

# Attacks on female journalists are attacks on democracy

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Abuse levelled at female journalists is often explicitly related to their gender, yet it is not a niche “gender issue”. Aimed at silencing the individual journalist, threats of rape and other forms of (sexual) violence stifle freedom of expression and the public’s access to information.

According to the OSCE’s Representative on Freedom of the Media, at least 24 female journalists have been killed in the OSCE region since 1997. But [thousands are threatened](#) on a daily basis.

Examples are readily available from every corner of the world: in The Philippines in early 2017, Maria Ressa who runs the social news network [Rappler](#) was targeted by a call for her to be raped and murdered. A young man wrote on [Rappler’s Facebook page](#):

*I want Maria Ressa to be raped repeatedly to death, I would be so happy if that happens when martial law is declared, it would bring joy to my heart.*

Ressa, who knows the power of audiences, asked her online community to assist in identifying the perpetrator. It worked and Ressa was able to identify the man as a 22-year-old university student. When his university learned what he had said, [he was forced to call Ressa and apologise](#).

Threats of rape and other sexual violence are not the only means used to prevent female journalists from doing their job. Shaming women into silence is another one. One widely covered case is that of Azerbaijani investigative journalist Khadija Ismayilova who in 2012 received snapshots of camera footage of her engaged in sexual intercourse with her boyfriend. Attached was a letter containing threats of “public humiliation”, if Ismayilova did not “behave”. The footage of the intercourse scene was then [posted online](#). Ismayilova reported the crime, but the public prosecutor [failed to properly investigate](#). Ismayilova ended up filing a complaint with the European Court of Human Rights, arguing a violation of her right to privacy and addressing Azerbaijan’s failure to prosecute the perpetrators. The case is [currently pending](#).

Online threats often spill over into the real world. A recent, tragic example is the case of Daphne Caruana Galizia, a Maltese investigative journalist who was well-known for her fiercely critical reporting on both government and opposition figures. Half an hour after she [published an article accusing the prime minister’s chief of staff of corruption](#) on her [blog](#), she was killed by a car bomb. Caruana Galizia had frequently been the target [of intimidation, threats, and the target of lawsuits](#). The investigation of her death is ongoing.

Although threats of rape and other forms of sexual violence overwhelmingly target women journalists, they affect all of us. Khadija Ismayilova and Maria Ressa chose to continue reporting, but others choose to self-censor or stop reporting. Some, like Daphne Caruana Galizia have been forcefully silenced altogether. When that happens, part of the news and information that reflects the diversity in society, the plurality of voices that makes it thrive, is silenced too.

While there are valiant efforts within civil to counter these effects, such as [the HeartMob initiative](#); efforts [to document online harassment](#) by groups such as the International Press Institute; and projects at the intergovernmental level such as the OSCE’s Representative on Freedom of the Media’s [Safety of Female Journalists Online campaign](#), the real onus in holding the attackers to account should be on governments. Ultimately responsible for keeping journalists safe and for ensuring that people have access to a diversity of

views and opinions, governments must recognise that an attack on a female journalist is not a gender issue – it is an attack on democracy itself.