



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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Communiqué No. 1/2019

**Communiqué by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media
on Media Pluralism, Safety of Female Journalists and Safeguarding
Marginalized Voices Online**

Across the OSCE region, online violence continues to raise the stakes for women speaking, blogging, writing and reporting in the public sphere every day. It has been four years since the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media raised this issue in the Communiqué 02/2015 on the growing safety threat to female journalists online and initiated the Safety of Female Journalists Online (SOFJO) project. During this time we have heard countless testimonies about sexual harassment, strategic attacks, disinformation and smear campaigns targeting female journalists. These attacks pose a threat to freedom of expression and access to information, and must urgently be addressed.

The last four years have presented the world with significant political and digital developments, necessitating a renewed and resolute approach to ensure the safety of female journalists online. Several political commitments adopted at the international level underline the specific risks female journalists face online and acknowledge that, to counter the online threats and abuse, a systematic gender-sensitive approach needs to be adopted within a wider legal framework for the safety of journalists.

Most recently, the OSCE Ministerial Council adopted, on 7 December 2018, a groundbreaking Decision on Safety of Journalists ([MC.DEC/3/18](#)) specifically emphasized “the distinct risks faced by women journalists in relation to their work, including through digital technologies.” It further recognised that specific attacks come in many forms, “such as sexual harassment, abuse, intimidation, threats and violence” and underlined the importance of ensuring that these are effectively addressed. This marked an important step forward by OSCE participating States in recognising the need for a gender-sensitive approach when ensuring the safety of journalists.

The same year, the UN Human Rights Council adopted a Resolution on Safety of Journalists ([A/HRC/RES/39/6](#)) with gender-specific provisions and, in 2016, the Council of Europe adopted *Recommendation on the protection of journalism and safety of journalists and other media actors* ([CM/Rec\(2016\)4](#)) referring to the specific risks faced by women journalists.

It is clear, female journalists face a double-burden: being attacked both as journalists and women. Online harassment is escalating in the OSCE region and beyond, with a significant impact on the work of women journalists and their participation in the field of journalism.

Democracy is seriously harmed when women's and other marginalized voices are threatened or suppressed.

Journalists who are members of these groups, and who attempt to amplify these voices and keep the public informed on relevant issues, are regular targets of online attacks. This communiqué will expand on the findings and recommendations presented in *Communiqué 02/2015 on the growing safety threat to female journalists online* to address key concepts and strategies for ensuring and protecting marginalized voices online, and the rich perspectives and knowledge they contribute to our societies for the betterment of and progress on freedom of expression and democracy as a whole.

Comprehensive approach

Journalists face varying levels of harassment and discrimination depending on the social context, the political environment in which they work, but also sometimes with layers of social stratification – such as gender, origin, sexual orientation, religious belief, or disability.

Successfully addressing the multi-faceted obstacles to participation goes beyond an awareness of various forms of discrimination; however, to address the fact that levels of discrimination may intersect or overlap each other, reinforcing barriers to opportunity.

Any proposed measures and strategies to combat the online harassment should take into account its impact on the right to the freedom of expression of marginalized groups.

Recommendations:

- (i) Media outlets should ensure that newsrooms reflect the diversity of the societies they serve, so as to contribute to ensuring a multitude of perspectives;
- (ii) It is crucial that governments, newsrooms and internet intermediaries take not only a gender-sensitive, but also a multi-faceted approach, addressing layers of discrimination and obstacles to participation, at all stages of planning and implementation to ensure genuine plurality and a diversity of female voices.

Legislative framework ensuring the safety of female journalists online

A wide spectrum of existing legislation, such as anti-discrimination law and provisions on the prohibition of hate-speech and defamation, can, in accordance with international human rights treaties and standards, effectively address the online safety of female journalists.

Recommendations:

- (i) The existing harassment laws should be considered to ensure the flexibility inherent in some of those laws, especially in the cases of harassment that is of a sexual and sexist nature;
- (ii) Current legal frameworks should be periodically reviewed and monitored to ensure that existing laws are being effectively implemented and equally applicable online;
- (iii) We call for a review of national legislation in line with OSCE [MC.DEC/3/18](#) on *Safety of Journalists* to “condemn publicly and unequivocally attacks on women journalists in relation to their work, such as sexual harassment, abuse, intimidation, threats and violence, including through digital technologies”.

Capacity building for State authorities

Law enforcement, members of the judiciary, and policy-makers should be provided training on the basics of online harassment, effective solutions and resources, and an overview of existing legal instruments relevant for ensuring the protection of marginalized voices online.

Recommendations:

- (i) Ensure that law enforcement agencies train staff to identify online threats to safety within the framework of existing legislation, in line with international human rights standards;
- (ii) Ensure that officials tasked with the implementation of policy, especially as relates to internet regulation, gender equality, and participation of marginalized groups, be provided digital literacy training.
- (iii) Encourage *strategic* coordination among the police, prosecutors and media organizations, and to promote reciprocal understanding.

Protection of other media actors

Other media actors, including freelancers, citizen journalists, bloggers, and other contributors, may actively choose to work outside the framework of organized media outlets or without contracted positions because of the flexibility and autonomy it allows, or because the media environment in which they live offers no viable alternatives. The nature of this work, however, can render them more vulnerable, with less access to resources that serve as a support structure following an online attack.

Recommendations:

- (i) News and media organizations must ensure that journalists and other media actors have access to a comprehensive system of support including digital security tools, psychosocial and legal assistance;
- (ii) Such resources should be made available to all media actors to support and enhance their safety online and offline;
- (iii) Media organizations should develop protocols for responding to online harassment, with a specific gender component, and make them available to all contributing journalists and other media actors.

Challenges and opportunities of the digital space

The internet provides a space for all voices to be heard, yet much of the fast-evolving digital technologies remain unregulated, and although their benefits are undoubtable, this deregulated space allows for a misuse of such technologies that effectively target and silence dissenting and/or marginalized voices online.

Algorithms and automated computing systems, such as chatbots and troll farms, are used to launch aggressive smear campaigns, exacerbating the existing forms of discrimination in our societies.

Recommendations to Internet intermediaries:

- (i) Human rights must be central to private sector design, deployment and implementation of artificial intelligence systems; this includes the need to update national regulatory frameworks, community guidelines, and undertake impact

assessments and audits of artificial intelligence technologies and ensure effective external accountability mechanisms;

(ii) Internet intermediaries should increase transparency on where and how machine learning technologies are used on their platforms. They should also regularly collect, analyse, and report publicly on sex-disaggregated data related to online abuse and its effects, including by creating a database of specific occurrences/incidents and follow-up with policy/law-enforcement.

Political will and leadership from policy-makers

A majority of the work to counter online abuse is still done by the targeted journalists. Having identified this issue as a serious threat to media plurality and, more broadly, democracy as a whole, initiatives must be prioritized, with State and international policy-makers at the helm. This requires adequate resources, effective implementation of the existing legal framework, and innovative strategies and projects, built with the input and participation of those directly affected by online violence.

Recommendations to governments:

(i) Establish regular multi-stakeholder dialogue involving all main actors, including female journalists and media organizations, intermediaries and state authorities to ensure a holistic and systematic response to online harassment;

(ii) Foster the development of innovative responses to online harassment, with the input of all stakeholders, in line with the international human rights standards.

For years now, global attention and work being done to address the online safety of female journalists has resulted in the production of tools and organization of workshops, provision of resources directly to those journalists targeted with online harassment, networks of support and better coordination and collaboration between a variety of stakeholders. It has helped create a climate and network of support for journalists by increasing awareness that online harassment has very serious repercussions not just for the journalists who are targeted, but for freedom of expression and the quality of our societies more broadly.

This Communiqué and the recommendations therein will, hopefully, provide a roadmap for stakeholders working to counter online harassment - from where we have come and what we have achieved, taking stock of our current position and looking ahead to the obstacles and opportunities emerging with new technologies, expanding internet access and a climate of instability and waning support for media in much of the world.

This document is not just a resource guide, however, but an indication of the continued commitment from the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media to continue to prioritize - through demands for political action, allocation of resources and shining a spotlight on violations - equal access and participation of women and all marginalized voices online.

It's our responsibility.

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Vienna, 21 February 2019