

# SEXISM'S TOLL ON JOURNALISM



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# FOREWORD

**By Christophe Deloire**  
Secretary General



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Journalists already face multiple risks, in war zones and, increasingly, in conflict-free countries. Year after year, dangers have increased for journalism itself. When our latest Press Freedom Index was published, we showed how the new decade would prove decisive for its function in society.

Globally, worrying political changes are taking place, such as the rise of despotic regimes and the weakening of democracies. Chaos in the flow of information, facilitated by social media, puts journalism in an impossible position in the face of unfair and farcical competition from government propaganda, paid-for content and rumours.

Thus, we have a pressing obligation to defend journalism with all our strength against the many dangers that threaten it, of which gender-based and sexual bullying and attacks are a part. It is unthinkable that women journalists should endure twice the level of danger and have to defend themselves on another front, a many-sided struggle since it exists outside the newsroom as well as inside.

In 2017, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) published a report entitled 'Women's Right: Forbidden Subject' which highlighted the difficulties faced by journalists – men and women – who report on women's rights. We set out clear recommendations that would give everyone the right to fair treatment in the media, without which we would not be able to talk about journalistic freedom or media pluralism.

Three years on, the latest RSF survey, 'Sexism in Journalism,' shows that the two-fold danger to which many women journalists are subjected is far too common, not only in traditional reporting fields as well as new digital areas and the Internet, but also where they should be protected: in their own newsrooms.

By sexism, RSF means all forms of gender-based violence, including discrimination, insults, sexual harassment, unwanted touching, verbal and physical sexual assaults, threats of rape and even rape itself. These activities have a damaging effect on the diversity of news and information.

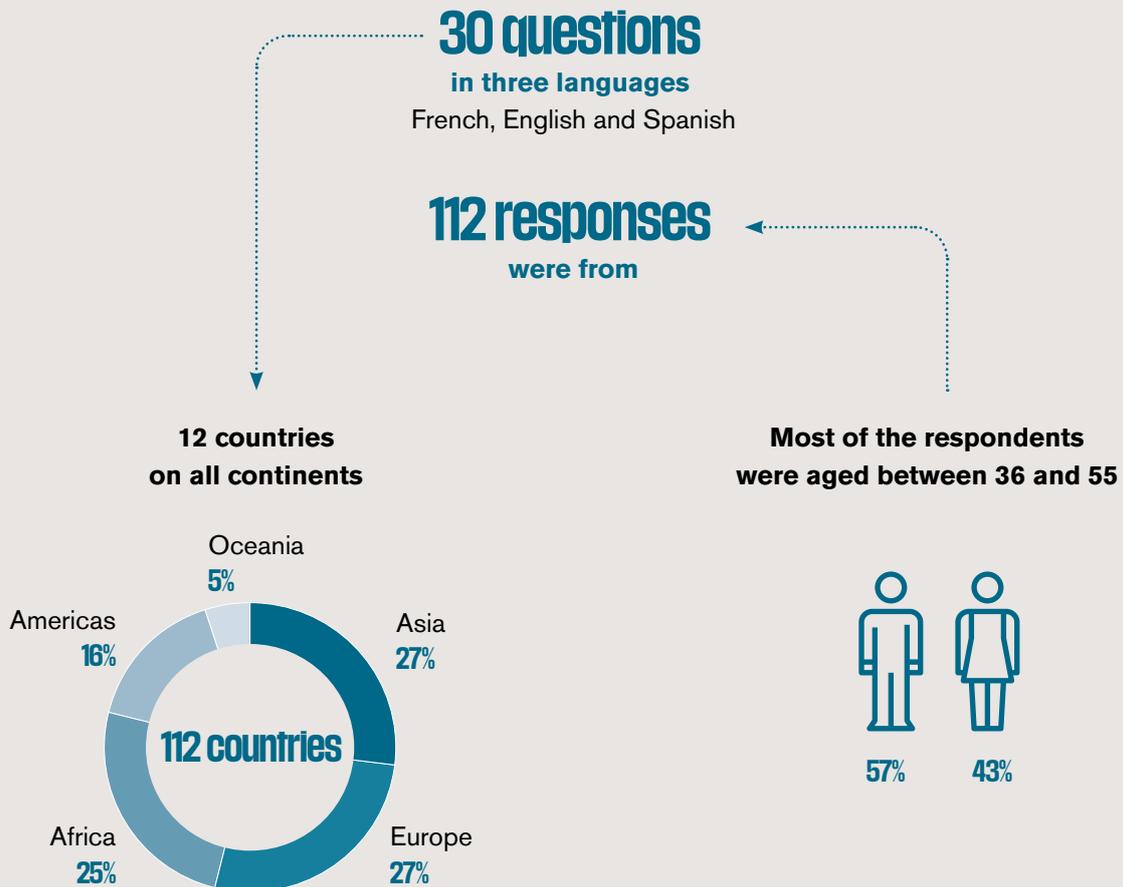
Our survey is based mainly on the assessment of responses to a questionnaire sent to 150 people in 120 countries. According to 85 percent of the respondents, when impunity prevails, acts of sexist violence are liable to be repeated and another woman journalist could fall victim to the same perpetrator.

More than two-thirds – 71 percent – of respondents were aware of discrimination towards women journalists because of their gender. What are the consequences? Forty-eight percent of respondents gave us an answer: "The woman self-censors and prefers to avoid mentioning certain subjects." That says it all.

# HOW THIS REPORT WAS COMPILED



With the aim of better evaluating trends perceived by Reporters Without Borders, the organisation sent a list of **30 QUESTIONS in French, English and Spanish** to its correspondents worldwide as well as to journalists who write about gender issues. Between 13 July and 6 October 2020, **136 replies were received, of which 112 were considered valid and were used to analyse the results.** A number of the responses were to multiple choice questions and the results were based on boxes checked by the respondents. Responses in which “other” was checked were not included in the statistical analysis but were listed and partially included in the report.



# 1 | DANGER ZONES

## 1.1. THE FIELD

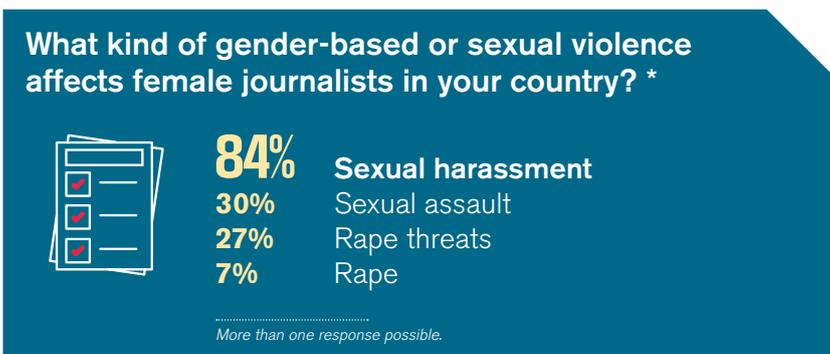
The French photojournalist **Laurence Geai** has never considered giving up working in the field. From the battle of Mosul to the Central African Republic, she has covered conflicts over more than 10 years. “Being a woman in the field is as much an advantage as a drawback,” she confides from the outset. “It’s an asset because we have terrific access to half of humanity who are less suspicious of us. I sometimes think my colleagues take more risks than I do.” However, the other side of the coin is that “in the field men regularly touch you and make unwelcome gestures.” She mentions the behaviour of a militiaman in the Central African Republic, a civilian in Azerbaijan, and a soldier in Iraq. “Nothing serious happened. It happens to me often and I just change the subject. In this job there are so many intense moments that it’s not the first thing I think of when I’m asked what has traumatised me in the field.”

Deciding whether to speak out depends on the circumstances. “You have to be strategic.” She quotes an example: “Once I was caught in a mob in the Central African Republic. Militiamen and civilians began to touch my arms, my face and my hair. I had to leave that day.”

*The photojournalist Laurence Geai follows the Iraqi army during its reconquest of the city of Mosul in June 2017.*  
© Andrea Diczenco



In the past, some female colleagues didn't get a chance. In 2011, at least two were raped as they covered the Egyptian revolution. In February, **Lara Logan**, former chief foreign correspondent of the US network CBS [was surrounded by hundreds of men](#). Her clothes were torn off and she was sexually assaulted. A few months later, **Caroline Sinz** of the French network France 3 [was attacked by a mob](#) in the same spot. "People applauded when they beat us," she recalls. "I really thought I was going to die." The assault took place on 24 November, the day before the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.



Although rape remains rare, the RSF survey confirms that it is the tip of the iceberg of violence against women journalists – the most visible and high-profile, but fortunately still unusual (7 percent of respondents report it as a form of gender-based violence). On the other hand, television and social media have highlighted the practice of “unwanted kissing.” In the [United States](#), [Brazil](#), [Russia](#) and elsewhere, this kind of sexual harassment targets female TV reporters as they are reporting live on sporting events or demonstrations. Among the most recent cases is that of **Raquel Guillán**, who was the unexpected [target of a kiss](#) while she was reporting live on Radio Television Canarias (RTVC) on 22 February 2020. On 14 March 2020, at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, **Evelyne Boone** of Belgium's VTM network was subjected to [a similar assault](#) by a bystander.



Raquel Guillán  
© RTVC screen grab

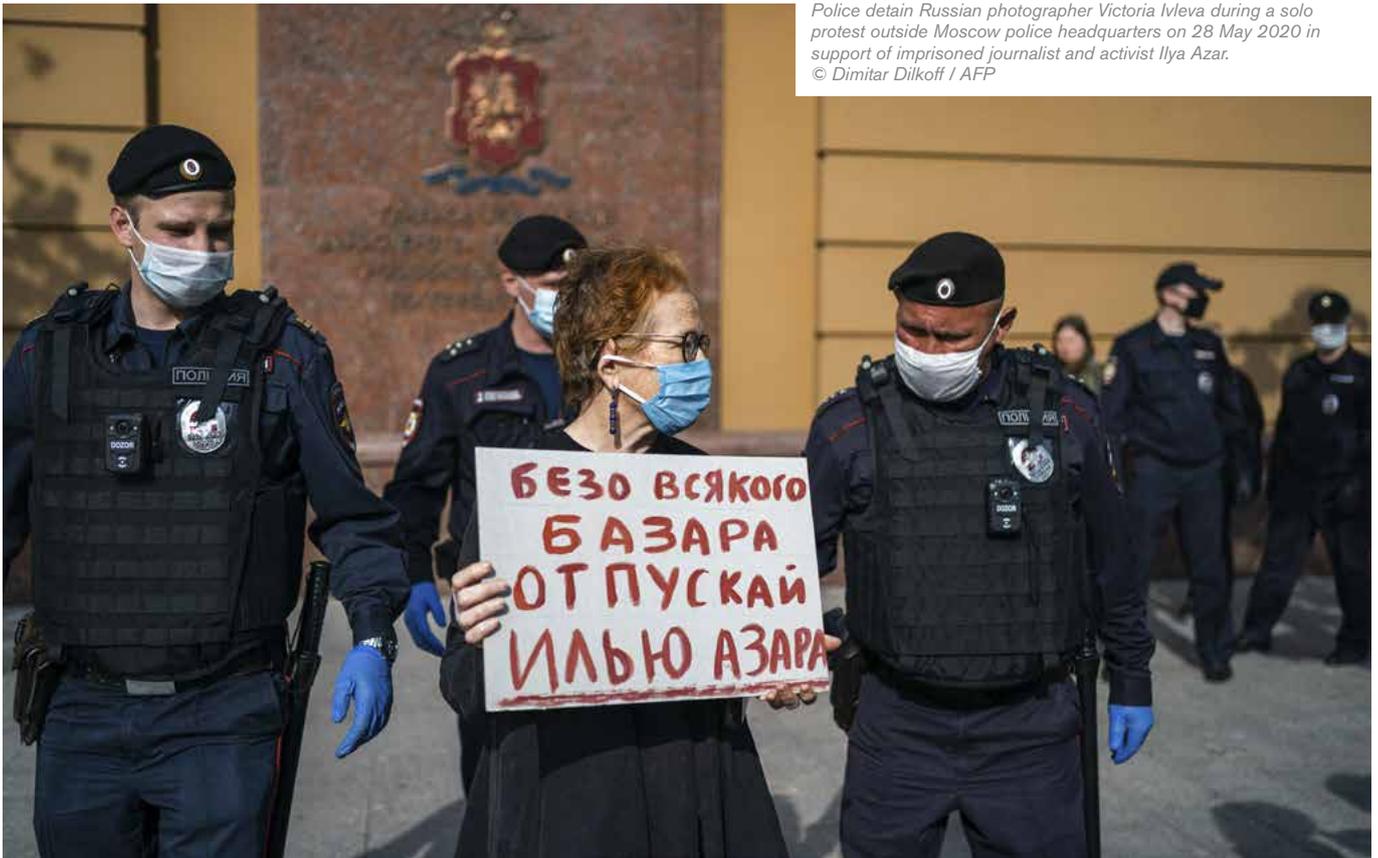
**“ In almost all cases of sexual harassment or assault, it is the female victims who are blamed in the first instance. The public accepts such objectionable conduct on the grounds that the women should be pleased and proud to be harassed in this way since it shows they are sexually attractive.”**

*Quotation from the RSF survey. Country concerned: Vietnam.*

Before the #MeToo movement, sexual assault would sometimes be dismissed as a clumsy attempt at flirting or a “schoolboy prank.” Times have changed. In Lebanon, the journalists **Dima Sadek, Loyal Saad, and Diana Moukalled**, among others, recently exposed the kind of harassment they endured when in the field covering demonstrations in a [video campaign](#) by the NGO Arab Foundation for Freedoms and Equality. They also restated their right to do their job: “No woman should think that giving up is the answer,” said Diana Moukalled.

Determination like this is necessary since this type of violence is a common feature of gender-based discrimination. The reports by the American journalists Jane Cazneau on the 1846 Mexican-American War, Nelly Bly on the trenches in 1914 and Martha Gelhorn on the Spanish Civil War and the D-Day landings paved the way for female war correspondents—and these days there are growing numbers of female reporters covering conflicts. Yet “the field” is too often considered to be a male province where women journalists are not safe. This is often used as an excuse for not assigning them to conflict zones, as demonstrated in the responses to our questionnaire. Asked about the kinds of discrimination to which women journalists are subjected in their countries, 45 percent of respondents cited a refusal to send female colleagues to areas considered “dangerous.”

Police detain Russian photographer Victoria Ivleva during a solo protest outside Moscow police headquarters on 28 May 2020 in support of imprisoned journalist and activist Ilya Azar. © Dimitar Dilkoff / AFP



## JOURNALISTS SUBJECTED TO SEXUAL VIOLENCE IN PRISON

Female journalists can find themselves in prison because of their work. Indeed, growing numbers find themselves behind bars. According to [RSF's 2020 Roundup](#), of the 387 journalists imprisoned around the world, 42 are women, compared with 31 in 2019, an increase of 35 percent. Besides enduring [harsh prison conditions](#), some also face the risk of sexual violence.

Such was the case for Egyptian multimedia reporter **Solafa Magdy**, who covers social unrest and minority and women's rights as well as issues related to sexual harassment in [Egyptian society](#). She has been in prison since November 2019, accused of membership of a terrorist group and "spreading fake news." She says she has been [subjected to body searches](#) and forced to strip naked. In August 2020, she said she had been forced to undergo a gynaecological examination which caused severe bleeding as a result of [surgery for a uterine tumour](#).

Vietnamese journalist and blogger **Pham Doan Trang**, winner of the [2019 RSF Prize for Impact](#), has been held in pre-trial detention since 6 October 2020 accused of "anti-state propaganda." Her investigations relate to [human rights](#), including the rights of women and LGBT+, and also concerning the killing of villagers battling to retain land appropriated by the authorities. She was previously arrested in 2018 and subjected to [torture and gender-based violence](#).

In China, seen as the [biggest jailer of journalists](#), 15 of the 121 journalists imprisoned at the time of writing are women. Among them are **Mirza Muqeddes** of *Xinjiang Education Press* and **Hekim Anargul** of *Kashgar Uyghur Press*, both arrested in 2019 for having [links to the Uyghur Muslim minority](#). While little is known about their prison conditions in Xinjiang, the north-western region where most of the Uyghur population lives, there is considerable cause for concern. A [recent BBC investigation](#) reported that detained Uyghur women are routinely raped in "re-education camps" and there was evidence of [forced sterilisation](#) being carried out.

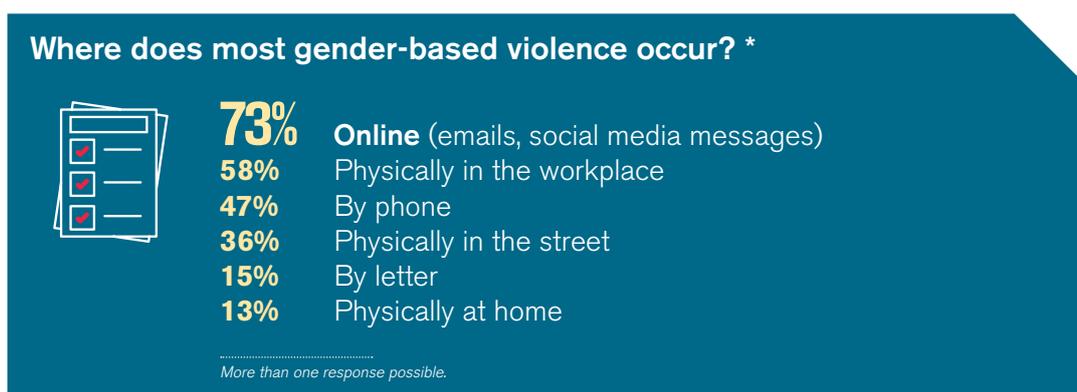
## 1.2. ONLINE

In June 2020, Australian television reporter **Lily Mayers** was horrified to discover dozens of screenshots from her private Instagram feed had been posted on a public forum with more than 81,000 followers. One was a holiday picture of her in a bikini and another showed her with a group of friends at a wedding. Each photo attracted crude comments on her looks. “But no one ever mentions my work,” she says sarcastically. “It’s objectifying.”

The accounts of [several hundred women journalists](#), rookies as well as more experienced ones, have been tracked in this way. “It is well known that for years rather seedy men have been taking screenshots of women who appear on television,” says Mayers, now a correspondent in Madrid. “But we had no idea that even our social media accounts were being spied on.” The misappropriation for sexual purposes of a journalist’s image has become a common form of gender-based assault and was reported by 65 percent of respondents in the RSF survey.



Another of the forum’s victims, **Antoinette Lattouf** of Australia’s Network 10 said: “For me it’s unfortunately just reinforcing how careful women need to be. We’ve got to be extra careful on the streets and extra careful online.” According to our survey, the Internet has become more hazardous for journalists than the street. Most gender-based violence now takes place online.



Attacks via the Web are as varied as they are numerous. The [Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma](#), attached to Columbia University in the United States, has recorded two forms of virtual theft: the hacking of email accounts and mailboxes and the posting of personal information. Another common form of attack is sending threats, or trolling, which involves automatically attaching harmful messages to all the journalist’s online activities.

Harassment can also take the form of a “raid.” Anonymous hackers get together to attack the same target. These online bullies may act spontaneously, one after the other in a snowball effect, without prior arrangement. The mob may also act by mutual consent after calls for harassment have appeared on private discussion groups.

In France, the 18-25 Blabla forum on the gaming site [jeuxvideos.com](#) owned by Webedia was behind several raids, including one against the *Europe 1* journalist [Nadia Daam](#) after she broadcast an opinion piece accusing the forum of being a breeding ground for online bullying.

In retaliation, she received a torrent of insults, including images of beheadings and threats to “rape her dead body.” As happened to Nadia Daam in 2017, online harassment of women journalists is regularly accompanied by rape threats, gender-based insults and an attempt to destroy her reputation.

"I get rape and death threats every day, aimed at me and my family," says [Syrian reporter Yakeen Bido](#), who uses the name [Merna Alhasan](#). She became a journalist by necessity. When Bashar al-Assad's bombs began to fall on her hometown of Idlib in north-west Syria, she felt bound to report what was happening to civilians. She is one of the [few female journalists](#) reporting from the field with a presence on social media. She regularly posts on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#) where she has tens of thousands of followers. Her high profile comes at a cost: she is regularly challenged by pro-government journalists, and many slurs against her circulate on social media in an attempt to discredit her work, such as false claims that she had been killed by her father.

In India, columnist and investigative journalist **Rana Ayyub** also received "daily threats of rape and death" and a wave of hatred on social media, and she also had her identity stolen. The fake identities [set up on Twitter](#) quoted her as making [improbable statements](#) in which she appeared to support child rapists and defend Muslims against the Hindu nationalist government.

"The main issue is to destroy the journalist's reputation so that she can no longer work," says Michelle Ferrier, professor at the journalism school of the University of Florida and founder of the [TrollBusters.com](#) website which supports journalists who are the targets of online attacks. To do so, Internet users employ increasingly sophisticated technology. Rana Ayyub was also the victim of a "deepfake" pornography plot. In this technique, visual and audio files are doctored to make the target do and say whatever the perpetrators want, to whomever they choose, creating realistic fake videos with devastating consequences.

"If the average person saw it without going through the details, such as the hair is not curly and the body is not mine, the average person would just look at the face and say, 'Oh, that's Rana Ayyub,' she said in an interview with Public Radio International.



*Indian journalist and author Rana Ayyub speaks during the launch of her self-published book "Gujarat Files in New Delhi" on 27 May 2016. © Chandan Khanna / AFP*

A few hours after publishing a story criticising the nationalist government, the journalist began receiving screenshots of the doctored video on her WhatsApp, Twitter and Facebook accounts.

"I felt like I was naked for the world. I was throwing up, I was in the hospital, I had palpitations for two days and my blood pressure shot up. I just couldn't stop crying."

Such online violence is all the more grotesque since it is almost impossible to contain. "When you are the target, how can you prove that it's not you?" says Michell Ferrier. "If you try to deal with it, the dark web will respond that it's because you have deleted the content. We face a growing technological challenge and we must work with the platforms concerned to fight this phenomenon."

## 1.3. THE NEWSROOM

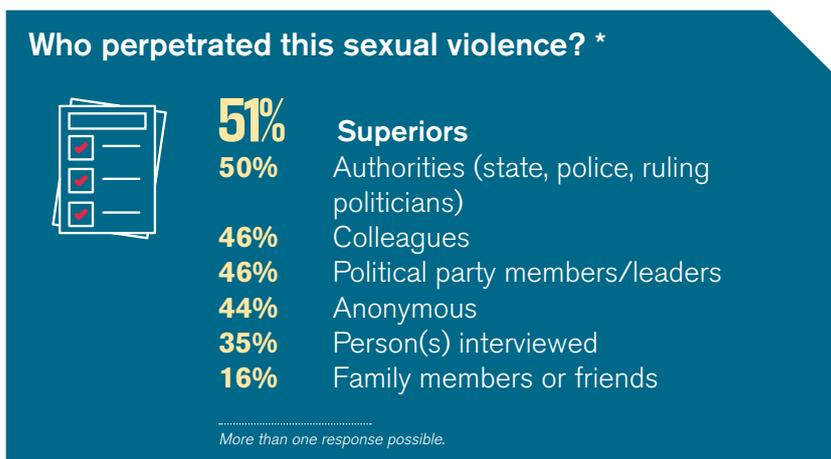
“You can't say that men and women are equal in Denmark,” said **Sofie Linde**, presenter of the Danish version of the popular television programme “X Factor,” speaking at a televised awards ceremony in August 2020. Apologising for spoiling the relaxed atmosphere, she disclosed that 12 years earlier, a senior staff member at the public broadcaster DR [threatened to destroy her career](#) unless she performed oral sex on him. She refused.

Her words sent a shockwave through a country where women's lives are ranked among the best in the world. “To dare to speak of sexism and violence against women was almost considered casting doubt on the national sentiment,” the researcher Camilla Møhring Reestorff was quoted as saying [in the French daily Le Monde](#).



Danish TV host Sofie Linde during the Zulu Comedy award show in 2020. By denouncing sexual harassment in the media, she restarted the #MeToo movement in Denmark. © Martin Sylvest / Ritzau Scanpix / Ritzau Scanpix via AFP

In response, [an article signed by more than 1,600 women](#) working in the media was published in the daily *Politiken* a month later. It described what women had experienced to a greater or lesser degree in the course of their careers: “Inappropriate comments on our appearance or clothes, suggestive messages, physical behaviour that crosses the line, warnings about which men to avoid at the Christmas party.”



Women journalists were able to speak out and, more generally, newsrooms were acknowledged as places that were not safe for them – as confirmed by our survey – thanks to the emergence of the #MeToo movement in the United States.



In July 2016, **Gretchen Carlson**, a former leading *Fox News* presenter, [launched a lawsuit against the network's chief executive Roger Ailes alleging sexual harassment](#). She reported that she had been fired for rejecting his advances. Another host, **Megyn Kelly**, said she had been similarly propositioned 10 years previously. These revelations led to Ailes's dismissal from *Fox News* and he died of a brain haemorrhage shortly afterwards, in May 2017. A few months later, the #MeToo movement expanded on an unprecedented scale on social media after the American actress Alyssa Milano posted a message on her Twitter account urging women to use the hashtag #MeToo, coined by African American activist Tarana Burke, if they had been sexually harassed or assaulted.

The Tweet had repercussions far beyond Hollywood. After it was adopted in the film world, the movement was taken up by journalists, first in Japan where the film-maker **Shiori Ito** launched #MeTooJapan in February 2018. In December 2019, she was awarded damages in her case against an eminent television



The Aurat March (women's march) in Lahore, Pakistan, to mark International Women's Day on 8 March 2020. In this ultra-conservative society, women are still put to death under ancient "honour" codes.  
© Arif Ali / AFP

colleague whom she accused of drugging and raping her in 2015. The movement spread throughout the world. Every continent had its own #MeToo.

In Benin, **Angela Kpeidja**, a journalist with the state broadcaster ORTB, posted a message on Facebook declaring: "Sexual harassment, even at my age, is still tolerated in the workplace... From the top down to petty lower managers, from editors and their deputies. And to think there are women among us who put up with it. Rape, psychological and sexual harassment... I've had enough." She urged victims to [sign up to the hashtag #N'aiepaspeur](#) ("Do not be afraid").

“The right to demand sex and the casting couch are an unwritten rule in Gabon's state media.”

Quote from the RSF survey.

French journalist **Sandra Muller**, who now lives in New York, also spoke of gender-based violence on social media and launched the French hashtag #Balancetonporc ("Squeal on your pig"). Muller was found guilty of defamation and ordered to pay 15,000 euros in damages. She has appealed and the verdict is expected on 31 March. Meanwhile, women have been speaking out in newsrooms across France.

The scandal of the French [Facebook group known as the Ligue du LOL](#) ("the LOL league"), which broke in 2019, can be seen in this context. Several journalists linked to the group were accused [of participating in the harassment](#) of female colleagues with outrageously sexist comments in the early 2010s.

The scandal led to the [dismissal of several journalists](#), including some on the staff of the daily *Libération* and the weekly *Les Inrocks*. At least two challenged their dismissal. One claimed more than 225,000 euros in damages, but [his case was dismissed](#). The second case, which claimed more than 350,000 euros in damages, has been referred by a conciliation court to a [professional magistrate](#).

The scandal led the editorial managements in several French news organisations to announce they had launched an audit of internal sexual harassment. The investigations led to a number of dismissals, including at the television and [culture magazine \*Télérama\*](#) and the French edition of the *Huffington Post*. Three of the dismissed *Huffington Post* journalists contributed to a private discussion group called “Radio Bière Foot” with 20 male members where they commented on the appearance of female editorial staff. One of their targets [was nicknamed](#) “Bitchy,” and had an emoji of the North Korean leader Kim Jong-un attached to her. “It became a toxic masculine discussion group,” said one of its *Libération* members later. “But at the time I wasn’t really aware of that.”

In its wake, the association ‘Prenons la une’, which campaigns for better representation and equality for women in the media, the page [Paye ton journal](#), which compiles accounts of harassment and sexist language in the print media, and the feminist movement #NousToutes (“All of us”) launched a contributory survey of instances of [misogynistic behaviour in French newsrooms](#). The survey, using the hashtag [#EntenduALaRédac](#) (“Heard in the newsroom”), showed the [magnitude of the issue](#). Contributors recounted such incidents in 270 news organisations. Among the news outfits mentioned, 208 were singled out for cases of sexual innuendo or sexual assault. For example: “I don’t know if she’ll manage it, you need big shoulders... and she’s a woman,” and: “I’m going to schedule your piece to go out at seven o’clock so that I can masturbate in bed as I’m listening.” All types of news organisations were involved: local and national papers, and general and specialist news organisations, as well as journalism schools.

## INDIAN JOURNALISTS WAKE UP TO HARASSMENT

© DR



*Rituparna Chatterjee is deputy editor in the Asia bureau of the British online newspaper The Independent, and RSF's representative in India. No stranger to gender issues, she has been*

*actively engaged in the battle against sexual harassment of women journalists in India.*

**You were one of the instigators of the hashtag #MeTooIndia and its associated Twitter account, which has more than 55,000 followers. Why did you launch the movement?**

All of us have experienced harassment. It is a sort of bad joke, a "rite of passage" to enter journalism. I've lost count of how many instances I've received from colleagues or sources. This is very common. Once, a government official told me, in exchange for an embargoed report: "And what

would you give in return for this? You know what I mean." During #MeToo, every generation of journalists realised that harassment is still happening, until today. In 2018, we opened a Twitter account to chronicle these stories. Many of them were sent by journalists. We also shared resources to help, including mental health and legal resources.

**What has been the impact of the #MeTooIndia movement?**

Senior journalists realised that younger journalists are still enduring what they did. But 20 or 30 years ago, they didn't even consider these things as harassment. It was common. Today, young journalists are making so much noise about it. Then, newsrooms "woke up" and set up their own internal complaints committees. Every organisation of more than 10 employees is required to have a committee. Journalism is not regulated enough. Its structure is designed in such a way that it goes against the interests of women and other cast and gender minorities.



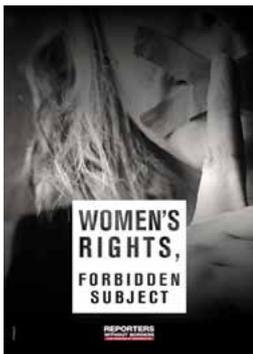
A protest against sexual harassment in the media in New Delhi on 13 October 2018. India's #MeToo movement has toppled Bollywood stars, a government minister and leading journalists.

© Chandan Khanna / AFP

# 2 | WHO IS IN THE FIRING LINE? |

## 2.1. THOSE WHO WRITE ABOUT WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Television journalist **Malalai Maiwand** was [killed, together with her driver](#), by two gunmen on her way to the offices of *Enekaas TV*, a privately-owned channel for which she worked, in Jalalabad in eastern Afghanistan. Responsibility for the attack was claimed by the [Islamic State](#). She was one of two women journalists killed in Afghanistan in 2020, out of [50 journalists](#) killed worldwide. The 30 year-old was the Jalalabad representative of the [Center for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists](#) (CPAWJ), which supports female reporters working in Afghanistan's remote areas. Its director, Farideh Neekzad, described her ex-colleague as "a role model for many Afghan women journalists." Not only was she a journalist, but also a woman committed to the [rights of other women](#). As such, she was a prime target for radical groups active in the country.



Writing about women's rights "can prove dangerous in some countries where it means undermining traditions and arousing awareness in minds that have been subjected to a machista society," says Juana Gallego, the head of Spain's Gender Equality Observatory and a lecturer in journalism in the 2018 RSF report ["Women's Rights: Forbidden subject."](#)

Of 942 journalists killed in the past 10 years, 43 were women and at least four of them, including Malalai Maiwand, have paid with their lives for working on women's issues. In Mexico, **Miroslava Breach**, a 54-year-old reporter for the newspapers *La Jornada* and *Norte de Juarez* in Chihuahua state, was shot dead in her car in March 2017. She covered organised crime and corruption, and had written about the high number of murders of women in the Ciudad Juarez area.

The leading Indian journalist **Gauri Lankesh**, 55, editor of *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*, a non-religious and feminist weekly, was [gunned down in her home](#) in the southern city of Bangalore in September 2017. She frequently criticised the constraints imposed on women by India's caste system. She opposed the Hindu nationalist government, accusing it of sexist policies, and the "system of hierarchy in society" in which "women are treated as second-class creatures."

In 2013, **Nawras al-Nuaimi**, a journalism student and presenter for Iraq's al-Mosuliya TV, was shot dead at her home in Mosul at a time when Al-Qaeda was particularly active.

Apart from losing their lives, imprisonment can be the price these journalists pay for daring to take an interest in the fate of their female fellow citizens. Of 42 women in prison at the time of RSF's [December 2020 round-up](#), at least two of those behind bars ended up there for having worked on the cause of women's rights. Among them is Saudi journalist **Nouf Abdulaziz al-Jerawi**, arrested in June 2018 (she was released on parole on 7 February this year), who was [tortured, subjected to electric shocks and sexually molested](#) while in detention. She denounced the system of lifelong male guardianship for women in Saudi



Arabia, depriving them of their majority in law and rendering them reliant on the goodwill of their fathers, brothers or husbands.

**Nassima al-Sada**, arrested at the same time, is still behind bars for “communicating with foreign entities hostile to the state” and “undermining morality and public order.” [She wrote among other things](#): “Why should an under-age boy be the guardian of a woman who is an adult? Why isn't there an age at which a woman becomes an adult, responsible for her decisions and her life? Why should there be a man responsible for her life?”

Another Saudi journalist, **Eman al-Nafjan**, founder of the SaudiWoman blog famous for supporting the battle by her female fellow citizens to have the right to drive, was also arrested in May 2018. She was finally released on bail in late March 2019. That year, RSF awarded her its [press freedom Prize for Courage](#), but she was banned from leaving Saudi Arabia and was unable to attend the RSF awards ceremony. She is not allowed to express herself in public, nor is Nouf Abdulaziz al-Jerawi. Their release under strict surveillance is another way of silencing them.

“**The fact that women often write about women and feminism, as well as sensitive subjects such as human rights and minorities, exposes them to a two-fold danger, of being bullied which almost always includes sexual insults.**”

*Quotation from the RSF survey. Country concerned: Spain.*



US President Donald Trump speaks during a press briefing about Covid-19 at the White House on 25 March 2020.  
© Mandel Ngan / AFP

## “TRUMP BROUGHT GENDER ISSUES TO THE FORE”

The American journalist Nina Martin, features editor of the [investigative website Reveal](#), looks back at her experience as a reporter focusing on reproductive rights and gender issues. Although Joe Biden has now been elected US president, she believes that the Trump years will have had a permanent effect on her way of working. Has your gender had an impact on the way you do your job?

### Has your gender had an impact on the way you do your job?

No, you don't have to be a woman to do this kind of reporting (on women's rights). But women unquestionably bring a special perspective — it's probably not an accident, for example, that female journalists led much of the #MeToo reporting at the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. Early in my career, I often heard male journalists complain that they “couldn't deal” with female victims of sexual and domestic violence; the male reporters often dismissed women as “hysterical” and thus not credible.

### Which case left the biggest mark?

Interestingly, as I was working on [my groundbreaking “Lost Mothers” project](#) on maternal mortality in the US, I often heard the same dismissals from male doctors who didn't believe that American women were suffering childbirth-related harm in great numbers and (more importantly) that the medical system was often to blame. Throughout my career, I have made a special effort to include women's stories at the centre of my reporting, using them as experts

as well as primary research subjects. Instead of being deterred by female “emotionalism,” I have learned to try to understand the source of women's anger and pain. This is something many male journalists still fail to do.

### What is your professional assessment of the four years of the Trump presidency?

Before his election, many journalists as well as readers/listeners had a hard time believing that the far right would be successful in their long-term efforts to curtail women's reproductive and economic rights. In the US and around the world, sex and gender issues — from battles over reproductive rights and health, to the disproportionate impact that the pandemic has had on female workers — are at the centre of what's happening in our politics and culture. Of course, issues such as workplace discrimination, sexual violence, and the role of women in politics and religion have always been important. But the election of Donald Trump — a misogynist and admitted sexual assaulter, allied with anti-feminist extremists and the patriarchal Christian right — brought them to the fore.

## 2.2. JOURNALISTS WHO COVER SPORT OR POLITICS

“We just want to be left in peace to work.” That’s the demand of the [50 Brazilian women journalists specialising in covering sport](#) who launched the [#DeixaElaTrabalhar](#) (“Let her work”) movement to denounce being forcibly kissed by team supporters and other inappropriate behaviour to which they are subjected. “We know that being a woman journalist in a mainly male news organisation could and still can expose you to inappropriate behaviour,” 37 women journalists working for the French sports daily *L’Equipe* said in a joint [statement](#) after a series of revelations about harassment within the news media. Female sports journalists are in the minority both in newsrooms and in the field, which leaves them even more exposed to sexist comments. In a [personal account of her experiences](#)

for the local version of *Vogue*, Australian sports journalist **Jessica Halloran** wrote, “At the beginning of my career there was such a lack of women in the media box at some footy games that several times I was mistaken for a waitress and asked on more than one occasion: ‘Are there any more pies coming?’”

In France, a male [sports commentator](#) caused an outcry in 2018 when a female viewer asked him, “Why do women never provide the commentary for football matches?” and he replied, “A male football match commented by a woman? I’m against that... If anything crazy happens, her voice could reach such a high pitch it could be painful.” For many women journalists, this was the final straw. “Don’t hide your sexism behind the spurious excuse of voice tone, because women don’t have a monopoly of the highest pitches,” [tweeted Anne-Laure Bonnet](#), a *beIN Sports* presenter who has herself been subjected to sexist comments.

Bonnet nonetheless thinks that a positive change in attitudes is under way. Even if only 10 to 15 percent of sports reporters are women at this moment, “we can start to be optimistic because 10 to 15 percent is much more than a few years ago,” she said in an [interview](#) for the magazine *Terrafemina*. Australia’s Halloran pointed to all the women reporters whose work is garnering praise, and to the growing interest—including financial interest—in women’s sports teams. Ending on a positive note, she added: “Looking towards the future, everything is better from the ground up. Not perfect, but better. Even stadiums are becoming more accommodating of women.”

Similar observations were made by women journalists who specialise in politics, another traditionally male-dominated field. While politics has ceased to be such a bastion of masculinity following the adoption of laws on equality between men and women, especially in France, some misogynistic currents persist. In a joint [op-ed](#) in the French newspaper *Libération* in 2015, 40 women journalists wrote: “In the Four Columns, the small room at the heart of the [French] National Assembly, a deputy greets us loudly saying: ‘So, you’re on the game, you’re waiting for a client?’ Another passes his hand through our hair and hails the return of spring. In the Senate, a parliamentarian deplores the fact that we’re wearing a rollneck rather than a low-cut dress. A candidate for the first round of the elections who is facing a clutch of male microphones decides to take our question ‘because she’s wearing a pretty dress.’ A party’s rising star insists on seeing us in the evening, outside official times and places. Behind the closed doors of his office, a deputy’s advances stop only when he is threatened with being reported to the police for harassment.”

Françoise Giroud, a leading media editor and director in France during the post-war years who promoted many women political reporters, “was convinced that male politicians would reveal themselves more readily to women,” the op-ed’s authors said. “We experience this ambiguity on a daily basis, an ambiguity often encouraged by male politicians.” Half of the respondents to RSF’s survey (50 percent) said women



*Brazilian women sports journalists launch a campaign against harassment and discrimination in stadiums and press rooms and on social media.*  
© #DeixaElaTrabalhar screen grab.

journalists continue to be subjected to sexist violence by officials, state representatives, politicians and well-known figures holding senior positions.

The violence is primarily verbal. Donald Trump's four years as president (2017-2021) were marked by contemptuous and [sexist comments](#) about women journalists—both regular reporters and [White House correspondents](#). They were also characterised by a resurgence of archaic attitudes. In July 2019, the Republican candidate for governor of Mississippi, Robert Foster refused to allow **Larrison Campbell** to cover his campaign without a male chaperone “[out of respect for my wife and the Christian faith](#).” Another Republican candidate for the same post later said he would not be alone with a woman who was not his wife, calling this “[common sense](#).”

Powerful positions facilitate sexual harassment and the higher their position in a hierarchy, the freer men feel to harass with impunity. In Maldives, **Rae Munavvar**, the editor of *The Edition*, the English-language version of the newspaper *Mihaaru Daily*, brought a [complaint against the secretary of communications at the president's office](#) in February 2020. “He propositioned me, offering special treatment for myself and the newsroom at which I serve as the editor, in exchange for ‘time spent with him’ at either a resort or an apartment in Sri Lanka,” [she said](#). He also offered to help her father, a former attorney general, get a position as ambassador. Her [tweet](#) in July 2020, reporting that no action had been taken in response to her complaint, triggered widespread outrage on social media. He finally [resigned](#) in January 2021.

Governmental harassment of women journalists is common. “First government officials target you, calling your tweet ‘fake news’ or accusing you of being an ‘enemy of the people’ or a ‘lifafa’ journalist (one who takes bribes),” said Geo News TV reporter **Benazir Shah**, one of 20 Pakistani women journalists who issued a [joint statement](#) in August 2020. “Then, after the official harassment, you are bombarded with abusive language by other people displaying the ruling Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party flag or Prime Minister Imran Khan’s photo on their Twitter accounts.” The harassment includes “threats of sexual and physical violence [that] have the potential to incite violence,” the joint statement said.

In Brazil, the harassment of **Patricia Campos Mello**, a leading investigative reporter for the *Folha de São Paulo* newspaper, was organised at the highest state level. After she [reported](#) that businessmen had illegally funded a WhatsApp disinformation campaign designed to get Brazilians to vote for Jair Bolsonaro in the 2018 presidential election, President Bolsonaro and his sons accused her of having “extracted” this information in exchange for sexual favours. The accusation was followed by such a violent cyber-harassment campaign that Mello was [forced to have a bodyguard](#).



Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro.  
© Luis Alvarenga / Getty Images South America

Mello responded by suing the president and other officials and obtained her [first court victory](#) in January 2021, when his son, federal deputy Eduardo Bolsonaro, was ordered to pay her 30,000 reais (\$5,600) in damages. “We are living through a new form of censorship and harassment in Brazil, outsourced to armies of patriotic trolls and amplified by bots on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and WhatsApp,” [Mello said](#) when receiving the International Press Freedom Award from the [Committee to Protect Journalists \(CPJ\)](#) in November 2019. “Women journalists are the main victims,” she added. “Much more frequently than our male colleagues, we have our parents and our children intimidated, our appearance mocked, our addresses and phone numbers exposed, and we are subject to violent threats both online and in the real world.”

## 2.3. AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Being a member of a minority constitutes an additional risk for women journalists. Lesbian, bisexual and trans journalists are among the most vulnerable to violence.

### What other forms of violence combine and compound sexist and sexual violence against journalists? \*



**36%**

**Racist comments and/or racist insults**

**36%**

Lesbophobia

**29%**

Comments linked to religion and/or insults based on religion

**19%**

Transphobia

*More than one response possible.*

Minorities who are the targets of hate vary according to the geopolitical context. RSF's respondent in Guatemala mentioned "members of indigenous communities." The Togo respondent cited "comments based on ethnicity." In Norway, it was "immigrant women, often Black or Muslim." The respondent in the Netherlands



Indian journalist Barkha Dutt outside a hospital in New Delhi on 12 June 2020, after the authorities eased preventive measures against the spread of Covid-19. She travelled 23,000 kilometres in India in 100 days drawing attention to the pandemic's impact on the country's "army of poor."  
© Prakash Singh / AFP

referred to the May 2019 report entitled "[An Unsafe Climate](#)" by researchers Marjolein Odekerken and Laura Das, which said that about 50 percent of Dutch women journalists, especially those with an immigrant background, have experienced violence, intimidation or threats in connection with their work.

According to a [survey](#) by the [Coalition For Women In Journalism \(CFWIJ\)](#) on the online trolling of women journalists, "Women of colour, (black, Asian, Latin, and mixed-race women) are 34 percent more likely to be mentioned in abusive or problematic tweets than white women."



**Imani Gandy**, a Black American journalist working for *Rewire* who has more than 230,000 Twitter followers, told the [Columbia Journalism Review](#) that she activates Twitter's "quality filter" before publishing any story likely to go viral. This filter means she sees only comments and replies from people she follows. "I don't know how any woman of colour can have their [direct messaging] open," she added.

Within the news media, the fact of being a woman journalist from a minority background is never insignificant. In an [opinion piece for Business Insider](#), **Neha Maqsood**, a journalist with a "Pakistani-Muslim" identity working for US and UK media outlets, referred to the tendency for journalists of colour to be assigned the "racism beat." In the earlier stages of her career, she said, this beat "cemented the belief that as a brown woman, I was obligated to ensure that the unreported stories and events of communities of colour were brought to light." But her attitude has evolved. "I will still continue to write about race and cover underrepresented communities and their stories, but I also want the media world to view me as more than just the colour of my skin (...) It's high time that our stories be accepted in spite of the colour of our skin and equally because of it."

## DISCRIMINATION AGAINST MOTHERS

It is clear from the RSF survey that journalists who become mothers are another category who are vulnerable to sexism. The discrimination is palpable within news organisations. "Contracts stop being signed or are not renewed when they become pregnant," the respondent in Peru wrote. In an [interview for the French sports daily L'Equipe](#) in April 2020, sports reporter **Clémentine Sarlat** said she was the victim of harassment while working for the sports department at France Télévisions, harassment that increased after she returned from maternity leave. She finally resigned after leave days were discounted although she had negotiated periods of remote-working with her superiors. "I told them: 'You don't sanction the three quarters of the old guys who never come into work. I work at home, I can prove it, and yet you deduct days behind my back?' I decided to leave."



Clémentine Sarlat  
© Remy Gabalda / AFP

The fact of being a mother can also magnify the online hate to which a woman journalist is subjected. The Brazilian investigative reporter Patricia Campos Mello is not the only one to see how the cyber-harassment of a woman journalist can also be channelled against her children. In France, Nadiam Daam's 11-year-old daughter was [also threatened with rape](#). In the UK, **Amy Fenton**—a reporter with the local Cumbrian daily newspaper *The Mail in Barrow*—was [forced to leave her home](#) because of threats made to her and her five-year-old daughter. In Northern Ireland, investigative reporter **Patricia Devlin's** family have been [subjected to numerous threats](#) both offline and on social media, including the rape of her newborn baby.

Whatever their employment status – freelancer, staffer or intern – and regardless of the type of contract they may have (fixed term or indefinite), all women journalists are vulnerable. The findings of RSF's survey show that all women journalists are equally concerned, regardless of their employment status or type of contract. Being a staff journalist with a contract of indefinite duration does not protect a woman journalist from potential sexual violence. On the other hand, the more precarious her employment status, the less likely she will be able to make her voice heard and defend herself.



## AROOJ IQBAL KILLED FOR WANTING TO LAUNCH HER OWN NEWSPAPER

She wanted to be the first Pakistani woman journalist to create and run her own newspaper but instead, **Arooj Iqbal** became the first woman in Pakistan's history to be murdered because of her journalism.

A few hours after the publication of the first issue of *Choice*, the local paper she had just launched, the 27-year-old woman's body was found on a street in the sprawling eastern city of Lahore on 25 November 2019. She had been shot in the head. The main suspect was her former husband, who is himself a journalist and owns a local newspaper specialising in crime coverage.

"He wanted her to drop the idea of launching her own local newspaper," Iqbal's brother, Yasir Iqbal, [told RSF](#), confirming that she had recently filed a complaint against him because he was threatening to kill her if she did not stop working as a reporter.

According to a [report](#) published in 2018 by RSF's partner in Pakistan, Freedom Network, fewer than 5 percent of the country's journalists are women. The report says they are subjected to many forms of discrimination including lower pay, being restricted to covering "women's" subjects, psychological and sexual harassment, and family pressure to stop working in a male-dominated environment.

"Arooj Iqbal's brutal murder is symptomatic of the terrible lack of security for women journalists in Pakistan," says Daniel Bastard, the head of RSF's Asia-Pacific desk. "With dependence on male superiors, contempt, threats and violence, work is a constant battle for them."



© Getty Images

# 3 | CONSEQUENCES FOR JOURNALISM |

## 3.1. FROM TRAUMA TO SILENCE

No one emerges from sexist violence unscathed, and the aftereffects can manifest themselves later as a kind of post-traumatic shock. They can take the form of disturbed sleep, an inability to concentrate or emotional agitation. They can manifest themselves as “migraines, stomach aches or acute anxiety,” says French journalist **Anaïs Condomines**, co-author of the book *Cyber-harassment: Much more than a virtual evil*. “Your mental space is saturated,” she says. “It’s impossible to concentrate on your work. The consequences are very concrete.”

### What are the personal consequences of gender-based violence? \*



<b>79%</b>	<b>Stress</b>
<b>65%</b>	Anxiety
<b>54%</b>	Fear of losing one’s job
<b>50%</b>	Loss of self-esteem
<b>49%</b>	Fear for one’s life
<b>43%</b>	Closing social media accounts temporarily or for good
<b>36%</b>	Depression
<b>11%</b>	Moving home

*More than one response possible.*

Condomines has herself been the target of several online attack campaigns as a result of her articles on feminism and immigration. The first time was in 2017, after she reported that a forum on the [jeuxvideos.com](https://www.jeuxvideos.com) website was behind many sexist attacks. “Ironically, I was myself then attacked, which was good proof



*Julie Hainaut, a journalist based in the French city of Lyon, prefers to limit her appearances in public after being the target of a violent cyber-harassment campaign.*  
© Bruno Amsellem / Divergence

of what I had written in the article.” For several days in a row, she received insults and death threats. Photos of her then-partner also circulated along with the claim that he raped children. “I was lucky they didn’t go further than that,” Condomines said, adding that, “in persons with certain fragilities, this can lead to burnout and depression.”

Victims of harassment and cyber-harassment like Condomines report feeling “very alone.” Another French journalist, **Julie Hainaut**, has been targeted by far-right activists for the past three years, ever since writing a [column](#) criticising a cocktail bar’s colonial nostalgia theme. “The cyber harassment is itself traumatic,” she said. “But what accompanies it is also at least as shocking—the deafness on the part of the state and judicial system, the lack of support and silence on the part of your editors and the people around you, who blame you for being a victim. I am disturbed by the suggestions that you should just turn off your computer or that ‘it’s just insults and threats! (...) All this trivialises hate (...) As well as being disturbing, these comments are extremely judgemental.” After being sentenced to six months in prison, one of her online assailants was acquitted on appeal on the grounds of procedural errors at the original trial. This made Hainaut feel even more alone.

The impact of such harassment and trauma on women journalists was measured in a 2016 study entitled [Women Journalists’ Digital Security](#) by the [Association of Media Women in Kenya \(AMWIK\)](#) and [Article 19](#). Online violence “is in most cases intended to ensure self-censorship and discourage women journalists from writing or covering issues that may make them targets of abuse,” the study found. India’s Rana Ayyub, a journalist who has been the target of cyber-harassment for years (see page 10), agrees that it encourages self-censorship. In a 2018 [article for HuffPost](#) about how she felt after seeing a porn video on which her face had been superimposed (or “deepfaked”), she wrote: “From the day the video was published, I have not been the same person. I used to be very opinionated, now I’m much more cautious about what I post online. I’ve self-censored quite a bit out of necessity.” In France, Anaïs Condomines recognises that she now faces a constant dilemma. “There’s a cost/benefit balance,” she says. “This tweet may allow me to express my view and defend a cause, but is it really worth the price of being posted? Do I really want to receive a hundred insults and spend a bad evening or even several days of hell?”

## What are the professional repercussions of this violence?\*



<b>48%</b>	<b>Self-censorship</b>
<b>37%</b>	Less motivation
<b>22%</b>	Closing social media accounts and/or leaving professional networks:
<b>21%</b>	Resigning/not wanting to renew her contract
<b>21%</b>	Abandoning her speciality
<b>13%</b>	Fired/contract not renewed

*More than one response possible.*

Self-censorship may be the most visible consequence, according to nearly half of the RSF survey's respondents, but it is not the most radical one. The [Women Journalists' Digital Security](#) study also reports that, "digital harassment leads women to withdraw from using the Internet, and in many cases, women have stopped working for some time." This is borne out by RSF's survey. Women journalists closing social media accounts and/or being deprived of their professional networks was reported by 22 percent of those polled by RSF, while 28 percent were aware of cases of women leaving their job because of the sexist or sexual violence they suffered in connection with their work.

"When I began, I saw lots of other young women but, with time, we have been pushed towards the exit," said Andreea Campeanu, a Romanian photo-journalist working in a secured humanitarian compound in South Sudan. She blamed this on the persistent harassment of which she has been one of the targets. "The camp administrator sent me explicit texts at night. I didn't reply to them but I had to communicate with him every day in order to negotiate different authorisations. It wasn't something I could complain about because it would entail a risk of doors being closed. So I accepted it, even though it was annoying."

Sometimes the media themselves contribute to the sidelining of women journalists who have been the victims of violence. After being raped in Egypt (see page 6), the French journalist Caroline Sinz found her account being questioned by other journalists and was met with silence from her superiors, who "above all, didn't want me to say it was a rape." This veteran reporter was effectively "banned" from doing foreign reporting, which she found very upsetting and which drove her to request a transfer. "It was over, for me," she said. "To recover, I had to kiss goodbye to the work I'd done for years. I started again from scratch."

The pressure pushing women journalists "towards the exit" may also increase when the violence takes place in traditionally conservative societies. RSF's India representative, Rituparna Chatterjee (see box, page 14), recalls the impact on her family: "If a victim of harassment opens up to her parents or her extended family, she may be urged to leave her job on the grounds that it is not a safe place for her." The pressure to abandon her career may be all the greater because "parents often fear that a woman who chooses to be a journalist will not be a good match in the 'marriage market' because she will have the reputation of being someone who is intrepid, who has overly confirmed opinions. Under pressure from their in-laws and husband, many women abandon the profession after marrying."

In Pakistan, **Asma Shirazi**, a political journalist with *Aaj News TV* and recipient of the [Peter Mackler Award for Courageous and Ethical Journalism](#) in 2014, made a [similar observation](#): "My close relatives don't follow me on social media to avoid having to see the abusive language these online trolls use in an attempt to silence me. Even my mother asked me to quit journalism."

## 3.2. IMPACT ON PLURALISM

Farida Nekzad, the head of the Centre for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists (CPAWJ), does not hide her concern about the future course of the peace talks between the Afghan government and the Taliban that began in September 2020. “Not enough account is taken of women or press freedom,” she says. “The Taliban have always said they would not allow women to work, especially in television. Eliminating women journalists is tantamount to imposing silence on all other women. In Afghanistan, men think through men’s eyes. They don’t want to pay attention to the issues that concern us. A news organisation without women is a guarantee that many subjects will never be covered.”

RSF’s India representative, Rituparna Chatterjee, also insists on the need for women to have more representation within news media. “The more women there are in news organisations, the more likely it is that things intimately affecting women, such as body politics, will be more easily covered. But employing women is not enough. More diversity is needed in positions of responsibility. Without women at the highest level in news media, these issues become invisible.”

The lack of multiple viewpoints within media organisations has major editorial consequences, including in the representation of women in the content offered to the public. In her book, [Women and Media, a Partial and One-sided Image](#), the French journalist Clara Bamberger produces figures to show that the press dedicate many fewer articles to women than to men, that more men than women talk on TV and radio and that the news media present women in biased way and virtually ignore gender inequalities.

Since this book’s publication in 2012, the trend for more women to work in journalism has continued all over the world, but the inequalities continue to be reflected in editorial content and media organigrams. A [report](#) entitled “The place of women in the media in a time of crisis” that was submitted to France’s ministry of culture in September 2020 confirmed that newspapers still assign a predominant place to men in their content (83.4 percent of the people appearing on the front page are men and 74.4 percent of those writing op-eds are men), and that parity has still not been achieved within media companies. This inequality encourages the persistence of sexist or gender-based stereotypes in the media, which have a big impact on the collective imagination and influence how women are perceived, including by themselves.

## SEXISM IN MEDIA OUTLETS

**The everyday sexism that still dominates in many news media throughout the world continues to affect the place of women in the media and their representation.**

“Women substantially outnumber men in journalism training and enter the profession in (slightly) greater numbers, but still today relatively few are rising to senior jobs and the pay gap between male and female journalists remains a stubbornly wide one,” the journalist and academic Suzanne Franks wrote in 2013 in her book *Women and Journalism*. The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, which is attached to the University of Oxford, studied the “glass ceiling” phenomenon in detail in 2020. It scrutinised the employee registers of 200 major news outlets in 10 countries, including South Africa, the United States, Mexico, Japan and Germany, and found that 77 percent of top editors are men although 40 percent of journalists in these countries are women.

“I spent a long time trying to shrug off my gender,” said **Barkha Dutt**, a well-known Indian TV journalist who now often writes for the *Washington Post*. “But after 22 years, here’s what I learned,” she told RSF, evaluating her career. “I had to work twice as hard to get to the same place as my male colleagues. I had to fight for certain kinds of assignments, in particular, to cover wars and conflicts.” The Covid-19 pandemic has aggravated the existing levels of discrimination. In Afghanistan, CPAWJ director Farida Nekzad reports that women are the first victims of the fall in sales and advertising revenue at media outlets. “The media are laying off the women first,” she said. “Around 20 percent of them have lost their jobs.”

### 3.3. CHANGING ATTITUDES AND JOURNALISTIC CONTENT

In August 2017, Swedish freelance journalist **Kim Wall** was murdered by a man she went to interview. He had built the world’s biggest home-made submarine, and it was aboard this vessel that he murdered her. In reaction to her murder and in the context of the #MeToo movement, the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma produced a series of recommendations for women reporters on what they can do to make themselves safer. It was based on video interviews with nine veteran women reporters including *New York Times Magazine* contributor Azmat Khan, the *New Yorker’s* Alexis Okeowo, and CNN chief international correspondent Christiane Amanpour, who says: “My advice would be if there’s anything that messes with your internal radar, listen to your internal radar.” Their advice, to be followed in the relevant context, is summarised in a post entitled “Maintaining Boundaries with Sources, Colleagues & Supervisors.”

Sisterhood networks among women journalists are growing rapidly. The RSF survey respondent in Ukraine said: “We have some closed chats and groups on Facebook where we discuss such cases and support each other.” In Brazil, *Agência Pública* co-founder Natalia Viana, who is often the target of online attacks from persons close to the president, said they had taken steps to protect themselves and were trying to build a stronger form of mutual aid. “We follow protocols for reporting in the field but it’s very hard [for an individual] to resist when subjected to a ‘virtual lynching.’ So we’re having talks about forming support networks with other women journalists.” In November 2020, an association of women journalists in France called *Prenons la une* created a support platform to “listen to, inform and guide” women journalists who are the victims of sexist or sexual violence in the workplace.



Hendrik Hinzel, a friend of Kim Wall, takes a photo of her on a wall showing journalists killed in 2017 during a memorial event at the Newseum in Washington DC on 4 June 2018.  
© Andrew Caballero-Reynolds / AFP

At the same time, journalists' collectives, associations and NGOs are increasingly funding investigative reporting on women's rights. This is the case with [The Fuller Project](#), which operates as a non-profit newsroom bringing together women freelancers and researchers working on such issues as the environment, public health and human rights. It has helped produce an investigative report on the [role of women in drug trafficking in Kenya](#) for *Time* magazine, one on [sexual violence and other abuses against women fleeing Venezuela](#) for CNN, and one on [women working in the Pentagon](#) for *Foreign Policy*. At the same time, the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) provides women journalists with training in online security and reporting in a hostile environment and with [reporting grants](#).



The findings of RSF's survey show that, internally, media organisations are still struggling to provide a satisfactory overall response to sexist violence, but some are beginning to take steps in the right direction. Nine percent of respondents said a good conduct charter or code was adopted within the media outlet after sexist violence was reported. Nine percent also said journalists were offered training in combating violence. State-owned France Télévisions provided [obligatory training](#) in the prevention of inappropriate behaviour to everyone working for its sports department after the journalist Clémentine Sarlat reported psychological harassment and sexism (see page 21). Station management also ordered an immediate [internal enquiry](#) that resulted in three journalists being fired and a fourth being reprimanded.

In another recent initiative, the position of gender editor has begun to be created in some news organisations in order to avoid missing important stories on women's rights and avoid reproducing sexist stereotypes, often inadvertently. The first of these positions was created by the *New York Times* in 2017. In Spain, Ana Requena Aguilar performs this role at the online newspaper *El Diario*. Lénaïg Bredoux is gender editor at the French online newspaper *Mediapart*.

The French news agency *Agence France-Presse (AFP)* is also moving ahead. Former news director Michèle Léridon asked two of the agency's general news journalists, Pauline Talagrand and Aurelia End, to write a report on the place of women in *AFP's* content and within its newsroom. "Much is being questioned at *AFP* with a view to producing better journalism," said Talagrand, who is the deputy head of the digital investigation department.

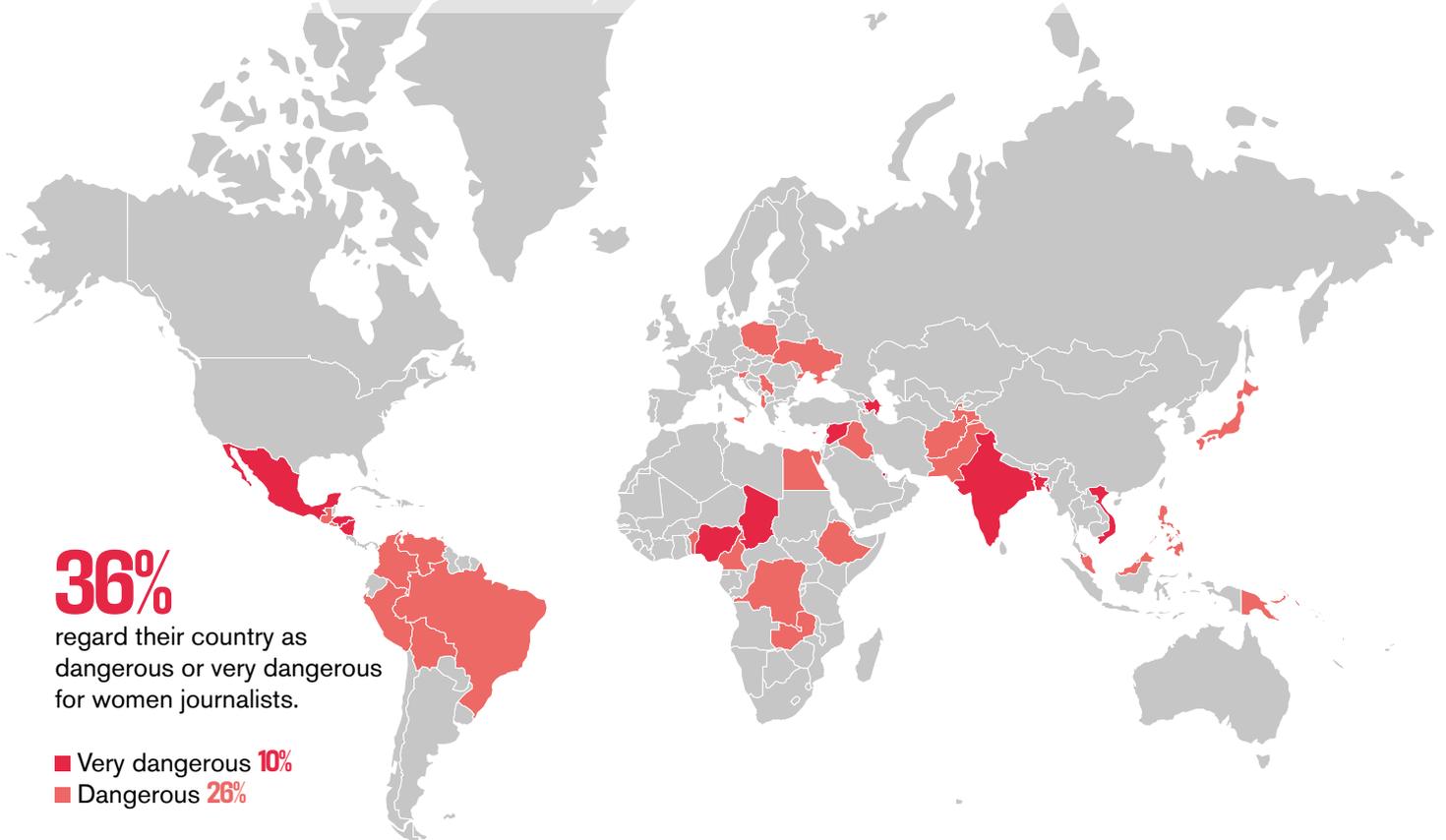
The *AFP* manual, which Talagrand calls "the bible of all those working at the agency," has been updated to include new chapters on such issues as the correct feminine versions of certain titles and positions, diversifying sources to avoid always interviewing male experts, and refraining from inappropriate references to women's physical appearance and attire.

A section on preventing violence against women journalists has also been added to the manual. “We realized that many women had never talked about it,” Talagrand said. “Personally, I can believe that in the past, misogynistic remarks were seen as part of the job. But it creates a bad work climate.” Resource persons have been named within the various editorial sections and in the administrative and commercial departments so that cases of harassment can be referred to them. “We also have a work doctor who has been trained in these matters, as well as in the dangers of post-traumatic stress disorder,” Talagrand added. “It’s important for management to take a clear position on this. The goal is to provide young women journalists with answers, to tell them that if this happens to them, we will be there to support them.”

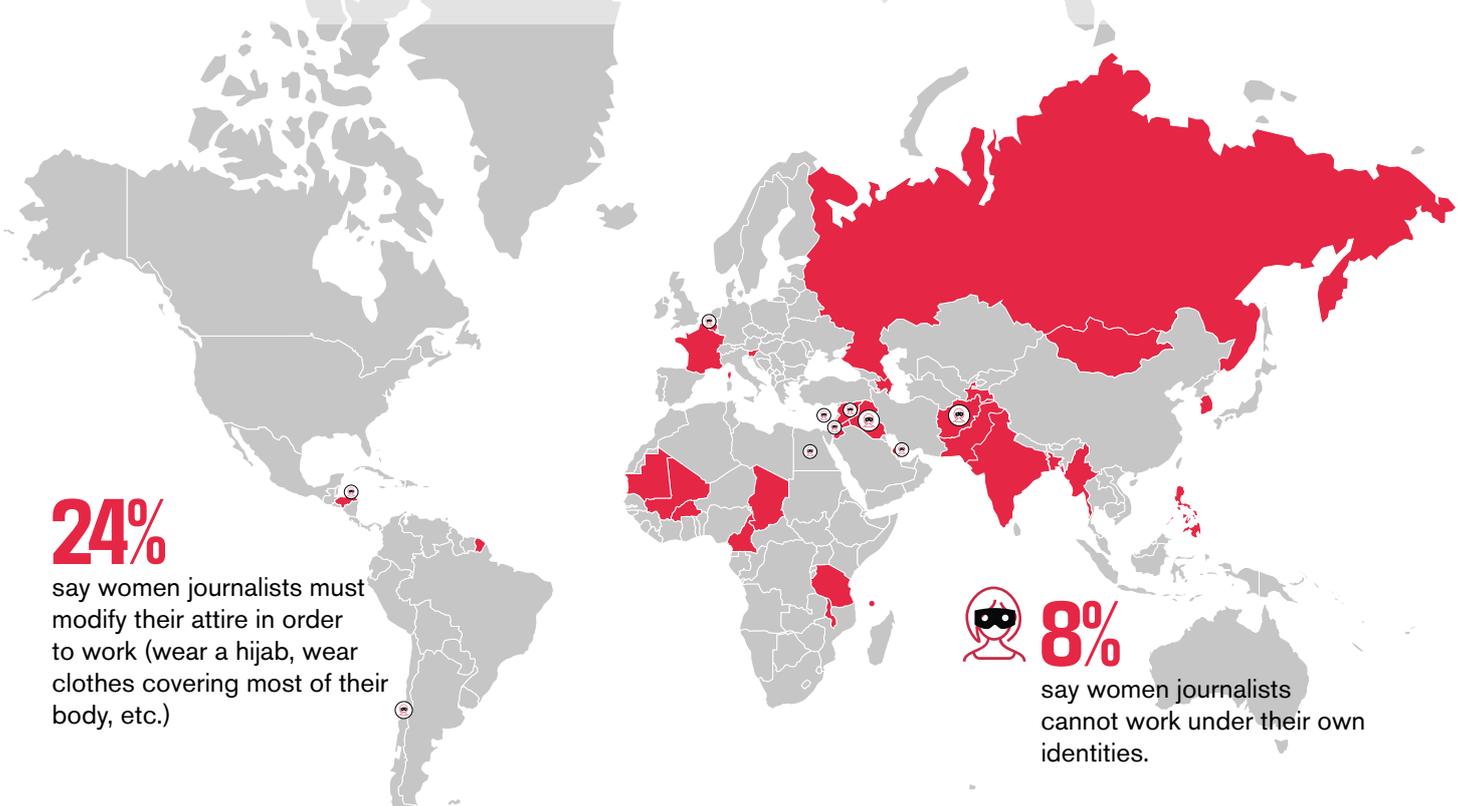


*Ukrainian police intervene between ultranationalist activists and journalists with Zik TV. Regarded as pro-Russian, this TV channel has just been stripped of its broadcast licence. Kiev, February 2021. © Sergei Supinsky / AFP*

## COUNTRIES REGARDED AS DANGEROUS AND VERY DANGEROUS FOR WOMEN JOURNALISTS



## COUNTRIES WHERE WOMEN JOURNALISTS MUST ADAPT TO PARTICULAR CONSTRAINTS



## ADDITIONAL STATISTICS FROM RSF'S QUESTIONNAIRE

Percentage of respondents who checked this answer

### QUESTION

Did the women journalists subjected to violence **report it to the police**?



said the women journalists concerned filed a complaint with the police, while 35% said they didn't.

### QUESTION

Why didn't the women journalist file a complaint about the violence?

**47%**

She thought the complaint would go nowhere

**46%** She was ashamed/wanted to forget quickly

**37%** She feared professional reprisals

**34%** She feared personal reprisals

**27%** She minimised the violence she had suffered

### QUESTION

Did the revelation of the violence lead to measures within the victim's news organisation?



**NO 61%**

### QUESTION

When a complaint was filed, what action was taken?

**43%**

The police registered the complaint, but took no action

**14%** The police refused to register the complaint

**14%** A trial was held but did not result in an appropriate sentence

**11%** A trial was held and the perpetrator was convicted

**10%** A trial is going to be held

### QUESTION

Do you feel that impunity prevails, that the violence could be repeated, and that another woman journalist could fall victim to the same perpetrator (whether an individual or entity such as the police or armed forces)?



**YES 85%**

\*More than one response possible.

## SOME OF THE OBSERVATIONS GATHERED DURING RSF'S SURVEY



### POLAND

“ I think women are still treated differently from men in workplaces. The expectations are lower and sexist comments are frequent. People often don't realise that certain behaviour can be sexist. ”



### MYANMAR

“ Women journalists face discrimination by their sources, including politicians and MPs. They are not taken seriously, especially if they are young. Also, some are discriminated against by their bosses or superiors on 'security' grounds. Some have not been allowed to cover major stories because of supposed threats to their safety. ”



### SYRIA

“ In all areas of Syria, and in neighbouring countries, Syrian women journalists face sexist and sexual comments, violence, threats and pressure. Most of the time, they don't report it. This kind of violence against women journalists (...) is accentuated by the lack of legislation by the state, which has no clear, detailed regulations on this issue. If there seem to be few cases of abuse against women journalists, It's not because they don't happen, it's because they're not reported (...) especially if the women have no official work contracts. ”



### CAMBODIA

“ Women journalists receive rude responses from government officials and the prime minister at press conferences. And they are subjected to online hate speech from political supporters. ”



### GAZA STRIP

“ A form of 'social control' prevails because this is a small place. It's almost like a village community (...) People fear scandal. This has advantages and drawbacks. Violence against women, including journalists, is rare. But women are afraid to make a complaint if they have been attacked. This is why it is very hard to get information about the extent of this problem. ”



### SRI LANKA

“ Most cases of sexist and sexual harassment against women journalists in Sri Lanka are not reported because the victims are very reluctant to talk about it. They usually suffer in silence and decide to leave their jobs. There is no specific place where they can go and seek justice. Verbal abuse by colleagues and superiors is the most common form of harassment. Women are not encouraged to speak out. ”



### SPAIN

“ Most of the difficulties women face in Spain are related to discrimination: salary, positions and promotions, and gender stereotypes in connection with such things as the relatively few women in sports news, and the physical attractiveness of women in TV news. Women writing about women and feminism are doubly exposed to cyber-bullying that almost always includes sexual insults. ”



### NORWAY

“ By and large, the #MeToo movement has shed light on the same challenges as in most other western democracies. Women reporters are more exposed to negative sentiments on social media, especially if they're from an immigrant background. ”

# 4 | RSF'S RECOMMENDATIONS

## For news media

### More visibility and equality

#### In content:

- > **Make space** for stories and investigative reports about women's rights, gender minority rights and gender-linked violence, and do this all the time, not just on international days or big events dedicated to these issues.
- > **Make sure** that women and men are equally represented among interviewees, guests on discussion programmes and news programmes, and those quoted in news stories.
- > **Eliminate** sexual and sexist stereotyping in language and illustrations, in the proportion of women and men portrayed as victims, the proportion of women and men identified by their family status, and so on.<sup>1</sup>
- > **Appoint** "gender editors" to help ensure that the preceding recommendations are implemented.

#### In working conditions:

- > **Ensure** that management and editorial staff are aware of these issues and create internal emergency mechanisms and alert systems for supporting and protecting women journalists who are the victims of harassment or any kind of sexist or sexual violence.
- > **Ensure** a work-life balance to avoid penalising journalists who have or would like to have children, by providing for flexible working hours, access to parental leave, childcare facilities and so on.
- > **Guarantee** equal pay at all levels and achieve parity in all editorial and management functions and in high-visibility positions (such as columnists and programme presenters).

### More security and vigilance

#### Within news organisations:

- > **Develop** mechanisms for providing information about all types of sexist violence and how to respond (monitoring unit, hotline for women who are the victims of violence, fact sheets, reports on interventions, list of groups active on this issue, point person within the media, and so on).
- > **Train** staff members occupying management positions in order to facilitate the detection of violence and helping women who are the victims.
- > **Facilitate** meetings and exchanges of information among women journalists in order to promote better mutual support in response to these problems.

<sup>1</sup> Recommended by Céline Calvez in her 2020 report "Place of women in the media in a time of crisis"

### Reporting in the field:

- > So that the dangers of reporting in the field no longer serve as an easy excuse for barring women journalists from these assignments, **include** a specific perspective for women journalists in the information and training provided to journalists going to high-risk areas.
- > **Ensure** greater communication between editors and women reporters in the field in order to reduce, inter alia, the risk of sexist or sexual violence.
- > For internal use by reporters preparing to go to high-risk areas, **provide** data files that include the latest information on the area, feedback from those last there, practical country data, checklists and tutorials.
- > **Distribute** “post-sexual attack kits” to women journalists or facilitate their acquisition.<sup>2</sup>

### Responding to online violence:

- > **Provide** journalists with training that helps them to develop good reflexes and responses to cyber-harassment, including working with the relevant services of the online platforms on which the trolls and harassers operate.
- > **Create** an emergency internal mechanism to respond to threats and sexist attacks online, whether by means of online content moderation or by providing psychological or legal support to the woman journalist being targeted.

## For women journalists

### Within news organisations

- > In the event of threats, attacks or harassment, **notify** your superiors or the person tasked with dealing with these issues, and/or make a complaint.
- > **Gather**, print and keep all evidence, including screen grabs, of harassment, insults, threats or attacks against you on personal or work messaging services and on social media.

### Before reporting in the field

- > **Get information** about cultural and social practices in the country you are going to, about how women are perceived, and about the security situation on the ground.
- > **Evaluate** the risks in detail before going into the field and favour team-working in high-risk areas.
- > **Provide** the contact details of persons in the field (such as fixers or fellow reporters) to trusted colleagues or to people within your news organisation with whom you work closely.

### Against cyber-harassment

- > **Follow** the essential digital security rules that are given in our report “[Online Harassment of Journalists: the Trolls Attack](#)”, (p. 33-35).
- > **While** you are being attacked, ask a trusted person to manage your social media accounts for you, sifting through what you are receiving, deleting insults, blocking accounts that are the source of insults, and reporting those accounts. Depending on the intensity of the harassment, consider switching your social media accounts to private access mode for as long as it continues.

<sup>2</sup> For example, the “post-sexual attack kits” that France Médias Monde provides to female employees travelling on assignment abroad contain a morning-after pill, a broad-spectrum antibiotic and emergency triple-therapy to prevent the spread of HIV pending hospital treatment.

## For governments and authorities

- > **Respect** your obligations with regard to press freedom. This includes safeguarding the right of journalists to cover subjects related to women's rights, and the right of women to be able to work as journalists in complete safety and in accordance with international standards.
- > **Recognise** that threats and other forms of online abuse against women journalists and media workers constitute a direct attack on freedom of expression and media freedom.
- > **Encourage** the creation of the position of special representative of the United Nations secretary-general for the safety of journalists, who would ensure that governments respect their obligations as regards eliminating violence against journalists, including women journalists.
- > **Ensure** that there is adequate legislation to respond to gender-based violence, especially against women journalists. Violence against journalists should be regarded as an aggravating circumstance in crimes because of its impact on the public's right to be informed. Adequate legislation is also needed to combat online harassment, as is the availability of legal recourse when online free speech is restricted arbitrarily.
- > **Ensure** that the criminal justice system is equipped to handle and prosecute cases of sexist violence, both physical and online violence, especially against women journalists; and ensure that cases of sexist violence and online harassment are systematically investigated and those responsible are prosecuted and convicted.
- > **Promote** activities that encourage equality between women and men and gender diversity in the media domain, and support capacity-building initiatives emphasising the safety of women journalists.
- > In countries where the media receive state aid, **create** incentives for media companies to commit to change, to equip themselves with mechanisms for evaluating and measuring the place of women, with a charter that commits them to equality between women and men internally, and with training tools to make staff aware of the importance of parity and equality, and so on; assist media companies financially with the creation and adoption of these mechanisms.
- > **Reinforce** the obligations on online platforms to safeguard both the right of their users to freedom of expression and their security against hate speech and online harassment.
- > **Make** lawmakers and those working in the criminal justice system more aware of online violence against women, especially women journalists.
- > **Promote** education in digital security, with an emphasis on making Internet users aware of the impact of online harassment and the legal consequences for perpetrators.
- > **Create** national committees for the safety of journalists that include representatives from the justice department, police and journalists associations in order to verify that all attacks and threats are properly investigated, improve procedures if necessary, propose protective measures if necessary, and take preventive actions to strengthen the safety of journalists.

## For platforms

- > **Develop** public awareness and communication campaigns about online violence against journalists, including women journalists.
- > **Create** an emergency alert mechanism in order to make it easier for the victims of online threats and attacks, especially women journalists, to report violence.
- > **Cooperate** actively with law enforcement in investigations into cyber-violence against journalists (by reporting those responsible for online violence, and so on).
- > **Combat** coordinated harassment campaigns and "troll factories" (which are partly responsible for online violence) by such measures as increasing the number of human moderators.

## For advertisers

- > **Refuse** to advertise on sites that help spread sexist prejudices or encourage sexist violence.
- > In association with civil society, **develop** charters of ethics and good practices in online advertising, to ensure that online advertising does not help finance online harassment.

## Resources used in compiling these recommendations:

- RSF, Contribution to the [report of the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women its causes and consequences \(2020\)](#)
- RSF, Report "[Online Harassment of Journalists: the Trolls Attack](#)" (2018)
- RSF, Report "[Women's rights: Forbidden subject](#)" (2018)
- RSF, [Safety Guide for Journalists](#), 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (2017)
- Céline CALVEZ, Report "[Place of women in the media in a time of crisis](#)" (2020)
- Library of Congress, Comparative study "[Laws Protecting Journalists from Online Harassment](#)" (2019)
- OSCE, Report "[New Challenges to Freedom of Expression: Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists](#)" (2016)
- CARVE-FACE, Report "[Involvement of companies in combating violence against women](#)" (2015)

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