From Normalization to Self-Censorship –

ANALYSIS
of Online Harassment of Women Journalists in North Macedonia

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/ CONTENTS /

/ **INTRODUCTION** /

The purpose of online harassment and attacks is to silence the voices of those targeted. However, considering the freedom provided by the digital space and the (seemingly) unlimited communication possibilities, online harassment does not only affect the person targeted, but also everyone else reading it. Moreover, the group of people who share with the primary victim of the online attack certain common identity traits, opinions and attitudes will also fall casualty to the message primarily addressed to that specific individual. Through their intention to discipline the victim, the harasser manages to influence the behaviour of the general audience that identifies with the victim. Hence, the underlying goal of online abuse and attacks on journalists is not only to silence all women journalists, but also all women in general.

The roots of the silencing of women's voices can be traced back to the patriarchal system of values, and they are still penetrating into all spheres of our society in which traditional gender roles and stereotypes are carefully nurtured. Despite of journalism being increasingly characterized as a "women's profession", mostly due to the growing number of women engaging in this profession, there is an obvious discrepancy when it comes to women's participation in the decision-making processes, especially in the centres of power.

Considering that women are disproportionately far more affected by the phenomenon of gender-based violence in the offline world, gender-based characteristics of violence are mirrored in the phenomenology of the digital space, too. This "new space", which promotes the principles of development and freedom, instead of contributing to some sort of evolution of the gender roles, is in fact a mere continuum of the patriarchal structures.

Although the development of new communication technologies and the expansion of the online space have allowed for many individuals' voices to be heard, including the ones who did not have such an opportunity in the offline world, they have nevertheless imposed new challenges, but also serious risks for everyone, especially for those whose profession is closely related to the public, such as journalists. Thus, on the one hand, women journalists got more opportunities for visibility, development and promotion of their work and their views, which, on the other hand, meant greater exposure to online violence, because *"being female*

and having an opinion can be a dangerous combination online".[1]

The beginning of 2020 also brought the COVID-19 pandemic, which has dramatically changed the way of life, especially the manner of communication. Considering the need for social distancing in the physical space as a measure to prevent the spread of infection with the virus, people mostly communicated and socialised online. This has contributed to a dramatic increase in online harassment and violence. The pandemic has sparked an increase in violence against women who, due to the restrictive measures, found themselves confined in their homes together with the perpetrators, which equally spilled over into the digital space, too.

Although according to the Press Freedom Index, North Macedonia made slight progress in 2021, the Reporters Without Borders report indicates that the situation of the media has deteriorated, given that government officials continued to threaten and insult the media, while online threats and verbal attacks against journalists are on the rise on social media.[2] Over the past few years, political parties in the country recognized the role of the online world, especially of the social media, in creating and controlling public narratives, and consequently turned the digital space into a battlefield of different power centres.. Thus, the vulnerability has increased of those who publicly give a critical account of the narratives that are being promoted.

Over the past period, field information and data from research conducted by journalists associations both indicate that women journalists in our country are being increasingly subjected to online harassment and attacks while doing their work.[3] Considering the importance of this issue, which is insufficiently addressed

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[1] Antonijevic, Z. (2016). The media can't be really free if women's voices are silenced. In: New Challenges to Freedom of Expression: Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists. OSCE. Available at: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/c/3/220411.pdf

[2] AJM. 2021 Analysis: Media Freedom and Journalist Security in the Republic of North Macedonia Through the Prism of Existing Legislative Solutions - How to Get Better Solutions [Анализа: Слободата на медиумите и безбедноста на новинарите во РСМ низ призмата на постојните законски решенија -Како до подобри решенија?] Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/publikacija-MK-internet-1.pdf

[3] See more in Spirovski, M. and Nasteska Kalanoska, B. (2022). North Macedonia: Indicators of the degree of media freedom and the safety of journalists in 2021 [Северна Македонија: Показатели за степенот на слобода на медиумите и за безбедноста на новинарите во 2021]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MK-MK-2021-finalen-izvestaj.pdf, and Tuneva, M. and Sandev, L. (2022). Safety of journalists and media workers – a reality or continuous punishment [Безбедноста на новинарите и медиумските работници – реалност или континуирана казна]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/MK_Bezbednost-na-novinarite-i-mediumskite-rabotnici-130322.pdf

in public, as well as the normalization of this type of events that can have serious consequences on the work and the safety of women journalists, this analysis entailed a more thorough investigation of the situation in order to acquire relevant data. Through this analysis, as part of the project "Promoting the Safety of Journalists and Professional Standards in the Media", supported by the OSCE Mission to Skopje, the Platform for Investigative Journalism and Analysis - PINA, an organization that has been working for several years to increase the awareness of the position of female journalists in the Macedonian society, will try to bring attention to this topic. Hence, this analysis is aimed at providing an insight into the online harassment and attacks on female journalists in North Macedonia as a form of gender-based violence, but also identifying possible solutions to overcome the problem, and mechanisms and resources to provide adequate protection and assistance.

/ METHODOLOGY /

For the purposes of this analysis, a combined research method was applied, consisting of quantitative and qualitative analysis of primary and secondary data. The data used in the analysis were collected through the application of several research instruments:

1. **Desk review –** relevant surveys, reports, legal analyses and other publications published in the field, and relevant international and national legislation;

2. **Survey** – in May 2022, an online questionnaire was distributed through Google Forms, which was answered by 103 women journalists. In North Macedonia there is neither official data on the total number of journalists nor on the number of women journalists. Various stakeholders working in the area have assessed the number of women journalists in the country as between 250 and 350. The latest data of the Association of Journalists of Macedonia indicate a number of 293 women and 329 men. In addition to journalists, these numbers also include other women and men working in the media. Furthermore, not all women and men journalists are members of the Association. Based on this assessment, the survey has likely covered between 30% and 40% of women journalists working in the country. The design of the questionnaire and the survey were done by PINA - the Platform for Investigative Journalism and Analysis. The questionnaire consisted of a total of 40 questions grouped into several thematic areas. During the analysis of the data obtained through the survey, the answers to the questions were grouped according to thematic areas that slightly differ from the ones that were initially set, for the sole purpose of obtaining a more appropriate order of answers.

3. **Interviews with relevant stakeholders –** a total of 4 semi-structured interviews were conducted with relevant stakeholders working in the field of journalism and/or gender-based violence, with a focus on the online space. For the purposes of this analysis, only the most appropriate data have been included in the main text.

/ **ANALYSIS** /

Desk Review

Statistics on the prevalence of gender-based violence which are available in North Macedonia indicate that we live in an environment in which violence against women is ubiquitous and that one of the main problems is the normalization of violence, which is widespread in our country. One of the more recent OSCE-led surveys in the country[4] suggests that the majority of women consider violence to be a common phenomenon and a private matter, which in fact points to a low level of awareness of both violence and its fatal consequences.

Over the past few years, there has been a gradual increase in the interest to tackle online violence and especially its adverse consequences, as evidenced by the growing number of studies and publications that address this issue. However, online violence and its gender dimension in particular are still under-researched in our country. The reasons can be attributed to the insufficient gender sensitivity of the public and the relevant institutions and, in addition, the fact that the online space in the country is an area that is neither sufficiently known, nor legally regulated.

Online gender-based violence is a set of violent acts against women and girls because of their gender identity, which have been committed or aided, partially or fully, through the use of information and communication technologies, which could result in serious consequences on the health, integrity and dignity of the victim and her close friends or family, and could put the victim in a life-threatening situation.[5] In the context of the profession, online violence against women journalists and other women media workers is a direct attack on their visibility and their ability to fully participate in public life.[6]

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[4] OSCE (2019) OSCE-Led Survey on Violence against Women in North Macedonia: Well-Being and Safety of Women. Available at: https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/3/5/419264_1.pdf

[5] Petkovska, N. and Lesoska, V. (2021). Who is the Internet a safe place for? Gender-based violence in the online space. [За кого интернетот е безбедно место? Родово засновано насилство во онлајн просторот]. Available at: https://glasprotivnasilstvo.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/12/Za-kogo-internetot-e-bezbedno-mesto-finalno.-docx.pdf

[6] UN. 2020 Combining violence against women journalists: Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences. Available at: https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G20/109/79/PDF/G2010979.pdf?OpenElement

Besides the positive aspects, new online public information platforms have brought on additional pressures on journalists and media workers, including exposure to online threats and attacks.[7] Although journalism is a profession which entails risk and exposure to violence against both women and men journalists, attacks on women journalists are gender-based and sexualized, both online and offline, considering that women journalists are targeted not only for the content of their reporting, but also for the very fact that they are women who dare to speak out publicly.[8] The fear of harassment and attacks changes women journalists' behaviour and actions and contributes to the occurrence of psychological problems, self-censorship, deleting personal profiles on social networks, as well as reconsidering their choice of profession.[9]

According to survey data received from the International Federation of Journalists, as many as 64% of the journalists have been subject to online violence, and nearly half of them (47%) have not reported the case.[10] The same study points to worrying data on the impact of online violence, which has caused serious psychological consequences such as stress and anxiety in 63%, self-censorship in 38%, and job loss in 8% of the abused respondents.

The latest data presented by Reporters Without Borders on North Macedonia also talk about the "new" space for gender-based attacks against women journalists. According to the data, even though there are no clear limitations of the social and cultural environment affecting free journalism, social networks and the online space generally favour the spread of disinformation and cyber-threats which, combined with low professional standards, contribute to the decline of public trust in the media and pave the way for attacks on journalists based on gender, ethnic or religious criteria.[11]

[7]   Bejkova, Joseska, B. and Dzigal, S. (2022). Analysis – Safety and the socio-economic situation in the media: Acting together for greater respect for the rights of journalists and media workers [Анализа – Безбедносната и социо-економската состојба во медиумите: Со заедничко дејствување до поголемо почитување на правата на новинарите и на медиумските работници]. AJM and SSNM. https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Bezbedni-Mediumski-Rabotnici-Analiza-Book-WEB-MKD.pdf

[8]   Khan, I. (2021). #Women JournalistsToo – Women Journalists Speak Out. Available at: https://srfreedex.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/JT_English.pdf

[9]   Ferrier, M. (2018). Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting. International Women's Media Foundation. Available at: https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Attacks-and-Harassment.pdf

[10] IFJ global survey shows massive impact of online abuse on women journalists. https://www.ifj.org/media-centre/news/detail/article/ifj-global-survey-shows-massive-impact-of-online-abuse-on-women-journalists.html

[11] Reporters Without Borders. Available at: https://rsf.org/en/country/north-macedonia

Although there are no precise statistics for North Macedonia on whether journalists and media workers are more exposed to attacks, pressures, harassment and blackmail, the general impression is that the environment we live in allows for women journalists to be more exposed to insults than their male colleagues, merely for being women.[12] Gender stereotypes are reflected in the content of comments and messages addressed to women journalists, which are much more often related to their physical appearance than their work. Hence, women journalists are most often subjected to insults and denigrations that undermine their personal and professional reputation, with qualifications that relate solely to women, in pejorative terms.[13]

The gender-based violence pandemic, which was one of the side-effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, spilled over online, and in 2020, despite the decline in the number of physical attacks on journalists, there was a growing tendency for online violence and verbal abuse.[14]

The gender dimension of online attacks on women journalists in the country can also be observed in the data that show that more than half of all the attacks against journalists in 2020 and 2021 were against women journalists and through online platforms or social media networks.[15] Online attacks on women journalists while doing their job are further enhanced with sexist and misogynistic discrimination.[16] In doing so, the threats that journalists receive

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[12] Tuneva, M. and Sandev, L. (2022). Safety of journalists and media workers – a reality or continuous punishment. [Безбедноста на новинарите и медиумските работници – реалност или континуирана казна]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/MK_Bezbednost-na-novinarite-i-mediumskite-rabotnici-130322.pdf

[13] Spirovski, M. and Nasteska Kalanoska, B. (2022). North Macedonia: Indicators of the degree of media freedom and the safety of journalists in 2021. [Северна Македонија: Показатели за степенот на слобода на медиумите и за безбедноста на новинарите во 2021]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MK-MK-2021-finalen-izvestaj.pdf

[14] US Department of State. 2021 2020 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: North Macedonia. Available at: https://www.state.gov/reports/2020-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/north-macedonia/

[15] Sulejman, D. and Breskovski, I. (2022). Attacks on journalists and media workers 2017-2021 – Trends and recommendations. [Напади врз новинарите и медиумските работници 2017-2021 година – Тенденции и препораки]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Attacks-on-journalists-MK-310322.pdf

[16] Sulejman, D. and Breskovski, I. (2022). Attacks on journalists and media workers 2017-2021 – Trends and recommendations. [Напади врз новинарите и медиумските работници 2017-2021 година – Тенденции и препораки]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Attacks-on-journalists-MK-310322.pdf

are most often sent exactly through social media networks.[17]

The different forms of gender-based discrimination that women journalists are subjected to within the organization they work for, or among the general public, and the gender data on the ownership structure and the decision-making level which indicate lower representation of women in these positions, all impose[18] the risk of their insufficient participation in the decision-making processes that would adequately reflect the specific needs of women journalists, including the adoption of policies and laws in this area.

The analyses of the existing national legislation in this area and its compliance with the international standards on the protection of journalists clearly demonstrate the need for legislative amendments to ensure prevention of and protection from attacks against journalists and other media workers. According to Reporters Without Borders, while the Constitution safeguards the freedom of speech and prohibits censorship, North Macedonia is lagging with the harmonization of media legislation with the European Union standards.[19]

Furthermore, the legislation in the field of protection of women against online violence is almost non-existent. Its absence was also obvious in the recent case called the "Public Room", in which among hundreds of women, several women journalists were also victims, which confirmed that in such cases the law protects minors only.

The Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence,[20] which entered into force on 6 May 2021, defines online sexual harassment as *any verbal, non-verbal or other sexual conduct which has the*

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[17] Bejkova, Joseska, B. and Dzigal, S. (2022). Analysis – Safety and the socio-economic situation in the media: Acting together for greater respect for the rights of journalists and media workers. [Анализа – Безбедноста и социо-економската состојба во медиумите: Со заедничко дејствување до поголемо почитување на правата на новинарите и на медиумските работници]. AJM and SSNM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Bezbedni-Mediumski-Rabotnici-Analiza-Book-WEB-MKD.pdf

[18] Starova, N. (2022). Key systemic gaps and possible solutions for bridging the pay gap and potential problems with hierarchical placement in media based on gender discrimination – a policy paper. [Клучните системски празнини и можни решенија за надминување на јазот во платите и потенцијалните проблеми со хиерархиската поставеност во медиумите базирани на родовата дискриминација – документ за политики]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/AJM_BTD_Rodova-diskriminacija-vo-mediumite_MK_AL_EN-1.pdf

[19] Reporters Without Borders. Available at: https://rsf.org/en/country/north-macedonia

[20] Assembly of the Republic of North Macedonia. (2021) Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence.

purpose or effect of violating the dignity or creating a threatening, hostile, degrading or intimidating environment, access or practice, through electronic means of communication. However, in spite of the enactment of the law, which is largely in line with the Istanbul Convention, more than a year after its entry into force, the proposed Criminal Code amendments to criminalise the acts prescribed by the law have still not been adopted.

According to the analyses of journalists organizations in the country, the proposed amendments to the Criminal Code further specify legal instruments and crimes that have not been included in the law so far, whose purpose is to protect women from harassment and attacks.[21] The proposed changes also introduce a new crime – stalking – whereby *whosoever repeatedly and unlawfully follows, persecutes or otherwise interferes with the personal life of another, or establishes or seeks to establish unsolicited contact with the other by movement in the area where the other is established, by abusing personal data, by using means of public information or other means of communication, or who otherwise psychologically abuses, disturbs or intimidates the other and thus causes a feeling of insecurity, anxiety or fear for one's own safety or that of a close person, shall be punished with a fine or imprisonment of up to three years.* The way it is defined, stalking will cover and thus also penalize online harassment, which it is expected to contribute to increased safety of women journalists in this respect.

However, the adoption of legislation does not necessarily ensure its proper application. What is still seriously lacking is the effective response to online violence by the law enforcement authorities and the managerial staff.[22]

All previous surveys and reports in this field, without exception, point to a high degree of distrust in the institutions, whether it be the police, prosecutors or the judiciary. Distrust is based on their lack of action or improper action, insufficient efficiency in the conducting of the proceedings, dissatisfaction with the outcome of the proceedings and non-sanctioning of online harassment and attacks. What is typical of the attacks against women journalists in North Macedonia is that

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[21] Bejkova, Joseska, B. and Dzigal, S. (2022). Analysis –Security and the socio-economic situation in the media: Acting together for greater respect for the rights of journalists and media workers. [Анализа – Безбедносната и социо-економската состојба во медиумите: Со заедничко дејствување до поголемо почитување на правата на новинарите и на медиумските работници]. AJM and SSNM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Bezbedni-Mediumski-Rabotnici-Analiza-Book-WEB-MKD.pdf

[22] Ferrier, M. (2018). Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting. International Women's Media Foundation. Available at: https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Attacks-and-Harassment.pdf

they are not addressed by the competent institutions with the required degree of seriousness. Only a small number of cases have been resolved in court and the majority of reported cases of attacks against women journalists end by filing a report at the Ministry of Interior (MoI) or the Public Prosecutor's Office (PPO), which is either not forwarded to the court, or is rejected.[23]

According to a survey on the safety of journalists in the country, 14.9% of the journalists who were threatened did not report the threats due to distrust in the judiciary, 14% due to distrust in the police, and 13.7% due to distrust in the prosecution.[24] In cases of online violence, journalists typically inform the public through their media outlets and their social media profiles first, then they report the case to their associations, while the filing of a report with the relevant institution is only the third step.[25]

However, data from the analysis conducted by the Association of Journalists in 2021 reveal that institutions are inert and not diligent enough when processing cases involving media professionals.[26] All this contributes towards continuing the trend of discouraging journalists from reporting attacks, considering the cases of serious online threats against journalists in which institutions were not

[23] Ristova, O. (2022). Key systemic gaps and possible solutions for improving the overall environment in society, from the point of view of the safety of journalists and media workers - a policy paper. [Клучните системски празнини и можни решенија за подобрување на целокупната средина во општеството, од аспект на безбедноста на новинарите и медиумските работници - документ за политики]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/AJM_BTD_Bezbednost-novinarite_MK_AL_EN.pdf

[24] Bejkova, Joseska, B. and Dzigal, S. (2022). Analysis –Security and the socio-economic situation in the media: Acting together for greater respect for the rights of journalists and media workers. [Анализа – Безбедносната и социо-економската состојба во медиумите: Со заедничко дејствување до поголемо почитување на правата на новинарите и на медиумските работници]. AJM and SSNM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Bezbedni-Mediumski-Rabotnici-Analiza-Book-WEB-MKD.pdf

[25] Ristova, O. (2022). Key systemic gaps and possible solutions for improving the overall environment in society, from the point of view of the safety of journalists and media workers - a policy paper. [Клучните системски празнини и можни решенија за подобрување на целокупната средина во општеството, од аспект на безбедноста на новинарите и медиумските работници - документ за политики.] AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/AJM_BTD_Bezbednost-novinarite_MK_AL_EN.pdf

[26] AJM. 2021 Analysis: Freedom of media and safety of journalists in the Republic of North Macedonia Through the Prism of the Existing Legislative Solutions - How to Come to Better Solutions? [Анализа: Слободата на медиумите и безбедноста на новинарите во РСМ низ призмата на постојните законски решенија -Како до подобри решенија?] Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/publikacija-MK-internet-1.pdf

effective enough to detect and punish the attackers.[27]

At the same time, the most recent European Commission progress report on North Macedonia noted that threats from politicians and public officials, online harassment and verbal attacks on journalists, including attacks on social networks, have increased, while stressing that the government and the judicial system should demonstrate a more active and systematic condemnation of attacks, bearing in mind that only a small number of perpetrators of attacks against journalists have been brought to justice.[28]

The recent analysis of "Attacks on Journalists and Media Workers 2017-2021"[29] provided insight into the practice of online violence mostly through cases processed in the Ministry of Interior as the only institution that has access to mechanisms for collecting online evidence through the Cybercrime and Digital Forensics Department and the Prosecutor's Office, the latter being in charge of making a final decision on initiating criminal proceedings. The procedure for tracking online attackers is difficult and slow, as it requires domestic institutions to use mutual legal assistance to collect information from abroad, as part of the pre-investigation procedure, and from the relevant ministry, thus most of the procedures take too long and end in failure. Furthermore, such attacks often come from anonymous profiles or so-called "bots" that use virtual private networks and can easily hide their trail online.[30] The analysis also points to the presence of double standards regarding the institutions' expediency in handling of cases of online attacks against journalists, as opposed to handling of cases

[27] Spirovski, M. and Nasteska Kalanoska, B. (2022). North Macedonia: Indicators of the degree of media freedom and the safety of journalists in 2021. [Северна Македонија: Показатели за степенот на слобода на медиумите и за безбедноста на новинарите во 2021]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MK-MK-2021-finalen-izvestaj.pdf

[28] European Comission. 2021 North Macedonia 2021 Report. Available at: https://neighbourhood-enlargement.ec.europa.eu/north-miamiia-report-2021_en?fbclid=IwAR0kUDLDUuHAb33hTZqh-fyOdOJk5c2ocwtd1Fc2RFu06WuFOkREv4bRf1o

[29] Sulejman, D. and Breskovski, I. (2022). Attacks on journalists and media workers 2017-2021 – Trends and recommendations. [Напади врз новинарите и медиумските работници 2017-2021 година – Тенденции и препораки]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Attacks-on-journalists-MK-310322.pdf

[30] Sulejman, D. and Breskovski, I. (2022). Attacks on journalists and media workers 2017-2021 – Trends and recommendations. [Напади врз новинарите и медиумските работници 2017-2021 година – Тенденции и препораки]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Attacks-on-journalists-MK-310322.pdf

when a government official has been attacked.[31]

The competent institutions, above all the Ministry of Interior and the Public Prosecutor's Office, have not established special departments or designated officers who would be responsible for conducting the investigations and procedures related to the acts of violence against journalists.[32]

As for those cases that manage to enter court proceedings, with the exception of a very few positive examples, i.e. one court ruling in the case of the journalist Meri Jordanovska, the case law for online harassment and attacks does not favour journalists.

Additionally, the data indicate that there is a lack of an adequate system of recording data among all authorities[33] which makes it impossible to have a detailed overview of the gravity of the problem, and thus to design appropriate measures and policies for addressing it.

However, considering the current inefficiency of the competent institutions when dealing with cases of gender-based violence offline, it would unfortunately be very hard to expect a serious approach to online violence reports any time soon for the very reasons that have already been analysed.

[31] Sulejman, D. and Breskovski, I. (2022). Attacks on journalists and media workers 2017-2021 – Trends and recommendations. [Напади врз новинарите и медиумските работници 2017-2021 година – Тенденции и препораки]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Attacks-on-journalists-MK-310322.pdf

[32] Spirovski, M. and Nasteska Kalanoska, B. (2022). North Macedonia: Indicators of the degree of media freedom and the safety of journalists in 2021. [Северна Македонија: Показатели за степенот на слобода на медиумите и за безбедноста на новинарите во 2021]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/MK-MK-2021-finalen-izvestaj.pdf

[33] Ristova, O. (2022). Key systemic gaps and possible solutions for improving the overall environment in society, from the point of view of the safety of journalists and media workers - a policy paper. [Клучните системски празнини и можни решенија за подобрување на целокупната средина во општеството, од аспект на безбедноста на новинарите и медиумските работници - документ за политики]. AJM. Available at: https://znm.org.mk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/AJM_BTD_Bezbednost-novinarite_MK_AL_EN.pdf

Poll

Demographic characteristics of (women) respondents

Nearly half (46.6%) of the women journalists surveyed belong to the age group of 35 to 44 years old, while only 2 women journalists (1.9%) are aged between 18 and 24 years (Chart 1). According to the place of residence, only 7 of the women journalists surveyed live outside of Skopje - in Stip, Bitola, Kumanovo and Ohrid, while 93.2% live in the capital (Chart 2)
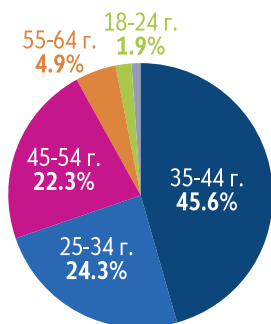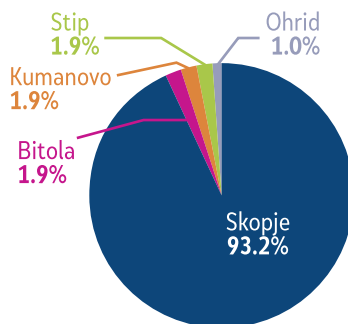

Chart 1: Age

Chart 2: Place of residence

Regarding the type of media they work for, almost half (48.5%) of the women journalists surveyed work for an online portal, 30% work in TV, while 12.6% work in print media (Chart 3). The majority of the journalists, i.e. 48.5%, are employed in the media, 22.3% of the respondents work as editors, while only 9.7% are editors-in-chief. Only 6 of the respondents, i.e. 5.8%, are also owners of the media (Chart 4).
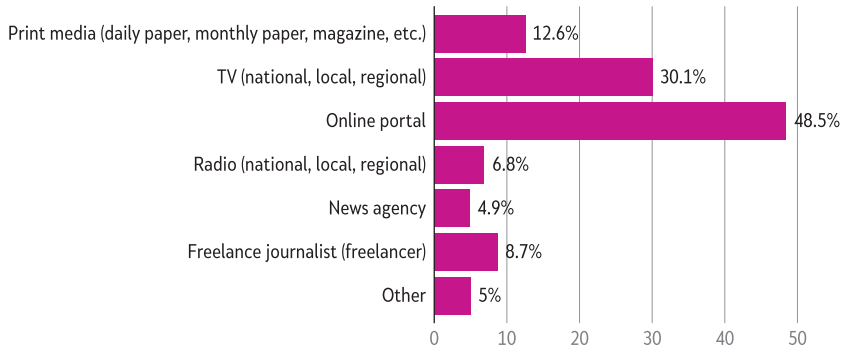
Print media (daily paper, monthly paper, magazine, etc.) 12.6%
TV (national, local, regional) 30.1%
Online portal 48.5%
Radio (national, local, regional) 6.8%
News agency 4.9%
Freelance journalist (freelancer) 8.7%
Other 5%

0　10　20　30　40　50

Chart 3: Media you work for

Owner 5.8%
Editor-in-chief 9.7%
Editor 22.3%
Journalist, employed 48.5%
Freelance associate 18.4%
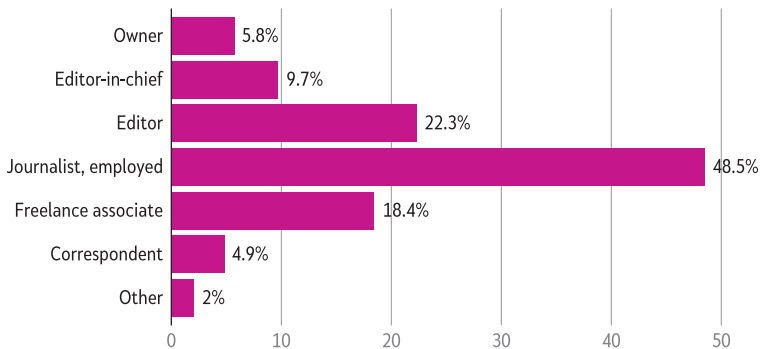Correspondent 4.9%
Other 2%

0　10　20　30　40　50

Chart 4: Position in the media you work for

As many as 80.6% of the respondents have worked as journalists for more than 10 years, which points to significant experience in journalism.

Online Activity

All surveyed women journalists work on designing media content that is published online. As for their activity in the social media, the majority of them (53.4%) do not publish their own views and opinions on public policies or daily political events in social media, as opposed to 27.2% who do (Chart 5).
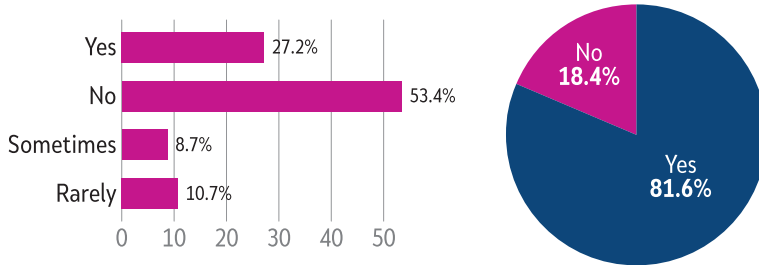
Yes — 27.2%
No — 53.4%
Sometimes — 8.7%
Rarely — 10.7%

No **18.4%**
Yes **81.6%**

Chart 5: Do you post on social media your views and opinions on public policies or daily political developments?

Chart 6: Have you experienced online harassment because of your work so far?

A significant number of women journalists, i.e. as many as 81.6%, have faced online harassment because of their work (Chart 6). More precisely, 89.9% of them have experienced harassment on Facebook. A smaller number, i.e. 24.7% have been harassed on Twitter, 15.7% on Viber, and 6.7% on Instagram (Chart 7).
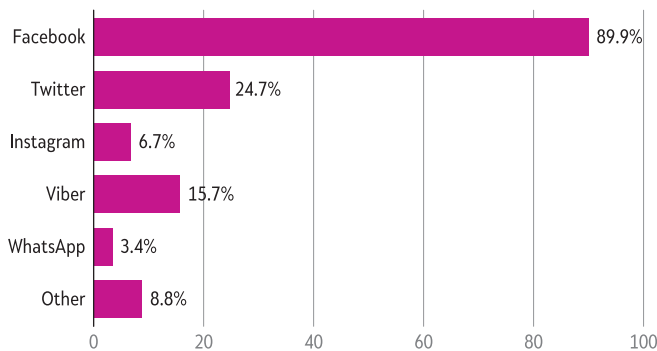
Facebook — 89.9%
Twitter — 24.7%
Instagram — 6.7%
Viber — 15.7%
WhatsApp — 3.4%
Other — 8.8%

Chart 7: On what platform did the online harassment occur?

According to the respondents, the motivation behind the harassment was mostly related to the publishing of journalistic contents aimed at other centres of power (56.6%), in 43.4% of cases due to the publishing of their own journalistic contents on social developments that were critical of the authorities, in 36.1% due to the publishing of journalistic contents on social developments, which were critical of a political party. A small number of journalists were harassed because of expressing personal views and opinions on social developments, critical of the authorities (24.1%) and of a political party (18.1%) (Chart 8).
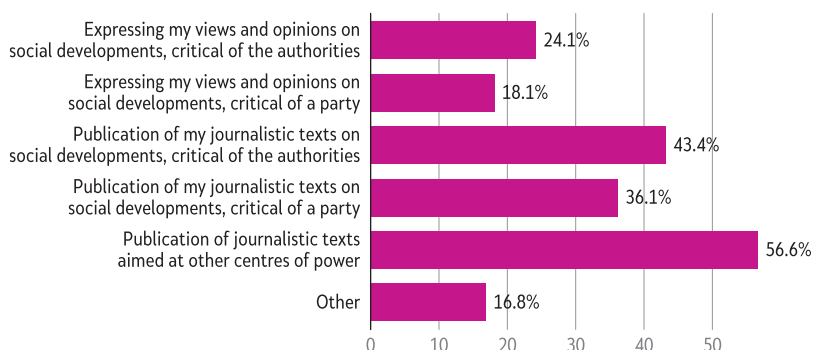

Chart 8: What do you think was the motive behind the online harassment?

In the experiences shared, some of the women journalists identified the cause of harassment to be rooted in the traditional gender roles, especially in areas that are still perceived as predominantly "male" in our society, such as sports, economics, etc.

As a sports journalist, I often face belittling and insults of the type "couldn't you find a man to write about sports", "stay at home and make lunch", "this aunty is so persistent about writing", "you haven't got a clue". (Biljana Blagoeska Petrusheva)

In doing so, the (presumed) gender identity of the journalist is the basis for the devaluing of her expertise.

Women cannot analyse issues that are of a "masculine nature".
(TV and print media journalist)

The ways in which respondents were harassed differ, but the most dominant forms are comments that are posted under the journalistic content (text, video)

which was shared in social media (63.7%), mentioning a female journalist's name and surname in social media in negative context related to her work (50.5%), as well as threats, insults and harassment in direct messages through social media (47.3%).

Some of them would doctor photos of me to distort my physical appearance. Comments under texts, messages in inbox are just some of it. (R.Z., print and online media journalist)

Photos of 29.7% of the women journalists have been shared in certain social media groups to discredit them. Furthermore, 22% of women journalists experienced online stalking, while orchestrated campaigns were directed against 18.7% (Chart 9).
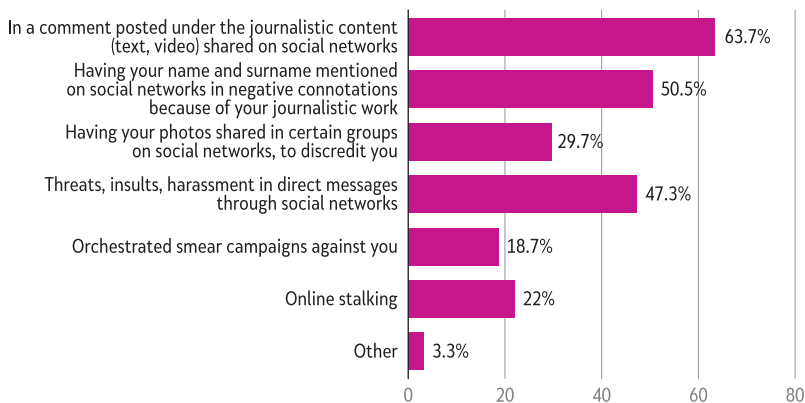

Chart 9: How were you harassed?

A media person posted an older photo of me and a colleague of mine and the post said "you're ugly and your T-shirts are ugly." I was rather upset, especially by the comments under the photo that called for us to be "hanged", "beaten" and a number of other sexual comments, as well as hate speech. (S.A., freelance journalist)

As for the content of online harassment, it mostly constituted hate speech - in 69% of cases, and in a slightly smaller number of cases sexism and chauvinism were demonstrated (51.7% and 43.7% respectively). In addition, 24.1% of journalists received threats of physical violence and 19.5% received life threats (Chart 10).
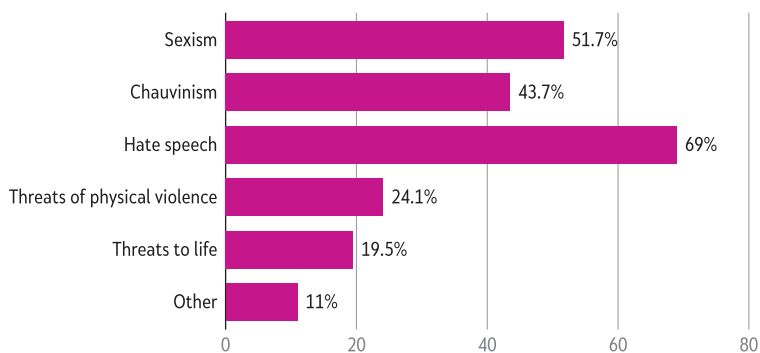
Sexism	51.7%
Chauvinism	43.7%
Hate speech	69%
Threats of physical violence	24.1%
Threats to life	19.5%
Other	11%

Chart 10: What was the content of the online harassment and attacks?

While working in a daily newspaper, I was even directly threatened with murder. (Online portal associate)

Several female journalists have pointed to the ease with which a simple communication might cause aggressive behaviour and overreaction.

I regularly notice hate speech comments published under the articles, where readers call for "journalists to be set on fire" for the grammatical errors and similar oversights. This has come to my attention because the insults are far too great for such trivialities. (Ivana S., an online portal journalist)

An ugly comment about a written text published under a post that I shared on my personal Twitter account. As a person who has been active on social networks for a long time, it didn't upset me much, but I was uncomfortable thinking that my exposure is sometimes and somewhere, someone's trigger to insult or be verbally aggressive. (Anna Golejska Dzikova)

In most of the cases (79.3%) the journalist did not know the harasser personally (Chart 11) while a significant share of women journalists (70%) were disturbed by three or more persons (Chart 12).

Most of the time the harassment comes from people who have been doing the same to other women colleagues and some of them use fake profiles. (TV editor)

In addition to the public comments left on my personal Facebook profile and on the page of the media where the texts were published, I have also received several

messages in my inbox, even though none of the individuals who left the comments are my friends on the social networks. (J.P., freelance associate)
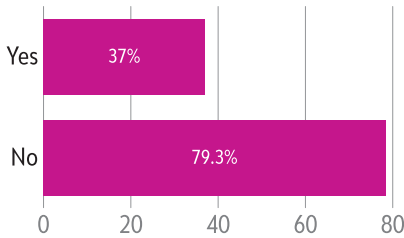

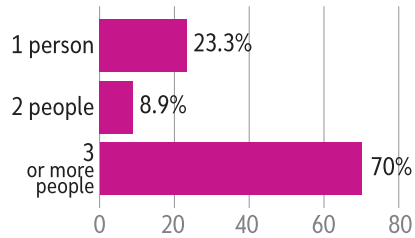**Chart 11: Do you know the harasser personally?**

Chart 12: How many different people have harassed you online?

It is worrying that, when asked whether they believe that the online harassment they encountered was organized by someone or committed by individuals, as many as 36% of journalists answered that the online violence was organized (Chart 13).

For several years now I have been subjected to online harassment that is mostly in the form of bulling and is carried out by anonymous and non-anonymous "trolls", but also persons active in politics and public life. In almost all cases, the reason for harassment were my journalistic texts critical of the government; following my publication the harassment was done publicly by individuals who were part of institutions or were political party supporters. (Editor of a media organization)
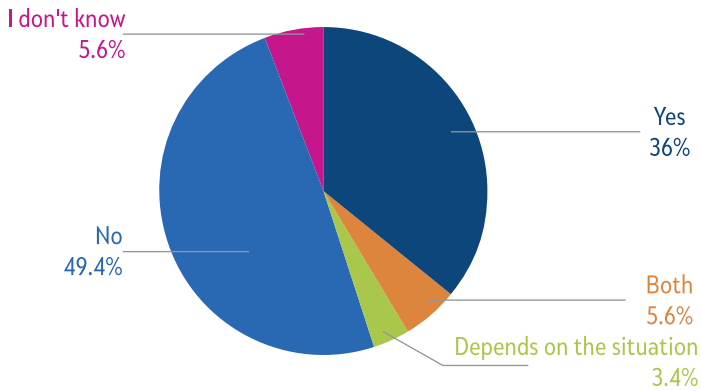
Chart 13: Do you think that the online harassment you faced was organized by someone, or was it done by individuals?

The impact of online harassment upon work and mental health

In terms of frequency, the majority of journalists have faced online harassment 5-10 times (29.1%) and 2-4 times (24.3%). Only 12.6% of the women journalists have never experienced online harassment (Chart 14).
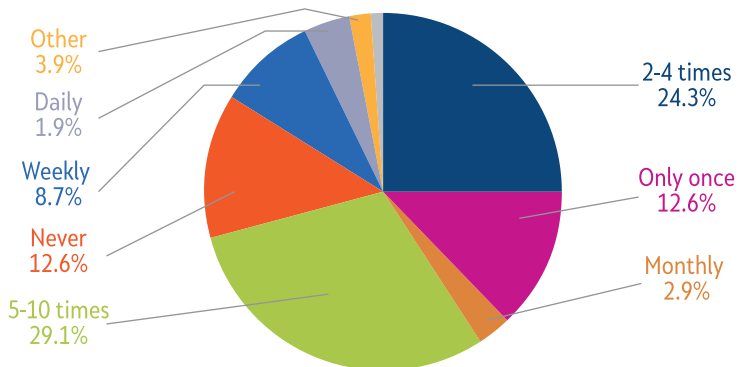

Chart 14: How often did you encounter online harassment?

The experienced harassment did not cause any changes in the behaviour of the majority (74.3%) of women journalists. Thus, for example, some of them stated

that they ignore the disturbing content addressed to them, accepting it as part of the profession.

I do not react; I do not respond to offensive comments and criticism. My work is public, and I have come to terms that social media have become a place flooded by negative reactions on daily basis. (D.Z. Freelance journalist)

However, ignoring has not always proved to be a successful strategy.

At first, I ignored them thinking that by not paying any attention to them they would give up. Some did, but the majority did not, and many new ones appeared, some of them known, most of them unknown, and a significant part of them with a hidden identity. (TV editor)

In addition, 6.9% of the women journalists considered abandoning journalism as a result of the harassment, 5.9% stopped covering certain topics and issues, while only 3% abandoned the platform where the online harassment occurred (Chart 15). Less than half (39%) of the women journalists who have experienced online harassment have been affected through self-censorship on social networks (Chart 16).
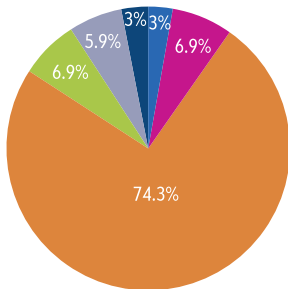
- I changed my behaviour on social networks
- Other
- I didn't change anything
- I thought about withdrawing from journalism
- I stopped posting about certain topics and issues
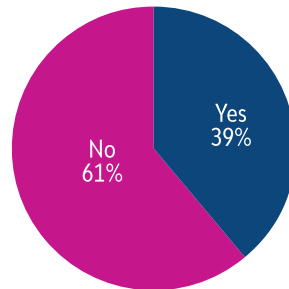- I disconnected from the platform where the online harassment occurred

Chart 15: How did you respond to the online harassment?

Chart 16: Do you self-censor on social media because of the online harassment you experienced?

My photos were shared on Facebook in different groups, and under the photos there was an orchestrated attack with hate speech, insults, threats of physical violence, sexism and chauvinism. I reported them to Facebook, to the relevant associations of journalists and the Ministry of Interior. Even though certain content was removed, it was not an obstacle for the orchestrated attack to continue. I have also experienced life threats in direct messages sent on Facebook. As all of this was causing great psychological distress to me, I decided to quit this network.
(S.Z., owner of an online portal)

I don't open my messages on Facebook anymore and I deleted my Twitter account completely because it was the most distressing. (Saska Cvetkovska)

The predominant feeling experienced by women journalists as a result of the online harassment was the feeling of discomfort in almost half (46.6%) of the respondents, and distress in somewhat less than 35.9% of the respondents. Furthermore, 26.2% of the women journalists had neutral feelings about the harassment they had experienced because in their work they expected and were used to such negative behaviour. (Chart 17).

Upset	19.4%
Embarrassed	6.8%
Angry	15.5%
Uncomfortable	46.6%
Distressed	35.9%
Degraded	14.6%
Intimidated	8.7%
Defiant	14.6%
Neutral (I expected it and I'm used to it)	26.2%
Other	4.9%
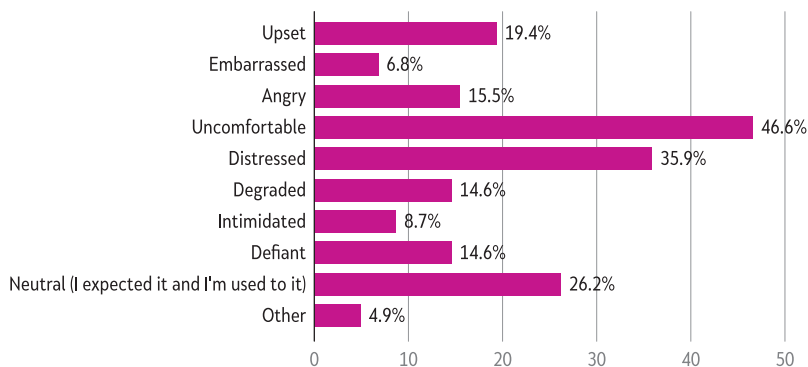
Chart 17: How did you feel after the online harassment?

I never react and have never felt I needed to report it anywhere, even though there have been cases when the harassment persisted for a long time. I usually solve these situations through blocking. I don't get upset, I don't feel bad, I'm used to it. This is a public profession after all, and it is normal that something that has been published will be liked by some, but not by others. (Antonija Popovska)

With the exception of only 6 women journalists, none of the remaining 95.1% women journalists requested any kind of psychological support and assistance. As for those who asked for help, most of them turned to their family and friends, and a smaller part to the editorial office where they work.

What somehow helped mitigate these insults and threats is the support of colleagues and friends who reacted massively to this kind of behaviour and attacks. (Suncica Unevska)

The social media editor monitors the comments and reports them. I choose not to read them because they stress me out, especially since it is impossible to make such comments stop. (Marija Mitevska)

None of the women journalists who faced harassment believe that the harassment will stop - on the contrary, the majority of the journalists believe that it is very likely to happen again (81.6%).

In 16% of the online harassment cases, the harassment also shifted offline (Chart 18). The majority of journalists (76.8%) do not fear their physical safety because of the online harassment (Chart 19).
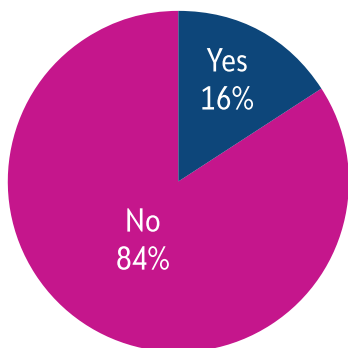

Chart 18: If you were harassed online, did that harassment also spill over offline?
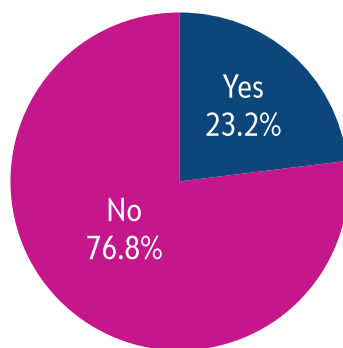
Chart 19: Are you afraid about your physical safety due to the online threats?

I have received additional threats in connection with my work related to the environment, from a close associate of a politician; I received threats by phone; he told me that it would not be good for me and my family, i.e. that I should "not stick my nose where it doesn't belong". However, I did cover the issue, regardless of the pressure, and there were no consequences afterwards. (Editor-in-chief of an online portal)

Although online violence rarely spills over into the physical space, it still poses a great safety concern. Thus, a women journalist said that *after a series of insults and slander which would not stop, death threats followed, so I was given police protection.* (Miroslava Burns)

Additionally, threats of physical violence sometimes do not only concern the woman journalist in question, but they also encompass her immediate surrounding.

The scariest thing was when they went for the kids. I was also receiving sexist insults about my kids (TV news presenter).

I have reported some of the harassment and I have kept quiet about some of the insults although they have a negative impact on both me and my family, especially when the insults are public, have my photograph attached and go viral on social media networks. (Meri Jordanovska).

According to some journalists, the harassment often comes from political party representatives, as well as former and current officials.

It is not rare for me to get threats in my inbox saying "you'll see when we come back, we'll cut you all off, , we'll have no mercy getting rid of people like you, be careful what you write, don't make enemies, instead of enjoying being with our party, you're making enemies." These messages often also come as "well-meaning advice" from party activists who are either my personal or business friends. (News agency associate).

There have been multiple instances of harassment on social media with insults and threats of physical violence. Most often they came from party activists. I have never responded to a single threat or insult because I do not want to engage in dialogue with such persons. (TV editor)

Protection and support

Nearly half (43.7%) of the women journalists surveyed did not report the online harassment case. Out of those who did, they mostly reported it to the editorial office, i.e. 32%; 19.4% reported it to the competent authority and 18.4% to one of the journalist organizations. A small proportion (19.4%) reported the case to the online platform in question, i.e. to Facebook (Chart 20).
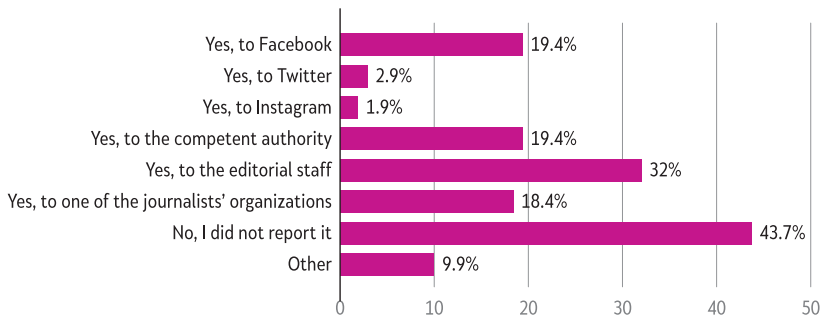

Chart 20: Did you report the case (s)?

Although the vast majority (86.4%) of journalists responded that they knew which institution they should report the online harassment to, only 25.2% reported the harassment to the competent institution.

Reports to institutions end without success. Hence, they feel encouraged to continue to threaten and disturb. This, in turn, has an impact on my work and with my colleagues we find ourselves self-censoring, especially when it comes to interviews with political party leaders, because then the threats are most frequent and most numerous. (TV editor)

I've had threats made against my life and the lives of my family members for writing texts about a person who was an official at the time. The threats soon came to life through a pre-emptive assault outside the editorial office. I reported it only to the Ministry of Interior and the abuser was warned, and other centres of power were used privately to make the abuser stop. I felt desperate and worried about my safety and the safety of those dearest to me. I was also frustrated that no protection is given in such cases, only a warning by the Ministry of Interior and of course the choice to start a court case. (TV journalist)

Some journalists find inadequate legislation to be the reason for not reporting the harassment.

I did not report it personally, we do not yet have such a law that would sanction the ones who publish the comments under the posts. People comment, and these comments are often sexist. For now, there is no way to regulate them, except to delete them. (Journalist in an online portal)

However, most of the statements made by the women journalists indicate that the failure to report the harassment cases is mostly the result of a high degree of distrust in the institutions, whether it be the police, prosecutors or judiciary.

I've only reported an online threat once, but the police answered that they couldn't do anything until the crime has been committed. After that event, I have no confidence in the institutions and therefore I never reported anything again. I ignore the messages that I receive on Facebook and Viber, and our media outlet is trying to delete such comments from my posts. (Kristina Atovska)

As the insults and threats were increasing, I reported some of them, but this waswithout any result. I have never felt fear but I have felt revolt and anger because of the dysfunction of the institutions. (TV editor)

As for the journalists who reported online harassment and attacks, 41.9% of them were very dissatisfied with the cooperation with the institutions. Only 2 women journalists (6.5%) were satisfied.

A person whose identity I only partially know was stalking and disturbing me on Facebook, writing comments under my posts and posts that I have commented on, containing not only profanity and insults of the most terrible kind, but also threats to my safety. The case was reported to the Cybercrime Department of the Ministry of Interior where I was interviewed and provided some data, and then the harassment, which had been going on for months, finally stopped. (Jugoslava Dukovska)

At the same time, the duration of the proceedings and their final outcome have a significant impact on journalists' motivation to report cases.

One of the cases I reported to the police was taken over by the prosecution. This happened in 2019 and since then I haven't received any information about the stage it is at and why the investigation is taking so long. The evidence I provided almost got

lost, my memory faded, and the interest in justice has significantly declined after so many years. (TV editor and journalist)

Four years after the first online threat I received a decision that the criminal charges were dropped because the threats were not explicit enough, and the fact that the man possessed a weapon meant nothing. (Katerina Sinadinovska)

However, some of the women journalists stated that they were not satisfied with how the associations of journalists handled the reported cases of online harassment.

The case was reported to the AJM and the lawyer told me that there were not enough grounds for a lawsuit, although there was obviously hate speech and incitement to violence. He suggested I filed a private lawsuit, which I didn't, because the very nature of the case wasn't private. I was at the workplace [during working hours] and the whole event was related to my work as a journalist. (TV editor and journalist)

I reported the case (of harassment by another woman journalist) to the Ministry of Interior and their cybercrime department, and I was informed that they could not take action and that I had to solve my own problem through a private lawsuit against her. It was also reported to Facebook, but they didn't react either. However, the greatest disappointment came from the AJM - they did not feel the need to even reprimand her stating that "She is a colleague of ours, and they do not get into fights between fellow journalists." (Editor-in-chief of an online portal)

When it comes to reporting abusive content to Facebook, although some of the journalists have used this tool, none of them shared a positive experience, i.e. the content was not removed in any of the reported cases.

Some of the women journalists also shared their experiences with insufficient support from the managerial staff of the media they work for, who do not take any action (such as deleting disturbing comments etc.) so that their media would have higher ratings.

The video was also shared by other followers of theirs, so I started getting insulting messages in my mailbox. I approached the programme director, but his comment was "It's good, it means they're watching the show." How did I feel? Headaches every day; I had an aversion to work and the show; the feeling is truly miserable, especially when there is no one to protect you at those moments. (TV host/news presenter)

Comments such as insults and hate speech left under the journalistic contents have become everyday life over these past years, considering that portals do not remove such comments, as they attract audiences and thus increase the views of the very content. (Journalist in an online portal)

Journalists' opinions are divided when it comes to prevention of online harassment and attacks; while half of them think they can be prevented, the other half disagrees with that statement. The largest portion of the journalists (36.4%) believe that online harassment can be prevented through proper sanctioning of the abusers, and by effective response of the competent institutions (23.6%). In addition, 16.4% of the journalists think prevention can be achieved through awareness raising, both among the public and among journalists themselves, while 10.9% believe that it is necessary to adopt appropriate legislation to regulate this area (Chart 21).
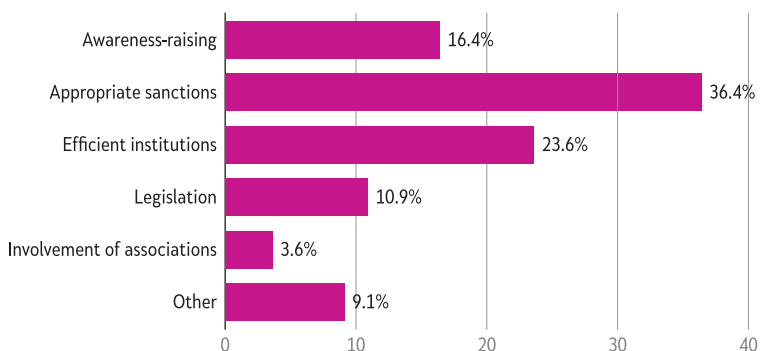

Chart 21: **How can online attacks and harassment be prevented?**

The only prevention is self-censorship, and I have no intention of self-censoring, so I don't think attacks can really be prevented. (Kristina Atovska)

The majority of women journalists (31.1%) are neutral when asked how much journalists, peers and associations pay attention to online harassment and how much support they provide, and there is almost equal distribution of responses between *a lot (14.6%) and very little (15.5%). (Chart 22).*
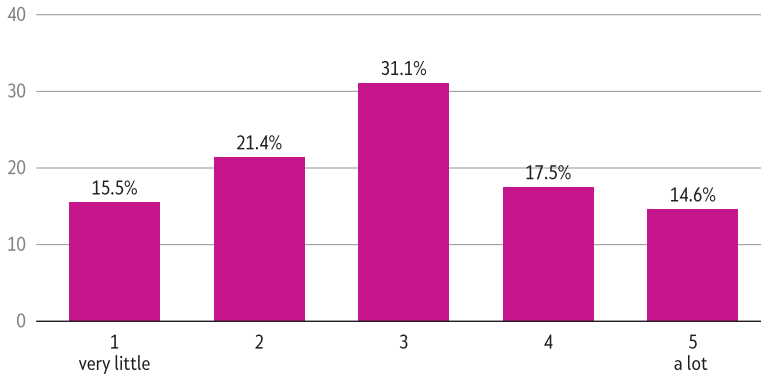
Chart 22: How much do journalists, peers and associations pay attention to online harassment and provide support?

One third of women journalists (32%) believe that there is not enough professional training on online and personal safety, nor are there other existing mechanisms for reporting harassment and abuse on online platforms and social media networks, while the majority (64.1%) believe that more work is needed on this issue (Chart 23). The journalists stated that this type of training should be organized and conducted by the associations (72.8%), institutions (61.2%), editorial offices (59.2%) and NGOs (35.9%). (Chart 24)

Chart 23: Is there sufficient professional training on online and personal safety or other existing mechanisms for reporting harassment and abuse on online platforms and social networks?

Chart 24: Who should be responsible for organizing/conducting trainings?
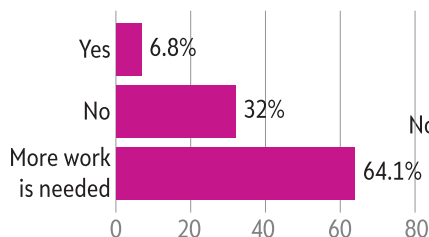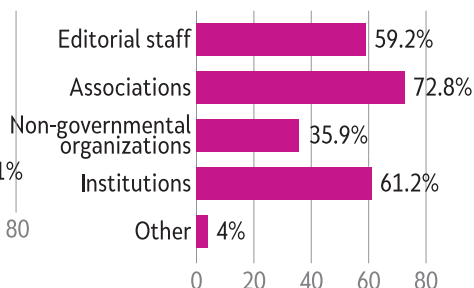
Interviews with relevant stakeholders

According to the interviewees, social networks in our country, and Facebook in particular, have become the space to which most of the communication and socialization moved, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, which also applies to online harassment and attacks.

According to Teodora Cvetkovska from the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers (SSNM), *online harassment has been around since social networks themselves. However, the real face of harassment in social media showed with the beginning of the pandemic, because people were confined at home and it seemed as if they had nothing else to do but surf the Internet.*

What is extremely worrying, however, are the organised online attacks, which are mostly politically motivated and supported. For Kristina Ozimec from the Platform for Investigative Journalism and Analysis (PINA), *what has been most worrying in the past years is that the organized online targeting of anyone who is loud and critical of certain policies is a "public secret". The attacks look like organized online smear campaigns starting with slander and lies, with the purpose of degrading women journalists as persons and as journalism professionals, in order to cause distrust in their journalistic content. Besides the online attacks against women journalists committed by individuals with a name and surname, online*

attacks by anonymous trolls also occur, mostly on Twitter, because of a write-up, action or statement published by the woman journalist.

At the same time, social networks and media have become a powerful tool that has entailed many challenges, too.

Over the years, the role of social networks has changed; we are all present there for various reasons and life is largely taking place there. The game of politics has also moved to the social networks, because political parties have recognised the opportunity to control narratives through social networks.[34]

Since 2014, the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM) has been keeping a Register of attacks on journalists and media workers and there has been a trend of increased number of attacks on women journalists. Milan Spirovski from the AJM said that *in the last 5 years there has been a trend of increased number of women journalists who are alerting that they are facing online threats and hate speech on social networks, mostly on Facebook and in private messages. However, no such case has been reported to us by a woman journalist.*[35]

Kristina Ozimec from PINA finds it *most worrying that this type of behaviour is normalized in the journalistic profession under the pretext that it is part of the profession, that we must have "thick skin" etc. As a result, many unacceptable and dangerous things are sometimes ignored. Some of those things that have been said online would never be tolerated offline, so I don't see why we would act in any other way.*

When it comes to the gender dimension of online attacks, all interviewees have pointed to gender stereotypes in our society as the foundation of violence, which almost never take into account the expertise of women journalists..

Very often the goal is to discredit women journalists and present them as less professional by evoking gender stereotypes and their emotionality while doing the job. The most common motive for harassing women journalists is the criticism they display through their work. I've felt it myself, as soon as I get louder, the attacks are triggered.[36]

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[34] Interview with Kristina Ozimec, PINA.

[35] Interview with Milan Spirovski, AJM.

[36] Interview with Kristina Ozimec, PINA.

As a result, online attacks are mostly related to the physical appearance of women journalists and attacks with sexual connotation.

The most common comment that male colleagues get is that they are stupid, whereas on top of being stupid, we (women journalists) get a broad range of insulting comments related to our physical appearance, whether we are married, whether we have children...people have the nerve to comment on us and we are used as a punching bag by just anyone.[37]

One of the conclusions of the public discussion "Cyber Violence – Safety and Self-Censorship" organised by the Helsinki Committee for Human Rights (MHC) a few months ago was that instead of providing a democratic environment that enables development, online space has turned into space where women's autonomy is violated, which results in self-censorship and withdrawal. According to Slavica Anastasovska from the MHC, *women in public life are the most frequent targets and these are usually threats and insults that basically stem from gender stereotypes and gender roles that are quite often directed against women's physical appearance.*

According to the interviewees, online attacks come from different sources and may take different forms. Thus, although they often come from individuals who simply found themselves at the keyboard, politically organised smear campaigns to target certain women journalists are not rare either.

Harassment can easily be transferred from online to real life, and we had such court ruling two years ago. Individuals who initiate hate speech are rarely aware of what they are writing and the consequences they might cause. It often starts very naively, but then it has a domino effect that cannot be controlled.[38]

All interviewees confirm that self-censorship exists, but that its form may differ. According to Kristina Ozimec from PINA, self-censorship is one of the greatest dangers of online attacks, considering the very essence of journalism as a profession. She says online attacks have an impact on the freedom of media and freedom of journalism. *They don't do that by chance. If it had no impact, they wouldn't be doing it.*[39]

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[37]   Interview with Teodora Cvetkovska, SSNM.

[38]   Interview with Teodora Cvetkovska, SSNM.

[39]   Interview with Kristina Ozimec, PINA.

Teodora Cvetkovska from the SSNM believes that online violence *has greater impact on the mental health of women journalists than on the obstruction of their work. I think self-censorship is more prevalent in terms of sharing their private lives on social networks.*

Through their investigative work, the AJM have noticed an interesting phenomenon – women *journalists usually do not react to online harassment. What we as an association have been trying to do is to encourage them to report all inappropriate comments and threats either to our association or, with our help, to the Ministry of Interior.*[40]

According to all interviewees, the number of cases that are reported, even those reported only to the associations, is significantly low, although the majority of journalists can recognize online harassment.

In the last period, we have only had one case of online harassment of a woman journalist which resulted in pressing criminal charges for hate speech, which was interpreted as calling for rape on Twitter. There was both hate speech and gender-based violence in the case, but the criminal charges were dropped.[41]

Non-reporting is believed to be the result of distrust in institutions, i.e. ineffective handling of cases of online harassment and attacks on women journalists.

Justice should be efficient and effective, as there is no point in processing events several years after they had happened.[42]

According to Milan Spirovski from the AJM, women journalists *do not report because they believe that instead of helping them, the lethargy of the institutions and the inertia of the justice system may only make things worse for them.*[43]

Regarding the work of the Cybercrime and Digital Forensics Department, Slavica Anastasovska of the Helsinki Committee believes that the inefficiency of the Department is due to the lack of trained staff.

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[40] Interview with Milan Spirovski, AJM.

[41] Interview with Slavica Anastasovska, MHC.

[42] Interview with Slavica Anastasovska, MHC.

[43] Interview with Milan Spirovski, AJM.

The team working in the department is very small, and that same department is also responsible for a range of other serious crimes, such as computer fraud, which they consider to be a priority.[44]

As for the legislation, the Criminal Code amendments seem quite promising, but most of the interviewees believe that it is still quite possible to take proper action even under the existing legislation.

The legal framework surely needs to be improved, especially in the area of criminalizing online gender-based violence, but the existing legal solutions can also be applied, such as Article 144 of the Criminal Code for the offence "Threatening the Safety", which also covers the commission of such offences through an information system.[45]

One of the advocacy goals of the AJM is the establishment of special departments or an appointment of responsible persons in the Public Prosecutor's Office who would specialize in cases related to journalists and media workers, for the purposes of creating a more effective prevention and protection system, i.e. an expedient and effective procedure that would contribute to reduced threats and attacks.

The AJM and the SSNM provide free legal assistance to journalists, in addition to the MHC, but they do not provide psychological support to journalists.

When it comes to online violence prevention, all interviewees pointed to the need for organizing continuous public campaigns to raise awareness of online violence and its negative consequences, which would also include information on media literacy, and providing continuous information to women journalists about online safety and protection.

One of the foundations of prevention is combating prejudices and gender roles that have been rooted in our society from an early age, both through public campaigns and through the educational process.[46]

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[44] Interview with Slavica Anastasovska, MHC.

[45] Interview with Slavica Anastasovska, MHC.

[46] Interview with Slavica Anastasovska, MHC.

Kristina Ozimec believes that *with PINA we managed to promptly detect this serious problem that is happening to women journalists, and therefore we want to contribute to raising awareness about what is happening to us and what we can change about this worrying trend, both among female journalists and the public. Furthermore, all organizations and institutions need to be engaged to identify the obstacles together, both legal and institutional, and come to a solution.*[47]

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[47] Interview with Kristina Ozimec, PINA.

/ CONCLUSIONS /

In order to gain a clearer insight into the key findings that resulted from the conducted analysis, the conclusions will be presented through the identified strengths which serve as foundation for further improvement of the situation in this area, as opposed to the weaknesses, as risks that should be removed to ensure adequate protection of women journalists.

Strengths

↗ Increased interest in tackling online violence and its consequences, especially on women;

↗ High level of awareness among women journalists about recognizing violence and its negative consequences;

↗ Women journalists that are well informed about the existing mechanisms for protection, both institutional and extra-institutional;

↗ Maintaining a high level of professionalism when doing the journalistic work despite of the attacks;

↗ Women journalists have already started applying certain strategies to deal with online violence and consider some of them to be successful;

↗ The feeling of fear for their own physical safety is rarely present among women journalists;

↗ Online violence rarely spills over offline;

↗ Free legal assistance is available to journalists, primarily through the associations;

↗ Increased participation of women journalists in working groups drafting media-related laws;

↗ The proposed amendments to the Criminal Code are likely to improve the online safety and protection of women journalists.

Weaknesses

⬊ Insufficient gender sensitivity and awareness about the problem of online violence among the public, the media management and the competent institutions;

⬊ Insufficient capacity of the competent institutions to recognise and process cases of online gender-based violence;

⬊ Ineffective proceeding of all competent institutions in cases of online violence;

⬊ The length of the proceedings and their final outcome discourage women journalists from reporting cases;

⬊ Use of double standards in view of the efficiency of the Cybercrime and Digital Forensics Department, based on the status of the person who is the victim of online violence;

⬊ Lack of adequate systems for collection of data on online violence cases in the relevant institutions;

⬊ High level of non-reporting of online violence by women journalists;

⬊ High level of distrust of women journalists in the institutions and their actions at all levels;

⬊ Normalizing online violence as part of the profession;

⬊ Trivialization of the severity of online attacks and their consequences, considering that they do not (usually) cause physical consequences;

⬊ Anonymity of the attackers through fake profiles and virtual private networks, which contributes to greater audacity and more aggressive behaviour on their behalf;

⬊ Insufficient legislation to regulate the online space, especially with regards to criminalizing online violence;

⬊ Inadequate implementation of the existing legislation by institutions;

↘ Failure by Facebook to act when online harassment is reported;

↘ Low representation of women in higher positions in the media and thus in the decision-making processes;

↘ Insufficient representation of the specific needs of women journalists in safety and protection measures and policies in the online space;

↘ Negative impact on the mental health of women journalists;

↘ Threats made to women journalists are sometimes passed onto their beloved ones;

↘ Presence of organized attacks, often with a political-party background;

↘ Risk of self-censorship;

↘ Lack of workplace rules and measures to protect women journalists in cases of online violence;

↘ Lack of psychological support for women journalists who have experienced violence.

/ RECOMMENDATIONS /

Institutions

❏ Strengthening the capacities of all relevant institutions, in particular the Ministry of Interior and the Cybercrime and Digital Forensics Department, the Public Prosecutor's Office and the judiciary, through trainings for identification, qualification and processing of cases of online gender-based violence, with a focus on the application of the principle of due diligence and prohibition of (re)victimization, in accordance with the Law on Prevention and Protection from Violence against Women and Domestic Violence;

❏ Promotion and application of a gender-sensitive approach by the relevant institutions in cases of online violence against women journalists, considering that it is an offence which is usually classified as gender-based violence;

❏ Urgent adoption of amendments to the Criminal Code, especially with regards to criminalizing online violence, and proper sanctioning of the perpetrators of this type of violence;

❏ Further harmonization of the relevant media laws with the standards of the European Union;

❏ Defining and legally regulating the term "online harassment", and defining prevention, countering and protection measures;

❏ Mapping the weaknesses and needs of the Cybercrime and Digital Forensics Department at the Ministry of Interior for effective processing of cases of online harassment and attacks, and assessing the resources available to the Department to do their work (number of employees, appropriate expertise of the staff, appropriate technology, opportunities for promotion of work, etc.);

❏ Appointment of one or more public prosecutors who would be specialized in the area, i.e. who would process cases of attacks on journalists and media workers, including cases of violence against women journalists;

❏ Adequate sanctioning of the perpetrators of violence, strengthening the efficiency of the judiciary and respecting the urgency of the procedures for

protection from gender-based violence by the courts, in accordance with the Law on Protection against Gender-Based Violence;

☐ The relevant institutions (Ministry of Interior, Public Prosecutor's Office and the judiciary) need to introduce and keep records on the number of cases and the types of gender-based violence (including online violence) that would be gender-disaggregated, including other data (for example, recording the profession of the victims of violence) which are relevant for the monitoring of the situation with gender-based violence in accordance with the Law on Protection of Victims of Violence;

☐ Promotion of protection mechanisms, such as the Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination, whose competences also include harassment, in accordance with the Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination;

☐ Alignment and coordination of the systems for collecting and analysing data on cases of online violence against women journalists by all entities that do the statistics, for the purposes of facilitating data search, having a better insight into the seriousness of the problem and designing appropriate protection measures and policies;

☐ Improving the cooperation and coordination of all relevant institutions with the media outlets and relevant associations in this field by convening periodic coordination meetings to share most recent information on the work of the relevant institutions and the problems that men and women journalists are faced with regarding the work of these institutions.

The public

☐ Conducting campaigns to raise public awareness of the consequences of online violence, with a specific focus on gender-based violence against women and women journalists;

☐ Conducting public campaigns and other promotional and educational activities to increase the digital literacy of the general public and to promote a positive culture of public communication and responsible use of the Internet;

☐ Demanding politicians and party leaders to engage in public advocacy and condemn any form of violence against men and women journalists;

☐ Undertaking activities for advocacy and promotion of the principle of zero tolerance of online violence by all relevant stakeholders, including the institutions and associations.

Journalists

☐ Conducting continuous training for women journalists about online protection, with special emphasis on social media;

☐ Continuous informing of women journalists about their rights and all protection mechanisms and support services available in the country, through information sessions, dissemination of informative materials etc.;

☐ Engaging women journalists in all processes of designing measures, laws and policies related to safety and protection from violence.

Media outlets and associations

❒ Strengthening the capacities of the media outlets and their management in particular, to recognize and understand the impact of online harassment and attacks on women journalists and the need to provide adequate support and protection at the very workplace for all women journalists facing this type of violence;

❒ Media outlets and associations need to create and provide unimpeded access to various services to support women journalists who are victims of online harassment and attacks, including psychological counselling, free legal aid and other professional assistance;

❒ Designing internal rulebooks indicating different steps to be taken when handling cases of online violence against women journalists, whether public or direct, and providing protection to women journalists, while respecting the right to free speech;

❒ Appointing a responsible person in all media outlets that share online content to monitor and intervene when disturbing comments are published in relation to the online content;

❒ Designing a system for monitoring and archiving of disturbing content addressed to women journalists in all media, in order to timely prevent and assess the risk of violence escalation;

❒ Strengthening the cooperation and coordination between media outlets and professional associations for the purposes of taking joint action to find and implement solutions for addressing the problem and drawing attention to this issue in general.

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