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“WHEN I ASK A QUESTION, THEY LOOK AT ME STRANGELY”

An exploratory study of women political reporters in India

Paromita Pain

This study uses qualitative interviews with 66 women journalists from print, broadcast, and online media in India, to understand how women political reporters assigned to the political beat negotiate gender issues and organizational and news routines while being effective journalists entrusted to cover matters of policy and enhance political awareness among audiences. Using Shoemaker and Reese's hierarchy-of-influences model that introduces five levels of influence on news content, this study explores how institutional, news gathering, societal procedures, and professional practices influence the functions of women journalists on the political beat and percolate into the content they produce. The results show that in India's growing media market, organizational and news routines, as well as the contentious issue of gender, control access to beats, especially the political beat, and percolate into news content produced by women political reporters.

KEYWORDS gender; India; journalism; newsroom norms; politics; women

Introduction

Women were not taken seriously in journalism. Men think that beat reporting is their preserve especially the political beat. It's a complete boy's club sort of situation out there. (Usha Rai, personal communication, December 2014¹)

News media and political journalists, in particular, perform a crucial function in democratic society (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956), creating a politically informed citizenry that is motivated to participate in democratic process—both in advanced democracies (Chaffee and Frank 1996) and in developing nations (Lerner 1958). In India, the political beat is beset with challenges. The world's largest democracy has only a partially free press (Freedom House 2013) and exposés of political skullduggery can lead to journalists losing jobs, facing extreme harassment, and even death threats (Barry 2013; Buruma 2002). A 2013 Reporters Without Borders study claimed that eight journalists, that year, in India, were killed in connection with their work. Three of these journalists were political reporters. These are, often, the reasons suggested for the small number of women assigned to the political beat in most media organizations in the country, which largely, therefore, remains a male domain.

Recent studies show that women make up only 2.7 percent of India's mainstream journalists (Rao 2008) in the media market in India, considered a key “emerging market” with enormous possibilities for exploiting the demand for transnational media products (Thussu 1999). Exact numbers of those assigned to cover politics are not available.

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Commenting on “the place of women in journalism roles in Indian-language newspapers,” Robin Jeffrey concludes that “their numbers ... scant, the jobs few and the prejudices against them formidable” (Jeffrey 2001, 230). As an area of research, topics related to women journalists in India have been given some, though limited and superficial, attention (Joseph 2004), but the study of women political journalists, as a separate subject, remains extremely underexplored.

This paper, an empirical study, uses qualitative interviews with 66 women journalists from print, broadcast, and online media in India, to understand how women political reporters assigned to the political beat negotiate gender issues and organizational and news routines while being effective journalists entrusted to cover matters of policy and enhance political awareness among audiences. Using Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996) hierarchy-of-influences model that introduces five levels of influence on news content, this qualitative study explores how institutional, news gathering, and societal procedures and practices influence the functions of women journalists on the political beat and percolate into the content they produce, and hopes to bridge gaps in the literature by focusing on the role and functions of journalists covering politics through gendered angles in the Indian subcontinent.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

Influences on News Content

Journalism has often been understood as a set of practices described as “doing news work,” including gathering, presenting, and dissemination of news (Zelizer 2004, 42) and the influences on these practices are many (Rao 2009). Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996) hierarchy-of-influences model introduces five levels of influence on news content. These include individual, routines, organizational, extra media, and ideological influences. The individual level examines how the characteristics, experiences, backgrounds, and role perceptions of individual media workers influence news content. The routines level focuses on how “those patterned routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs” (105) affect how news is constructed. The organizations level assesses the impact that the structure, demands, and goals of media organizations have on content as well as routines. At the extra media level are factors outside of a media organization—such as sources of information, sources of revenue, social institutions, and the economy (among others)—all of which can play a role in shaping what becomes news content. Ideology is the final level, which Shoemaker and Reese define as “a symbolic mechanism that serves as a cohesive and integrating force in society” (212). Social systems or “the structure of relationships among people and the institutions they create” (Shoemaker and Reese 2013, 64) work in ways that allow power and dominant ideologies to be expressed through the media and constrain journalists’ work.

The five levels are not entirely self-contained nor are they mutually exclusive (Liebler and Moritz 2013). As Shoemaker and Reese’s (2013) hierarchy-of-influences model points out, political (or non-political) influences on the media need not always be direct: they can manifest themselves in tacit ways. The individual, routines, organizational, institutional, and systemic “levels” of influence are not watertight categories but work in a way where each successive level subsumes the previous ones (Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Shoemaker and Reese see the individual journalist as having internal conditioning forces, but

not being totally free to be directed by them. Instead, the journalist must operate within the constraints of procedures established by his or her media organization, which has its own interests that interact with other institutional forces. All of these actors are “part of a wider social system” (Reese 2001, 642). Studies which focus on the production of news and journalists’ professional practices also note how the newsroom itself, as well as journalists’ socialization within it, is deeply gendered (Allan 2010; Byerly 2004; De Bruin 2000; Djerf-Pierre 2011; Lavie and Lehman-Wilzig 2005; North 2009a). In the United States, for example, men hold nearly two-thirds of the reporting jobs, compared to the 36 percent held by women (Harris, Mosdell, and Griffiths 2016). Weaver et al. (2009) found fewer women (79 percent) than men (87 percent) felt satisfied with their news jobs.

Media content, says Reese (2001), is fundamentally an act of construction and thus it is important to understand the different influences on this construction. The hierarchy-of-influences model locates the individual within a web of organizational and ideological constraints. Embedded within organizational procedures and news routines are social norms, especially related to gender, and gender perceptions, and thus this model in the area of journalism helps to untangle some of the criticisms of press performance through an identification of appropriate kinds of evidence. It is argued these gendered attitudes are more likely to emerge at the organizational level than the individual level (Correa and Harp 2011). How do gender, media production, professional norms, and media organizations interact and what is the impact of such interactions? Van Zoonen (1994) has observed that there were few studies on the interaction of gender and organizational variables and this is very true in the case of India. In India, where gender disparities are glaring, it is important to understand how being a woman can keep people from engaging in certain beats and hinder their contribution and growth.

The Contentious Question of Gender

Politics and the political journalism beat, especially in the developing world, are the arenas in which gender inequality remains perhaps most pronounced (Inter-Parliamentary Union 1997; Kenworthy and Malami 1999; Nelson and Chowdhury 1994; Staudt 2002). While the question of how gender specifically influences news content remains unresolved; arguably, the perspectives of female news reporters provide alternative viewpoints and diversity to news by bringing “different values, interests, and priorities to the newsroom which can positively influence affect the manner in which news stories are researched, framed, and written” (Peiser 2000, 245; Rodgers and Thorson 2003, 659).

Critical theorists blame gender inequality in the media on power relations and the way they are embedded in the political and social order in this country (Diamond and Quinby 1988). Bybee, for example, argues that power is connected to knowledge in studying the social construction of women in news and sees what he calls power/knowledge as “an integrated, mutually reinforcing discourse of truth” that both keeps the media consumer from seeing and hearing women’s voices presented in the news, and women from presenting the news (Bybee 1990). An organizing assumption of much of such research that focuses on women in the newsroom is that the increased presence of women in the newsroom will necessarily encourage substantive changes in news work practices: women, it is often argued, are more inclined than men to endorse informal, non-hierarchical management structures and to support collectively based decision-making processes. Some

scholars even argue that key aspects of women's representation in the media, especially political representation, can be positively mediated by female media producers (Adcock 2010).

Research on female journalists has frequently concluded that largely male-defined news selection criteria tend to push those issues and topics which are relevant to women to the margins of the news, thereby suggesting that what is of interest to women is less important than that which interests men (Holland 2000). At the same time, however, other researchers have questioned the extent to which arguments such as these can be supported as a general rule (Smith 1989; van den Wijngaard 1992; Van Zoonen 1994). Many are skeptical of the claim that there is a "woman's perspective" which female journalists bring to their reporting. Such perspectives are important but as Arthurs (2003, 87) postulated in her discussion of the televisual industry in Britain: "More women in the industry is not enough: there need to be more women with a politicized understanding of the ways in which women's subordination is currently reproduced, and with the will to change it."

In terms of news content, studies show that more female reporters mean that the lines between "hard" and "soft" news will continue to blur, leading to a news agenda defined more closely with "human interest" news (Dougary 1994; Gallagher 1995; Lafky 1993; Norris 1997; Schulman 1995). Feminist researchers have regularly argued that in (the still) male-dominated newsrooms, the decisions which journalists make every day about what is newsworthy tend to be based on masculine conceptions of the world and what is important in it (Ross and Carter 2011). As Louise North (2009b) has pointed out in her seminal study of Australian women journalists and their negotiations to survive in a masculine newsroom culture, just being a female journalist is often challenging enough, but taking up a feminist subject position in journalism is even more contentious. An overview of the research on gender in the newsroom shows certain conflicts about how gender really operates within media organizational structures and its effects on news production. But after more than a decade of such studies, we can agree with North (2009a) that in essence newsrooms are deeply gendered and that gender is an important element that shapes the daily dilemmas and constraints of journalists' routine activities.

Globally, feminist media studies examining the processes of socialization into the newsroom, where reporters learn on a daily basis the skills needed for their job, show that historically, assumptions about gender-appropriateness have been central to definitions of the profession (Chambers, Steiner, and Fleming 2004; Djerf-Pierre and Lofgren-Nilsson 2004). A seminal study by Harris, Mosdell, and Griffiths (2016) asked an important question: how does the gender of a journalist override qualification experience and ability when being assigned stories? Their analysis showed that a large percentage of women interviewed felt that their gender had some clear advantages.

Yet as different studies have emphasized, professionalized "norms," where gender differences are assumed to have "disappeared," are taken for granted and govern journalistic routines, conventions, and norms in ways which make them difficult to identify as gendered and therefore difficult to challenge even as women themselves can point to any number of instances of unequivocally gendered practices (De Bruin and Ross 2004). Examples include the construction of work schedules where, in order to undertake the most prestigious types of journalism (typically, time constrained, daily "hard" news stories), reporters must often work long, unsociable hours in order to get ahead (Ross and Carter 2011).

Women Journalists in India

India ranked 105 out of 136 countries surveyed on the World Economic Forum's Gender Gap Index in 2013, scoring poorly on overall female to male literacy and health rankings. Women in the country are just over half the population but they are not considered an important constituency by decisions makers (Relly and Schwalbe 2013). For example, the Working Paper on a National Media Policy submitted to the Indian government in 1996 by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting made no specific recommendations relating to women as consumers of and participants in the media or in terms of media representations of women.

Internationally, the women and media research landscape took shape in the 1970s as issues moved from popular political fronts into the academies of Europe, the United States, Canada, Latin America, India, and elsewhere (Byerly 2012). Yet in countries like India this took a longer time to establish. Ammu Joseph (2000), a journalist and media monitor, conducted the most comprehensive examination of women in journalism in India, a nation where women began moving into mainstream reporting in the 1940s and 1950s, after the nation's liberation from the United Kingdom in 1947. Joseph's face-to-face interviews with 200 Indian women journalists revealed widespread frustration with job conditions that included sexual harassment, segregation into jobs with less challenge and pay, and glass ceilings (blocks to advancement based on gender), among other things. Another report, "The Status of Women in Print Journalism in India," clearly stated that women journalists felt that

they have to be twice as good as their male counterparts just to get their foot in the door. Others report that the stress of working hard to keep up standards, and to forestall any negative expectations, can be debilitating. (Bhagat 2004, 36)

These two studies, comprehensive in their scope, did not quite explore the specific challenges associated with explicit beats. Akhileshwari (2014), in her seminal work, *Women Journalists in India*, finds that while more women are seen in journalism, newsrooms are still run mostly by men, especially in the vernacular press and important assignments still elude women.

Many of the issues confronting Indian women in journalism are similar to those faced by women in media in other parts of the world, while others are more closely linked to specific social and cultural norms prevalent in Indian society (Akhileshwari 2014; Joseph 2013). For instance, a number of media establishments in India try to evade statutory responsibilities towards female employees (such as night transport) by either "excusing" women from the night shift or using the "problem" of night duty to justify not hiring women (Joseph 2007). Women are not encouraged to work the night shift. These influences may not be overt but certainly manifest in the assigned beats given to journalists. Societal and organizational procedures, either implicit or explicit, therefore, play an important role in the way journalists function. Gender plays into the media "routines" aspect where women are "routinely" excluded from the political beat (Joseph 2007).

Political Journalism and Media Ownership in India

Unlike the West where there has been a decline in newspaper circulation, India has witnessed a growth in the print industry (Ninan 2007, 66). The competition between

newspapers has changed drastically; major newspaper publishers and media companies are trying to expand into geographic regions (to competing cities and smaller markets), initiating price wars, and strategically marketing campaigns to specific readerships. The biggest beneficiary of the economic reforms has been the vernacular press and regional-language television channels. In metropolitan cities such as Delhi and Mumbai, cable packages can include up to 20 regional-language channels catering to a linguistically vast and diverse audience. Regional and vernacular publications continue to garner the largest circulations. "Salaries in the journalism and media sector are among the fastest growing at about 14.6% in 2007," reports the Hewitt Salary Asia Pacific Survey (quoted in the *Indian Express* 2007). Yet in 2010, as Akhileshwari (2014) found, not a single woman covered politics in Andhra Pradesh in India.

Yet a cursory look at the recent scholarly literature on Indian journalism reveals strong critiques of the Indian news media for their adoption of global corporate culture and sheer commercial compulsion of journalism practices which Rao (2009) caustically terms the "Murdochization of the Indian press" (Sonwalkar 2002, 831). Yet Indian newspapers (Relly and Schwalbe 2013) and television channels (Rao 2008) regularly expose political corruption at local and national levels, and journalists are at risk while doing so. The Committee to Protect Journalists reported in 2013 that three employees at a newspaper in the state of Assam in India were stabbed to death for covering contentious and corrupt local politics. An analysis by The Hoot (2012), a South Asian media watchdog, found that although it is difficult to trace the complex paths of media ownership in India, political parties and individuals with political affiliations own and control increasing sections of the press. The report also mentioned that more than a third of news channels in India are owned by politicians or political affiliates, who use their channels as "political vehicles" to influence the course of local elections. Employing Shoemaker and Reese's (2013) hierarchy-of-influences model, this paper seeks to extend an understanding of how female journalists in a developing country work in the political beat, negotiating gender, news, and organizational routines.

In this light, this study seeks to understand:

RQ1: In what ways do women political journalists feel they have the agency to be effective purveyors of political information?

RQ2: How does gender influence the way women political journalists work and function as journalists?

RQ3: How do organizational procedures and news routines impact the way women political journalists work?

RQ4: How do such influences percolate into the political narratives women journalists' produce?

Methodology

This analysis draws upon 60 semi-structured interviews with women journalists based in the Indian cities of New Delhi, Bangalore, Mumbai, and Chennai. A focus group of six journalists was convened in Kolkata. Thus, a total of 66 participants were recruited for the study. To find participants, I asked for referrals from colleagues as well as posted requests on Twitter and Facebook, social media groups for journalists and journalism professors, and on listservs of journalism professors. The sample was a snowball one (Browne 2005) and

comprised of participants from English and Hindi 24-hour news channels, daily newspapers, and online media, during August 2015 and June 2016. A snowball sample allowed access to participants without having the organization intervene and influence the responses in anyway.

The journalists interviewed worked for the following news organizations: *Indian Express* (English), CNN-IBN (English), Zee News (Hindi), Star News (English and Hindi), *The Hindu*, *The Times of India* (English) and *The Hindustan Times* (English), Rediff.Com, and Sify.Com. This was a representative sample of the media in the country in terms of the different media, print, and television and online, that it represented. The sample of media outlets also includes the vernacular and local-language press. The Institutional Review Board at the university granted approval for the project on July 15, 2015. The journalists' age range varied from 30 to 55 years. Out of the 66 participants, 10 belonged to the non-English and vernacular media.

After participants consented to the interviews verbally on record, interviews were conducted either in person or over the phone, from August 2, 2015 to June 30, 2016. The length of the interviews ranged from 25 to 50 minutes. A series of open-ended questions, asking about their typical routines, organization support, and ways they negotiated gender at work and on the beat were asked. The questionnaire was adapted to focus on understanding the concerns of journalists on the political beat from the "Working, Watching and Waiting—Women and Issues of Access, Employment and Decision-making in the Media in India. Women and Media: International Perspectives" study by Ammu Joseph in 2004.

McCracken's (1988, 85) long interview technique was used which allows researchers to "step into the mind of another person, to see and experience the world as they do themselves." This method allows researchers to immerse in the culture and norms of their subjects to gain unique insights as they interpret the data (Cassell and Lucien 1977; McCracken 1988). Questions were added in while the journalists spoke, depending on the issues they were referring to (McCracken 1988). The data were coded into categories by grouping together interrelated ideas (Creswell 1999), and reviewed multiple times, for critical understanding and to find manifest meaning. The categories obtained from the interviews showed that women covering politics in India faced issues mainly from: media organizations and routine news practices, the gender of the journalists themselves, and the cultural or ideological context. While the interviews provided more focused answers and insights about the situation, the focus group granted an opportunity to understand how the journalists as a group agreed on the issues they were raising in general. The interviews provided the broader questions and issues that were further discussed in the focus group. One example is that of transport that many of the journalists raised. This was an issue that the six journalists in the focus group said was important to them and they wished that organizations would pay heed to.

To answer RQ1 (In what ways do women political journalists feel they have the agency to be effective purveyors of political information?), journalists were asked (among other questions), "What do you think is the role of a political journalist in society?," "Do you think you report fairly on politics in a way that informs and empowers your audience?," and "Recently, a number of journalists have been sacked or harassed after doing stories against some politicians. When something like this happens, do you get fearful too?" These questions attempted to understand the individual journalist's understanding of their work and the influence of this understanding on their occupation.

To answer RQ2 (How does gender influence the way women political journalists work and function as journalists?), participants were asked (among other questions), "Do you feel that being a women political reporter has some inherent disadvantages?," "Would you say it has some advantages as well?," and "Have you ever felt discriminated against or treated unfairly because you are a woman?" This question attempted to understand the demands of gender in their cultural context and the gender negotiations the journalists made on the job.

To answer RQ3 (How do organizational procedures and news routines impact the way women political journalists work?), the sample of journalists interviewed were asked (among other questions), "Do you think any organization you have worked for has a political leaning or has close ties with a political party/leader?," "Do you, on your own, decide to do or not do particular stories or take particular angles on account of your organization's political links or leanings?," "Do you feel stories done by male colleagues are looked at differently than the ones you or other women do?," and "Has any supervisor/organization ever asked you not to cover a story or cover it in a particular way?" The questions aimed to understand social norms, especially related to gender, and gender perceptions usually embedded within organizational procedures and news routines.

To answer RQ4 (How do such influences percolate into the political narratives women journalists' produce?), the participants were asked (among other questions), "Do you think a lack of support from your organization impacts the kind of stories you do?" and "Do you, on your own, decide to do or not do particular stories or take particular angles on account of your organization's political links or leanings?"

Findings

The Influence of Gender

Ninety-two percent of respondents said that their gender was the "single most" important factor that made political journalism not just hard but "sometimes downright unpleasant." The influence of gender was felt from the very start of their careers. The "deeply feudal mindset" (personal communication, 2015) of the organization was often and repeatedly emphasized. Most senior journalists interviewed said that this was the single most important cause that made entry into covering politics difficult. One respondent said:

It was assumed that I would want to do gender or lifestyle-related work. The management didn't even think that with my political science training I could be interested in or want to do politics. (Online journalist, August 2015)

Gender influenced not only how they worked but also how they dressed and conducted themselves. One respondent said:

Since I started covering politics, I have forgotten my jeans and trousers. All I can wear are my *salwar kameezes* [long loose baggy garments] with, of course, the *dupatta* [long piece of cloth covering the chest]. Once I forgot to take it as I left the house, I had to stop and buy it on my way to the press conference. In hindsight, maybe, more people would have been willing to speak to me. But would I be willing to have that kind of conversation? (Journalist, print media, December 2015)

Indian media does, often effectively, cover political skullduggery. The journalists were proud of this and had many examples to relate. But they realized the examples they were referring to were all exposés conducted by men. As one respondent claimed (during the focus group):

I think there must have been women on the editorial team. They could have mentioned them at least in the story credits. (Journalist, print media, September 2015)

The focus group as well as the interviews revealed a deep awareness of the discrimination meted out and the lack of women covering politics.

The focus groups witnessed many exchanges of individual experiences and the group (gathered at a coffee shop after work) agreed that perhaps the political beat was the toughest of all news-reporting beats to navigate. "It's not a beat for women," said one respondent, and "you will never be allowed to forget it. When I ask a question, they look at me strangely" (Journalist, television, November 2015).

Respondents said that political press conferences were usually full of men, from those organizing it to those reporting it, and this was a topic of discussion in the focus group as well. This made it hard for them to get close to the person speaking to get an exclusive question in. One participant said: "We get pushed back. Physically pushed back. Simple" (Journalist, television, December 2015). This invasion of physical space was an oft-iterated issue. Organizations do little to help and, as participants said, they are left with "watered down quotes."

Finding and establishing sources seemed to be the hardest aspect of negotiating gender on the political beat. As one senior editor explained:

Politics here is so much about back slapping and getting great quotes over drinks at the Press Club later. I would love to have a drink and chat as well. But god forbid if I do this with a male source. So I learned to stand my ground at press conferences and keep shouting out my question till I get an answer. Not always a satisfactory one but at least an answer, however dissatisfying. (Journalist, print media, October 2015)

Two journalists from a Hindi (regional language) channel emphasized that being a woman on the political beat came with many disadvantages:

Firstly, no one really expects you to break stories or do really hard-hitting pieces. Today there is talk of gender parity and diversity so organizations hire us but then expectations are so low that frankly after a while we lose the zest to do our best. We know that all the plum assignments will go to the men. (Journalists, print media, November 2015)

Fear of reprisals is a constant and real factor. One participant said that she had recently done a story on how women were being regularly assaulted by goons from the dominant political in one village while the police were turning a blind eye. When she questioned the minister in charge about the atrocities, he asked her to go home before she became one of the victims. "He looked straight into my eyes as he said that. Would he done that to one of my male colleagues? I don't think so," she says.

The respondents interviewed, as well as those in the focus group, reiterated that other beats like city reporting or even the municipality were less biased. Most had come into political reporting from other beats and they thought that other areas were far more hospitable than politics but they also agreed that crime, perhaps, could be just like the political beat. None of the women interviewed had covered crime as a regular beat.

There is an acceptance of the disadvantages of gender and a certain rueful acknowledgment that being women did not necessarily mean coming together and forming an alliance. As one respondent explained,

It's easier for men to share contacts. They make them faster and more easily than women. For us, it takes such strategy to make a source talk without implicating us in any way. That's why I guess once we make it, we find it harder to share with other women. For us the competition never ends.

Five respondents clearly stated that helpful male colleagues made their work easier. One participant said, "Since I was introduced to the folk in the ministry through him and he is a very senior person, they were more open to me coming in and asking questions."

While some agreed that as women journalists they did give special importance to explaining how policies would help or hinder women, writing especially for women audiences was not always a priority for the respondents interviewed. One respondent said,

When it comes to, say, economic issues or the budget then yes I do separate stories talking about the benefits for women. But if this is say interviews with politicians on matters of policy then I don't always specifically keep my women audience in mind.

Belonging to a well-known and large media organization helped mitigate the issue of gender to a degree. A recurring notion was that even if the reporter was a woman and politicians did not really want to give her an interview, being featured on the media was important. As one participant said,

It's true that women politicians are sometimes more open and like to talk to us. But that's not an advantage we can press home too often. Firstly, except in the center we have very few women in positions of power. Towards the rural side, its men and only men that rule. We are usually sent out there when say riots have broken out and women have been affected and we need to question the person in authority about the state of law and order. That's when the disadvantages of our gender really hit us.

As Shoemaker and Reese (2013) have pointed out, individual journalists are not free to be completely directed by their own motivating forces, but must operate within the constraints of procedures established by their organizations. Again organizations are not completely free agents either. Their interests interact with other institutional forces, making journalists and organizations all "part of a wider social system" (Reese 2001, 642).

Cultural expectations play an important a role in the way these journalists were perceived. One respondent was clear,

I don't think my editor quite understands that women too can cover politics as well as anyone else. I came from a background in lifestyle. I am often asked to contribute to those pages.

Influence of Organizational Practices and News Routines

Shoemaker and Reese (1996, 105) have defined news routines as "patterned, routinized, repeated practices and forms that media workers use to do their jobs," and have underlined their importance and influence on news construction. The organization level assesses the impact that the structure, demands, and goals of media organizations have on not only content but also routines. Forty percent of respondents stated clearly that

their organizations influence the way they covered political stories and while this had to do with the relations and ideological leanings of their organization, gender further complicated the issue. It is within organizational procedures and news routines that social norms, especially related to gender, and gender perceptions, are deeply entrenched. Participants in the focus group as well those individually interviewed felt that editors and supervisors often found it easier to try to influence a woman reporter to change her story rather than a male reporter. As one respondent said:

It's well known that the institution I work for has a certain party affiliation. But when I joined I didn't think that that would actually be such a hindrance in my work. I was covering a story on mining and it involved a certain minister that the paper usually writes positively about. All I wanted to do was to just talk to him and get his say about the issue. I didn't even say that I would write it but my editor stopped me. He said it was unnecessary. If I was a man, I don't think I would have been stopped. (Journalist, online media, December 2015)

As the interviews reiterate, news is not always about the social construction of women. When stories filed by women are dismissed on such grounds, women's voices are surpassed and they are prevented from presenting news (Bybee 1990).

Institutional norms work in different ways. In India, where women are not viewed as an important part of the citizenry by decisions makers (Rely and Schwalbe 2013), newsrooms are deeply gendered (Allan 2010; Byerly 2004; De Bruin 2000; Djerf-Pierre 2011; Lavie and Lehman-Wilzig 2005) and they encourage professional socialization where women are always deemed less efficient than their male counterparts. This is probably among the leading causes of the low numbers of women in journalism in general and on the political beat in particular (Rao 2008).

As Jeffrey (2001, 227) has iterated for women, and this is even more so for women on the political beat, "the jobs are few and the prejudices against them formidable." One participant said that in her organization two very senior male reporters cover politics and while they are open to anyone wanting to learn how to work the beat, the organization actively discouraged it:

They refuse to give us transport at night or give us time to build our sources. We have to cover other stories and our interest in politics is almost treated as a hobby. As it is, so few women want to cover politics ... and so little is done to encourage our participation.

While half of the respondents said that their organizations did not interfere in their ways of working, two very senior reporters emphasized that interference could often be "subtle," like holding back a negative story or sending back a story for numerous rewrites till the reporter gets tired and abandons it. While this could have happened to reporters irrespective of gender, participants felt that women were victimized more.

It is here that ideology, which Shoemaker and Reese (2013, 212) define as "a symbolic mechanism that serves as a cohesive and integrating force in society," and which is an important part of "the structure of relationships among people and the institutions they create" (64), becomes important. It works in ways that allow dominant ideologies to find expression through the media matter produced and restrain journalists' work. As feminist media studies have shown, journalists are taught skills in ways rife with assumptions about gender-appropriateness, which often then become central to their understanding and definition of the profession (Chambers, Steiner, and Fleming 2004; Djerf-Pierre and Lofgren-Nilsson 2004). One of the participants emphasized that "Women are discouraged from

covering politics in general. When young people join they are pushed to beats like education and lifestyle but rarely are they encouraged to become political journalists."

One participant said that she was always interested in politics, stating that she was attracted "by the glamor, a certain sense of power" she felt the political reporters in her organization had:

There was just one woman who covered politics in our team and I really wanted to be like her. But one day she wrote a controversial story that got our paper sued. She was in the right but she was sacked. I was given her place but this came with an indirect warning—cross the line and I would go the same way. (Journalist, print media, October 2015)

Another issue is the lack of support extended by organizations to women who work late or need to travel to follow a source or story. It is often assumed that in journalism at least gender differences are less stark or have "disappeared," even as women themselves can point to any number of instances of unequivocally gendered practices (De Bruin and Ross 2004). Examples include work schedules where the most prestigious assignments or daily "hard" news stories nearly always entail long, unsociable hours in order to get ahead (Ross and Carter 2011). Respondents were clear that travel and nontraditional work hours were huge areas of contention that their organizations refused to do much about. This impacted their work very negatively during election time.

It's important to follow the campaign trail. Sometimes the office refuses to provide a car. The men can use motorbikes. We can't. We are forced to ask the politician's office to share transport. Now try asking hard questions when after a press conference you have use to their car to get back home. (Journalist, television, December 2015)

The issue of transport was echoed by many of the participants interviewed as well as those in the focus group who said that this affected the kind of stories they wrote. One participant said,

Once during a rally the minister said some inflammatory stuff and a riot broke out. My male colleagues on bikes took photos and drove away to the office. I had to wait around. I got a big story with quotes from the rioters and victims but mine came out a day late. My male colleagues were lauded for breaking a story.

As "The Status of Women in Print Journalism in India" report (Bhagat 2004) stated, women journalists felt that "they have to be twice as good as their male counterparts just to get their foot in the door" and that "the stress to forestall any negative expectations, can be debilitating." As one respondent explained:

In the political beat, the pressure can be very draining. In India especially, at a press conference, everyone's eyes follow you. Where you stand, how close you stand to the minister and whether he or she smiles at you, all can have implications you never dreamt of. No one ever asks my male colleagues how "close" they are to the ministers they interview. That's viewed as demands of the profession. (Journalist, online, January 2016)

Influencing News Content

Participants overwhelmingly agreed that a lack of organizational support hindered their work and prevented them from following a story through. Respondents from

newspapers stated clearly that while their organization clearly had associations with certain political parties and groups, they could do relatively “safe” political stories with minimum interference. When asked to describe what they meant by “safe” stories, respondents said these stories included covering speeches, rallies, and press conferences where policies with clear benefits and no critical debate were announced. They also added that women asked to cover politics were usually given such stories.

If you compared bylines you might see that men and women perhaps have an equal number of stories. It’s when you compare content that the discrimination becomes apparent. Most organizations still believe that women can only cover press conferences best. Try pitching a more analytical story, that’s when you raise hackles. (Focus group respondents, 2016)

As many participants said,

it’s not as if what happens to us doesn’t happen to our male counterparts. It’s just that the implications are different. Men are given a chance to come back. For us, the fight to get in is hard. To stay on is even harder.

How does such discouragement affect aspects of political representation of women? What are the alternative viewpoints that we miss when female media producers are not given a chance to navigate news here? (Peiser 2000; Rodgers and Thorson 2003).

In the Indian media, ownership patterns are often hard to trace. As the analysis of *The Hoot*, a South Asian media watchdog, shows, individuals with political influence are increasingly buying up major shares in the country’s most influential media channels and those with wide reach. One participant from a television station, which was recently bought by a large industrial corporation said,

The Corporation is known to be very conservative in its approach towards women. Suddenly my channel too seems to have adopted those views and we political reporters have to bear the brunt of it. Suddenly women have to go home early and only the men are given the in-depth political coverage to do. Nothing changed for the men.

When the organization subtly discourages women, this discouragement can take many forms and percolates into the content. This discouragement can include meetings done without women, no promotions for women on the political beat, and arbitrary shifts to other beats.

My editor didn’t believe I was an effective political reporter because I didn’t agree with his political views. With men who disagreed he would have a drink and have loud debates. With me, he simply held up my stories or didn’t give me in-depth stories to do. (Journalist, print media, February 2016)

Respondents from newspapers stated that while their organization clearly had associations with certain political parties and groups, they could do relatively “safe” political stories with minimum interference.

One senior journalist who is also a well-known political commentator wrote a critical piece on how the recent corporate takeover of the Indian media was not healthy for democracy. The piece incited debate and she was cautioned by her organization to “tone it down.” When she did not listen she was suddenly promoted to the magazine’s features head. “They took me away from my political beat,” she said. While in two very high-

profile cases two male reporters lost their jobs because of political pressure, her case did not make headlines. Explaining the difference, she says, it is because of a lack of women in high positions in the media set-up. She missed her beat and for a while actually considered doing “safer” pieces till the heat was off.

The lack of women in certain beats and in important decision-making positions in media is often deemed by critical scholars like Bybee, for example, as a way of alienating audiences from women’s voices and from women presenting news and information (Bybee 1990). Scholars attribute the misrepresentation of women in the media to the lack of women covering news and believe that women journalists can be positive mediators in the area of political representation. But the influence of gender on news coverage remains undecided and studies have shown that gender does not always influence news coverage, especially in the realm of political coverage (Beasley 1993). A common criticism about Indian journalism reveals strong critiques against the sheer commercial nature of journalism practices (Rao 2009), which has often been termed the “Murdochization of the Indian press” (Sonwalkar 2002, 831). The participants interviewed said that being women did not always mean that they focused on writing for a female audience or focused on women in politics significantly more than they did on male politicians.

As the women interviewed emphasized, while their influence might not be felt on content yet, greater numbers of women in the field might “change this.” As one participant said,

Sometimes women politicians often speak more freely to us than they do to male reporters. So if I was writing a profile story on a woman candidate or politicians then perhaps my gender might work to my advantage but on hard issues of policy and questions of government functioning, I am treated like any other reporter.

Purveyors of Political Information

Shoemaker and Reese’s (1996) hierarchy-of-influences model, which introduced the five levels of influence on news content, says that the individual level examines how the experiences and role perceptions of individual media workers influence news content. Sixty percent (36) of the participants agreed that they were able to do their job to their satisfaction. Most deemed reporting on policy as “deeply satisfying.”

As one participant whose response reiterated much of the other responses, said:

When I first got into political journalism, I thought all I would be doing would be covering political rallies. But now I see that perhaps this is one beat that percolates into nearly every story that I do. Policies affect our daily lives and after a year on this beat, I have made it my mission to ensure that my audience understands this important aspect. Political reporting isn’t only for during elections.

As the focus group revealed, a common refrain was the recognition of their ability to do their best and follow a story through as much as possible. Yet most of the respondents said that while there was always a certain tension, “you get used to it. Journalism leaves you open to all sorts of criticism and not all translate into physical danger or a loss of a job.”

Discussion

While gender inequity remains prevalent in Indian journalism, the area of political journalism is perhaps the worst affected (Inter-Parliamentary Union 1997; Kenworthy and

Malami 1999; Nelson and Chowdhury 1994; Staudt 2002). The participants felt that it was important to address why in the first place were there so few women reporting on politics in the first place and that “it was sad that today we were still debating issues of access.” The issue of access is among the key issues raised by feminist media scholars and the presence and absence of women are key components whose unequal representation certainly skews relationships and conversations in the public domain (Byerly 2012). This study with 66 in-depth interviews with women journalists from some of India’s leading media organizations, guided by the theory of hierarchy of influences, reveals problems that cut across all layers, from organizational, ideological, to the individual level. The interviews revealed a deep understanding of the many constraints placed on their work. At the individual level, journalists revealed a desire to be more effective political journalists while being aware that at the news routines and organizational level there was little support forthcoming. As qualitative analysis of the responses revealed, gender was the most important constraint in their work. While many of the issues they raise can be applicable to their male counterparts, as the journalists said, it had greater “implications” when women were involved since it clearly influenced the way they worked and the kind of news reports they did. For example, editors could stop stories done by male colleagues but the women believed that it happened to them more often. Journalists as a whole had to toe the organization line on reporting on certain political issues but the women felt that limits were imposed on their work more often. Softer stories were expected from them; their investigative work was often held up and it was easier to reject their reports than a male counterpart’s.

As the participants interviewed made clear, it was not just an increase in numbers they wanted. As the answers iterated, they were in agreement with Jane Arthurs’ (2003) view that newsrooms and the political beat needed not just more women but women who understood how to engage and retain more women in meaningful roles in the profession. Just as the women North (2009a) interviewed, demanding to be treated as equal, just to do their job, in some cases made them stand out in unpleasant ways. Thus, asking tough questions brought strange looks. Carefully cultivated sources were thus harder to share with female colleagues.

While the participants did refer to incidents of harassment within organizations and other issues on the political beat, they did not report losing jobs (rather they were often shifted to other beats) or death threats (Barry 2013; Buruma 2002). This can probably be attributed to the lack of in-depth investigative stories that expose political wrongdoing. An interesting theme that emerged from the interviews was the satisfaction the journalists felt at being able to cover politics while clearly aware of the many influences on their work that actually prevented them from doing their best. As Liebler and Moritz (2013) showed, the five levels of influence on new content as explained by Shoemaker and Reese are not entirely self-contained nor are they mutually exclusive. As participants overwhelmingly agreed that a lack of organization support did hinder their work and prevented them from following a story through, their responses highlighted, just as the hierarchy-of-influences model suggests, that political (or non-political) influences on the media need not always be direct: they can manifest themselves in tacit ways (Shoemaker and Reese 2013). Individual journalists, routines, organizational, institutional, and systemic “levels” of influence often subsumed previous levels and percolated into news content (Shoemaker and Reese 1996).

While their gender did not lead them to self-censor, the simple restriction imposed by gender kept them away from important sources and they could not do in-depth

investigative stories. Ideology that deemed women as unimportant parts of the citizenry seems to pervade organization and news routines which then see a socialization of journalists into a culture that basically keeps women out of certain beats. Political journalists, both in advanced democracies (Chaffee and Frank 1996) and in developing nations (Lerner 1958), are crucial in democratic society (Siebert, Peterson, and Schramm 1956) for they help inform audiences and create political awareness, which ensure that communities participate in the democratic process. Women were still being kept out of political reporting and in such a situation how equitable is India's media sphere? Political journalism plays an important role in democratic societies—it is through the presentation of in-depth news and information that government and important political actors of society can be held accountable for their work. The issue of access is a very fundamental one and it is lamentable that it is still a matter of contention.

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NOTE

1. Usha Rai is one of India's earliest socio-political development reporters, reporting on the influences of policies on social development.

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