

14 June 2021

Submission to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression to inform her thematic report on gender justice

The European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF), European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Free Press Unlimited (FPU) and OBC Transeuropa (OBCT), as part of the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR), welcome the opportunity to make this submission for consideration by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression, Irene Khan, in the preparation of her thematic report on gender justice and the right to freedom of opinion and expression, to be presented at the 76th session of the General Assembly. We likewise welcome that the Special Rapporteur has identified the empowerment of women and girls as one of the priorities of her mandate.

This submission considers barriers, challenges and threats that women journalists and media workers face in the exercise of their profession. It draws on our monitoring of press and media freedom and the safety of journalists, which is documented on the [Mapping Media Freedom](#) platform. The MFRR project covers European Union member states and candidate countries, plus the United Kingdom. The data used in this submission runs from the start of the MFRR project on 1 March 2020 until 27 May 2021. We would like to stress, however, that the alerts of the platform most likely do not cover all violations of the freedom of opinion and expression of female journalists and media workers, as a lot of threats are never reported.

In the period and region covered in this submission, the MFRR documented 615 alerts of press and media freedom violations, involving a total of 1504 attacked persons or entities. Interestingly, in 21.8% of cases, women were involved as attacked persons, compared with 48.5% of cases in which men were involved as attacked persons. In 28.9% of cases, gender is not a relevant factor (e.g., the attack is on a media outlet and is not gender-related) and in 7% of cases we lack the pertinent information.

Taking a more detailed look shows that there are specific threats that women journalists are more subjected to than their male colleagues. Statistical analysis of the data reveals several significant trends:

- Concerning the type of incident, in 66% of cases, women journalists and media workers were subjected to verbal attacks and psychological abuse, which is significantly more likely (factor = 1.41) than for their male colleagues. This includes online and offline intimidation and threatening, insult and abuse, harassment, and bullying and trolling behaviour. The latter is especially more likely to affect women (factor = 4.94). In 1 out of 5 cases, women journalists and media workers were

physically assaulted. This is significantly less likely (factor = 0.65) compared to their male colleagues. Legal consequences (such as detention) also feature significantly less frequently (factor = 0.61) in alerts involving women journalists and media workers.

- Concerning the context of the incident, attacks on women journalists and media workers are most likely to occur online or in the digital sphere, constituting 30.5% of documented cases. This is significantly more likely (factor = 2.37) than for their male counterparts. Similarly, women journalists and media workers are significantly more likely (factor = 2.28) to be attacked in their office or workplace.
- Concerning the source of the incident, women journalists and media workers are significantly less likely (factor = 0.57) to be attacked by the police or other state security forces than their male colleagues. Also here, it must be stressed, such attacks nevertheless constitute a considerable problem for women (with 14.8% of cases), just less so than for men. Women journalists and media workers are significantly more likely to face attacks from unknown assailants (factor = 2.20).

Gender-based harassment, threats and smear campaigns

The 2021 MFRR analysis "[Interviewing journalism. Needs and gaps in support for European journalists](#)" by the OBC Transeuropa identifies women journalists and media workers among the most vulnerable, highlighting the fact that they suffer from verbal harassment more than their male colleagues. Numerous stakeholders interviewed for the realisation of the study shared their personal experiences and insights. Kersti Forsberg, Director of the Fojo Media Institute in Sweden, in this regard said: "If you are a woman, it's also quite common that [a threat] is describing what they want to do with your body, threats of rape and sexual abuse". For instance, "some photos of me behind a lot of muscular black men started circulating," Italian journalist Angela Caponnetto stated. "In the beginning I did not give it so much importance; then they became increasingly heavy, like "you have to die" or "you have to end up like Ilaria Alpi."¹

The MFRR has documented several incidents occurring across the region with a specific gender-based component to the attack. Many of these are part of a growing trend of anti-media rhetoric, online and offline, resulting in targeted harassment, threats and smear campaigns directed at journalists and media workers of all genders. Reinforced by national or regional issues such as territorial or geopolitical conflicts, anti-refugee or xenophobic sentiment and increased polarisation in society, harassment is an increasingly common type of threat facing journalists and media workers. When such harassment and threats target women, they can take on an outspoken misogynistic character. For instance:

- In Belgium, journalist Tanja Milevska has been repeatedly targeted by gender-based online trolling and abuse. In [July 2020](#), she was harassed and threatened, including threats of physical and sexual violence, via Twitter, in relation to her coverage of the election campaign in North Macedonia. In [December 2020](#), she received hundreds of

¹ Ilaria Alpi was an Italian journalist killed in Somalia in 1994 while reporting on the illegal smuggling of toxic waste from Europe to the African country.

anonymous messages, including insults of a sexual nature, after she responded on Twitter to a misogynistic thread about the gaming community. A thousand euros bounty was offered to hack her profile.

- In [France](#), war correspondent Liseron Boudoul faced a flow of hate speech and insults that lasted for several days, receiving dozens of insulting and threatening messages on social media after broadcasting a report about the conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh on 22 October 2020. One comment referred to her as a "genocidal whore", and another referred to "beheadings of senior TF1 staff". Boudoul also received a message on WhatsApp from someone who had managed to get her phone number. The day following the broadcast, 300 members of the Armenian community demonstrated outside TF1's headquarters in Paris to protest what they considered biased coverage of the conflict. The channel removed the report from its website.
- In [Germany](#), Maybrit Illner, journalist and TV host on public service broadcaster ZDF, received death threats in a letter sent via email. It was signed with "NSU 2.0", alluding to Neo-Nazi group Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund. The threat appears to be part of a series of emails that targeted women in public life.
- In [Italy](#), journalist Silvia Bergamin was subjected to a wave of sexist insults and gender-based attacks after writing about a drug-charge arrest for Il Mattino di Padova. The online harassment occurred on the private community Facebook page "Sei di Cittadella se", which has 12,700 members. Bergamin described the online abuse, which included more than 60 comments, as an "avalanche of hatred". She initiated libel proceedings against individuals involved. The administrator of the community quickly removed the comments after being contacted.
- In [Northern Ireland](#), a Twitter account under the name "Barbara J Pym" sent abusive and misogynistic messages to several journalists and academics over the course of months. At least three journalists were targeted by this smear campaign: Allison Morris (Belfast Telegraph), Martina Devlin (Irish Independent) and Aoife Moore (Irish Examiner). The Pym account, together with nine others linked to it, was suspended by Twitter for violating its "policy on platform manipulation and spam". On 12 May, Morris and Moore initiated legal action against columnist Eoghan Harris. He has admitted to being one of the people running the account, accusing him of trolling and harassment and seeking to identify other parties involved. According to a statement by Phoenix Law, representing Moore, she has been the subject of more than 120 tweets from two accounts over the course of a year. They wrote that "most concerning of all, some of the tweets directed at our client sought to belittle her views and undermine her professionalism through the use of misogynistic language."
- Also in the [United Kingdom](#), Amy Fenton, chief reporter at The Mail in Barrow, was placed under police protection due to the abuse she received due to her coverage of an ongoing criminal case. Threats of physical and sexual violence were shared online, as well as alleged threats against her daughters. The abuse centred around a report of a woman charged with perverting the course of justice over false allegations of rape. It was not the first time Fenton was the target of online abuse.
- In another case in the [United Kingdom](#), Marianna Spring, who covers disinformation and social media for the BBC and BBC World Service, has online harassment on different platforms, including Instagram and Twitter, as a result of her work. She is

[frequently called "Satan's whore"](#) and other misogynistic insults and has also been targeted with explicit threats, such as "watch when you are seen in public."

On top of misogynistic harassment and attacks coming from the public, increasingly authorities and political actors are guilty of smearing women journalists. When political leaders use sexist speech, it fans the flames for further misogynistic abuse. Two striking examples:

- In [Slovenia](#), Eugenija Carl, a journalist for public television RTV, is a common target of smears in right-wing media outlets and online harassment and threats, after Prime Minister Janez Janša infamously called her and another journalist "prostitutes" in retaliation for critical reporting. On 1 June 2020, she received an envelope containing a threatening handwritten note and a mysterious irritating powder, to which she had an allergic reaction. The letter contained several insults and threats and arrived at the RTV Slovenia filing office despite lacking a postage mark. It was the third time she was sent white powder in the mail. In her recent [memorandum](#) on freedom of expression and media freedom in Slovenia, the Commissioner for Human Rights of the Council of Europe noted "that there is no systematic approach to tackling sexist hate speech against female journalists. Even in the most extreme cases involving death or rape threats, female journalists are reluctant to go to the police because they do not think it will achieve anything."
- In [Serbia](#), politician Vojislav Seselj verbally abused journalist Natasa Miljanovic-Zubac, who works for Radio Television of Republika Srpska. While he was a guest on the "Weekend Morning" show, Seselj made misogynistic comments towards Miljanovic-Zubac, calling her a "prostitute" and a "whore" and claiming she had a secret affair with Bishop Grigorije. He went on with further allegations about her private life. Miljanovic-Zubac said it had affected her and her family members' health.

Gender roles and stereotypes

The MFRR's [2021 needs and gaps analysis](#) shows that women journalists and media workers continue to be impacted as a consequence of gender roles and stereotypes: "Women are expected to take care of kids and soon after I got pregnant, I don't know I became like 'an empty place!' Nobody was speaking to me about future projects or ... I was even working by that time, but somehow nobody cared about my opinion anymore because I was about to be out of work for 1 year and 2 months," a Lithuanian journalist told us.

Because of the need for flexibility as a consequence, women tend to work freelance more than men. Spanish freelancer Esperanza Escribano said: "We see that the majority of freelancers are women, which are normally worse paid than normal journalists ... and also we see differences in salaries for those working on media outlets. We still see we have news on gender violence that puts all the pressure and responsibility on victims. And... when we decide to be mothers, there is a huge discrimination because usually it is women who decide to get a part time job after having a child. For these reasons, in Catalonia we founded the group [Feminist Communicators](#)."

Marital status can also become the object of negative comments: "In Lithuania, you can change your surname and its ending shows if you are married or not, so if a woman decides not to take her husband's surname, others think she's still unmarried and she receives a lot of comments about that," said Akvilė Venckutė of the Lithuanian Journalism Centre. "Especially when they work on social problems, on children, on family legislation, they get comments like 'you don't have children, how can you speak about that?'"

Interference with reporting on feminist issues

Finally, the MFRR also recorded instances of interference with reporting by women on feminist issues by state and non-state actors:

- In [Turkey](#), journalist Zeynep Yağmur Kaya was detained while reporting on a crackdown by the police on a feminist march in Istanbul on 8 March 2020 that local authorities had outlawed. Alongside more than twenty other women, she was taken to the police station. Her camera and laptop, with other personal belongings, were confiscated. She was released without charge, but was called to the police station again in May to give a statement about the events at the protest.
- In [Denmark](#), TV 2 channel banned employees who had signed on to an open letter raising awareness of sexism in the Danish media industry from reporting on the issue. Six TV 2 employees authored the letter, which was signed by over 701 women across the country and reflected the lived experience and knowledge of the authors. News director Jacob Kwon said he was "happy that it is coming out now", but TV 2 stated that any media professional who signed the letter was disqualified from covering the issue in their professional capacity. They could make minor parts of a more substantial feature, such as recording vox pops but could not produce features or record live interviews on the subject.

Lastly, also in [Turkey](#), the government-controlled Radio and Television Supreme Council (RTÜK) issued a fine against an internet series and ordered them to remove a broadcast that featured the country's first openly trans model and actress, Çağla Akalın. Reportedly, this was the first time that a trans woman had appeared on a Turkish programme. On the talk show Katarsis, which airs on the digital platform Exxen TV, Akalın spoke about her life and the challenges she has faced. The regulator claimed that her appearance set a "negative example for the viewers." RTÜK has become increasingly conservative under the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP), singling out programmes for content it deems offensive to so-called "family values" and using fines to compel broadcasters not to air LGBTQ content.

Conclusions and recommendations

Across Europe, online and offline verbal abuse, threats and harassment disproportionately affect women journalists and media workers. It can take on a particular misogynist character. Such attacks, which are frequently met with impunity, contribute to a hostile climate. Society must send a clear signal that this cannot be tolerated, including:

- Instances of online and offline gender-based harassment and abuse should be consistently, swiftly and thoroughly investigated and prosecuted, leading to the perpetrators being held accountable. To enable this outcome, state authorities should amend relevant laws to make them gender-responsive and invest in capacity-building and awareness-raising of stakeholders, including police, prosecuting services and the judiciary.
- Social media platforms should include specific gender-based harassment and abuse sections in community guidelines, review the effectiveness of reporting mechanisms and increase the transparency of content moderation, which must be in line with international human rights law and standards. Platforms must more actively combat coordinated harassment campaigns.
- Media organisations should foster gender equality within the sector, by ensuring equality in work and working conditions and gender balance across functions. They should empower women journalists and media workers to respond to online and offline gender-based violence and harassment including appropriate support, such as training on physical and digital security, improved mental health support and support with reporting abuse on social media platforms
- Politicians and public figures, in particular, must abstain from using sexist speech, as this sends a signal that such behaviour is acceptable. Instead, they should condemn misogyny in all its forms.

This submission has been written by the Media Freedom Rapid Response (MFRR), which tracks, monitors and responds to violations of press and media freedom in EU Member States and Candidate Countries. This project provides legal and practical support, public advocacy and information to protect journalists and media workers. The MFRR is organised by a consortium led by the European Centre for Press and Media Freedom (ECPMF) including ARTICLE 19, the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ), Free Press Unlimited (FPU), the Institute for Applied Informatics at the University of Leipzig (InfAI), International Press Institute (IPI) and CCI/Osservatorio Balcani e Caucaso Transeuropa (OBCT). The project is co-funded by the European Commission.

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