



South Asian Women in Media
(SAWM) India
and SANHITA

**THE HIDDEN STORIES:
SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF WOMEN
JOURNALISTS IN WEST BENGAL**

March 8, International Women's Day
Kolkata

**Message from the President, South Asian Women in Media (SAWM) India**

Dear Friends,

It gives me great pleasure to launch the study, "The Hidden Story: Sexual Harassment of Women Journalists in West Bengal," on International Women's Day, 2021.

This study is the result of a collaboration between South Asian Women in Media (SAWM) India, and SANHITA, a gender resource centre based in Kolkata. SANHITA works in the area of mainstreaming gender concerns by enabling institutional accountability and systemic reforms through advocacy, research, training, development communications and issue based campaigns.

SANHITA has done the research design, documentation and analysis for this study report. SAWM's network with media houses facilitated the sampling and selection of the respondents. SAWM is a network of women journalists based in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka – in every country of South Asia. We stand for freedom of speech and expression, fair and equal representation of women in the media and equal opportunity for women in the media across the region.

SAWM India organizes digital and other platforms for dialogue between the Media, civil society and other representative bodies. To empower and equip women journalists better, SAWM India provide grants to women journalists, arrange field visits, hold national and regional meets.

SAWM India has stood by women who came forward to share their experiences in the course of the #MeToo movement in India in 2018.

I am absolutely sure that this study will contribute to the growing evidence of gender discrimination and sexual abuse that women journalists face across India. The shame is, often, hidden, preventing women from speaking up in the workplace – although that is precisely what they have joined the profession to do.

Through you, we hope that this very important issue will be discussed threadbare, that the bright light of exposure will cleanse the darkness that tarnishes us all when we hold our silence. I would like to thank SANHITA for this very important collaboration with SAWM to each of the women journalists who have participated in it, and to my friend, colleague and SAWM General Secretary Swati Bhattacharjee for shepherding this study over the past several months.

Best Wishes,

Jyoti Malhotra,

President,

SAWM India

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New Delhi, International Women's Day, 2021



**Towards Harassment Free Workplaces
Message from Director, SANHITA**

As India slips four places from 108 to 112 in the Global Gender Gap Index 2020¹ and the Female Labour Force Participation drops from 30.3% to 20.3% in 10 years to become the lowest in South Asia², the struggle for ‘safe workplaces’ for women continues. Among the multitude of reasons that keep pushing women to drop out of the workforce, sexual harassment is a significant cause, which is often unrecognized or trivialized.

Sexual harassment at workplace is complex and interspersed with factors like the operation of a gendered power differential, sexualities, sexual mores and values, role stereotypes and other inherent socio-cultural pre-conditioning. Deep set patriarchal codes and prejudices operating in society, their perpetuation in work cultures, existing myths & misconceptions and plain denial are some of the major stumbling blocks that determine the prevalence and extent of the issue.

In India, the issue of safety of women workers, which has always been an area of concern, could only be highlighted in the public domain in the early 90s. This eventually resulted in the landmark Vishaka Guidelines laid down by the Supreme Court of India in 1997, and followed by *The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal), Act 2013*. But even after all these years, several blocks remain to translate the spirit of both the Vishaka Guidelines as well as the legislation into practice. In 2018, the global #Me Too Movement brought to fore the issue of non-consensual, coercive sexually harassing behaviour as experienced by a cross section of women across work sectors. It once again brought a renewed focus on the issue of sexual harassment of women at workplace and the rights promised to them under the statutes.

Our experience shows that although sexual harassment at workplace is rampant, the reporting is minimal. Complaints are often not dealt with the requisite sensitivity or rigour. When the woman speaks out, ironically, regardless of her seniority or her position, the oft repeated pattern of retaliation is to subvert her credibility to prove that her complaint is motivated, if not false. Complex and treacherous roadblocks are common experiences forcing her to constantly question the decision to have complained in the first place. The repercussion is that women undergo serious mental, emotional and physical triggers. Many women thus prefer silence over these high costs of having dared to register a complaint.

Research on sexual harassment at workplace is inadequate. Information is more anecdotal than data based. SANHITA, with its commitment towards gender justice & gender equity, is working on the issue for the past two decades. We started our journey with *The Politics of Silence*³, one of the earliest researches in India on sexual harassment of women at workplace.

¹ World Economic Forum report December 2019

² World Bank Report June 2020

³ Published in 2001

The present study is yet another effort of SANHITA in the area of evidence based advocacy to create safe workplaces.

I take this opportunity to thank SAWM for the partnership, especially Swati Bhattacharjee, General Secretary, SAWM India for her enthusiasm. I also thank all who shared their views and experiences with us.

I thank the SANHITA team of researchers Srividhya Sainathan, Gargi Banerjee and Sirsha Gupta, special thanks Srividhya Sainathan for collating & analysing the data and writing the findings. I thank Priti Mehra for editorial support. I acknowledge assistance of Sudarshana Chakraborty and Smita Dutta.

I humbly acknowledge The Oak Foundation and Trustees of SANHITA for supporting our work.

And I dedicate the study to all the women who confided in us.

We are in the process of finalizing this Draft Report; we welcome your feedback and recommendations.

In Solidarity

Soma Sen Gupta

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International Women's Day

March 8, 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Sexual harassment is a manifestation of gender discrimination and violence against women at the workplace that upholds unequal economic and social structures thriving in an atmosphere of threat, hostility and reprisal. Sexual Harassment at Workplace (SHW) is a violation of women's human rights that adversely affects their safety, dignity, mental and physical wellbeing resulting in loss of life and livelihood opportunities and may have other negative consequences. It affects women from every social class and community; even those from the 'privileged strata' of society are not spared sexual assault at workplace in some form or other.

In the wake of the #MeToo Movement in India, when women journalists spoke out against sexual harassment they faced at work, we felt the need to take a critical look at how media organizations approach and deal with the issue.

The present study is an attempt to understand the situation of sexual harassment of women journalists and also to understand if media organizations are equal opportunity workplaces for women. The journalists spoke on the condition of anonymity. This assurance of confidentiality allowed many women, who would otherwise have remained silent, to come forward and express themselves.

The study was conducted during the period from August 2019 to June 2020 among female and male journalists and HR personnel from media houses at Kolkata and the districts of West Bengal.

The methodology adopted was a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods. It included Survey, Focussed Group Discussions and In-depth Interviews with journalists and HR personnel. The total sample included more than 130 journalists most of them at senior and mid-level positions. All journalists interviewed were working in West Bengal over a number of years, and are full time employees, retainers or contributors. The study included print and audio visual media as well as web portals.

The study is a collaborative effort between South Asian Women in Media (SAWM) India and SANHITA, a gender resource centre. While SAWM's network with media houses facilitated the sampling and selection of the respondents, SANHITA with experiences of addressing the issue of sexual harassment at workplace for over two decades, collected & analysed the data and wrote the report.

Study Findings

A Significant Proportion of Women Journalists Face Sexual Harassment at Work: Despite the stringent law the study revealed that SHW is widely prevalent in different forms. More than half the women surveyed revealed that they had faced some form of SHW during their career. Majority of the mid-career and senior journalists interviewed said that they knew of at least one instance of SHW within their organization.

Verbal Harassment was the Most prevalent: In the survey, 56% women journalists reported having faced SHW. Of these women 60% reported verbal harassment, 36% reported both verbal and physical harassment and 4% reported verbal and nonverbal (like gestures, ogling etc) forms of harassment.

Absence of SHW Policy: 36.7% of survey respondents stated that their organizations had SHW policy in place; 33.3% stated that there was no such policy. While the remaining 30% did not know whether such a policy existed in their organizations or not.

Gaps in the grievance redressal mechanism: 40% of the survey respondents stated that their organizations had Internal Committee (IC) to address complaints of sexual harassment, 29% said they had no IC; 31% were unaware of the existence of any IC.

Low Confidence in the Internal Committee: The survey reveals that the ICs inspired little or no confidence. Only 20% of the women who faced SHW had lodged a complaint. The others chose not to take any formal action. From among the complaints lodged, perpetrators were punished in only 20% cases. The very fact that a sizeable number of women did not take their complaints to IC indicated a trust deficit. During interviews and FGD, participants shared that many incidents of sexual harassment go unreported. They felt that the organizational culture greatly influenced the working and efficacy of ICs. Many respondents found the ICs non-functional or serving as puppets of the management trying to absolve male perpetrators in senior positions.

Inadequate Institutional Structure and Process to prevent SHW: Respondents during the interviews and FGDs shared that the orientation and awareness on SHW, imparted by the organizations was sporadic and adhoc in nature. Most organizations took the education of their employees lightly and without sincerity. A structured and cohesive institutional mechanism as mandated by the law was lacking in most media houses. More importantly, institutional understanding and the management will to address this critical issue is missing.

Women Journalists face backlash for Lodging a Complaint: 38.9% survey respondents revealed that they knew of instances where the aggrieved women resigned from their jobs. During interviews, respondents said that it was just not about losing livelihood, but also the trauma, hostility, and humiliation one had to undergo after lodging a complaint. The label of 'troublemaker' impacts women's future job prospects as well.

Women Photojournalists are more Vulnerable to Physical Harassment: During FGD, women photojournalists expressed that the very nature of their job made them particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment of a physical nature. In constricted spaces, it is easy for the men to touch, push or paw and blame it on the crowded environment. This is in addition to their struggle against a system that refuses to acknowledge their skills and abilities.

Discriminatory and hostile workplaces: Interviews and FGDs revealed that gender stereotypes play a significant role in determining women's assignments, responsibilities and career growth within the organizations.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- It is recommended that the SHW Act should be implemented both in letter and spirit by the news media organizations. The Act has entrusted the employer with responsibility towards prevention, prohibition and redressal of sexual harassment. Hence, their responsibility extends beyond just implementing the provisions of the Act; to displaying zero tolerance for sexual harassment and ensuring gender sensitive workplace and justice for the aggrieved. Hiding behind the excuse that "this doesn't happen here" should end.
- The **Internal Committees should be oriented to the issue, the provisions of the Act and the redressal procedure in case of sexual harassment and their capacity enhanced** for competent and effective redressal of sexual harassment grievances.
- **All women employees should be covered** by media organizations as per the Act 2013, including those who work in bureaus, in other locations, individual correspondents reporting from distant areas, or any such. The Act covers all kinds of women workers, whether regular, temporary, ad hoc or daily wage basis workers, directly or indirectly employed, paid or unpaid, contractual worker, probationer, trainee, apprentice etc. Hence no woman, regardless of the nature of her work and contract, can be denied the protection of the Act 2013. This includes all journalists (interns, freelancers, retainers and any such) as well as non-journalists (like those working in the reception, library, archive, advertising, cleaning & maintenance etc.).
- It is recommended that senior employees of media organizations, in both news rooms and management positions, should not **play down the seriousness of sexual harassment as it amounts to endorsing harassment**. Women often face retaliation and a hostile work environment after they report sexual harassment. Issuing threats, denying opportunities or any other attempts to 'punish' the woman who has lodged a complaint should be treated as a serious offence.
- **Coordinated efforts** by journalists' organizations such as the press clubs, unions, women journalists' associations and such others are recommended to work on prevention of sexual harassment at workplace. It is recommended that these bodies also conduct sensitization sessions, provide counselling, legal aid, financial aid and other support to women journalists who have lodged complaints against sexual harassment or any form of gender discrimination at work.
- **Gender audit** of media organizations is recommended at regular intervals by monitoring and independent bodies such as the Editor's Guild, Women's Commission and the result shared in public domain. The audit should review a range of factors including sensitivity

and awareness level of staff across hierarchy, the number of women employees, their positions, pay parity, career enhancement opportunities, physical infrastructure and job entitlements provided like maternity benefit, compliance with sexual harassment at workplace law among others.

- It is recommended that **assignments should not be marked by gender**. The practice of marking certain reporting beats (culture, education, fashion etc.) as ‘women's beats’ and others (politics, business, sports, crime etc.) as ‘men's beats’ by media houses perpetuates patriarchal codes and prejudices which ‘normalizes’ sexist behaviour and sexual harassment. These discriminatory practices violate the spirit of gender equality in the workplace.

শর্ত যখন অসম্মান: কী ভাবে কাজ করছে মেয়ে সাংবাদিকরা

পোশাকের উপর দিয়ে স্তনে হাত দিলে স্বক স্পর্শ করা হয় না, তাই তাকে যৌন হয়রানি বলা চলে না। বম্বে হাই কোর্টের নাগপুর বেঞ্চের এক বিচারপতি সম্প্রতি এই রায় দিয়েছেন। শুনে বাক্যহারী দেশবাসী। সুপ্রিম কোর্টের দুই বিচারপতি এমন ভাবেই এক বার দেশকে হতবাক করে বলেছিলেন, থানার মধ্যে ষোল বছরের কিশোরীর সঙ্গে দুই পুলিশকর্মীর যৌনসংসর্গ ‘ধর্ষণ’ নয়, কারণ মেয়েটির বুকে-পিঠে ক্ষতচিহ্ন মেলেনি, চঁচামেচি করতেও কেউ শোনেনি। ‘মথুরা রিপ কেস’-এ সুপ্রিম কোর্ট যখন এই রায় দিয়েছিল (১৯৭৯), তখন আমার বয়স ছিল দশ বছর। আজ আমার বয়স বাহাল। মাঝে আমার জীবনের বিয়াল্লিশ বছর কেটে গেল, কিন্তু আমার দেশ বুঝে উঠতে পারল না যৌন হয়রানি কাকে বলে, আর কী করলে তা প্রমাণ হয়। সেই জন্য এই রিপোর্ট তৈরি করেছে আমরা। যাতে দেশের মানুষের কাছে স্পষ্ট হয়, কত পরিকল্পিত ভাবে অন্যায্য হয়ে চলেছে মেয়েদের সঙ্গে। আর মেয়েরাও বোঝে যে কেবল তারাই বিশ্রী অভিজ্ঞতার শিকার হয়নি, তাদের হয়রানি, অসম্মান, এক বৃহৎ নকশার অংশ, যা মিডিয়া-সহ নানা কর্মক্ষেত্রে ছড়িয়ে রয়েছে। কেবল মেয়ে হওয়ার জন্য কর্মক্ষেত্রে আমাদের কী ধরনের অসম্মান সহিতে হয়, কত ভীতিপ্রদর্শন আর বঞ্চনাকে অতিক্রম করে কাজ করতে হয়, এই রিপোর্ট তার একটা খণ্ডচিত্র। কর্মক্ষেত্রে মহিলা সাংবাদিকদের সম্মান ও নিরাপত্তার মূল্যায়ণ করেছে এই রিপোর্ট। পশ্চিমবঙ্গের সংবাদপত্র, টিভি এবং ওয়েব-মিডিয়াতে কর্মরত সাংবাদিকদের থেকে সংগৃহীত হয়েছে এই রিপোর্টের তথ্য।

মহিলা সাংবাদিকদের সংগঠন ‘সাউথ এশিয়ান উইমেন ইন মিডিয়া (ইন্ডিয়া)’ এই রিপোর্ট তৈরির সিদ্ধান্ত নেয় ২০১৮ সালে। হাত মিলিয়েছে অসরকারি সংস্থা ‘সংহিতা,’ যা দীর্ঘ দিন কাজ করছে কর্মক্ষেত্রে যৌন হয়রানির প্রতিরোধ ও প্রতিকারের জন্য। এই দুই সংস্থা যৌথ ভাবে এই রিপোর্টটি তৈরি করেছে। ২০১৯-২০ সালে তথ্য সংগৃহীত হয় কলকাতা-সহ পশ্চিমবঙ্গের বিভিন্ন জেলা থেকে। নব্বইজন পুরুষ ও মহিলা সাংবাদিকের মধ্যে সমীক্ষা হয়, ৩৬জন মহিলা সাংবাদিকের বিশদ সাক্ষাৎকার নেওয়া হয়। এ ছাড়াও তিনটি আলোচনার আয়োজন করা হয়, প্রথমটি পুরুষ সাংবাদিকদের, দ্বিতীয়টি মহিলা ফোটা জার্নালিস্টদের এবং তৃতীয়টি জেলার মহিলা সাংবাদিকদের (এঁরা অস্থায়ী কর্মী, রিপোর্ট-পিছু টাকা পান)।

মহিলা সাংবাদিকদের অনেকে নানা দ্বিধাদ্বন্দ্ব সরিয়ে রেখে, বহু ঝুঁকি অগ্রাহ্য করে আমাদের সঙ্গে কথা বলেছেন। অনেকেই দফতরের বাইরে সাক্ষাৎকার দিয়েছেন, যাতে এমন একটি বিষয়ে কথা বলার জন্য কর্মক্ষেত্রে সমস্যা না হয়। সমীক্ষা (সার্ভে) করার জন্য কেবল ‘হ্যাঁ’-‘না’ উত্তরের প্রয়োজন থাকলেও, অনেক সাংবাদিক সেখানে থামতে পারেননি। মনের কথা উজাড় করে দিয়েছেন। কলকাতা ও জেলার পুরুষ সাংবাদিকদের অনেকে অত্যন্ত সংবেদনশীলতার সঙ্গে কথা বলেছেন। কর্মক্ষেত্রে অন্যায্য-অবিচারের প্রচ্ছন্ন নকশাটি কী ভাবে কাজ করে, সে কথা আমাদের কাছে প্রাঞ্জল করেছেন তাঁরা। এ ছাড়াও আমরা কথা বলেছি আটটি মিডিয়া সংস্থার মানব সম্পদ বিভাগের আধিকারিকদের সঙ্গে। প্রতিষ্ঠান কী চোখে যৌন হয়রানির সমস্যাকে দেখে, সেটাও ধরা হয়েছে এই রিপোর্টে।

যৌন নির্যাতন যেন সমাজের গুপ্তরোগ। তার প্রকাশ সর্বত্র, কিন্তু রোগটা যে আছে সেটা ভদ্র সমাজে উচ্চারণ করা চলে না। কেউ করলেও অন্যরা ভুরু কুঁচকোয়, যেন যে রোগের কথা বলছে সে-ই বেয়াদব। বাঁকা চোখে তাকায়—তার মানে ওরই নিশ্চয়ই ...! তবে যৌন হয়রানি আরও মারাত্মক, কারণ ব্রান্ত, বিকৃত, আধিপত্যবাদী মানসিকতা বাসা বাঁধে একজনের মনে, আর তার যন্ত্রণা সহিতে অন্যদের। আমাদের পূর্বপ্রজন্মের মেয়েদের বহু চেষ্টার পরে সুপ্রিম কোর্ট কর্মক্ষেত্রে যৌন হয়রানি নিবারণে একটি রায় দেয় (বিশাখা গাইডলাইন, ১৯৯৭), তার ষোল বছর পরে পাশ হয় যৌন হয়রানি প্রতিরোধ ও প্রতিকারের আইন (২০১৩)। আমার ২৫ বছরের কর্মজীবনের ২২ বছর অতিক্রান্ত হয়েছে এক এমন দেশে, যে দেশ কর্মরত মেয়েদের প্রতি

সহকর্মী বা উর্ধ্বতন কর্তার অশ্লীল ইঙ্গিত, কুপ্রস্তাব, বদ স্পর্শ, ধর্ষণকে ‘অপরাধ’ বলে মনে করে। আইন মনে করে, একটি মেয়েকে সুরক্ষা দিতে, ন্যায়বিচার দিতে তার কর্মক্ষেত্র আইনত দায়বদ্ধ। অথচ, আমার গোটা কর্মজীবনই কেটে গেল অপমানের ভয়ে সিঁটিয়ে-থাকা মেয়ে, অপমানকে হেসে উড়িয়ে-দেওয়া মেয়ে, আর অপমানকে বুকে চেপে গুমরোতে থাকা মেয়ে দেখতে দেখতে। পুরুষের বাক্যে-ব্যবহারে অসম্মানিত হয়নি, এমন মেয়ে সাংবাদিক চোখে পড়েনি। আয়নার সামনে দাঁড়িয়েও না।

কত বড় এই সমস্যা?

সমাজ-সংসারে যে কোনও অন্যায্য, অপরাধের যা ব্যাপকতা, সমীক্ষায় তার একটি অংশমাত্র উঠে আসে। সমাজবিজ্ঞানী মাত্রই তা জানেন। এর একটা কারণ, অন্যায্যকে ‘স্বাভাবিক’ মনে করার অভ্যাস। শৈশব থেকেই কটুবাক্য কিংবা অবহেলায় যে অভ্যস্ত, সে গালাগাল বা উপেক্ষা নিয়ে নালিশ করে না, এমনকী নিজের প্রাপ্য বলেই মনে করে। গার্হস্থ্য হিংসা নিয়ে সমীক্ষায় যেমন মেয়েদের এমন মত পাওয়া যায় যে, বরের মুখে মুখে তর্ক করলে, রান্না খারাপ হলে, বর তো দু’ঘা দেবেই(১)। তা নিয়ে আবার নালিশ কীসের! ঘরে যেমন, বাইরেও তেমন। মেয়েরা কৈশোর না পেরোতে বুঝে যায়, বাসে-ট্রেনে যাতায়াত করতে হলে, কলেজে-কারখানায়, অফিসে-আদালতে কাজ করতে চাইলে মন্দ স্পর্শ, অশ্লীল উক্তি এড়ানো অসম্ভব। তাকে মেয়েদের ‘ভাগ্য’ বলেই ধরে নেয় মেয়েরা, ‘অন্যায্য’ বলে প্রতিবাদ করার ইচ্ছেটা আর খুঁজে পায় না। আরও একটা কারণ, অপমানের প্রতিবাদ না করতে পারলে মনে এমন একটা আত্মশ্লাঘা হয়, যে বহু মেয়ে নিজের কাছেও তা স্বীকার করতে চায় না। তাই সমীক্ষার প্রশ্নে ‘জানি না’ বলে এড়িয়ে যায়। এর দৃষ্টান্ত ইতিহাসে প্রচুর। দেশভাগের সময়ে পঞ্জাব বা বাংলার মেয়েদের যে সাংঘাতিক নির্যাতন-অপমান সহ্য করতে হয়েছিল, তা নিয়ে একটা সামূহিক নীরবতা কাজ করেছিল। উর্বশী বুটালিয়ার মতো সাংবাদিক, গবেষকদের কাজ (২) সেই নীরবতার পর্দা সরিয়ে ভয়ানক সব অভিজ্ঞতাকে বার করে নিয়ে আসে বহু দশক পরে। স্বাধীন ভারতে সংসারে কর্মক্ষেত্রে মেয়েদের উপর নির্যাতন নিয়ে যত সমীক্ষা হয়েছে, তার প্রতিটাই দেখিয়েছে যে, স্বাধীন ভারতে এক অঘোষিত যুদ্ধ চলেছে মেয়েদের উপর। মেঘের আড়াল থেকে ইন্দ্রজিতের শরবর্ষণের মতো, সাম্য ও সক্ষমতার বাণী সামনে রেখে, তার পিছন থেকে কখনও বর্ষা, কখনও গ্রেনেড — গর্ভস্থ কন্যার হত্যা থেকে কর্মক্ষেত্রে যৌন হেনস্থা — ছুটে আসে মেয়েদের দিকে। এমন নারীবিদ্বেষের পাঁকে ডুবে সংসার করা, কাজ করা মানবসত্তার এক চরম অবমাননা। মেয়েরা তাই সে প্রসঙ্গ এড়িয়ে চলাকেই সম্মানরক্ষার উপায় মনে করে। কেউ সে প্রসঙ্গ তুললে বিরক্তি দিয়ে বিপন্নতা ঢাকে।

সমীক্ষা ও সাক্ষাৎকারের প্রশ্নগুলো নীরবতার এই আচ্ছাদনকে ছিন্ন করে অন্তরের সত্যকে বার করে আনার একটা উপায়। আমাদের সমীক্ষায় দেখা যাচ্ছে, কলকাতা ও জেলা মিলিয়ে যে ৯০জন পুরুষ ও মহিলা সাংবাদিকের সঙ্গে কথা বলা হয়েছিল, তাঁদের ৪৭ শতাংশ জানিয়েছেন, মহিলা সাংবাদিকের হয়রানির কোনও না কোনও ঘটনা তাঁরা জানেন। মেয়ে সাংবাদিকদের অর্ধেক জানিয়েছেন, তিনি নিজে যৌন হয়রানির শিকার। এটা ব্যতিক্রম নয়। মহিলা সাংবাদিকদের অপর একটি সংগঠন (নেটওয়ার্ক অব উইমেন ইন মিডিয়া, ইন্ডিয়া) ২০১৮ সালে একটি সমীক্ষা শুরু করে, যা নানা রাজ্যের ৪৫৬জন সাংবাদিকের থেকে তথ্য সংগ্রহ করে। সেই সমীক্ষাতেও দেখা গিয়েছে, নিজে যৌন হয়রানির মুখোমুখি হয়েছে বলে জানিয়েছে ৩৬ শতাংশ মেয়ে সাংবাদিক। পড়শি দেশ পাকিস্তান ও বাংলাদেশের সমীক্ষাতেও প্রায় একই ছবি পাওয়া গিয়েছে। ভারতের অন্যান্য কর্মক্ষেত্রে মেয়েদের হয়রানির চিত্রও এর চাইতে খুব আলাদা নয়। এই রিপোর্টে অতীতের গবেষণাগুলির একটি চুম্বক (‘লিটারেচার রিভিউ’) রাখা হয়েছে পাঠকদের কাছে যৌন হয়রানির ব্যাপকতার ছবিটা তুলে ধরতে। তিনজনে একজন, অথবা দু’জনে একজন মেয়ে যদি বলেন তাঁরা যৌন হয়রানি সহ্য করেছেন, তা হলে এ সমস্যা তাম্বিল্য করার মতো নয়।

কেন সমাধান এত কঠিন?

এই সমীক্ষা এ-ও দেখাচ্ছে যে, যত মহিলার যৌন নির্যাতনের অভিযোগ হয়েছে, তাঁদের ৮০ শতাংশ তা নিয়ে অভিযোগ করেননি। (৩) এর কারণগুলি খোলসা হয়েছে সাংবাদিকদের সাফাৎকার থেকে। প্রতিবাদ করলে মেয়েটিকেই অন্য বিভাগে বদলি করে দেওয়া হয়, না হলে এমন পরিস্থিতি তৈরি হয় যে কাজ ছেড়ে দিতে হয় তাদের। আমাদের সাফাৎকারগুলি থেকে উঠে আসা তথ্য বলছে, যত মেয়ে অভিযোগ করেছে তাদের অধিকাংশই কাজ ছেড়ে দিতে বাধ্য হয়েছে। আইন বলছে, যৌন হয়রানির অভিযোগ খতিয়ে দেখতে কমিটি ('ইন্টারনাল কমপ্লেনস কমিটি') তৈরি করতে হবে সব সংস্থাকে। পশ্চিমবঙ্গে সব মিডিয়া সংস্থা তা এখনও তৈরি করেনি, ধরা পড়েছে সমীক্ষায়। যেখানে কমিটি আছে, সেখানেও তার স্বাভাবিক নিয়ে প্রশ্ন উঠেছে বারবার। পুরুষ ও মহিলা সাংবাদিকদের অনেকেই মনে করেন, বহু ক্ষেত্রে সংস্থার শীর্ষ কর্তাদের অঙ্গুলিহেলনে কমিটি কাজ করেছে। কখনও অভিযুক্ত পুরুষ 'আমি কোনও অন্যায় করিনি, তবে কেউ দুঃখ পেয়ে থাকলে দুঃখিত' গোছের অসার কথা বলে পার পেয়েছে। কখনও 'শাস্তির' নাম করে অভিযুক্তের বিরুদ্ধে অতি সামান্য কোনও ব্যবস্থা নেওয়া হয়েছে। অনেক ক্ষেত্রে কমিটি মেয়েটিকে বলেছে, তারা যথেষ্ট 'প্রমাণ' দাখিল করতে পারেনি। সিনিয়র সহকর্মীকে (চিফ রিপোর্টার, নিউজ এডিটর) বলে সুরাহা করতে গিয়েও লাভ হয়নি। 'আরে অমন হয়েই থাকে' বলে হেসে উড়িয়ে দিয়েছেন তাঁরা, মেয়েটি বুঝেছে, সহকর্মীর (অধিকাংশ সময়ে সিনিয়র সহকর্মীর) অভব্য আচরণ মেনে নিতে রাজি না থাকলে কাজ করা যাবে না। যৌন হয়রানির প্রতিবাদ করে যে মেয়েরা কাজ ছেড়ে দেয়, তাদের নামে নানা কথা ছড়িয়ে দেওয়া হয়, যার ফলে তাদের আবার কাজ পাওয়া প্রায় অসম্ভব হয়ে ওঠে। যারা ওই সংস্থাতেই কাজ চালিয়ে যায়, তাদের প্রায়ই এক রকম কোণঠাসা করে রাখা হয় ভাল কাজের সুযোগ না দিয়ে, খারাপ পারফরম্যান্সের অভিযোগ আনা হয়।

কে কার বিরুদ্ধে অভিযোগ করল, কী হল প্রতিক্রিয়া, এ সব গল্প মিডিয়ার দফতরে, প্রেস ক্লাবে, সমাজ মাধ্যমে হাওয়ায় ভাসে। সমীক্ষায় যখন সেই গল্পগুলি গ্রথিত হয়, তখন বোঝা যায় যে এটা দু'চারজন বদ স্বভাবের পুরুষ আর দু'চারটি বেপরোয়া মেয়ের গল্প নয়। কে, কাকে, কী ভাবে নিশানা করে, তার একটা সুনির্দিষ্ট ছক রয়েছে। কোনও মেয়ে সেই ছককে সম্পূর্ণ এড়িয়ে চলতে পারে না।

এই 'প্রতিকারহীন শক্তের অপরাধ' যেমন ব্যক্তির কাছে কখনও কখনও অসহ্য হয়ে ওঠে, তেমন সমাজের কাছেও। ২০১৮ সালে ভারতের মিডিয়াতে আছড়ে পড়ে #আমিও ('মিটু') আন্দোলন। একের পর এক মহিলা সাংবাদিক, যাঁরা অনেকেই এখন নিজ ক্ষেত্রে সুপ্রতিষ্ঠিত, প্রকাশ করতে থাকেন তাঁদের উপরে যৌন নিগ্রহের ইতিহাস। 'দ্য টেলিগ্রাফ' এবং 'এশিয়ান এজ' কাগজের প্রাক্তন সম্পাদক এম জে আকবরের বিরুদ্ধে ধর্ষণের অভিযোগ করেন সাংবাদিক প্রিয়া রামানি। আকবর তাঁর বিরুদ্ধে মামলা করলে প্রিয়ার সঙ্গে যুক্ত হন আরও আঠারো জন মহিলা, যাঁরা সাংবাদিক জীবনে আকবরের দ্বারা নিগ্রহীত হয়েছিলেন। তাঁদের মধ্যে 'সাউথ এশিয়ান উইমেন ইন মিডিয়া'-র এক সদস্যও আছেন। জনমতের চাপে কেন্দ্রীয় সরকারের মন্ত্রিস্ব থেকে পদত্যাগ করেন আকবর। এই মামলাটি ভারতে #আমিও আন্দোলনের ঢেউয়ের চূড়া বলা চলে। মানহানির এই মামলায় দিল্লির আদালত প্রিয়া রামানিকে নির্দোষ সব্যস্ত করেছে। ১৭ ফেব্রুয়ারি, ২০২১ ঘোষিত এই রায়ে আদালত বলেছে, যে কোনও মঞ্চ ব্যবহার করে মেয়েরা তাঁদের প্রতি অমর্যাদার প্রতিবাদ করতে পারে। একে আইনের চোখে ভারতে #আমিও আন্দোলনের স্বীকৃতি বলে দেখা চলে।

এর আগে-পরে আরও অনেক মহিলা সাংবাদিক তাঁদের নিগ্রহের কথা জানিয়ে অভিযুক্তের নাম প্রকাশ করেছেন। অনেক ক্ষেত্রেই দেখা গিয়েছে, এক ব্যক্তির নামে নিগ্রহের অভিযোগ আনলে আরও অনেক মেয়ে জানাচ্ছেন, তাঁরা সেই ব্যক্তির দ্বারাই নিগ্রহীত হয়েছেন। বোঝা যাচ্ছে যে, মেয়েরা নিগ্রহীত হয়েও কথা বলবে না, আর বললেও কেউ শুনবে না, এই সাহসে কিছু পুরুষ ধারাবাহিক ভাবে নিগ্রহ চালিয়ে যাচ্ছে। এই অসহ্য ব্যবস্থাকে উন্মুক্ত করতে সমাজ মাধ্যমকে ব্যবহার করে মেয়েরা সংগঠিত হল, সমাজ-সংসারের ছিঁচিকারের

তোয়াক্ষা না করে নিজের নিগ্রহের কথা প্রকাশ করার সাহস দেখাল। তাঁদের সম্মিলিত শক্তিকে অগ্রাহ্য করতে পারল না সমাজ, সংবাদ প্রতিষ্ঠান। এই পর্যায়ে মেয়েদের আনা অভিযোগের জেরে বেশ কিছু অভিজুক্ত সাসপেন্ড হয়েছেন, তাঁদের বিরুদ্ধে তদন্ত শুরু হয়েছে। কেউ কেউ বদলি হয়েছেন, বরখাস্তও হয়েছেন কয়েকজন। অনেকেই প্রকাশ্যে ক্ষমা চেয়েছেন। #আমিও আন্দোলনে সামিল মেয়ে সাংবাদিকরা নিজেদের যৌন হয়রানির কথা প্রকাশ করে একই সঙ্গে পুরুষতন্ত্রের ভন্ডামির মুখোশ ছিঁড়ে ফেলল, আর সেই সঙ্গে সংবাদ মাধ্যমেরও। সমাজের 'চোখে আঙুল দাদা'-র কাজ করে সংবাদ প্রতিষ্ঠানগুলি। হরদম নারী-পুরুষ সাম্যের পক্ষে সওয়াল করে। তারা যে নিজেরাই এক একটা পুরুষতন্ত্রের আখড়া, তা স্পষ্ট করল #আমিও আন্দোলন।

কী করে সমাধান সম্ভব?

#আমিও আন্দোলনের অভিঘাতে সমাজ যেমন বেসামাল হল, তেমনই আন্দোলনের মধ্যেও বিতর্কের ঘূর্ণি উঠল। অন্যায়ের প্রতিবাদ, ন্যায়বিচার পাওয়ার ইচ্ছা যে কোনও আন্দোলনের চালিকাশক্তি। কিন্তু সমাজ মাধ্যমে একজনের বিরুদ্ধে অভিযোগ আনা, তাকে আত্মপক্ষ সমর্থনের সুযোগ না দিয়েই তাকে দোষী প্রতিপন্ন করা, এও কি অন্যায় নয়? #আমিও আন্দোলনের বিরোধিতা করে অনেকে (তার মধ্যে মেয়েরাও আছেন) বললেন, হতে পারে, অনেক পুরুষ বাস্তবিকই অপরাধী। কিন্তু নিরপরাধের নামেও যে অভিযোগ উঠছে না, তা কি বলা যায়? অন্যায়ের প্রতিকার পাওয়ার রাস্তা তো রয়েছে। সে পথে না গিয়ে এমন 'শর্ট কাট' খোঁজা কেন? কুড়ি বছর আগের ঘটনায় কারওকে অভিজুক্ত করলে সে কী করে নিজেকে নির্দোষ প্রমাণ করবে?

এর বিপরীতে, #আমিও আন্দোলনের সমর্থকরা বলেন, দফতরের ইন্টার্নাল কমপ্লেনস কমিটি, পুলিশ বা আদালত যৌন হয়রানির অভিযোগকে কী চোখে দেখে, আর কি বিচার দেয়, তা কি আমরা দেখিনি? সেখানে নিরপেক্ষতা তো দূরস্থান, মেয়েদের উপর অপরাধের জন্য মেয়েদেরই দায়ী করার সাবেকি প্রবণতা পূর্ণমাত্রায় বর্তমান। প্রতিকারের আর সব পথ বন্ধ বলেই এমন সরাসরি 'নাম নাও, লজ্জা দাও' পদ্ধতি নিতে হয় মেয়েদের। যত দিন না ন্যায়বিচারের প্রতিষ্ঠানগুলি যথাযথ ভাবে কাজ করবে, তত দিন এমন আইন-বহির্ভূত উপায় কাজে লাগতে হবে মেয়েদের।

এ কথাকে মান্যতা দেয় আমাদের সংগঠন, **সাউথ এশিয়ান উইমেন ইন মিডিয়া**। তবে সেই সঙ্গে 'আমিও' আন্দোলনের সীমাবদ্ধতা সম্পর্কেও আমরা সচেতন। সেই সীমাবদ্ধতা এই যে, যে কোনও অভিযোগ প্রথমেই দু'পক্ষের একটা সংঘাত তৈরি করে, যার ফলে কোনও বিচার-বিবেচনার আগেই কোনও একটা পক্ষ নিতে হয় অন্যদের। যাঁরা সংবাদ প্রতিষ্ঠানের অভ্যন্তরের সমস্যা নিয়ে ওয়াকিবহাল, তাঁরাও সেই সংঘাতের আওতে পড়েন, এবং অমুক দিন আসলে কী ঘটেছিল, তমুকের কী গোপন মতলব ছিল, এই সব প্রশ্নে ঘুরপাক খেতে থাকেন। যা আসল কাজ, প্রাতিষ্ঠানিক ব্যবস্থার পরিবর্তন, সেটা যথেষ্ট মনোযোগ পায় না।

সেই জন্যই এই ধরনের সমীক্ষার প্রয়োজন। অপরাধ যে প্রতিনিয়ত ঘটছে, এবং তা ঘটছে সংবাদ মাধ্যমে পুরুষ-আধিপত্যের সুযোগ নিয়ে, সে কথাটা সামনে আনা দরকার বারবার। তাতে নিগ্রহকারীর নাম প্রকাশ হোক আর না হোক, নিগ্রহের সত্যতা প্রতিষ্ঠা করা যায়। তাই ২০১৮ সালের #আমিও আন্দোলনের অব্যবহিত পরে ভারতের দুটি প্রধান নারী সাংবাদিক সংগঠন স্বতন্ত্র ভাবে মহিলা সাংবাদিকদের যৌন হয়রানি নিয়ে সমীক্ষা শুরু করেছিল, এবং বছর দুয়েকের মাথায় তথ্যভিত্তিক রিপোর্ট প্রকাশ করল। উদ্দেশ্য, মেয়েদের জন্য হিংসানূল্য, সাম্যময়, সম্মানজনক কাজের পরিবেশ তৈরি করা।

যৌন নিগ্রহ: একটি সমস্যার সালতামামি

এর আগের সমীক্ষাগুলির মতো, এই সমীক্ষার রিপোর্টও দেখাচ্ছে, সংবাদ প্রতিষ্ঠানগুলির নিয়মকানুনে বড়সড় ফাঁক থেকে যাচ্ছে। যার ফলে এক দিকে মেয়েদের সমান সুযোগ থেকে বঞ্চিত করা সহজ হচ্ছে, আর অন্য

দিকে যৌন নিগ্রহ করে অনায়াসে পার পেয়ে যাওয়া সম্ভব হচ্ছে। সুযোগ থেকে বঞ্চিত, আর যৌন হয়রানি — এ দুটি লিঙ্গবৈষম্যের এ পিঠ আর ও পিঠ। যৌন হয়রানি ঘটতে পারে, এই আশঙ্কায় কিছু সংবাদ প্রতিষ্ঠান এখনও কেবল কিছু ফিচার পাতায় মহিলাদের কাজ দেয়। অনেক প্রতিষ্ঠান মেয়েদের নাইট ডিউটি করতে দেয় না। প্রায় কোনও কাগজ বা চ্যানেলই জেলায় মহিলা রিপোর্টার নিতে চায় না। পুরুষের হিংসা, এবং হিংসার আশঙ্কা, মেয়েদের কাজের সুযোগকে সঙ্কুচিত করে। যে সংবাদ মাধ্যম ধর্ষণ, যৌন নিগ্রহের বিচার দাবি করে আকাশ ফাটায়, সে-ও মহিলা সাংবাদিকদের প্রতি একই অবিচার করে। আমাদের সমীক্ষায় ৪৯ শতাংশ মেয়ে, এবং ৪০ শতাংশ পুরুষ জানিয়েছেন, তাঁদের সংবাদ প্রতিষ্ঠানকে তাঁরা ‘সমান সুযোগ কর্মক্ষেত্র’ (ইকোয়াল অপরচুনিটি ওয়ার্কপ্লেস) বলে মনে করেন না।

এখনও বেশ কিছু প্রতিষ্ঠানে আইন মোতাবেক যৌন হয়রানি প্রতিকারের কমিটি তৈরি হয়নি। আমাদের সঙ্গে সাক্ষাৎকারে কোনও কোনও সংস্থার আধিকারিকরা জানিয়েছেন, কমিটি তৈরির প্রয়োজন আছে বলেও তাঁরা মনে না। যৌন নিগ্রহ তাঁদের প্রতিষ্ঠানে ঘটে না, এমনও দাবি করেছেন অনেকে। যে ক’টি প্রতিষ্ঠান কমিটি তৈরি করেছে, তারাও তা তৈরি করেই হাত ধুয়ে ফেলেছে। আইনে রয়েছে, যৌন হয়রানি কী, বিচারের প্রক্রিয়া কী, তার শাস্তি কী, সে সব তথ্য কর্মীদের জানাতে হবে। কিন্তু সে কাজগুলো উপেক্ষিত হয়, তাই সমীক্ষায় ৩১ শতাংশ সাংবাদিক বলেছেন, কমপ্লেনস কমিটি আছে বলে তাঁরা জানেন না, ২৯ শতাংশ বলেছেন, কমিটি নেই। সাক্ষাৎকারে অধিকাংশ মেয়ে সাংবাদিক জানিয়েছেন, তাঁদের কর্মক্ষেত্রে যৌন হয়রানির অভিযোগের প্রতি হয় উপেক্ষা, নয় বিরূপ মনোভাবই তাঁরা দেখেছেন। একজন জানিয়েছেন, জেলার এক মহিলা সাংবাদিক তার সিনিয়র সহকর্মীর বিরুদ্ধে অভিযোগ দায়ের করার পরে তা প্রত্যাহার করার জন্য চাপ দেওয়া হয় তাকে। অভিযোগ ফিরিয়ে না নিয়ে সে কাজ ছেড়ে দেয়। আর একটি মেয়ে অভিযোগ করলে তাঁকে প্রশ্ন করা হয়, ‘তুমি জোরে হাসো কেন?’

মেয়েটি কোনও ভাবে ছেলেটিকে প্রশ্ন দিয়েছে ঘনিষ্ঠ হতে, এই অভিযোগ যেন পালটা আক্রমণের হাতিয়ার। মেয়েটিকে বিরত করতে তা যথেষ্ট কার্যকর, কারণ কোনও সহকর্মীর সঙ্গে সাধারণ কথাবার্তা, হাসিঠাট্টা, একসঙ্গে চা-কফি খাওয়া যে ‘ঘনিষ্ঠ হওয়ার আহ্বান’ নয়, তা বোঝানো কঠিন। এমন নয় যে, কিছু মেয়ে যৌনতার খেলায় যোগ দেয় না, আমাদের বলেছেন সাংবাদিকরা। কাজে টিকে থাকার, এগিয়ে যাওয়ার শর্ত সিনিয়র সহকর্মীর একটা ‘বিশেষ’ সম্পর্ক তৈরির প্রস্তুতি সায় দেওয়া — সেটা বুঝে, বা আন্দাজ করে, তারা সিনিয়র সহকর্মীকে কিছুটা প্রশ্ন দেয়। পরে অতিষ্ঠ হয়ে নিষ্কৃতি যখন চায়, তখন তাকে ‘ধান্দাবাজ’ প্রতিপন্ন করা হয়। ওই সিনিয়র সহকর্মী কেন নিজের ক্ষমতার সুযোগ নিয়ে একটা সম্পর্ক তৈরি করলেন, সে প্রশ্নটা তেমন ভাবে ওঠে না। যৌন হয়রানির প্রসঙ্গ তুললেই প্রথম প্রতিক্রিয়া শোনা যায়, ‘মেয়েটারও দোষ আছে।’

সমস্যা হয় যখন প্রতিষ্ঠানও এই মানসিকতায় চলে। এর ফলে একটি মেয়ে অভিযোগ করলে দফতরে তাকে যেমন আচরণ এবং মন্তব্য তাকে সহ্যে হয়, তা আর এক প্রশ্ন নির্যাতনের সামিল। আবার বহু ক্ষেত্রে সংবাদ দফতরের প্রাতিষ্ঠানিক পরিকাঠামোটি টিলেচালা, প্রায় অসংগঠিত ক্ষেত্রের মতো। যেমন, বড় সংবাদ প্রতিষ্ঠানের ছোটখাট ব্যুরোতে। সেখানে সুবিচার পাওয়ার কোনও প্রক্রিয়া নেই বলে বহু মেয়ে সাংবাদিক আরও বিপন্ন হয়ে পড়ে। বিপন্নতা এড়াতে তারা নানা কৌশল নেয়। একজন সাংবাদিক আমাদের বলেছেন, তিনি এক মেয়ে সহকর্মীকে দেখতেন যে অফিসে পরে আসে টিলেচালা পোশাকে, কিন্তু বাইরে পরে ফ্যাশনদুরন্ত পোশাক। কারণ জিজ্ঞাসা করতে সে বলেছিল, বস-এর কুনজর এড়াতে চায় সে। “এমনই সতর্ক হয়ে কাজ করে মেয়েরা,” সাক্ষাৎকারে জানিয়েছেন ওই মহিলা সাংবাদিক।

এক সিনিয়র মহিলা সাংবাদিক বলছেন,

“যখন যৌন হয়রানির ঘটনা সামনে আসে, গোটা মিডিয়া হাউজ চূপ করে যায়। পুরুষটির বিরুদ্ধে একটি কথাও কেউ বলে না। পুরুষ রিপোর্টারদের সংযোগ থাকে নেতাদের সঙ্গে, যারা ওই অভিযুক্তের হয়ে কথা

বলে। নেতারা সব সময়ে পুরুষদের সমর্থন করে, কারণ তারা জানে যে পুরুষরাই টিকবে, মেয়েরা টিকবে না। আমি একটি দৈনিকের কথা জানি যেখানে একটি পুরুষের নামে অনেক মেয়ে অভিযোগ করার পর তার চাকরি চলে যায়, কিন্তু সে সঙ্গে সঙ্গে অন্য একটি মিডিয়া হাউজে কাজ পেয়ে যায়। অন্য দিকে, একটি মেয়ে হয়রানির অভিযোগ করে থাকলে তার অন্যত্র কাজ পাওয়া কঠিন।”

হয়রানির প্রতিবাদে কাজ ছেড়ে অন্যত্র আরও নিচু পদে, কম টাকায় কাজ করতে বাধ্য হয়েছে, এমন দুষ্টান্ত মিলেছে। আবার, যৌন হয়রানি সহ্য করে কাজ করছেন অন্য কাজ না পাওয়ার আশঙ্কায়, এমন সাক্ষ্যও মিলেছে সাক্ষাৎকারে।

যৌন হয়রানির মূলে যে রয়েছে ক্ষমতার প্রকাশ, কেবল যৌনতা নয়, এ কথা এই সমীক্ষাতেও ফের প্রকাশ পেয়েছে। কোনও মেয়ে অফিসের গাড়ির ড্রাইভারের বিরুদ্ধে অভিযোগ করলে সে বরখাস্ত হবে, কিন্তু বসের বিরুদ্ধে করলে মেয়েটিকেই চাকরি ছাড়তে হবে, জানা যাচ্ছে সাংবাদিকদের কথা থেকে। পুরুষ সাংবাদিকদের আলোচনাচক্রে একজন সিনিয়র পুরুষ সাংবাদিক বলছেন, “সহকর্মীদের দুর্ব্যবহার মেয়েরা সাধারণত সামলে নেয়, আসল অপরাধী হল যারা ক্ষমতার জয়গা দখল করে আছে। তাদের বিরুদ্ধে অভিযোগ করা কঠিন। আর আইন যা-ই থাক, কেউ অভিযোগ করার ২৪ ঘণ্টার মধ্যে অভিযোগের খবর, আর তাকে ঘিরে ভয়ানক সব গুজব ছড়িয়ে যাবে গোটা সংবাদ মহলে।” এই সাংবাদিকের মতে, কী ভাবে মেয়েরা যৌন হয়রানির মোকাবিলা করবে, তা শেষ অবধি মেয়েদের দক্ষতার উপর নির্ভর করে।

সামনের পথ

অর্থাৎ ‘আমিও’ আন্দোলনের ঢেউ বয়ে যাওয়ার পরেও যৌন নিগ্রহের ক্ষেত্র প্রস্তুত হয়ে রয়েছে আগের মতোই। পঁচিশ বছর আগে যখন আমি যোগ দিয়েছিলাম সংবাদ মাধ্যমে, তখন যে ধরনের ব্যবহার পেয়েছি, আজ আমার নবীনতম সহকর্মী মেয়েটি যে তা পাবে না, সে যে অধিক সুরক্ষিত, সে বিষয়ে আমি নিশ্চিত হতে পারছি না। যদিও সাংবাদিকতায় অনেক বেশি মেয়ে এসেছে, তারা অত্যন্ত কৃতিত্বের সঙ্গে কাজ করছে, তাদের অনেকে পশ্চিমবঙ্গ তথা ভারতের ঘরে ঘরে পরিচিত নাম, তবু তাদের অসম্মানের সঙ্গে মোকাবিলা করে কাজ করে টিকে থাকতে হবে, এমন আদ্যন্ত অন্যায়ে শর্তটা রয়েছে।

এই সমীক্ষা তার প্রতিবাদ। এর ফলগুলি একই সঙ্গে অন্যায়কে প্রকাশ করছে, এবং তার সমাধানের পথ দেখাচ্ছে। আমরা চাই, প্রতিটি সংবাদ প্রতিষ্ঠান যৌন হয়রানিকে একটি সমস্যা বলে স্বীকার করুক। কেবল আক্ষরিক অর্থে নয়, আইনের কথাগুলির অন্তর্নিহিত উদ্দেশ্যকে সম্মান করে যৌন নিগ্রহের প্রতিকারের ব্যবস্থা নির্মাণ করুক।

এই রিপোর্টে যে সুপারিশগুলি করা হয়েছে, তা সেই প্রতিকারের ব্যবস্থার একটি রূপরেখা।

আমরা দুঃখের সঙ্গে লক্ষ্য করেছি, কলকাতা প্রেস ক্লাব #আমিও আন্দোলনের সময়ে যৌন নিগ্রহের বিষয়ে তাদের কর্তব্যকে কেবল ক্লাবের পরিসরে ঘটে থাকা নিগ্রহের প্রতিকার করবার আশ্রয়ে সীমাবদ্ধ করে রেখেছে। আমরা এই সিদ্ধান্তের সঙ্গে এক মত নই। আমরা মনে করি, প্রেস ক্লাবের দায়িত্ব কেবল তার ভৌগোলিক সীমা দিয়ে নির্ধারিত হয় না। তার সকল সদস্য, বিশেষত কোনও মহিলা সদস্য অন্যায়ের প্রতিকার না পেলে, তাঁর পাশে দাঁড়ানো প্রেস ক্লাব, সাংবাদিক ইউনিয়ন-সহ যে কোনও কর্মী সংগঠন বা সামাজিক সংগঠনের কর্তব্য। ক্লাব, ইউনিয়নগুলিও যদি পুরুষতন্ত্রের ঘাঁটি হয়ে থাকে, যৌন হয়রানিতে অভিযুক্ত পুরুষদের প্রশংসার চোখে দেখে, তবে তা কাজের পরিবেশকে দূষিত করে।

আমরা আশা করছি, সংবাদ প্রতিষ্ঠানগুলি, সাংবাদিকদের বিভিন্ন সংগঠন, সর্বস্তরের সাংবাদিক ও সংবাদকর্মী, এবং সেই সঙ্গে শ্রমিক সংগঠন, মহিলা সংগঠন, মানবাধিকার নিয়ে কর্মরত সংস্থাগুলি এই সমীক্ষা-ভিত্তিক প্রতিবেদনটিকে গুরুত্বের সঙ্গে গ্রহণ করবে।

আমরা কৃতজ্ঞ সেই সাংবাদিকদের কাছে, যাঁরা এই সমীক্ষায় অংশ নিয়েছেন। যে সব সংবাদ প্রতিষ্ঠানের আধিকারিকরা সাফাংকার দিতে রাজি হয়েছেন, তাঁদেরও ধন্যবাদ। সাউথ এশিয়ান উইমেন ইন মিডিয়া'র পক্ষ থেকে ধন্যবাদ ও অভিনন্দন জানাই 'সংহিতা'-র কর্ণধার সোমা সেনগুপ্ত এবং তাঁর গবেষকদের প্রাণবন্ত দলটিকে। এমন একটি স্পর্শকাতর বিষয়ে সমীক্ষা-সাফাংকার গ্রহণের কঠিন কাজটিকে আন্তরিকতা, ধৈর্য ও নির্ভর সঙ্গে তাঁরা সম্পন্ন করেছেন। বাংলা তথা ভারতের প্রতিটি মেয়ের জন্য নির্ভয়, আনন্দপূর্ণ, সাম্যময় কর্মক্ষেত্রের স্বপ্নকে সত্য করার লক্ষ্যে আমরা যৌথ ভাবে এই প্রতিবেদন পেশ করছি।

স্বাতী ভট্টাচার্য

সাধারণ সচিব, সাউথ এশিয়ান উইমেন ইন মিডিয়া

নারী দিবস, ৮ মার্চ, ২০২১

সূত্র

(১) ন্যাশনাল ফ্যামিলি হেলথ সার্ভে ৪, ২০১৫-১৬। বাহাল্ল শতাংশ মেয়ে এবং ৪২ শতাংশ পুরুষ বলেছিল, সাতটি কারণের কোনও একটির জন্য স্ত্রীকে মারধর করা যেতে পারে - স্বামীকে না জানিয়ে বাইরে যাওয়া, সংসার বা ছেলেমেয়েকে যথেষ্ট মনোযোগ না দেওয়া, বরের সঙ্গে তর্ক করা, বরের সঙ্গে যৌনসম্পর্কে রাজি না হওয়া, ঠিকমতো রান্না না করা, অপর পুরুষের সঙ্গে সম্পর্কের সন্দেহ, স্বশুর-শাশুড়ির প্রতি অসম্মান প্রদর্শন।

(২) উর্বশী বুটালিয়া, দ্য আদার সাইড অব সাইলেন্স। পেসুইন, ১৯৯৮

(৩) অপর মহিলা সাংবাদিক সংগঠনটির সমীক্ষায় দেখা গিয়েছে, যৌন হয়রানির পরে মেয়েদের ৫৩ শতাংশ তা কাউকে জানায়নি। যারা কোনও অভিযোগ দায়ের করেনি, তাদের ৪৭ শতাংশ জানিয়েছে, এর কারণ তাদের প্রতিকারের প্রক্রিয়ার উপর আস্থা নেই। 'ক্রিয়েটিং সেফ ওয়ার্কপ্লেসেস: প্রিভেনশন অ্যান্ড রিড্রেশাল অব সেক্সুয়াল হ্যারাসমেন্ট ইন মিডিয়া হাউজেস ইন ইন্ডিয়া।' প্রকাশক: নেটওয়ার্ক অব উইমেন ইন মিডিয়া এবং জেন্ডার অ্যাট ওয়ার্ক।

Sexual Harassment and #MeToo in India: A Response

A bright December morning in 2018 saw an unusually large gathering of SAWM Bengal members at a cafe in central Calcutta. The air was the right degree of cold and smelt pleasantly of coffee. But it was also charged. #MeToo had just erupted in India and most of us at SAWM had reacted strongly to it.

During the intense discussion that followed that morning, it was clear that not everyone agreed on the question of seeking redressal for sexual harassment. But as the stories tumbled out, some of them very disturbing, one thing was clear. We all felt that as part of the media, it was our duty to bring to light the sexual harassment that is intrinsic to the media, often disguised, as it is elsewhere, as friendliness, patronage or even protection. At other times, of course, it is a brutal and naked exercise of power, sanctioned by an aggression that is often glamourised in the newsroom as a requisite for the profession. If you are not aggressive enough, you are not reporter enough. You are “too sensitive” and not fit for the job.

The discussion that day inspired us at SAWM to think of this survey. So perhaps in the first place it is appropriate here to look back at the case that made the country sit up and acknowledge sexual harassment at the workplace as a problem.

Bhanwari Devi also remains the most ironic reminder of what can happen to a complainant in a sexual harassment case in India. On the evening of September 22, 1992, Bhanwari Devi, a saathin -- a grassroots social worker employed in the Women’s Development Project of Rajasthan state government -- was allegedly raped by five men from her village Bhatari, in front of her husband, when the couple were working in the fields. Committed to her work, Bhanwari Devi had opposed a child marriage that was being organized by the family of one of her alleged attackers. The child was nine months old. But the wedding could not be stopped; it took place only one day later. Four months later Bhanwari Devi was raped as the men intended to punish her, a lower caste woman, for her transgression. She had dared to interfere with their lives. All the men belonged to the Gujjar caste; Bhanwari Devi belonged to the lower Kumhar (potter) caste.

In the years that followed Bhanwari Devi, who is now in her 60s, became one of the most recognised faces of the women’s movement in India. Despite her extremely limited means and lack of social privilege, she refused to give up her battle for justice. Her case attracted national and international attention and her struggle, helped by women’s rights organizations, led to the formulation of India’s sexual harassment law, the Vishaka Guidelines, in 1997. These were replaced by the Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act in 2013. Women’s rights groups campaigning for her had filed a public interest litigation at the Supreme Court, with the demand that workplaces should be safe for women and the employer should be responsible for the safety of the employee.

But the ironies, too many of them, are stark and as extreme as the violence that was done to her. It is ironic that we still have to use the word “allegedly” about the accused, because the case remains unresolved, 28 years later. The landmark case that changed the law of the land and grabbed the attention of the country and the world still drags on at Rajasthan High Court.

Her attackers were never brought to book. She had been raped because she had been working for the empowerment of women and was committed enough to stake her life and security on an act of defiance that she considered her duty. Finally, her “harassment”, the brutal act of rape, committed in an agricultural field, led to the formulation of law on sexual harassment at the workplace, but till date women working in agriculture are hardly acknowledged as workers.

The delay in her case reflects the indifference, callousness and hostility a complainant faces after she reports her harassment. It undermines her fight and discourages others from reporting harassment. This is a conspiracy of silence that cuts across class, caste and communities and is perpetuated by the collusion of state, its agencies and private organizations. Few phenomena are as universal as sexual harassment.

This very silence was shattered by #MeToo. Even as -- or perhaps, because – the ground realities, typified by Bhanwari Devi’s case, remained unchanged for decades, the impact of #MeToo on India, too, was stupendous. The allegations began to pour out in 2018 here, a year after the movement had gathered momentum in the US, from where it spread to other countries. It was articulated mostly in the entertainment and media sectors in India. The voices exploded, suddenly free to tell what they could not for years, and story after terrible story piled up in the social media and got added to the hashtag.

The movement obviously had its problems and limitations, in India and elsewhere. In India, the main concern was about how a movement in the social media, backed by class, privilege, technology and knowledge of English, would be able to adequately represent the voices of all working women in the country. An overwhelming majority of working women in India belong to the less privileged sections. On the face of it, those who were speaking up as part of #MeToo were as removed from Bhanwari Devi as possible.

According to a report released in 2019 by consultancy firm Deloitte, in India, 95 per cent, or about 195 million women, are employed in the unorganized sector or unpaid labour. And participation of women in the labour force has also taken a sharp downturn through the past 15 years or so, from has declined from 34% in 2006 to 24.8% in 2020, according to the **United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) India** study. (In this report we are speaking of women alone, because as with domestic violence, women experience sexual harassment far more than men. Almost every #MeToo voice belonged to a woman. The movement also articulated the voices of the LGBT community.)

In a way the problem of addressing sexual harassment at the workplace is fundamentally the problem of looking at women’s work. Especially in less privileged households, a woman hardly rests, doing housework as well as helping to generate income for the family, by working in the fields or in construction or factories, or engaging in a craft or tailoring at home, or by being employed as a domestic worker. But no data reflect this adequately. A basic problem exists in recognising women’s workplaces in the first place.

Whoever thinks of a family where a domestic worker comes every day as a place of employment? Or of a construction site as a workplace? Yet the most serious offences happen here, including rape and murder. The notion of a workplace is a bourgeois construct and most women in India work outside such a space. The phrase “working woman”, too, implies a certain

social status. The vocabulary of labour is rooted in class. Hardly any law applies in the case of a domestic worker in a household or a woman labourer at a construction site. Such workplaces are almost invisible as workplaces.

But even within the organized sector, in “recognisable” workplaces, how many women would be able to access #MeToo? Language and technology aside, there is widespread fear in the minds of women employees about reporting sexual harassment, as time and again it has been proved that a complainant is met with hostility by the authorities and feels even more vulnerable at the workplace. And the redressal mechanism is hardly there, or if there, hardly functional, in most workplaces, despite the Vishaka Guidelines and the subsequent Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013, ironically, again, abbreviated as POSH.

Under the Act, every employer will constitute an Internal Committee (IC) to address sexual harassment at each office with 10 or more employees. For an office which has fewer than 10 employees, or for a complaint to be lodged against the employer, or for women working in the informal sector, a Local Committee (LC) has to be formed by the district officer or collector at the district level, and if required, also at the block level. Training and awareness programmes are to be conducted by the government for its officials to deal with cases of sexual harassment.

In 2017, a survey conducted by the Indian National Bar Association of 6,047 people, of which 78 per cent were women working in the organized sector professions such as BPOs, IT, education, legal and hospitality, stated that 38 per cent women claimed to have experienced sexual harassment at the workplace even as 50.7 per cent claimed to have experienced it online. Most women did not report sexual harassment because of fear of adverse reaction or lack of faith in the redressal mechanism.

A recent Human Rights Watch report refers to a study by Martha Farrell Foundation based on Right to Information requests sent to 655 districts in India. In response 29 per cent wrote that they had formed Local Committees, and 15 per cent said they had not. But the remaining 56 per cent, the largest segment, did not even respond.

How could a movement like #MeToo succeed against such overpowering circumstances? There were also challenges that were within #MeToo, everywhere.

While agreeing on the basic premise that sexual harassment was pervasive and must be articulated, and that the voices must be heard, there was disagreement on the questions of “belief” and “agency”. Did one have to believe the women who were bringing the allegations without question? Did the woman who was harassed have no agency? Could she not have said no? By saying that she was completely vulnerable, was she also not doing away the hard-earned rewards of the women’s movement, of the ideas of women’s empowerment and autonomy? What was the meaning and role of “consent”? This debate often created fireworks, and raged within SAWM as well, with its members divided sharply into two sides.

These questions still remain, fortunately for us, because by debating them we can understand our problems better, in their complexity, with more clarity, which always makes for better resolutions. Which is why the questions raised by #MeToo remain as relevant today.

But apart from everything else, #MeToo had descended like a tidal wave. While it raised many questions, much scepticism and doubt, it swept away with its emotional charge all the reservations, with numerous women responding to it spontaneously and powerfully. You can question the details of a particular case, but you cannot question the truth of such emotion. What you feel in such a way is true. #MeToo spoke out loud about how women have felt for generations under the shadow of patriarchy.

After the entertainment industry, where women accused powerful men from Bollywood of exploiting them sexually, the media industry was shaken by accusations spiralling against M.J. Akbar, a leading Indian journalist, editor and politician. Some SAWM members, too, brought allegations against him.

Allegations exploded on the floors of several leading media organizations, and the names of several male editors and senior journalists were called out. Some of the accused lost their jobs, some were transferred and some, unfortunately, remained where they were. But the movement had done its bit.

Though most of the allegations came from women working in the big media houses, often English language, #MeToo had shaken up media establishments in general so much that for the first time they had to acknowledge that the problem exists and how widespread the problem was. A hush descended in the corridors of power and at daily briefing meetings, presided mostly by men. The newsroom chatter seemed to lose its lascivious edge. Women felt a little better.

Recently, in February, Priya Ramani, one of the journalists who had accused Akbar of sexual harassment, was acquitted in the defamation case filed by Akbar.

These are heartening, but things look grim still. Though some of the accused men lost their jobs, or were transferred or retired earlier, other harassers continued to be in positions of power. Some who lost their jobs were reinstated in top positions in other media houses. Patriarchy is older than #MeToo and has a much wider network, which can even include press clubs.

But at SAWM, we felt that we should hold on to the impulse of #MeToo and never lose sight of how women journalists feel when they work. Journalists are entrusted with telling the truth. This survey, a collaboration between SAWM and SANHITA, a gender resource centre located in Calcutta, is our attempt to tell the truth about ourselves.

Chandrima S. Bhattacharya
Member, SAWM India
Kolkata

THE HIDDEN STORIES – SEXUAL HARASSMENT OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS OF WEST BENGAL

CHAPTER 1 – OVERVIEW

Purpose and Scope

The study was conducted among the female and male journalists in select media houses in West Bengal. It examined the following:

1. Sexual Harassment of Women Journalists from Media Organizations
2. Media Organizations as an equal opportunity workplace for women

The study recorded the views of both male and female journalists and management representatives. With respect to Sexual Harassment of Women, there was a specific focus on prevalence, frequency and nature of harassment, the consequences, the profile of harassers and victims, and institutional mechanisms for prevention and redressal of SHW.

The study also gauged the attitude of employers and the perspective of male and female journalists on issues such as gender equity within organizations, recruitment policies, working hours, nature of assignments, salaries, promotions, benefits, and entitlements.

Partnership

The study was the result of a collaborative effort by South Asian Women in Media (SAWM) and SANHITA, a Gender Resource Centre. SAWM's network with media houses facilitated the sampling and selection of the respondents for the study.

Considering the personal nature of the study, maintaining confidentiality and anonymity of respondents was of utmost importance. Hence beyond provisioning for a cohort of potential respondents, SAWM did not involve itself in conducting the study.

SANHITA, with experiences of addressing the issue of SHW for over two decades, collected & analysed the data and wrote the report.

Research Methodology and Sample

A mixed methodology was adopted for the research, comprising both quantitative and qualitative approaches. The quantitative survey was conducted among 90 participants. Half of the respondents (45) were male and the other half (45) were female. All respondents were employed or had retired from news media organizations in West Bengal. The questionnaire for the survey comprised 21 close-ended questions with multiple choices.

The qualitative segment comprised of Focussed Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews. Both FGDs and interviews included open-ended questions addressing several issues related to sexual harassment and gender equality at the workplace.

For this study, those with up to 12 years work experience were categorised as middle level journalists while other with more than 12 years in the profession as senior level journalists.

In-depth interviews were conducted with a total of 29 journalists whose profile is as follows:

- 21 were senior journalists with 13 to 38 years work experience, 8 were middle level journalists with 5 to 12 years in the profession
- 25 respondents were women and 4 were men
- 13 were associated with regional newspapers, 11 with Bengali and 2 with Hindi dailies
- 7 were working with national English dailies
- 3 journalists were employed with the audio-visual news media, 3 were freelancers, and 2 were writing for web portals
- 1 was a former journalist

The 8 Human Resources (HR) representatives interviewed had work experience ranging from 3.5 years to 37 years. They held positions as manager, senior manager, and executive director. Of the HR representatives, 5 were from Bengali dailies and 1 each from a Hindi newspaper, a national English daily, and the audio-visual media. All HR interviewees were male.

FGDs were conducted among 3 groups: male journalists, women photojournalists and women journalists employed in the districts. A total number of 17 journalists participated, of which 12 were female and 5 were male. 10 of the 17 were senior level journalists and 7 middle-level. 10 were Kolkata based and seven were from the districts: Siliguri, Dakshin Dinajpur and North 24 Parganas.

Consent and Confidentiality

Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were assured of complete confidentiality and anonymity prior to interviews/FGDs and before answering the survey questionnaire. A written consent form was signed by both researcher and the study participant.

Information gathered from the study has been kept confidential, with only researchers being privy to it. The participants were not identified by name and their identities have been kept secure and protected.

Challenges and Limitations

Given the sensitive nature of the study, there were several inherent constraints.

Since the survey takes a critical look at institutional mechanisms which ensure safety of women employees, it was imperative to ascertain the views of HR personnel to ensure a fair review. However, this proved to be a challenge for varied reasons.

Some of the media outfits did not have a dedicated HR department. National media houses operating with skeletal staff in regional offices often had no employee assigned to discharge HR functions. But the biggest challenge was the reluctance of the HR representatives to meet researchers despite assurance of confidentiality.

Another limitation of the study was its small sample size (90). Hence, the conclusions drawn are only indicative and cannot be generalised to represent all media houses in West Bengal. However, the qualitative part of the study offers an introspective and reflective perspective to the gender dynamics and work culture that exists within media organizations in the state.

CHAPTER 2 – THE FINDINGS

Sexual harassment is widely prevalent

It clearly emerged from the survey and the in-depth interviews that Sexual Harassment of Women (SHW) journalists was more common than perceived. It was not a random occurrence. In fact, other than specific cases of SHW, women Kolkata and the Districts journalists also revealed that the general work culture was sexist. Lewd remarks about women were made with impunity by male colleagues causing great distress to the victims.

It must be placed on record at the outset that sexual harassment is not always a dramatic development involving an attempted rape or physical molestation. It can be sexist jokes, vulgar personal innuendoes, remarks soliciting sexual gratification, inappropriate touch, use of power or so-called casual banter that has an embarrassing gender subtext. In fact, actions or speech which gnaw at a woman's physical dignity and sexuality also constitute SHW.

These were two examples cited by women journalists illustrating this:

“I was attending a conference with a group of other journalists when a male colleague turned to me and commented, ‘In three or four years you will leave journalism, get married and will be attending kitty parties and discussing the size of your bra with other women.’ Everyone laughed and no one thought that the comment constituted harassment for a woman. I shot back at him saying, ‘Sure, just as your wife does now!’ He got extremely angry and would have hit me if he could”.

“On one occasion when my boss and I were on gtalk, he suddenly put the chat off the record mode and asked me. ‘when was the last time you had roaring sex?’. I realized that I had to draw the line. I put the chat back on record to ensure that his messages were public. After that I started seeing his angry side. When I applied for a scholarship, he didn't let me go.”

Remarks or jokes such as these, loaded with sexual innuendos, were often ignored. Some women journalists said that complaints were not lodged for fear of being labelled *nyaka* or a fussy person. The language in the newsroom, they pointed out, was traditionally masculine. So, protesting the use of abusive and sexist language would mean that the woman was not a sport or lacked a sense of humour. Such a reputation could come in the way of her future in the organization and the nature of work assigned to her.

Consequently, women ended up as unwitting and passive participants in sexual harassment. For instance, they laughed at sexist jokes in a desperate attempt to be accepted. Because of this, sexual harassment got normalised over time and became an intrinsic part of organizational culture. The survey findings reflected this:

***Among the female journalists surveyed, 56% (25) revealed that they had faced some form of SHW during their career.**

***Of those who reported this, 24% (6) said they encountered sexual harassment while out on assignments.**

***In the in-depth interviews, an overwhelming majority said they knew of at least one instance of SHW within their organization.**

***Half of them had personally faced SHW within the office premises and the remaining knew about the experiences of others who had faced harassment.**

When defining the perpetrators, frequently used expressions were ‘senior men’ and ‘men in power’. When it came to victims, most felt that all women were vulnerable to harassment, with some being more vulnerable.

For instance, juniors, particularly interns and freelancers, were perceived as more susceptible as they ranked low in the hierarchy. Women who were seen to be friendly, talkative and career oriented were also considered at risk. Those hailing from small towns, and those based in the districts were identified as most vulnerable. Women journalists with economic or emotional problems were easy targets.

During FGDs, a TV journalist narrated her experience:

“I have faced harassment personally in my job with a television channel. I was on night duty when my boss tried to touch me inappropriately. I initially moved away and then ran out to where the security guard was. He understood and asked me to sit there. The boss got mad and left the office. I got away safely that night. But after that, the boss’ behaviour changed significantly and he started pressurising me to provide seven exclusive stories every single day. I was doing the culture beat those days and with great difficulty when I managed to give the stories, he started hounding me on the means I was adopting to get my stories.”

A senior woman journalist from the districts recalled:

“When I go out to cover any story or event, often it is at a very crowded venue. Women journalists are far and few in the districts and usually I am the only woman among several men. I somehow guard myself by extending my arms. If I am not alert hands from three directions will come and paw or touch me. Male journalists constantly refer to me as ‘bhabiji’ and question my ability to cover news. They also keep commenting on my clothes and ask pointed questions like ‘aap kya jeans pehen ke news cover karne jati hai (do you go on reporting assignments wearing jeans)?’”

The many shades of SHW

Often it is difficult to define SHW in black and white since there are several grey areas. Sometimes it comes in the form of an innuendo. At other times it can be more physical or a direct verbal proposition. It can be abusive or suggestive language questioning the moral character of a woman. The results of the survey reflected all this.

***Of the SHW instances reported, 60% were of a verbal nature**

***36% reported both verbal and physical harassment**

***4% faced verbal and non-verbal harassment.**

During the interviews, women journalists narrated one instance after the other which revealed how emboldened some of the men in power were. They brazenly transgressed all modicum of appropriate workplace behaviour.

During the interviews senior and mid-level women journalists narrated their experiences:

“One of the district editors offered me a position in his team and I took it up. I really enjoyed the work. He was of my father’s age and was almost like a mentor to me. But slowly things changed. He started holding me back unnecessarily and would not let me pack up and leave. He started asking uncomfortable questions about my personal life, my menstrual cycle and so on. It then went on to inappropriate touches. When I could not keep quiet anymore, I shared my predicament with the news editor. He suggested I send a written complaint to the IC, which I did. What I didn’t realise then was that the news editor was settling his professional rivalry with my boss and I was being used as a pawn in the game.”

“My boss would call a woman he found attractive lasyamayi (seductive) or ‘hot’ and go near her and rub his hands together the way one would in front of a fire. If someone wore a white blouse, he would pass a comment like ‘choto size er bra porecho na? (you are wearing a small size bra, right?)’ or touch his private parts in public and pass vulgar comments with double meanings.”

“Once a male colleague about to go on a foreign trip suggestively asked me, ‘What is your waist size, I can get you a pair of jeans. There are good ones abroad’. I told him sternly that I can buy my own jeans.”

“A colleague who was quite senior would keep holding my hands as he spoke to me. Even if I pulled back, he would again try to hold my hands. Once he even pinched me just below the neck. I pushed his hand away and twisted his finger.”

Discrimination and SHW go hand in hand

Sexual harassment faced by women journalists is a symptom of a deeper malaise that prevails across media houses. It begins with the heavily skewed and imbalanced gender ratio within organizations. While the recruitment of women was slow to start with, it steadily increased over the years. However, there are still media houses that either don’t recruit women or hire them only for desk jobs.

In the interviews, women spoke of the hostility they faced by virtue of being isolated or singled out within a male dominated workspace and during reporting assignments. The discrimination

which began with recruitment continued at every level, from the assignment of beats to growth and promotion opportunities. It came camouflaged in various forms:

- **Benign patriarchy:** This manifested in statements like '*meyeder nile khub jhamela, night korano jaye na* (its problematic to recruit women as we can't assign them the night shift)'. The implication was that it is unsafe for women to work at night or gather information for political reporting which involved ground level news gathering. The excuse was that women are not safe when they mingle with strangers on the streets to elicit opinions. However, the real reason was an unwillingness to allow women to report politics, which is considered a male preserve.
- **Sexist platitudes:** This found expression in statements like '*Era toh meye eder toh emnie interview diye debe.* (These are women journalists. They get interviews easily).' '*Era toh meye era ki kaaj kore, emni taka paye. Eder tai toh bhalo dekhete meye rakhte hobe.* (Women journalists do not have to work, they get money for their looks).' This reduced and nullified professional capabilities of women.
- **Stereotyping:** It influenced decisions on the assignment of beats. The unwritten code in most media houses seemed to be that men do better justice to serious beats like politics, crime, sports, and technology. Women, on the other hand, were considered a better fit for 'softer' stuff like education, health, entertainment, and fashion. This pigeonholing was more pronounced in case of reporters.
- **Dismissiveness:** This reflected in the belief that women were not capable of shouldering responsibilities and handling senior positions such as chief of bureau. Almost all journalists interviewed agreed that there were very few women in senior management positions across media houses. Clearly the glass ceiling was intact, and not allowed to be breached.

One point that was repeatedly reiterated during FGDs and the interviews was that whenever women held senior positions in organizations, it made a qualitative difference to the overall culture, attitude, and approach to women employees.

During the FGDs with male respondents, one senior journalist pointed out:

"There is usually an adrenaline rush on the news floor and slangs are openly used, sexually coloured jokes are the norm. This gets reduced when the boss is a woman or women are in positions of power. They don't cuss that openly, as a result the men also remain controlled in their use of words".

Apathy and Indifference

The #MeToo Movement had its beginnings in Hollywood and was widely reported. Soon women in the western world across professions mustered the courage to speak out. Many men in high places stood exposed as skeletons tumbled out of their closets.

The movement also left its footprint in India. It was not long before women journalists spoke of the humiliation they suffered at the hands of senior male colleagues and editors. The men had used their position to sexually harass and mentally torture them. As the dark testimonies

poured out, it was hoped that the profession that reports gender discrimination and exploitation would look inwards and address these concerns within their own organizations.

However, the study found that there was no systematic attempt to introspect and improve overall work culture. During the FGDs and interviews many women journalists shared what transpired when any SHW incident came to light.

The default response in most media establishments was to ignore the case, and pretend it never happened. This was followed by hushed whispers and a trail of gossip which led to further harassment of the woman. If she considered lodging a complaint, she was most likely to be discouraged and reminded that she would be unable to prove the allegations.

During interviews women journalists had this to say:

“Without the knowledge and tacit support of the management such incidents cannot happen.”

“The management would rather not hire women than risk controversies. They simply do not want any complaint to be lodged.”

“Any free-spirited woman who talks freely or even smiles a lot is considered ‘available’ or ‘forward’. Should she get sexually harassed, no one will stand by her in support.”

“Though #MeToo has been covered by the media extensively, we have hardly heard anything about SHW within our own profession here. Women risk even their personal safety to get a story. For most of us our careers mean a lot. If raising her voice against SHW can cost a woman her job, it is likely that she will go quiet about it.”

“There have been several instances when we as photojournalists are elbowed on our breasts by male colleagues while taking photographs. If we protest, the reaction would invariably be that one cannot be so careful when photographs are being clicked in a hurry. Any pawing will be positioned as a ‘professional hazard’.”

There were, however, few positive instances of how media houses had adopted ‘Zero Tolerance to SHW’ and put systems in place to ensure the same.

In the words of a senior woman journalist from a national TV channel:

“A lot of checks and balances were put in place in my organization. The SHW policy is displayed prominently in every office and the headquarters ensures this during inspection visits. Stringent monitoring mechanisms are active, with the HR department speaking to interns once a week on a conference call to ascertain if they were being treated well. All this has ensured that employees understand the importance of keeping workplaces safe for women”.

Another initiative was mentioned by a young woman journalist from a national English daily about how her management reinforced workplace ethics amongst its employees:

“Employees are made aware that within the organizational culture SHW will not be tolerated. There is also an online test for staffers to take periodically (once a quarter). It has questions related to SHW and answers are graded. If an employee fails to score minimum marks, a retest is taken. With all these measures the management continues to keep awareness levels high.”

Though these two examples were exceptions rather than the rule, they clearly illustrated that adopting and implementing a stringent SHW policy was possible if there is organizational will.

CHAPTER 3 – PREVENTION AND REDRESSAL

The Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act 2013 unambiguously placed the accountability of creating safe workplaces on employers. Any workplace with more than 10 employees was legally mandated by the SHW Act to implement the following:

- Formulate and widely disseminate an internal policy or resolution or declaration for prohibition, prevention and redressal of sexual harassment at workplace intended to promote gender sensitive safe spaces and remove underlying factors that contribute towards a hostile work environment against women
- Treat sexual harassment as misconduct under Service Rules and intimate action for such misconduct
- Organize workshops and awareness programmes at regular intervals for sensitising the employees with the provisions of the Act
- Constitute (employing 10 or more employees) Internal Committee (IC) to enquire into complaints in a time bound manner
- Orient and build capacities of the members of the IC
- Display the penal consequences of sexual harassments; and the order constituting the IC and declare the names and contact details of all the Members of the IC
- Support the Inquiry Process
- Act on recommendation(s) of IC within 60 days of receiving the inquiry report
- Provide assistance to the aggrieved woman if she so chooses to file a complaint in relation to the offence under the IPC or any other law for the time being in force, especially if the perpetrator is an outsider
- Include in the annual report of the organization the number of cases filed, if any, and their disposal under this Act and intimate such number of cases, if any to the District Officer

After the Act became operational, it was expected that the fourth estate would identify and correct systemic deficiencies and legal non-compliance in their organizations. But did they? In the context of the #MeToo Movement, it was important to examine whether systems and processes were streamlined, and institutional mechanisms put in place to ensure safe workplaces for women. The following section explored that aspect.

SHW Policy in Media Houses

The survey revealed the lackadaisical attitude of managements towards addressing sexual harassment. Many of them only had a SHW policy on paper. And even when they did, they did not make employees sufficiently aware of it. As for the IC, they actively discouraged women employees from lodging complaints and were quick to defend the perpetrator, particularly if he was in a senior position in the organization.

The survey threw up the following:

- *Only 36.7% of respondents said their organizations had a SHW policy.**
- *33.3% stated there was no such policy at their workplace.**
- *The remaining 30% were not aware of whether such a policy existed or not.**

A similar trend emerged in the in-depth interviews:

- *Only about a third of the interviewees confirmed the existence of a SHW policy in their organizations.**
- *Even among them, very few knew whether SHW was part of the service rules.**

Two disturbing facts emerged from the survey and interviews that were indicative of the level of importance accorded to SHW by managements:

1. There were a significant number of media organizations not functioning in accordance with the legal requirement of a SHW policy.
2. Sizeable number of journalists were unaware of the status of the SHW policy in their organizations.

Employee Orientation on SHW Policy

The survey and interviews revealed that creating awareness and sensitising employees was not a priority for a sizable majority of media managements:

- *Only 24.5% of survey respondents said that their employers conducted awareness programmes on the issue.**
- *During interviews just a small number recalled an orientation session as a one-time event.**
- *Journalists said SHW was usually addressed briefly in some media houses during induction of employees.**
- *Very few respondents mentioned comprehensive awareness programmes or refresher sessions.**

The inference that can be drawn from this is that though the law places the onus of prevention of SHW on employers, they made little effort to comply with this requirement.

Internal Committee: Relevance and Concerns

The SHW Act mandated the setting up of Internal Committees (ICs) within organizations to address complaints related to sexual harassment and provide redressal. But how effective was this mechanism? Were employees aware of its role and existence? The results were quite disheartening:

- *Only 40% of respondents said their organizations had an IC.**
- *28.9% said they had no IC.**

***31.1% were unaware of the existence of an IC.**

In the interviews the response was confusing. More than half of the participants stated that their organizations had an IC, but on probing further it came to light that many were not aware of the composition of the IC. Further, only a negligible number had a vague notion about the complaint and redressal process. The few who knew, had gathered patchy information from noticeboards, updates on websites and mails sent to them.

A small group of women journalists were members of the ICs in their organizations. However, none of them reported having received any special training on IC processes or their specific role in it. Half of them also revealed that there had never been a SHW case during their tenure as members.

Majority of the respondents pointed out emphatically in their interviews that they found the ICs irrelevant. Some of the strong opinions voiced by senior women journalists are as follows:

“My IC inquiry was so biased that I asked the chief editor if this is the approach, why was the IC created? He said, ‘That is a corporate need. I hope you are not so naïve to take it seriously. We have several courts in the country, does it mean that everyone gets justice?’. I eventually decided to leave full time reporting and took to freelancing and teaching journalism.”

“There was a complaints committee in our organization, but it was dysfunctional and not trusted. So, no one approached it. The fear was that the committee could twist and turn the whole incident and blame it on the woman.”

“In the media house where I was employed, I overheard a conversation in which a male employee accused of sexual harassment was being briefed by a member of the IC on the internal discussions. This was being done to give him a heads up in the case. I realised ICs are just puppets of the management.”

Some male journalists also expressed their reservations on the effectiveness of IC:

“It is not possible for everyone to go to the sexual harassment complaint cell. I have never seen any woman benefitting from it. Usually what happens is she ends up losing her job. Even if she is not fired directly, such a situation is created that she is forced to leave. Complaints do come to the IC. But the outcome depends on the mindset of the organization. Where the mindset is not feudal some action is taken.”

“Where the entire organizational structure is against women, what difference can an IC make? There is imbalance in the basic structure, unless that is addressed ICs will not be able to deliver much.”

Respondents felt that the organizational culture greatly influenced the working and efficacy of ICs. They noted that instances of a fair inquiry or effective action taken against the perpetrators were few and far between.

Efficacy of Informal Channels

Were formally constituted ICs more effective than traditional informal mechanisms for addressing SHW cases? Opinions were divided.

Almost half the journalists interviewed revealed that there were once informal channels in their organizations to deal with SHW complaints. Some of these were effective but were replaced by ICs. However, in some establishments they were not wound up and continued to function through the HR department, or a sensitive senior woman or male colleague. Some women found the informal channel easier to approach and had benefitted from its intervention. But there were others who had serious reservations about them.

Following are two contrasting views expressed:

“I feel there used to be a personal touch with the informal channels which is missing now. All these Committees are good, but they are very mechanical and devoid of the human element”.

“Informal mechanisms always work against women. Senior women often dissuade their younger colleagues from complaining. This leads the victim to accept sexist behaviour.”

Why complaints are seldom lodged

The proof of any complaint and redressal mechanism is in the action taken. Its effectiveness can be gauged from the confidence it inspires among complainants.

Here was what the survey revealed:

***Only 20% of the women who had faced SHW lodged a complaint. The others chose not to take any formal action.**

*** From among the complaints lodged, perpetrators were punished in only 20% cases.**

***46.7% respondents knew employees who had faced SHW and lodged complaints.**

***Of these, in only 43% cases had managements dealt with the complaints. In the rest no action was taken.**

It emerged that many SHW instances go unreported since there was a trust deficit in the redressal process. This emerged during the interviews and FGDs. A majority who had faced SHW said they had decided not to lodge a complaint. The few who did, faced biased inquiries and ended up being used as pawns in intra-office rivalries. They were also maligned, stigmatised, and accused of having ‘asked for it’.

These women felt strongly that ICs were farcical and served as puppets of managements. Moreover, confidentiality was not maintained during inquiries. Senior and mid-level women

journalists who had been victims of SHW shared their anger, disappointment, and disillusionment with the inadequate and unfair redressal process in their organizations:

“The IC took up my SHW complaint and I was asked questions like, ‘Is there any proof?’ Where would I get that from? After a point I was pressurised to withdraw my complaint and they were even willing to draft it for me. When I refused, I was called to the chief editor’s office. He was smooth during the entire interaction. The message was clear that I had no choice but to retract my complaint. He said, ‘we are like a family here. When you have problems with your family, do you go to the police? Why did you send a written complaint?’.”

“I told almost every senior in the organization about the harassment that I was facing. Nobody advised me to make a formal complaint. And the harasser would tell me that everyone in the IC was his friend and so there would be no use complaining. I was so stressed emotionally that I decided not to complain to the Committee. However, I did speak to the HR person. Far from getting any support, I was unceremoniously transferred from reporting to the tabloid section. I felt so let down that I quit within three months”

During FGDs and interviews, both male and female journalists agreed that many women who faced SH preferred not to approach ICS for fear of being targeted. This apprehension was more pronounced if the complaint was against men in senior positions as it put their job at risk. There was consensus that sexual harassment had more to do with power that men wield rather than the sexuality of a woman. The following testimonies bear that out:

“I have known of cases where the woman had to quit her job as there was no other way out. One of the prime reasons for this is that most of the time the harassers are men in senior positions whom the organization thought to be indispensable. Unless a man has the confidence of getting away with harassing a woman, he will not attempt it. Some men even gloat over how they have got away with it.”

Through the HR Bifocal

The human resource department has a key responsibility in ensuring the safety of women at the workplace. The institutional mechanisms to check and counter SHW functions under it. This made it imperative for the study to look at the HR perspective and the affirmative actions taken by it.

However, not many HR or management representatives were forthcoming despite being assured anonymity. Though several attempts were made, only eight came forward and were willing to be interviewed. But there too, very minimal information was provided by them. Interestingly, some media houses did not have a designated HR department.

As for creating awareness among employees about SHW and the Act, only one representative spoke about these being included in the induction programme for employees. The others did not mention any awareness building initiatives.

When it came to the composition of ICs, two HR representatives reported the absence of an IC in their organizations. One was not sure if an IC had been constituted. The remaining five interviewees confirmed the presence of an IC and had some idea of its composition, particularly the number of members and the identity of the external member. However, beyond that none of the respondents were clear or confident about the details of the IC.

When asked how employees were notified about the IC, the respondents said that it was through posters on notice boards, email communications and messages, rather than personal interaction. Only one HR representative spoke extensively about his organization's SHW policy. He described the workplace as 'gender neutral'. By this account, the organization had trained team leaders who in turn educated the employees working with them and made them aware of the role of the IC. Ironically, none of the interviewees mentioned any training being given to members of the IC.

Through the interactions one could conclude that the SHW issue was not given due importance within organizations. Whatever orientation and awareness that happened was sporadic and ad hoc. A structured and cohesive institutional mechanism required by the law was lacking in most media houses. More importantly, institutional insight and the will to reflect on this critical issue seemed to be missing.

CHAPTER 4 – LODGING COMPLAINTS AND ITS BACKLASH

The study showed that it was the complainant who often ended up being victimised. She was left with two choices: to come to terms with the harassment or quit. More often than not, the perpetrators were allowed to go scot free.

In the survey 38.9 % respondents revealed that they knew of instances when SHW victims resigned from their jobs. A similar trend emerged in the interviews with journalists. According to many of them, eventually the only option left for the woman if she did not want to accept the harassment was to quit. In some cases, women put up with it as long as it was tolerable.

Interestingly, it was a similar experience for those who chose not to complain but expressed displeasure. In some cases, the women were strategically shunted out. Very few interviewees spoke of a fair inquiry or any action being taken against the perpetrator.

Women said it was just not about losing employment, but the trauma, torture, and humiliation one had to undergo after complaining. It was also about the gossip, isolation, and vitiated atmosphere that had to be faced day in and day out.

Women journalists shared their own unpleasant and harrowing experiences as well as those of their colleagues:

“My immediate boss would openly name body parts and say that he can see them through the dress. On one occasion I complained to the news editor that my boss pinched me on the thigh when we were being dropped back home in the same car. The news editor laughed dismissively. His attitude was that this cannot be a complaint. He very casually said that he would tell the concerned person (my boss) not to do such things henceforth. But nothing changed and I wrote about the incident on social media. Subsequently, other women colleagues also complained against him and refused to take the car with him. Despite all this, no action was taken. In fact, I think he received a promotion, while I left the job”.

“Despite putting up with the harassment, my promotion was stopped. I tried applying for other jobs, but the position and pay packages offered were not good enough. So, I had to put up with it. Being a single mother made me particularly vulnerable to exploitation in an unsupportive workspace. At one point, things had worsened to such an extent that getting up in the morning and reporting to work became mentally stressful”.

“When there is a case of SHW, the whole organization goes quiet. Nothing is spoken against the man. I know of a regional daily where a male staffer was removed after many women complained against him. But he immediately got a job with another media house. On the other hand, a woman who has faced harassment is marked. She will find it difficult to relocate to a new job.”

In media organizations where SHW was taken lightly, it required immense courage for a woman to speak up against harassment and lodge a complaint. If she did so, it was not only

seen as challenging the perpetrator but also the entire system that emboldened and protected him.

During interviews and FGDs, respondents pointed out that women who dared to complain were labelled ‘troublemakers’ and ‘rabble-rousers’. Irrespective of the outcome of the inquiry (if at all there was one), the tag remained. Further, the media grapevine ensured that even if the victim was transferred to another department or joined another organization, she carried the stigma of being ‘the woman who created a ruckus’. It almost became part of her professional identity as illustrated by the testimonies below:

“The department to which I was transferred to was equally hostile. Before joining I called my new boss and informed him. He immediately warned me that if any inside information leaked from his department, he would assume that I was responsible. I went to the HR and asked what was happening. They said that none of the women were able to work with my new boss, so they had posted me there to break the jinx. I could not take it anymore. I resigned at the earliest opportunity.”

“I had to quit my first job because of harassment. The boss in the next one knew my personal history and gave me a raw deal both in terms of designation and pay. It was a demotion of sorts. But I was desperate for a job as a single mother and took it up. So, for women the troubles continue even after a job change. To avoid this perennial backlash, I threw away eight years of organizational experience and decided to become a freelancer.”

“One of the reasons managements do not want to take action is because everyone has been guilty of ignoring or encouraging SHW. So, it was like opening a Pandora’s box. Because I spoke out, it defined my identity. When I joined the next job, I realised that I was being used as a pawn and was pitted against my former organization as they were rivals. So, I decided to quit journalism after working for four years with two leading national dailies.”

It emerged from the survey that organizational culture and attitude towards sexual harassment was a critical determinant of how aggrieved women reacted. One of the main deterrents to women reporting or speaking out on the issue was their harassment through the course of inquiry, and even after a complainant quit her job.

CHAPTER 5 – THROUGH THE LENS OF WOMEN PHOTOJOURNALISTS

Women camerapersons are a minority in the media. Currently the ratio of female to male photojournalists is around 1:10. In absolute numbers there are seven full time women photojournalists in Kolkata. The rest are freelancers.

A decade ago, the numbers were even more miniscule. At that time women aspiring to take up photojournalism were dissuaded from doing so. It was believed that women would not be able to cope with the physical stress of the job. There were also instances of male photojournalists expressing their displeasure at women joining their ranks.

The survey revealed that for those who secured a job in the photo section, it was an uphill task. When out on work, women photojournalists often found themselves fighting for space at crowded venues in the midst of male counterparts.

More often than not, to get the required shot they had to manoeuvre themselves and their equipment. In physically constricted spaces it was easy for the men to touch, push or paw and blame it on the crowded environment. In such instances, it was very difficult to establish or provide evidence of SHW. It was often brushed off as an unintentional act and an occupational hazard. A woman photojournalist had this to say:

“It is quite common to see a woman photographer in front trying to click a photograph with ten male photographers trying to jostle and push her aside. This is the physical nature of the work which involves brushing aside all obstacles to get the best shot. There are men who take advantage of the situation and intentionally grope at the breasts and move away. There are no rules or protocol for such situations. If you say anything to the men or complain, the immediate response will be that in a crowded scenario there will be push and pull. That is why women should not be photojournalists, that it is not a woman’s job, so on and so forth.”

During the FGDs few women photojournalists also shared the embarrassment and humiliation they had to suffer in public because of the inconsiderate and vile behaviour of their male counterparts. As some of them recalled:

“At the time of the 1983 World Cup, we were covering the Indian team that had come to Kolkata. At one event, other male photographers had kicked me, and I had fallen at Cricketer’s feet. The cricket legend looked at them and said, ‘disgusting’ and walked away. He refused to give us a shot. Those men did not even give me the respect due to a fellow human being.”

In the FGDs, women photojournalists spoke about their work being devalued or belittled. They also shared instances when they were side-lined and denied a prestigious assignment since they were not deemed capable. They said women were only given routine work, and not prime assignments. Also, there was little scope for promotion or rising to the top.

Women photojournalists further shared their harrowing experiences at work. They delved into the unending struggle against a system that refuses to acknowledge their skills and abilities. In this context, some of them had this to say:

“In our organization there was a male photographer who would always be sent on important assignments. On one occasion he failed to get the required photograph. So, they finally gave me an opportunity. I did manage to click the picture, and this created quite an uproar in the office. The discussion amongst colleagues veered around the means I must have employed as a woman to get the photograph. It was a very demeaning experience.”

“Most organizations do not prefer to send women photographers on outstation assignments. The reason cited is that staying overnight in a hotel or lodge could compromise safety. This, in effect, means that women must huff and puff from 4am to 3am but come back home. There have been instances when I had to travel to Bankura, return, and travel to Purulia the next day just because it was thought to be unsafe for me as a woman to stay in a hotel room.”

“I know a woman photojournalist who painstakingly covered all the practice matches at the Eden Gardens. But on the day of the final match, I could not see her and asked the editor of her paper who had been deputed to cover the event. He said ‘Vital match bujhli to, kichu Jodi miss hoye jaye. (You see it is a vital match, what if she misses something)’.”

Covering rallies or natural calamities was a challenge for women photojournalists. While on outdoor assignments lack of proper public toilets for women was a problem. Working in stressful situations during monthly periods was another. But the women said no one dared speak about such issues as it reinforced stereotypical notions about women photographers:

“When we are out on an assignment there’s no certainty about where we might find a toilet. Often, we cannot locate one throughout the day. Many women are unable to take the physical stress. During major political rallies or events, there is never a toilet around. The organizers of such events can put up a bio-toilet, but they do not. When male security personnel check our personal belongings, it feels like a violation of our privacy. After we protested, the authorities have now posted female security staff at some venues. It is a small beginning, but nevertheless a beginning.”

“I was covering a dignitary’s visit to Kolkata. For a story like this, it is the standard practice for it to be covered by the same photographer from start to finish. Despite this, a male colleague was asked to take it up midway. When he came back without any photographs, I was sent the following day to try my luck since my bosses felt that being a woman, I could perhaps get some exclusive coverage. This kind of undermining of one’s work and worth happens all the time.”

CHAPTER 6 – VIEWS OF MALE JOURNALISTS

The survey indicated that awareness among male journalists about SHW in their organizations largely stemmed from those cases where complaints were lodged, and the details went public. That, perhaps, explained the contrasting views expressed by the men and women surveyed:

***40% male journalists surveyed stated they knew of instances where women employees had faced SHW.**

***They also said that the women who faced harassment had lodged complaints. According to them, 55.5% of these were addressed by the management.**

***However, the women survey respondents said that 50% of those who faced SHW eventually quit their jobs.**

***During the FGDs and the interviews women journalists noted that only a small percentage of those who faced harassment gathered the courage to formally complain.**

***The women also said that during the enquiries, confidentiality was not maintained.**

Some male voices echoed the gender inequity in organizational culture and the discrimination women journalists faced:

“There’s a paradox in the management policy of media houses. I have been working in this organization for 13 to 14 years. On paper the HR policy is very stringent. Every week they send an email stating ‘zero tolerance to sexual harassment’. These mails spell out what is sexual harassment, and that there is a cell to address complaints. We are required to read the communications and respond to questions asked. So far, so good. But in the same office there are multiple women losing their jobs because they have put on weight. When you are on TV, looks matters, and this applies particularly to women. So, what does it convey about the organizational policy towards women employees?”

At FGDs and interviews, most of the male journalists stated that action was occasionally taken against the perpetrator, sometimes even ending in the termination of his services. However, they added that swift action was taken only if the man was a junior. In contrast, they knew of a lot of top bosses who went scot free despite serious allegations levelled against them.

But it must be noted that action against perpetrators was few and far between when compared to the number of women forced to resign because of SHW.

CHAPTER 7 – IS MEDIA AN EQUAL OPPORTUNITY WORKPLACE?

Workplace culture can be assessed through an organization's policies vis-à-vis gender equity, hiring, pay, promotion, working hours, night shifts, outstation reporting, assignment of beats, basic amenities, entitlements, and diversity.

The survey threw up no overwhelming consensus on whether equal opportunities were inbuilt in the organizational structure of media houses:

***57.8% of women journalists surveyed felt that their organizations were equal opportunity workplaces.**

***42.2% felt they were not.**

***68.9% male journalists were of the view that their organizations provided equal opportunity.**

***31.1% disagreed with this.**

The FGDs and interviews further probed issues pertaining to workplace ethos. The picture that emerged was of a work culture that explicitly or subtly discriminated against women. Even the most basic provisions or entitlements did not come without a struggle. Women journalists were cautious and weary of what to demand lest they be branded troublemakers.

Maternity break pushes Women Journalists career backwards

The issue of maternity leave threw up differing responses. A majority (73.3%) of those surveyed stated that their organization provided maternity leave. However, the in-depth interviews revealed otherwise. Only less than half the women interviewed said they were provided full six months of paid maternity leave as stipulated by law. Surprisingly, almost half the women interviewed were not aware of the details of the maternity policy adopted by their organizations. Ditto was the response of men and women journalists who participated in the FGDs.

Women journalists pointed out that getting back into the groove was difficult after a maternity break. They said it was quite common for women returning from maternity leave to be sidelined. Often it was under the guise of care and concern that the woman was asked, 'will you be able to handle it?'. As for those who were adopting a child, the presumption was that leave was not required since no pregnancy was involved!

Two testimonies shared by women journalists reflected gender discrimination and insensitivity towards maternity:

"I applied for maternity leave and got it. The HR later took notice of a social media post of mine where I had mentioned that my child was adopted. My benefits were immediately withdrawn on the grounds that there was no Maternity Benefit Policy for adopted children. In fact, I was asked 'why do you need the leave? You have not given birth'."

“Within three days of my going on maternity leave, the HR called me and asked me to get a male freelancer to fill in for me. After one-and-a-half months the senior photographer informed me that my accreditation would not be renewed since I was no longer reporting for work. I also found that the office had not paid (and probably wasn’t planning to do so in the future) the freelancer who had been working in my place. I was left with no choice but to pay him myself. But can you complain about this to anyone? They will ask you to go on leave and replace you on some pretext or the other.”

Some of the key takeaways from the interviews were:

- Maternity pushed back the careers of most women journalists.
- The absence of structural support for a woman to get back to her job makes it difficult. With no child-care leave and crèche facilities it turns into a lone struggle.
- Most breaks in careers for women happen during maternity or because of personal reasons.

In the interviews with HR personnel, two representatives said their respective organizations offered paternity leave of five to seven days. One organization had provisions for adoption leave for single mothers. Another was planning to start a crèche once it was sanctioned.

The Struggle for Gender Segregated Toilets

Gender segregated toilets were not a priority for some managements. This was specially the case in their bureaus and district offices. Women employees were expected to make do with the general toilet. However, in headquarters and metro centres gender segregated toilets were provided after women demanded it.

In the survey 81.1% respondents said their organizations provided gender segregated toilets, while 13.3% reported that this was not the case where they worked. The remaining 5.6% did not know!

Almost one-fifth of those interviewed also confirmed that their offices did not have gender segregated toilets. The reasons cited for this were varied. Paucity of space was one of them. Most organizations did not provide a separate toilet for a lone woman employee or a few of them. Even pan India organizations, which provided gender segregated toilets at offices in the metros, made no such provision at small offices in the states with skeletal staff.

However, very often it was the lack of gender sensitivity on the part of managements that made them ignore the smaller offices. This was pointed out by two senior journalists:

“When I joined a leading newspaper as a regular employee in the district, there were two toilets. One for the male staff and one for guests and high-ranking officials on a visit. Once I got into an awkward situation of stepping into the washroom when a male visitor was inside. I wrote about this in an internal blog. As a result, people ganged up against me and I was trolled for months. When they rented this office space it never occurred to them that there could be women employees joining in the future and that they would need a toilet as well.”

“Initially I was not formally employed although I wrote features for the publication. When I enquired as to why I was not being taken on as a staff I was told it was because there were no toilets for women. Now, of course, things have changed.”

The Fallacy of Hard vs Soft Beats

Is there gender discrimination in media organizations when it comes to assigning beats? The survey revealed that 49 % of respondents felt that there is. In the interviews more than three-fourth of the participants strongly expressed their angst over the discrimination and went on to detail the overt and covert ways in which different standards were adopted for men and women. Here were some testimonies:

“As in all other sectors, patriarchy has also seeped in deep in the media and this is reflected in assignments that are given to men and women. It is often presumed that politics, crime, and economics are beats exclusively for men and a woman will have to prove her grit and mettle to make inroads. This discrimination is more marked in the districts”.

“I was not given the sports beat by my organization even though I had requested for it. Ironically, every time there was a major sports event to be covered and there was paucity of staff, I was sent to assist. But I was not allowed to handle the beat on my own. As a reporter I wanted that experience but was never given an opportunity.”

“Men generally take the lead in segments like gadgets and technology, while women cover glamour, lifestyle etc. Initially I was on the desk which was dominated by women. Later, I took the initiative and developed the automobile beat for the newspaper which raised several eyebrows because I was a woman. We had a drive and review component in our section and a business segment. Whenever I went for the drive and review, I was always the lone woman since other media houses employed men for this task. They would take the wheel first and I was always the last. My company eventually hired a male journalist and he started to go for all the test reviews ostensibly because he had more experience with reviewing automobiles. Ultimately I was unceremoniously shunted out of the very beat I developed from scratch.”

The Daily Grind

In the interviews there was no gender discrimination reported vis-a-vis working hours. However, it was noted that long, rigorous, and uncertain working hours impacted men and women differently with the latter being the worse for it. This was because women had to balance domestic chores with their professional responsibilities. Skewed, stretchable and indefinite work schedules made this difficult. It was the main reason for higher attrition of women, particularly in reporting jobs. The hurry to rush home also came in the way of women rising to senior management positions.

While on the issue of discrimination, opinion was divided among respondents when it came to pay, promotion and increment. However, there was concern expressed by some on the lack of transparency and a clear-cut policy on this in their organizations. One point that found repeated mention was that a woman's rise in an organization is often attributed to her personal equation with her boss rather than her effectiveness at work.