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**To cite this article:** Paromita Pain (30 Apr 2024): “I know my work has effect.”– the rise of the woman citizen journalist in India, *Communication Research and Practice*, DOI: [10.1080/22041451.2024.2322809](https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2024.2322809)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/22041451.2024.2322809>



Published online: 30 Apr 2024.



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# “I know my work has effect.” – the rise of the woman citizen journalist in India

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## ABSTRACT

Using in-depth interviews with 65 participants from the CGNet Swara and the Video Volunteers, two citizen journalism organisations, this study investigates how citizen journalism in India is encouraging a new generation of women in very resource-poor areas to participate in the news production process and produce what they call a ‘journalism of change’. Women journalists say they have found a ‘space’ and ‘channel’ through these organisations to report on stories that are women centric but also serve the community as a whole. Viewing their roles as ones of responsibility rather than power, they also work to motivate other women to join, creating networks of empowerment that encourage greater participation from women who hitherto had few such opportunities. The reporters speak up for the rights of women but reporting on women’s issues can often be a delicate negotiation with patriarchal social structures.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 25 September 2023  
Accepted 7 February 2024

## KEYWORDS

Citizen journalism;  
participatory media;  
empowerment; India;  
women; communities

## Introduction

The Katihar district in Bihar, among the most backward districts in India (Ministry of Panchayati Raj, 2009), is plagued by human trafficking, deemed a ‘critical public health issue’ (Burns, Chen, & Stoklosa, 2021). The police, who are easily bribed, generally prove recalcitrant to follow leads (PTI, 2023). In such situations, reporters from the citizen reporting group, Video Volunteers, regularly step in. In a recent case, even though the journalist was threatened with dire consequences by the trafficker, she pursued the story and ensured that the trafficker was arrested (Devi, 2022).<sup>1</sup> In rural Chhattisgarh, where rural standards of living are very low, a similar problem persists. When the police refuse to assist, women reporters from the CGNet Swara make crucial connections that often help rescue such kidnapped women. As the reporters interviewed for this study said, their reports may not have always influenced political changes or ensured disciplinary action against corrupt officials, but with more women participating in producing news that has impact, reporters from CGNet and Video Volunteers believe that theirs is ‘a journalism of change’ that this beleaguered part of India desperately needs (Personal Interview, 2023).

As an area of study, citizen journalism is no longer new. Prominent examples range from citizen coverage of incidents like the 2004 Tsunami, which affected millions

globally, the Mumbai attacks (2008), to the murder of Brazilian investigative blogger Evany José Metzker in 2015 (Thorsen, 2020). Yet little is known about the content creators, especially the women participants, in regional and under resourced parts of India – how do they view the work they do and the kind of values they ascribe to it (Holton, Coddington, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Sherwood, 2019). Thus, this study investigates the motivation, methods of news selection and reasons for participation of women citizen journalists from some of the most underdeveloped parts of India. Using a total of 65 in-depth qualitative interviews with women reporters, trainers and founding members from two citizen journalism organisations in India this study examines how women citizen reporters view their work and define its impact in transforming their communities. In the process, it contributes to our understanding of citizen journalism practices in India and the impact these women reporters have on their communities as well as epistemology focusing on the implications and effects of citizen journalism through gendered angles.

## Setting the context

### *CGNet Swara*

Shubrashu Choudhury, a former BBC correspondent, set up CGNet Swara in February 2010 for the people of Chhattisgarh. Though primarily based in Chhattisgarh, their audiences are spread outside state borders as well. The impetus behind CGNet Swara was to extend reach to anyone with access to a low-end mobile phone. Since CGNet is a voice-based platform for citizen journalism, reporters call a toll-free number to record a story which is then vetted by a team of moderators, who work with CGNet. The fact checked stories then can be heard by dialling the same toll-free number and using voice prompts. CGNet is supported by organisations like Gates Foundation and International Center for Journalists. The team of moderators are paid a monthly stipend, but the reporters volunteer for the portal (Marathe, O'Neill, Pain, & Thies, 2015). 'While creating the news site, we didn't aim it at women. Nor did we actively promote it among them', says Choudhary. 'The women reporters have joined on their own initiative'. (Personal Interview, March 2022).

### *Video volunteers*

Video Volunteers was set up in 2006. 'The primary reason behind Video Volunteers was the simple belief that women taught to use a camera could be empowered to bring about positive change in their situations and communities', says founder Jessica Mayberry (Personal Interview, June 2019). 'Today it's our journalists who bring out the voices of those displaced and whose basic human rights are threatened'. As the 2023 Annual report of the Video Volunteers states, their work has a 'particularly strong impact on women'.<sup>2</sup> Video Volunteers work all over India and hold training camps in rural areas like Bihar and Chhattisgarh. Video Volunteers produce video reports which audiences watch on their mobile phones through the Video Volunteers website or through their YouTube channel. They receive private and philanthropic funding and pay their reporters a stipend for filing stories. They try to partner with

the national broadcaster Doordarshan and private channels like CNN IBN, the Indian CNN affiliate, and online media outlets like the Scroll.in and IndiaSpend to bring in funds and help reach audiences.

CGNet Swara and Video Volunteers operate in areas of insurgency that have been designated 'as India's greatest internal security threat' (Mudliar, Donner, & Thies, 2012) with some of the lowest standards of living in India. Women bear the brunt of poverty compounded by patriarchy that even to this day seek to isolate menstruating women and often subject them to horrific domestic violence (101Reporters, 2022). Village councils have few women decision makers and child marriage is extremely common (Pandia, 2022). India may favour women politicians, but in families traditional gender roles are given precedence and clearly favoured (Evans, 2022). Also thickly forested, Chhattisgarh has rich reserves of minerals but lacks basic schooling and health facilities. To illustrate, hand pumps crucial to address the water needs of the small hamlets that constitute Chhattisgarh often do not work. The needs of the people here get little mainstream media attention but reporting on CGNet Swara has often seen the pumps being repaired. Not every report finds a resolution and nor do they always rally the community around a national issue that brings about policy change at the national level but this does not dilute the nature of their impact. For people desperate for access to water, a repaired handpump is of paramount importance. The Video Volunteers and CGNet Swara may be the 'other media' or 'marginal media' (Rodriguez, 2001) but in regions where no other media is around to be the watchdog, these organisations are bringing about considerable and measurable change (Pain, 2018a).

India has various examples of media collectives that promote the presence of women journalists (discussed below). The CGNet Swara and Video Volunteers, selected for this study, are not organisations exclusive to women journalists, but they have different documented cases of social change the women journalists have brought about (Pain, 2018b). Women usually join, as the founders said, to use their reporting to empower the communities they come from and often they have direct relationships with the groups and people who consume the information they produce (Carpentier, Lie, & Servaes, 2003). In the process of creating spaces for alternate voices through news production, these two organisations have brought into existence an arena where extremely marginalised women can and have challenged the patriarchal traditional norms about women (Field, Jayachandran, & Pande, 2010).

## Literature review

### *Citizen journalism as a concept*

Rodriguez (2001) defines citizen journalism as a philosophy that encompasses a type of 'journalism and a set of practices' that are a part of citizens' everyday lives and the media they produce that is driven by the motives of these people. Prior research has focused on how the ability to produce content and participate in media production, either as part of mainstream media or as independent producers, increases political awareness, civic participation, and in some cases even mobilise audiences for positive social change (Holton, Coddington, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013; Sherwood, 2019).

### ***Citizen journalism in India***

Citizen journalism in India has had an impact mainly in situations of crisis (tsunamis, earthquakes, rains, terrorist attacks), but is also increasingly influencing politics by exposing corruption and highlighting social issues such as the sexual harassment of women and the life situations of minorities through the lens of gender, religion, caste and ethnicity. India's largest citizen news portal like Merinews have been lauded for trying to create a citizen's charter and supporting discussion on different issues whereas Mynews.in visualises citizen journalists as contributors to and auditors of mainstream media (Thomas, 2012). Some mainstream media, especially new websites like Rediff. Com, often provides a space for citizen reporting. CNN iReport, for example, has a thriving presence in India. But as Chadha and Steiner (2015) and Pain (2018a) have shown, mainstream journalists reject the notion of citizen journalism contributing in meaningful ways to mainstream journalism and increasing participation from some of the India's most rural and underdeveloped areas. Also, while digitisation may have made it easier to participate as citizen media producers, mediating factors of birth, class and caste remain. Journalists from urban areas with access to economic resources find it easier to contribute and collaborate as media personnel, whereas those from deemed lower classes, especially women, often find insurmountable barriers (Thomas, 2012).

### ***Participation of women in alternative media***

Media scholars have extensively critiqued the democratic scarcities inherent in corporate-dominated and commercialised media systems, especially in the areas of access, representation, and political power (Carroll & Hackett, 2006). The gaps created by these inequalities are often filled by alternative media, which provide the focus for both specific community interests as well as for 'the contrary and subversive' (Silverstone, 1999, p. 103). Rodriguez (2001) illustrates this in the example of the resource poor Colombian women who felt empowered through the production of participatory video since it provided a new lens to view their surroundings and re-evaluate their social status while drawing crucial media attention to issues. Thus, their producers might not work according to the usual norms and professional procedures of established journalism and by nature they are smaller and commercially less viable (Reese, Rutigliano, Hyun, & Jeong, 2007). However, by ensuring the entry of marginalised women into journalism they serve as important platforms to develop more democratic and feminist media spheres.

The growing influence of citizen journalism, especially in developing countries, such as India, Brazil, China, and Vietnam (Allan, 2009), attests to this. Citizen journalists in these four countries are making notable contributions to the fight for human rights and democracy using journalism as a tool besides giving access to a variety of perspectives, including those of women (Thompson, Gómez, & Toro, 2005) in some cases. As Susanna George of ISIS Women-Manila (George, 2003) has noted, women from developing countries are portrayed by mainstream media in a 'highly selective and disempowering manner' (p. 216) and are ignored by most global media coverage except as victims or refugees in crisis situations. But alternative media often portrays them as empowered change agents, active in developing and promoting solutions to issues, providing crucial perspectives and input. Citizen journalism organisations that enhance and encourage the

participation of women as news producers can be seen as examples of ‘new media developments and alternative forms of media and participation in order to develop new forms of public life’ (McLaughlin, 1993, p. 616). By encouraging the participation of women traditionally cut off from the mainstream media and by enabling the creation of alternative forms of information production, they facilitate a more egalitarian and feminist media coverage of gender and its related issues (McLaughlin, 1993).

In India, besides the CGNet and Video Volunteers, citizen journalist organisations operated by and reporting about women can be found in resource-poor areas. ‘Namaskar’ in Odisha and ‘Khabar Lahariya’ in Bundelkhand are two news collectives that work to change women’s presence and the coverage of issues in rural areas with women reporters from marginalised communities (Sinha & Malik, 2022). In Andhra Pradesh, India, a group of Dalit women run the Community Media Trust that brings together policy makers, nongovernmental organisations, and local farmers to address significant issues by creating videos on a variety of locally relevant subjects, including seed sovereignty, biodiversity, and local women’s issues (Mookerjee, 2010). UNESCO funded projects like Nabanna: Networking Rural Women and Knowledge (Baduria, North 24 Parganas District, and West Bengal, India) and the Namma Dhvani Local ICT Network promote local voices and ensure that communities get access to information specially tailored for their betterment (Allan, Sonwalkar, & Carter, 2007). Atton (2003, p. 268) says that alternative media presents a ‘radical challenge to the professionalized and institutionalized practices of the mainstream media’ and as these examples show, a feminist alternative media framework can assume a change-oriented approach that influences representations and alternatives to commercial media by providing a space for the messages of marginalised groups and genders (Riaño, 1994).

### ***The Indian media scenario***

A KPMG 2020 report on the Indian media, considered a key ‘emerging market’ with enormous possibilities for exploiting demand for transnational media products has projected media growths of about 33% in 2022 in spite of the losses incurred during the pandemic. The English language press, in particular, is a major source of information for the urban educated elite throughout the country and is owned by large private business concerns. The Indian media today is increasingly controlled by business or industrial houses and in spite of the prolific market, much consolidated and controlled by few powerful interests (Chadha & Steiner, 2015). Mainstream media in the country often underserves rural communities (Mudliar, Donner, & Thies, 2012) and usually devote only 2% of their coverage to rural issues, focusing most rural coverage on violence, crime, disasters, and malnutrition (Chadha & Steiner, 2015).

The number of women reporters in the Indian mainstream media are considerably low and this has often been attributed to the generally unequitable coverage of women’s issues. Women hold 13% of senior roles and the coverage of issues related to women like sexual assault are distinctly disempowering (Laghate, 2023). Thus, conversations about media as means of information is incomplete without addressing the key questions raised by feminist media scholars related to the crucial issue of gender representation, and wider examinations of the place of women in media industries, especially related to women as producers and reflections of their own

situation in relationship to the media spaces (Volčić, 2008). Organizational and news routines in commercial media are generally hazardous for women reporters and often gender is a deciding factor for the kinds of beats assigned (Pain, 2017). But research on women reporting from small towns show that while they are aware of the deeply embedded politics and discrimination they are unafraid to confront the usual patriarchal measures through the media they produce and in the process challenge gendered expectations in private and public spaces (Mullick, 2015).

In this light, this study seeks to investigate:

**RQ1:** How do the Video Volunteers and CGNet Swara encourage women to participate as citizen journalists?

**RQ2:** How do the women reporters view the impact of their work as citizen journalists?

**RQ3:** How do the women citizen journalists working for Video Volunteers and CGNet Swara select their topics of news coverage?

## Methods

The two citizen journalist organisations recruited for the study were chosen for the documented impact they have in the communities they come from and work in. A qualitative approach comprising semi structured interviews and analysis of the interview discourse were considered ideal for as Holstein and Gubrium (1995) have emphasised this provided an opportunity to actively select 'people' rather than just members of a given population and understand their complex human experiences in the natural setting (Cleland, 2017). A total of 65 interviews were done from 2019 to 2023. The interviews were conducted in Hindi, the local language and participants were assured of confidentiality. Generally, 10 participants, in qualitative interview-based research is considered enough to 'investigate in detail the relationship between the individual and the situation' (Kvale, 1994) but since this study wanted to investigate in depth the experiences, both personal and professional, motivations and the culture surrounding the work of marginalised women, looking into the how and why of their experiences, the number of interviews provided opportunities to compare and contrast the different accounts shared and analyse common themes. Travelling to Chhattisgarh and the remote villages where the journalists report from proved to be arduous. Chhattisgarh often faces issues of insurgency and costs of travel (funded by personal funds and research grants) were prohibitive. Face to face interviews were important because they put the participants at ease, and, as they said, made it more amenable to share thoughts and explain situations.

The founders of CGNet Swara and Vide Volunteers were the first to be interviewed in 2019 with further follow-up interviews. They provided contacts for the reporters, moderators and trainers. Twenty-five reporters from the Video Volunteers were interviewed while 30 candidates from the CGNet Swara participated in this study. Three trainers from the Video Volunteers and five trainers

who also were moderators for the CGNet Swara were also interviewed. Thus, the semi-structured interviews asked questions directly related to the research questions but allowed the participants to answer in their own way and order. To answer RQ1 and explore how CGNet and Video Volunteers encouraged women to participate as journalists, questions related to training, the support provided and access to equipment, among others, were asked. Participants were also asked to reflect on how they perceived the organisations helped them become journalists. To respond to RQ2 that examines how the reporters viewed the impact of their work as citizen journalists, the interview questions asked them to describe how they recognised the effects of their work, their motivations to participate, and if their gender provided any advantages or complicated issues. For journalists interviewed in 2021 to 2023, questions also asked about how the pandemic affected their work and relationship with the CGNet and Video Volunteers. This led them to discuss how they selected the topics they choose to cover (RQ3) and discuss the different influences on such choices and their impact. Each interview ranged from 60 to 90 minutes. They were transcribed to be qualitatively analysed for recurring themes. Using McCracken's (1988) long interview technique, each transcribed interview was used as a deep dive to investigate and immerse in the responses provided to find common themes and were read and reread for 'the long preliminary soak' (Hall, 1975, p. 15) before the data was coded into categories defined by related ideas and the research questions (Cresswell, 1994). This allowed for a discerning of latent meaning and well as inferences (Fürsich, 2009) leading to 'deeper and more critical interpretations' (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 207).

The reporters ranged in age from 20 to 55 years. Most of them had some school education though 10 had not received any formal education. Most of the older reporters, especially those in the age group between 30 and 45, worked as farm labourers and did seasonal jobs. The younger reporters, between the ages of 20 to 25, were high school educated with some going to local colleges and planning further education. Reporters in the age group of 30 and above generally had more than one child. Most of the women were not the primary wage earners. Their years of work with CGNet and Video Volunteers ranged from 6 months to over 10 years.

## **Findings and results**

This section presents the analysis from the 65 interview responses collected from respondents from the CGNet Swara and the Video Volunteers interviewed from 2019 to 2023. Findings in response to how the organisations helped the women work as citizen journalists, how they viewed their work and the influences and motivations behind the different topics of coverage produced a variety of rich communication exchanges with thematic commonalities.

### ***Encouraging participation and expanding on identities***

In response to RQ1 that investigated the role of the CGNet Swara and the Video Volunteers in encouraging women to participate as citizen journalists, the journalists



emphasised two important ways the organisations encouraged them to participate. CGNet Swara and Video Volunteers were instrumental in creating a ‘space’ and ‘channel’ for them to start reporting. This ability to report helped expand on their sense of identity both professional (journalists) and personal (being wives, mothers, and daughters). This expansion of identity has been discussed in greater detail in the section presenting the results of how the women viewed their roles as citizen journalists. But as the women emphasised beyond the training and all the opportunities provided, it was this that made them confident reporters, and find worth and value in what they were doing.

As one respondent aged 45 with 6 years of experience said:

Before CGNet Swara, I had no way to talk about these issues. She echoed another interview participant who said, “All of us feel strongly about the various injustices we suffer here. Now thanks to Video Volunteers we have a channel which is receptive to our views, and which also ensures that our voices don’t remain in the wilderness.” (Personal Interview, 2020).

Participants from Video Volunteers were very enthusiastic about the technical training they received. As one respondent said:

They showed me how I could do my interviews, talk to people, and do an actual story. They showcased my work on their website and showed me my work has value. (Personal interview, 2022)

For the trainers and moderators, encouraging participation meant teaching the nuances of video and audio to women who had very little access to digital technology. They are taught codes of ethics and how to stay fair. Trainers from CGNet emphasised the importance of ensuring that the reporters were well versed in technology. As one of the trainers from Video Volunteers said, ‘This makes them more confident reporters’. (Personal interview, 2022).

Interviews with the founders of CGNet Swara and Video Volunteers (2022) showed that both organisations were very concerned about ensuring they had funds to pay the journalists. Both said that paying reporters would ensure greater and more consistent participation which would improve the quality of coverage and enable to do more in-depth investigations of issues.

### ***Role as citizen journalists***

RQ2 explored how the women viewed the influence of their work as citizen journalists. Being able to participate as citizen reporters, doing stories that brought about documented change, helped them find a strong voice in their community as those unafraid of confronting problems and resolving issues. But interactions with mainstream journalists often proved problematic. Participants said mainstream media would often take story leads from them without credit and generally be reluctant to partner with them. As most of the mainstream reporters posted to these areas were men, the participants for the study felt that women may have made a difference. Working with those whom they share the same concerns influenced the way the women viewed their work. A participant from the Video Volunteers said:

Sometimes the people I interview will not talk to anyone but me. Their problems won't embarrass me. If they use the field as a toilet, so do I. (Personal interview, 2021)

While this did not automatically mean positions of leadership in the community, as the women reiterated, the ability to contribute as a journalist meant inhabiting more than traditional gender roles of being mothers and daughters. This not only helped expand their world view but also encouraged them to do stories that would do the same for others. For journalists in the age groups of 30 to 45, this helped break the mould of conventional roles in ways that enabled them to appreciate the diversity of life. Many said they were encouraging the education of daughters, which is given very little importance in their society. As one woman (age 45, 8 years of experience) whose reporting focused on human trafficking said:

Since I was married off as a teenager, I thought marriage was something that happened as a matter of course. Covering these stories of trafficking showed me that this was hardly a solution to poverty or a hard life. Now I know education and finding a job is far more important. (Personal interview, 2023)

This perception of expansion of identities was especially apparent in the younger reporters in their 20s. Reporters who had just started out, associated for a year or two with reporting, described newfound levels of confidence when they realised that they could enhance their professional capacities through storytelling. As they went about their work, reporting on different issues, they encountered situations that showed them they could confront difficult situations and overcome them to get results.

Respondents said they felt fulfilled, were contributing in a meaningful way to society through their work and all of them viewed their roles as one of responsibility not power. As one respondent from the CGNet Swara said:

Taking the effort of putting it on CGNet Swara ensures that issues are listened to and addressed. A few days back I had posted a story about a midday meal school cook who wasn't being paid, and suddenly she got her payment after a report on CGNet Swara. I know my work has effect. (Personal interview, 2022)

They talk about CGNet and Video Volunteers in their social circles and share their experiences with other women in a bid to educate and encourage others to join. They talk about the stories on trafficking they have done where they have covered the story from the point of view of women who are tricked and hoped that others would then not marry off their girls early and before they have finished school. They try to highlight the 'why' of issues like trafficking and how the survivors are building a life afterwards to promote their acceptance in society. Often these discussions serve to create networks of empowered women who are then eager to be trained. The reporters give importance to how a story might be received and if it could be used to influence more women to take an empowered stance against such gendered crimes. Thus, they considered their reporting to be 'a journalism of change'.

As one participant (age 45 with 5 years of experience) said:

I will feel that my work is fulfilling when I am able to inspire more women to join. . . . When women see how useful CGNet Swara they will start posting news on their own. (Personal interview, 2022)

The effect they had as reporters made them view themselves as changemakers with a voice that few could ignore. As they talked about the consequences they have had as reporters, conversations turned to the kind of topics they selected and the influences on these choices.

### Selecting topics of coverage

RQ3 investigates how the reporters select their topics of coverage. While the CGNet Swara and the Video Volunteers often focus on single issues and produce special features on them, CGNet Swara also does general news. The women are free to choose the stories they do. While the organisations have editors to fact check and improve the quality of the work presented, none of the women said that they were prevented from doing a story or working on an idea. Reporters, especially the ones in the age group of 30 to 45 years with more than 5 years of reporting, said ‘doing social good’ (personal interview, 2021) was a powerful motivator. Being women, as the participants said, most of the stories they started out with concerned women. For example, as one reporter who had just finished high school and had many travails said:

My school did not have toilets for girls. Many therefore could not come to school because of this. My first story focused on how this basic need was hampering the education of so many girls. (Personal Interview, 2019).

The women said they were aware of the many issues that women in their communities faced and knew that their participation brings more women voices out. ‘We definitely speak up for woman’ was a common refrain. They realised that being women gave them certain privileges and access to spaces that men could not reach and thus they made it a priority to highlight female voices. As one respondent said:

Women are more comfortable speaking to other women. Men might have all the right questions to ask but if they won’t be let into the house how will they talk to women? (Personal interview, 2022)

One respondent from CGNet Swara saw her role as a documenter, a sort of historian of poor women no one cared about. She said that her work, which often entailed travelling far distances on foot, helped document the atrocities against women – ‘someone has to also write down what we women go through every day, how in the name of tradition we are always held back, always made to sacrifice’. (Personal interview, 2022)

Many reported that they used media to address violations of their human rights, but they did it diplomatically. They weren’t afraid to talk about and highlight such issues, but they realised that in their patriarchal society a direct approach would not always serve their purpose. Domestic violence was one such area. They reported on domestic violence but instead of highlighting individual cases, they spoke about the law and the rights of women. One reporter from CGNet Swara was very keen to do a story on lawyers who were unaware of the rights of women. She said:

Often when we women go to seek help, lawyers and police advise us to make up with our husbands and go home. I want to do a story on how wrong this is. (Personal interview, 2019)

In spite of the diplomatic approach the reporters professed to follow, there were many stories that there were many stories that highlighted incidents where women's rights had been violated. The CGNet Swara had a special series on drought that had first person accounts of poor, Dalit women who had to migrate to the city when the drought hit and what it meant to move with children, leaving behind familiar landscapes. A story on the Video Volunteers site about women fighting for the right to work in a small village state clearly that they are fighting against patriarchy. They knew that by focusing on issues important to women, they were solving issues pertinent to the community as a whole.

While their focus was often women centric, they also covered issues that concerned everyone in their community like broken handpumps, schools with no teachers and non-functioning health centres. This was particularly important during the pandemic. As the reporters said, providing information on vaccines and encouraging people to stay home was an important aspect of their work. This was complicated because much of their audiences were daily wage earners whose loss of work nearly brought families to the brink of starvation. So, the reporters also had to enhance their messages with information about food banks and charitable organisations who were assisting families in need. As such, having a balance was necessary.

A majority of the respondents reiterated that the areas they lived in were 'full of issues, each one demanding attention, and each one more important than the other'. So, at times reporters would also choose topics that they were sure would see resolution fast. As one respondent from the CGNet Swara said:

We get together and discuss the most pressing issues, which we have been trying to resolve for a very long time and put those online. Men also listen to us when we do this. They listen because their problems are also resolved. (Personal interview, 2022)

They were conscious that mainstream media did not always consider the issues they faced to be of value and worth consistent coverage. While speed of resolution was certainly important, stories posted on the sites of CGNet Swara and the Video Volunteers focused on issues of child marriage and human trafficking. Reporters working on these issues said these were topics that needed major attitude changes and that sometimes it was disheartening because unlike a broken hand pump, this would not be easy to resolve.

## Discussion

As this study with 65 in-depth qualitative interviews with women reporters, trainers and founding members from the CGNet Swara and the Video Volunteers show, women from some of the most underdeveloped regions in the country can use media to bring about change in their communities, highlight women's voices and issues, and create networks of empowerment that can ensure greater participation of women in media. As demonstrated in responses to RQ1, which looked at how CGNet and Video Volunteers assisted their participation, women citizen journalists appreciated the 'space' and 'channel' they have to report on the many issues facing their communities. This opportunity was made possible by the access, training and development offered by these news organisations. In the process they speak up for and encourage other women to join, thus bringing to light the views of a wide range of women and address the inequalities and democratic scarcities that are intrinsic to mainstream media (Carroll & Hackett, 2006).

Capacitating other women as part of their work would also ensure sustainability of such reportage. As one reporter said, she saw her work as a documenter of the lives of poor women. Thus, among the effects of citizen journalism on communities through gendered angles was its ability to include the voices of the poor and thus powerless people. As the interviews reveal, no longer are they only outraged by the many injustices they suffer, now they have a platform to address the issues and take concrete action.

Their ways of addressing subjects, which they have full freedom to choose, focusses on speaking up for women though an empowering community lens. Thus, through stories on trafficking that portray kidnapped women as survivors rather than as victims, they emphasise the important of educating women. No longer are resource poor women portrayed as victims or in a 'highly selective and disempowering manner' (George, 2003, p. 216). Rather as the examples prove, women in these media are shown as entrepreneurial, capable change agents and as people fighting back for their rights.

The reporters, with ties to their communities, take a strong rights-based approach to addressing women's issues and their women centric stance makes them focus on issues facing their social groups as a whole. By resolving issues faced by women they are also helping solve the problems faced by their communities (Carpentier, Lie, & Servaes, 2003). Besides, in a country where the mainstream media devotes restricted amounts of time and space to issues in these deeply rural areas far away from urban glare (Chadha & Steiner, 2015; Mudgal, 2011), these journalists play crucial watchdog roles by steadily ensuring that civic and women's issues find a voice, and this is done in a way that also highlights community issues. Their women centric approach has certain distinct advantages. When these reporters reach out to spaces off limits to men and produce nuanced content, an example being the story of the caring school cook, they exemplify a media sphere, which provides a critical site for the explication of women's voices.

But in spite of their presence and ability to bring in more women's voices, negotiating basic rights can often be tricky. When they talk about domestic violence, they emphasise legal rights and refrain from highlighting individual cases. Working in areas where women still bear the strain of poverty and patriarchy where traditional family structures are valued (Evans, 2022; Pandia, 2022), this approach has certain advantages. It enables them to educate women about their rights and laws without shaming individuals.

As these women show, their public identities can positively influence their private lives. For the journalists of the Video Volunteers and CGNet Swara, the training and ability that their work gives are also a means to ensure a better future for their daughters as they are now able to appreciate a diversity of viewpoints. Thus, in the process of producing media, their self esteem have also undergone positive changes. In the younger journalists, this was most profound. For them, even if their reports did not bring about resolution, they learnt to be more confident and developing a voice as they went about their reporting.

There is little doubt that being able to produce news directly of interest to their community and which addresses immediate concerns is certainly helping very resource-poor women create access to an arena they earlier had little entry to, where women are important subjects and where their viewpoints matter. As participants said, reaching out to vulnerable women with information that would help them stay safe was deeply satisfying. Clearly, their contributions are helping make crucial inroads into giving them a profession they could not have aspired to before, and their work is opening up avenues to 'new forms of public life' (McLaughlin, 1993, p. 616).

RQ2 which looked at how they viewed the significance of their work as citizen journalists clearly showed that these reporters, working as makers of media who aim to make media more equal and imbued with more female voices, their feminist stance gives them hope that their work will encourage other women to file stories as well. They work to make other women aware of their rights and thus talk about the laws on domestic violence. A recurring refrain was that when other women see that reporting for these organisations meant an amplification of voices and perhaps a resolution to issues, more women would be encouraged to join. In the process they realise that they are not alone in the issues they face. Like the poor Columbian women who felt empowered through the production of participatory video (Rodriguez, 2001), being able to produce news has changed the way these journalists negotiate their rights and view themselves.

It's these experiences that crucially underline the important influence of citizen journalism on empowering women and show how us how the act of becoming information producers can enhance women's reflections of their own situation in relationship to the media spaces (Volčić, 2008). Their impact is different when compared to that of mainstream media. They haven't yet been able to bring about policy level change but even though they may be 'marginal' in terms of circulation numbers (Rodriguez, 2001), they are not powerless. They are engaged citizens, a role they 'inhabit' with pride (Mullick, 2015, p. 704). Their journalistic practices are certainly re-emphasising the importance of alternative media as sites that promote feminist ideas (Steiner, 1992), and while they may have to tread carefully, being diplomatic in the ways they approach stories, but overall, their stories don't shy away from addressing issues related to women and highlighting the many injustices they face.

As shown by RQ3, which discussed how they choose their topics, resolution of topics is important but so is changing of attitudes especially if those attitudes are to do with issues like child marriage. Their nuanced effects on their communities and the way they see themselves is 'radical' when compared to the 'professionalized and institutionalized practices of the mainstream media' (Atton, 2003, p. 268).

Alternative media is often deemed to be a democratic space for ideas, and it is the enthusiastic participation of these women here that ensures a variety of perspectives (Thompson, Gómez, & Toro, 2005) of not just women but vulnerable women in situations with little access to basic education and healthcare due to poverty. Viewing their roles as ones of responsibility rather than power, their nuanced impact on their communities and the way they see themselves is 'radical' when compared to the 'professionalized and institutionalized practices of the mainstream media' (Atton, 2003, p. 268). There are no women's movements per se in these areas but these women with their focus on creating a greater awareness of rights, violations, and ways of redresses are certainly creating movements towards more empowered communities where marginalised women are empowered to confront traditional patriarchal norms of what being a woman means (Field, Jayachandran, & Pande, 2010; Thomas, 2012).

But in spite of the many positives these journalists are still ignored by mainstream media (Chadha & Steiner, 2015; Pain, 2018a) and thus find it difficult to get across to audiences beyond their communities. The participants believed that if more mainstream reporters in their areas were women, they would find greater receptivity. While they may consider their journalism one of change that is imperative to the well-being of their communities, they are barely making a dent in the overall media scenario of the country. This is because the number of women journalists, especially those in leadership positions,

are abysmally low, and this bias is reflected in the coverage of gender issues. (Laghate, 2023; Sachde, 2023). An important question that this paper does not address, and which is an important lacuna, focuses on ways in which such representation and participation can be improved.

While issues of gender representation and participation have been positively influenced by their involvement, wider examinations of the place of women in media need to be done to holistically understand how this association can be better enhanced. For now, in developing countries, in deprived settings, citizen journalism is helping address gender inequities and creating opportunities to address specific community interests and issues that are often considered 'contrary and subversive' (Silverstone, 1999, p. 103). It is this implication that augments the axiology of studies that look into understanding the values citizen journalists ascribe to their work (Holton, Coddington, & Gil de Zúñiga, 2013). Future research can look at comparative media analyses where citizen journalists around the world can be interviewed and their motivations for participation and content topics can be compared for a richer gendered understanding of the ecology of citizen journalism through gendered lens.

## Notes

1. <https://www.videovolunteers.org/fixing-india-catching-a-human-trafficker-featuring-navita-devi-2/>.
2. <https://www.videovolunteers.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/low-Final-Annual-report-22-23-2.pdf>.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This study was funded by a grant from the Center for Advanced Media Studies (CAMS), Reynolds School of Journalism, University of Nevada, Reno.

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