

DELHI UNION OF JOURNALISTS

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Press Statement

The Delhi Union of Journalists and its Gender and Ethics Councils strongly and unequivocally condemns the sexual assault perpetrated by Tehelka owner and editor Tarun Tejpal on a young journalist in his employment.

Tarun Tajpal's statement admitting a 'lapse of judgement' and his self-declared sabbatical from editorship both confirm the allegation. It is clear that he stands in breach of the law. He has sought to make light of two incidents of molestation including one incident of digital (finger) rape as 'drunken banter' but in fact this appears to be a criminal act. The survivor is reported to be both the daughter of a friend as well as his own daughter's close friend. For her this is also a case of breach of trust as it is a betrayal by someone who stands in her parents' place.

In his statement Tejpal has said that he is going to do penance that 'lacerates' him! What about the lacerations of the girl's psyche? Not to mention the violation of her bodily integrity. His self laceration and penance notwithstanding, he must be made to answer the law. We hope the survivor will rethink her stand to not file a criminal complaint so that the law can act. No assaulter should be let off with an admission of guilt, an apology and so called penance. This would amount to making a mockery of the law.

The DUJ acknowledges the outstanding role played by Tehelka through its bold journalism over the years and regrets the impact this episode will have on the organization and the many brilliant journalists who work for it. It is also seriously concerned about the damage caused to the reputation of the entire media. Already beleaguered by charges of demanding bribes, of paid news and motivated sting operations the media could have done without this ultimate charge of blatant misuse of power by a male owner/editor against a female colleague and employee. It is a fact that despite Supreme Court directions most media institutions do not have a Committee against Sexual Harassment in place that, by its very existence, can instill confidence in employees suffering harassment by seniors and bosses.

The DUJ regrets Managing Editor Shoma Chaudhury's ambiguous stand in the matter whereas she should have clearly instituted an internal inquiry by a sexual harassment committee. According to a report in the Indian Express she told their reporter, 'I don't know how this concerns you...I don't think you can ask me these questions'. This betrays her acute anxiety with which the DUJ finds it difficult to sympathise.

How can a senior journalist like Chaudhury -- who took an uncompromising stand on the right to ask questions of journalists and demand accountability from the media in the Nira Radia tapes case -- question the right of a reporter to ask questions. We urge Chaudhury to stop making statements on behalf of her employer-editor to the effect that his actions have satisfied the survivor, seek legal advice to act against him and thus create a precedent for exemplary conduct.

The media has deservedly been praised for its uncompromising stand and campaign against influential persons accused of sexual misconduct and assault in recent months. This is not the time to hide behind technicalities and penances but to live by the standards it has set for others. Inward gazing may cleanse the conscience but a crime deserves and must get its punishment. And what Tejpal has done is a crime.

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