

## Chapter 9

# Online Harassment of Female Journalists in Bangladesh: Forms, Reactions, and Consequences

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The online harassment of female journalists is a rising concern around the world and also in South Asia. Bangladesh, a South Asian country, recently, has experienced an increasing number of harassments against female journalists online. Various studies explored the online harassment, mostly from the Western perspectives. Scholars have argued that the online harassments may negatively affect the freedom of expression. But little is known about Bangladesh. Drawing upon feminist theory, this study investigated the experiences of online journalists in Bangladesh. The objectives were to explore the nature and forms of online harassment and to find how this experiences of harassments affect the freedom of expression of the victims. Data were collected through content analysis, semiotic analysis of the uncivil comments available in the online news feedback and in-depth interviews. Results of the study indicate that online harassment is a frequent phenomenon where the victim journalists feel vulnerable in the 'unsafe' online 'patriarchal' environment.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Online harassment of journalists is a global issue. It is one of the newest challenges to the female journalists around the world. The rising trend of harassment puts threats to female journalists in social media platforms and intimidates them into silence (International Women's Media Foundation, 2018). The usage of digital platforms, more precisely, social media has become an essential part of journalistic works today. So, journalists use various social media and other online tools for sourcing, creating and circulating

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their content, reaching audiences, broadcasting live, and for other professional works (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2017). In the age of technological convergence, multiple use of social media platforms often pose threat to digital safety challenges and online harassment risks. In the case of female journalists and media professionals, gendered assaults have been emerged as a persistent part of their daily job. The ways of the harassments encountered by female journalists are different than that of their male colleagues' as the men do not get hit for their gender identity. A critical observation reveals that perpetrators often target physical appearance, personal life, faith and religious identity, family members and personal relationships of female journalists. Sometimes the offenders make uncivil comments (comments lacking in courtesy, ill-mannered, impolite from gendered and/or other perspectives) in response to any news story reported by the journalists on online news platform. Meanwhile, sometimes the journalists experience the harassment on personal social media platforms. In extreme cases, these harassments translate into physical and direct offline threats as well. The remarks often intend to demean the intellectual meticulousness and professional qualifications of the female journalists (Adams, 2018).

The tendency of online harassment is an increasing concern for journalists in the developed countries also. According to a survey (2018) by the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) at least 70 percent of female journalists face different forms of online harassment in the United States of America (USA). Not only in the USA, threats of murder, rape, and physical violence in the comment sections of news outlets are frequent phenomenon in different parts of the world (Jamil & Muschert, 2020). For example, a research (2014) by the International News Safety Institute (INSI) describes the significances and consequences of the online harassment around the world. According to the report, different actors use online and offline harassments against female journalists and media workers to intimidate, propagate disinformation, and discredit the journalist and the news media as well. This practice has substantial consequences on victims' profession, emotion, and sense of security. The unfriendly environment is an attack on the freedom of expression globally might have the intent to mute females' voices in public sphere (Committee to Protect Journalists, 2019).

It is quite surprising that female journalists are experiencing high level of online misogyny even in many developed western countries which have high reputations for protecting human rights (Adams, 2018; Claudia et al., 2018). In a study in 2014, UK-based think tank Demos claimed that journalism is one of professions where female get more abused than that of male. The research reveals that female journalists receive approximately three times more offensive reactions than their male colleagues. Another study by International Women's Media Foundation (2018) showed that two-thirds female journalists get violent intimidations online in response to their work because of the gender identity.

The worldwide online harassment phenomena indicate that female journalists' voices have come under attacks in the most dangerous of ways which is also dangerous for democracy as it hampers the multiplicity of expressions and opinions online (Jamil, 2019a; Carlsson & Pöyhtäri, 2017).

In the context of South Asia, gendered harassment and discrimination in the media industry has long been a deep rooted problem. Therefore, in today's challenging online environment, attack aimed at female journalists is a new trend, which is growing day by day. The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), in 2017, published a safety guide titled *A Journalist's Guide to Combat Cyber Harassment in South Asia*, which explains about the online safety situation of the region. Regarding India, the document observes that in return for communicating online, the female journalists face threats of rape and murder, personal attacks, professional assaults, annoyance and gendered insults. Too often, they get 'trolled'. Altogether, these forms of online misogyny are working in silencing them and also assisted in increasing self-censorship (IFJ, 2017). According to the IFJ guide, the situations of Pakistan, Nepal, Afghanistan

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