Conclusion and recommendations

This report demonstrates that online violence against women journalists is a global phenomenon, albeit one with uneven impacts that are heightened at various intersectional points, including racism, religious bigotry, sectarianism, homophobia and disinformation. There is a climate of impunity surrounding online attacks on women journalists which must be more urgently and effectively addressed because impunity emboldens the perpetrators, demoralises the victim, erodes the foundations of journalism, and undermines freedom of expression. For too long, the emphasis has been on making women journalists responsible for their own defence and protection, rather than making the perpetrators and instigators, the platform enablers, and law enforcement and media employers accountable.

What more can be done?

These methods of attack are growing more sophisticated, and they are evolving with technology. They are also increasingly networked and fuelled by political actors. This points to the need for responses to online violence to grow equally in technological sophistication and collaborative coordination. Another point highlighted by our research: most women journalists do not report or make public the online attacks they experience, in line with low levels of reporting when it comes to violence against women more broadly. As our research participants also demonstrated, many media employers still appear reluctant to take online violence seriously. This aligns with the evident failure of the internet communications companies - whose social networks, messaging and search services facilitate much of the harassment, intimidation, abuse and threats targeting women journalists - to take effective action to address this freedom of expression and gender equality crisis.

28 recommendations for action

Cross-cutting recommendations for all stakeholders:

● Recognise that the problem of online violence is transnational, and operates in the context of huge and profitable technology companies.

● Facilitate and encourage coordinated, global multi-stakeholder cooperation and exchange of good practice between States, and across professional boundaries, in the interests of effective implementation of holistic measures for tackling online violence against women journalists in all countries.

● Foster and fund collaborative responses involving civil society organisations, journalists' networks, and researchers to gain more granular knowledge about targeted online violence, and to develop collective responses to protect and support women journalists.

● Invest in genuinely independent research into the fast-moving nature and scale of online violence and social media company responses, addressing new platforms (including those providing entertainment and gaming services) and coordinated cross-platform trolling.

● Recognise the intersectional threats associated with gendered online violence, such as racism, religious bigotry and homophobia, and respond accordingly - through policy development and training.

Intergovernmental organisations, including UNESCO, could:

● Ensure that the mechanisms and protocols developed to safeguard journalists and end impunity are appropriate for cases of orchestrated online violence against women journalists.

● Recognise and work to counter the role of officials active in facilitating and orchestrating large-scale and continuous online attacks on women journalists.

● Monitor, research and record evidence, and speak out against, online violence associated with crimes against journalists in a gender-responsive and gender-disaggregated manner.

● Consider initiating a multi-stakeholder 'early warning system' to trigger interventions (including from UN Special Rapporteurs) in cases where there is a significant risk to a target under attack online.

● Develop and provide training and education for law makers, law enforcement agencies and the judiciary to enable them to deal more effectively and appropriately with online violence against women journalists.

Individual States could:

● **Ensure that laws and rights designed to protect women journalists offline are applied equally online as required by UN GA Resolution A/C.3/72/L.35/Rev.1 (2017) and reaffirmed by UN GA A/RES/74/157 (2019), which calls on States to observe the particularities of online threats and harassment of women journalists through: "Collecting and analysing concrete quantitative and qualitative data on online and offline attacks or violence against journalists, that are disaggregated by, among other factors, sex" and "…publicly and systematically condemning online and offline attacks, harassment and violence against journalists and media workers."**

● **Consider introducing protocols and guidelines to act against officials who engage in gendered online violence and ensure prosecution of those who attack women journalists.**

● **Make social media companies more clearly accountable for combating online violence against women journalists.**

● **Introduce regulation that provides victims of online violence with effective access to appeals against platform (in) action, including (where required) an independent, national ombuds facility.**

Political parties and other political actors could:

● **Desist from mounting attacks (on and offline) against women journalists and discourage pile-ons against them.**

● **Punish members and officials who partake in acts of online violence against women journalists.**

Platforms could:

● **Continuously review their policies, algorithms and moderation processes, to address the ever-evolving nature of online violence.**

● **Implement proactive countermeasures against abuse and reverse the onus on the women victims to report the abuse to start with.**

● **Define more effective policies and procedures for detecting and penalising repeat offenders, and stop the same abusers assuming new online identities after temporary suspensions or permanent bans.**

● **Create more effective abuse reporting and content moderation tools that support local languages and are sensitive to local cultural norms, because harassment and abuse received by women journalists is often posted in a minority language, dialect, vernacular or slang.**

● **Develop reporting systems with capacity for escalation for women journalists under attack (and their employers), recognising their particular vulnerabilities and the implications for press freedom, and include the problem and reactions in regular transparency disclosures.**

Media organisations could:

● **Introduce or update protocols and guidelines pertaining to online violence to ensure they are gender-sensitive and gender-responsive, and develop appropriate responses in the context of weaponised social media platforms, viral disinformation, far-right extremism and conspiracy networks.**

● **Hold the platforms to account through critical reporting, and advocacy on media freedom and journalism safety, regardless of commercial ties to the social media companies.**

● **Ensure online safety support is holistic (integrating psychological, digital security, editorial, and legal responses), as well as responsive to intersectional threats/ impacts, and readily available to all staff and freelancers.**

● **Make it clear that it is not appropriate for staff to participate in acts of targeted online violence (including trolling) against women colleagues or those working for competing news outlets.**

Civil society organisations and donors could:

● **Reinforce the call for responses to online abuse of women journalists to conform to international human rights standards.**

● **Partner with journalists, news organisations and researchers on investigative and monitoring projects about how online violence manifests itself, and responses to it.**

● **Help raise awareness and educate women journalists and editors in online safety, effective use of platform tools for countering online abuse, employer advocacy, and legal support.**

A note about our methodologies

The survey method adopted was 'purposive sampling', with 'snowballing' techniques used to generate responses within the international field of journalism. The results, therefore, are not generalisable, although it is legitimate to extrapolate many patterns that may well have wider applicability. To avoid illegitimate or inauthentic responses and ensure data integrity, the survey was distributed digitally via the closed networks of UNESCO and ICFJ, our research partners, civil society organisations focused on media development, journalism safety and gender equality, and groups of professional journalists. The survey ran from September 24th to November 13th 2020 and it garnered 901 valid responses. The survey results were then disaggregated along gender lines, and a subset of data from 714 respondents who identified as women was isolated for analysis. In parallel, we identified 173 interviewees through the survey and institutional outreach, as well as via the networks of the research team. The interviews were conducted face-to-face (where COVID-19 restrictions allowed) and via digital channels. Most of the interviews were undertaken synchronously by the researchers identified in this report. The vast bulk of interviewees chose to be publicly identified after being offered the option to remain anonymous.

For the big data case studies on Maria Ressa and Carole Cadwalladr 2.5 million social media posts were collected over the course of five years and 13 months respectively. Relevant subsets of these collections were identified for network analysis and deeper investigation via Natural Language Processing (NLP). The results were synthesised with the long form qualitative interviews and contextualised via detailed timelines developed through desk research.

The University of Sheffield (UK) granted ethics clearance for the English language version of the survey and English language interviews. Translations of the survey into other languages were conducted by UNESCO and reviewed by ICFJ. The University of Sheffield also provided ethics clearance for quantitative data gathering and analysis associated with the big data case studies featured here.

UNESCO
United Nations
Educational, Scientific and
Cultural Organization

ICFJ
International
Center for
Journalists