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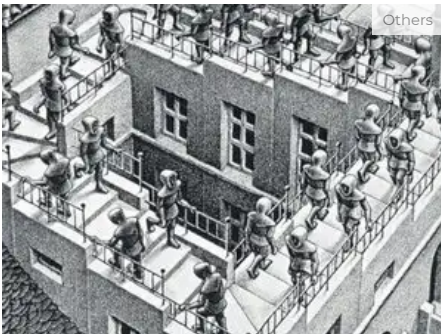
#MeToo: Impunity and immunity of sexual predators must end at media workplaces

By Chaitanya Kalbag, ET CONTRIBUTORS Last Updated: Oct 18, 2018, 11:18:00 AM IST

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Synopsis

#MeTooIndia has exposed a deep wound, but the wound has been festering for decades.



Stop going around in circles: Detail from 'Ascending and Descending', M C Escher, 1960

To call woman the weaker sex is a libel; it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then, indeed, is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior.

—Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi

Male-dominated. Super-hierarchical. Forgiving. Stanford sociologist Marianne Cooper listed these characteristics of workplaces that incubate [sexual harassment](#) in a [TEDx talk](#) earlier this year. All three match the Indian newsroom.

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Journalists form the majority of harassers outed over the past two weeks. The high-adrenaline newsroom culture attracts many bright young people, especially on our television channels. There is very little sensitisation and training before these young people are pitchforked into high-pressure work cultures that demand quantity with only a perfunctory nod towards quality.

Sexual harassment is about power. It is about impunity, and immunity, and it is about showing a woman her place. It is about an organisation's culture, and that percolates down from the very top. One media CEO said things won't change in a hurry because most news organisations — and, indeed, most large Indian businesses — are family-controlled. So, in addition to being hierarchical, they are also quick to brush things under the carpet and not sully the family name.

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#MeTooIndia has exposed a deep wound, but the wound has been festering for decades. The elephant was in the room. We just didn't want to spot it. In a recent post on the [Network of Women in Media India \(NWMI\) website](#), Rajashri Dasgupta describes the prolonged sexual harassment inflicted on her in the mid-1980s in a Kolkata newsroom.

Ammu Joseph, a co-founder of NWMI, says with more social interaction, and women journalists taking up more challenging assignments in traditionally male-dominated 'beats', there ought to have been less room for such "creepy, slimy behaviour". Actually, it is precisely because more women are doing more

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and more brilliant journalism, that more men feel threatened.

Reset Priorities

How are things going to start changing? First, we need to see more women in newsroom leadership positions. (How many women editors of national newspapers or online news outlets can you name?)

Second, it is not enough to have more women human resource (HR) managers or set up internal complaints committees unless your organisation empowers them to be autonomous in taking action against wrongdoers.

Third, an equitable culture will not happen by magic, or osmosis. You can set out guidelines, but training is vital. When I managed large, diverse, multinational newsrooms at Reuters more than a decade ago, every employee had to take a 'Management 101' course in workplace etiquette and gender sensitisation. Newcomers also had to go through a detailed induction.

Another thing that worked well was 'reverse mentoring', where young journalists taught their seniors a thing or two.

Fourth, survivors of sexual harassment need to organise themselves. At the least, senior women journalists must provide a bulwark and a resource centre, like [Press Forward](#) in the US, which was founded by 12 current and former women journalists.

Fifth, as sexual harassment is present across government and private sectors, a national effort must be launched to combat gender bias. For instance, [TIME'S UP](#) in the US has set up a Legal Defence Fund that has over the past year already helped 3,500 women from farms to film studios fight in the courts.

In response to the outpouring over the past two weeks, some lawyers have offered free legal help to #MeTooIndia survivors. They ought to form a collective. M J Akbar's defamation lawsuit against journalist Priya Ramani lists 97 lawyers on the prosecution side. Ramani's lone lawyer is appearing pro bono. This problem is not just an Indian one.

Watching an April video of a Washington discussion organised by Newseum on newsroom sexual harassment, I heard how, despite a free and strong press, US media organisations were still so unequal. Every major news organisation (save The New York Times) is headed by a white male (echoing the charge that Indian newsrooms are dominated by upper-caste, upper-crust males).

Organisations are only just setting mandatory harassment awareness training

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(at the National Public Radio, NPR) or a buddy/mentor pairing for interns (at The Wall Street Journal). Madhulika Sikka, who heads The Washington Post's flagship podcast, said at the Newseum discussion, "The thing that I've been struck by in our industry... is a real lack of humility in the leadership of these organisations. I don't think they really stepped up to talk about how it's affected them. And I think it would get them some respect if they confessed that maybe they were surprised about how bad it was." This is true of India too.

Rewrite Rules

There is also an inherent risk in inadequate leadership training for journalists who are catapulted into management positions.

What next? Industry leaders must deliberately, meticulously and consistently refashion their organisations to change equations. #MeTooIndia has already caused some heads to roll. But as the media CEO said, this is all reactive, not proactive.

"When the perpetrator holds the key to your future, it can be impossible to come forward or fight back. And over and over again, harassers are getting away with it because their power is shielding them from both discovery and punishment," Stanford's Cooper said. We, especially the men among us, must make sure this changes.

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