Top 26 Preliminary Findings

Manifestations of online violence

1 **Nearly three quarters (73%)[7] of our survey respondents identifying as women said they had experienced online violence.**

2 **Threats of physical violence (identified by 25% of survey respondents) including death threats, and sexual violence (identified by 18%) also plagued the women journalists we interviewed. And these threats radiated: 13% of survey respondents and many interviewees said they had received threats of violence against those close to them, including children and infants.**

3 **One-fifth (20%)[8] of survey respondents identifying as women said they had been attacked or abused offline in connection with online violence they had experienced. A similar proportion of our interviewees also experienced offline abuse associated with online attacks, including the subjects of both of our big data case studies.**

4 **Racism, religious bigotry, sectarianism, ableism[9], homophobia and transphobia intersect with misogyny and sexism to produce significantly heightened exposure and deeper impacts for women experiencing multiple forms of discrimination concurrently, as evidenced by our survey respondents and interviewees, and detailed in our big data case study on Maria Ressa.**

5 **Black, Indigenous, Jewish, Arab and lesbian women journalists participating in our survey and interviews experienced both the highest rates and most severe impacts of online violence.**

6 **Online violence against women journalists verges from large-scale attacks or extreme threats at a moment in time, through to the slow burn of networked gaslighting, which involves constant lower level abuse.**

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[7] Expressed as a percentage of 625 woman-identifying respondents who answered this question.
[8] Expressed as a percentage of 596 woman-identifying journalists who responded to the question.
[9] Discrimination in favour of able-bodied people i.e. those who do not have disabilities.

Impacts of online violence

7   Physical threats associated with online violence caused 13% of women survey respondents to increase their physical security; 4% said that they had missed work due to particular concerns about the attacks moving offline and resulting in physical violence. This pattern was also evident among the interviewees, several of whom relocated due to the physical threats associated with online attacks.

8   A number of our interviewees were suffering from PTSD connected to online violence, and many were in therapy as a result. The mental health impacts were also the most frequently identified (26%) consequence of online attacks among survey respondents. 12% of respondents said they had sought medical or psychological help due to the effects of online violence.

9   When asked "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.

10   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. The interviewees confirmed this pattern, and the big data case study on Carole Cadwalladr potently underlines it.

Online violence sources and triggers

11   The reporting theme most often identified in association with heightened attacks was gender (49%), followed by politics and elections (44%), and human rights and social policy (31%), according to our survey. This was also borne out by our interviews and case studies.

12   41% of survey respondents said they had been targeted in online attacks that appeared to be linked to orchestrated disinformation campaigns. This trend was underlined by the interviewees and also linked to reporting on far-right extremism and conspiracy networks. Additionally, it was highlighted by both of our big data case studies.

13 Our interviewees and case study subjects identified high-level political leaders and other State actors as some of the biggest instigators of online violence. Political actors were also the second most frequently noted sources (37%) of attacks and abuse after 'anonymous or unknown attackers' (57%), according to the women survey respondents.

14 Partisan news outlets, media operating at the fringes of the political spectrum, and misogynistic journalists are instrumentalised to amplify and fuel attacks. This is a trend identified across our interviews and case studies.

15 Online violence against women journalists has worsened in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The platforms as vectors of online violence

16 Social media companies are the main enablers of online violence against women journalists.

17 Facebook was the most frequently used (77%) platform, network or app for journalistic work (closely followed by Twitter on 74%) according to the women surveyed, but it attracted disproportionately higher rates of incident-reporting to the platforms among the respondents (39% compared to Twitter's 26%). It was also rated the most dangerous of the top five platforms/apps used, with nearly double the number of respondents rating Facebook "very unsafe" compared to Twitter.

18 Despite fledgling responsive efforts and stated commitments to enhancing journalists' safety on their platforms, the social media companies are failing to stem online violence against women journalists, with sometimes devastating consequences, as illustrated through our big data case studies and interviews.

19 In addition to technical design and business model failures that enable online violence on their platforms, social media companies lack gender-sensitive, human-focused solutions to online attacks on women journalists. Despite capacity to do more, they also lack rapid response units and capability to respond in all languages that their platforms allow.

20 Online violence frequently jumps platforms in networked attacks, demanding networked responses.

The role of media employers as responders to online violence

21 **Despite progress made by many employers over the past five years, only 25% of the women survey respondents said they had reported online violence incidents to their employers, and the top responses they said they received when they did were: no response (10%) and advice like "grow a thicker skin" or "toughen up" (9%), while 2% said they were asked what they did to provoke the attack.**

22 **Evidence of victim-blaming by employers is accompanied by the emergence of a pattern of policing women journalists' speech as a response to 'managing' online violence through more restrictive and punitive social media policies introduced by news organisations.**

23 **In some cases, women journalists are actively discouraged from speaking about their experiences of online violence or engaging with those attacking them. They are also sometimes told to avoid discussing "controversial" topics on social media as a preventive measure. In the worst cases, they have been suspended or sacked from duty in the midst of a major attack.**

24 **A range of obstacles inhibits more effective responses to online violence by news organisations. These include: external factors such as social media companies' failure to adequately address platform design and business model flaws that enable online violence and empower abusers.**

Legal remedy and law enforcement

25 **Only 11% of the women journalists surveyed had reported instances of online violence to the police, and very few interviewees had made a complaint to law enforcement agencies, highlighting a general lack of confidence in prosecution.**

26 **Only 8% of the women journalists surveyed and just a few of our interviewees had taken legal action, highlighting a reluctance among those targeted to pursue legal remedy due to various impediments. This signifies the need for improvement in legal and judicial responses to online violence against women journalists. Two of our interviewees[10] were pursuing legal action against State actors (foreign and domestic) at the time of writing.**

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[10] They are: Lebanese journalist Ghada Oueiss and Brazil's Patricia Campos Mello.