

# Violence against women journalists

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Violence against women journalists is sadly an important issue that is rarely openly confronted. There are at least four different ways in which violence against women journalists occurs. One is during the course of reporting dangerous events such as wars and conflict zones where a woman journalist, much like a male journalist, simply finds herself in a dangerous context. A second form is sexual violence which, while meted out on occasion to male journalists, is preponderantly acted out against women. A third is state-sponsored violence in the form of arbitrary arrest, imprisonment and torture of journalists, amongst whom number many women. And a fourth form includes trolling and other forms of sexualised hate speech that women encounter on the internet.

## Violence in the real world

Journalism can be a dangerous profession. In order to cover breaking stories, journalists put themselves in contexts of war, conflict and natural disasters, while in order to report on corruption, human rights abuses and political chicanery, journalists often incur the wrath of the most powerful in society. Journalism historically was a male profession and women have often encountered sexism from their colleagues as well as from outsiders (Tumber, 2006).

The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) documents attacks on journalists that include targeted killings, physical attacks, censorship tactics, confiscation of equipment and anti-press legislation. 1,005 journalists have been killed around the world since 1992 (CPJ, n.d.). Already some 31 journalists have been killed in 2013. Statistics on the CPJ website suggest that 3% of those (6% since 1992) have been women (CPJ, 2013). The International Media Safety Institute (INSI) seems to have collapsed, although its 'Joint code of practice for journalists working in conflict zones' or 'safety guidelines' was adopted in November 2000, by a range of television companies, including APTN and Reuters TV.

Many journalists were killed in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The Syrian conflict has recently seen the deaths of two women journalists. Maria Colvin of the British Sunday Times was killed in Homs, Syria in February 2012 when a makeshift press centre was struck by a shell; she had already lost one eye covering the Sri Lankan civil war a decade earlier. Yara Abbas, a correspondent for the pro-government TV channel Al-Ikhbariya, was killed when her crew's vehicle came under rebel sniper fire in May 2013 in Al-Qusayr, Syria, according to official Syrian news sources.

## Violence against women who are journalists

Since women journalists often find themselves in locations that are in socio-political turmoil, they are sadly sometimes the specific focus of violence. Recent cases of such violence have occurred in political mobilisations in Egypt, especially in Tahrir Square. CBS News' Lara Logan was attacked during the 2011 revolution, saying 'men in the crowd had raped me with their hands'. The Egyptian journalist Mona Eltahawy was assaulted by Egyptian security forces in November 2011, as was a France 3 TV reporter Caroline Sinz. Natasha Smith was gang raped in June 2012 and a Dutch reporter was raped in July 2013 (Daily Mail, 2012). While a young female photojournalist was gang-raped in Mumbai in August 2013 in the second of such violent attacks on women.

Sadly, this is not a new subject. In 2005 the International News Safety Institute in Brussels conducted a survey of female war reporters. It found that of the 29 respondents who took part, over half reported sexual harassment on the job while two said they had experienced sexual abuse. But the survey also found out that women often do not report such violence and are loathe to talk about it for fear that it would affect gender equality and their ability to be sent on important assignments (Matloff, 2007).

Indeed, it took nine years before Colombian journalist Jineth Bedoya spoke publicly about the brutal rape she had endured while reporting on right-wing paramilitaries in May 2000. On assignment for the Bogotá daily El Espectador, Bedoya was abducted, bound, blindfolded and taken to a house in the central city of

Villavicencio, where she was savagely beaten and raped by multiple attackers (For more examples, see Ronderos, 2012).

In a 2011 report, CPJ interviewed more than four dozen journalists who said that they had been victimised on past assignments. Most reported victims were women, although some were men. Journalists have reported assaults that range from groping to rape by multiple attackers (Wolfe, 2011).

## State violence against journalists who are women

Sometimes it is the state apparatus itself that tries to intimidate women through various forms of violence. The Islamic Republic of Iran has arrested and imprisoned many women journalists and bloggers. Mona Eltahawy had both arms broken by the Egyptian military police as she covered the ongoing political crisis in Tahrir Square in November 2011.

Reeyot Alemu, columnist for the Ethiopian newspaper Fetehe, was sentenced to 14 years in prison in September 2011, accused by the government of conspiracy to commit terrorist acts and participation in a terrorist organisation. Alemu has been one of the few women reporters writing critically about the political climate in Ethiopia and she was one of three winners of the 2012 Courage in Journalism Awards (International Women's Media Foundation, 2013).

Khadija Ismayilova, reporter for Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Azerbaijani service, and another winner of the 2012 Courage in Journalism Awards, has investigated and exposed corruption and power abuse at the highest levels in Azerbaijan. In May of 2012, she received a suspicious package with an anonymous letter, including photographs from surveillance cameras installed in her apartment, portraying her in an intimate sexual relation with her boyfriend. Despite these threats of defamation Ismayilova has refused to stop working and has publicly denounced her accusers.

The three winners of the International Women's Media Foundation 2013 awards are Najiba Ayubi, of the Killid Group in Afghanistan who reports on politics and women's rights and has sustained anonymous threats and attacks from government entities for over a decade; Nour Kelze, a photojournalist for Reuters who has been shot at often and hospitalised twice for wounds sustained while covering the Syrian story and targeted in pro-Assad propaganda; and Bopha Phorn, reporter for The Cambodia Daily in Cambodia, whose coverage of crime, land rights abuses and environmental exploitation issues nearly got her killed in April 2012, when her car came under heavy fire during a reporting trip in the Cambodian jungle (International Women's Media Foundation, 2013).

It is estimated that 21 journalists have been killed since Russian President Vladimir Putin came to power in March 2000 and in the majority of cases, no one has been convicted and sentenced for the murders. The high profile murder in 2006 of Novaya Gazeta journalist Anna Politkovskaya, known for her critical reporting on the conflict in Chechnya in which she sought to expose human rights abuses, triggered some public outcry. In 2007, the World Association of Newspapers passed a resolution, calling on the authorities in Russia to 'investigate journalist deaths more vigorously'. The same year, the International News Safety Institute said more journalists had died violent deaths in Russia in the previous 10 years than anywhere in the world apart from Iraq.

It has to be said that on occasion male journalists are also at risk from sexual assault, usually as state-sponsored violence. This has happened in Iranian prisons, where such violence has been used to intimidate reporters into silence. There are also the cases of Mumtaz Sher and Umar Cheema in Pakistan.

In October 2011 the 2011 Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to renowned Yemeni press freedom activist Tawakul Karman, Chairwoman of Women Journalists Without Chains, along with two other female leaders. CPJ wrote that the prize recognized 'her relentless battle for a free press in Yemen but also highlights the free flow of information as vital for peaceful and democratic societies... and we hope that this prize helps to shed light on the targeting of journalists which continues to plague the Arab world' (CPJ, 2011).

## Internet trolling/violence against women commentators

New forms of aggression and violence against women have emerged in Internet practices.

Some egregious examples of this occurred in Britain in summer 2013 as various female journalists were targeted. In July, Labour MP Stella Creasy and Caroline Criado-Perez, a feminist campaigner, received threats of rape on Twitter after they had campaigned to keep a woman represented on one of Britain's banknotes (Jones, 2013).

Also in July, Guardian columnist Hadley Freeman was sent a tweet at 5.50pm from an anonymous user, @98JU98U989, which claimed that a bomb had been placed outside her home and would be detonated at 10.47 pm. She reported this to the Metropolitan Police who said they were launching an investigation as the threat was an arrestable offence but also advised her not to stay at home overnight. Several other women – including Grace Dent of the Independent; Catherine Mayer, Europe editor of Time magazine; Sara Lang, a social media manager at American non-profit AARP; and Anna Leszkiewicz, editor of Cherwell, Oxford University’s independent student newspaper – subsequently received identical threats (Batty, 2013).

A useful development from these frightening threats was that Twitter apologised and has now agreed to include harassment in the definition of behaviour it considers abuse, and has confirmed that an in-tweet ‘report abuse’ button - available on the Twitter app for iPhones - would be added to the Twitter website and to platforms used on other mobile devices in order to report abusive comments (Reuters, 2013).

## Training, risk assessment

In a male-dominated profession, and working in some of the most violent, unstable and patriarchal societies, the dangers to women journalists might always be present. There are no sections on sexual harassment and assault in the leading handbooks on journalistic safety, by the Committee to Protect Journalists and the International Federation of Journalists. CPJ provides general tips from safety experts who have trained soldiers and journalists, arguing that while not every assault can be prevented, anticipation and sound judgment go a long way toward minimising risk (CPJ, 2012), and it also includes material by Judith Matloff (2011) designed specifically for women journalists.

The BBC, a pioneer in trauma awareness, is one of the few major news organisations that offers special safety instruction for women, taught by women. The Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma is a leader in recognising the trauma that journalists can endure and provides support for post-traumatic stress for journalists. So the issue is only slowly coming into focus across media organisations and more and better awareness training and safety procedures are needed for both female and male journalists.

The UN Commission on the Status of Women did hold a session on the safety of women journalists in March 2013 that included Irima Bokova, Director General UNESCO; Pamela Falk, CBS correspondent and President of the UN Correspondents Association; Elana Newman, of the Dart Centre; and Larren Wolfe, Director, Women under Siege at the Women’s Media Centre. However, few specific recommendations seem to have made it on to the agreed conclusions of the CSW other than general concern to combat all forms of violence against women and girls (Commission on the Status of Women, 2013).

Sadly, journalism is often a dangerous profession conducted in the most risky of contexts and the risks for women journalists are even higher. More acknowledgement of this issue is slowly happening but there is little policy or academic research and a lack of joined-up thinking. The Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma (Dart, 2013) provides very important support for journalists after a traumatic event; a similar platform regarding preparatory training for journalists could be as useful. The profession everywhere needs better training in safety and violence against women and greater media organizational responsibility should an event happen, while there also needs to be better governmental and police follow-up when incidents occur and wherever the location. Women journalists can offer a different news agenda and different insights on regular news stories – but they have to be able to work safely.

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