

## **A Matter of Choice**

When a girl student from a college where I teach journalism, came to me in tears refusing to continue interning at a popular national Hindi daily in Lucknow where she had been sent by the placement cell of the college, I knew things had not changed.

All of nineteen, this young intern who was trying to learn the tricks of being a reporter, had lost all the awe she had for the field; thanks to what she was subjected to. Unnerved at the unwelcome overtures of the senior journalists whom she was reporting to she decided to quit the field altogether.

Not surprising, as the senior scribe, who was her guide went to the extent of making suggestions to the girl to try and get permission to stay the night out on duty from home so that he could take her to another city on 'assignment.'

While it shocked her, for me it was just another victim of the much rampant sexual exploitation in media that had been seeing since the time I was a young journo trying to make a name in the big bad world of scribes.

And mind you, with over 15 years of service rendered to the fourth estate, I had the opportunity to see enough. The saving grace though for me was my aggressive temperament and a quick tongue which kept most of my 'esteemed and veteran seniors' from trying to outrage my modesty at least. But I paid a price for it too-with delayed promotions, axed bylines, poor appraisals and meager hikes.

Such was, and still is deplorable state of affairs which has often made me wonder is the sexual exploitation within media a gender thing?

But then logic brings home the point that journalism has no gender. Women keep the same schedule as their male counterparts and juggle even graveyard shifts irrespective of the constraints of home and family.

They pretty much handle the same beats and are as turf ridden as any hot blooded male following a exclusive story, most even make it to positions as editors in leading newspapers and magazines albeit with hushed whispers of how they rose that high!

But there is no doubt that being in media is a battle of brains rather than the much hyped gender inequality as seen in other professions.

So what then causes women to fall prey to sexual exploitation?

Says Shalini Kumar, former senior features editor of a well known English newspaper who quit after she was harassed to verge of a breakdown, "Sexual exploitation owes its sustenance to the power games that are played in journalism. The thought that governs mindsets is a common belief that you don't say NO to a senior in media. If they want something they get it and it makes no difference if you want to draw the line. Despite being on a superior position

myself it did not dissuade my senior male colleagues from sending me obscene messages and e-mails. I ignored it till I could but when the harassment grew it was not something I would take lightly. Lewd jokes and conversation with double meanings would be indulged in front of us and when women journalist objected press releases for our pages would be held till an hour before page release time to upset deadlines, duties would be changed frequently and we were put regularly on night shifts. Finally the editor called me in and said I should think about having an affair with him as I was single and promised me power, money and 'privileges.' That was the last straw and I resigned."

But things were no better at the next place she joined up and owing to sexual harassment by the editor there Shalini suffered three heart attacks back to back.

"The doctors called it myocardial infraction, a condition caused when someone is under tremendous pressure and collapses under it. But I would not prove a thing as in media to even dare to allege sexual exploitation is considered sacrilege, so I took the next best option out and quit. While there are several witnesses not a single one will volunteer support."

While she was lucky Maya Sharma was not. This young correspondent working with the Uttar Pradesh bureau of a South Indian News Channel was driven to suicide due the sexual harassment she faced but she survived.

Recalls Maya, "The bureau head insisted on staying the nights at my house despite me telling him I was uncomfortable with the arrangement. He would turn up at odd hours at my house and get alcohol with him and pass out on the floor of my hall. As I was living alone, people began to talk and I sternly told him he was not welcome. I made a complaint as well to the Managing Editor who was based in the South and he did pull up the man. But then my bureau head took out his angst on me, using abusive language when he spoke, canceling my off days and sending me on mundane assignments. He would also turn up at my house drunk and create a scene in the colony I was staying. The pressure was too much for me to take when my engagement broke due to the character assassination my colleagues indulged in. Finally I decided to end the torture once and for all."

But Maya survived the overdose of sleeping pills and today quit journalism altogether being happily married and settled in New Delhi.

With such instances to go by it would be but natural to assume that women seem to be having it tough in media, but says a young male journalist working at a well known news agency in New Delhi, "Sexual exploitation is not always a negative term in media today. In fact some bank on its existence to promote and forward their careers. I see it happen quite openly irrespective of the gender at my workplace. Its so prevalent that today I have come to the point that even I am open to be used if that is the way I can further my career. It is frustrating to see juniors move up the ladder simply because they have no qualms to oblige any request made by the bosses sexual or otherwise."

Agrees Anita Mishra, another senior scribe who handled the post of Asst. Editor with a much read English national daily, “The rookies are quite well aware of the rules of the game to be successful in media today, they come conditioned and groomed to take it their stride and use it to their advantage. A classic example I remember was this young correspondent we had at our office. She had the editor eating out of her hands so much so that senior journo’s like me too had to take orders from the girl or face the music. It was nauseating to have someone with just a few months’ experience dictate terms to you just because the editor fancies her and she was more than ready to oblige. I am glad I left when I did,” she avers.

And with the trend growing by leaps and bounds sadly we are moving towards a situation when creativity and caliber are no longer the prerequisites to be in the profession that is a watch dog for society.

In short-we finally have our very own casting couch in the fourth estate and who will expose them is the point to reckon!