7. Violence Against Women Journalists – Online and Offline

Julie Posetti and Hannah Storm [27]

INTRODUCTION

Women journalists face disproportionate risk and experience of violence and intimidation for the work they do – both on and offline. They are affected as members of a profession that is increasingly becoming a target in conflicts, in the context of terrorism, and as a feature of the rising global tide of populist politics. They are vilified and attacked for the messages they share and questions they ask. In some cases, they are even targeted for daring to speak at all. In addition to the risks and threats experienced by their male counterparts, they are also exposed to gender-based harassment and violence in the field and in the newsroom. Such attacks can be physical or virtual in nature, and they are frequently sexualized.

Traditionally, the news industry has been dominated by men. From behind the editor's desk to the front page, it's men who predominate in prestigious field assignments, and men who overwhelmingly have occupied positions of greatest power and highest profile (Ross, Boyle, Carter and Ging, 2018). This also translates to news content, where male sources and male voices dominate. [28] This gender

imbalance is also reflected in lower salaries[29], fewer senior positions held and less secure working conditions for women.

The newest threats faced by women journalists and media workers (along with their female sources) exist in the digital realm, particularly on social media sites. These risks range from pernicious, gendered online harassment to overt, targeted attacks that frequently involve threats of sexual violence. Increasingly, they also include digital security breaches from the exposure of identifying information (exacerbating the offline risks) through to malicious misrepresentation using Artificial Intelligence technologies.[30]

As a result of these convergent risks, women journalists and media workers are both less visible and more vulnerable - a double-edged sword that delegitimises their roles, while simultaneously increasing their burdens and taxing their resilience.

In recent years, women's involvement in media and in public discourse has increased, albeit slowly (Global Media Monitoring Project [GMMP], 2015), but this has coincided with a parallel rise in the violence and threats they face. In the case of online harassment. Emerging research indicates that the resulting chilling effect is causing increasing numbers of women reporters to withdraw from public conversation and to leave the profession (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe [OSCE], 2016).

News organizations and civil society groups have begun to recognize the scale of the problem and moves are now afoot to pay heed to the specific safety issues faced by women journalists in some media organisations, within certain countries,

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and at the international level through media support groups, civil society organisations, journalist unions, regional bodies like the OSCE and the United Nations.

The United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity (UNESCO, 2012) highlights the need for a gender-sensitive approach in relation to the safety of journalists. UNESCO coordinates the plan, which includes Journalism Safety Indicators that involve a gendered aspect and training for women journalists. In addition, each year UNESCO collaborates with GAMAG on Women Make the News, a global initiative to raise awareness of issues relating to gender inequality in and through the media.

It is crucial that any initiatives focussing on the safety of women journalists exist within the broader framework of conversations aimed at meeting the specific targets of the UN's Sustainable Development Goal 5 to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, and recognize that much of the violence that women journalists face stems from more deeply rooted gender-based discrimination and inequality in the media industry, and society at large.

EVIDENCE

Specific data detailing the exact numbers of women involved in journalism vis-à-vis men globally, and the scale of the violence and intimidation they face, remains scarce. UNESCO's *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development* report (UNESCO, 2018) notes that while progress has been made, gender equality has not been reached.

[31] *See: https://en.unesco.org/womenmakenews (Accessed 14/8/18)*
[32] *Note: The Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, are a set of 17 global goals launched in 2015 by the UN sending an agenda (the 2030 agenda) of achieving 169 targets by 2030. The focus of SDG 5 is to 'achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls' through nine targets, ranging from a focus on ended gendered violence to increasing the participation of women in politics.*
More information about the SDGs can be viewed here:
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/SDG5 (Accessed 14/8/18)

In November 2017, the United Nations General Assembly adopted a resolution (UN 2017b) with a particular gender focus, 'condemning unequivocally' all 'specific attacks on women journalists in the exercise of their work, including sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence, intimidation and harassment, online and offline'. The resolution reflects many of the recommendations in a UN Secretary General's report from earlier in 2017 on the safety of women journalists (UN 2017a) which came at a pivotal moment in the history of women's involvement in journalism.

The average percentage of women journalists killed between 2006 and 2016 was seven percent of the total (UNESCO, 2017), but in 2017 that figure rose to 19 percent of the overall total (Beiser, 2018). The historic difference may be explained, in part at least, by the fact that traditionally fewer women journalists have covered conflict zones. However, simply pointing to a perceived rise in the numbers of women working in war zones in recent years does not adequately account for the increased casualty numbers, because most of the women journalists killed in 2017 were not working in active war zones. Lauren Wolfe, director of the 'Under Siege' program at the Women's Media Center, says it could be because women are also covering more dangerous beats, as well as reporting from dangerous locations (Chacar, 2017). Arguably, it could also be because the risks are spreading to states considered as generally lower risk environments for journalists.

The International News Safety Institute's 2012 publication, *No Woman's Land: On the Frontlines with Female Reporters* (Storm and Williams, 2012) was collated after the sexual assault of CBS correspondent Lara Logan in Egypt's Tahrir Square. In it, forty women journalists paint a global picture of the daily risks of mob-related attacks, harassment from public officials and sexual advances often perpetrated by those who are supposed to protect them in their work.

The recent momentum of the #metoo movement has empowered some women to share their experiences of sexual harassment and abuse within domestic newsrooms in developed democracies, and a number of high profile men alleged to have perpetrated these abuses have been fired.[33]

In 2014, a joint report by INSI and the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF, with support from UNESCO) found that women journalists have long-suffered sexual violence and harassment at work (Barton and Storm, 2014). Respondents to the project survey, completed by almost 1000 women, found that nearly two-thirds of respondents had experienced 'some kind of intimidation, threats or abuse in relation to their work'. Most of the incidents had occurred in the workplace and were perpetrated by male bosses, supervisors and co-workers. It also found that most incidents of harassment and violence were never reported, even though a majority of women said it had psychologically affected them. Many women expressed fear of repercussions that reporting such abuse could have on their careers, a cultural and professional stigma that gender-based violence and harassment still carries (Chacar, 2017).

Any risk assessments that are completed rarely include specific gendered considerations, be that how to deal with unwanted harassment from contacts, fixers or colleagues, or the need to factor risk into assignment budgets – for example, when public transport is likely to be more dangerous than private alternatives. Because these structures are generally designed by, and for, men these elements simply do not become part of the normative framework. This, again, underscores the particular vulnerabilities of certain groups of female journalists, such as freelancers and those working in conflict scenarios heavily dominated by men (Harris, Mosdell and Griffiths, 2016).

[33] *Note: In this context, a group of journalists, editors and academics (including the authors of this chapter) published an open letter on sexism and misogyny in the news business with 14 recommendations for change. You can read it here: http://www.niemanlab.org/2018/06/how-to-end-misogyny-in-the-news-industry-an-open-letter-to-the-international-journalism-community/ (Accessed 12/8/18).*

WOMEN JOURNALISTS AS TARGETS OF SEXUALIZED ONLINE ABUSE [34]

The newest and broadest threat facing women journalists is the global proliferation of online abuse targeting reporters and commentators online. This scourge has led the UN (including UNESCO[35]), the OSCE, IWMF, INSI, Reporters Sans Frontiers (RSF, 2018), and other civil society organisations to recognize the problem, commissioning research into its impact and calling for actions and solutions.

Early research highlighting the misogynistic nature of harassment experienced by women bloggers in the pre-social media era serves as a beacon for the rampant cyber-misogyny now experienced by women journalists in the age of 'social journalism' (Filipovic, 2007; Seelhoff, 2007; Citron, 2009). The expectation is that journalists be actively embedded on social platforms like Facebook and Twitter to facilitate the direct audience engagement that is now integral to journalistic research, production and content dissemination (Posetti, 2013). This however, has placed women media workers on the frontline of a massive problem. The 'pile on' effect (organic, organized, or robotic mass attacks against a person online) worsens the impacts of online harassment experienced by women media workers, along with their female audiences and sources (Posetti, 2017b).[36]

About 20% of respondents said they had experienced some form of online abuse or attack. Women who report on issues of gender, technology and migration also find themselves at greater risk of increased attack according to more recent accounts. Also, in 2014, a study by British think-tank Demos, which examined

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hundreds of thousands of tweets, found that journalism was the only category where women received more abuse than men, with female journalists and TV news presenters receiving roughly three times as much abuse (Bartlett, et al., 2014) as their male counterparts. The keywords for the abusers were 'slut', 'rape' and 'whore'.

In 2016, the OSCE published research that demonstrated the international impact of online abuse of female journalists, whom it described as being disproportionately targeted for 'hate trolling'. The study found that 'female journalists, bloggers and other media actors are disproportionately experiencing gender-related threats, harassment and intimidation on the Internet, which has a direct impact on their safety and future online activities' (OSCE, 2016).[37]

Another hallmark of this online abuse of women media workers (and others producing verifiable information in the public interest across a range of digital platforms) is the use of disinformation tactics: lies are spread about their character or their work as a means of undermining their credibility, humiliating them, and seeking to chill their public commentary and reporting. In some instances, journalists have been targeted in acts of 'astroturfing'[38] and 'trolling'[39], experienced as deliberate attempts to 'mislead, misinform, befuddle, or endanger journalists' (Posetti, 2013). In other cases, they faced cyberattacks designed to reveal their sources, breach their privacy to expose them to risk, identify their sources. Attacks may also aim to access their unpublished data through phishing (King, 2014), doxing[40], malware attacks and identity spoofing.[41] Computational propaganda (Woolley and Howard, 2017) has increased the risks for journalists dealing with 'astroturfing' and 'trolling'.

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[36] See a summary of the gender elements from the UNESCO study Protecting Journalism Sources in the Digital Age here: https://blog.wan-ifra.org/2015/09/18/gender-dimensions-of-protecting-journa-lism-sources-in-the-digital-age
(Accessed: 20/7/18).
[37] See also: Clark, M & Grech, A (2017) Journalists under pressure: Unwarranted Interference, fear, and self-censorship in Europe, Council of Europe: https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168070ad5d
(Accessed 12/8/18).

This involves the use of bots to disseminate well-targeted false information and propaganda messages on a scale designed to look like an organic movement. Frequently, these attacks involved gendered elements and threats of sexual violence. Concurrently, AI technology is being leveraged to create 'deepfake' porn videos and other forms of content designed to discredit women journalists.

RECOMMENDATIONS

STATES SHOULD:

• Act in response to the UN Secretary General's report (UN, 2017a) on the safety of women journalists that urges measures to 'inform a gender-sensitive approach to

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[38] Note: 'Astroturfing' is a term derived from a brand of fake grass used to carpet outdoor surfaces to create the impression it is natural grass cover. In the context of disinformation, it involves spreading fake information, targeting audiences and journalists with an intention to redirect or mislead them, particularly in the form of 'evidence' of faux popular support for a person, idea or policy.
See also Technopedia definition: https://www.techopedia.com/definition/13920/astroturfing (Accessed 20/06/18).

[39] Note: 'Trolling' in its Internet related application refers to acts that range from gentle teasing, tricking and goading to deliberate deception. However, it is increasingly deployed as a term to cover all acts of online abuse. This is potentially problematic as it conflates a wide range of activities and potentially underplays the seriousness of online harassment.

[40] From Technopedia: Doxing is the process of retrieving, hacking and publishing other people's information such as names, addresses, phone numbers and credit card details. Doxing may be targeted toward a specific person or an organization. There are many reasons for doxing, but one of the most popular is coercion. Doxing is a slang term that is derived from the word '.doc' because documents are often retrieved and shared. Hackers have developed different ways to dox, but one of the most common methods is by obtaining the victim's email and then uncovering the password to open their account to obtain more personal information: https://www.techopedia.com/definition/29025/doxing (Accessed 29/03/18).

[41] From Technopedia: Spoofing is a fraudulent or malicious practice in which communication is sent from an unknown source disguised as a source known to the receiver. Email spoofing is the most common form of this practice. A spoofed email may also contain additional threats like Trojans or other viruses. These programmes can cause significant computer damage by triggering unexpected activities, remote access, deletion of files and more:
https://www.techopedia.com/definition/5398/spoofing (Accessed 29/03/18).

[42] The term 'deepfake' is a portmanteau of 'deep learning' and 'fake'. It involves AI technology in the creation of fraudulent content, sometimes of a pornographic nature, that is virtually undetectable. It is used in cyberattacks to discredit people, including journalists. See:

the issue of the safety of women journalists that is located in the broader context of gender-based discrimination and inequality'.

• Follow up the UN General Assembly Resolution (UN, 2017b) on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity which '*condemns unequivocally* the specific attacks on women journalists in the exercise of their work, including sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence, intimidation and harassment, online and offline' and also *calls upon States* 'to tackle sexual and gender-based discrimination, including violence and incitement to hatred, against women journalists, online and offline, as part of broader efforts to promote and protect the human rights of women, eliminate gender inequality and tackle gender-based stereotypes in society'.

Additionally, it *calls upon* States to:

'...create and maintain, in law and in practice, a safe and enabling environment for journalists to perform their work independently and without undue interference, inter alia...including with a strong focus on combating sexual and gender-based discrimination, and violence against women journalists, as well as the particularities of online threats and harassment of women journalists; (c) regular monitoring and reporting of attacks against journalists; (d) collecting and analysing concrete quantitative and qualitative data on attacks or violence against journalists, that are disaggregated by, among other factors, sex; (e) publicly and systematically condemning violence and attacks; (f)dedicating the resources necessary to investigate and prosecute such attacks and to develop and implement gender-sensitive strategies for combating impunity for attacks and violence against journalists, including by using, where appropriate, good practices such as those identified in Human Rights Council resolution 33/2;[10] and (g) putting in place safe gender- sensitive investigative procedures, in order to encourage women journalists to report attacks against them and provide adequate support, including psychosocial support, to victims and survivors'.

- Follow the UN Action Plan on the Safety of Journalists' recommendation to disaggregate data from a gender-perspective to allow for a better understanding of the specific threats facing women journalists.

- Review legal and normative frameworks to determine the applicability of existing laws/guidelines and the potential amendment (or introduction of new laws/guidelines) to defend the freedom of expression rights of all who produce journalism in the public interest (on and offline), being mindful of the need to avoid censorship.

- Consider supporting public information campaigns and broad media literacy training designed to address the problem.

CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANISATIONS AND MEDIA EMPLOYERS SHOULD:

- Operate a zero-tolerance approach to sexual harassment in newsrooms (on and offline) and the promotion of cultures of inclusion where everyone feels safe to speak out about their experiences and empowered to act if they witness something inappropriate happening.

- Provide physical security, technical assistance, legal advice and psychological support as required when dealing with women journalists affected by sexual violence and sexual harassment – on or offline.

- Develop holistic strategies by involving security/cybersecurity staff, senior editors, editorial trainers, workplace health and safety teams, social media editors in developing and disseminating policies and guidelines when dealing with incidents involving offline or online threats, recognising that these problems now interact and overlap.[43]

- Customise gendered safety training – safety training should be more bespoke. Most existing safety training is run by men, and where it does address specific

issues facing women journalists, it is rarely done so sensitively. This requires greater understanding of the emotional/psychological aspects of violence that impact on women journalists.

• Ensure better access for women in news organizations to the kinds of support (confidential where necessary) that they need to help them reintegrate physically, psychologically and emotionally, and ensure their careers are not negatively impacted if they suffer violence or harassment that requires them to take time away from their duties.

• Implement of gender-sensitive safety risk assessments and digital threat assessments that are integrated where required.

• Recognise and acknowledgement of the seriousness of online harassment from senior management to junior reporters (noting that policies and action plans should be disseminated to all staff).

• Escalate early reporting of serious incidents of abuse – on or offline - to the police where appropriate.

• Invest in online community engagement management (including clear policies and guidelines for intervention, along with adoption and communication of effective abuse reporting tools/processes) and adding misogynistic terms to comment moderation guidelines.

• Devote editorial resources to coverage of these issues.

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[43] *Note: Several of the recommendations pertaining to online harassment presented here were first published by Fairfax Media in an article about the problem written by co-author Julie Posetti in 2016: https://www.smh.com.au/lifestyle/swedish-broadcaster-alexandra-pascalidou-describes-online-threats-of-sexual-torture-and-graphic-abuse-20161124-gswuwv.html (Accessed 20/7/18).*

• Make a plan to deal with potential online harassment at the commissioning stage of 'lightning rod' stories (i.e. stories that are likely to attract online harassment of women journalists or sources, such as stories about feminism).

• Provide greater support for freelancers and those who are more vulnerable, such as interns, women of colour, non-binary people, and members of the LGBTQ community.

RESEARCHERS SHOULD:

• Consider the gender aspects and impacts when undertaking research on journalism safety and impunity issues.

• Consider the gender aspects and impacts of digital communications issues as they affect women journalists and media workers.

• When researching gender issues in media, consider digital and non-digital issues in tandem, recognising the interplay of both online and offline experiences.

• Make research of gender-related violence and harassment of women journalists a priority to support the defence of women's freedom of expression rights globally.

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