

## **INDIA: Protect photojournalist Masrat Zahra against online harassment and intimidation in Jammu and Kashmir**

(Kathmandu, 23 May 2018) -The Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA) is deeply concerned over the harassment, intimidation and threats against Masrat Zahra, a female photojournalist from Srinagar city, Jammu and Kashmir state. She has been subjected to online vilification after a photograph of her covering an operation by armed security personnel in Kachdoora, Shopian district of the same state, was shared widely portraying her as an informer and spy.

On 15 May, she posted a picture of herself taken on first April, when she was covering a gunfight between the Indian Army and a group of militants in Kachdoora. The picture, with the caption 'Gun vs. Camera,' portrayed her getting ready to take pictures of the army men near the encounter site. She shared the picture on Facebook after staying 45 days in hospital for treatment due to the injuries she received while covering the encounter. The picture was shared by her friends. However, after a short while, she found that her picture was shared on Facebook by a person calling her a Mukhbir (informer). Since then, several social media users have been sharing the picture, with captions calling her a spy, traitor and collaborator, as she was seen surrounded by the Indian Army in the picture.

The Facebook post and name calling have resulted in her being vilified and threatened over social media. The abuse, harassment and threat have caused her mental distress. Many users have also started posting sexual assault content. One Facebook user wrote 'Stay at home, it's not your job trying to become like Hazrat Fatima, Islam doesn't allow you to do this job.'<sup>1</sup>

FORUM-ASIA strongly condemns the online harassment of the female photojournalist that affects her physical and mental health, and causes serious security threat. FORUM-ASIA demands that the Cyber-Crime cell of the Police immediately identifies the perpetrators and takes stringent action against them, as per law, to ensure her safety and security. FORUM-ASIA further demands that social media platforms, like Facebook, take proactive measures to counter online threats and harassment, and to prevent its users from posting messages that openly declare threats of violence and sexist language, while ensuring the right to freedom of expression is not compromised. The responsible authorities including the Government of India must ensure the safety and security of all journalists by creating an enabling environment for their work.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/india/kashmir-woman-photojournalist-dubbed-mukhbir-faces-online-abuse>

**About FORUM-ASIA:**

*FORUM-ASIA is a regional human rights group with 58 member organisations in 19 countries across Asia. FORUM-ASIA has offices in Bangkok, Jakarta, Geneva and Kathmandu. FORUM-ASIA addresses key areas of human rights violations in the region, including freedoms of expression, assembly and association, human rights defenders, and democratisation.*

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