

## **Changing Forms and Platforms of Misogyny: Sexual Harassment of Women Journalists on Twitter**

RICHARD REGO  
St Joseph's College (Autonomous), India

Across time, in a variety of forms and spaces -from homes and workplaces to digital domains of social media- women have become victims of male dominance. So also are the other vulnerable sections that suffer multi-layered abuse, and endure sexual harassment in social media. Yet, this phenomenon is insufficiently explored. Therefore, this article argues that social media spaces have become domains for sexual harassment and subjugation of women. This article examines gender-trolling on Twitter as a form of sexual violence against women. Employing qualitative analyses of the Twitter conversations on Indian journalists, namely Barkha Dutt, Sagarika Ghose, and Rana Ayyub, it exposes the nature and form of sexual violence against women on the micro-blogging space, and argues that social media platforms constitute convenient havens of harassment against assertive women

Keywords: Twitter, social media, women journalists, sexual harassment, misogyny

In last two decades, the Internet has evolved as a platform for people to express themselves freely. Since the advent of Web 2.0, the Internet has given birth to many a social media platform like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and blogs. These social media networks help create, curate, and explore content, generating discourses in the public domain.

The Internet has not only opened avenues for inter-user communication but also given rise to deviant behaviour in equal measure. Such deviants have found easy targets among those in disagreement with dominant ideologies and ruling political dispensations. They have also harangued those supportive of alienated sections of society such as *dalits* (people of scheduled/ lower castes), *tribals* (or indigenous people), minorities, and women. In the recent past, women have been among the prime targets of trolls. Deviants have also found social media to be anonymous and encouraging ecosystems for trolling, name-calling, and profanity. Within the context of harassment of women, these online behaviors across online platforms have misogynistic variants called 'gender trolling' (Mantilla, 2013).

Trolls are characterised by sadistic tendencies, deriving pleasure by shaming and humiliating their targets, and indulging in disruptive, narcissistic behaviour, triggering conflicts among the community of users (Hardaker, 2010; Shachaf & Hara, 2010). Thus, often, they derive emotional satisfaction at the cost of those in disagreement with themselves. Such a disruptive, anti-social behaviour reveals pathological characteristics. The availability of Internet at fingertips on smartphones and other computing gadgets has aggravated such behaviour, and the anonymity associated with it has made disruptive and 'Machiavellian behaviour' all pervasive on the Internet (Buckles, 2014).

---

Correspondence to: Richard Rego, Department of Communication, 36 Langford Road, St Joseph's College (Autonomous), Bengaluru-560 027, India.

## Social Media and Women's Harassment

Typically, trolls troll by posting a question or a comment against their targets. They often work in tandem. The troll community, in other words 'troll farm', disturb online conversations. Another trolling device employed to target people online is 'lulz'—an act of aggressive laughter derived from evoking emotional reactions from their target(s) (Phillips, 2011). It is a way to gather great number of trolls to attack, to behave outrageously, and offensively.

In the recent past, women journalists like Rana Ayyub, Teesta Setalvad, Barkha Dutt, Sagarika Ghose, Nidhi Razdan, and Dhanya Rajendran have been among the main targets of trolls in India. These women journalists have been attacked using abusive and vulgar language, visuals such as Graphics Interchange Formats (GIF) and memes. They have been at the receiving end, irrespective of the subject of their online conversations—be they political issues, socio-cultural events, national or international occurrences, or anything of public or private nature.

## Sexual Harassment

For a very long time, treatment of women has been a controversial topic in the public arena. Women's ill-treatment has taken multiple forms like uncomfortable gaze, verbal abuses, name-calling, stereotyping, non-verbal gestures, physical injuries such as corporal punishment and wife battering, molestation, rape, and a wide variety of sexual abuses. In all these, the most controversial question that has dogged women, feminists, women-sympathisers, women-activists, legal community, as well as academicians is what constitutes sexual harassment.

While there are disagreements in defining sexual harassment, it is important to examine the phenomenon of 'ill-treatment' of women from the victims' perspective. Hence, 'any meaningful understanding of sexual harassment must be grounded in women's experiences, the day-to-day "suchness of our lives"' (Fitzgerald, Swan, & Magely, 1997: 5), since empirical or legalistic interpretations of such acts tend to diminish the enormity and sensitivity of the problem. Day-to-day human experience also points at many cases wherein for lack of empirical evidence or the lack of legal requirements, perpetrators of any form of violence—sexual harassment included—tend to get away with their crimes. Victims are left to cope with their own bruised dignity, minds, and bodies. While it is thought that with spread of information technologies, education, and awareness, situation would improve, experience shows us that crimes against women have continued to be committed in spite of all these.

## A Case in Point

when Anita Sarkeesian, launched a fundraising website Kickstarter to take on sexist representations of women in the gaming community, she was threatened with rape, sexual assault, doxing, and death. Additionally, trolls launched a website, *Beat Up Anita Sarkeesian*. On it, the users could virtually attack her and see the image bruise and bleed. Another tech blogger, Kathy Sierra, was forced to move out of her hometown for blogging, as she was threatened with rape and death. Sierra left her home; later, she stopped blogging for the next six years.

Gurmeher Kaur, the daughter of a martyred Indian army man, when posted a video saying '*Pakistan did not kill my father but bullets did*', she was trolled by Kiren Rijju, the

Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, Randeep Hooda, a film actor, and Virender Sehwal, a much-loved cricket star.

Dhanya Rajendran, Editor-in-Chief, [www.thenewsminute.com](http://www.thenewsminute.com), was targeted on Twitter for her review of Shah Rukh Khan's film *Jab Harry Met Sejal*, and negatively compared it with Tamil actor Vijay's film *Sura*, saying the latter was more tolerable because she could stay till the interval watching *Sura*. She was forced to delete the tweet after an army of trolls (fans of Vijay) posted sexist comments targeting her personally, and threatened her. Within a few minutes, her phone was bombarded with over 31,000 Twitter notifications trolling and sexually abusing her, and an abuser even 'wanted to penetrate her with a metal rod' (Marino, 2017).

From the real world of patriarchy, misogyny has been imported onto the social media. Celebrities and public personalities like journalists, political leaders, and activists are trolled through hate tweets, and memes. Having a virtual presence makes it easy for chauvinistic people to sit in front of their screens and attack people in the virtual world.

This research article explores how the micro-blogging site Twitter has been employed to sexually harass women journalists, thus serving misogyny. Taking the example of three New Delhi based Indian women journalists: Barkha Dutt, Sagarika Ghose and Rana Ayyub who have been trolled on social media time and again, this article argues that Twitter has provided a convenient platform for varieties of misogyny and sexual harassment for deviant elements.

## Women Journalists

Barkha Dutt, was a television journalist till recently. After working for NDTV for 21 years, she left the TV channel to co-found *The Print*, an online media venture along with Shekhar Gupta. She has been on Twitter since February 2009. As on 23 April 2018, Dutt has 6.78 million followers on the micro-blogging site.

Sagarika Ghose, another TV journalist, currently is the Consulting Editor of *Times of India* newspaper. Her Twitter handle shows that she has 3.99 million people following her on the micro-blogging network, as on 23 April 2018. On social media, Ghose has been targeted for her political thoughts and cynicism.

Rana Ayyub, is an independent journalist, who earlier worked for *Tehelkanews* magazine and NDTV. She is known for her investigative reporting, and her book *Gujarat Files: Anatomy of a Cover Up*. Ayyub joined Twitter in March 2011. On her Twitter handle, she is followed by 528,000 followers as on 23 April 2018.

## Literature Review

Though, research on online misogyny and sexual harassment is limited, but considering the fact that social media is relatively new, and that online trolling is still a newer phenomenon, the amount of research interest evinced by scholars in this field is significant.

Herring (2002) defines trolling to be a sensational or disruptive act, in which 'posts' from the recent past become the center of attraction for trolling. Online trolling is an aberrant behavior taking place on various platforms (Hardaker, 2010; Shachaf & Hara, 2010). Using objectionable online behaviour, troll armies try to provoke and elicit response from the larger online communities. Causing disruptions and disagreements are at the heart of trolling. Among the aberrant behaviours, Suler (2005) includes flaming, trolling, harassment, and unrestrained bullying.

Mantilla (2013) and Fichman and Sanfilippo (2014) argue that online communities are home to aggressive online behaviour, and express themselves in multiple variants of misogyny called 'gender trolling.' It is a new form of virtual sexism unleashed by the online communities. Phillips (2011) terms trolling as a sub-culture on online forums like '4chan,' fostered by homogeneous communities of trolls. He finds basic similarities between online trolls and the KKK (Ku Klux Klan): features such as intelligence, playfulness, mischief, and atheistic and agnostic attitudes. Phillips explains trolling to include hate-crimes that aim at attacking memorial pages on Facebook. This form of online hate speech includes rape threats, death threats, and doxing.

Most of the trolls are males, who indulge in anti-social behaviour. Suler and Phillips (1998) believe that male deviants have historically been easily accessible and huge in number in comparison to females. This, also, is a reason why women become an easy target for trolls.

Sometimes organizations and institutions like media houses and political parties also become a part of harassment by trolling hiding behind the mask of anonymity. Chaturvedi (2016) points to politically organized trolls to target their victims. She argues that most of the trolls are volunteers or sometimes, tend to be paid to troll. Some of the characteristics of Indian political trolls, according to her, are that they use pseudo names to hide their identities, and use various technological tools like virtual private networks (VPNs) to hide themselves.

It is difficult to silence trolls. MacKinnon and Zuckerman (2012) believe that more the trolls are responded to, more they win. The comments section on social media makes it easy for users to react, and be entrapped into deviant or anomalous participation (McCosker, 2013b).

Byerly (2013) believes, the ownership and control of new media is male-dominated, and globalization is the evidence that it is gendered and has put women at disadvantage. Consequently, online discourse has paved the way for gendered abuses and male domination on many online and offline platforms, and has resulted in misogynistic online ecosystem in a patriarchal environment. In fact, as Banet-Weiser and Miltner (2015) have pointed that abuse do not remain gendered alone, but are racist in nature, too. In the *intersectionality* of interlocking systems of power (Crenshaw, 1989; Cooper, 2016), various forms of social stratification work together in feeding the networked misogyny.

Online abusers thrive on a series of advantages of trolling like the ease of communication, anonymity, global correspondence, slow law enforcement, and safeguards (Adams, 2017). Safeguards are slow because it is easier to build a mob online, but difficult to catch one due to the restrictions provided by the virtual world.

In many cases, trolling has become *normalised* because men are in-charge of it all the time. Women refrain from reacting to trolls, and legitimisation of trolling online continues, deepening the 'spiral of silence' (Noelle-Neumann, 1991, in Anderson; Neil, 2009). In silencing and suppressing women, male trolls claim women's space. Adam (2005) asserts that when a woman tries to reclaim her space, it is always the male who elicits responses to it.

The online abuse and its effects faced by women are worse in comparison to those experienced by men (Pew Research Center, 2014). Herring (1996) argues that in gender comparison, women are more likely to be victims of abuse in the digital realm than their male counterparts. Research by Auerbach and Coleman (2012) and Bartlett (2015) reveals that trolls demeaned women journalists online. The authors pointed out that trolls especially targeted women who get bylines for their online stories, and termed them 'attention whores.' As major tools of abuse, trolls usually employ derogatory words, name-calling, and shaming.

They also regularly use flaming and other kinds of antagonisms on interactive online platforms, subordinating women, and creating male hegemony in the virtual world.

Coleman (2010) believes that harassment and abuse of journalists are daily bread for trolls, and attributes it not to the Internet phenomenon, but to ideologies, politics and economy, and trolls with such agenda thrive in the Internet culture.

In this digital era, there has been an alarming rise in violence against women in online spaces. The available research points to this phenomenon of increased sexual violence both in offline and online spaces, and a possibility of ever increasing mutations of such forms of sexual harassment on the wired digital platforms against women.

## Objectives

Broadly, the study has been carried out based on the following objectives:

- (i) To examine if the discourse surrounding the three Indian women journalists on Twitter amounts to sexual harassment online.
- (ii) To examine the forms of misogyny surrounding the three women journalists on Twitter.

## Methodology

This research analyses the Twitter discourse surrounding the original tweets posted by the three women journalists Barkha Dutt, Sagarika Ghose and Rana Ayyub. The data was collected for the month of October 2017. Thirty-one original tweets by the three journalists, and the discourse surrounding it, consisting of 40,000 tweets, were processed for analysis.

The research employs a qualitative conventional content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005), within the framework of Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), to explore the stated objectives. Conventional content analysis involves coding categories that are directly derived from the data. FCDA tries to advance a rich and nuanced analysis in the working of power and ideology in a complex state by sustaining the discourse of gendered social order (Lazar, 2007).

All the available tweets were classified, categorised and coded. Here, the coding of the tweets evolved from the data. The tweets by the three journalists and replies to them were categorised and coded into four categories.

Misogyny and sexual harassment of women are two different things; the former a general form of hatred against women, whereas the latter is a specific form of abuse against women, which takes multiple forms, from mild offences to extreme violations of human rights and dignity; it may also be an outcome of misogyny. Here, in this article, both the terms are used in their broadest meanings. They refer to the abuse of women with sexual overtones on the social media platform Twitter, and also any abuse against women using verbal, non-verbal or textual form. It could include words like nicknames or pet names which are supposed to be addressed by persons close to them (such as 'baby', 'sweetie', etc.), direct vulgar and sexual terms, references to women's bodies or minds or relationships, or any aspect of femininity, and threats to rape. In general, they refer to the five categories of abuse of women listed by Till (1980), as also three referred to in Gruber's (1992) typology of sexual harassment, both of which were classified in the pre-online era. Hence, the categories exclude Till's specifically offline categories of physical sexual crimes such as coercion for sexual activity, rape and sexual assault.

The data for this research was later filtered to serve the objectives of the study, on the basis of abusive and sexual content present in the discourse surrounding each of the journalists. The data focused on the original tweets by the three journalists that elicited

the highest number of replies from trolls. The replies analysed also included GIFs, and memes and texts in English.

**Analysis**

Opinion leaders are trolled, attacked, or criticised by trolls affiliated to particular political, religious, or cultural groups and practices for various reasons, primarily for disagreements, or for holding a particular belief or opinion different from their own. That is true in this case of the three women journalists, as well. Since the three women journalists are primarily professional opinion leaders and public personalities discussing and commenting on public issues on public domain, it is only logical that they also be criticised or people disagree with them for professional reasons or practices. Hence, this article welcomes and respects such professional criticism; it considers for analysis only the personal, gendered, and sexual attacks against the three, which digress from professional practice.

This research approaches sexual harassment from a ‘victim vulnerability’ (Fitzgerald, Hulin, & Drasgow, 1997) perspective, on the personalised, gendered, and sexual aspects of the attack, since such attacks betray an abusive mind-set riding on the public and democratic platforms, and violating human dignity in the guise of exercising freedom of speech and expression. The Twitter discourse betrays a mind-set that does not respect women, especially on public for a, which also denigrates basic human values, and speaks for the emboldened uncivilities in the public domain. Hence, all those tweets which evinced misogyny or sexual overtones were categorised and coded.

Throughout this article, the terms sex/sexual are preferred to include both gender and sex, so that they envelope the social, cultural, physical, psychological, and the sexual aspects of the discourse.

**Codes:** From a large number of categories, four codes were shortlisted for analysis:

*Sexual Abuses:* These are misogynistic in nature and use words signifying sexual or vulgar content like hoe and bloody bitch. Abuses against the three journalists are derogatory in nature to women.

*Name Calling:* Labelling women with names and titles, meant to denigrate them either sarcastically or directly. For example, *libtards* and *presstitutes* (portmanteaux for liberal + retards and press + prostitutes, respectively).

*Condescending Terms:* These terms evince intimacy towards the victims by patronizing them, by using endearing terms such as baby, sweetheart.

*Belittling Language:* Employing language that denies the victims their due, and underestimates their abilities and achievements. Eg: tagging someone as somebody’s wife or daughter.

Tables 1-3 show the classified sexual harassment of individual female journalists

Table 1. Abuses against Barkha Dutt:

Codes	Abuses
Sexual abuses	Dumbass bitches, shit lady, dirty rat, sex slave, which outfit suits the best?
Name-calling	Libtard, presstitute, moron
Condescending terms	Sweetheart, baby
Belittling language	fake reporter, anti-national, parasite media touts, paidmavathi, burnol

Table 2. Abuses against Sagarika Ghose

Codes	Abuses
Sexual abuses	Brain in the knees, senseless female, ugly cunt, horny couple, blow job, bitch, perfect whore
Name calling	Presstitute, ISI agent, asshole, as whole
Condescending terms	Crybaby, baby, toilet paper
Belittling language	Keep on barking, woman or demon? filthy creature, Christian by religion jihadist by culture, buy a burkha, You're Muslim use green not orange, big loser, use burnol, grind your bum to harm Modi, moron

Table 3. Abuses against Rana Ayyub

Categories	Abuses
Sexual abuses	Pakistani pimp, fuck you and Muslims, slut, prostitute, whore, Is she good on bed? release your CD with Sanjiv Bhatt, female cobra, run nude on the road, ISIS sex slave, bitch shut up, fuck off asshole, asshole, go fuck yourself, hoe, bloody bitch
Name calling	Agent of Congress, Pakistan, ISIS, Terrorist, jihadists, witch, pigshit, spokesperson of ISIS.
Condescending terms	Baby, sweetheart
Belittling language	Communal clashes, Gujarat Piles, 'go back to your country,' spew venom, play the blue whale challenge and do us a favour, apply burnol, rub ice on your ass

## Discussion

As Tables 1-3 show, Twitter has provided ample scope for trolls to target the women journalists for various reasons like differing on the dominant discourse on social media platforms, and voicing their own and independent opinions. As the data shows, grounds on which they have been abused vary from religion to a form of exclusive nationalism constructed by trolls, to criticising certain political dispensations, to voicing their opinions on religious-cultural celebrations, to their own personal achievements. Under the garb of free speech and expression, the trolls have taken the liberty to attack the three women personally and harass them sexually, using language usually not employed in any conversation, not least in public domains. A closer analysis of the classified data reveals a patriarchal and sectarian mindset that targets women openly and on flimsy grounds using harshest and even vulgar language.

*Sexual Abuses:* In the sexual abuses category, sexist and vulgar language has been employed to target the three women journalists. While Barkha Duttis targeted with abuses like *dumbass bitches, shit lady, dirty rat, sex slave, and which outfit suits you the best*. Sagarika Ghose has been attacked with abuses like *brain in the knees, senseless female, ugly cunt, horny couple, blow job, bitch, and perfect whore*. Likewise, Rana Ayyub is abused using terms such as *fuck you and Muslims, Is she good on bed?, release your CD with Sanjiv Bhatt, prostitute, female cobra, run nude on the road, whore, slut, bitch shut up, fuck off asshole, Pakistani pimp, asshole, ISIS sex slave, hoe, go fuck yourself, and bloody bitch*.

As can be seen, the free speech on the democratic media platform, in this case, has given free vent to Twitter users' hatred against the three women. Free speech, which presumes responsible speech and actions, has metamorphosed into vulgar hate speech, mixing sex with character assassination along sexual lines. In the backdrop of the arrest of Dera chief and self-proclaimed God-man Gurmeet Ram Raheem in the north Indian state of Haryana, Barkha Dutt tweeted asking for more evidence against the Dera chief's adopted daughter Honeypreet Insan's involvement in the violence that ensued the arrest. Soon after this, trolls started attacking the journalist with sexual innuendo and personal attacks. Such an attack is both sexual harassment in nature and hate speech and bigotry. While it becomes hate speech and bigotry because of the contemptuous nature of the language employed in it, it assumes sexual harassment proportions by the very words and terms the discourse employs.

Calling a woman sex slave, dumbass bitches, shit lady, dirty rat, or referring to her outfit, is vulgar in nature; they completely sexualise and reify the woman under consideration. Besides, the issues the trolls have been talking about have nothing to do with the issues under consideration on the micro-blogging site. The abuses hurled at Dutt go beyond the limits of civility. Such language is aimed at offending sensibilities of women and violates the victim's modesty.

Sexual harassment against Sagarika Ghose has been along personal lines, too, offending a woman's modesty and violating her human dignity. *Brain in the knees* is a patriarchal insult against a woman, uttered in traditional patriarchal Indian societies. To call a woman an *ugly cunt* (which refers to female genitalia; it also means a cunning fox), *horny couple* (a vulgar abusive term which drags her husband Rajdeep Sardesai, who has also been trolled regularly for similar online disagreements), *blow job* (a non-normal sexual act not spoken of in public, which tends to evoke pornographic images), and *bitch* (a sexual abuse indicating no dignity), and *perfect whore* (directly referring to prostitution) is meant to sexually demean her, and reduce a woman to mere object worthy of deriving sexual pleasure.

Sexual attack, perhaps, has been the most cruel and vitriolic against Rana Ayyub compared to two other journalists (Table 3). What goes on as public discourse is of public nature, in which anyone can take part and comment. And such discourses have some express or implicit conventions. But irrespective of the subject of the debates, the language employed against Ayyub is both vulgar and un-parliamentary, as shown in Table 3. Slurs repeatedly used against Ayyub, *Is she good on bed? prostitute, run nude on the road, whore, slut, bitch shut up, fuck off asshole, Pakistan pimp, asshole ISIS sex slave, go fuck yourself, and bloody bitch* are embarrassing. These words posit the woman as cheap (with no morals); they reify the woman under consideration in the most despicable way, stripping her off her human dignity. All the words used against her would be considered vulgar and obscene in any public conversation.

The blatantly sexist language (see Table 3) used against Ayyub de-humanises her, and projects her merely in terms of paid or cheap sex, and in many instances sexually objectifies her, associating with what populist nationalist sentiment considers as 'enemy' (Pakistan) of the state. This inter-sectionality intensifies the misogyny and takes it to another level of sexualizing.

Another abuse *release your CD with Sanjiv Bhatt* is a sexual slur on her character. Sanjiv Bhatt, the former Indian Police Officer, is known for his carping criticism of the current political dispensation, and therefore has been branded as 'anti-national'. Hence pairing Ayyub with him (himself, a family man) not only imputes anti-national motives, also attributes adultery to her, which is a major crime in Indian society. Obscenities such



as *Fuck you and Muslims* are a slur against her sexual morality, which vulgarises, humiliates, and communalises the online conversation. It demonises the entire Muslim community while robbing her of her dignity in the eyes of the online public. Additionally, she was also humiliated on her religious affiliation, insulting Islam, in the context of Las Vegas (1 Oct. 2017) and Mogadishu, Somalia (14 Oct. 2017) bombings.

The explicitly sexual language employed in this discourse demeans women in general and the three protagonists in particular. A barrage of attack like the one unleashed against these three, can make the victims numb with fear and shock. Through the agency of the obscene language, trolls sexually harassed them, and tried to establish an upper-hand for themselves, thus cornering their victims, and rendering them helpless on the public forum.

*Name Calling:* Name-calling is a device used in propaganda to discredit a person, thus establishing an upper hand for the propagandists over their rivals. In the case of the women journalists, the most commonly used name-calling devices were the two portmanteaux *libtard* and *presstitutes*. They indicate insanity (hence untrustworthiness) and equating their journalism to sexually cheap behaviour, i.e. prostitution. *Libtards* is a combination of the two words *liberal* and *retards*. In the Indian context, *libtards* are those who pretend to be liberal and politically correct, but actually are out of their minds. Thus *libtards* signifies cheap, pretentious people but out of their minds, hence need to be dismissed as such.

The portmanteaux *Presstitute* comes from American alternative journalism, and refers to mainstream journalists because of their perceived tendency to tread the government track and betray their journalistic calling. The word became a widely used and derogatory term to refer to English media and other secular-minded media persons in the backdrop of the 2014 general elections to the Indian Parliament. While some media personnel were accused of unethically receiving incentives for their favourable reporting of certain political parties and corporates, others were identified as nationalist for carrying out a certain type of political reporting. Since Dutt and Ghose did not match the 'nationalist' frame, they were accused of lacking morals and selling themselves. It meant, they did not deserve any respect because of their 'fallen status' as defined by trolls. The import was clearly sexual.

Ghose and Ayyub, both were termed 'ISI/ISIS agents', associating them with either the Pakistani intelligence agency ISI, which is pitted as India's *bête-noir*, or with the international Islamic extremist wing (ISIS), notorious for unleashing a reign of terror in some parts of the world. Calling the two journalists *agents* of these two outfits makes them traitors, thus bringing upon themselves the curse of a nation.

Though name-calling is an attacking device with wide-ranging connotations with the intention of discrediting the opponents, in this case, it has also been widely used to evoke sexual overtones with the help of explicitly sexist language, and thus attack moral integrity of the victims.

*Condescending Terms:* Trolls on Twitter frequently employed terms like *Baby* and *sweetheart* in an effort to condescend on them. *Sweetheart* is a romance partner. Usually this term is used by lovers in their romantic relationship and it is not proper for anyone outside a romantic bond to call anyone else *sweetheart*. *Baby* is both an infant as well as a romantic/sexy sweetheart. Both the terms refer to an intimate and private relationship. To use these terms for woman-professionals by persons not related to them, and that too in a public discourse, is violation of a woman's modesty. It casts aspersions on the moral character of

those against whom such terms are used. It makes them look 'cheap' and without character in the public eye, in a society which values sexual morality highly in public. In a one-sided, unpleasant exchange on public domain, the use of such condescending terms is both sarcastic and sexually harassing, since it misappropriates the women in the public eyes, demeans them, and robs them of their public image.

Similarly, the term *cry baby* is also condescending. It attributes an infantile attitude to the grown-up professionals, denying them their mature and rightful identity because they did not fall in line with the trolls' ideas and ideologies.

*Belittling Language:* Barkha Dutt has been belittled using terms like *fake reporter*, *anti-national*, *parasite media touts*, *paidmavathi*, and *burnol*. While the first four are demeaning terms of general nature, *burnol* has a sexual connotation, especially in the context of a picture/ GIF posted along with it. Such language is used against all the three women: Dutt, Ghose and Ayyub, whereas the GIF was posted against Sagarika Ghose. *Burnol* is a cream used when someone suffers some burn injuries. But when the three independently tweeted on various political and cultural issues, they were targeted with '*use burnol*', attributing to them jealousy.

In the context of Gujarat Assembly Elections in 2017, Sagarika had made some predictions on the ruling BJP's win. The trolls replied with a *Burnol* tweet: '*Burnol moment for you and Chordesi?*' 'Chordesi' was a personal attack against her husband Rajdeep Sardesai, though he had nothing to do with this particular online conversation. The trolls personally attacked Ghose and her husband by calling him a robber. In the traditional Indian society, for a woman to have a robber-husband is to be shameless.

One troll went on to harass her with *use ice* and *burnol*; another tweeted, *burnol moment on Sunday morning oops*; others said, *pls order burnol in advance to avoid stock shortage*; *need burnol?* The import of the attack was that Ghose was against particular party winning elections in Gujarat, and hence she was jealous. When someone imputes jealousy to someone else, in the absence of any mention of it in the conversation, it suggests a projective technique on the part of the abuser. When women become assertive and vocal in any society, the dominant section of men feels threatened, and feels jealous for the women's assertiveness (Meyers-Abell & Jansen, 1980; Dijkstra & Buunk, 1998). The three women journalists becoming vocal and assertive in voicing opinion, and daring to differ from the dominant discourse might easily be construed as 'dominance' by male trolls, a characteristic typically associated with men in a patriarchal Indian society.

The GIF posted in response to Ghose as a naked man standing (legs upright) and bending completely forward into a bucket placed on the ground in front of him, dipping his head in its colour water. There is a huge fire seen in the person's anus as flames are going up. On the top-right of the picture are words inscribed, 'For those who are burning today', and below them are pictures of *Burnol* tubes.

*Parasite media tout* and *paidmavati* are abuses hurled at Barkha Dutt, in response to a tweet by Dutt about a meeting with Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal and Congress spokesperson Manish Tewari. Both tweets implicitly accuse Dutt of currying favour from political leaders by selling journalism. The second abuse '*paidmavati*' is a portmanteau for '*paid journalist*' and the controversial Hindi film *Padmavati*, in which the protagonist queen Padmavati was wrongly said to be engaging in a sexual affair with the Muslim invader Allauddin Khilji.

While abusing Dutt, a troll posted a GIF of a fragmented female body (buttocks) thrusting out, in barely clad green lingerie. The tweet said, 'Barka after meeting'. The colour hints her to be Muslim (for her sympathies with Muslim community, though she herself is

a Hindu). The GIF tends to offend civil sensibilities. It is intended to humiliate a woman in public.

The belittling language against Ghose included various tweets like *Keep on barking, woman or demon? filthy creature, Christian by religion jihadist by culture, buy a burkha, You're Muslim use green not orange, big loser, grind your bum, and moron*, indicating an unease of the trolls with women asserting themselves.

Once again, Rana Ayyub faced the worst and the most vicious belittling language: *Gujarat Piles* (referring to her book 'Gujarat Files'), *communal clashes, go back to your country, fuck you and Muslims* (referring to her religion), *play the blue whale challenge and do us a favour* (referring to the Internet-based suicidal game), *spew venom, apply burnol, female cobra, witch, run nude on the roads and rub ice on your ass*. This language could be termed as 'below the belt' language and humiliating to any human being, not just to a woman on a public forum. Ayyub has, often, been called a prostitute, irrespective of the occasion and the tweets she posts.

On the Hindu festival of lights of *Diwali*, which many people celebrate by bursting crackers, Ghose tweeted promoting 'eco-friendly' 'green-Diwali'. She was trolled—*woman or a demon?*—questioning her womanhood and humanity. Trolls also tweeted *Green diwali do you mean?* referring to Islam, and posted a *photo-shopped* image of herself, with her husband Sardesai in a long beard and green *kurtha*, wearing a Pakistani flag on his *kurtha*, and a skull cap, once again associating him with Pakistan and Islam. The idea is to alienate dominant female and mislead the public on the issue at stake by bringing in an enemy and sexualised discourse.

As is seen in the Twitter discourse, misogyny and sexual harassment are communicated in various forms. Given the attack on the victims' intellect and integrity, it is obvious that trolls digress from and deflect attention from the contemporary discourse.

## Conclusion

Misogyny on the web has become an everyday phenomenon; women have become the targets for trolls on social media. The power imbalance between men and women makes women susceptible to trolls; it leads to over-sexualisation of the online discourses, and sexual harassment of women in public domains.

The discourse on Twitter surrounding the tweets of the three women journalists points to a few sexualised trends online. It shows that sexual harassment, which has existed for a very long time across communities and countries, continues unabated. In this age of digital society and social networks, the sexually discriminatory practice has extended to online platforms, beyond offline harassment, exposing the female victim to a large canvas of humiliating trolls and the online public.

From the disturbing male gaze, verbal and physical abuse, molestations in workplaces, and sexual harassment which were private or relatively much less public in nature, the trajectory of the harassment in social media has taken multiple forms like gendered trolling, verbal and non-verbal abuses including words, pictures, hashtags, GIFs, videos, name-calling, condescending or belittling language, and a number of other devices. In a free-for-all online slugfest, women are deprived of their personhood and modesty.

Though there are some laws in India to safeguard people from online abuses, not much has been done to uphold the dignity of women on public platforms, due to the lack of gate-keeping on social media networks.

Social media by their very nature, pave the way for uncontrolled social interactions and crowd-sourcing of data; consequently, because of the uncontrolled and sexualised

discourse on them by sexist trolls, they have created a virtual world of misogyny and patriarchy where sexual harassment of women is acceptable spectacle. Users on the Internet, and in particular the users of social media, are influenced by others as they are forced to conform to the prevalent practice in a given space. Women journalists like Barkha Dutt, Sagarika Ghose and Rana Ayyub represent the large canvas of female victims of gendered trolling on social media platforms, such as, Twitter. Trolls have used this as one of the ways to silence the assertive women and who voice their critical opinion. It is important to note that media—both the fourth estate and the social media—come with huge responsibilities that need to be carried out carefully for the smooth and harmonious functioning of a society. At times, when the political scene in a democracy becomes volatile because of the socio-political conditions, the safety of the vulnerable sections of the society is compromised with because of the religious, political orientations and the cultural-political actors in the media.

It is observed that when individuals like Dutt, Ghose, and Ayyub, who are critical of the ruling dispensations, or voice out their personal opinions, they are sexually harassed by trolls. Trolls indulge themselves in anti-social behaviour and demean the status of the messengers, especially women. Sexual attacks, name-calling, naming and shaming, outright abuse, alienation, and serious threats of rape and murder become weapons of silencing articulate voices, as seen in the Twitter discourse. Women journalists, like Dutt, Ghose and Ayyub in this case, have been the worst victims of brutal and patriarchal attacks because of the power structures.

Misogyny and sexual harassment have assumed a variety of forms and attackers are seen to be active at the core of the contemporary online discourse against women. While controlling and monitoring of social media platforms may not completely do away with the sexual harassment of women in online forum, adapting informative, awareness, and educative programmes, inculcating respect for the dissenting voices, especially for women, could help clean up the social platforms of such sexual abuse to some extent.

**Acknowledgment:** The author is grateful to Evelyn Kandur of St. Joseph's College Autonomous, Bengaluru for her painstaking efforts in collecting the data and helping in classifying it.

## References

- Adam, A. (2005). *Gender, ethics and information technology*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Adams, C. (2017). "They Go for Gender First". *Journalism Practice*, 1-20. doi:10.1080/17512786.2017.1350115 Accessed Jan. 23 2018.
- Auerbach, D. (2012, Feb.2). Anonymity as Culture: treatise. triplecanopy. [https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/anonymity\\_as\\_culture\\_\\_treatise](https://www.canopycanopycanopy.com/contents/anonymity_as_culture__treatise) Accessed 17 Mar. 2018.
- Auerbach D. & Coleman, G. (2012). *Here comes nobody*. Triple Canopy. Kindle Ed..
- Banet-Weiser, S. & Miltner, K.M. (2015) #Masculinity So Fragile: culture, structure, and networked misogyny. *Feminist Media Studies*. 16(1), 171-174. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2016.1120490> Accessed 20 Jan. 2018.
- Bartlett (2015). How do you Stop Twitter Trolls? Unleash a Robot Swarm and Troll them Back. *The Telegraph Newspaper*. Accessed on 10 Apr. 2018 via <http://bit.ly/1yqRaA6>.
- Beard, M. (2015). The Public Voice of Women. *Women's History Review*. 24(5). <https://doi.org/10.1080/09612025.2015.1023023> Accessed 10 Jan. 2018

- Bishop, J. (2013). The Psychology of Trolling and Lurking. *Examining the Concepts, Issues, and Implications of Internet Trolling*, 106-123. doi:10.4018/978-1-4666-2803-8.ch009. Accessed 25 Mar. 2018.
- Buckles, E.E., Trapnell, P.D., & Paulhus, D.L. (2014). Trolls Just Want to Have Fun. *Personality and Individual Differences*, 67. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2014.01.016>. Accessed 25 Mar. 2018.
- Byerly, C.M. (2013). Women and media control - Feminist interrogations at the macro level in Carter, C., Steiner, L., & McLaughlin, L. (Ed.) *Routledge Companion to Media & Gender*, 105-115
- Chaturvedi, S. (2016). *I Am a Troll: Inside the Secret World of the BJP's Digital Army*. New Delhi: Juggernaut.
- Coleman, B. (2010). Hacker and Troller as Trickster. *Social Text*. [https://socialtextjournal.org/hacker\\_and\\_troller\\_as\\_trickster](https://socialtextjournal.org/hacker_and_troller_as_trickster) Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.
- Cooper, B. (2016). Intersectionality in Disch, L. & Hawkesworth, M. (Ed.) *The Oxford Book of Feminist Theory*. Oxford: OUP., 385-406.
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1(8). <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/> Accessed 20 Dec. 2017.
- Dijkstra, P. & Buunk, B.P. (1998). Jealousy as a Function of Rival Characteristics: An Evolutionary Perspective. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/01461672982411003> Accessed 25 Apr. 2018.
- Fichman, P., & Sanfilippo, M. R. (2014). The Bad Boys and Girls of Cyberspace. *Social Science Computer Review*, 33(2), 163-180. doi:10.1177/0894439314533169 Accessed Jan. 21 2018.
- Fitzgerald, L.F., Swan, S., & Magely, V.J. (1997). Legal, Behavioural, and Psychological Definitions of the Workplace Victimization of Women, in *Sexual Harassment - Theory, Research, and Treatment*, in O'Donohue, W. (Ed.) Boston: Allyn and Bacon. 5-28.
- Fitzgerald, L.F., Hulin, C.L., Drasgow, F., Gelfand, M.J., & Magley, V.J. (1997). *The antecedents and consequences of sexual harassment: A test of an integrated model*. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, Vol 82(4), 578-589
- Gruber, J.E. (1992). A typology of personal and environmental sexual harassment: Research and policy implications for the 1990s. *Sex Roles*, 26. 447-464.
- Hardaker, C. (2010). Trolling in asynchronous computer-mediated communication: From user discussions to academic definitions. *Journal of Politeness Research. Language, Behaviour, Culture*, 6(2). doi:10.1515/jplr.2010.011 Accessed Jan. 23 2018.
- Herring, S.C. (2002). Computer-Mediated Communication on the Internet. *Annual Review of Information Science and Technology*. 109-168.
- Hsieh & Shannon (2005). Three Approaches to Qualitative Content Analysis, *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1049732305276687> Accessed 23 Mar. 2018.
- Lazar, M. M. (2007). Feminist discourse analysis: articulating a feminist discourse praxis. *Critical Discourse Analysis* 4.2: 141-64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17405900701464816> Accessed 10 Jan. 2018
- Mackinnon, R., & Zuckerman, E. (2012). Don't Feed the Trolls. *Index on Censorship*, 41(4), 14-24. doi:10.1177/0306422012467413 Accessed 10 Feb. 2018
- Mantilla, K. (2015). *Gender trolling: how misogyny went viral*. California: Praeger
- Mantilla, K. (2013). Gender trolling: Misogyny Adapts to New Media. *Feminist Studies, a special issue: categorizing sexualities* 39(2), 563-570. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23719068> Accessed 20 Jan. 2018.

- Marino, A. (2017). Twitter has a harassment problem in India, and targets say the company isn't doing much to fix it. *Buzzfeed News*. <https://firenewsfeed.com/technology/609927>. Accessed on 13 Dec. 2017.
- Marwick, A., & Boyd, D. (2011). To See and Be Seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 17(2), 139-158. doi:10.1177/1354856510394539 Accessed 20 Jan. 2018.
- McCosker, A. (2013a). De-framing disaster: affective encounters with raw and autonomous media. *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 27(3), 382-396. doi:10.1080/10304312.2013.772109 Accessed 20 Jan. 2018.
- McCosker, A. (2013b). Trolling as provocation: YouTube's agonistic publics. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 20(2), 201-217. doi:10.1177/1354856513501413 Accessed 20 Jan. 2018.
- Meyers-Abell, J.E & Jansen, M.A. (1980) Assertive therapy for battered women: A case illustration. *Journal of Behaviour Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry*.11(4), 301-05.[https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-7916\(80\)90077-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/0005-7916(80)90077-4) Accessed 02 Apr. 2018.
- Neil, S. (2009). The Alternate Channel: How Social Media is Challenging the Spiral of Silence Theory in GLBT Communities of Color, *American University, Washington, DC*, <https://www.american.edu/soc/communication/upload/09-Neill.pdf>. Accessed 01 Apr. 2018
- Noelle-Neumann, E. (1991). *The theory of public opinion: The concept of the Spiral of Silence*. In J. A. Anderson (Ed.), *Communication Yearbook 14*, 256-287. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Phillips, W. (2011). Meet the trolls. *Index on Censorship*, 40(2), 68-76. doi:10.1177/0306422011409641 Accessed 01 Apr. 2018
- Phillips, W. (2016). *This is why we cant have nice things: mapping the relationship between online trolling and mainstream culture*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Saha, A. (2015). The sad story of #RANDI and the disguised misogyny in it on Twitter. *Hindustan Times*. <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/the-sad-story-of-randi-and-the-disguised-misogyny-in-it-on-twitter/story-moiJv2tLYqbaR7tZqLecuJ.html> Accessed 10 Apr. 2018
- Shachaf, P., & Hara, N. (2010). Beyond vandalism: Wikipedia trolls. *Journal of Information Science*, 36 (3), 357-370. doi:10.1177/0165551510365390 Accessed 10 Jan. 2018
- Shaw, A. (2014). The Internet Is Full of Jerks, Because the World Is Full of Jerks: What Feminist Theory Teaches Us About the Internet. *Communication and Critical/Cultural Studies*, 11(3), 273-277. doi:10.1080/14791420.2014.926245 Accessed 10 Jan. 2018
- Suler, J. (2005). The online disinhibition effect. *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies*, 2(2), 184-188. doi:10.1002/aps.42 Accessed 10 Jan. 2018
- Suler, J.R. & Phillips, W.L. (2009) The Bad Boys of Cyberspace: Deviant Behaviour in a Multimedia Chat Community. *Cyber Psychology & Behaviour*, 1(3).<https://doi.org/10.1089/cpb.1998.1.275> Accessed 20 Feb. 2018.
- Till, F.J. (1980). *Sexual harassment: A report on the sexual harassment of students*. Washington, DC: National Advisory Council on Women's Educational Program.

**Dr. Richard Rego** is an associate professor in the Department of Communication, and is the Director of Research Centre at St. Josephs College (Autonomous), Bengaluru, India. His research interests include film studies with a special interest in Indian cinema, journalism, new media, social media, and community radio.