

# Global thematic analysis: key trends

We synthesised the data from the **173** original research interviews, the **15** country case studies and the gender-disaggregated results from our survey of **901** journalists, along with the two big data case studies detailing the online violence experienced by Maria Ressa and Carole Cadwalladr, to conduct an analysis that led us to identify **eight key international trends** in online violence against women journalists. They are:

## 1 / Intersectional threats

Women journalists who are also disadvantaged by forms of discrimination that intersect with sexism and misogyny (e.g., racism, homophobia, religious bigotry, sectarianism) face additional exposure to online attacks, with worse impacts.

## 2 / Online violence moving offline

There is increasing evidence that online violence against women journalists moves offline with significant impact. This includes physical attacks and offline abuse and harassment that is seeded online, as well as legal harassment enabled and reinforced by online violence.

## 3 / Disinformation as a multi-pronged and intersecting threat

The weaponisation of false and misleading content functions both as a method of attack (e.g., the deployment of disinformation tactics) and a lightning rod for attacks (stimulating misogynistic 'pile-ons') in the context of online violence against women journalists. Simultaneously, orchestrated disinformation campaigns operationalise gendered online violence to chill critical reporting.



**173**  
research  
interviews

**901**  
survey  
respondents



**2.5m**  
social media  
posts  
analysed

**15**  
country  
case  
studies

survey  
respondents  
from  
**125**  
countries

#### **4 / The role of political extremism (in particular far-right extremism), nationalism and populism**

Misogyny is weaponised in the global tilt towards populism, and women journalists are clear targets - particularly those reporting on far-right extremist networks.

#### **5 / The platforms as vectors of online violence**

Social media platforms are seen as the major enablers for online violence against women journalists but cast as (largely) failed responders to the problem.

#### **6 / Political actors as attackers**

Politicians and political party officials/donors are implicated as major instigators and amplifiers of online violence against women journalists.

#### **7 / Instrumentalisation of partisan media**

Partisan media outlets, and mainstream media actors sympathetic to certain political ideologies, are identifiable as instigators and amplifiers of online violence against women journalists.

#### **8 / News organisations still struggling to respond effectively**

There is a need to reboot threat modelling and gendered online violence response protocols. This is in the context of an increasingly toxic information ecosystem - in particular at the intersection of disinformation/far-right extremism and diverse forms of discrimination. In parallel, there is an alarming trend involving employers victim-blaming and policing women journalists' speech when they are targeted.

## Misrepresentation

via [spoof](#) accounts and manipulated images, video and audio. Such [synthetic media](#) were shared openly via social media and on fringe sites that facilitate coordinated attacks, or via email, text message etc.

## Threats to damage their professional or personal reputations

## Digital privacy and security-based attacks

including hacking, doxxing, interception and surveillance

## Harassment in the form of fraudulent online orders

being sent to women journalists' homes after doxxing

# Types of online violence and their manifestation

based on analysis of our combined datasets

## Coordinated 'dogpiling'<sup>11</sup> attacks

involving not just fringe networks of misogynists and disinformation agents, but also publicly identifiable political actors and male journalists

## Orchestrated attacks involving State actors

## Manipulated search results

on YouTube and Google which were flooded with hateful and/or disinformation content designed to malign and discredit the targets, drowning out their professional journalistic content

## Harassing private messages

(including text messages) which often involved soliciting for sex

## Threats of sexual assault and physical violence

including death threats (some of which were extremely graphic). These were generally received via open social media platforms, closed messaging, email, and text messages. Some journalists also received death threats that came via analogue means (e.g., traditional post) after being [doxxed](#)

<sup>11</sup> Dogpiling' refers to a way of loosely organising targeted attacks against women journalists online through digital 'dog whistling'. It is related to 'brigading', which is synonymous with the term 'piling-on'. All these terms refer to the function of online mobs called to attack an individual.

## i. WEAPONISING MISOGYNY

Threats of physical and sexual violence plagued the women journalists we interviewed and surveyed. Our interviewees testified to experiencing some particularly chilling threats. One example among many came from Lebanese journalist [Ghada Oueiss](#)<sup>12</sup>, Al Jazeera's principal Arabic presenter, who has been the target of a prolific online violence campaign focused on her gender, her Christianity, and her age. She was portrayed as a prostitute by her attackers, and she told us:

***“ [Every day I went on air], I would receive on my Al Jazeera email - because somehow it was leaked - a death threat. One of them that I can never forget [said]: ‘You will be looking at the camera to talk to your audience and you will start reading the bulletin and reading the autocue in front of you. You will notice that there is a gun and [a] bullet, that bullet will go straight to your head.’ Then I started getting emailed pornographic pictures... they started to put my head on naked women. And then, they made another email in my name and they started sending to my colleagues pictures of [my] head on a naked body, also porn pictures. ”***

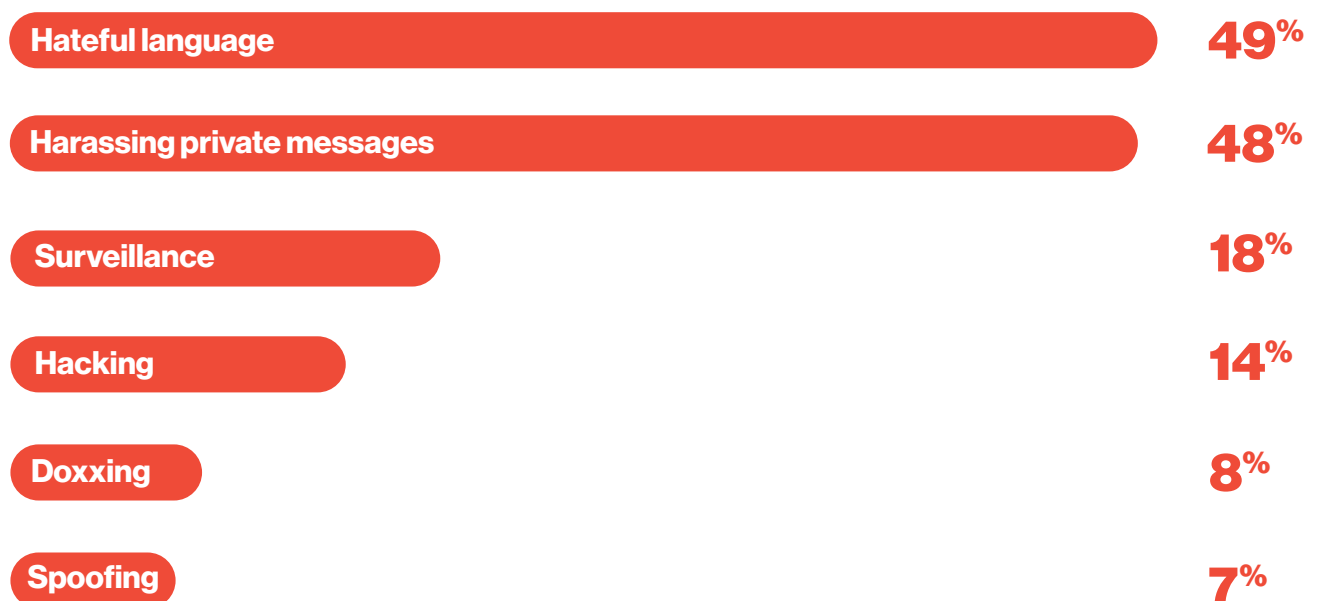
<sup>12</sup> Oueiss is currently pursuing legal action against various officials and individuals in relation to the coordinated online attacks she experiences.

Bystanders who rallied to the defence of our research participants - sources, colleagues, and audiences - along with family members (including children), were also targeted. In fact, 13% of our survey respondents said that in the course of online violence episodes, they had received threats of violence against those close to them.

**Caoilfhionn Gallagher QC** represents dozens of women journalists from the BBC Persian service who have experienced prolific online violence suspected to be connected to a foreign State actor. In two cases, children of the women were also targeted. In the first instance, the head of one of the presenters whom Gallagher represents was Photoshopped onto a pornographic image, which was then sent to her 14-year-old son at his school:

**“ [There] are multiple examples from social media platforms - Twitter, Instagram - which are horrifying. They are rape threats. They’re horrendous threats of sexual violence either to the journalists themselves, or to family members. And sometimes they’re misogynistic threats to male journalists singling out female family members, or false allegations about male journalists raping their female colleagues. ”**

## Online threat experience



Almost half (48%) of the women journalists we surveyed reported being harassed - often sexually - with unwanted private messages, highlighting the fact that much online violence occurs in the shadows of the internet, away from public view. But the most commonly reported (49%) online threat experienced by the women surveyed and interviewed came in the form of abuse laced with hateful language designed to denigrate them. This abuse was most noticeably misogynistic and sexist. Classic tropes identified by our interviewees, and evident within our big data collections, included: “witch”, “hag”, “whore”, “bitch”, and “presstitute” (a portmanteau of ‘press’ and ‘prostitute’).

Dozens of our interviewees had been doxxed - several had their addresses emails and phone numbers shared on extremist websites, and sites designed to facilitate the networked trolling of women. A number - in the US, Sri Lanka, the UK and South Africa - had to move house, region or even country. Digital security and privacy attacks against the women survey respondents included reported exposure to surveillance (18%), hacking (14%), doxxing (8%); and spoofing (7%). This is a significant set of findings that not only indicates increased susceptibility to physical violence for the women involved (because of the public identification of personal details, including physical addresses), but also increased threats for at-risk [confidential sources](#), and their family members.

Al Jazeera’s White House correspondent, **Kimberly Halkett** - a work-related sexual assault survivor - was targeted in a brutal campaign of online violence in 2020 after being doxxed:

***“ They wanted to kill me. They were going to come after my family. My address was posted all over the internet. But the part that really upset me and that rattled me to my core is when they went after my 15-year-old daughter... .They found a post where I talked about her recently doing well in math and I had tagged her, and so they began to blow up her Instagram, saying all kinds of horrible things about her, about me... My daughter had done nothing except be my daughter. ”***

**13%**

**of women survey respondents received threats of violence against those close to them, in the course of online violence episodes**

Finally, nine percent (9%) of our survey respondents reported being threatened financially, including attempts to extort money or assets, hacking into bank accounts, and misrepresentation to financial institutions. In Brazil and the US, doxxing attacks also resulted in unwelcome product orders being delivered to journalists' homes, including pizzas, sex toys, manure, worms, and other offensive material.

## **ii. AT THE INTERSECTION OF MISOGYNY AND OTHER FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION**

Our research highlights the ways in which other forms of discrimination - such as racism, homophobia and religious bigotry - intersect with sexism and misogyny to worsen and deepen women journalists' experiences of online violence. Within our self-selected sample of respondents, while 64% of white women journalists (compared to 73% of women respondents overall) said that they had experienced online violence, the rates for minorities and additionally marginalised communities of women were significantly higher. For example, 81% of women journalists identifying as Black, 86% identifying as Indigenous, and 88% of Jewish-identifying women journalists, reported experiencing online violence. A similar pattern can be seen when analysing the survey data through a sexual orientation lens: while 72% of heterosexual women indicated they had been targeted in online attacks, the rates of exposure for those identifying as lesbian and bisexual women were much higher - standing at 88% and 85% respectively.

### **Rate of offline attacks associated with online violence:**

**20%** All women survey respondents

**53%** Arab women respondents

## Intersectional experience rates of online violence



Highly troubling is the finding that Arab women respondents seem significantly more likely to experience offline attacks, harassment, and abuse associated with online violence than other racial/ethnic groups. Over half (53%) of the women identifying as Arab said they had experienced offline attacks they think were seeded online, compared to 11% for white women and 20% overall.

This pattern of heightened online violence risks faced by women journalists at the intersection of multiple forms of discrimination was confirmed through our interviews, with at least 23 interviewees from around the world highlighting the functions of racist, anti-Semitic, xenophobic, bigoted and sectarian abuse intertwined with misogyny.

Racialised and religiously bigoted misogynistic abuse hurled at women journalists online by the far-right is a global phenomenon and many of our interviewees linked this problem to elected officials creating the enabling environment for this pattern to become entrenched. The broader role of [‘patriotic trolling’](#) and the weaponisation of social media platforms to [advance far-right ideologies](#) has also been explored by other researchers.



*Guardian* US technology reporter Julia Carrie Wong, who covers disinformation and the far-right, has been the subject of multiple disinformation-laced attacks orchestrated by far-right groups which abused her with racist and anti-Semitic slurs. In an early episode, she “...caught the attention of the Daily Stormer back when [it] was on the surface web and had a pretty significant audience,” she said. “That was my first experience with serious online hate because I am Chinese and Jewish. That became a fixation for the writers and commenters at the Daily Stormer who then proceeded to Photoshop me with horns and a Jewish star, and discussed my racial makeup with quite intense and disgusting fervour.”

## Racial vilification and structural racism

Women journalists from diverse backgrounds described additional layers of attack based on their attributed race and ethnicity. These factors made them “low hanging fruit” or “easy targets”. Two Black women journalists we interviewed in the UK palpably demonstrated the structural racism that is amplified through online violence. They both said that being called the ‘N-word’ is normalised. Rianna Croxford, an award-winning BBC Investigations correspondent, described the repetitive pattern of racist abuse: “It’s not the first time somebody called me the N-word. It won’t be the last time. I’ve had racial abuse... ‘monkey’, mocking my appearance in different ways.”

In South Africa, *Daily Maverick* associate editor Ferial Haffajee was [maligned and vilified](#) online in an orchestrated campaign that began in 2016 in response to a corruption investigation she undertook when she was Editor at Large for the local edition of Huffington Post. The attacks on Haffajee leveraged disinformation tactics that included accusing her of being a journalist working for “White Monopoly Capital”. This attempt to discredit her was particularly potent in the South African context. Haffajee describes “raw racism and misogyny” including taunts that she said she had never experienced before, such as “Go back to India, this is not your country.”

## Sectarianism, anti-Semitism, and other forms of religious bigotry

In Northern Ireland, online violence against women journalists has taken a [sectarian](#) turn. Sunday World crime reporter **Patricia Devlin** has been reporting on families affected by the ongoing criminal activities of paramilitary groups for 14 years. She has recently watched “usual levels” of misogynistic abuse become more sectarian and [terrifying](#):

**“ In October 2019, I received a message to my personal Facebook account, and it said ‘Don’t go near your granny’s house in Maghera, Tricia, or you’ll watch your newborn get raped’. And it was signed off in the name of a neo-Nazi group called Combat 18, which in the past has had links to loyalist paramilitaries in Northern Ireland. So it was absolutely traumatising. I have never felt disgust and fear like it. I went to the police. That was the turning point for me. I said, I can no longer brush it off. It’s getting worse. My children are being threatened. ”**

Online violence based on religious and associated cultural factors amplifies the risks to women journalists who are targeted in such ways, especially in countries where perceptions of immorality or blasphemy can trigger backlash, and even offline attacks.

In Pakistan, freelance journalist Youssra Jabeen was accused of blasphemy and ‘defaming Islam’ when she wrote about the fact that female heroes are missing from school textbooks. In the aftermath, she was asked to delete the story as “these accusations can get you traced, killed or kidnapped... It could have affected my workplace and everything,” she said. In Lebanon, TV presenter Dima Sadek told us that being a Shi’ite and publicly criticizing the Shi’ite Hezbollah has made her the victim of many smear campaigns, with trending hashtags such as “ةي طاوولا امي د” or (“Dima the vile”).

Three of our interviewees received anti-Semitic abuse. And Crister Ohlsson, head of security at Sweden’s Bonnier News - which owns the newspaper *Dagens Nyheter* - said much of the harassment against journalists working for their company is based on anti-Semitic abuse emanating from the racist right: “Our Editor-in-Chief is Jewish, the Bonnier family [the publisher] is Jewish. So that’s one dimension of harassment from the extreme right-wing.”

## Gender identity and sexual orientation

In many countries internationally, gender equality is not mandated. In others, commitments to gender equality are being [wound back](#). There are also examples of governments [condemning LGBTQ identities](#). These approaches further intensify the digital risks facing many women journalists.

Sabahat Zakariya, a freelance journalist, points to the intersectional abuse in Pakistan, where sexism and misogyny blend with homophobic vitriol (and where the word ‘khusra’ is used as a slur for ‘trans’): “One thing I get a lot is [abuse] about my short hair. They write comments like, ‘oh, you’re khusri’, or something either homophobic or transphobic. You know they try to find a way to get to you or something that will make you feel insecure about yourself.”

Our survey respondents and interviewees overwhelmingly identified their online attackers as men, but there is an emerging pattern of harassment and abuse coming from women in some contexts - especially with regard to reporting on transgender issues. CNN International reporter **Tara John** experienced a three-day wave of abuse after publishing what she and her editor Inga Thordar say was a balanced [story on trans rights](#) focused on Scotland’s Gender Recognition Act laws. The harassment became so intense that John felt afraid to leave her home:

**“ The moment the piece went out, it exploded. And this was around the start of the lockdown... I’m not really too fussed when people start trolling me... but this time it felt very personal. I had, for about three days, people scrutinising my tweets. One group threatened to sue me on Twitter. Others told me to f\*\*k off, many encouraged pile-ons and others called me a men’s rights activist, a moron, and it just did not stop... Perhaps the intensity of it was, for me as a woman, that these were also women. ”**

### iii. AT THE INTERSECTION OF DISINFORMATION AND MISOGYNY

Disinformation is now inextricably bound up with online violence against women journalists: disinformation methods are [co-opted in misogynistic attacks](#); and [reporting on disinformation](#) and associated themes (e.g., digital conspiracy communities; far-right networks) is a lightning rod for pile-on attacks. This helps explain the high number of women journalists responding to our survey (41%) and participating in our interviews who have experienced online violence in the context of what they perceive to be coordinated disinformation campaigns.

Most of the women we interviewed for this research experienced disinformation-based attacks designed to smear their personal and professional reputations, hold them up to ridicule, and expose them to increased offline risk, thereby both humiliating them and potentially chilling their accountability journalism, while simultaneously undermining trust in their reporting. A significant number of the journalists we interviewed had been “slut-shamed” by attackers seeking to cast doubt on the morals of women working in culturally and socially conservative societies. In particular, journalists based in Latin America, Africa, Asia and the Arab States were targeted in this manner - from the use of deepfakes to false narratives about extramarital affairs, and sexual orientation.

Reporting on disinformation is also increasingly recognised as a trigger for orchestrated, cross-platform online attacks - it was a beat identified by 16% of the women we surveyed as one likely to lead to an increase in harassment and abuse. Among them are those reporting on disinformation, far-right extremism, conspiracy and disinformation networks in Brazil, South Africa, the UK and the US.

Investigative journalist **Brandy Zadrozny** covers disinformation for NBC News and MSNBC in the US. Her reporting has focused on far-right networks, the QAnon conspiracy, and the anti-vaccination movement. She “loves” her job, she said, but the impacts of online violence have led her to devise an exit strategy, and she does not plan to be covering disinformation in five years’ time:

**“ I’m not in a war zone, I’m behind a computer. But the effect of online harassment and bad faith journalism from disinformation agents... is meant to silence us, meant to stop our reporting, meant to scare us. I think it does all of those things... And that takes a real toll on you. ”**

## Nationalism, foreigners and spies

Following publication of her BBC investigation into Nigeria's cough syrup cartels, award-winning Nigerian journalist Ruona Meyer was targeted in a campaign of extreme online harassment which lasted almost a year. Her marriage to a German citizen and her association with the BBC led to her being accused of being a 'foreign agent' by anonymous trolls. "I'm also somebody not to be trusted because I'm not patriotic. Why? Because I have... 'sexually transmitted citizenship'." Trolls - linked, she suspects, to those the investigation exposed - created a fake blog in Meyer's name, posted homophobic content on it and tagged the BBC in an attempt to elicit a negative response from her UK audience. Separate attacks designed to damage her reputation in Nigeria speak to how the country's gender norms may be used to query women journalists' credibility: "Whenever they want to turn the Nigerian public against me they'll say things like I'm wayward, I married a foreigner, my husband's penis doesn't work... What has that got to do with my work as a journalist?"

In Serbia, women journalists are called 'Albanian' and 'Gypsy' as insults, while in Sri Lanka, the *Daily FT's* Marianne David - a veteran business journalist - was called a traitor to her country when she spoke out against women being sexually harassed on the street. Maria Ressa is also falsely accused of being a foreigner and a "CIA agent" in The Philippines.

## iv. TOP SOURCES AND TRIGGERS ASSOCIATED WITH ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN JOURNALISTS

The [impacts of populist politics](#), which were associated with misogynistic narratives and the demonisation of journalists and journalism in every region we studied, are clear in our data. This reflects the increase in politically motivated attacks on journalists and independent journalism around the world. The role of political actors - including politicians, government officials, political party representatives, party members, political operatives, and extremists on the political fringe - as instigators and primary perpetrators of online violence against women journalists is an alarming trend confirmed by our survey respondents, interview participants and big data case studies. For example, over a third (37%) of our survey respondents identified political actors as top sources of online attacks against them. Prime targets of such attacks among our interviewees include: Lebanese journalist Ghada Oueiss; Brazilian journalist Patricia Campos Mello; Maria Ressa in the Philippines; Kimberly Halkett, April Ryan, Julia Carrie Wong, and Brandy Zadrozny in the US;

# 37%

of our women survey respondents identified political actors as top sources of online attacks against them

Carole Cadwalladr, Rianna Croxford, Nadine White, an anonymous political journalist, and BBC Persian journalists in the UK; and Pauli Van Wyk and Ferial Haffajee in South Africa.

In late 2018, **Patricia Campos Mello** started publishing a series of articles investigating disinformation allegations in the context of the Brazilian national elections. The orchestrated [attacks against her](#) involved significant disinformation - including that she traded sexual favours for information. The internet became littered with falsified pornographic images of her, deep fake videos, viral memes, and rape threats:

***“ The type of violence online was very aggressive, it was more false news. There were thousands of memes of a naked woman, or in bra and panties, with my face on it...thousands of memes with different [sexual] positions, movies, videos of me as a ‘prostitute journalist’, and threats such as ‘you should be raped’ ”***

In response, Campos Mello sued Brazilian President Jair Bolsonaro and his Congressman son for moral damages, accusing them of stating or implying that she offered sex in exchange for exclusive information. She won. A Brazilian court found [against the President](#) and [his son](#) in early 2021.

While the UK government has recently announced a [new framework](#) to better train and empower industry leaders and police forces to address online violence against journalists (among other forms of attack), two Black journalists we spoke to had experienced severe online harassment after their journalism was discredited by the UK’s Equalities Minister. **Nadine White** was a reporter at HuffPost UK when the Minister shared screengrabs of the journalist’s emails via Twitter, described her as “creepy and bizarre,” and said her conduct provided “...sad insight into how some journalists operate.” A flood of abuse followed - via email, phone and social media. In response, White and [her editor called for a public retraction](#), and then sent a legal letter to the Minister, asking for an apology:

**“ As a Black woman journalist, coming into this industry as the vast minority within this white-dominated elite base, it’s daunting on so many levels just to get up in the morning each day and do what I do, much less to know that you’ve been targeted by a minister and that’s been effectively sanctioned by the people that run this country, by the powers that run this country. ”**

[The Council of Europe issued an alert about the incident](#) in response to notifications from several press freedom organisations, but the UK Cabinet office dismissed a formal complaint from HuffPost. The UK [replied to the COE alert](#) in March 2021, stating:

*The Government agrees that the harassment of journalists and those working in the media is unacceptable and that is why the United Kingdom has established the National Committee for the Safety of Journalists [and]... a National Action Plan for the Safety of Journalists, which looks at measures to address the abuse experienced. The Government notes that these tweets were not issued from an official government Twitter account, but instead from a personal Twitter account. The Minister is personally responsible for deciding how to act and conduct herself, and for justifying her own actions.*

Our research confirmed that online violence against women journalists comes from State officials, and is increasingly associated with legal harassment. In Pakistan, founder of the Digital Rights Foundation, Nighat Dad, said: “The attacks are made by people declaring affiliation with the ruling party, and in the coordinated campaigns women journalists are referred to as peddlers of ‘fake news’, enemies of the people and accused of taking bribes. Some journalists [have] shared that after official harassment, their social media accounts are bombarded with gendered slurs and abuse by accounts displaying the ruling party’s flag or the Prime Minister’s picture on their accounts.”

Our participants also revealed an alarming trend involving male journalists from competing news organisations and fringe blogs, especially those from the edges of the political spectrum, ‘dogpiling’ specific women journalists. Eight percent (8%) of our survey respondents identified “staff of rival news organisations” among their regular abusers. This

was a particularly noticeable pattern in the US and the UK, with multiple interviewees being subjected to gaslighting attacks from male journalists and commentators featuring pernicious sexism and misogyny.

This behaviour is identifiable as part of a pattern whereby certain influential male journalists trigger or amplify abuse by signalling (e.g., through sharing a tweet from the targeted journalist with critical annotations) to their followers to join the attack on a woman journalist. Niche sites and partisan news media outlets then respond to these cues through blogs, columns or [TV segments](#) - both amplifying the abuse and delivering new participants to the 'pile-on' brigade. In some cases, the attack is then "laundered" or legitimised by mainstream media actors. This type of coordinated online assault on a woman journalist sometimes includes pressuring her employer to [sack her](#). *New York Times* technology reporter **Taylor Lorenz** is a [regular target](#) of such campaigns across multiple platforms:

*“My frustration and anger with all of this is I actually don’t even care about death threats anymore. I’ve had so many people tell me they’re going to come rape me and murder me. I’m kind of immune to them by now. But what I really care about is the reputational harm... Their ultimate goal is to make you seem difficult in some way... They wrote a whole story where it implies that I rape children. It’s insane. But smears like that hurt my credibility in the eyes of the public... And let’s also talk about how the right-wing media amplifies all of it... you would not believe how famous they’ve made me in that ecosystem.”*

## Thematic reporting triggers

As indicated, gender was the story theme most frequently associated with heightened harassment according to our research participants, highlighting the primary function of misogyny in online violence. Lightning rod issues in the category of gender identified by survey and interview participants include: feminism, domestic violence, sexual assaults, femicide, reproductive rights (especially abortion), and transgender issues. The second most likely theme to be met by online harassment and abuse was 'politics and elections', underscoring the role of political attacks on the press in exacerbating journalism safety threats.



In Sri Lanka, an anonymous interviewee described being attacked on Facebook - through her inbox as well as the pages of political parties - in the context of her posting on political issues:

***“ I would be getting these abusive messages, like 100 messages a day, to my filtered inbox...threats all sorts of threats... then other admins reposted it...and sent me messages, voice recordings saying that I would like to do this and this to you, I would rape you, kill you, throw acid at you, kidnap you - beware when you are taking a bus...and that has happened a few times. ”***

Aima Khosa, a news editor at Pakistan's *Friday Times*, became the target of prolific abuse when she reported about the kidnapping of a young Pashtun activist who had made a speech critical of authorities in 2019. In response, social media users accused her of prostituting herself: "... they started calling me a whore, and my mother a whore, too. Some said 'your mother is sponsoring you as a whore', 'what's your hourly rate?'... These created long threads with groups of people, men, talking to each other, enjoying a foul conversation about me, against me, attacking me, accusing me ... One after another."

One journalist in the UK, who chose to remain anonymous, was abused in the context of national political party events she was covering while also coming under sustained attack online. In response, her employer hired bodyguards to protect her. By contrast with most other UK journalists we interviewed, she stated: "...the far left has been the worst for me by a million miles...the most alarming bit to me is about how legitimate and professional people have started using attacks on journalists as part of their campaigns. That's much more alarming to me than the sort of mob stuff either online or in real life, which is horrible." The journalist still regularly receives messages telling her to "f\*\*k off [eds' asterisks] and die."

## v. WHEN ONLINE VIOLENCE SPILLS OFFLINE

A pattern emerged from this research, connecting online violence campaigns and offline attacks, highlighting the escalating threat levels faced by women journalists globally. Aside from inflicting very real psychological injury, targeted online violence poses increasing physical safety risks, especially in the context of campaigns against women journalists that trigger mob reactions. One-fifth (20%) of the women journalists we surveyed reported experiencing abuse and attacks in the physical world that they believe were seeded online. This finding is particularly disturbing given the [emerging correlation](#) between online attacks and the actual murder of journalists with impunity.

Additionally, the fear and anxiety connected to the threat of physical attack is also relevant. Seventeen percent (17%) of our survey respondents indicated that they had felt physically unsafe as a result of online violence, while 4% reported missing work due to the potential for the online attacks they had experienced to morph into physical attacks. Many of our interviewees also discussed feeling compelled to adapt their offline movements and increase their physical security in response to serious threats made online. Some even relocated multiple times, with significant impacts on their families.

In Northern Ireland, *Sunday World* reporter Patricia Devlin has received online death threats in parallel with offline threats - including having her name graffitied on walls in Belfast alongside the crosshairs of a gun. The police also warned her about multiple death threats in 2020. However, 17 months after reporting the aforementioned rape threat against her newborn son to the police there has been no progress on the matter: "It was traced to an individual but he's never been arrested or questioned, and he's actually fled the UK now," she said. "And I have a complaint with the police ombudsman about that case because I feel they inadequately investigated it and their actions led to this person absconding. [He] has a serious history of violence and links to a paramilitary group here in Northern Ireland. He's carried out attacks. He's also involved in the neo-Nazi movement in Scotland - a really dangerous individual."

Also in the UK, BBC Disinformation Reporter Marianna Spring was stalked in connection with her COVID-19 conspiracy debunking reports and social media commentary. A message was left for her on a notice board outside the train station she uses to commute to work. "So when I'm walking to and from work, it's me that has to be hyper-aware, me that can't listen to music or podcasts when I'm walking anymore. It's me that kind of has to forfeit certain freedoms as a consequence of these people being horrible," she said.

# 20%

of all women  
survey respondents  
experienced abuse  
and attacks in the  
physical world that  
they believe were  
seeded online

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# 17%

felt physically  
unsafe as a result  
of online violence

Sri Lankan author and former journalist Sharmila Seyyid was targeted when she suggested in an interview with the BBC that the legalisation of sex work could provide workers some protections. She was then subjected to a [campaign of harassment](#) by self-identified Islamic fundamentalists. Seyyid has been '[raped and killed online](#)', cyber stalked, and had her identity stolen. The online campaign against her climaxed in a group circulating false stories that she was dead, along with Photoshopped images of her apparently mutilated body. The ongoing threats made against her, the hate campaigns and propaganda have had significant psychological, physical and professional impacts on her, she said. Her case illustrates the ways in which online violence can be paralleled by, or trigger, offline attacks: she has been mocked in public - even while shopping; the English academy that she and her sister ran was vandalised; and her parents have had to relocate several times. Eventually, in response to this onslaught, she gave up her journalism career and fled the country to India for three years with her infant son.

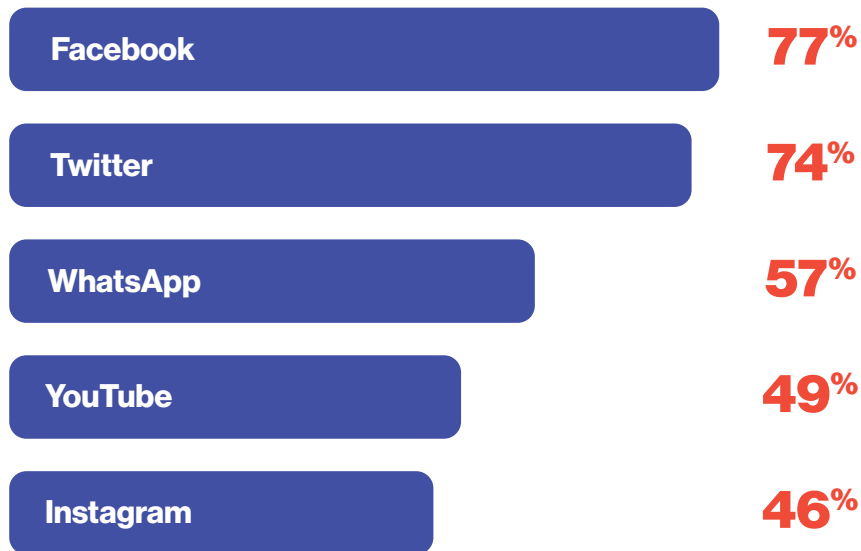
For The Grio's White House correspondent April Ryan in the US, the offline impact of the online violence she experienced included people coming to her home, or waiting for her outside the White House to abuse her when she finished work. As a result, she cannot stop looking over her shoulder: "I'm in therapy and they say it is trauma, not only from Donald Trump, but the minions, always having to...make sure someone's not coming after you," she said. "Will my life ever be the same? No." Two of our other US-based interviewees were physically attacked - punched in the face while walking in the street or reporting on far-right rallies - in the course of their work. Both were investigating radicalised supporters of former President Donald Trump.

It is no wonder, then, that so many of the women we interviewed around the world had resorted to changing their patterns of movement and even going into hiding in response to online violence. Many also increased their physical security, highlighting their sense of vulnerability and their awareness of the potential offline consequences of digital attacks.

## **vi. THE PLATFORMS: VECTORS OF ONLINE VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN JOURNALISTS**

The role of internet communications companies as vectors for online attacks against women journalists cannot be underestimated in an era of digital journalism, networked disinformation, toxic online communities, and populist political actors who weaponise social media and leverage misogyny as tools to demonise journalists. According to our survey, the top five platforms or apps most frequently used by the women survey

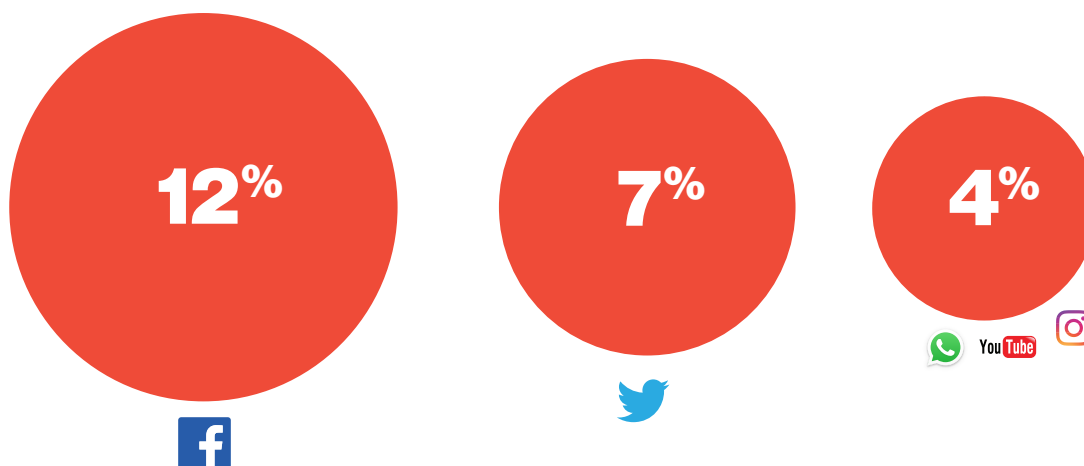
## Top 5 platforms most frequently used by women survey respondents<sup>13</sup>



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## Very unsafe high-use platforms

As indicated by our survey respondents who identified as women.



<sup>13</sup> WhatsApp and Instagram are both owned by Facebook.

respondents in the course of their work were ranked like this: Facebook (77%); Twitter (74%); WhatsApp (57%); YouTube (49%); and Instagram (46%). But Facebook was disproportionately identified as the platform to which respondents most frequently reported online attacks (39%), with Twitter attracting complaints at the rate of 26%. Facebook was also identified as the least safe of these high-use platforms, with 12% rating it “very unsafe” - almost double the number (7%) who rated Twitter “very unsafe”. WhatsApp, YouTube and Instagram were identified as “very unsafe” by 4% percent of respondents.

Considering the role of Facebook and Twitter as major enablers of online attacks against women journalists, the fact that just over a third of our survey respondents had formally reported the problem to Facebook, and just over a quarter to Twitter, probably reflects both a sense of futility frequently associated with such efforts and the general reluctance of the women surveyed to escalate these issues externally. Of particular concern is the fact that even though social media platforms are expected to comply with international human rights standards and have [policies against online abuse](#), when women journalists report online attacks, the platforms often [fail to adequately enforce](#) their own rules.

Our interviewees, across all countries examined in this study, voiced very significant dissatisfaction with the social media companies’ responses to abusive content and accounts that they reported through the platforms’ facilities. The most common experience they mentioned was that the platforms frequently ignored or rejected their requests for the deletion of offensive content or accounts. For example, the South African editor Ferial Haffajee said she was frustrated by what she termed “stonewalling” by Twitter’s automated reporting system, which did not provide allowances for local context or sensitivities. But Filipino-American journalist Maria Ressa reserved her harshest criticism for Facebook, and others pointed to YouTube as the worst offender. Such concerns underpinned the widespread call among our interviewees for these companies to employ many more human moderators with specialist training in human rights, particularly in the areas of gender equality and press freedom.

In order to force the companies into action, **Susanna Skarrie**, Editor-in-Chief of Swedish magazine *Hem och Hyra*, enlisted help from an external consultant to liaise effectively with Google and Facebook about removal of abusive content and reduction of traffic to websites targeting her, her family, and her colleagues with abuse:

***“ It is way too complicated to deal with this yourself and it requires constant work. At first Google said they would stop the search engine optimisation of these websites but then they slip through anyway and are back online again. And Google does nothing. Every time a new subpage emerges we have to contact Google again. ”***

Skarrie’s dealings with Facebook were similar: “We tried to get Facebook to take down these accounts and at first they simply say they are not illegal, although they clearly are. While we did manage to get some of these accounts taken down, they keep reemerging and are used to slander me and my family and other journalists who have investigated them.”

We were also told by interviewees in the Arab States region that the scope and swiftness of platform responses can depend on the amount of attention the journalist/incident is getting, their prominence on the platform (e.g., the number of followers they have), and whether or not international organisations were drawing attention to their cases.

What all this clearly demonstrates is the need for social media companies to stop making reporting or blocking offenders the responsibility of the journalist herself. Instead, the women we interviewed argued that the platforms need to respond proactively to acts of online violence, including gendered violence, and work harder to prevent such expressions and their dissemination, not wait for them to make complaints on a scale deemed necessary to trigger action.

Another significant concern raised by our interviewees was the unevenness with which these companies are detecting and acting on abuse across different languages and countries. While abuse moderation in languages spoken in the companies’ major markets is somewhat better addressed, this is far from being the case in less prominent local languages, including in countries such as Kenya, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, the Philippines and Pakistan. At an intersectional abuse level, interviewees pointed out that being abused in languages such as Persian, Sinhala, Tagalog, Malay, Urdu or Tamil adds to the frustration of trying to report abuse to the platforms which have very limited abuse reporting and moderating capability in these languages, and therefore often do not respond appropriately. This is a point underscored by Pakistani journalist Yousra Jabeen: “There is no point in us reporting anything because we know nothing is going to get done there. They operate in English, so how do you report threats in Urdu?”

In addition to linguistic diversity, the cultural context of online violence is currently not captured by the platforms' algorithms and policy implementation workflows. A particularly pointed example is the experience of the Al Jazeera journalist Ghada Oueiss, who reported to Twitter a fraudulently altered video purporting to show her naked in a jacuzzi, screengrabs from which she said were retweeted 40 thousand times. The video and a series of photos showing her eating a meal with colleagues were stolen from her phone, she alleges, as part of an orchestrated attack designed to discredit her. They were distributed with messages alleging she was an alcoholic, drug-addicted prostitute. Twitter's North American corporate perspective was that the content did not violate their policies. However, being a journalist working in the Arab States, the wide circulation of this stolen and manipulated material put Oueiss at risk of retribution and caused significant reputational damage.

Many of our interviewees and survey respondents said the platforms need to create rapid response units - staffed by multilingual employees with expertise in press freedom and gender-based violence. Others called for the equivalent of a "big red button" that they could hit when they came under sustained attack on a social media platform, or received a serious threat. A series of practical product design solutions [proposed by PEN America](#) represents a potentially effective set of responses at a technical level.

It should also be noted that our interviewees' attitudes to the platforms varied. While Facebook was generally condemned by the women journalists we interviewed, some (e.g., Maria Ressa in the Philippines) reported recent improvements in their dealings with Twitter, while others reserved their harshest criticism for Google and its social video channel YouTube.

There is a pattern of victim-blaming associated with online violence against women journalists, which seeks to make the targets responsible for the toxic behaviour of others, paralleling the sort of treatment women still often encounter in the context of sexual harassment, assault or domestic violence. This is reflected in the "mute, block, report, delete" mantra of internet communications companies that are failing to deal with the problem structurally, and it is also evident within law enforcement and judicial contexts, as well as within news organisations.





## vii. NEWS ORGANISATIONS STRUGGLING TO RESPOND EFFECTIVELY TO ONLINE VIOLENCE

Despite the high incidence of online attacks identified by the women survey respondents, only a quarter (25%) reported incidents to their employer. This likely indicates that: women journalists, who are frequently structurally disempowered and disadvantaged in newsrooms, remain reluctant to draw attention to the impacts of online violence with their employers; and it is only the more extreme instances that cause women journalists to escalate such safety concerns within their workplaces.

The responses that the women survey participants reported receiving when they did report online violence to their employers were, on the whole, very unhelpful. They illustrate the enduring failures within many news organisations to respond appropriately or effectively to the crisis. The most common response received was that no action was taken; the next most frequently identified response was gender-insensitive advice such as “toughen up” or “grow a thicker skin”. A Kenyan journalist who chose to remain anonymous was clarion on this point:

***“ Having a thick skin does not protect you from a personal attack that leads to your data being shared and someone promising that they will rape you. ”***

More disturbingly still, some of our research participants said their employers asked them what they did to provoke the attacks, highlighting the perpetuation of victim blaming, along with women’s subjugation. This also demonstrates a clear need for more gender-sensitive approaches to managing the problem within news organisations.

The women journalists who participated in our survey identified mental health impacts as the most significant consequence of the online violence exposure that they had experienced (26%). And a substantial number (12%) said they had sought medical or psychological help in response. Another 11% said they had taken time off work to recover, and a number of our interviewees experienced severe psychological injury, including PTSD. Indeed, many of our interviewees broke down while discussing their experiences with us, describing how important it was for them to be listened to.

**12%**

**of women survey respondents sought medical or psychological help**

Access to psychological support is therefore crucial, but of the women journalists participating in the survey, only 11% said their employer provided access to a counselling service. In many newsrooms, sometimes even where a protocol for responding to online violence was in place, our research revealed a lack of understanding of the psychological harm caused by such attacks, and a corresponding failure by employers to address the potentially serious mental health consequences for those targeted. Historically, professional cultural barriers have also been significant.

**Kristen Neubauer** from Thomson Reuters said: “There’s this culture and a tradition ... in the news industry... a kind of a macho swagger. [When we first launched our peer network], people were reluctant to talk about problems for a variety of reasons: [they were] concerned about how that would reflect on their career and [thought they might be] pulled off stories or assignments; and ... there’s a stigma [about] mental health and discussing problems. ... And so nobody came to talk to us in the beginning.”

There is also a false narrative that insists that online violence is not “real”, or that it is incomparable to physical violence. In Serbia, journalist Jovana Gligorijević said the lived experience of women journalists exposed to online violence is frequently diminished by those who covered the 1990s conflicts in the former Yugoslavia: “When it comes to taking online threats seriously, that will never happen. I talked to [my colleagues] very openly...to let them know that they need to acknowledge that... I don’t feel safe and that [online violence] happens. The answer I got comes down to one sentence and that is: ‘You know how we were all war reporters, so to us all this is like nothing. [It’s] nonsense compared to what we went through.’”

A number of larger international news organisations have formal, written policies and procedures in place to deal with online violence, particularly in the US and the UK (e.g., the *New York Times*, *The Guardian* and the BBC). Some smaller news organisations, such as Rappler and Vera Files (Philippines), the Center for Investigative Reporting (Sri Lanka) and the *Premium Times*’ Centre for Investigative Journalism (Nigeria) also have effective practices in place to counter gendered online violence despite the absence of formal policies at the time of writing.

However, many of our interviewees - even those working for international news organisations regularly held up as exemplars of good practice - expressed exasperation and a sense of abandonment by their employers when they were in the midst of an online violence storm. This was generally a response to gender-unaware policies, or protocols that had stagnated as a result of a failure to take account of increasing online toxicity, escalating political polarisation and populism, the rise of far-right extremism, and viral disinformation which have taken hold globally since 2016.

One of the most significant grievances expressed by our interviewees was about the victim-blaming and ‘speech-policing’ in evidence as a response to online violence - even in major international news organisations. Sometimes, this was a product of social media policies requiring journalists not to engage with their attackers, or to avoid expressing any kind of opinion about controversial matters, under the misapprehension that this would prevent trolling.

Many of our interviewees also said they wanted a newsroom “point person” whose job it would be to take over their email and social media accounts in the event of a major online violence attack. They need their accounts monitored by a trusted person to minimise further exposure to abuse and threats, preferably by someone who can also catalogue threats and screenshot abuse in case of future legal action. The “point person” should also contact social media platforms on the journalist’s behalf to escalate reports and aid efforts to trace users behind the most serious attacks, they suggested.

One very clear point of agreement across all women journalists experiencing intersectional abuse came back to the culture and leadership in many newsrooms. Sri Lanka’s Methmalie Dissanayake, Deputy News Editor at *Ceylon Today*, suggested that women do not often raise these issues publicly, or in the workplace. Fatima Hussein, president of the Washington Baltimore News Guild and reporter for Bloomberg Law, said that “traumas” are routinely absorbed by women facing intersectional discrimination. “Since there is this lack of diversity in editorial ranks and among reporters, even the notion of complaining about ill treatment is frightening because I want to keep doing my job and I don’t want something to be taken from me. I don’t want my beat to be taken from me.”

South African Editor-in-Chief, Branko Brkic (*Daily Maverick*) may provide a model for (mostly male) editors to follow in responding to gendered online violence against their staff. Investigative journalist **Pauli van Wyk** credits Brkic’s leadership and support for her survival as a journalist when she faced large scale online attacks in the course of her reporting:

**“ [He was] incredibly supportive. He really was quite amazing. He shielded me from attacks and he helped me to move around the country [in response to credible threats] as well. And without my editor, I can tell you now, I probably wouldn’t be a journalist anymore. ”**

