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*Intersectional  
Feminist Media  
Development*

# Safety of women journalists

*Learning Brief No. 1*

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*In the past decade, awareness that women in the media are subject to gender-based violence has grown as a number of ground-breaking reports have been published, establishing that violence and threats against women journalists have reached endemic proportions. Three out of four women journalists have now been subject to online violence, and the killings of women journalists have increased at an unprecedented speed.<sup>1</sup> Along with this awareness has come a greater understanding that these threats pose a serious challenge to media freedom and development.*

Addressing the safety of women journalists is not only a matter of protecting individuals but also a means of safeguarding democratic values, human rights and the richness of media representation. It is essential for fostering an environment where all journalists can work freely, contribute to informed public discourse and play a vital role in shaping the societies they serve.

**In September 2016, the Human Rights Council unanimously adopted resolution 33/2 on the safety of journalists, which condemns unequivocally any specific attacks on women journalists in the exercise of their work, including sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence, intimidation and harassment online and offline, thus highlighting the need to address gender-specific threats faced by women journalists.<sup>2</sup>**

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# Un/seen threats that women journalists encounter

As concluded in the IMS report *The Safety of Women Journalists: Breaking the Cycle of Silence and Violence* from 2019, the threats against women journalists are two-fold. As journalists they are threatened by the dangers all journalists work under but are also targeted for the simple fact that they are women taking on a public role.

The safety of women journalists from an intersectional perspective refers to ensuring the physical, psychological and professional wellbeing of women journalists. This concept includes protection from the violence, harassment and discrimination that threaten women journalists and hinder them from carrying out their work. From a feminist perspective, the safety of women journalists involves examining and addressing power dynamics, structural inequalities and gender-based violence. A feminist perspective allows us to dismantle patriarchal systems that upholds discrimination, oppression and violence against women. This perspective is crucial to understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by women journalists.

Gender-based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for harmful acts that hurt, threaten, violate, force or restrict a person, that are directed at an individual or a group based on their gender and that are based on a gendered power structure. This structure contains perceptions of masculinity and femininity that hierarchically rank different genders. This results in a power imbalance

that puts women and girls at risk. GBV is rooted in gender inequality, harmful norms and abuse of power. It is a brutal form of discrimination and a violation of fundamental human rights.<sup>3</sup>

The safety of women journalists, whether they work as contractors for media houses or as freelancers, can be categorised in three broad groups. 1) Physical and sexual violence includes killing, physical abuse and detention, but women journalists are also more often targets of sexual violence than men journalists. Verbal threats and abuse, particularly online, include, in high volume, explicit threats of sexual violence, personal insults and circulation of private information or demeaning images. 2) Workplace harassment, discrimination and social inequality manifest in unequal pay, low numbers of women able to advance to the decision-making levels and a tolerance or lack of protocols for handling sexual harassment by colleagues, sources or interviewees. 3) Social pressure against women in the media and family obligations also disadvantage women in the field.

In 2021, the percentage of women journalists killed rose to 11 percent from six percent the previous year. This concerning increase may reflect the growing trend of women journalists facing online gender-based attacks that escalate into offline violence, thereby endangering their safety.<sup>4</sup>

Women journalists reporting on or originating from conflict zones face an elevated risk due to the harsh realities of the conflict, particularly due to the widespread availability of weapons, the presence of militias and the absence of legal structures. They may face physical threats to their safety, involving intimidation, kidnappings, threats of rape, harming family members, causing disabilities, stealing or destroying equipment and, in extreme cases, even assassinating women journalists and citizen journalists.

During the military coup 2021 in Myanmar, women journalists were arrested while reporting the news and during house raids. The arrests included mothers of underaged children. They encountered acts of violence and threats during the arrests and interrogations, and communication with families was prohibited for a prolonged period during interrogation and detention. The detainees were deprived of the protection of law and were charged and sentenced under unjust laws. Once released, they were unable to return to their professions in the news and media communities.<sup>5</sup>

Since 7 October 2023, Palestinian journalists have been operating under extremely challenging conditions. Among the journalists walking that taxing tightrope between work, family and safety is Mona Akal, who reported for Palestine TV from inside of Gaza but has since left the Gaza Strip. She has a young daughter, whom she is trying to take care of while doing her work. “The pressure has been so immense, navigating two responsibilities: The responsibility of work and the responsibility of family,” she says. “There are many difficult situations. We are here every day. We die a million times because we see and live the pain of all the people, and we have seen things that might take years to forget.”<sup>6</sup>

While sexual violence remains largely underreported due to social stigma and shame, the UNESCO Global Survey on Online Violence against Women Journalists

found that 18 percent of women journalists have been threatened with sexual violence. Sexual violence against women journalists can occur in detention, in crowded places and elsewhere and be perpetuated by sources or coworkers during assignments alone.

Online harassment on social media platforms and online spaces can become arenas for harassment and abuse directed at women journalists. Women journalists are frequently targeted with online harassment, cyberbullying and misogynistic attacks. According to a report published by UNESCO in 2021 on global trends in online violence against women journalists, 40 percent of “personal attacks” were sexist and misogynistic.<sup>7</sup> This can include hate speech, threats, doxing (publishing private information online) and the spread of false narratives or stories about their lives. The anonymity provided by online platforms can embolden harassers and make it difficult for women journalists to trace or confront their attackers.

Some individuals or groups may engage in organised trolling (deliberately posting offensive or provocative content online to provoke reactions or disrupt discussions) and discrediting campaigns, including gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech, against women journalists. These campaigns aim to undermine their credibility, professionalism and reputation by spreading false information, conspiracy theories or misleading narratives. For more information on online gender-based violence, see IMS’ [Intersectional Feminist Media Development Learning Brief no. 2.](#)

Being a woman journalist entails specific challenges, as does reporting on women’s issues. In 2016 and 2017, Reporters without Borders (RSF) registered more than 60 cases in more than 20 countries of journalists’ rights being violated in connection with their reporting on the issues faced by women.<sup>8</sup> In Colombia, women reporting on human rights issues such as land right and environmental problems are particularly targeted with often fatal attacks.

In IMS’ report on women journalists’ safety from 2019, sexual harassment in the workplace was cited as a safety threat to women in nearly all nine countries of the study (Afghanistan, Colombia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Nepal, Pakistan, Somalia and The Philippines).<sup>9</sup>

## Case: Gender equality in the Somali media sector

“Across Somalia, 49 media houses have signed the Gender Declaration developed by the Somali Women Journalists Organisation (SWJO) in 2018. Signatories have pledged to implement 19 concrete and actionable points, ranging from enabling equal opportunities in their workplaces to implementing measures against sexual harassment. One significant impact is that the Gender Declaration has created an entirely new space for dialogue and discussion around issues relating to gender, and more specifically around the sensitive topic of sexual harassment in the workplace.

As a result of those discussions, two media houses proceeded to install CCTV cameras to provide a safer working environment for women journalists, and in one instance caught sexual harassment taking place on video and later took measures against the perpetrator. The cameras not only provided evidence but also prevented new cases and provided more security and safety for women journalists.

Furthermore, three media houses have introduced paid maternity leave and others have established gender desks and prayer rooms reserved for women. IMS, together with Fojo Media Institute, has worked with SWJO since 2016.

Other forms of GBV are microaggressions and sexism, which are subtle and often unintentional discriminatory remarks or behaviours and can be a constant challenge for women journalists. Sexist comments, stereotypes and everyday sexism may be pervasive in the workplace and contribute to a hostile environment. Unequal pay, limited opportunities for career advancement and exclusion from important assignments may persist as unseen threats affecting their professional growth.

In Afghanistan, Khujesta (not her real name), an Afghan woman journalist, acknowledges that the challenges she faces are two-fold. Since the Taliban’s takeover in August 2021, the country’s media outlets have faced self-censorship, limited access to information and restrictions on the topics they can report on. But women journalists must also navigate restrictions on their rights as women, such as the closure of the journalism education for women, limitations on employment and freedom of movement and specific dress codes mandating women in the media to cover their faces – which further limit their ability to report.<sup>10</sup>

Women journalists may be subjected to gendered stereotypes and objectification

in which their appearance and personal lives are emphasised over their professional capabilities. Women journalists may also be subject to tokenism in which they are included in newsrooms primarily for the sake of appearance or to have woman in the team rather than for their expertise. This form of marginalisation can make it challenging for women to be taken seriously and to have their voices heard on important issues.

A frequently overlooked issue pertains to the subtle effects of gaslighting and manipulation, a form of psychological control that seeks to instil doubt in individuals regarding their perceptions or mental wellbeing. Within the professional sphere, women journalists may encounter gaslighting as constant, low-to-moderate volume abuse and harassment that burns slowly but can be cumulatively devastating.<sup>11</sup>

Applying an intersectional feminist perspective allows us to delve into the safety of women journalists from multiple angles, considering how factors like gender, race, class, age, abilities, geography, ethnicity and more reinforce each other. The UNESCO study from 2021 shows that women journalists identifying as Black, Indigenous or Jewish experience online harassment

to a significantly higher degree than white women journalists, and lesbian and bisexual women journalists to a higher degree than heterosexual women journalists. Arab and Muslim women are also alarmingly more at risk of experiencing offline attacks than all others.<sup>12</sup>

Among these overwhelming challenges, women journalists, especially those who operate as contractors for media houses or as freelancers, face a lack of support and solidarity from their colleagues and media organisations. This absence of support can engender feelings of isolation and reluctance to report incidents of threats, harassment or discrimination, fuelled by the fear of potential repercussions on their careers. Inadequate resources for training, mental health support and legal assistance further contribute to a hostile working environment.

# Why is ensuring the safety of women journalists crucial?

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Ensuring the safety of women journalists is fundamental to upholding press freedom, a cornerstone of democratic societies. Journalists play a vital role in providing information, fostering public debate and holding those in power accountable. When women journalists face threats, violence or harassment, it undermines the free flow of information and weakens democratic principles.

Women journalists contribute to diverse perspectives and voices in the media landscape. Ensuring their safety is essential to fostering an inclusive and representative media environment. When women cannot work safely, it limits their ability to contribute fully to journalistic endeavours, resulting in a less diverse and enriched media landscape.

The safety of women journalists is a matter of human rights. Every individual, regardless of gender, has the right to work in an environment free from any sort of violence. Protecting the rights of women journalists aligns with broader efforts to promote human rights, equality and dignity for all.

Addressing the safety of women journalists is integral to advancing gender equality. It involves dismantling systemic barriers and challenging cultural norms that perpetuate discrimination and violence against women in the media sector. A safe working environment allows women journalists to thrive professionally and contribute to shaping public discourse.

The safety of journalists, including women, is linked to the credibility and trustworthiness of the media. When journalists face threats or violence, it can lead to self-censorship, compromising the ability to report on critical issues without fear. A safe environment enables journalists to fulfil their role as

watchdogs, contributing to a more informed public.

Women journalists often cover issues that affect societal wellbeing, including women's rights, gender-based violence, and social justice. When their safety is compromised, it can negatively impact the quality and depth of reporting on these critical issues, preventing societal awareness and progress.

Addressing the safety of women journalists contributes to preventing impunity for acts of violence and harassment. Creating mechanisms to investigate and prosecute those responsible for attacks on journalists sends a clear message that such actions will not be tolerated, fostering a safer environment for media professionals.

# What can media development organisations do?

Addressing the safety of women journalists requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach that involves media development organisations, tech industries and advocacy groups.

1. Proactively adopt and enforce policies that promote gender equality, prevent discrimination and address harassment in media houses. These policies should be clear, accessible and include transparent mechanisms for reporting and addressing complaints.
2. Advocate for and actively work towards stronger legal protections against gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace, including advocating for the ratification and implementation of the ILO Convention concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work (C190). Legal frameworks should encompass both online and offline spaces to ensure comprehensive protection for women journalists.
3. Organise training programmes designed to raise awareness about gender-based challenges and equip journalists with tangible tools to mitigate these issues effectively. This could involve scenario-based training, digital safety modules, wellbeing techniques and circles of exchange intersecting across various contexts.
4. Recognising the power of solidarity, establish tangible support networks within the journalism community both nationally and regionally. Implement mentorship programmes that pair seasoned journalists with newcomers, providing guidance and a platform for sharing experiences. Additionally, consider forming alliances and forums where women journalists can collaboratively address challenges and advocate for their rights.

## Case: Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN)

SFJN, a Syrian exile feminist media development foundation and long-term IMS partner, addresses the multifaceted challenges encountered by Syrian women journalists. According to SFJN's Protection Programme Coordinator, Nada Al Jendi, these challenges span various contexts, including within media institutions, fieldwork environments and the online space. She says: "As women in the media sector, they experience different forms of violence and discrimination, including societal rejection that limits women to specific professions. The media sector is not immune to such biases. Frequently, these threats aim to dissuade them from pursuing journalism careers."

Within media institutions, gender-based discrimination is common, with limited job opportunities, biased hiring practices favouring men and the absence of protective policies. In the field, security risks such as bombings and shelling pose significant dangers, compounded by societal non-acceptance of women in media. Obtaining press cards is difficult, hindering their work and exposing them to security threats. In Turkey, exiled Syrian media outlets face obstacles obtaining work permits and press cards, putting them at risk of arrest and deportation. Online, the digital space is deemed generally unsafe, especially when covering taboo women's issues, leading to offensive comments, smear campaigns and cyberbullying.

SFJN's protection programme provides support to Syrian women journalists and human rights defenders facing violence and gender-based discrimination. It includes a case management mechanism, emergency grants, referral systems, knowledge production and training on protection and safety procedures and wellbeing techniques. Additionally, the programme collaborates with Syrian media outlets to improve their working environments by developing protection policies and procedures.

# Do you want to know more?

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## Suggested readings:

- [Knowing the truth is protecting the truth](#): highlights of the UNESCO Director-General's report on the safety of journalists and the danger of impunity published on the occasion of the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists. UNESCO, 2022.
- [The Chilling: Global Trends in online violence against women journalists](#) (Research discussion paper), UNESCO (2021).
- [Legal frameworks: The nexus of gender-based violence and media](#), IMS, 2020.
- [The safety of women journalists: Breaking the cycle of silence and violence](#), IMS (2019).

## Resources for media and journalists:

- [Making invisible visible](#), ARTICLE 19, 2021:

**Guideline 1:** An intersectional gender guide to monitoring and documenting attacks against journalists and social communicators.

**Guideline 2:** Advocating on emblematic cases of attacks against journalists using an intersectional gender approach.

**Guideline 3:** An intersectional gender guide to protection training.

- [They came together not to be silenced](#), Kvinna Till Kvinna, 2023.

## Safety of Women Journalists

Published in 2024 by IMS

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# Notes

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- 1 “The Chilling: Global Trends in online violence against women journalists (Research discussion paper), UNESCO (2021).
- 2 “Combating violence against women journalists - Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences”, Human Rights Council (2020).
- 3 They came together not to be silenced, Kvinna Till Kvinna, 2023.
- 4 “Knowing the truth is protecting the truth: highlights of the UNESCO Director-General’s report on the safety of journalists and the danger of impunity published on the occasion of the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists 2022”, UNESCO (2022).
- 5 “Detained women journalists during the military coup”, Myanmar Women Journalists Society (2021).
- 6 The Silencing of Gaza (IMS): The silencing of Gaza | IMS (mediasupport.org).
- 7 Ibid, UNESCO (2021).
- 8 Women’s rights – forbidden subject, Reporters without borders.
- 9 The safety of women journalists: Breaking the cycle of silence and violence report, IMS, 2019.
- 10 The stories of Afghanistan’s women journalists (afghanwitness.org).
- 11 ibid UNESCO (2021).
- 12 ibid UNESCO (2021).



*IMS (International Media Support) is a non-profit organisation working for global press freedom by supporting local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition.*

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