Role of Women in Media in a Digital Society

Digital media platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are ubiquitous these days. It is almost impossible for a media house to avoid them if it wants to reach out to its existing and prospective audience. Same is the case with journalists: they have to be on one or the other of these platforms and networks to interact with their audience, to promote their work and also to send and receive information. While this has opened up many new possibilities such as the ease and high speed of information exchange, they are also more exposed to criticism than ever before. Their posts and stories draw instant reactions and responses from fans, detractors and everyone in between. Their private and professional lives can now be subjected to unprecedented scrutiny. Often this scrutiny results in vilification campaigns and threats of violence against journalists. If and when an individual or a group does not like a journalist’s work, the result is immediate trolling, stalking and the warnings of bodily harm.

For women working in journalism, these activities are usually couched in a sexually explicit language, including sexist comments and threats of rape and assault. According to the Internet Health Report 2019, an annual global documentation of online trends, many women experience depression and anxiety after receiving such comments and threats. They also avoid engaging with others through their social media accounts. If nothing else, this puts female journalists at a massive disadvantage in comparison with their male counterparts when it comes to using social media and digital platforms for information exchange.

The harassers, meanwhile, are generally not held accountable even though their activities have been made cognizable offences under the Pakistan Electronic Crimes Act and various other laws dealing with sexual harassment and violence against women. This panel, therefore, aims at:

- Listening to female journalists about their online experiences – both positive and negative.
- Analysing various options they may have at a personal level to deal with online harassment.
- Exploring the institutional and legal mechanisms available to address the problem and evaluating reasons for the failure of these mechanisms.
- Proposing various policy options and interventions that may be put in place to improve the performance of available institutional and legal mechanisms.
- Discussing how the Internet and digital media platforms can be made safe spaces for female journalists.

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