

Representation and Challenges of Women in the Workplace: A Study of Women Journalists in Kerala

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Dr. Archana C A¹

Abstract

Being the lifeline and backbone of a nation, media is considered the fourth estate of democracy. It plays a crucial role in both supporting and criticizing the government while representing the interests of the people. The media constantly reminds and alerts the government about its duties and responsibilities. At the same time, it acts as a voice for the voiceless in society. In today's digital era, however, media organizations often face pressure, target, and suppression from authorities. Despite these challenges, the media continues to uphold the democratic values and serve the nation. It plays a vital role in informing the public about what is right and wrong. Traditionally, journalism has been regarded as a male-dominated profession. Although print media has a history of nearly 300 years worldwide, female representation in this field began only about a century ago. Today, in a highly mediated society, the presence of women in the media has significantly increased. The number of women journalists is growing day by day, and they play a pivotal role in many media organizations. However, several questions remain: Are women journalists satisfied with their profession? Do they receive adequate job security and equal opportunities in their workplaces? This paper examines the role and experiences of women journalists in their workplaces in Kerala.

¹ School of Media Studies, Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University, Malappuram, Kerala

Corresponding Author:

Dr. Archana C A, Assistant Professor (On Contract), School of Media Studies, Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University, Vakkad P.O., Tirur, Malappuram, Kerala – 676502, India.

Email: archana2826@gmail.com

Keywords

Media, Journalism, Women Journalists, Workplace, Work-life imbalance

Introduction

Journalism, like many other professions, was traditionally male-dominated. However, the situation has changed significantly over time. In India, the number of women in journalism and the broader media profession has been steadily increasing, female presence now spans across diverse areas of the media industry. Women journalists today occupy various positions in media organizations, ranging from trainee reporters and trainee sub-editors to senior editorial roles such as news editors and coordinating editors. In addition to working within media institutions, many women also serve as freelance journalists for both Indian and international media outlets. Earlier, journalism was rarely considered a work-from-home profession, although forms of armchair journalism did exist. However, the rapid advancement of communication technologies and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic transformed the nature of journalistic work, making remote work more common in the profession. While traditional print media, such as newspapers and magazines, provided opportunities for women journalists in the past, the growth of radio and television marked a significant milestone in expanding women's participation in the media. More recently, the rise of digital media has further broadened the professional landscape, creating new opportunities and flexible working environments for women journalists.

Kerala has a long and significant history of journalism. The journalistic culture in the state began with the efforts of European missionaries, who were the pioneers in introducing newspapers and magazines in the region. These early initiatives laid the foundation for the development of print media in Kerala. Although print media developed relatively early, it took nearly a century for Kerala to witness the transition from print journalism to radio broadcasting. Later, after a gap of almost forty years, television was introduced to the state. With the advent of the new millennium, Kerala rapidly embraced internet-based technologies and digital media platforms. Today, the state of Kerala is widely recognized as the most literate state in India and has evolved into a highly mediated society. The state hosts a wide range of media platforms including print, radio, television,

and digital media. These platforms play a major role in shaping public opinion and social discourse. Despite this strong media presence, the representation of women in the media sector remains relatively low. A research study conducted in 2023 reported that the maximum participation of women in the media sector in Kerala was only 12.8 percent, while the average female work participation rate stood at 11.4 percent (Dhanusree, 2023).

Work participation is widely considered a significant factor in women's empowerment. Employment provides financial security and improves social status, which in turn enhances women's confidence. It also has the potential to transform women's roles within society. The media profession offers several opportunities that can contribute to women's empowerment. Apart from financial independence, it provides visibility, familiarity among the public, and sometimes even celebrity status. These factors can significantly influence women's social positioning and professional identity. However, alongside these opportunities, women working in the media industry may also face various challenges and workplace issues. Understanding these experiences and the realities women encounter in media organizations is essential. This study seeks to explore the other side of the workplace and examine the conditions faced by women in the media sector.

Need and Significance of the Study

The growth and development of digital media have brought significant changes to society. The most notable impacts of digital media is accessibility of communication. Digital media has also expanded the meanings and forms of communication, allowing individuals to share information, opinions, and experiences instantly across various platforms. However, digital media is used for both positive and negative purposes. In recent years, incidents of online abuse have increased considerably. Women journalists, have become major victims of such online harassment. Their news reports, presentations, or even simple social media posts often trigger abusive comments, trolling, and harassment. Apart from online abuse, women in the media industry also face various forms of malpractice and discrimination within their workplace. These issues highlight the urgent need to address the challenges faced by women journalists. Therefore, it is important to initiate serious discussions and implement

preventive measures to ensure a safer and more supportive working environment for women in the media sector.

Review of Literature

The study 'Employment Pattern in the Electronic Media Sector: A Case Study of Kerala' (Mathews, 2014), found that the representation of women journalists was at an alarming level during 2010 to 2013. The study also found that the private electronic media had a higher male-female ratio than public broadcasting. These organizations provide a good-working environment for women journalists.

The major finding of the study 'Engendering Media Participation: The Case of Women Journalists in Assam' (Chakraborty et al., 2015) was that most of the women journalists in Assam were involved in doing soft news rather than hard news or hardcore journalism. Due to the prevalence of gender dynamics and security issues, women journalists either need to be content with fewer opportunities than their male counterparts in this field or leave their jobs. Discrimination in work allotment, poor working environment and inadequate sanitation facilities were also challenges faced by the women journalists. Absence of clear guidelines and in-house policies regarding maternity leave was a problem for married journalists.

The study 'Work and Life of Women Journalists: A Study With Special Reference to Kerala' (Karthika et al., 2019) revealed that gender discrimination is the major hardship faced by the women journalists in Kerala. As a male-dominated industry, women get secondary importance only. The study highlighted that many media firms reject female journalists at the time of recruitment. The study suggested that the media industry should ensure gender equality and equal opportunities.

The study, 'Study of Work-Life Balance of Women Journalists in Print Media Industry' (Chaudhary and Kumar, 2021), has focused on the work-life balance of women journalists. This study analyzed that the women journalists miss their family time. They don't get enough time to travel away from home. They wanted to work on holidays too. So, the study proposed several suggestions such as childcare resources, work-at-home facility, HRD programs, maternity leave etc.

The study 'Opportunities and Challenges for Women Journalist in Media Industry: A Critical Review' (2023) found that gender bias, sexual harassment, work-life imbalance and under-representation of women journalists in editorial positions were the major difficulties of women journalists in India.

Objectives of the Study

- To examine the representation and challenges of women journalists in Kerala.
- To analyze the various forms of discrimination faced by women journalists in Kerala.
- To understand the abuses and harassment faced by women journalists in their workplace.

Theoretical Framework

Feminist media theory considers gender as a factor that structures identity and experiences without assuming permanent or static gender differences (Kalavathy, 2024). This theory is highly relevant to this study because it addresses issues such as power, gender, and structural inequality, as well as the power relations that shape representation and professional experiences. Feminist media theory emerged from feminist theories of the 1960s and 1970s. It discusses how media institutions, content, and training shape and regulate power relations, particularly those related to gender. It also observes that women are marginalized or negatively portrayed in mainstream media. Gender is a socially constructed and dynamic factor that shapes identity, leads to opportunities, experiences, and professionalism. It challenges the patriarchal system that excludes women from positions of power, such as editors, who make decisions on administration, policies and contents.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a purely qualitative research design, employing an unstructured, in-depth interview method to explore the experiences and perspectives of women journalists. A total of twelve women journalists participated in the study. The participants were selected from different sectors of the media industry: 3 from

print media, 3 from radio, 3 from television, and 3 from online media. The respondents were selected using non-probability sampling methods such as purposive and convenience sampling to ensure relevance and accessibility. Purposive sampling is a widely used sampling method and that intentionally selects specific units. It has the ability to provide rich and context-specific insights. Based on the relevance to the research questions or objectives, this method is particularly valued for exploring complex phenomena in depth (Golzar et al., 2024). Here, in this study, the researcher selected 6 respondents through the purposive sampling method. While the convenience sampling is significant for strengthening the representativeness of the sample and the generalisability of the research results. It is effortlessly reachable by the researcher. Convenience sampling basically means that the researchers utilize a sample that is readily available and have access to (Golzar et al., 2022). The researcher selected 6 respondents through convenience sampling.

The data for this particular study were collected through unstructured, in-depth interviews using open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted in a hybrid mode, combining both online and offline interactions. The names of the respondents and the media organizations they are affiliated with have been kept confidential, in accordance with their request, to ensure privacy and ethical integrity.

The research and interviews were conducted over a one-year period, from January 2025 to December 2025.

Findings and Analysis

The media industry continues to combat deep-rooted gender inequalities. While women have made remarkable achievements in this field over the years, they still face various challenges that restrict their career growth, job safety, recognition etc. in their workspace. To understand these challenges, the following questions were asked of the respondents.

- Have you ever faced a distinction between men, women and trans-people in journalism?

- How do women journalists face gender discrimination in and out of the work place?
- How do you define unrepresentaion and under-representation in media?
- What is your opinion about the role of women journalists in decision making process?
- Is language a barrier in journalism?
- How do you see job security in journalism?
- What are the uncertainties faced by women journalists?
- Income has been a primary concern for journalists. Comment on your views on this.
- Have you ever faced verbal, physical or cyber harassment?
- How do you see the stereotyping of women journalists?
- Comment on your observations on work-life balance.

Based on the responses from the samples of this study, the following have been identified as the issues faced by them in their workplace.

1. Unrepresentation or under-representation

Despite increasing entry into journalism or media profession, women are largely underrepresented in decision-making roles. While they may be visible in entry-level or junior positions such as trainees, sub editors, bureau chiefs etc, they have a limited role in higher positions. Leadership roles continue to be dominated by men, leading to uneven gender representation. This leadership gap or uneven leadership roles proves the unfair biases in workplace culture. According to one of the respondents of this study, fewer than 20 women journalists hold the topmost positions, even in legacy media. The recruitment of women journalists into the editorial roles by newly established TV channels brings hope to the industry. All the respondents together opined that if the women journalists are given decision-making power, the majority of workspace issues will be solved.

2. Language barriers

Women journalists in Kerala are being restricted by language barrier. Most of them are more fluent in Malayalam. If they don't get a good position in a Malayalam media, they don't get better opportunities outside Kerala. But newcomers are being selected by the English media. They also work with English online portals and news channels. However, the language barrier limits their visibility and career progression in national and international platforms.

3. Limited job security and uncertainty

Women in media, even in legacy institutions, often experience job uncertainty. In this highly competitive field, we can mark the survival of the fittest. The experienced hands are being suppressed by the highly talented newcomers. In addition to this, the women journalists face problems such as digital transformation, financial instability, work pressure, irregular work shifts, non-permanency, performance issues, uncertainty over contract renewal etc.

4. Unfair wage

Journalists of all genders get insufficient wages. Except for legacy media firms, junior-level employees don't get enough wages. So, it is hard for them to meet their daily needs. For women journalists, the lower income hinders their financial independence and professional growth. As per one of the respondents of this study, her former institution denied her salary for ten months. It was a punishment for her since she refused to write about the government. As an environmental journalist, she was forced to stop writing environmental reports. Later she resigned from the institution. These jobs and financial insecurity are a threat to women empowerment.

5. Workplace harassment

Many women journalists faced verbal and physical harassment and abuse in the workspace. Most of the time, it is considered as merely teasing. But it is not at all teasing. The use of double-meaning words, abuse on costume, colleagues, stories and presentations often happens in media houses. There are Internal

Complaints Committee (ICC) in several media institutions. Unfortunately, ICC doesn't properly address the complaints of women journalists. Its functionality and independence are often questionable, discouraging women from filing complaints. According to a respondent of this study, the head of ICC was the person whom once she complained about. Later, she was considered as a culprit, instead of a victim. She added that there are many women journalists and non-journalists who faced harassment from this person. But they didn't dare to complain against him because of job security and uncertainty. According to the respondents, filing a complaint can be deadly because of fear of threats from colleagues and authorities.

6. Cyber harassment

Women journalists are being frequently targeted for online abuse and cyber-attacks. These attacks aim to silence and threaten the journalists who report in-depth and debatable stories. Unparliamentary and un-political terms are often used for a cyber-attack. Their partner, children, parents and other family members are also being attacked verbally.

7. Work-Life imbalance

Work-life balance is a significant factor for the well-being of a person. Unfortunately, women struggle with maintaining a healthy work-life balance. A healthy work-life balance determines the success of an individual. Women journalists have to work in various shifts, stay away from home and office for fruitful stories and follow deadlines. Sometimes, they fail to meet these responsibilities. Moreover, maintaining a proper work-life balance is a tough task. A good support from life partner, family members, colleagues and management is needed to avoid work-life imbalance.

8. Stereotyping

Women journalists are often forced to cover soft stories such as fashion, health and entertainment into some extent. But it is different in some media firms. There, the management allows women to report serious and complex issues from all beats. Stereotyping also hinders the career growth of women journalists.

One of the respondents noticed that both men and women journalists are given priority in reporting stories of women.

Conclusion

The findings of this study highlight that, despite the visible presence of women in the media industry, gender inequality continues to persist in multiple forms. Women journalists have made significant progress in entering the profession and contributing meaningfully to Journalism, yet structural and cultural barriers still limit their full participation and advancement. Issues such as under-representation in leadership roles, language barriers, job insecurity, unfair wages, workplace harassment, cyber harassment, work–life imbalance, and stereotyping collectively shape the professional experiences of women journalists. These are not just workspace issues; it affects the overall development of a women and society. The glass ceiling is also a prominent issue in media firms. Journalists are the people who address the voice of the voiceless.

One of the most significant concerns identified in this study is the lack of representation of women in decision-making roles. While women are increasingly entering journalism at the entry and mid-levels, leadership roles remain largely dominated by men. This imbalance not only reflects persistent gender bias but also limits women’s influence in shaping newsroom policies and workplace culture. Empowering women with leadership and decision-making roles could contribute significantly to addressing many workplaces challenges they currently face.

Another major concern is the lack of job security and financial stability. Women journalists often face uncertainties related to contract employment, performance pressures, digital transformation in media, and institutional financial crises. In addition, insufficient wages and delayed payments negatively affect their financial independence and professional confidence. Such conditions make it difficult for women journalists to sustain long-term careers in the industry.

Maintaining a healthy work–life balance also remains a major challenge due to irregular work schedules, demanding deadlines, and field reporting requirements. Without adequate support from family, colleagues, and organisational

management, women journalists struggle to balance personal and professional responsibilities.

Overall, this study emphasizes the urgent need for structural reforms and supportive workplace policies in the media industry. Ensuring fair representation in leadership, strengthening institutional mechanisms against harassment, providing equitable wages, improving job security, and creating supportive environments for work–life balance are essential steps toward achieving gender equality in journalism. Addressing the issues of all genders of journalists properly is the need of the hour.

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About the Author

Dr Archana C A is an Assistant Professor (on contract) in the School of Media Studies, Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University, Malappuram. She holds a PhD in The Effect of Information and Communication Technology in the Communication Process of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan from Thunchath Ezhuthachan Malayalam University (2021) and has six years of teaching experience in Journalism and Mass Communication from Panampilly Memorial Govt College, Chalakudi and Malayalam University. Her research interests include communication, media and society, digital culture and educational communication. She has published several research papers and articles in peer-reviewed journals and books. She has also presented papers at various national and international conferences.