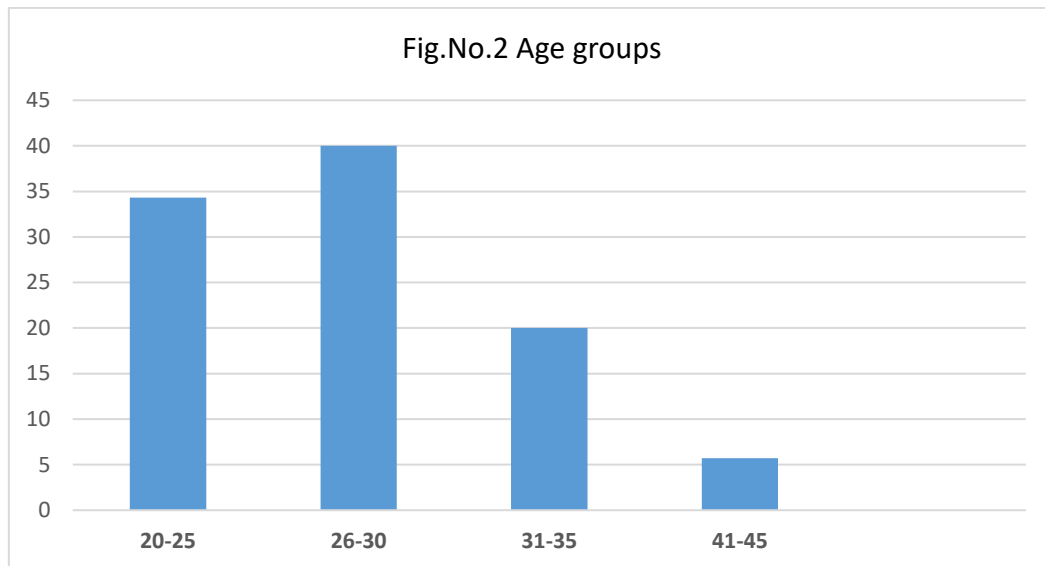
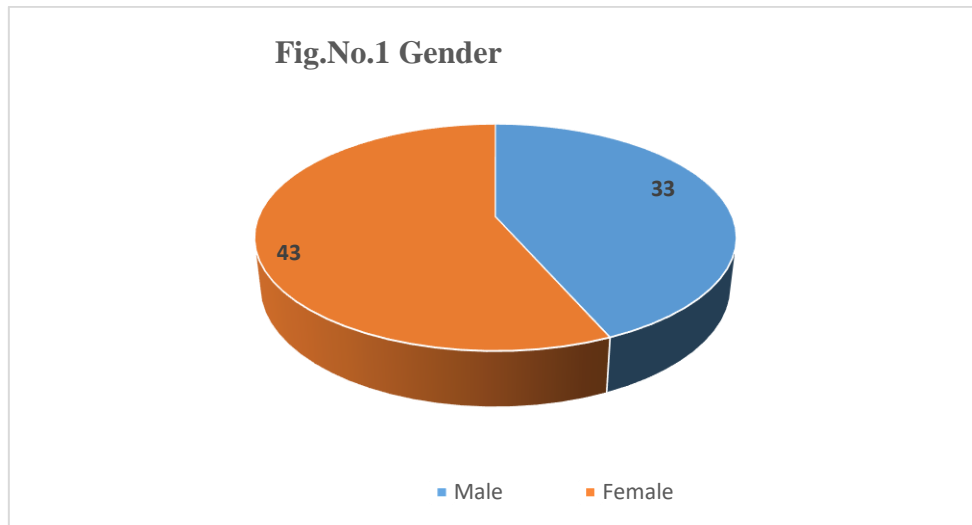
The goal of feminism is a social change of unequal relations between men and women (Minic, 2007). According to Minic (2007), the above statement is one of the rare statements around which there is a consensus not only among feminist theoreticians and activists, but also among the many diverse schools of feminist theory. At the same time she had a criticism on theoretician and an activist served in Belgrade, Serbian country that activists don't read and so don't have the knowledge that is also required for activism, whereas theoreticians are not committed to 'really' helping women and taking part in protests. The first lack theory and the second one is practice.

Also she mentioned in her study is about the criticism on the feminist media activism. Awareness of the environment in which one acts is also important in order to avoid certain unwanted compromises. Some of the frequent compromises when the media is open to feminism are: approaching feminist criticism of sexual objectification of women bodies from the angle of 'decency'; increasing the number of women in the media without making more room for subjects of particular importance for women; sensationalism in covering the subject of violence against women; and representing feminism through its. Most moderate currents along with the exclusion of the more radical ones. Some of these problems are pointed out by the aforementioned theoretical criticism of feminist media activism. Based on this the researcher tries to find out the obstacles and opportunities for women in the regional news media and their reactions.

Methods

The researcher used a mixed method technique for the current study, which comprises surveys and in-depth interviews. Journalists that work with news organisation as the population and samples were chosen from a variety of Tamil news organizations in Chennai through snowball sampling. Male and female journalists participated in the survey and structured questionnaire was used to collect data. Totally 130 questionnaires were distributed, and only 76 questionnaires were received after long follow-ups. There was some non-cooperation in filling in the questionnaire, especially by senior journalists. In-depth interviews were conducted only among female respondents with semi structure questions. Nine in-depth interviews were used for the current study and those informants were not ready to reveal their identification. This study primarily focuses on the status of women in the media organization, the challenges faced by women journalists, and their progress.

Data analysis

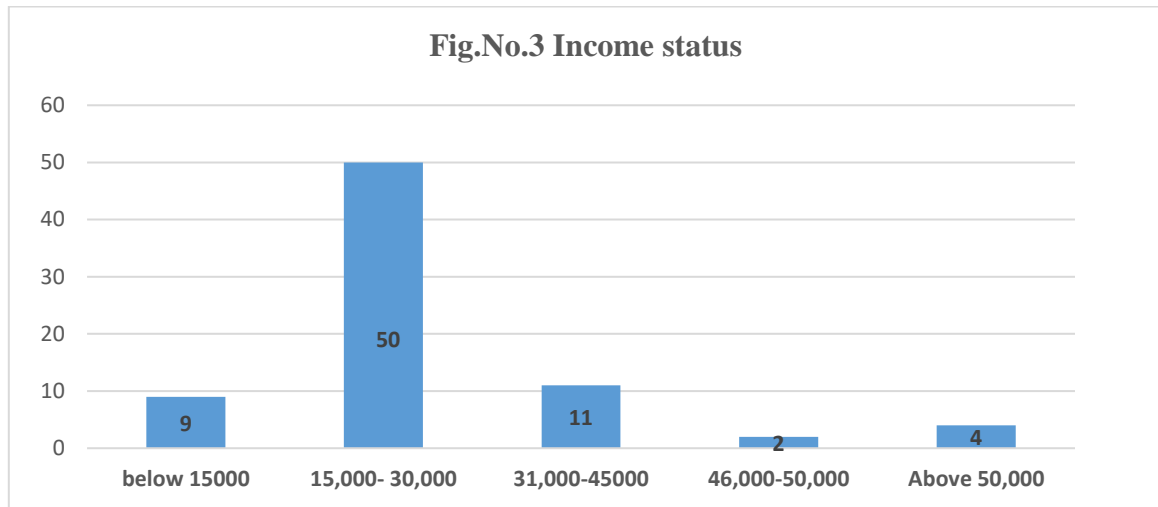


Most of the respondents were female journalist and majority of the respondents were in the age group of 20 to 30 years participated in the study.

Table No.1 Job nature of the respondents

Nature of Jobs	percentage
Permanent	62.9
Contract	17.1
Freelance/part time	20.0
Total	100.0

According to the job nature of the respondents, most of the respondents were permanent staffs in the news organisation and 20 percents were freelancers or part time journalist and 17 percent of the respondents were working on the contract basis.



Most of the respondents were coming under the income slap of rupees fifteen thousand to thirty thousands and 11 respondents were earning 31 thousands to 45 thousands, and nine respondents were come under the income slap of below Rs.15000 and only few getting 46 thousands and above.

Table No.2 News organisation

Organisation	percentage	Organisation	percentage
News paper	2.9	Youtube channels	31.4
Magazines	8.6	Website/ Online Channel	25.7
Television	25.7	Others	5.7

Table No.3 Job Profile of the respondents

Job Profile	percentage
reporting	11.4
editing	25.7
Feature/script writing	20.0
Anchoring/news reading	8.6
Producing TV programs	5.7
Editor in charge	2.9
Social media executive/ manager	2.9
Reporting and editing	8.6
Others -Content writer, graphic designer, Involved Everything	14.3
Total	100%

According to their organisations, most of the respondents working on the You Tube channels, Television channels and news websites. Very few from other new organisation like print and radios. Most of the respondents were working on the desk, like editing and writings, 11percent of the respondents were working in the field and nine percent of them were anchoring in news program or reading the news. Seven percent of the respondents were involving in the field reporting and editing as well. Some of the respondents mentioned that they have involved in every works in the news organisation.

Majority of the respondents were agreed that news organisation prefer women journalist.

Although while the majority of respondents believed that women journalists could work in a variety of fields, as well as three percent of men and 23% of women disagreed that. Just six percent of female respondents replied no, while the majority of respondents indicated that there were separate restrooms for women. In addition, 27% of respondents—both male and female—said that the company does not take into account the unique needs of women, such as those related to special leaves and restrooms. Only 20% of respondents said that women are permitted in night shifts, while 68.6% of respondents said that women are not permitted in night shifts. According to samples, concerns with self-security, access to transportation, and other issues were present for women journalists who worked night shifts.

On the question of positive bias towards women journalist, the women's perspectives are like 'Important Assignments, Good Display, and Opinions taken into consideration by bosses'. Male Journalist's perspectives on this are 'not being questioned, increase salaries and fast promotions'. But on the question of negative bias towards women journalists, the majority of the male respondents mentioned that 'No idea, and extended hours'. In the side of women mentioned that 'Stories were killed, Opinions were not considered, and Pressure on more stories and difficult assignments'.

The majority of the male and female journalists accepted that the organization provides sufficient equipment and supplies to perform their duties. Also, the majority of the respondents accepted that organizations provide them with relevant training and professional development opportunities for male and female journalists.

Only six percent of the female respondents and 20 percent of male respondents mentioned that no training and professional development opportunities. And 17% of male and 9% of female respondents were experienced intimidation threats or abuse in relation to their work.

17% of male and three percentages of female respondents were experienced with tapping, hacking, and/or digital security threats. The majority of the respondents had not taken any digital safety training to keep their data safe. The majority of respondents are not a member of any press club and they think that there is no space to raise any grievances

In-depth Interviews:

Gender as a Barrier

According to the informants, most of the news media organisation not concerned about the special needs of women, like restrooms, napkin machines, maternity leave, childcare, etc.. Most of the media organisations not ready to encourage women develop their skills, or slow progress on their promotions only after 25 years of their age.

"In my organisation, rest rooms facilities were good but napkin destruction machines or napkin vending machines were not available. Maternity leave is very rare in the media, they have to take a break and rejoin. Re-joining is not easy, if the organization does not have a vacancy for that position, you can't do the same work; again women have to start their career from the scratch. And I have to mention that in my organization they are providing six months paid maternity leave for women but they don't get any increment or promotion for that year". (Informant No. 03, TV channel).

"Any training related with technology, or special issue was mostly given for the selected persons. When we talk about the inclusion of women in technological training comparatively very low. If a woman is below 25 years, she can work or get training in any department. Women in above 25 years, most of the organization doesn't prefer or offer them training. So that option automatically going to a male journalist.

Because women will get married after that age and men can get training and serve to the organisation throughout their career” (Informant No.1, from TV Channel).

Ratio of women in the field is very low and most of the women in the news organisation were involved in desk works. Most of the organisations were not encourage women to work after 7 or 8 o'clock at night. When compared with traditional media, online media gave vast space to women for the desk work. Representation of women in decision making or leading position like senior sub-editor/Editor/ Senior Editor Post in the news organisation is very low in numbers.

“Women in ground reporting are very less, based on my experience I used to go for field reporting, when there were 20 reporters, only 1 or 2 were women reporters. When we think about field camera women are even more very low; mostly men were allotted for camera handling. Now, I'm working in the digital department. When we talk about the ratio in my department it's 50/50. Most of the media houses have second thoughts when they hire women. From my experience, the reasons given by them are, media houses can't allot shift 2 for women because of the security (they are not ready to take responsibility for women security). Organizations won't allow women journalists to stay back after 8 pm”. (Informant No.8, Website).

“From my experience women in decision making or involvement of women in interview panels are very low. We can easily count the numbers. Women can reach the position of senior sub- editor that is also very difficult”. (Informant No.3 TV Channel).

Women journalists were facing their difficulties not only from the entry level, it continues in to all their works and promotions including salaries.

“Salary discrimination was there, low level there is no difference in salary. If a woman wants to reach higher positions first, it is very difficult. Secondly, the pay difference will be there”. (Informant No.5 News paper).

Character Judgements

Working environment differs from organization to organization. According to the women journalist experience, basically reach and appreciation for the content was equally given for both female and male. But, serious news opportunities or big news opportunities were very rarely given to women journalists. Women journalist should prove them self at every time throughout her carrier. Also most of the journalist or their colleagues were not ready to accept the order of women bosses.

“From my 6 years' experience as a woman my voice will reach and be accepted by colleagues only if I'm a straight forward, less smiling and well knowledgeable person. When we compare ourselves to a male, a female has to prove herself throughout her life. Even though proving myself, as a woman journalist, when I'm going with my news ideas, if the news idea was hard news or field based news story my head first tries to allot that news for my male colleagues. After identify their ignorance or incapability only I can get permission for that news story”. (Informant No.2 Magazine).

“Working environment will differ based on the age of women, organization. I'm a sports beat writer, usually technology, automobiles; sports related beats were allotted for men. Generally, they have the mindset that women journalists have to cover and take care of women related issues, lifestyle, and celebrity based stories”. (Interviewee No.5 Newspaper)

“Menstrual time mind block is the main pressure for me in work and then getting an opportunity to work in some stories is difficult for women. Getting an opportunity to prove myself is very difficult when compared with men” (Informant No.8 website).

Women Related Content

According to the informants, the women journalist felt that, women related content were sensationalised by the news media, as well the portrayal of women also in the news were very worst manner especially in the website news.

“Srimathi 12th standard girl who committed suicide in Kallakuruchi, many media have published her name, and personal life before the police enquiry of her death and declaration of that death as suicide. I have personally worked on the field reporting and I have refused to portray that news in that way. After my resignation from that organization they changed many things in that news and re-edited those videos. In this new media era the reach of the news is based on audience opinion more important than the portrayal of women in that news’. (Informant No.1 TV channel)

“Portrayals of women in the news are the worst. After the emergence of social media the ethics of journalism has changed in many ways. For the news related with cine actress, the thumbnail of that news contains physically attractive pictures. It's so common now, at the end of the day the news media is working for the reach. Only some of the print media are still following ethics for publishing women related news” (Informant No.7 Website)

Physical and verbal harassments

According to the women journalist, harassments were definitely taking place in the media organisation. When compare with physical abuses, through messages, words, looks, were facing every day by the women journalist. If the women journalist raised the complaints against the persons, the authorities advise to compromise, sometimes the women journalist forced to quit the job, or shift to other organisations.

“Physical harassment and verbal harassment happened for women in every field, no exemption for the media. I have faced physical abuse, made a complaint about that incident to my head but no action was taken against him even though that incident happened under the surveillance of cameras. Organizations always want to have a peaceful working environment so they prefer to go for compromise or it will give advice for that woman” (Informant No.3 TV Channel).

Some of the women journalist felt that organizations were not ready to take responsibility for woman journalist security. Before lockdown some media organizations provided cab facilities for women journalists. But now, most of the media houses won't give cab facilities for late night shifts so they won't allow women to work after 8pm. Most of the media organizations always have second thoughts when they hire women candidates because of their security. The women journalist stated that ‘if a women journalist has to do field work, she has to do with her own risk’.

“I had a bad experience from one of my organizations. I faced abuse on the MTC bus when I travelled to the office for my shift. I filed a complaint against that man through online with my designation and office details. The reaction and the advice given by my organization and my own colleagues, senior persons including women was ‘withdraw that complaint, don't make this as a big issue, it's just a normal thing which is happening everyday for many women, if we want to make complaint about everything women can't come out for any work they have to stay back at their homes’. This shows their responsibility.” (Informant No.1 TV Channel)

“I have worked in 3 to 4 organizations, none of them allow women to stay after 8 pm. Organization can't take responsibility for the women so they don't even allot shift 2 (2pm -10pm)for women journalists. Women have to work in the morning shift. Organizations have Grievance cells, but they never work properly” (Informant No.7 Website).

Women Journalist were always targeted by other colleagues in the name of Dress, Skin tones, Make-ups, etc, “Most of the news organizations expect women to wear proper dress like salwar, if a woman wears jeans, T-shirt, or kurti without shawl, the male colleagues insist her to wear proper dress. On the other hand, if a woman wears a good appealing dress, ‘she tries to seek attention from others’, if a woman wears dull dress, ‘she doesn’t belong to the media industry’ this is how the comments will come from your colleagues” (Informant No.6 You Tube Channel).

“Women have to face color discrimination when she wants to come in front of a camera. If a man wants to work in front of a camera his color or appearance doesn't make any sense. If a woman wants to work in front of the camera her appearance plays a major role. Being a dark skin woman, many women didn't get an opportunity for a camera presence even in this era” (Interviewee No.3 TV Channel).

According to the women journalist, after the emergence of new media, it opens many doors for the women journalists. But the entry is different now, when they hire women they don't give much importance to their knowledge instead the importance is given to their face value and their social media participation. A senior journalist suggested that lot of women journalist have to enter in the field. When the number of women Journalists increases, women in decision making positions and inclusion of women in all departments will happen. The field of journalism for women is good and women have to enter this field in large numbers to break the stereotypes (Informant No.8 Website).

Conclusion

Based on this study the researchers conclude that, there are issues in the media organization for women. Some of the previous research and respondents also suggested that more number of women journalist should enter to the field which balance the gender equality.

According to Minic (2007), the numbers cannot change the working atmosphere for any women, if the women ready to frequent compromises when the media is open to feminism. Ex: approaching feminist criticism of sexual objectification of women's bodies from the angle of ‘decency’; increasing the number of women in the media without making more room for subjects of particular importance for women. According to Zoonen (1998), women journalists have different ethics is proved from the statement of informant no.1. For the news of Srimathi, Kallakuruchi suicide case, women journalist ready to fight and quit their jobs. This study also proved that male Journalist's perspectives on related with women issues completely differed from women perspectives.

In this Scenario, the society needs more voices from the women, for the women, and by the women. Need a social change as per feministic ideas (Feminism is a social change of unequal relations between men and Women). Women journalist should organise or gang up to create organisation to raise voices for violence against women and involve in activism to create social change.

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