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# **The Chilling:** **What More Can News Organisations Do to Combat Gendered Online Violence?**



## **AUTHORS**

Julie Posetti  
and Nabeelah Shabbir

## About this Publication

This is an extracted chapter from a wider UNESCO-commissioned [global study](#) on online violence against women journalists produced by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ). The full-length study will be published in 2022. This chapter seeks to identify the role of news organisations in preventing online violence against women journalists and providing due protection when these attacks do occur. It also provides 26 action-oriented recommendations to help the news industry respond more effectively to the crisis.

UNESCO has previously published two reports from this overarching study, [Global Trends in Online Violence Against Women Journalists: A Global Snapshot of Incidents and Impacts \(2020\)](#) and [The Chilling: Global Trends in Online Violence Against Women Journalists \(2021\)](#).

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**EDITORS:** Julie Posetti and Nabeelah Shabbir

**CONTENT WARNING:** This document includes graphic content that illustrates the severity of online violence against women journalists, including references to sexual violence and gendered profanities. This content is not included gratuitously. It is essential to enable the analysis of the types, methods and patterns of online violence.

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## ICFJ ONLINE VIOLENCE PROJECT LEADERSHIP TEAM

**LEAD RESEARCHER/AUTHOR:** Dr. Julie Posetti. Global Director of Research, International Center for Journalists (ICFJ); Senior Researcher, Centre for Freedom of the Media (CFOM), University of Sheffield; Research Associate, Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism (RISJ), University of Oxford

**SENIOR RESEARCHERS:** Prof. Kalina Bontcheva (CFOM); Prof. Jackie Harrison (CFOM); Dr. Diana Maynard (CFOM); Nabeelah Shabbir, ICFJ Senior Research Associate; Dr. Sara Torsner, University of Sheffield (CFOM)

**RESEARCH ASSOCIATE:** Nermine Aboulez, ICFJ researcher and University of Oregon PhD candidate

## REGIONAL RESEARCH TEAM

**AFRICA:** Assoc. Prof. Glenda Daniels (Regional Lead); Fiona Chawana; Dr. Omega Douglas; Dr. Julie Posetti; Nabeelah Shabbir; Alexandra Willis

**ARAB STATES:** Nermine Aboulez (Regional Lead); Dr. Julie Posetti; Nabeelah Shabbir

**ASIA AND THE PACIFIC:** Assoc. Prof. Fiona Martin (Regional Lead); Liana Barcia; Dr. Ayesha Jehangir; Nirasha Piyawadani; Dr. Julie Posetti; Dr. Jenna Price

**CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE:** Dr. Greta Gober (Regional Lead); Jen Adams; Bojana Kostić; Nabeelah Shabbir

**EUROPE AND NORTH AMERICA:** Dr. Julie Posetti (Regional Lead); Dr. Greta Gober; Prof. Jackie Harrison; Nabeelah Shabbir; Dr. Sara Torsner; Prof. Silvio Waisbord

**LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN:** Dr. Luisa Ortiz Pérez and Dr. Yennue Zárate Valderama (Regional Leads); Dr. Kate Kingsford; Carolina Oms; Dr. Julie Posetti; Nabeelah Shabbir; Kennia Velázquez; and Prof. Silvio Waisbord

**SPECIALIST RESEARCHERS:** Becky Gardiner and Angelique Lu

**UNESCO EDITORIAL COORDINATION:** Saorla McCabe and Theresa Chorbacher.

**PROJECT SUPPORT:** Jen Adams; Fatima Bahja; Heloise Hakimi Le Grand; Mark A. Greenwood; Mora Devi S. Hav; Senka Korać; Juan Mayorga; Eunice Remondini; Erin Stock; Joanna Wright; Mengyang Zheng (ICFJ/CFOM); Johann Bühr; Sara Bonyadi; Annina Claesson; Lou Palin; Dana Muresan; Antonia Eser-Ruperti (UNESCO).

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# What more can news organisations do?

Given the gravity of online violence targeting women journalists demonstrated by the ongoing UNESCO-ICFJ study *The Chilling*,<sup>1</sup> and in the face of new threats such as viral disinformation, far-right social networks, and digital conspiracy communities, it is essential to assess news organisations' responses. Research underpinning this chapter indicates that many newsroom reactions to gender-based online violence appear to have been non-existent, ad hoc, or inadequate. At times, they have even damaged the women journalists targeted.

Large global news organisations sometimes identified as “best practice” exemplars by expert responders interviewed for this study were nevertheless criticised by the journalists interviewed in the course of the research with regard to their responses to the crisis. They were accused of failing to fully understand the gendered nature of the attacks, appreciate the serious psychological impacts, adapt to emerging and increasingly sophisticated threats, and provide effective and holistic support that recognises intersectional risks and hybrid security threats. A number of outlets were also criticised for insensitive and counterproductive victim-blaming and/or speech-restrictive behaviours.

Many of the journalists interviewed for this study expressed exasperation and a sense of abandonment by their employers when they were in the midst of an online violence storm, even when there were credible threats of offline violence associated with these attacks. This was linked to gender-unaware policies, or those that had stagnated as a result of a failure to take account of increasing online toxicity and hostility towards journalists - especially on social media platforms - in the context of escalating disinformation, along with political polarisation and populism. The COVID-19 pandemic further heightened the risks, as news organisations and journalists became more reliant on digital communications platforms for socially distanced reporting and audience engagement (Posetti, Bell, and Brown, 2020)<sup>2</sup>.

This chapter explores the systemic reasons for these failures, identifies impediments to better practice, and develops evidence-based recommendations for more effective responses by news organisations.

There are wider obstacles to more effective newsroom responses (e.g., structural failures associated with Big Tech's management of online violence, and the need for legal and legislative reform). These aspects of the problem have been well-documented as it has evolved (See: Citron, 2014; Posetti, 2014; Löfgren, Nilsson, and Örnebring, 2016; Posetti, 2016; Gardiner, 2016; Posetti, 2017a; West, 2017; Adams, 2018; Gardiner 2018; Chen et al., 2018; Jane, 2018; Posetti, 2018a). Such considerations signal that newsrooms not only have to ensure effective comment moderation on their own websites but, among other things, develop preventive and responsive strategies that recognise that the

<sup>1</sup>This chapter is extracted from the forthcoming book *The Chilling: A global study of online violence against women journalists* (UNESCO: 2022). It builds on a discussion paper published in May 2021

<sup>2</sup>A comprehensive bibliography accompanying this study is published separately by ICFJ [https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/UNESCO%20Annexe%201\\_%20Bibliography.pdf](https://www.icfj.org/sites/default/files/2022-05/UNESCO%20Annexe%201_%20Bibliography.pdf)

primary site of online attacks against women journalists is now social media. Accordingly, there is a need to shift the onus for managing gendered online violence from the individual journalists under attack to the news organisations that hire them, the political actors who frequently instigate and fuel attacks, and the digital services that act as vectors for abuse. News organisations at least have to navigate all these dimensions.

### Emerging signs of a positive shift in news organisations' responses to gendered online violence

As this research was concluding in late 2021, there were fledgling indications that the proforma newsroom response to online attacks against women journalists - "don't feed the trolls" - was being recognised as inadequate. This approach, which has been subject to increasing criticism from women journalists, has had the effect of constraining those who might seek to defend themselves publicly in the midst of an attack, and leaving them feeling more exposed. It has also served to diminish the seriousness of online violence by suggesting that it was possible or necessary to ignore online attacks.

Four indications of more empowering and effective responses from large news organisations and one notable industry collaboration were identified during the final phase of this research:

- **Employers publicly defending their journalists:** Major outlets like the *The New York Times*<sup>3</sup> and *The Washington Post*<sup>4</sup> have used their editorial power to issue public statements of support for women journalists in the midst of targeted online attacks. NBC News<sup>5</sup> and HuffPost UK<sup>6</sup> also issued public statements in defence of their journalists while they were experiencing significant online violence, criticising the perpetrators.

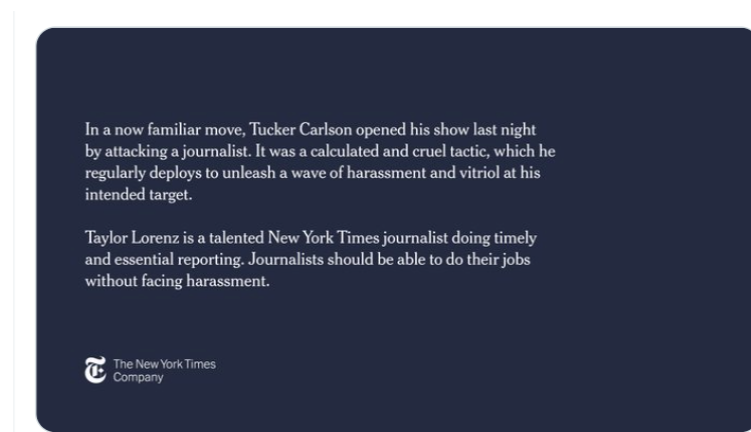


Figure 1: A statement released by *The New York Times* in March 2021, in defence of then NYT technology journalist Taylor Lorenz, after she was targeted on television by Fox News' Tucker Carlson in an attack that fuelled online abuse and harassment.

<sup>3</sup> <https://twitter.com/NYTimesPR/status/1369747504565256193?s=20>

<sup>4</sup> <https://twitter.com/kriscoratti/status/1365040361572339714?s=20>; See also this full page advertisement defending Indian investigative journalist and Washington Post columnist Rana Ayyub in February 2022 <https://twitter.com/wppressfreedom/status/1495395937820282884?s=20&t=QaIGRxIMjKBKs9ysoyj02Q>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.poynter.org/ethics-trust/2020/nbc-news-defends-a-reporter-after-a-bizarre-tucker-carlson-criticism/>

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/kemi-badenoch-twitter-huffpost\\_uk\\_603780a1c5b69ac3d35ca3e5](https://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/entry/kemi-badenoch-twitter-huffpost_uk_603780a1c5b69ac3d35ca3e5)





Figure 2: A statement released by *The Washington Post* in February 2021 in support of White House correspondent Seung Min Kim, who received racist abuse online for what the Post said was practising “basic journalism”.<sup>7</sup>

• **Increasing attention on intersectional threats:** News organisations like the BBC, CNN, CBC (Canada), and Al Jazeera acknowledged the need to increase security and consider intersectional threats in the context of escalating online violence associated with COVID-19-related digital conspiracy networks: “We know these attacks are more often aimed at women and journalists of colour, so we want to make sure we have particular support for those groups and are looking at what this could be,” BBC Director of News and Current Affairs Fran Unsworth told staff in mid-2021 (Townsend, 2021).

• **New roles created in newsrooms to more effectively address the crisis:** For example, the UK’s biggest commercial news publisher Reach PLC advertised for an Online Safety Editor in June 2021. The Group Editor-in-Chief said: “We will not allow our journalism to be silenced or our colleagues to live in fear”<sup>8</sup> (Tobitt 2021b).

In October 2021, former Yorkshire Post Newspapers head of news Dr Rebecca Whittington was hired by Reach PLC in ‘the industry-first role’ of online safety editor (Tobitt, 2021d). Six months into her role, she described how she was creating an abuse database of sorts to improve understanding and prevent prevalent abuse types, ensuring protocols and procedures were “up to scratch”, and seeking to update abuse reporting and newsroom awareness systems, while also taking the audience’s safety into account (Tameez, 2022).

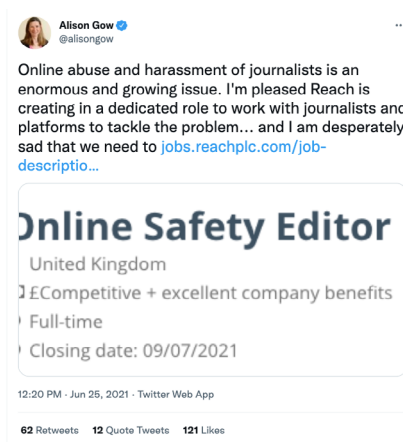


Figure 3: Tweet from Alison Gow, Regional Editor in Chief (Digital) for Reach PLC in June 2021.

<sup>7</sup> Tweet from Seung Min Kim in February 2021, who was told in an email to ‘Go back to China, b\*tch’ <https://twitter.com/seungminkim/status/1364762782554587141>

<sup>8</sup> In October 2021, former Yorkshire Post Newspapers head of news Dr Rebecca Whittington was hired in ‘the industry-first role’ of Online Safety Editor <https://pressgazette.co.uk/reach-hire-industry-first-online-safety-editor-tackle-abuse/>

- **Reporting on the crisis:** Various outlets (detailed later in this chapter) have published editorials and reportage reflecting on the first findings from this study, decrying gendered online violence, critiquing the platforms' role in the crisis, and calling for new approaches to combat it. This was an important demonstration of advocacy journalism focused on a press freedom and journalism safety threat directly affecting their own staff.

- **Canadian news industry collaborative campaign:** In late 2021, Canadian news organisations collaborated on an industry initiative designed to respond to gender-based online violence against journalists. Coordinated by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and Radio Canada, the effort involved a conference designed to facilitate a collaborative industry response to the crisis in Canada (CBC/Radio-Canada, 2021), and specially commissioned research (Ipsos, 2021).

## i. Methodology and research context

In order to evaluate news organisations' responses to gendered online violence against journalists and develop recommendations for better newsroom practice, a large data corpus associated with this study has been synthesised and analysed for this chapter. It consists of:

- Responses to a UNESCO-ICFJ survey (conducted in late 2020)<sup>9</sup> focused on questions regarding newsroom practices and journalists' experience of them;
- 15 detailed country case studies<sup>10</sup> produced to underpin this study which scanned news organisations' responses in diverse national contexts;
- Longform interviews with 113 international journalists and editors exposed to online violence or tasked with managing it<sup>11</sup>, and;
- 20 additional interviews (conducted specifically for this chapter<sup>12</sup>) with key news organisation responders, and external digital safety experts who deliver online violence defence training to newsrooms. These interviewees - 12 women and 8 men - are senior editors and managers from newsrooms and investigative journalism organisations in six countries, as well as senior members of civil society and investigative journalism organisations based in Europe and North America.<sup>13</sup>

## ii. Hits and misses: Assessing newsroom responses to gendered online violence

Although 73% of women survey respondents to the [UNESCO-ICFJ global survey](#) underpinning this study said they had experienced online violence in the course of their work, only a quarter (25%; n=179) had reported this to their employers. This indicates that many women journalists, who are frequently structurally disempowered and disadvantaged in newsrooms, only escalate the more extreme instances of online violence with their employers. **The reluctance to report and escalate when attacks occur can be linked to systemic failings such as unsympathetic, misogynistic, patriarchal or otherwise hostile workplace cultures, poor**

<sup>9</sup> <https://en.unesco.org/themes/safety-journalists/women-journalists/global-survey-results>

<sup>10</sup> Produced by regional research collaborators identified on the inside cover.

<sup>11</sup> These interviews were conducted by chapter co-author Julie Posetti, co-editor Nabeelah Shabbir and several of the international researchers identified in the attributions at the start of the chapter.

<sup>12</sup> Chapter co-author Becky Gardiner conducted these interviews.

<sup>13</sup> 901 self-selecting international journalists, editors and experts responded to the survey fielded by UNESCO and ICFJ between September and November 2021. 714 of them identified as women and it is that cohort whose responses are reflected in the statistics presented in this publication.

leadership, a lack of clear and established reporting procedures, and/or a lack of a formal protocol to deal with the problem.

The survey respondents highlighted a double impediment to effective action from media employers: low levels of access to systems and support mechanisms for targeted journalists, and low levels of awareness about the existence of measures, policies and guidelines addressing the problem (Posetti et al., 2020a). If women under attack do not know how, nor to whom, they should report such attacks, or have reason to believe that their alerts will not be responded to sensitively or effectively - possibly even impacting negatively on their careers - they might resign themselves to silence, and silence can effectively perpetuate the failure to develop adequate systems.

The responses that the women survey participants reported receiving when they did report online violence to their employers were, on the whole, very unhelpful. 10% (n=71) of the respondents said their employers did nothing at all. Very few women who reported online violence were offered support by their employer: only seven respondents were offered counselling, time off work to recover, or physical security. It is concerning that so few participants who reported online violence were offered psychological support, considering the top ranked impact of online harassment and abuse indicated by survey respondents was mental health issues (26%; n=186). Meanwhile, only 21 respondents who had reported online violence incidents said they were given any digital security support. This highlights a significant gap in newsroom responses considering the risks to their journalists and their sources posed by digital security threats, along with the propensity for doxxing to lead to physical violence. One in five women journalists surveyed (n=119) said they had experienced offline attacks, harassment and abuse associated with online violence.

### **Victim-blaming, speech-restriction and punitive social media policies**

According to interviewees and survey respondents participating in this study, there remains a pattern of victim-blaming associated with online violence against women journalists. This in effect makes the targets responsible for the violent behaviour of others and puts the onus on them to respond to the problem by modifying their behaviour to protect themselves. It is a parallel to treatment women still often encounter in the context of sexual harassment, assault or domestic violence. Ten per cent (10%) of survey participants said they were told to “toughen up” or “grow a thicker skin” (see also: Chen et al., 2018) when they reported online violence to their employers. This reflects a failure within many news organisations to take the crisis of gendered online violence seriously as a workplace safety threat (Jane, 2018).

A Kenyan journalist who chose to remain anonymous was clear 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”. Northern Irish freelance crime and investigative journalist Patricia Devlin, who was a staff reporter at *Sunday World* when she was interviewed in mid 2021, also spoke with clarity on the futility of the standard “grow a thicker skin” advice:



The last two years, I have lived every week of my life getting abused and then getting death threats. And [you] just start to say to yourself, is this ever going to end, is it ever going to stop? I just feel hopeless. ...Can I continue on like this? I can't do my job without being on social media, so I can't come off social media. That's not the answer. ...And now the death threats. I just can't see how I can sustain that... . You try [to] brush it off. And I'm very thick skinned. But wouldn't it be good if I just didn't have to go through that?

Fourteen of the women survey respondents and several interviewees said their employers had asked them what they did to provoke the attacks, highlighting the perpetuation of victim-blaming, along with women's ongoing subjugation.

Corporate social media policies that problematically restrict journalists' reactions to attacks and incorporate punitive measures including disciplinary action and dismissal (Tobbitt, 2020e), are becoming more commonplace globally. These policies tend to focus on the obligations of the journalist rather than preserving their safety, freedom of expression, or dignity. Sometimes they require journalists to avoid engaging with their attackers, expressing opinions, and discussing controversial matters. For example, the BBC's social media rules for journalists<sup>14</sup>, include instructions to: "always treat others with respect, even in the face of abuse" and tell journalists not to "be drawn into ill-tempered exchanges" and "avoid 'virtue signalling'". They were highlighted as problematic by a number of interviewees. These constraints may be misconstrued by news executives as appropriate measures to avoid escalating episodes of online violence. However, such rules can undermine the agency of women who are under attack, and contribute to a damaging feeling of powerlessness, potentially exacerbating mental health impacts suffered due to online violence.

Five BBC, *Washington Post* and *New York Times* journalists interviewed expressed concern about their freedom of expression being chilled by their own news organisations, and the sense of disempowerment that resulted. One said the stringent guidelines which discouraged engagement with, or criticism of, those who attack journalists left her feeling almost like her employer was targeting her; another said she felt she was being 'tone-policed', "so I cannot be too aggressive with somebody else, even if I'm just defending myself". A third said she had been disciplined for her tweets, even in the context of ongoing online attacks which involved partisan journalists from competing news outlets campaigning for her dismissal.

Research for this study surfaced several examples of women journalists being sidelined, disciplined, suspended and even fired in the midst of pile-ons, which they believe was a result of such policies, or the insensitive implementation of them. Among them are the cases of Lauren Wolfe at *The New York Times* (Gabbatt, 2021), Amy Wilder at AP (Place, 2021), and Felicia Sonmez at *The Washington Post* (Holpuch, 2020). These episodes, along with anonymous accounts gathered

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.bbc.co.uk/editorialguidelines/guidance/individual-use-of-social-media>

from women journalists in the course of research for this study, suggest that it might be appropriate for online violence response teams to sensitise editorial leadership to the need to support women under fire in such circumstances, and to view patterns of behaviour that might otherwise result in social media policy breaches in the context of devastating work-related online violence.

Additionally, there is an element of inconsistency in the application of these policies. This is a point that *Guardian* and *Observer* investigative journalist Carole Cadwalladr has raised with her editors: “The news organisation’s response to attacks on journalists has been ad hoc and inconsistent. It has publicly supported some individuals on some subjects, but not others”. *The Washington Post*’s Felicia Sonmez also underlined this point.



Figure 4:<sup>15</sup> Tweet from Felicia Sonmez, sent in March 2021, critical of what she describes as the double standards which led to her being put on administrative leave from *The Washington Post* over her tweets regarding a news story about sexual assault allegations.<sup>16</sup>

There are also cultural factors which need to be considered when assessing action taken against women journalists in response to their online abuse. In Pakistan, for example, Gharidah Farooqi - a respected TV anchor - lost her job after online slurs about her sexual morality, which were followed by accusations of bias in her coverage. It took her 18 months to find another job in the news media (Butler and Iftikhar, 2020). Nigerian documentary reporter Ruona Meyer, who has worked for a range of news organisations, said she had chosen to remain freelance so that she could respond to racist and misogynistic online violence on her terms, including by using counter-speech “without fear of breaching employer guidelines regarding online conduct”.

This highlights how newsroom protocols designed to address online abuse and harassment can be undercut by guidelines on journalists’ use of social media. Michelle Stanistreet, Secretary General of the UK’s National Union of Journalists (NUJ), said that “too many employers were ignoring gendered online violence as an aspect of their duty of care for their employees, while taking punitive action against women under attack.” The pendulum needs resetting, she said, relaying instances where being abused and harassed had landed journalists “in hot water when they snap or retort back on social media”. This involved employers stepping in “from the perspective of: you’re somehow damaging our reputation and we’ll resort to disciplinary processes”.

<sup>15</sup> <https://twitter.com/feliciasonmez/status/137555534879866894>

<sup>16</sup> Sonmez, a sexual assault survivor, was placed on administrative leave for tweeting about historic sexual assault allegations against Kobe Bryant at the time of his death in early 2020. Sonmez said she received thousands of abusive social media messages, including death threats, and had to flee her home after she was doxxed. See: <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/washington-post-guild-defends-reporter-placed-on-leave-after-tweeting-about-rape-allegation-against-kobe-bryant/>

*The Guardian* and *Observer's* Carole Cadwalladr called for a “two-way relationship with news organisations” and said a “rapid response unit” could ensure that when a journalist is attacked, the “obligation” comes back to employers as well.<sup>17</sup> Guidelines to this effect could therefore be embedded in online violence response protocols. US sports journalist Julie DiCaro, who received rape and death threats for reporting on the case of an ice hockey player’s sexual assault court case, also referred to the need for a two-way social media policy: “What can employees expect from their bosses when online harassment begins? Will you help protect me? Will you back me up if I go to law enforcement? Will you provide security for me if I need it? What will you do if you find one of your employees is using social media to troll people? Will you use your relationship with platforms like Twitter to advocate for me? Can I take a mental health day [leave] if I’m in the middle of a storm of abuse?” (DiCaro, 2021)

Globally, 38% (n=271) of the survey respondents described reacting to online violence in ways that made them less visible. When responses are triggered by employers - however well intentioned - the situation can be a double-edged sword. After reporting instances of online violence to their employers, some survey respondents were told to take time off social media, others were taken off air or had their bylines removed. In two cases, a woman journalist who had come under attack had her byline handed to another journalist on an exclusive story as a ‘preventive’ measure. While these measures are sometimes recommended to help mitigate the trauma, they can also serve to render women journalists invisible, and undermine their ability to do their jobs, while also limiting career development.

### **Concerns about freedom of expression can lead to institutional reluctance to confront online violence**

Traditionally, news organisations are reluctant to take action (including legal action) associated with limiting speech because of the propensity for powerful actors to use legal mechanisms (e.g., defamation law) to chill critical independent journalism. This has led to a false binary between ‘free speech’ on the one hand, and the protection of press freedom and the UN-mandated right to safely practice journalism (online and offline) on the other hand<sup>18</sup>. However, freedom of expression rights enshrined in international law do not uphold the right of a person to use hate speech and threats of violence to limit the speech of another person. This is particularly relevant in the case of journalists, who also frequently benefit from press freedom protections enshrined in international law.

Nevertheless, there is a reluctance for news organisations to call out abusers. Particularly in the US where ‘First Amendment absolutism’ makes women journalists reluctant to report online violence, according to those interviewed. *The New York Times’* Jason Reich articulated this problematic tension from an organisational perspective:

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**As First Amendment organisations, we’re obviously incredibly hesitant to [support anything] that can be used to restrict speech. [...] we are very hesitant even to try and get... a Twitter account banned or something [...] *The New York Times* does not want to be in the**

<sup>17</sup> See the big data case study on Carole Cadwalladr published in conjunction with this study.

<sup>18</sup> See detailed discussion in Chapter 5.0.

## business of banning voices. So that's a major obstacle for us. But it's one that's, you know, self-imposed.

This “hesitancy” is heightened by consciousness of power asymmetries between news organisations and many individuals, Reich said.

### **Sexual harassment and structural sexism discourage reporting of online violence incidents**

Patriarchal norms still permeate newsrooms internationally. While women dominate journalism schools and entry level positions in many newsrooms, they remain seriously underrepresented in top management positions where editorial and workplace policies are devised (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2020). They also continue to be subjected to physical manifestations of sexual harassment and assault in the course of their work - including at the hands of colleagues and supervisors. Some interviewees described groping and sexual harassment as being commonplace in their newsrooms. This makes reporting online violence both intimidating and futile for many women journalists around the world. Where women's physical safety within the workplace is not taken seriously, it is unlikely that online violence perpetrated by outside actors will be addressed. “In some countries, workplace harassment is such a problem; that would need to be tackled first,” Pamela Morinière of the International Federation of Journalists said.

However, even where overt sexual harassment from colleagues within the workplace is not tolerated, sexism in newsroom cultures may still prevail, making women journalists reluctant to report online violence and doubtful that it will be taken seriously if they do so. Many interviewees spoke of prevailing structural workplace inequality, saying they struggled to be given ‘hard news’ roles, for example. Others referred to the ongoing power of the newsroom ‘boys club’ which works against the promotion of women journalists to leadership roles. For example, Lebanese women journalists reported having to constantly fight being further marginalised within their male-dominated profession in a context where stigmatisation and sexualisation of women is entrenched (Melki and Farah, 2014; El Hajj, 2019). One of the Lebanese journalists interviewed, Youmna Fawaz found through her editorial supervision work that harassment often begins within the news organisation for consistency itself, coming from people in managerial positions.

### **Barriers to addressing intersectional abuse**

One very clear point of agreement among the women journalists interviewed who experienced intersectional online abuse<sup>19</sup> came back to the role of newsrooms. Sri Lanka's Methmalie Dissanayake, Deputy News Editor at Ceylon Today, who has been accused online of wanting “to ruin Buddhism and Sri Lankan culture”, suggested one reason Sri Lankan newsrooms were not addressing online abuse against women reporters was because journalism was not highly professionalised across the country and it was easier for them “to find new people rather than keeping...the [journalist] who faced this kind of violence”.

In the US, a reporter who asked to be anonymous, was labelled a “terrorist... promoting Islam or Sharia law” and suffered other online abuse after interviewing

<sup>19</sup> Intersectional online violence refers to attacks that target women who experience multilayered forms of discrimination e.g., racism and religious bigotry in addition to misogyny.

local Muslim groups. Fatima Hussein, president of the Washington Baltimore News Guild at the time of her interview for this study, said that those “traumas” have to be “absorbed” by women journalists from marginalised ethnic communities: “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. And so I think there’s an expectation that you have to deal with it.”

At the BBC, despite the existence of a well-established protocol for responding to the mental health impacts of online abuse, the researchers identified gaps regarding intersectional abuse, reflecting a failure to properly account for the additional risks and impacts faced by women journalists from diverse backgrounds in an organisation lacking in diversity (James, 2021). On Twitter and via Gmail, Black journalist Rianna Croxford was called a “monkey”: “the N-word... mocking my appearance in different ways or criticising my ability... ‘That’s crap’. ‘Shouldn’t be on air’, ‘isn’t qualified’...”. The online violence experienced by Croxford came amidst intimidation from political actors and targeting by partisan news media and fringe blogs, which led to a political campaign for her dismissal. “I felt like I had to be silent because it’s the BBC. You don’t want to bring it into disrepute,” she said. “As a journalist of colour, I sometimes feel you’ve got to work harder, that you can’t afford to make mistakes, and this feeling suddenly felt amplified.”

Fran Unsworth, BBC Director of News and Current Affairs, wrote to staff in June 2021, after a white male journalist was physically attacked by anti-lockdown protesters, which radiated to other reporters who were doxxed and harassed online, including on channels such as Telegram. Unsworth acknowledged the additional exposure of women and journalists from minority ethnic groups to online violence, and she said efforts would be made to adapt support mechanisms to recognise this (Townsend, 2021).

When old tweets from *Guardian US* Senior Reporter Julia Carrie Wong were surfaced by reporters at Breitbart, her editors put out a statement supporting her. “[Which] I was also appreciative of, because they made it clear that they were on my side and that they weren’t going to bow down to Breitbart calling me racist,” Wong said. At the BBC, Rianna Croxford later had tweets from her time as a student unearthed by trolls (and used by prominent politicians) as ‘proof’ that she was not politically impartial following an article she had written. Croxford said she had never been found to have breached editorial guidelines in her time as a BBC journalist. The BBC social media guidelines provide for this scenario; stating that tweets from a journalist’s life before they worked for the corporation are not taken into account when enforcing social media policies that demand impartiality. A spokesperson for the BBC publicly defended her “invaluable reporting”, noting her tweets before joining the company were “completely irrelevant” (Revoir, 2020). Nevertheless, at the time Croxford was advised to stay off social media and deprive the trolls of oxygen.

In another example highlighting the need for greater attention on intersectional threats in existing protocols, a reporter from a minority racial background in the UK who wished to remain anonymous, told a researcher that she was threatened by far-right racist Tommy Robinson. He had wrongly identified the reporter as another journalist from a minority background who had reported on him, and he had sent a threat which she said warned that he would “come to my house and wake up my kids”. The woman said her news editor had responded to the threat she had received from him by emailing senior leadership, including the managing editor, who contacted Robinson’s legal representative to demand that he desist.



On her own initiative, the reporter contacted the police, and was advised by both them and her newsroom to scrub her private details from the internet, the onus being on her to do this. Robinson went on to be convicted of stalking another British journalist and her partner<sup>20</sup> (PA Media, 2021). Speaking with hindsight, the journalist told the researchers that while it was “helpful” that her employer showed her online abuse policy documents at the time, the company should have escalated the case to the police on her behalf, recognising the compound risks she faced. **The targeted woman suffered additional exposure to psychological injury through intersectional abuse.** She accepted counselling offered by her employer at a later stage, unconnected to this event, and only then realised how badly affected she had been by the experience.

## **Failure to adequately address mental health impacts**

The UNESCO-ICFJ survey revealed very low levels of access to practical or psychological support within news organisations for targeted journalists. Globally, only 14% (n=100) of respondents said they knew that their employer had a policy about online violence or had been issued guidelines about how to deal with it. The same small percentage said they were able to contact a digital security expert who could assist them. Only 17% (n=121) knew that they could access legal support and just 11% (n=79) said that their employers provided access to a counselling service, while 20% (n=143) said they had access to a gender-sensitive peer support network. **“From all the social media guides I’ve seen, there’s nowhere where it prioritises the mental health of each individual journalist in dealing with social media trolls, or the gendered nature of the harassment.”** Nigerian documentarian Ruona Meyer said.

Only 50 survey respondents had been offered any training in their workplace to deal with online violence. Many interviewees and survey respondents either did not find the training that was on offer particularly valuable or gender-sensitive, or they had difficulty accessing it. Gladys Rodríguez Navarro, freelance journalist in Mexico, said when employers do give permission for training, the caveat is that it is on unpaid days off. On the other hand, a British digital safety consultant who asked not to be identified said journalists she trains in the US and UK can be blasé and question “why they need to know this”.

Even in those newsrooms where a formal protocol for responding to online violence was in place, this study revealed a lack of understanding of the psychological harm caused by gendered and intersectional online violence, and a corresponding failure to address the mental health consequences for those targeted. Hannah Storm, former International News Safety Institute Director, highlighted the need for an emotional ‘flak jacket’ to address gendered online violence: **“We wouldn’t send somebody to war without a physical flak jacket. We shouldn’t be sending anybody anywhere where their mental health might be compromised without an emotional flak jacket. That means talking to them about how their work is going to impact them and thinking about resources and risk mitigation in advance”** (Tobitt, 2021a).

At the BBC there are around 100 mental health “first aiders” – members of staff who have undergone trauma risk management (TRiM) training, and can offer peer-to-peer support. First aiders are identifiable by their different coloured lanyards, and their names are publicised on the intranet. The aim is to have one first aider in every team, and in every bureau internationally. Like many large news organisations, the BBC also has a well-established employee assistance programme, run by a third party. Through this programme, journalists (and their families) can access professional help of various kinds, including counselling.

<sup>20</sup> See Chapter 2.5 (When online violence spills offline) and Chapter 5.0 (Legal and Normative Frameworks for Combating Online Violence Against Women Journalists) to learn more about UK reporter Lizzie Dearden’s experience with online violence” cos its odd otherwise.

Thomson Reuters also has a long-running global trauma programme for journalists. Originally set up 15 years ago to support journalists who worked in war zones, this service was expanded in 2015 with the addition of a peer network, which is independent of management, and supervised by a third party provider of trauma support. In 2021, there were 60 people in the network, offering peer-to-peer support to journalists.

Suspicion of authority, corporations and Human Resources departments make peer support networks an important bridge to professional psychological support for women journalists enduring online violence, according to Michael Christie, General Manager, Global Logistics & Security at Thomson Reuters. Kristen Neubauer, also from Thomson Reuters, described a macho "swagger" that she said fed a stigma associated with mental health issues. This is one of the industry impediments to more effective responses to the problem of gender-based online violence against women journalists.

Another kind of newsroom 'swagger' is the type that insists that online violence is not "real", or that it is incomparable to physical violence. Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro has said women journalists are "targeted in cyberwars the same way they are in kinetic wars" (The Economist, 2019). One of the Serbian journalists interviewed - Jovana Gligorijević of Vreme - said that the lived experience of women journalists exposed to online violence is frequently diminished by those who covered conflicts in the former Yugoslavia in the 1990s:

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**[W]hen it comes to taking online threats seriously, that will never happen. I talked to [managers] very openly... to let them know 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 is] nonsense compared to what we went through'.**

In an industry in which the idea that journalists can develop PTSD after being exposed to traumatic events has only recently been acknowledged (Smith et al., 2015), online violence (most often experienced by women journalists) may be dismissed as trivial compared to the "real" violence that hard news reporters (still mainly men) face. However, "real" and "virtual" harms cannot be separated and psychological injury needs to be understood as "real" harm (Lumsden and Morgan, 2017; Global Fund for Women, 2019; Chocarro et al., 2020; Posetti et al., 2020b, 2021). Former CNN Executive Editor, Digital Inga Thordar said: "There has to be, in my view, a total review of how we are handling these cases. Are we understanding that the psychological impact is just as great as you kicking me in the shin?" The fact that online violence is disproportionately experienced by women journalists, and that the most frequently reported impacts are psychological, may help explain the low priority that is often given to tackling the problem by media employers, even when its existence is acknowledged.

## Recognising and responding to disinformation and political extremism related to online violence

According to the UNESCO-ICFJ survey, 41% (n=293) of female respondents said they had been targeted in online attacks that they believed were connected to orchestrated disinformation campaigns. Such attacks often involve attempts to discredit the professionalism of the journalists targeted, and this damage radiates to news organisations, contributing to the erosion of trust in journalism and facts in general (Posetti 2017b; Posetti 2018a; Posetti, Maynard and Bontcheva, 2021). These are the sorts of challenges that newsrooms on the frontlines of the disinformation war, such as Rappler in the Philippines, The Quint in India, and Daily Maverick in South Africa, have responded effectively to through editorial and strategic advocacy efforts (Posetti, Simon and Shabbir, 2019a; 2019b). Fundamental to their responses has been an understanding about how viral disinformation and political extremism are bound up with gendered online violence.

Julia Carrie Wong's reporting for *Guardian US* has led to the de-platforming of several white nationalist groups on Facebook. After a year of constant online violence, including rape and death threats, combined with isolation due to COVID-19 lockdown, Wong experienced an escalation of psychological trauma after receiving graphic images associated with one of her investigations. "That also just really triggered some bad mental health consequences for me and a return of the panic attacks. And basically some conversations with my editors that soon I am not going to report on tech anymore." She said *The Guardian* has been very supportive and understanding about her need to take time off.



Figure 5: Twitter thread from March 2021.<sup>21</sup>

According to Wong, who was a freelancer prior to joining *Guardian US*, employment insecurity, weak labour laws, and the absence of universal health care in the US can exacerbate the impacts of gendered online violence, something employers should be aware of: "So much of the way that this stuff works is [about] attacking your sense of safety as far as your livelihood goes, trying to get people fired. You know, losing your job in this country obviously means losing your health care. It can just be catastrophic".

In August 2020, recognising the real damage caused by disinformation campaigns targeting news organisations and those who write and report for them, Guardian Media Group took legal action to shut down a website generating fake *Guardian* headlines and byline profiles which were being shared with the trending Twitter hashtag #TrollingTheGuardian. Carole Cadwalladr was one of the journalists targeted by the now defunct guardianmeme.com website. At the time of her interview for this study in early 2021, Cadwalladr said that her employer fails to adequately recognise, understand or respond to disinformation as a factor in the attacks she endures. However, Gill Phillips, director of editorial legal services for Guardian Media Group, pointed out that when it comes to the disinformation beat or reporting on political extremism and being targeted in an orchestrated far-right attack, there are limits to what a news organisation can practically do, unless a threat can be deemed as "serious" and imminent: "If things look like they're getting someone outside your door physically or the equivalent of that online, then definitely you feel you can move that into the criminal sphere."

<sup>21</sup> Twitter thread by Julia Carrie Wong about her experience of online harassment: <https://twitter.com/juliacarriew/status/1369504775545397252>

At the BBC, while the Infosec (information security) team can flag threats in disinformation reporter Marianna Spring's public Twitter timeline, initially it fell to her to sift through the torrents of abuse and threats that often come via her personal devices and private messaging channels. The inability of the BBC to monitor the direct messages Spring receives on social media platforms due to privacy concerns also hampers their responses. This is a challenge for media employers: some of the worst online violence directed at women journalists comes via closed channels like Facebook Messenger and direct messages on Twitter and Instagram, but legitimate source protection and privacy protocols can prevent routine monitoring of journalists' private messaging spaces by employers. Spring said, however, that it is "problematic" that the onus was on her to deal with this.

While Marianna Spring has been the subject of offline stalking connected to online attacks, she was only recently provided with a BBC phone to allow her to better separate her personal life from her work and help protect her from doxxing. Another BBC employee, who wished to remain anonymous, explained that in her newsroom, she and her colleagues had been increasingly exposed to online violence and doxxing because they were required to use their own devices for socially distanced reporting and social media-based investigations during the pandemic. In a number of instances, she said, women journalists on her team had been harassed on their personal mobile devices by sources they had contacted which also exposed them to a real risk of doxxing.

A freelance journalist, based in Europe, told researchers she personally absorbed the costs associated with replacing her digital devices after being hacked by a suspected foreign State actor, despite being continuously employed by a major news organisation for over 15 years.

### **Formal online violence protocols are a good start, but no guarantee that journalists will be supported**

The expert trainers and consultants interviewed for this chapter observed that all newsrooms should have a written protocol for dealing with online attacks, but the majority did not yet have one in place. The journalists and editors interviewed and surveyed for the broader study echoed this perspective, indicating that many newsrooms do not have any clear protocols, policies, or guidelines in place to tackle online violence against women journalists. Some journalists mentioned ad hoc institutional support, but most said that the newsrooms they worked for did not see online violence as a workplace safety issue (Jane, 2014). There was little institutional understanding of either the mechanisms or the consequences of the threats, abuse and harassment that women journalists experience. And where the targets did get support, it was most often informal or came from external networks.

A number of larger international news organisations do have formal, written policies, guidelines and procedures in place to deal with online violence, particularly in the US and the UK. But a protocol for responding to online violence does not equate to an effective prevention or protection mechanism. Michelle Stanistreet from the UK's National Union of Journalists (NUJ) said that there is often a "gap between written policies and effective practice". When asked for examples of good practice, the expert trainers and consultants interviewed for this chapter all identified the same few (Western) news organisations. However, as discussed, several journalists interviewed for this study who worked for these newsrooms said they had not received effective support. They saw gaps in policies such as the absence of an intersectional lens and/or a failure to understand the function of disinformation in connection with such attacks, while others described feeling unsupported, and isolated, or being punished while under attack. Carole

Cadwalladr's experiences at *The Guardian* reflect this perspective; so too do the experiences of some journalists at the BBC, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*, who also told the researchers (on condition of anonymity) that they had not felt adequately supported by their employers, despite there being well-established protocols and support systems in place.

While this study has accumulated evidence of policy gaps, leadership failures and problematic protocols in some of the world's most influential news organisations, there are also demonstrations of strong, empathetic and effective leadership at these outlets.

When she embarked on a high-risk investigation about the exchange of sexual favours for grades, the BBC took freelance Nigerian journalist Kiki Mordi, a founding member of the Feminist Coalition<sup>22</sup>, through its safety policies, including how to deal with online harassment, to improve her digital security and protect her personal details online. Other employers, she said, had not informed her of any policies regarding online abuse. The online violence that Mordi has experienced, and the lack of clear, accessible legal mechanisms and employer policies to support Nigerian women journalists who are victims of online violence means Mordi now feels that she has to take a deep breath before tackling stories that champion women's rights. "No matter what, I will always stand up and fight for women. But it may be harder [...] because of what I went through."

Many of these leadership-related parallel weaknesses and strengths are also evident internationally in smaller news organisations, as highlighted below.

### iii. Newsroom leadership: failings, awakenings, and exemplars

At *Sunday World* in Northern Ireland, management is dealing with extreme risks to reporters, including blanket death threats issued against all their staff. When she was a staff reporter on the paper, Patricia Devlin was offered counselling by her employer and the legal department pursued one paramilitary figure who threatened her. But she recalls that she was still a freelance journalist for the paper in 2020 when the stress and fear associated with attacks on her and threats against her family caused her to take a month off work: "I just said, I can't do this anymore. Work was great that way, they allowed me to take the time off. But that was actually before I was [on] staff. So I didn't get paid for those four weeks. [T]hat's hard when you have three children at home and you have to take that time out, and you're not getting paid for it."<sup>23</sup>

According to Michelle Stanistreet of the UK's National Union of Journalists (NUJ), strong newsroom leadership - which publicly practises empathy - is an important feature of a robust response to gendered online violence. "[You need to know] that your employer cares; that your employer takes your safety seriously and actually has measures that they put in place pretty swiftly." Stanistreet also explained that practical assistance should be provided to protect women journalists under attack and facing financial disadvantage:

**A member of ours in England was forced to flee her house and was told by the police that there was a credible risk of attack against her. She had to leave**

<sup>22</sup> A feminist collective in Nigeria which campaigns on a range of issues.

<sup>23</sup> Devlin left *Sunday World* in December 2021 due to concern about a lack of management support in the context of ongoing online violence. She is now a freelance crime and investigative journalist.



with her kids. This was during one of the lockdowns. The company paid for the first night she stayed in the hotel and then pretty much she was on her own. ... She's a local reporter, so she's seriously out of pocket as well as under enormous stress and strain. And yet the company did the bare minimum really.

In the male-dominated Pakistani media industry, women journalists say they have to struggle even harder to convince their male counterparts and management that online violence is real, and that it affects their personal and professional lives. According to a 2016 Solidarity Center report on the working conditions of women journalists in Pakistan, 82% of the 214 survey respondents (n=176) received no physical or digital security training or resources, and 75% (n=161) had had no digital safety training. Only 17 respondents said their media house had provided 'stress counselling' to help them cope with negative experiences (Solidarity Center, 2016). In the view of freelance journalist Yusra Jabeen, most women journalists are still told by editors and producers to "go silent" in response to online violence. "They've always said 'this is Pakistan, this is how society is, you have to deal with it, or learn to deal with it'. Such responses are not helpful and leave us feeling even more worn down than before." Sabahat Zakariya, who reports on gender issues, said complaining about online violence to Pakistani media employers can lead to them positioning women as "nuisances", or "trouble makers", and result in lost job opportunities. These experiences are compounded by the "many cases of sexual harassment and discrimination from male members of journalism unions" that the Coalition For Women in Journalism (CFWIJ) responds to, said founding director Kiran Nazish.

In Lebanon, instead of fighting back against extreme online attacks, however, the journalists' own news organisations are accused of disregarding the problem or denying responsibility for what the journalists experience. The effect is a reinforcement and further perpetuation of stereotypes that re-entrench the women's secondary status in society (Melki and Hitti, 2020). Lebanese interviewees said that news organisations where they worked seldom invested in protecting their journalists' safety. Journalist Youmna Fawaz said that although they may pay for hospitalisation in the event of injuries sustained on the job, media employers are unlikely to pay for any costs incurred by women journalists dealing with online abuse. Luna Safwan, a freelance journalist and journalism safety trainer in Lebanon, observed that: "Male employers would always say you're a journalist, you have to be tougher than that, while female employers are more compassionate and would give me time off." She considers that there are two things missing in many Arab news organisations: clear policies against sexual harassment; and policies for mental health and safety.

### **Modelling good practice in newsroom leadership in news organisations small and large**

In South Africa, Branko Brkic, Daily Maverick's Editor-in-Chief, may provide a model for (mostly male) editors to follow in responding to gendered online violence against their staff. Investigative journalist Pauli Van Wyk, who has received brutal threats of sexual assault and murder, including being "shot in the pussy", credited Brkic's leadership and support for her survival as a journalist.

“[He was] incredibly supportive.<sup>24</sup> He really was quite amazing. He shielded me from attacks and he helped me to move around the country as well. Without my editor, I can tell you now, I probably wouldn’t be a journalist anymore,” she said.

When US disinformation reporter Brandy Zadrozny was targeted in a TV segment presented by Fox News’ Tucker Carlson, after first being abused online, she was doxxed. She received hundreds of threatening voicemail messages and emails, including threats radiating to her children. But she said her employer, NBC/MSNBC, was “really good about taking care of me and... rallying around me”, and she described their “thoughtfulness” in putting out a statement, which she recognises a lot of companies do not provide: “You have to loudly stand up for your people when these sort of bad faith campaigns happen... I had armed guards outside my home, which is great. My company offered to move me... they were very interested in my physical security”. But Zadrozny pointed to what she sees as a missing element in her managers’ response: the need to protect her from ongoing exposure to the threats as they rolled in. She said the onus on her to monitor the threats she receives has to shift: “I needed someone to take my accounts, take my email, take my Twitter. I don’t want to have to read through all these and listen to all the voicemails and then say, ‘Oh, this is a credible threat’”.

Tara John, a digital news reporter with CNN based in the UK, was subjected to severe online abuse and harassment when she reported on transgender law reform efforts in Scotland in 2020. She was shaken at the time, and felt uncomfortable leaving her home, but she told this study that she felt safe to continue reporting on the theme of trans rights because she had two “incredible”, “progressive” and supportive women editors to rely on – former CNN Digital Executive Editor, Inga Thordar<sup>25</sup>, and Blathnaid Healey, Senior Director for Europe, the Middle East and Africa - who understand the threats. Tara John has not always felt so well supported in other newsrooms, however. “Honestly, the change in management is just amazing. You know, finally, I feel like I’m functional. They really get it”.

Whilst she was Executive Editor, Digital, Inga Thordar said she tried to steer CNN’s protocols to ensure her staff under attack are protected as well as possible through legal and safety interventions. “And we were experts deep diving where those threats are credible. And overall, their response to this has been to my satisfaction.” Thordar said she had more journalists coming to her in the past two years to report online abuse than in the past 15 years. Although the taboo of discussing gendered online violence has been removed and gender-focused support networks exist in many newsrooms, Thordar said: “We still have a long way to go. And even if these processes are being put in place, they have been slow to materialise. There’s probably still a lot more work that can be done”. In her view, news organisations must tackle digital misogyny as vigilantly as they are responding to disinformation.

At the BBC, Marianna Spring said she is empowered by having an editor who himself has experienced COVID-19-related online conspiracy-based abuse. While saying that media employers in general “could do more to be supportive”, *The New York Times*’ Apoorva Mandavili acknowledged that she was in a comparatively privileged position, having access to structured support. “I’ve been lucky that we have a security team.” But there also needs to be an emphasis on holistic care, she said: “I think it would be very helpful for everyone to have not just that kind of practical help, but also sort of

<sup>24</sup> Under Brkic’s leadership, Daily Maverick commissioned a film about the online violence experienced by its women journalists who are routinely targeted in the course of their work, including Pauli van Wyk and Ferial Haffajee. The film is called Section 16 in reference to the South African constitution, which protects freedom of expression with the exception of hate speech based on gender, race, ethnicity or religion. Completed in April 2022, the film was reviewed by this study’s editors prior to its public release. It represents a valuable example of editorial and investigative responses to the problem of gender-based online violence.

<sup>25</sup> Inga Thordar left CNN in early 2022.

emotional support, moral support and just validation that this is not OK.”

In October 2021, US TV reporter Betty Yu was targeted by a conservative YouTube host for her “aggressively Asian face”. Her employer, CBS Television and its local San Francisco station KPIX 5 put out a joint statement of their support for their “colleague” and said that they condemned “the horrific, racist comments directed at Betty, as well as the other demeaning Asian stereotypes spread during [the] programme”. The statement added: “We stand in solidarity with Betty, an accomplished journalist and valued member of our CBS family. These hateful and offensive remarks are outrageous and destructive and re-affirm the importance of our work as journalists to shine a light on anti-Asian violence and hate speech when it occurs” (Patten, 2021).

In 2018, as an editor managing a Canadian newsroom with a dozen reporters - mainly people of colour - Joanna Chiu noticed that no matter the topic or shared bylines, trolls would come after the women journalists. The abuse ranged from condescending and ill-informed criticism, to rape and death threats. As national correspondent at *Toronto Star*, she spent a lot of time compiling evidence of attacks on her which she screenshotted for her editor. “The *Toronto Star* was trying to learn more about what’s happening,” and she came across old death threats that she had forgotten about amidst of torrents of abuse: “They said I should get my neck ready because they were coming over to my house to behead me - horrifying”<sup>26</sup>. The police told her that judges were hesitant to allow investigating officers access to identifying IP addresses unless there was an imminent threat to someone’s safety (she had received death threats), and that the cyber crime unit was mainly focused on economic crimes like fraud. She wrote a front-page story about how common online hate is, in which the Minister for Public Safety said Canadians who experienced online abuse should go to the police (Chiu, 2021). Chiu described the process as “very circular” (CBC/Radio-Canada, 2021).

Journalists working for Rappler in the Philippines described feeling well-protected and supported by the women in charge of their newsroom, despite a constant bombardment of online violence. Central to this trust was the fact that the newsroom leaders joined them ‘in the trenches’, fighting back against their online attackers. At a conference, political reporter Pia Ranada told an audience that Rappler’s support included defending her in the Philippines Supreme Court (Rappler, 2019), while also fighting back online: “I’m just so proud of my company... It takes a certain kind of boss to stand up against a greater power, when they are already themselves on the receiving end of so many attacks. So thank you Maria Ressa<sup>27</sup> and the rest of Rappler for standing up for us.”

## Increasing awareness of the need for greater gender sensitivity

Al Jazeera English's White House Correspondent Kimberly Halkett was sexually assaulted in 2008 while reporting on International Women’s Day: “It just about destroyed my life and it almost took away my career... My middle managers blamed me...so I kept trying to navigate [it] with these completely inadequate and ill-equipped middle managers who saw it as a problem and tried to cover it up to protect their own jobs. Because the fact that this had happened to me meant they weren’t doing their job.”

<sup>26</sup> Apoorva Mandavilli at *The New York Times* told us she had received a similar death threat via email - and also that she was similarly abused online disproportionately compared to her male colleagues: “the emails are actually worse, because they’re more private... that I should have my head cut off in public...I am a liar. I should be ashamed of myself. I don’t deserve to live. One said, I hope you get the virus and choke...very nasty and vile emails”.

<sup>27</sup> Ressa, founder and CEO of Rappler, is a 2021 Nobel Peace Prize laureate and The 2021 UNESCO World Press Freedom Prize winner.

Halkett was reluctant to escalate the case to senior management because she was afraid of hurting her career. But when her immediate supervisors fired her to cover up the attack and the lack of security that helped to cause it, she did complain and the managers were sacked instead. She said she would be “forever grateful” for the interventions of these senior managers, whom she said immediately recognised the magnitude of the attack and its effects, and supported her as she rebuilt both her confidence and her career.

When Halkett found herself at the centre of an online violence storm in mid-2020 - which included death threats, doxxing, and the targeting of her teenage daughter, she realised that: “The internet and technology has moved so rapidly that we have a new avenue for violence against women, and no protections in place in the way we do with sexual assault or any of these other crimes against women because of their gender”. In this instance, though, her current employer’s response was the opposite to what she experienced in 2008. She said additional security was deployed immediately by her bosses - a product of superior management training and policies, she said. They called her at midnight to tell her exactly what they were doing to protect her. But there was still room for improvement, she said: “...they were doing everything they could within the parameters of what’s in place, and I just don’t think that any company is really fully equipped because it’s just such a new frontier. There just aren’t the level of protections because the policy just hasn’t been formulated yet”.

Al Jazeera English Managing Director Giles Trendle acknowledged that there may be a gender blind-spot in terms of responses to online attacks that the company needs to consider:

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**We need to be more gender sensitive. We’ll address online violence against our journalists but we don’t necessarily specify whether it’s male or female. We’ll first see it as an attack on an Al Jazeera journalist. An attempt by someone or some people to try to stop us from doing a story that they don’t like by one of our journalists who just happens to be one gender or another. But I do think it is critically important to be more gender aware.”**

Noting this study’s emphasis on the propensity for gendered online violence to lead to offline attacks, Giles Trendle said he now felt compelled to read more research on the theme. “It’s a bit of a paradigm shift because it’s opened up the door where you completely reconsider things.”

When former HuffPost UK reporter Nadine White was harassed online after being targeted by a UK government senior official, her then editor-in-chief Jess Brammar, who has held senior roles at both ITN and at the BBC, mounted a strong public defence of White, demonstrating strong leadership and meaningful support. Brammar explained that her first response was a feeling of shock and a protective instinct. There is a conflict, she said, of wanting “to minimise the situation and minimise the impact on the journalist. But equally, you want to take an important ethical, robust stance against what’s happening”. In defence of White, Brammar tweeted publicly at the senior official and asked for an

apology, continuing to follow up weeks later. As deputy editor of the Newsnight programme at the BBC, Brammar experienced a slew of online attacks herself, triggered by a story about a political leader. She said that experience – “48 hours of the most horrendous abuse” – helped shape her reaction as an editor.

### **The risks of requiring journalists to participate in real time audience engagement**

Having tied business model development to new modes of digital newsgathering, audience engagement and content distribution that are partly dependent on journalists’ online brands and their direct relationships with audiences, many newsroom leaders are left with a conundrum. A combination of editorial and commercial pressure (Gardiner, 2018) can result in newsrooms trying to ‘balance’ the benefits of personalised social media engagement for audience development, distribution and amplification, with the rights of journalists to be protected from online violence in the course of their work. The shift from open to more closed social media systems of audience engagement - where the actions of perpetrators are less visible and even harder to combat - has created a whole new set of problems for news organisations trying to respond to gendered online violence.

As well as often being expected by their employers to help develop audiences on social media, individual journalists sometimes feel the need to share personal information online in order to build their own ‘brand’. Viktorya Vilks from PEN America said that “journalists sometimes feel pressured to grow a strong following on various social media platforms, including Instagram, and to do that they feel they have to share personal stuff to appear authentic and help engage followers”. Although it is not necessarily a binary decision, some women journalists feel that they face a stark choice: either build an online brand for the economic and professional advantages (Finneman et al., 2019), or operate as anonymously as possible in their work to avoid online violence, and suffer the economic consequences (Adams, 2018), along with likely limitations to their career progression. This ‘invisibility cloak’ approach also has serious implications for press freedom and gender inequality in and through the news media.

### **The bottom line: Managing digital spaces effectively is both challenging and expensive**

While the costs associated with mitigating the threats posed by online violence are no excuse for abrogating the responsibility of news media employers to protect women journalists, they are an ongoing burden for news organisations faced with existential economic challenges worsened by the pandemic (Posetti, Bell and Brown, 2020). In this context, the quickly evolving nature of online attacks, along with the mushrooming and interconnectedness of the platforms on which they take place, can feel overwhelming. This is true even for large organisations, like Thomson Reuters, where Michael Christie is General Manager, Global Logistics & Security. “Like many media organisations, [...] we struggle with the basics of finding out that [harassment is] occurring. We don’t have the tools to measure the vitriol coming through direct messaging, and all that kind of stuff. We’re by no means where we need to be.”

The scenario is similar at Vice Media, where Senior Information Security Engineer Destiny Montague said: “We are constantly playing whac-a-mole”. In the UK, *Observer* editor Paul Webster also acknowledged the challenges of trying to address online violence ‘at scale’: “We will provide support where we can to people who are impacted, although that’s probably limited because we’re hard pressed and because... it happens across the whole waterfront.” Nevertheless, Webster acknowledged that there were potential gaps that



needed addressing, starting with supporting writers more: “We need to think about psychological support for people who face online abuse...because that’s the level at which it operates.” Webster also recognised that journalism “must not be closed down” due to these attacks, proposing a solution of “better mechanisms for monitoring and responding to the disparities”. *Observer* investigative reporter Carole Cadwalladr said that in addition to routinely providing psychological support to women journalists under attack, news organisations should also consider a strategic communications plan to counter serious attacks on a journalist.

### **Collaborative leadership**

Beyond the need for internal collaboration between key responders to online violence, it is evident that the scale of the problem, and the increasingly sophisticated methods of the perpetrators, require newsroom leaders should cooperate with their competitors on solutions to gendered online violence. Examples are collaborating on knowledge sharing, developing resources and training to help mitigate online violence against women journalists. Many interviewees underscored this point.

Canadian news industry leaders have begun developing a formal collaborative approach to combating online violence against women journalists in that country, which could serve as a model. The partnership has adopted a three-pronged approach: a) A collaboratively organised industry virtual conference designed to facilitate a cooperative industry response to the online violence crisis held in November 2021 (CBC/Radio-Canada, 2021, b) Commissioned research into the scale and nature of the problem in Canadian context (Ipsos 2021, and c) Facilitated small group conversations designed to deepen understanding and extend awareness.

### **The need to hold social media companies accountable for the gendered online violence crisis**

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The social media platforms have become enablers or facilitators. ...We need to better understand how we can push back against these big tech companies. ...I do think they have a very, very big role and responsibility in combating online violence and abuse and threats... How much do they see as their responsibility, and how much are they willing to take action?

Giles Trendle, Managing Director, Al-Jazeera English

Many of the interviewees and survey respondents, including newsroom leaders, expressed frustration about the limited, unclear and ineffective routes for reporting online violence incidents to the platforms. The fact that the individual journalists receiving the abuse and threats are required by social media companies to report incidents independently through automated systems remains a major barrier to newsrooms’ efforts to manage the problem. While

some outlets (e.g., Rappler in the Philippines), actively campaign for reform of social media companies to better address the problem, many news organisations do not rise to challenging these companies to address the crisis at a systemic level.

The symbiotic relationship between news organisations and the platforms - which involves commercial contracts and funding - can make news organisations reluctant to demand action from the platforms. Nevertheless, numerous research participants – both journalists and editors – described using informal back channels to report incidents to the major companies because the official automated reporting mechanisms were not fit for purpose. At *The Guardian*, while journalists are often encouraged to make their own representations to the platforms and follow official reporting procedures, Director of Editorial Legal Services Gill Phillips said that in particular cases the media organisations can “make representations to the big guys [at Facebook and Twitter] about things. If we’ve got a back door route that we can use, we will use it and deploy it”.

Former HuffPost UK editor Jess Brammar used her own contacts at Twitter LA’s press office when her journalist Nadine White was doxxed in the middle of the night, but she acknowledged hesitation about using back channels to get action:

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**That’s the only time I’ve ever actually got in contact with them...you don’t want to use your journalistic privilege to be like, ‘I’m going to the press office of Twitter rather than by means of address that any other person would have’. But in that case, it was because she was in danger and it was to do with the fact that she was a journalist. So I felt like [it] was the right thing to do and they just immediately responded and took it down.**

This example - triggering action via a social media company’s press office in preference to relying on standard (and largely ineffective) automated procedures - highlights the problem of opaque, disjointed policies and personnel disconnects within these companies. One of the key challenges for editors and other newsroom responders is finding the right individuals within these companies with the expertise, capability and power to respond to incidents.<sup>28</sup> The research suggests that some newsroom managers do lobby the major platforms for better tools and features, as well as more support (including specialised human contact points for urgent response and escalation), and more capability for responding to complaints in languages other than English. But they are less likely to challenge “the gendered assumptions and world-views embedded within, and reproduced by, technology” (Salter, 2018), or the constructed nature of algorithms that shape online discourse in which misogyny and abuse thrive (Gillespie, 2010; Noble, 2018; Van Dijck, 2013; Seymour, 2019).

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<sup>28</sup> See the chapter published in parallel *The Chilling: Assessing Big Tech’s Responses to Online Violence Against Women Journalists*.

Former CNN Executive Director Inga Thordar said news organisations need to explicitly challenge the platforms on the misogyny that underpins online violence against women journalists:

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**Your bar is always the white man. And that just cannot, should not, be the bar for anything anymore. And I think the online harassment bar that the platforms set themselves has got to be put in different places for men and women. But in order to get that, you have to understand the hill that women have to climb and the differences in the abuse that women get online.**

Several editors and a number of civil society actors promoted the idea of regulation as a solution. However, *Observer* editor Paul Webster highlighted the reluctance on the part of many news outlets to openly call for legislation to force the platforms to take more effective action against online violence. While Webster wants “quicker responses” to complaints and “confidence” that they will be “taken seriously”, he also noted the “fine balance” to be struck “between protecting journalism, and in particular the journalists who are subject to abuse, but not curtailing the debate, and not preventing people from having a chance to take part in it”.

In 2019, the International News Safety Institute (INSI) announced a year-long project in partnership with Google, Facebook and Twitter to convene meetings of journalists from 40 news organisations<sup>29</sup> to try to work collectively to combat the online harassment of journalists (INSI, 2019). However, the details of the ongoing discussions have not been made public. While collaborations with the platforms on potential solutions are often suggested as a way forward, several newsroom leaders interviewed for this study expressed a lack of trust in such processes, as well as a sense of resignation that they are unlikely to change anything.

## **iv. Guidelines for building on current good practice**

This section describes elements of effective responses to online violence identified within the overarching data corpus of nearly 1100 interviews and survey responses associated with this study. The insights gleaned were bolstered by the 19 in-depth interviews conducted specifically for this chapter with news organisation staff responsible for responding to online violence at their outlets, and a sample of trainers and experts who consult to international newsrooms on digital safety, and online violence. What follows is a distillation of their combined insights and advice, together with examples of good practice - from newsrooms large and small, from print to broadcast and digital-born news media - to illustrate practical implementation. The aim is to provide a roadmap for outlets looking to take more effective steps to counter online violence.

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<sup>29</sup> The 40 news organisations that took part in these discussions were all members of INSI, and there was very little representation of the Global South.

## The time to be prescriptive is now

A number of larger news organisations referenced here do have formal, written policies and procedures in place to combat online violence, particularly in the US and the UK. Jason Reich at *The New York Times* said he is now comfortable being prescriptive about the need for every news organisation to have a formal response mechanism to deal with online violence: “At this point, [an effective protocol] should be common practice everywhere... Every institution needs to have a transparent, reactive and quick process in place for responding to the harassment of its staff. It’s not an easy problem to solve but it’s long past the time to start trying.” It should be noted, however, that the nature of digital threats changes quickly, and so any measures adopted in response to online violence need to be regularly reviewed and updated.

Some smaller news organisations studied, such as Rappler and Vera Files (Philippines), the Center for Investigative Reporting (Sri Lanka) and the Premium Times’ Centre for Investigative Journalism (Nigeria) did not have a written protocol by mid-2021, but nonetheless had effective practices to counter gendered online violence. Rappler, for example, adopted pioneering strategies to combat the problem when the women-led digital news outlet came under concerted attack in 2016. Under the leadership of then Editor-in-Chief and CEO Maria Ressa<sup>30</sup>, they introduced the following holistic measures (Posetti, 2017b; Posetti et al., 2019b):

- 1 Escalating digital and physical security in tandem.
- 2 Providing tailored psychological support for all staff coming under attack.
- 3 Deploying advanced digital investigative journalism techniques to expose orchestrated online violence campaigns.
- 4 Allowing targeted reporters to take a break from beats that attract intense abuse, or pairing them with a reporting partner, or sending them on international fellowships for their own safety.
- 5 Harnessing loyal audiences and deploying ‘movement journalism’ techniques to mobilise community support online.
- 6 Holding the platforms and State actors to account for their facilitation and enablement of online violence.
- 7 Speaking up and raising awareness rather than staying mute and avoiding exposure.

## Developing an effective formal response protocol

So, what should a robust online violence response protocol for news organisations look like in 2022? Firstly, while incorporating gender-sensitive and digital-security aware guidance and procedures for comment moderation on the outlet’s own website/s, it would recognise that social media platforms and apps are now the primary sites of online violence against women journalists, in particular orchestrated and cross-platform attacks. It would also acknowledge that some of the most severe or high risk attacks involve perpetrators associated with State and political actors, powerful individuals and networks operating at the nexus of disinformation.

<sup>30</sup> Ressa stepped back as Rappler Editor-in-Chief in 2021 but she continues as CEO.

Secondly, it would focus on preventive measures, such as threat assessment procedures tuned to identify ‘lightning rod’ beats and stories (e.g. those focused on gender issues, politics/elections, human rights issues, disinformation and investigative reporting) which this study has highlighted. Such procedures would also seek to predict the type of attacker, and mode of attack potentially triggered by particular beats and stories - especially important when State actors or far-right extremist networks are implicated. Risks at the intersection of misogyny and other forms of discrimination - such as racism, religious bigotry and homophobia - should be factored in to threat assessment matrices too.

Also on the preventive side, this ideal protocol would seek to embed holistic training for all staff (tailored according to their roles and levels of exposure), along with provision of base level digital security support which incorporates online violence defence tactics, such as anti-doxxing procedures, at the point of a journalist’s ‘onboarding’, and periodically thereafter.

Then, the protocol would include a number of informal and formal response measures to be enacted in the case of attacks, to support the journalist while she is at the core of a storm. Making sure the woman’s digital security is tight when she is under attack is a vital first step. Many of the journalists interviewed for this study 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 to minimise further exposure to abuse and threats, preferably by someone who can also assess risk, catalogue threats and screenshot abuse in case of future legal action. One recommendation comes from a report with guidelines for West African newsrooms, imagining the role of an “Online Safety Coordinator” who could “regularly attend editorial meetings to become aware of upcoming content that may trigger online abuse”, and liaise between management and legal teams (Sarpong, 2021). As described earlier, Reach PLC in the UK has recently appointed a Online Safety Editor.

Those newsrooms that have recognised gendered online violence as a workplace issue, and have taken their responsibilities to their women journalists seriously, have ended up introducing remarkably similar protocols, regardless of their size or location. Analysis of a range of international approaches has allowed identification of the following six key features of a gender-sensitive online violence response protocol for newsrooms.

## 1. Awareness of leadership on, and communications about, the problem

The first step in any protocol is to acknowledge the existence of online violence, and the harm it can cause in order to create an environment where employees feel supported enough to report their experiences. Some larger organisations survey staff as part of this process, such as *The Guardian* (Gardiner, 2016), the *Toronto Star* (Campion-Smith, 2020) and the UK’s biggest commercial news publisher Reach PLC (Tobitt, 2021b). Acknowledging the intersectional nature of much digital violence is also crucial, because those targeted are often already marginalised and therefore may have legitimate concerns about reporting attacks.

Once the nature of the threat is understood, policies and protocols must be developed and communicated to all staff and freelancers. They also must be championed by top editorial leadership. An example is Oluwatosin Alagbe of the Premium Times Centre for Investigative Journalism in Nigeria, who said she regularly discusses the threat of online violence in the newsroom, encourages journalists to report it to her, and organises regular training sessions as part of a holistic approach to journalists’ physical, psychosocial and digital security.



Strong leadership can also help bridge gender divides in news organisations to avoid gendered online violence being relegated because it is a ‘women’s issue’ – a position which, apart from being sexist, underestimates potential male solidarity and also fails to recognise the chilling effects on audience development (and therefore business models), editorial diversity (the absence of which affects trust) and press freedom. A number of the male editors interviewed expressed shock and alarm at the scale and ferocity of online attacks described by their female colleagues who participated in the research for this study, demonstrating the need for cross-gender recognition of the impacts of online violence on women journalists. Editorial leadership-facilitated conversations that empower women journalists – particularly those from additionally marginalised groups – to speak about their experiences and needs, while requiring male journalists to actively participate, could be a valuable practice. Menaka Indrakumar, former parliamentary correspondent for the *Daily News* and *Sunday Observer* newspapers<sup>31</sup> in Sri Lanka, agreed discussions on the issue of online violence should involve men and women, so that: “Irrespective of their social standing, their sexual orientation, their...position or whatever, they should come together and come to a common...emotional understanding [of the problem]”.

## 2. A prevention strategy

An effective protocol focuses on prevention. At minimum, all journalists should be required to undertake digital security training aimed at protecting their devices, communications and personal data, all of which could potentially be compromised as part of an online attack. Digital security experts agree that this training should include the secure use of passwords, two-step authentication, data encryption, general protection of personal data, protection from malware and the use of secure (end-to-end encrypted) email. It should also include advice about scrubbing personal/identifying data from the internet, and subscriptions to services that enable this process (e.g. [DeleteMe](#) in the US).

Digital security needs to be led at the organisational level – it is difficult for an individual journalist to make the necessary behavioural and technological changes without institutional support (Posetti, 2017a). Such support should also be extended to freelancers whose journalism for the outlet places them at risk. Also, a protocol that makes the individual journalist responsible for digital security may unintentionally shift the focus to women under attack, or as the ones in the chain primarily responsible for dealing with the problem, thereby normalising gendered online violence. Organisational support should also include setting time aside for training, keeping encryption software up to date, and ensuring that journalists do not have to use their personal phones and laptops for work.

Vice Media Group (USA) has established a formal training programme for its staff and contracted freelancers, including an e-learning programme and in-person small-group training. The in-person sessions target high-risk groups, including women and racial minorities. The InfoSec team undertakes a personalised digital security risk assessment for their most exposed journalists, checking and “cleaning” their digital footprint. The Vice training encourages participants to do their own gender-aware “threat modelling”. This is similar to the ‘self-doxing’ workshop developed by *The New York Times*, in which staff discover for themselves how much of their personal information is available online, and are shown how to clean up their digital footprint (NYT Open, 2020).<sup>32</sup> *New York Times*’ staff have also described hosting ‘lox<sup>33</sup> and doxx’ parties with colleagues from other outlets during which they use this guide to collaboratively reduce their exposure to doxxing.

<sup>31</sup> Menaka Indrakumar is now a freelance journalist.

<sup>32</sup> Consumer Reports’ online guide. “Keep your data secure with a personalised plan” is also useful: <https://securityplanner.consumerreports.org/>

<sup>33</sup> Yiddish term for smoked salmon commonly used in the US.

Gender-aware digital security should also form part of a risk assessment protocol: rather than only considering a journalist's physical safety before sending them out on an assignment, organisations should also do a digital risk assessment, and consider addressing the need for an "emotional flak jacket". In other words, responses must integrate physical and digital security measures, along with psychological support, and editorial and workflow strategies. Training offered as a preventive measure must be holistic to reflect these different but interrelated elements. Unless the defensive strategies are joined up, they will not succeed.

As this study demonstrates, there is an increasing risk of online violence spilling offline in the form of physical attacks and harassment. The trend is also clear in reverse: offline abuse can trigger online pile-ons, creating a vicious circle. So, it is now more important than ever to ensure responses to gendered online violence are holistic from the outset, and this integrated approach is understood and championed by senior newsroom leadership. Heightened risks at the intersection of misogyny and other forms of discrimination should be factored in to threat assessment matrices too.

At Rappler (the Philippines), the likelihood of a journalist being targeted online is considered before the publication of every story. If it is deemed to be "sensitive", the social media team is alerted; care is taken over the time of publication, to ensure that staff are available to deal with any hostile response, and headlines are reviewed to ensure they do not invite pile-ons. Allies within Rappler's grassroots community networks (Posetti, Simon and Shabbir, 2019b) are also alerted to help support and defend the journalists if and when they do come under attack.

Prevention also encompasses editorial approaches such as comment moderation and clear community standards. Despite a widespread flight from hosting on-site comment platforms (Reagle, 2015; Ellis, 2015; WAN-IFRA, 2016), many media organisations do still offer such facilities. If poorly managed, these can be a source of online violence. [The Coral Project](#), originally an initiative of the Mozilla Foundation, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* and now part of Vox Media (US), designed open source software to enable newsrooms to host more civil discussions. This software is translated into several languages and is used by nearly 200 newsrooms in 21 countries.

Key to the Coral approach is the notion that online violence is not just a technological problem, but also "a strategy and culture problem that technology can help or hinder", according to Head of Coral Andrew Losowsky. But the role of unmediated social media platforms as vectors of online violence makes hosting civil discussion within those communities extremely difficult.

Online violence is also a design and business model problem in the social media realm. The inability to pre-moderate comments on news organisations' social media assets (e.g. Facebook), for example, remains a substantial impediment for news outlets trying to improve the standard of conversation through community guidelines. It also poses significant legal risks (Karp, 2021). As a result, the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) decided to keep comments closed on most of its Facebook posts and within its Facebook groups to help develop "safer online spaces" (Fenlon, 2021). Following this shift, the CBC said readers' comments on their website surged.

Effective comment moderation on news outlets' websites can help reduce journalists' exposure to gendered online violence in certain contexts. Some of the smaller newsrooms represented in this study, as well as some larger newsrooms with relatively small numbers of comments (e.g. Sveriges Radio), took active steps to engage with the comments on their websites to help keep conversations constructive. At larger outlets, like *The Guardian*, a very high volume of comments makes such engagement impossible – instead, they

limit the number of articles open to comments. Comments below “sensitive” articles are either turned off, or are pre-moderated, and the community standards have been re-written to make them more robust<sup>34</sup>. *The New York Times* pre-moderates all the comments on its site to ensure no published comments are overly threatening or abusive. Other outlets, like Daily Maverick in South Africa and De Correspondent in the Netherlands, have adopted a membership model, which limits commenters to those paying to join the community on their website - a measure that can help curtail abuse. Again, though, these practices and standards cannot simply be transposed onto social media platforms, and these are the sites of much of the most brutal and dangerous online attacks against women journalists.

### 3. Clear reporting lines, and a means of tracing and tracking cases

Targeted journalists need to know who to tell, and how to describe what they are enduring. They also need to feel confident that they will not be penalised if they do tell – and the people within the organisation to whom they report need to have the necessary training to respond effectively, in a gender-sensitive manner. Under-reporting will occur if any of these needs is not met.

In some newsrooms – particularly those where physical sexual harassment is a significant problem – there are strong disincentives to report any kind of gendered violence, as discussed above. In some contexts, women may be disrespected and shamed if they are seen to be targeted sexually, or subjected to sexualised misrepresentation, discouraging reporting and public discussion of their experiences. Additionally, as mentioned, there is sometimes a stigma attached to mental illness, making it difficult to admit to being harmed by such attacks. This makes setting up clear reporting lines in newsrooms both more difficult, and more important.

Following a report of sexual harassment in the workplace, Tayyeb Afridi, managing editor of the Tribal News Network in Pakistan, introduced a staff training programme and set up an ‘inquiry committee’ to encourage reporting and to respond to incidents that did occur. Afridi said that the increased understanding of workplace sexual harassment and its impacts led in turn to more awareness of digital violence. Digital security training is now also given to staff, and the committee devised a protocol to deal with online violence as well as workplace harassment.

At larger organisations in less conservative contexts, under-reporting may be a result of a lack of clear reporting lines as well as a fear of being perceived as overly sensitive - a product of sexist attitudes that peg women journalists as ‘weak’ because they may express emotion. Some have tackled this by encouraging all staff to report online violence that they experience, or that they see others experiencing – even if they themselves do not feel threatened by it. *The New York Times*’ Jason Reich said threat assessments are best conducted by people with expertise, not the receiver of the abuse: “Everyone has a different threshold...we’ve got reporters that get death threats every day, and they’re like, ‘whatever’... But [we tell them] that’s for us to determine, not for you”.

In a large organisation, it is easy for reports to get lost. Reich advocates a “single contact culture” – rather than put the responsibility on the individual to decide if what they are experiencing is a digital security problem, a physical security problem, or an HR problem, and all reports are made to a single email address. This simplifies the process, and lowers the bar to reporting, Reich said. Importantly, freelance journalists also have access to this email. The individual being targeted receives a response that is both rapid and human – an email or

<sup>34</sup> These can be seen at: <https://www.theguardian.com/community-standards>

call from a member of the team who reassures them that the matter is in hand, and offers any immediate support that may be needed.

*The New York Times*, as a large organisation, has a team that responds to these reports – members include a senior editorial member of staff who provides context and editorial judgement, an expert in physical and digital security, a legal expert to evaluate whether the online behaviour meets the threshold for legal action, and someone from human resources, to offer appropriate support for the targeted individual. In smaller organisations, the primary responder may be an individual, but if so they may still need access to legal and technical support for the victim. It is important that the same individual or team responds, so that responses can be monitored and evaluated over time. In this way an organisation can develop deep, contextual expertise. Additionally, the response team should have no responsibility for disciplinary matters.

Once online violence is reported, it should also be traced (to the source, if possible), and the case should be monitored. These steps are important to the pursuit of legal remedies, should they become necessary. But they also allow news organisations to learn from incidents in order to predict the types of attacker and mode of attack triggered by particular beats and stories to help prevent their recurrence and to improve their responses as the patterns and methods of perpetrators evolve. Further, tracing and tracking perpetrators can aid investigative reporting and research as a response to the problem.

There have been various attempts to track cases on a national or international basis, though these have mainly been under-resourced and/or time-limited, and often not disaggregated for gender. The International Press Institute (IPI) hosted one such database in partnership with Jigsaw<sup>35</sup> in 2016, enabling the reporting and tracking of online harassment of a number of journalists in Turkey and Austria over a period of time. This was the year of a failed coup attempt in Turkey, and a presidential revote in Austria, and journalists in both countries were under intense attack online. This work forms one of seven case studies in the report *State Sponsored Trolling: How Governments Are Deploying Disinformation as Part of Broader Digital Harassment Campaigns* (Nyst and Monaco, 2018)<sup>36</sup>. There are clear potential benefits of large-scale tracking, if maintained over a period of time. Javier Luque from IPI observed:

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**What we learned was that it would be better to track individual cases [...] analysing the way the attacks [are] disseminated on various platforms and propaganda sites, using content analysis, social network analysis, and so on – this would be a better way of identifying both trends and perpetrators. A database of this sort, properly funded and which newsrooms around the world could feed cases into, would be invaluable.**

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<sup>35</sup> A unit within Google which the company describes as building solutions technology for social problems such as disinformation and toxicity, defined as "rude, disrespectful, or unreasonable language that is likely to make someone leave a discussion". Perspective API was launched in 2017.

<sup>36</sup> See also: <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2018-government-sponsored-cyber-militia-cookbook/>

A more sophisticated version of this approach was adopted for the big data case studies focused on journalists Maria Ressa (the Philippines) and Carole Cadwalladr (UK) produced for this study (Posetti et al., 2021)<sup>37</sup>. In those cases, network analysis was combined with Natural Language Processing (NLP) techniques to describe patterns, methods, and types of attack within 2.5 million social media posts before being synthesised with qualitative research to create timelines and contextualise escalation pathways. Case studies of this kind could ultimately help inform newsroom protocols for referring cases to the police and to the platforms through partially automated identification of threat signals, for example (ICFJ, 2021)<sup>38</sup>.

#### 4. Risk assessment guidelines

A prevention protocol will include a gender-sensitive assessment of the risk of digital violence before a story is published. But what about when an attack does occur? A trustworthy assessment of risk not only helps protect journalists from potential physical harm, it can also minimise psychological harm. When the journalist knows that steps have already been taken to mitigate risks of physical violence, and that the risk of data breaches have been minimised through defensive digital security tactics, then any subsequent attack that does take place may have reduced psychological impact.

Risk assessment guidelines must be based on the best available knowledge, and should be regularly reviewed, but they need to evaluate the physical, psychological and digital security aspects, as well as the professional risks to the journalist who has been targeted. The guidelines will be dependent on local contextual variables and on the ever-evolving nature of online attacks.

To a list of potential threats could be added State actors, political leaders, conspiracy networks, disinformation purveyors, anti-vaxxers, anti-lockdown protesters, online networks of misogynists and racists, and so-called ‘stan armies’. In certain countries, security forces, law enforcement officers, local government officials and dark PR operatives would rise up the list, as would the threat of offline violence connected to online attacks.

Various threat modelling tools may be used<sup>39</sup>, but a robust risk assessment is alert to the context in which the journalists work, as well as to the journalists’ gender, ethnicity and other risk factors such as religion and sexual orientation. Additionally, monitoring threats in real-time is important to ensure risk assessments respond to changing threat environments. This could involve collaborations with experts - in academia and civil society - to apply monitoring tools that can function as early warning systems for offline violence. Such a system is [currently being built](#) by ICFJ and the University of Sheffield as part of a research commission from the UK Government.

#### 5. A holistic and adaptable recovery plan

An effective protocol would include a number of informal and formal response measures to be enacted in the case of attacks. Making sure the woman’s digital security is tight when she is under attack is a vital first step. This should apply to both her professional and personal accounts and devices. The journalist will likely need support to lock down her accounts (i.e. restrict privacy settings and filter replies) to deflect further attacks or monitor ongoing threats, to relieve her of those burdens while she is under attack. Sveriges Radio’s development editors Robert Jakobsson and Niklas Malmberg call this process ‘storm management’:

<sup>37</sup> See snapshots from these big data case studies in an earlier extract from *The Chilling* <https://en.unesco.org/sites/default/files/the-chilling.pdf>

<sup>38</sup> This is the basis of a major new study commissioned by the UK’s Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office which is being undertaken by ICFJ in partnership with University of Sheffield computer scientists and linguists.

<sup>39</sup> Jason Reich uses the FBI’s strategies as outlined in, “Making Prevention a Reality: Identifying, Assessing, and Managing the Threat of Targeted Attack”: <https://www.fbi.gov/file-repository/making-prevention-a-reality.pdf/view>

“We get an overview of the [situation]: what’s the storm about; where is the storm; how big is it; how big can it get?... We always remove [the targeted individual] from dealing with it on his or her own...the security department [takes charge]”.

The individual “point person” (e.g. responsible managing editor) suggested by many of the journalists interviewed for this study should contact social media platforms on the journalist’s behalf to escalate reports and aid efforts to trace users behind the most serious or prolonged attacks. This approach, rather than locking or temporarily deleting accounts, enables real-time monitoring of threats of physical or sexual violence to determine the offline risk and trigger appropriate physical security measures. It can also aid investigations when cases are escalated to law enforcement agencies. So, a robust protocol should also include such a process.

Physical security and temporary relocation may need to be considered in serious cases of online harassment involving credible threats of physical or sexual violence. A robust protocol will also recognise the impacts on the woman’s personal life. Recovery plans should therefore factor in the additional stress and trauma created and consider ways to support affected family members.

At least seven journalists in six countries reported to researchers attached to this study that they had been made to either pay for emergency hotel accommodation after a single night, or absorb the costs for children travelling with them. The costs of these measures should be absorbed by the news organisation, with the assistance of NGOs or state mechanisms where justified.

Mitigating solutions as a response include: changes to working conditions or duties for a woman journalist who has come under extreme or long-term attack online. The opportunity to take time off work can at least be a chance to withdraw from social media temporarily. It might also be helpful to offer employees a temporary break from a particular beat or role, or to work with a partner on assignments. Opportunities to recover away from the newsroom can allow for professional development (e.g. on a fellowship or on a novel assignment with a long deadline) but the targeted journalist must be fully involved in these decisions, which should be clearly communicated as temporary (unless the journalist requires otherwise) to avoid perceptions that they are being sidelined because of the “drama”, or removed from duties because they are judged to be “weak”.

Peer support is essential. This should include opportunities for supportive conversations and mentoring in gender-sensitive environments. In some newsrooms this involves formal networks, but in smaller newsrooms, peer support may be offered informally. Informal networks formed between targeted women from different outlets and in different countries were also highlighted as valuable interventions by many women journalists interviewed. One example recommended by Real Amazônia reporter Kátia Brasil was the Zero Hora<sup>40</sup> unit providing specific support for journalists experiencing violence. Psychological injuries can develop over time, therefore newsroom leaders should remain appropriately attentive regarding the mental health and well-being of women recovering from online violence episodes, especially when these have been cumulatively damaging. Long-range mental health support should be made available for this reason.

Legal support should be provided wherever it is requested by women under attack. And newsrooms should not hesitate to call in law enforcement officers to protect journalists and prosecute perpetrators where necessary (with the consent of the targeted journalist). In several cases uncovered in this study, women journalists were required to independently seek access to (often costly) legal support, and initiate police complaints. Both of these processes can be exhausting and potentially re-traumatising, compounding the mental health

40 Brazilian newspaper based in the city of Porto Alegre, the sixth largest in the country.



impacts. However, it should also be noted that some interviewees expressed their reluctance to pursue legal avenues because they did not trust the police or the courts in their countries. Vulnerable internet users (such as marginalised women or racial minorities) may be particularly reluctant to call the police.

Reporting cases of online threats, harassment and abuse against women journalists to the police and the platforms, or initiating defensive legal action, should not be left to the journalist herself but spearheaded by her employer. The news organisations' contact point should then follow up on these reports to track progress until there is a resolution. In the case of the platforms, reporting should not be limited to automated on-platform reporting mechanisms. Newsroom leaders should insist on the social media companies providing a human contact point for the rapid escalation of high risk, high volume or long-range attacks as part of any commercial arrangement connected to the use of their tools or the production of content, and not hesitate to use these conduits. Although involving police or the judiciary can be a vital component of a holistic response, newsrooms should be sensitive to intersectionality and local realities.

## 6. An editorial and advocacy strategy for newsrooms dealing with online violence

Rappler in the Philippines is perhaps the best known example of how powerful a hybrid editorial and advocacy response can be as a function of an online violence protocol. They approached the online attacks they experienced as they would any other important story: they investigated them (Posetti, 2017b; Posetti, Simon and Shabbir, 2019b; Posetti, Maynard and Bontcheva, 2021). Rappler journalists were able to show that the attacks they experienced were systematic and organised, and published evidence that they were State-linked. As this example shows, the core skills that should be found in every newsroom – the ability to investigate and expose wrongdoing, to explain complex ideas to the public, and to report in the public interest – can become powerful tools in the fight against gendered online violence, if newsrooms are willing to use them.

Rappler's Maria Ressa (CEO), Glenda Gloria (Editor-in-Chief) and Chay Hofileña (Managing Editor) also highlighted the importance of public advocacy about the issue in national and international fora to underscore their refusal to be silenced by online violence. In 2016, Rappler launched a campaign called #NoPlaceForHate which focused on countering social media toxicity. The outlet's community engagement team published stories about what was happening online, held webinars and organised in the community. Their message was "this is how social media is being misused and abused, and you have to know that this is being done, and you have to fight back!" Rappler Managing Editor Chay Hofileña said. However, Maria Ressa later declared that a "naive" mission because it did not account fully for the viral nature of online abuse and hate speech, or the platforms' unwillingness or inability to effectively counter it (Posetti, Simon and Shabbir, 2019b; Posetti, 2020b). However, since then, Ressa and Rappler have prioritised investigative journalism responses, public advocacy focused on the need for accountability from the platforms, and media literacy campaigns.

*The Guardian* and *Observer* newspapers also pioneered editorial leadership efforts to address online abuse by publishing an analysis of 70 million comments on their own website, together with a series of articles under the banner, 'The Web We Want' (Gardiner, 2016). They also routinely published editorials and statements advocating for their journalists when they have come under attack. More recently, they published a call to action triggered by the preliminary findings of this study, advocating action against gendered online violence: "The chilling effect of mob censorship cannot be overestimated and must be urgently addressed, with a view to stopping and rolling back its baleful spread" (*The Guardian*, 2021).

*The Toronto Star's* Public Editor, Bruce Campion-Smith adopted a similar approach, conducting a survey of staff in 2020 (Campion Smith, 2020) and writing an editorial in 2021 in response to this study's earlier outputs titled "[Online abuse of women journalists is a crisis we can no longer ignore](#)" (Campion-Smith, 2021). Similarly, the Director General of Sveriges Radio (Sweden) Cilla Benkö wrote a clarion editorial for International Women's Day in 2021: "Women journalists are subjected to hatred and threats online to a much greater extent than men, and above all, this is coming from a sexualised and threatening climate on digital platforms. If the situation does not improve, journalism and the community at large run the risk of losing important voices and perspectives" (Benkö, 2021).

## v. The role of intergovernmental and civil society organisations in facilitating newsroom responses

Many interviewees and survey respondents mentioned the valuable role played by intergovernmental and civil society organisations in funding, developing and facilitating research, training, advocacy campaigns, and resources to help news organisations combat gender-based online violence. Prominent among them are trade unions and professional bodies, press freedom and media development organisations, women-centred media support organisations, international and regional level intergovernmental organisations such as [UNESCO](#), UN Women, and the [OSCE](#).

This research surfaced dozens of initiatives designed to respond to online violence against women journalists. However, one problem identified in the course of the research is the proliferation of outdated and dormant resources and tools developed to respond to online harassment, such as phone-based support services which are no longer operational (Gober and Posetti, 2020). This makes the job of surfacing and accessing reliable, trustworthy and current resources for responding to online violence when a journalist comes under attack even more challenging for news organisations. This research-identified gap led to the launch of the [Online Violence Response Hub](#) in 2021, as a partnership between the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ). The Hub is a project of the Coalition Against Online Violence, a network which aims to connect journalists, experts and civil society organisations working collaboratively to respond to the problem as it evolves.

Several other initiatives are worth noting for the benefit of news organisations seeking access to knowledge, resources and advice. Reporters Without Borders (RSF), the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), PEN America and ARTICLE 19 provide training in a number of countries, and several journalists interviewed said they had benefited from these courses. CPJ has also produced a range of resources<sup>41</sup>, and PEN America has published a free "[Field Manual](#)", offering guidance for navigating online abuse, which is available in multiple languages. The International Press Institute (IPI) published a report in 2019 identifying good newsroom practices (Trionfi and Luque, 2019), which was accompanied by a platform<sup>42</sup> hosting resources for news organisations and detailed guidelines for how to set up a gender-aware online harassment protocol (IPI, 2017). The IPI protocol guidelines were credited by several interviewees in the US, Nigeria, Serbia, Sri Lanka and Brazil – as having provided the blueprint for their own protocols. The International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT) has also produced resources for women

<sup>41</sup> These include blog posts with guidance on self defence strategies online (CPJ, 2019b), and safety notes focused on digital security in reference to harassment (CPJ, 2019a).

<sup>42</sup> <https://ipi.media/programmes/ontheline/>

journalists.<sup>43</sup> The Dart Centre for Journalism and Trauma has developed a trauma risk management (TRiM) approach to gendered online violence that has been adopted by some larger newsrooms; they have also made factsheets and other resources available online.<sup>44</sup>

## vi. Conclusion

Firstly, it needs to be acknowledged that news organisations have as much responsibility to ensure the safety of women journalists online - including those who work in a freelance capacity - as they do offline. This means working to both mitigate attacks and respond sensitively to the personal and professional impacts of gendered online violence. Recognising the interplay of physical, digital, psychological, professional, personal, and press freedom-related as well as editorial risks and impacts is key. This is particularly important where misogynistic attacks intersect with other forms of discrimination, and related threats such as viral disinformation, hate speech and far-right networks.

Secondly, news organisations seeking to respond more effectively to gendered online violence need to recognise the widespread and entrenched structural sexism and misogyny that enables sexual harassment of women journalists by colleagues and superiors, as highlighted by the #MeToo movement, and documented by researchers over decades (Global Media Monitoring Project, 2020). As one woman journalist under fire online put it: “Even the most open-minded media organisations are still run by men who don’t fundamentally understand the misogynistic nature of these attacks” (Klein, 2021). Beyond the need for awareness, there is a clear requirement for employers to provide practical, holistic, research-informed training to both help prevent attacks (e.g. enhancing individual digital security and safety), and improving the capacity of individual journalists to respond to gender-based online violence when they are targeted.

Thirdly, it is important to note that news organisations are not homogeneous - they range in size, focus, culture, capability, independence, and viability.<sup>45</sup> Many are also subject to varying degrees of press freedom violations and institutional capture. Additionally, newsrooms have become more ‘dispersed’ and technology-dependent in the context of the pandemic. These factors mean that there is no ‘one size fits all’ approach for newsrooms seeking to respond to gendered online violence around the world, and any policies or protocols developed to help manage the problem need to be localisable, adaptable to deal with emerging challenges, and regularly reviewed.

News media employers, often already struggling with issues connected to the lack of diversity among staff, especially in senior ranks, and the associated lack of diversity in the representation of communities through their journalism, need to be mindful of these impacts (Kassova, 2020; Cherubini et al., 2021). It is important that they find other, more effective ways of protecting women journalists under attack - especially those made more vulnerable due to intersectional risks such as racism - to ensure that their journalism can be seen and heard.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that news organisations can only do so much in an environment where exposure to organised online attacks and audience toxicity primarily comes via the social media platforms, not their own websites, and perpetrators include powerful political forces. Yet, while wealthy technology companies are the main vectors of gendered online violence, and State-actors and political leaders stand accused of instigating and fuelling some of the worst

43 These include the video, How to Counter Gender-based Online Harassment of Journalists (IAWRT, n.d.b) and the 2017 handbook;

What if ...?: safety handbook for women journalists : practical advice based on personal experiences (Saady, 2017).

44 Dart publishes some free online resources: <https://dartcenter.org/resources?page=1&featured%5B0%5D=750>

45 [https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379826\\_eng](https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000379826_eng).

attacks on women journalists, this is not a justification for news media employers to sit still, stay silent, or fail to listen to their female staff.

Because of the chilling effect on women journalists' practice and the increasing involvement of State actors and political forces in coordinated attacks, there are also implications for press freedom and the public's right to know. The compounding problem of pandemic-era conspiracy networks that increasingly meld with disinformation and political extremism online, also heightens and extends the risks facing women journalists. All of these factors should cause news organisations to redouble their efforts to combat online violence against women journalists, and significantly upgrade their response protocols. They have a responsibility to do everything they can to prevent these attacks, protect and defend targets when they are under attack, and in the aftermath; and report and ensure that perpetrators face consequences from the state and internet companies where appropriate.

# Recommendations for Action

The following research-based recommendations are proposed for consideration by news organisations as key responders to online violence against women journalists globally.

## News organisations could:

- 1.** Recognise gendered online violence as a workplace safety issue experienced by their journalists (whether staff or freelance). Understand that this applies regardless of whether or not the abuse is directed at the journalist on their own news website, or a digital service owned by a third party.
- 2.** Ensure that online violence is understood as “real” and that psychological injury suffered by women journalists under attack is recognised as serious.
- 3.** Acknowledge the increased intersectional risks and impacts facing women journalists at the nexus of misogyny, racism, religious bigotry, homophobia, transphobia and other forms of discrimination which require recognition in editorial guidelines and online violence response protocols.
- 4.** Recognise the correlation (and potential causal link) between online violence and offline attacks, and respond accordingly by ensuring that defensive strategies integrate physical safety, digital security, psychosocial support (including access to specialised trauma-aware counselling), editorial responses and legal assistance.
- 5.** Avoid making women journalists responsible for their own protection and defence.
- 6.** Develop or improve newsroom protocols that can address online violence against women journalists, recognising their additional exposure to risk.
- 7.** Such protocols should be designed to identify, monitor, prevent and respond to online violence. They should be sensitive to intersectional threats, and should also be regularly reviewed so that they are responsive to the changing nature of gendered online violence.
- 8.** Ensure that these protocols take into account contexts of weaponised social media platforms, viral disinformation, far right extremism and conspiracy networks.
- 9.** Establish procedures and systems that cover both staff and freelancers.

- 10.** Call on law enforcement officers to protect those targeted and prosecute perpetrators in those countries and circumstances where it is safe to do so (bearing in mind intersectionalities and global realities).
- 11.** Collect and analyse data related to online violence and its effects, as experienced by staff and freelancers, and create a gender-disaggregated database of specific occurrences, and any follow-up. Use this internally to keep protocols under review, and make it available to trusted researchers internationally, so that the changing nature of attacks can be monitored, and the efficacy of remedial action can be evaluated.
- 12.** Provide targeted education and training initiatives to staff and freelancers.
- 13.** Appoint a Digital Safety Editor with capabilities and responsibilities that bridge editorial functions, digital security, and journalism safety. This position should include selection criteria that reflect the need for gender-awareness and understanding of intersectional threats and impacts.
- 14.** Assign a point person/team to deal with the monitoring and reporting of attacks across platforms, private messaging, email, and across different devices when a woman journalist is under attack.
- 15.** Lead from the top: create a company culture of gender equality and zero tolerance for threats and harassment (online or offline) against staff, or women journalists at other outlets.
- 16.** Put in place clear and transparent procedures related to content and comment moderation on corporate websites, along with clear community guidelines, and train relevant staff accordingly. Apply these principles - where possible - to the social media communities created and curated by the news organisation.
- 17.** Hold social media companies to account through investigative reporting, and through advocacy for media freedom and journalist safety, regardless of commercial ties to the platforms.
- 18.** Use investigative and data journalism as countermeasures to both raise awareness of gendered online violence, and to investigate and expose perpetrators (including orchestrated and/or State-sponsored attacks).
- 19.** Ensure that coverage avoids inflaming online mobs targeting women journalists by amplifying and legitimising their attacks.
- 20.** Avoid “victim-blaming” and speech-restrictions when responding to gendered online violence cases, recognising that the target is not to blame for the abuse, harassment, or threats to which she is subjected. Empower her to speak, recognising that “don’t feed the trolls” is an inadequate response.
- 21.** Ensure that policies on social media use represent a ‘two-way street’ - where the obligations of the journalist to behave professionally on social media are matched by a commitment to support and defend her when she comes under attack.
- 22.** Work collaboratively with other media organisations, professional associations and civil society organisations to monitor online violence, create robust integrated models of risk assessment, evaluate recovery models, and create industry-standard guidelines, support systems and training.



**23.** Advocate for governments to formally recognise that online violence directed at journalists is an attack on freedom of expression (including press freedom), and that it has a disproportionate impact on women and marginalised journalists.

**24.** Advocate for social media companies to recognise the special needs and status of women journalists – with sensitivity to intersectional risks – and introduce rapid response units focused on the safety of journalists, with human points of contact.

**25.** Support regulation to make social media companies accountable for the safety of women journalists on their services.

**26.** Act on the November 2021 recommendation from the Council of Europe Expert Group on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence which encourages media organisations and journalists unions to “take concrete steps to eradicate gender-based discrimination, victim-blaming attitudes and violations of the privacy of victims of gender-based violence against women and their children in all their journalistic activities. Further efforts should be undertaken to uproot male-dominated power dynamics in media landscapes”.

## 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 183 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.



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