Negotiating Access to and in Educational Spaces: Experiences of Women Photojournalists in Kerala

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Abstract

This paper explores the lived experiences of women photojournalists in Kerala. Even as it does extremely well in terms of various human development indices, Kerala records a meagre presence of women in the workforce. It is in this context that this study attempts to examine the gendered nature of the profession of photojournalism by documenting and analysing the experiences of women photojournalists in Kerala. By examining the multiple negotiations that these women engage in order to access both education and employment in a "non-conventional" area of work, the study attempts to highlight the patriarchal control exerted on them. Analysing the social positions of women, the research also tries to examine how they negotiate socio-spatial constraints both in their personal and professional lives. The study pursues lived experiences of women photojournalists through in-depth interviews, encouraging participants to describe how they perceive their social positions and to define issues in their own terms.

Keywords: women, photojournalism, Kerala, patriarchy, agency of women, autonomy, literacy, technical courses, education of women, empowerment

Introduction

The matrilineal family structure in Kerala mostly followed by Nair families and some Muslim families endowed women autonomy, physical mobility, and power. These women were literate and, thus, motivated other women to look upon them as icons. Mathew observes the status and the statistics of literacy rate of women in Kerala as an irony. Although Kerala was far ahead in its literacy rate

compared to other states in India, its vernacular education model was rooted in its culture and tradition. Its lessons taught women to be subordinate to men and instilled the patriarchal notions and beliefs of the society. Women found no seat in the educational system in its early phase; later, the proportion of women gradually increased. But the kind of jobs women take up still adhered to the patriarchal notions and beliefs. Even though matrilineal tradition allowed women to hold position and descend property through the female line, women's autonomy was limited. The "Karanavar" or the elder brother in the household took the ultimate decisions (Mathew 1995).

According to data released by the World Economic Forum, India slipped its place 108 to 112 on the Global Gender Gap Index. This data is proportional to the all-time low participation rate of women in India. The labour force participation rate of women in India ranks lowest among South Asian countries (Jain 2020). In the 1991 census, Kerala ranked twenty-second among Indian states concerning the work participation rate of women, which is contrary to the fact of the high literacy rates of Kerala (Mazumdar and Guruswamy 2006).

For this study, I interviewed seven women who had worked as photojournalists in Kerala. It was difficult to find the contacts of women photojournalists in Kerala as the number was scarce. I travelled extensively and followed them around to conduct their in-person interviews and collect data. At the time of the interviews, four of them continued working as photojournalists, one had transitioned to being a reporter, and two women had moved from journalism to content writing and academia.

Women photojournalists and their standpoint regarding societal norms and approaches are crucial in understanding their work life and issues. The women photojournalists I interviewed in Kerala belong to different class and caste locations. In-depth interviews helped to listen to how an individual understands her experience and explains her situational location and to locate these expositions in relation to her social position (Cuádraz and Uttal 1999). Each one of them had unique experiences and their own stories. I have provided pseudonyms for my respondents to protect their privacy.

Education and Matrimonial Prospects

Mithra is a photojournalist at one of the leading English newspapers. She did her diploma course in photojournalism from Udaan School of Photography in Mumbai. She had an interest in photography

since her childhood. She says:

> *I used to click pictures on my small mobile phone. Smart phones weren't introduced back then. Initially, I didn't take photography seriously. It was just a hobby for me. But when I started uploading my pictures on Facebook, many people appreciated me. So, at this juncture, I realised I have a talent for photography.*

Mithra got a job as a photojournalist soon after she completed her course. But at the time of the interview, she had resigned from the job as she was about to get married soon. Her parents believe that her job could mean fewer prospects in the matrimonial market. She says:

> *My parents were reluctant to allow me to do a photojournalism course. They were worried that I would not get a good marriage proposal because of my course.*

In a survey conducted by *Malayala Manorma*, one of the leading newspapers in Kerala, it was found that among women college students, a high proportion of students desired to have a career that balances their professional and personal life duties (Devika and Thampi 2011). As observed by Kodoth and Eapen (2005: 3820), "Women's education is being oriented in directions that either foster female domesticity or at least does not threaten to destabilise it. A relevant hypothesis here is that a secondary or general higher education is perceived to be in the interests of the family, fostering 'informed' child care, health and education." Education of women is narrowed down to a mere criterion for a good marriage proposal rather than offering them an empowered life. To fit into the "good women" cohort, it is vital that they pursue a course judged to be "feminine". Women's educational choices have been and continue to be shaped by the patriarchal norms of the society. Photojournalism, being a vibrant career demanding extensive travel and risk involved, is judged not suitable for women. This inhibits women from expressing a strong passion towards this profession. A woman's education affecting her choice of career is expected to have an impact on her familial duties. Women are not denied their right to education, but their freedom to choose the course they like is restricted. Often, a woman's education is the decision of her family or other male counterparts.

Ranjini, 40 years old, speculates that she is possibly the only woman photojournalist in Kerala who has been in this profession for more than ten years. She was working in one of the Malayalam dailies,

but at the time of the interview, the newspaper had shut down, leaving her in search of a new job. Ranjini recounts her passion for photography and journalism since her high school days. Even though she enrolled in Botany for her under-graduation degree, her love for photography persisted. During her college days, she participated actively in student politics and political events, and this furthered her interests in photojournalism. Meeting two photojournalists who visited her college campus for an event coverage gave her the necessary impetus to start thinking about photography professionally. However, her interest and enthusiasm were not enough for her to pursue photography as a career. It was only after her wedding, with the support of her husband, that she was able to enrol for a certificate course in photography. Rajani says,

> *During my college days, I was in a relationship with my neighbour, and we shared our dreams and aspirations with each other. So, I had told him about my passion to become a photographer, and he was of full support of the same, we got married soon and I got enrolled for a certificate course in photography*

Ranjni's father, being a strict parent, had never been supportive of her passion for photography. In a study conducted by Allendorf in India about "women's agency and quality of family relationships" (2012: 203), it was found that the higher the quality of familial relationships the more the women experienced empowerment. The bond in familial relationships might help women to assert themselves and superior members with regards to traditional hierarchy in family to consider women's opinion. It was also observed that women enjoyed agency if they maintained good relations with their partners (Allendorf 2012). The support and assistance of Ranjini's husband helped her in pursuing photojournalism, her dream course.

The prevailing social structure of Kerala and its archaic traditions have influenced its investment in human capital and women's educational attainment (Mitra and Singh 2007). Educational choices of women and marriage prospects are interlinked. The main issue faced by most of the photojournalists was the dissatisfaction of/restriction by their own family for selecting the photojournalism course as it is male dominated. Technical courses that involve heavy equipment is often regarded as "masculine". Photojournalism, which demands skilful camera techniques and operation, is also labelled as such, If the profession is male dominated, it is automatically considered an unsuitable

career option for women. While the masculine categorisation of photojournalism makes it difficult for women to join this course, they do join mass communication or journalism courses as an alternative. Two out of seven women photojournalists I spoke to had completed a postgraduate degree in mass communication and journalism.

The old-school traditions of Kerala society embedded in progressiveness and the irony in high literacy rates is not limited to the selection of educational courses but extends to gendered notions of education and professional spaces. In the following section, I will delve more into the nuances of the financial dependency of women on their families having an impact on their choice of course.

Education and Financial Commitments

Only two photojournalists shared their experience of having complete agency in completing an educational course according to their preference. Both were earning and were financially independent women who decided to pursue photojournalism after a small stint in another job sector. The remaining four women photojournalists I interviewed did not have the autonomy to choose a photojournalism course.

Greeshma is a photojournalist for one of the leading newspapers in Malayalam. Her love for travelling made her interested in street photography. She resigned as an accountant in Dubai and pursued her passion in photojournalism. Greeshma says:

> *I had no support from my family when I said I wanted to study photojournalism. I bought my camera with my own hard-earned money while I was working for a firm in Dubai. I left my job and came to Kerala to focus on photography.*

According to Mukhopadhyay and Seymour (1994), student's educational decisions were not their individual decisions in India. It was always adjudicated by their family. They observed that the prime reason for the same to be the association of familial funds for education and not independent monetary involvement. Financial dependence of children on their parents has a relation to the choices

children make in their education and career. For the two women who pursued a course in photojournalism, it was their economic independence that gave them the agency to choose their careers. However, it needs to be stated that earning money, in and of itself, does not make a woman empowered. It is the control and liberty over the earned money that allows for the agency. This is the major difference between moulding conditions favourable for empowerment and the real experience of empowerment.

Rawat cites Spreitzer, arguing, "The favourable conditions created for empowerment are present in the environment and are external to the woman (termed as eve empowerment). If conditions favouring eve empowerment make a woman experience empowerment, then it is termed as psychological empowerment. Psychological empowerment is a motivational construct and is present within the individual" (Rawat 2014: 46). In the context of women in Kerala, concerning Spreitzer's argument, more attention needs to be given to women's psychological empowerment. For instance, women photojournalists could be considered empowered with regard to their literacy level, but they do not experience empowerment because of the lack of agency and autonomy. They are not self-reliant; they cannot make decisions independently and have control of their life. And so, while favourable conditions are available for the empowerment of women, they never lead to the *experience* of empowerment.

Gendered Classroom Experiences

When plunging into the nuances of choices about education, it is vital to dissect the experiences women have during the duration of the course through the angle of gender. This section tries to introspect the extent of accessibility and treatment for women in classrooms and how they navigate through this. Ranjini also added that she tried to get into a studio for training before she enrolled in the photography course. She said:

> *No studio was willing to accept a woman at that time. It was only later that I heard about the photography course at the Central Human Resource Project in Pulimood. When I approached the institute for admission, they were reluctant to admit me since they had no*

other female students at that time. The justification given for the same was that the course included dark-room classes! They did not want a woman alone in a dark room with other male students. They finally agreed to admit me if I arranged one more female student to pursue the course. I persuaded one of my friends to do the same and enrolled for the course. But she left the course after a few months.

Here, the paternalistic, patriarchal, and deeply problematic attitude towards women's entry into traditionally "male" institutions and professions is made evident. Not only were people in power apprehensive about co-ed education, this was also complicated by connotations of men and women working together in a dark room. On the other hand, the institute was receptive to the idea of having two female students in a class. They believed this companionship would safeguard them from the male crowd. This shows the significance of safety for women when they choose their careers.

Ranjini, who now also works as a guest faculty at the Kerala Press Academy teaching courses in photography, argues that the number of women students is abysmally low. She says that she has never taught a class that has an equal number of men and women. She also pointed out that women often drop the course in the middle when given a photojournalistic assignment or internship. Soman (2009) argues that the societal notion of soft and hard jobs for women is instilled deep in women's minds, and they underestimate their potential according to societal standards. Patriarchy being a constitution existing for women, they are accustomed to its overages. Veiled under this, they are side-lined and helpless to react against the subjugation and misogynies prevailing in the archaic society. Women photojournalists find it hard to cope with the night schedules or precariousness of the profession due to the constraints placed on them by their own families or society. Thus, tagging photojournalism as a hard job for women makes the road and the journey more difficult for women to explore and navigate.

Rukma was a photojournalist for a Malayalam daily newspaper. She left her job almost six months ago due to low pay in the field of photojournalism. She found it difficult to meet her basic needs with the salary she received. She is currently working as a content writer for an advertising company. She did her post-graduate diploma in photojournalism from Press Academy, Thiruvananthapuram. She says,

There were twenty-four students in our batch. Out of twenty-four students, only three were women. I was very comfortable with my batch mates and had a good time there. But I noticed the teachers' tendency to appreciate only male students more when assignments were submitted or tasks were completed.

Balakrishnan and Low, referring to a study conducted among engineering students in India, state:

Undisputedly, the much higher number of male students in engineering programmes could make female students feel disadvantaged. Moreover, due to a long-held stereotype ingrained in many societies, engineering has been regarded as a male's domain in which women are less suitable, or less qualified. Given this stereotype, male students tend to receive more attention and praise in the classroom, thus intensifying female students' sense of isolation as a minority in the engineering field. (Balakrishnan and Low 2016: 232)

Similarly, in the photojournalism classes, a tendency to validate the work or assignment done by male students over females is seen. The stereotypical notion of considering works done by men more prominent than by women has been reiterated in this case. Technicalities underestimated to be an alien for women made their work unremarked and neglected. This might even lead to a lack of confidence and other mental traumas in women.

Conclusion

As Shilpa Ranade (2007: 1524) argues, "It is through the body that the spatio-temporal regulations of social structure are produced, reproduced, represented and transformed." Bodies of women are considered not as mere physical bodies but as a culmination of socially formulated ideas. Gendered expectations continue to structure the lives and aspirations of women in Kerala. This paper has tried to draw how the restriction in agencies of women in the progressive societies of Kerala impacts their choices in educational courses/spaces through the lives of photojournalists.

The participants of this research, despite belonging to middle-class families, faced many restrictions in opting for a course and, subsequently, a career in photojournalism. Limited exposure, even if

women decided to opt for a career in photojournalism; lack of institutions where women can pursue their interests; lack of familial support for the same; and the general perception of the profession as masculine hindered the entry of women into this profession. While women are empowered to be educated, they do not feel empowered to choose their education stream. The main reason that constrains women from choosing non-conventional courses are the concerns of families over matrimonial prospects. Photojournalism, being a male-dominated and uncertain field, is estimated to be undesirable for "good women" (Mathur 2008). Financial dependence and institutional spaces being hostile to women also contribute to the lack of participation of women in this profession. Breaking gendered notions and thinking beyond prejudices will ensure higher participation of women in the field of photojournalism.

Anna Binu is an economics enthusiast who is trying to explore the boundless realm of media. She has pursued her master's in media and cultural studies from Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, after her graduation in economics from the University of Delhi. Having a strong passion to explore the unexplored, to meet new people, to make unknown and new cities home, she is a travel bug who has a penchant for documentary film-making. Her expertise lies in ideation, research, and video production. She has a keen interest to contribute to social causes and invoke changes in society in possible ways as she can.

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