



Women Journalists and Agency: Reshaping Feminist Narratives in Media - A Comparative Study of the United States and India

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Abstract

This study examines how women journalists exercise agency in shaping feminist narratives and influencing public discourse on gender equality. Through a comparative analysis of the United States and India, this research explores women's evolving roles in journalism and their strategies for challenging traditional narratives. Despite persistent structural barriers, women journalists have developed innovative approaches to story selection and framing that significantly impact public perceptions of feminist issues.

Keywords: *Feminist Journalism; Media Framing; Narrative Agency; Cross-Cultural Analysis; Activism*

Introduction

Women journalists occupy a unique position as both observers and participants in the struggle for gender equality. Their perspectives deepen feminist discourse while challenging patriarchal media systems (Beasley 2020; Chambers 2020). Despite growing recognition of their importance, women continue to navigate structural and cultural barriers that limit their editorial freedom.

Adopting the theoretical framework of Agency, this research investigates how women journalists in the United States and India use editorial and narrative strategies to assert agency and influence feminist discourse in mainstream media. Agency in journalism manifests through story selection, narrative framing, source selection, and professional identity negotiation within newsroom cultures (Sinha, 2018). For women journalists, the agency involves navigating tensions between professional expectations and gender-based constraints, requiring strategic career navigation and balancing advocacy with objectivity. The central inquiry of the research is: How do women journalists showcase their agency through their reporting, and how does this influence feminist issue representation in mainstream media? Employing a

qualitative methodology that integrates primary and secondary data, this study draws on media content, case studies of feminist movements, and surveys from women journalists in both countries.

Historical Context of Women in Media

The media sector has historically been a male-dominated sector, with women confronting numerous hurdles, resistance and discriminations. The history of women in journalism largely began from the 18th century “when women started contributing to newspapers and magazines as correspondents and columnists” (Dhiman 2023:1). Women were excluded from decision-making roles in the media and were confined to reductive stereotypes that reinforced traditional gender norms (Beasley 2020, Byerly & Ross 2006, Chambers 2020, Chambers et al. 2004). The women’s rights movements in the 19th Century and more so in the 20th Century gave a boost to the women’s participation in the media, and women journalists played a crucial role in advocating women’s rights and social reform, through their reporting (Byerly 2003, Dhiman 2023, Williams 2025). From the 20th Century particularly from the mid-20th Century women began to gain more opportunities in media production and as women entered creative and executive positions, they catalyzed cultural shifts, redefining narratives and challenging traditional representations (Chambers et al. 2004, Ross 2009).

Women’s participation in U.S. journalism grew notably since the late 18th century and accelerated further during the 20th century despite institutional obstacles. The rise of female journalists, such as Dorothy Thompson and Helen Thomas, marked a new era in the field of journalism as despite discrimination, they “broke barriers by reporting on politics and international affairs, challenging the notion that such topics were the sole domain of men” (Williams, 2025:1). Similarly, trailblazers like Lucille Ball and Oprah Winfrey revolutionized television production, media ownership and storytelling, fundamentally changing entertainment landscapes and paving the way for feminist voices in popular culture (Montalti et al. 2014).

Indian women’s participation in journalism is historically tied to the independence movements and social reform. Early figures like Kadambini Ganguly used print media to advocate for women’s rights. Female journalists have long confronted corruption, human rights abuses, and gender-based violence despite facing structural barriers like harassment and cultural bias (Sengupta, 2021).

Contemporary Challenges and Systemic Barriers

The evolution of women’s roles in media reflects the progression of gender equality: as movements for women’s right and gender equality gained popularity and support, women’s role and opportunities in the media increased. Currently women play notable roles in the media industry, from reporting important events to advocating for gender and social equality and justice. The society today with advances in social and technological spheres have created better opportunities for women in the media industry. The changing societal norms on gender and increasing recognition of the importance of gender diversity in the workplace is increasing opportunities for women in the media (Dhiman 2023). Further, the rise of digital platforms, social media, and streaming services create new opportunities as these provide spaces for women to engage more widely in media to tell their stories, share their views, advocate for change, and challenge traditional power structures (Williams 2025). The respondents of this study who participated in the questionnaire survey have also said that digital and social media platforms have provided more opportunities for women journalists to voice their perspectives.

However, despite the progress made by women in media, they continue to face challenges such as underrepresentation in leadership, pay disparities, lack of opportunity and stereotyping, harassment and safety concerns, which are all based solely on their gender (Dhiman 2023, Ross and Carter 2011, Women’s Media Center 2019). Given below is an overview of these challenges faced by women in the medial industry in the U.S and India:

Underrepresentation in the industry and its leadership: In the U.S. women outnumber men in journalism programs and colleges, but they are in the media workforce (Ricca 2022), women comprise about 41.7% of the U.S. journalism workforce, produce 37% of reports and hold only 27% of top management roles, while 63% of prime-time news anchors or correspondents are men. Furthermore, 69% of all newswire bylines published by the Associated Press and Reuters and 60% of all online news are by men, while women report only 41% of stories in prime-time broadcast and cable news, print, digital, and wires, and only 15% of sports stories (Women's Media Center 2021).

The 2017 research to understand the gender ratio in the state of reportage reviewing reviewed the bylines and articles of prominent most widely circulated newspapers - *The Times of India*, *The Hindu*, *Hindustan Times*, *The Telegraph* and *The Indian Express* – and found that of the 7,372 articles screened in the study only 32 per cent were written by women, which meant the number of men in the workforce were double to that of women (Singh 2018). There is also a glaring absence of women in higher decision-making positions at the production stages in all media cultures (Ibid).

Pay gaps: The Women's Media Center (2019) reported that in the U.S. men's pay in the Associated Press, Los Angeles Times, The New York Times, San Francisco Chronicle, The Wall Street Journal and The Washington Post, were considerably more than those of women despite same qualifications and experience, and overall women in the industry. It is reported that women earn 70 cents for every dollar earned by men (The Women's Media Center 2021).

In India, various studies have reported pay disparity among men and women in media reports that women were often having low pay on a daily basis or on short term contracts (Bhagat 2004, Akhileshwari 2014, Pain 2017, 2021) The Periodic Labour Force Survey 2019 to 2023 (National Sample Survey Office, 2023) also reports that men earn 2.8 times more across all employment forms, which would mean that the media industry is no exception.

Most of the respondents participating in the questionnaire survey for this study also agree to gender based pay disparity in the media industry. One of the respondents said "*In all of my newsroom roles I've seen women, including myself, paid much less for the same roles and be expected to carry a larger load/responsibility in journalism*". Another respondent said that there were "*two main factors contributing to this: a lack of open conversation among women (and men) in newsrooms about compensation, and an unwillingness of many men to advocate for the women in their newsrooms to be compensated to the same level they are*".

Lack of opportunity and stereotyping: In the U.S. at early stages, women in media and entertainment are at equal representation as men, but due to lack of opportunities for promotion based on gender bias and stereotyping more women than men are leaving their companies, and further, women in the media industry have reported that not only are the evaluation and appraisals standards gender biased, but that they are often judged by different standards than their male counterparts (Beard et.al. 2020). Women journalists are often stereotyped and not given opportunity to cover certain topics just because of their gender, for instance in fields like sports, technology, and international politics, a huge majority of journalists are men (Guttmann 2024).

In India, women journalists have very little access to equal employment to the extent that many organisations often deny women promotions on the excuse that they cannot do night duty, additionally women have to work twice as hard as their male colleagues, women journalists do not get opportunity for on-the-job training or mentorship as the senior males say they would rather mentor other men than women (Bhagat 2004, Pain 2021). Gender stereotyping results in women being assigned to cover topics like culture, lifestyles or education and health, known as the "soft beats", while men get to cover politics, crime or sports, (Pain 2021, Sengupta 2021). Furthermore, organisational constraints and norms prevented women from being as outspoken and professionally proactive and even if women are in senior

and with longer experiences, they are “rarely considered good enough to lead departments” (Pain 2021:89).

The respondents of the study’s questionnaire survey have also confirmed that they too have faced such gender-based biases in various ways such as in appraisals, topics to cover, how their opinions are received, etc. Most of them reported that they often feel that *“male journalists are taken more seriously by editors and sources”*.

Harassment and safety concerns: Women journalists may face more harassment than men. In the U.S. women in the media industry experience more microaggressions as compared to women in other industries (Beard et. al. 2020). Even more serious data is about online harassment; a survey by the Seattle University Department of Communication reported that 79% of 115 surveyed women journalists feared online harassment resulting in their avoidance of reporting on certain kinds of stories (Women’s Media Center 2019).

In India, studies revealed that harassment from sexist jokes, verbal harassment to sexual harassment prevalent in the media industry; 60% women journalists interviewed reported facing verbal harassment, 56% said they faced sexual harassment and a majority said they knew of at least one similar case within the organization; nonverbal harassments like staring or lewd gestures were also reported (Sengupta 2021). The digital age with social media has opened up new spaces for women in media, but along with it has been an increase in harassment and threats for women – there are numerous incidences of sexist abuse, harassment and threats for women (for examples of this see Pain 2021).

The media landscape is still male-dominated and gender bias runs deep within the systems and processes. In such an environment, discrimination against women is witnessed from hiring practices to assignments, appraisals, promotion opportunities, and even when they reach the higher positions, they often face intense scrutiny and criticism that their male counterparts do not experience. Thus, despite increased female representation, the media industry still reflects entrenched gender disparities in both on-screen depictions and behind-the-scenes roles. The challenges and obstacles faced by women in media are manifestations of gender based structural inequalities resulting in systemic barriers within the institution that continue to limit women’s capacity to shape narratives and policy.

Agency and Narrative Strategies

No doubt there still exists many challenges and obstacles for women in media on the basis of gender based structural inequalities that have permeated throughout the industry’s culture, systems and processes. Such structural inequalities limit women’s ability to fully participate and shape narratives (Beard et.al 2020, UNESCO-UN Women 2015). In such an environment, women journalists use distinct approaches in framing and selecting stories. As women are gradually accessing more opportunities, they have challenged stereotypes and traditional narratives with more nuanced, diverse, and empowering storylines. Many emphasize lived experience, adopt intersectional lenses, and focus on solutions-oriented reporting. More importantly, women journalists contribute to redefining societal norms by framing narratives that challenge stereotypes; they do this by integrating lived experiences into their reporting, and thus bring authenticity to feminist discourse. (Sinha 2018, Women in Media Report 2024). These strategies contribute authenticity to feminist discourse and expand the scope of mainstream coverage. The respondents of the study’s questionnaire survey have reported that they often bring their lived experiences to the job and, it is often the women journalists who identify, discuss and raise awareness about issues that impact women, including reporting or broadcasting them in an authentic manner.

The upsurge of digital platforms, social media, and streaming services have given women a considerable space and leverage where more women are using these platforms to tell their stories, advocate for change, and challenge traditional power structures (Williams 2025), although this arena too

has more men (India Foundation 2018). Of course, these platforms come with their own challenges, the biggest and most serious being the uncontrolled online harassment and threats to women. But, despite the challenges, these platforms have given women equal access to media creation, more control over their stories and narratives. Digital platforms empower women journalists to bypass traditional gatekeepers. Blogs, independent media, and social media allow alternative feminist narratives to flourish, particularly on underreported topics like reproductive rights and intersectionality that often challenge stereotypes, advocate for social justice, and promote gender equality. These tools have enhanced women's journalistic agency by fostering greater editorial control and audience engagement. All the respondents of this study's questionnaire survey have confirmed that digital platforms and independent media have given women journalists space and opportunities, although this is for men too, where they can write/broadcast on issues that mainstream media do not do so readily such as domestic violence and sexism. One of the respondents added that this sphere is still a "manosphere",

Professional networks bolster agency by offering mentorship, peer support, and platforms for advocacy (Mehta, 2022). Women-centered journalism organizations facilitate knowledge sharing and coordinated campaigns for equal pay, anti-harassment policies, and workplace equity. These networks empower women not only as storytellers but also as change agents within media institutions—amplifying their voices while transforming industry norms. This is a significant point that respondents of this study have brought up saying that there are many networks and programs tailored to support women, citing them as crucial positive changes because they offer more opportunities and support to women journalists.

The #MeToo Movement: A Case Study in Media Agency

The #MeToo movement exemplifies women journalists' role in shaping public discourse through both reporting and personal testimony. Initiated by Tarana Burke in 2006 as a non-profit organization to help and empower women of color from low-wealth communities who had survived sexual violence (Garcia 2017). It was in the late 2017, that this movement gained mass momentum when three journalists published articles exposing Harvey Weinstein's numerous incidents of sexual violence (O'Keefe 2021). It soon turned into a global movement as digital platforms exposed systemic injustices, fostering public accountability. In all this it was mostly women journalists, who played a pivotal role in uncovering abuse, holding institutions accountable, and foregrounding feminist concerns (O'Keefe 2021, Sonkar 2020). This was indeed a true example of media agency led by women journalists.

The Women's Media Center 2019 reported that in the U.S. articles exploring sexual assault and harassment rose by 30 percent in the 14 largest newspapers during the 15 months after the main story of Harvey Weinstein's alleged sexual crime hit headlines. The movement led to many legal reforms, structural changes in newsrooms, such as policies for safe working environment, gender balance and fair representation of minorities, with *The New York Times* being one of the first to appoint a gender editor responsible for promoting gender equality in articles and visualizations (Fiedorek 2024).

In India, #MeToo highlighted entrenched inequalities in the media sector. It revealed the exclusion of freelancers and rural women from the narratives, reflecting broader structural disparities (Sitlhou 2019). Digital media enabled collective mobilization and the amplification of marginalized voices, but institutional responses remained inconsistent (Sonkar et.al 2020).

The movement galvanized a global mass movement leading to empowerment of sexual violence survivors, and a cultural shift in perception of power, gender, and sexual violence. Further, it created new spaces to fight for women's rights and the rise of feminist media. One of the biggest successes of the movement has been the international journalist networks for covering gender-based violence. However, with the rise in women journalists covering sexual assault and harassment, cyber bullying against women journalists is also on the rise: over 60% of journalists covering gender-based violence have faced such threats (Fiedorek 2024). Notwithstanding this negative consequence, the movement has been a beacon of

media agency by women journalists ushering in transformation in journalism and wider policy and societal change processes

Conclusion

This study highlights both enduring barriers and emerging opportunities for women journalists in the United States and India. While structural inequities persist – particularly regarding safety, leadership, and compensation – women have developed powerful strategies to assert agency and reshape media narratives. The rise of digital platforms and independent media have given space and opportunity for women journalists to broadcast their stories in empowering narratives that question traditional gender and social power structures. Although digital era has also brought new challenges of increased cyberbullying and online harassment against women journalists, which is another manifestation of gender biases in media, women continue to rise to the challenges and break boundaries by bringing stories and narratives that question norms and power structures.

The #MeToo movement revealed how women journalists can amplify marginalized voices and drive public accountability. Yet it also exposed limitations in institutional inclusivity – particularly for freelancers and women outside urban centers.

Moving forward, sustained change requires integrated approaches combining institutional reform, individual empowerment, and policy innovation. Only then can women journalists fully realize their agency and lead inclusive, transformative storytelling in global media.

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