

Introduction

There is nothing virtual about online violence. It has become the [new frontline](#) in journalism safety - and women journalists sit at the epicentre of risk. Networked misogyny and [gaslighting](#) intersect with racism, religious bigotry, homophobia and other forms of discrimination to threaten women journalists - severely and disproportionately. Threats of sexual violence and murder are frequent and sometimes extended to their families. This phenomenon is also bound up with the rise of viral disinformation, digital conspiracy networks and political polarisation. The psychological, physical, professional, and digital safety and security impacts associated with this escalating freedom of expression and gender equality crisis are overlapping, converging and frequently inseparable. They are also [increasingly spilling offline](#), sometimes with devastating consequences.

Here, we present an edited extract from a major interdisciplinary study produced by the International Center for Journalists (ICJ) under commission from UNESCO. The book-length study will be published by UNESCO in mid-2021.

The research underpinning this paper consists of: a [global survey](#) of **901 journalists**² from **125 countries** conducted in five languages³; long-form **interviews**⁴ with **173 international journalists, editors, and experts** in the fields of freedom of expression, human rights law, and digital safety; **two big data case studies** assessing over **2.5 million posts on Facebook and Twitter** directed at two prominent women journalists (Maria Ressa in the Philippines and Carole Cadwalladr in the UK) undertaken to validate the self-reporting of our interviewees and survey respondents with objective data; **15 detailed country case studies**⁵; and a literature review covering hundreds of scholarly and civil society research publications. A team of **24 international researchers**⁶ from **16 countries** contributed to the study.

One of the unique aspects of this research is its **focus on understudied developing countries** recognising that online violence against women journalists is a global problem, but one with disproportionate offline impacts and complex [intersectional](#) challenges that inhibit effective responses. Our **interviewees represent 17 States** and span every UNESCO region. They are **racially, ethnically and linguistically diverse**. They also include a number of men (e.g., senior editorial leaders, digital security, legal and freedom of expression experts), **people of different abilities**, and they **express a range of sexualities and gender identities**.

² 714 respondents identified as women. All survey results presented here are expressed as a proportion of this sample unless otherwise indicated.

³ Arabic, English, French, Portuguese and Spanish.

⁴ All quotes featured in this report are from original interviews unless otherwise indicated.

⁵ Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, Lebanon, Tunisia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Poland, Serbia, UK, US, Sweden, Brazil and Mexico.

⁶ In addition to the identified authors of this report, the researchers named on the inside cover can choose to be recognised as contributing authors.

The chilling effect

Online violence against women journalists is designed to: belittle, humiliate, and shame; induce fear, silence, and retreat; discredit them professionally, undermining accountability journalism and trust in facts; and chill their active participation (along with that of their sources, colleagues and audiences) in public debate. This amounts to an attack on democratic deliberation and media freedom, encompassing the public's right to access information, and it cannot afford to be normalised or tolerated as an inevitable aspect of online discourse, nor contemporary audience-engaged journalism. As UN Secretary-General António Guterres [tweeted](#) in March 2021 in connection with this research:



There should be no room for misogyny and violence in journalism. Social media platforms and governments must protect women journalists from online violence.



António Guterres

UN Secretary-General
March 2021

A worsening crisis

Online attacks on women journalists appear to be increasing significantly, as this study demonstrates, particularly in the context of the [‘shadow pandemic’](#) of violence against women during COVID-19. The [pandemic has changed journalists’ working conditions](#), making them yet more dependent on digital communications services and social media channels. The emergence of the [‘disinfodemic’](#) has also increased the toxicity of the online communities within which journalists work, making journalists “sitting ducks” according to the UK National Union of Journalists’ Michelle Stanistreet, interviewed for this study.

Women journalists are now more exposed to online violence than ever.

Our research also highlights the threefold function of disinformation in gendered online violence against women journalists:

1 // Disinformation tactics are routinely deployed in targeted multiplatform online attacks against women journalists.

2 // Reporting on disinformation and intertwined issues, such as digital conspiracy networks and far-right extremism, is a trigger for heightened attacks.

3 // Disinformation purveyors operationalise misogynistic abuse, harassment and threats against women journalists to undercut public trust in critical journalism and facts in general.

Another major issue in evidence is the role of political actors - including presidents and elected representatives, party officials and members - in instigating and fuelling online violence campaigns against women journalists. Additionally, partisan, mainstream and fringe news media can be shown to amplify such attacks, triggering [‘pile-ons’](#) that escalate the risks of online violence morphing into offline assault or causing significant psychological injury.

While the platforms are the main vectors or enablers for online violence against women journalists, media employers are responsible for ensuring a safe working environment for their journalists. And States are obliged to protect journalists, so that they can do their work freely and safely in accordance with international obligations, legislating accordingly and ensuring law enforcement agencies respond appropriately.

Problematically, however, women journalists are both the primary targets of online violence and the first responders to it. On the unmediated social media platforms they use in the course of their work, they are the ones required to ‘report’, ‘block’, ‘mute’, ‘delete’, and ‘restrict’ their attackers, potentially compounding the effects of the abuse, and creating unbearable pressures when the attacks come at scale.

Online violence against journalists is a significant feature of what we call ‘[platform capture](#)’, which involves the weaponisation of social media by bad-faith actors, in combination with the structural failures of the platforms’ business models and product design, and the virtual entrapment of many news organisations and journalists into platform dependency.

While making fledgling attempts to improve their products to enable easier reporting and filtering of abuse, and engaging in regular public relations exercises designed to promote their commitment to safer platforms, our research indicates that the social media companies have so far failed to respond swiftly or effectively to the crisis. Central to this failure is an attempt to use ‘free speech’ as a shield against accountability, and a continuing reluctance to assume responsibility for the content on their sites. Additionally, there is a lack of coordination between these companies in addressing orchestrated, cross-platform online violence campaigns targeting individual journalists. There have also been few attempts to hold social media companies liable or make them accountable through legal redress or forms of regulation.

Media employers have made some progress in addressing gendered online violence against their journalists (primarily within the comments sections of their websites), but the journalism safety threats posed in the networked social media environment, and the risks intersecting with disinformation and political extremism (particularly on the far-right), appear to be either poorly understood or too overwhelming to manage in many cases. Increasingly, and very problematically, employers respond to the problem by policing journalists’ speech (e.g., by introducing social media policies that discourage them from engaging in public commentary on “controversial issues”) and victim-blaming (e.g., by suggesting a woman’s speech triggered an attack, or punishing them for the brand exposure caused by an attack).

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Simultaneously, social media companies, news organisations and States are struggling to respond effectively to online violence against women journalists. This highlights the urgent need for policy reform, and novel legal, legislative and normative responses, in full compliance with international freedom of expression and privacy standards, from key stakeholders - in particular UNESCO Member States. This research discussion paper - published ahead of the major forthcoming study - seeks to help stimulate, identify and elicit such responses.



Defining and describing online violence

Gendered online violence can be understood as a combination of:

// Misogynistic harassment, abuse and threats.

// Digital privacy and security breaches that increase physical risks associated with online violence.

// Coordinated disinformation campaigns leveraging misogyny and other forms of hate speech.

Online violence targeting women journalists manifests itself in a variety of ways, but it has a number of common characteristics:

// It is networked
Online violence is often organised, coordinated or orchestrated. It can include State-sponsored '[sock puppet networks](#),' acts of '[patriotic trolling](#),' and involve mobs who seed hate campaigns within one fringe network before pushing it into more mainstream networks and partisan media. But such abuse can also come from individuals united in a common cause - like misogyny.

// It is usually misogynistic
Misogyny is one of the key features of online violence targeting women journalists, and it has been routinised.

// It radiates
The perpetrators of online violence against women journalists often target their families, sources, colleagues and bystanders too.

// It is intimate
In detail and delivery, the threats are personal. They arrive on mobile phone screens first thing in the morning and last thing at night, and they are often highly sexualised.

// It can be extreme, intense and prolific
Often described by targets in terms of extreme weather events, natural disasters and war, such as: "torrential", "tsunami", "flood", "avalanche", "a barrage", "trench warfare", "bombardment".

// It can behave like networked gaslighting
Constant moderate-low volume abuse and harassment that burns slowly but can be cumulatively devastating.