

The Global Impact of Government Censorship on Women's Access to Information: A Literature Review

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Abstract: In today's digital world, access to information is essential for personal growth, education, and empowerment. However, government censorship continues to limit this access, and women are often among those most affected. This study explores how censorship impacts women's ability to obtain important information—especially on issues like education, health, and gender rights. By analyzing different cases worldwide, this research highlights the inequalities created by censorship and the ways it restricts women's voices in media and public spaces. Through a combination of surveys and academic research, the study examines how censorship operates, whether through direct restrictions, biased media representation, or online harassment. The findings show that censorship can deepen gender inequalities, silence critical discussions, and even impact women's mental well-being. The study also emphasizes the role of social media, where women journalists and activists face online violence, leading to self-censorship and reduced participation in public discourse. To address these challenges, the research suggests policy changes that promote freedom of information and gender-inclusive media representation. It also highlights the need for better legal protections and awareness campaigns to ensure women can freely access and share information. Ultimately, this study advocates for a world where information is available to all, empowering women to make informed choices and actively participate in society.

I. Introduction

In the last few decades of increased connectivity and the digital era, the world has experienced a tangible change in the dialog involving women rights to information because of government censorship. However, being aware of this shift in narrative, this research will center on the effects of government censorship on women's access to information in my research project titled "The Global Impact of Government Censorship on Women's Access to Information: A Literature review"

My focus on this study is a quest for knowledge on a broader view of gender-based challenges associated equality and free flow of information. In the last few years, I have observed a growing inequality of information to women due to government-imposed restrictions. Thus, it is pertinent to study how censorship of information affects women's rights globally, contribute to the numerous studies surrounding women's rights, advocate freedom of information, equality, and empowered decision-making for women across the globe.

II. Literature Review

The United Nations (UN) accepted the right to information within Article 19 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, December 10, 1948 (UNDHR 2015). Right to information (RTI) are legal provisions that grants individuals the right access to information, also known as freedom of information (FOI) or access to information (ATI). These are laws currently in established and practiced in over 100 countries worldwide. (Lemieux, et al 2016). Scholars have over the years discussed the dynamics of free speech (Jereza et al 2022) and till date reports from journalists have reported an approximate number of 15,000 individuals involved in content moderation on Facebook and Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, Google+, Snapchat, Yik yak (Jereza 2022). With the rise in social impact posed by these digital platforms all around the world, there is need to study these impacts in relation to how policies instituted by governments affects the rights of audiences (Jereza, et al 2022).

According to McFarlane (1990), justifying women censorship is based on an impression that women enter a world of bias, prejudice and value judgments against them. Men are often described as impassive and restrained, while women are seen as, emotional and uncontrolled with the potential risk of being overwhelming without reflection. These contrasts are sometimes justified based on God's plan or biological differences, leading to debates on these grounds. Another basis for justifying censoring women is restriction against pornographic media and performance. In 2019, the increasing societal consciousness regarding unauthorized sharing of explicit videos, led the Korean government to establish one of the most stringent internet censorship measures observed in a democratic country (Lee, 2021). The resultant effect of stringent internet censorship policies shows the intricate relationship between gender norms and other factors, all contributing to the larger narrative to justify the censorship of women in modern societies.

On the other hand, women journalists find themselves as targets of online violence and at the same time being the first responders to such incidents. On the unfiltered social media platforms, they are tasked with reporting, blocking, muting, deleting, and restricting their attackers. This

obligation, especially in the increasing number of immense attacks, can aggravate the impact of abuse and impose overwhelming pressures on these journalists (Callamard 2006).

In a sample of cases investigated, 11% of surveyed women journalists reported online violence to the police, and legal action was only taken against 8%. This indicates a widespread lack of confidence in prosecution of incident related to online violence. The reluctance to pursue legal cases, evident in just a few interviewees, emphasizes the need for improved legal and judicial responses to counter online violence against women journalists. (Posetti et al, 2021).

'This gender-based censorship is comprised of dynamics that are both systematic and selective in nature, explicit and implicit by expression, intentional and unintentional in outcome and both deliberate and thoughtless in impact. It expresses itself in many shapes, colours, and voices. But ultimately, like all other forms of censorship, it alters reality, disempowers, controls, renders invisible, and silences. New Zealand has 32% female politicians and a female Prime Minister, only 18% of political news subjects in the local media were women. In Rwanda, which has the highest proportion of female politicians in the world (49%), only 13% of politicians reported on in the news were women. It appears that the media underrepresentation of women's experiences and voice becomes a powerful actor in the censorship of women, not just an indirect or reluctant messenger nor merely a passive mirror reflecting surrounding society's values and norms' (Callamard, 2006).

In a survey conducted by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, (UNESCO), physical intimidations linked to online violence prompted 13% of surveyed women to enhance their physical safety. An addition of 4% of surveyed women were reported missing from work due to concerns about the assaults transitioning offline and resulting in physical maltreatment. This pattern of abuse was obvious among interviewees, with some relocating due to the threats associated with online attacks. Several interviewees further experienced PTSD stands for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) associated to online violence, with many seeking therapy. 26% of respondents were identified with mental health impacts, with most frequently reported for having online attacks. In addition, 12% sought medical or psychological help due to the effects of online violence.

A question was posed to women journalist, how does the level of online violence you experience affect your journalism practice and your interaction with sources/audiences?

'30% of the women journalists surveyed answered that they self-censored on social media. 20% described how they withdrew from all online interaction. Self-censorship was also a response noted by many interviewees. Employment and productivity impacts reported by the women survey respondents included missing work to recover from online violence (11%), making themselves less visible (38%), quitting their jobs (4%), and even abandoning journalism altogether (2%). Linked to this was the professional discreditation of online violence targets' (Posetti, et al, 2021).

McFarlane, (1990) stated that these irregularities associated with censoring women will result to extreme cases of sexual harassment, and anti-feminine violence. In more conventional religious communities, women may seemingly be desexualized through methods like screens, veils, or circumcision. This act of supplanting is becoming more excessive, as women end up bearing the concerns of men's discomposure in dealing with female sexuality on an equal and understanding basis.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 19 emphasizes the essential role of media in preventing and counteracting all forms of gender-based discrimination. Public service journalists should be legally obligated to contribute positively against discrimination and intolerance on gender-based issues. Other media establishments, enterprises, and workforce should bear a moral and social responsibility to do the same. The primary recommendations to governments include adoption of policies to enhance women's access to all forms of media and ensuring that media legislations guarantee equal access for women.

Recommendations to media and regulatory bodies consist of establishing effective ethical and self-regulatory programs that incorporate a gender-sensitive approach, excluding prejudicial stereotypes of women. They should design and implement media programs endorsing understanding of sexism and discrimination, with a focus on gender-sensitive methodologies, and choice of interviewees. Emphasis should be placed on the centrality of radical and feminist perspectives.

Furthermore, encouraging media regulatory bodies to adopt a gender-sensitive approach, secondary community broadcasting for women, and advocating for a more inclusive understanding of the public interest that incorporates issues specific to women are all essential steps outlined in the recommendations to curb discrimination and intolerance against women.

This all-inclusive study offers a thorough study of gender-based censorship, analysing its historical origin, exploring the far-reaching significance gender-based censorship creates, and furthermore analyzing the potential weaknesses it poses to women's open speech of their notions and perspectives. The study aligns with the principles outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, underlining the principal importance of lack of restrictions in expression as an important and unchallengeable human right, thereby highlighting the need for upkeep and endorsing this fundamental aspect of human self-worth.

III. Methodology

Research Question - What are Global Effects of Government Censorship on Women's Right?

Sampling: Understanding the global disparities in gender-based access to information and its effects on freedom of speech is my rationale behind this study. It is a worldwide phenomenon that in several climes, women's rights and access to information

are being suppressed. In this research, I adopted a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis to have an in-depth exposition of the complexities surrounding women censorship in access to information. I employed the questionnaire method as my primary research approach. This method involved recruiting diverse participants and collate data to understand the extent of this form of censorship and unequal right to access information focused on women. The questionnaire included a series of well-crafted

questions designed to gauge the extent of this form of censorship, the inequality in women's access to information, and the repercussions of such censorship on women. The practicalities of this study encompassed participant recruitment, questionnaire administration, data collection and analysis.

I used a recruitment of Hundred (100) individuals to participate in this research. Most participants are from India, with a few from Nigeria and the country of residence for most participants is the United Kingdom. This research is gender specific, so to get the desired responses from women and account for gender balance, The participants comprised different social statuses, including post-graduate students, members of the working class, and people engaging in business. The mean age of the participants was 30 years.

Analysis:

The study's findings highlight the predominant reliance on digital platforms, particularly online news websites and social media, as primary sources of news consumption among the interviewed participants. This emphasis on online sources underscores the evolving landscape of information dissemination, reflecting the increasing prevalence of digital media in shaping individuals' access to news content. Despite the majority of participants consuming news daily, the presence of some respondents accessing news less frequently—on a weekly basis—suggests varied engagement levels with news content among individuals. This variance in consumption frequency may indicate diverse preferences or time constraints among participants, showcasing that not everyone engages with news content as regularly.

The diverse range of occupations represented among the respondents implies that news consumption is not confined to specific professional or demographic groups. This openness in news consumption across various occupations highlights the accessibility and relevance of news content to a wide audience, reinforcing the notion that news consumption habits are inclusive and cater to diverse interests and professions. The levels of trust expressed by respondents towards their chosen news sources—ranging from high to moderate—indicate a perceived reliability and credibility associated with the sources accessed. This suggests that individuals make conscious decisions about the sources they trust, potentially based on factors like accuracy, credibility, or alignment with personal beliefs. However, while the majority exhibited high or moderate trust levels, the presence of varying degrees of trust highlights the need for further exploration into the criteria individuals use to evaluate the reliability of news sources.

In reference to McCombs et al.'s theory of agenda setting, the analysis delves into the constraints faced by traditional media channels—newspapers, magazines, radio, and television—in covering an extensive array of news events due to limitations in time and space. This limitation in coverage emphasizes the selective nature of traditional media in highlighting specific news topics, thereby influencing public perception through the topics they prioritize. The expanding landscape of media platforms, including cable television and the Internet, has opened avenues for continued scholarly exploration into inter-media agenda setting. Researchers aim to comprehend how the interconnected agendas of diverse media sources influence the selection, presentation, and prioritization of news topics. This interplay shapes the information environment, influencing public perception and shaping the evolving media ecosystem.

IV. Findings

News Censorship & Frequency Encountered – In addition to blocking websites and editing news stories, respondents also highlighted instances of government-controlled narratives through selective omission or distortion of facts in news reports. Some participants mentioned encountering limitations in accessing news content due to geographical restrictions or biased reporting by state-controlled media outlets. The frequency of encountering censored or restricted news content varied based on geopolitical regions, indicating that individuals from certain areas experienced censorship more frequently than others. A few respondents also cited instances of self-censorship within media organizations due to fear of repercussions or pressure from authorities, contributing to restricted news coverage.

Awareness of Government Policies on Censorship – Apart from being somewhat familiar with government censorship policies, respondents expressed a desire for more transparency and clarity in understanding these policies. A section of respondents highlighted the need for accessible and comprehensive information regarding censorship regulations to enable informed public discourse. Some respondents mentioned the challenges in navigating the evolving digital landscape, where censorship policies might differ across online platforms and media outlets, causing confusion and ambiguity regarding what content gets censored and why. There were also suggestions for educational campaigns or workshops to enhance public awareness and understanding of these policies.

Perception on the Negative impact of Government Censorship on Women Access to Information- In evaluating the negative impact of government censorship on women's access to information, respondents emphasized the potential role of

ensorship in perpetuating gender- based inequalities in accessing diverse and critical information. Some participants voiced concerns about restricted access to reproductive health information, educational resources, or news relevant to women's issues due to censorship. Moreover, there were reflections on how censorship might contribute to reinforcing societal stereotypes and limiting women's voices and perspectives in the public sphere. Respondents also highlighted the importance of unrestricted access to information for women's empowerment, education, and decision-making.

Agreement of existence Gender-Based Government Censorship in home country/country of residence - Expanding on the perception of gender-based censorship, respondents cited specific examples of news topics or issues related to gender that were either censored or underrepresented in media coverage. Additionally, participants expressed concerns about the lack of representation and biased portrayals of women in media due to censorship, hindering the visibility of women's achievements and contributions to society. Some respondents noted instances of differential treatment in censoring content related to gender issues compared to other topics, highlighting the need for gender-sensitive media policies and practices.

Respondents' comments on Impacts of Gender-Based Censorship and Anticipated Change to Policies - Participants elaborated further on the psychological and societal impacts of gender- based censorship, including increased feelings of marginalization, reduced public discourse on gender issues, and inhibited progress towards gender equality. They emphasized the urgency for legislative reforms and policy changes to address gender-based censorship, advocating for increased representation of diverse voices and experiences in media coverage. Respondents also stressed the necessity for proactive measures, such as awareness campaigns, educational initiatives, and the involvement of advocacy groups to challenge gender-based censorship and ensure equitable access to information for all genders.

V. Conclusion

Hooks, (1984), in her book on feminist theory has explored the connection between race, class, and sexual categories in media representation. This study provides an increased awareness among respondents regarding different types of news censorship. Most of the respondents showed interest in staying informed despite potential restrictions. Participants of this study accept possible gender-based pattern of government censorship, which creates an opportunity to deepen the research to explore the implications of gender-specific access to information. The exploration in this study shows how media can contribute to creating gender-specific identities for women. It will also help to understand the gender-based patterns in government censorship as it examines the representation of women in media and the implications for access to information.

Weaknesses observed in this study shows that focus groups or interviews cannot get the full representation on the impact of gender-based censorship because a lot of the questions posed to the respondents seem confusing. Another weakness in this study is the geolocation. To efficiently get the aim of the study, reducing the scope to a unit is important because a global analysis will be too broad to decipher the extent of the implications of gender-specific access to information. There was no ample intersection between other factors such as ethnicity, race, and social class in providing an ideal comprehension of the impact. There is also need for a more in-depth qualitative analysis of first-hand experiences of individuals affected by gender-based censorship.

Finally, this research offers insights to policy makers as it sheds light on impact of gender-based censorship. There was recommendation for media literacy and programs to help women facing restriction to access of information. International advocacy programs can use this study to enact campaigns in the protection of women rights. This study has contributed to literature by use of comparative analysis of different regions by adding more knowledge in the dynamics of gender- based censorship globally. Evaluating the historical evolution of gender-based censorship has also enhanced knowledge in understanding the variations of censorship over the years. The use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches has created a further in-depth exposition of the complexities surrounding women censorship in access to information and creating a pedestal for further study.

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