Quratulain Rehbar is a journalist from Pulwama in South Kashmir. In this interview, she spoke about the role of various state and non-state actors in suppressing voices of women from religious minorities as a direct result of identity and political assertion, the inherently violent nature of harassment and the mental toll it takes on them.

Journalism is under attack all over this country. India slipped to 150th position in the World Press Freedom index in 2022. Quratulain explores how the tentacles of suppression are much deeper and state sponsored in conflict zones like Kashmir where military, police and special powers bestowed to them create a smothering atmosphere for anyone in the field of journalism.

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AA: When was the first time that you faced some sort of pressure and harassment because of your work?

QR: Indirect harassment dates long back, but it was on 12 June 2021 when I was first summoned at the police station in Pulwama, less than a km from my home. I was not told the reason for it at first but it was because of a tweet from a day where I addressed the reckless beatings of the locals by the army in the name of Covid restrictions. Shops were forcefully shut down and it was mostly these shopkeepers that were targeted.

The tweet got viral and was widely circulated over social media. My people in the area informed me merely two days after posting the tweet that police were asking around my whereabouts.

It is hard to work as a journalist in Kashmir, especially if you are a woman. So I always maintained a low profile, as I come from a place where being low-key about work helps.

Few days later, the CID officer came directly to my house, which caused much panic in my family. I was taken and kept in a women’s cell/solitary room for almost an hour. I had to stay there for 5-6 hours and was told in that those beatings were because of people’s involvement in drugs.

My colleagues from journalism federation of Kashmir, of which I’m a part too, came along, claiming to issue a statement post that I was finally let off with a cautionary warning.

AA: Do you think you were eyed by the police before this tweet, or was it just this that triggered all this?
QQ: I am pretty sure that summon was pre planned since the time I did a story on illegal transferring of land to CRPF camps in Pulwama. Firstpost carried it. Not many journalists covered it from Pulwama and even local media restrained itself. The story visibilised me enough to garner unwanted police’s attention. Firstly, it revolved around human rights and politics in Kashmir and secondly, it came from an opinionated woman. Both are extremely problematic standings for the authoritative and masculine regime of Kashmir.

AA: In what ways did the intimidation pierce into your everyday life?

QQ: The harassment deepened with each passing day. The thought of intimidation that the family would have to face frightened me, spiraling me into self-censorship. I would speak much less now but there was no end to harassment. My brother would get calls from army camps, asking for my number. Even the shopkeepers nearby were asked for my contact information. All of this was just an excuse for intimidation because they already had information about me. It disturbed me mentally to an extent that I would get panic attacks in public. Just talking about it right now is making me shiver.

AA: When online harassment took to insulting of muslim women through online auction platforms, you were targeted too. Can you tell me about that time and comment on the state’s inaction?

QQ: A friend from Delhi had called me in the wee hours of January 1, 2022 and informed me that my name was there on that derogatory site. They had even used my picture. Honestly, I was shocked at first because previously I had written about Sulli Deals for Vice with another reporter who is a correspondent there. But I had normalized it in my mind because of all the harassment that I had been facing ever since. I belittled the issue in my mind thinking that it was just online so it won’t be much of a problem.

It was only after I saw fellow journalist Ismat Ara’s tweet and after I started getting calls from international media (Al Jazeera) that I thought of speaking up. It was a direct target on my identity. It was sexual harassment, sure, but it was also for being an opinionated woman.

Few weeks on, whenever I thought about it or revisited the whole episode, I would get panic attacks. Nothing seemed normal. It had deeply affected me and my psyche to a point that there was a physical manifestation of it all. I went to a psychiatrist who gave me some meds that helped relieve the immediate effects. But I wasn’t even aware of what was happening to me. I had no time to think. I couldn’t articulate or work for 2-3 months post
that. I just worked on one opinion piece because I was asked for it. Living got difficult because I’m a freelance journalist and this breakdown invited financial troubles.

I missed many opportunities in those months as I was planning to apply for international studies and those early months of the year is when the forms are released. I had lost all focus and couldn’t afford continuous therapy, as that is also expensive. I was diagnosed with Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). I am not fully healed even now but I have at least realized that I need to take my mental health seriously.

AA: When it is the state itself that is directly involved in perpetuating harassment, what happens to the scope of filing a complaint and getting justice?

QR: The authorities have gone around asking my whereabouts and address. They have inquired about my current location and being a woman, it feels very unsafe.

We can’t trust them for filing complaints. They don’t provide us with any safety net. Had there been some women and child commission, I would prefer going to it rather than to a police station. In future also if there emerges a need to complain, I won’t go for it because information is not at all safe here and there are a lot of things at stake.

We have to practice self-Censorship to an extent where even going to the court is also not a resort. We are scared that they can make up a case against us if we reach out. Under PSA also, they can detain for 48 hours after which the person is presented before the court. This gives them enough time to put charges against us.

AA: Can you throw some light on a unique kind of harassment that is specific to occupied territories. To what extent are the stakeholders of a captured state involved in suppression of voices of assertion?

QR: The abuse of journalists by Kashmir police is at the helm of such suppression. Laws like the Public Safety Act are tools of harassment. It is a lawless law that bears no impunity or respect. You see how Fahad Shah, editor of Srinagar based newsroom Kashmir Walla where I worked before, has been criminally put behind bars under this draconian act. The precariousness that comes with this work in Kashmir is astounding, to say the least.

AA: While the tangents that such harassment often take are rooted in overtly political, economic, religious and social positioning/assertions of a kind that does not sit well with the establishment, do you think when it comes to women- gendered harassment becomes primary?
QR: I very strongly think it does. There are very few female journalists here who undertake the risk. But there are a lot many, who unwillingly have to take their minds off the thought. I am reminded of a past conversation with a senior journalist who asked me how I was able to write so openly about issues on twitter. She said she’d be engulfed in fear before doing something like this. The issue is that it’s a woman undertaking big important stories and becoming opinionated. It is a South Asian problem. From striking at something as basic as a woman living alone, to questioning her authority as someone talking on human rights- each attack by state and society both, is gendered in essence.

AA: Earlier in the conversation you expressed concerns about local media of Kashmir not taking up important local issues now, as much as they used to sometime back. How do you see this downward trajectory of journalism in the state? How far does intimidation play a role?

QR: Honestly, I sometimes feel we cannot blame journalists or media houses for this. They are not the ones to point fingers at, for this silence is enforced. The economic model is such that most of them are dependent on advertisements, which when pulled, can shatter the functionality of the media houses.

For people in the field, journalism is also a work like any other, providing a source of income that supports families. Shutting down media houses also generates issues of employment. Fahad Shah, Asif Sultan, Irfan Mehraj, and many others that are put behind bars simply for doing their work also have immediate families that drown in uncertainty when an all-powerful state gets determined to muzzle voices of dissent with much valorized authority.

In the early days of complete blackout, the entire media community could have dissented together to send a message to the world. Unfortunately, local media is used and pressurized to publish opinion pieces that are harsh towards its own fraternity. You see how Sana Irshad Matto, most recently, and many other female journalists are talked about- being called ‘narrative vultures’. They stated how we all do similar kinds of work that victimizes Kashmir. It’s a blatant attack on the female journalist community.

The state is using multiple means to illegitimate our work and us. Greater Kashmir, Rising Kashmir, and many other popular English language media houses have had their digital archives vanished. Such is the rootedness of control.

My switch to freelance is also rooted in this. It is freelancers from the region that are writing truth while others adorn the robe of normalcy.
AA: Do you see technology as bringing about democratization of voices or has it turned into the State’s new tool of control?

QR: Speaking personally, I found and created my audience through twitter. It gave me worldwide reach, which was not possible through traditional means. It is unlikely that news will be missed when on social media, as it stays there and is available on profile for all to see and revisit. So the impact is much more.

But it is definitely an irony, yes, that state uses the same means against us. Social media has turned into a tool for the state to spread disharmony and communal tension. Social media laws are confusing. New regulations have been tabled but the precariousness that comes with the job lingers large. We can be persecuted for anything they don’t like.

Unfortunately, it’s all going against us. Sajad Gul, a student of journalism from the valley who was working with The Kashmir Walla as a trainee is still behind bars after a year of arrest. He was booked under criminal conspiracy and other charges days after he posted a video of a family protesting against the killing of their kin in a gunfight with security forces.

Big charges under UAPA and PSA are loosely used, which forces people to very cautiously use the space and practice self-censorship.

AA: Do you feel communitarian efforts can mitigate the suppression by raising solidarity and accountability? Is there any community of journalists in the valley that provides a safety net to people in the field?

QR: Unfortunately, there is no such organization in Kashmir, no shelter for the journalists. There is not even a Press Club there. It is shameful that the state promotes the region so much for its own gains but when it comes to media- the same state unleashes persecution at a level where something as basic and necessary as a Press Club is out of reality’s ambit.

There are backings to an extent, yes, as statements are released, but no Body as such. It all plays out as if the police have a right on us. Every step of the way is endowed with disrespect.