SUMMARY OF THE OSCE RFoM QUESTIONNAIRE ON SAFETY OF FEMALE JOURNALISTS ONLINE

1. Background

OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media Dunja Mijatović earlier this year voiced her concern about the increasing amount of threats and sexual intimidation of female journalists and bloggers online and the effects this phenomenon may have on free speech and free media. [1] She considers this gender-based abuse to be a major challenge to female journalists´ safety and online freedom and called the OSCE participating States for action, offering them some preliminary recommendations on how to deal with the issue.

The topic has received increased attention since last year, also by international organizations. [2] There are numerous reports posted on the Internet in which female journalists and bloggers have shared their experiences. However, not much research seems to have been carried out and there is obviously a need for more. [3]

The Representative´s office is currently working to establish several activities to raise awareness and discuss strategies and responses. As part of this project, the office has conducted a small-scale qualitative study addressing female journalists all over the OSCE-region who were targeted with online abuse to learn more about their experiences and identify critical issues for further discussion. This article sums up the findings.

2. About the study

We wanted to know more about the kind of online abuse these journalists encountered, including how it affected them in their daily work, what actions were taken to counter the abuse, their views about what responses should be taken by the government and other actors.

In addition to those female journalists the office had already been in contact with on journalists' safety-related issues, Internet research helped us identify a target group of 23 female journalists

---

[1] See Communiqué on the growing safety threat to female journalists online of 6 February 2015 (http://www.osce.org/fom/139186).

[2] E.g. in the UNESCO report, "Building Digital Safety for Journalism", March 2015, a chapter is dedicated to gender perspectives on safety issues, where online abuse towards female journalists is discussed as one of the main challenges, http://www.unesco.org/new/en/communication-and-information/resources/news-and-in-focus-articles/in-focus-articles/2015/strengthening-digital-safety-for-journalists .

[3] Two independent studies, that gave support to the Representative's concern, where cited and linked to in the abovementioned Communiqué; Study by the International Women's Media Foundation and International News Safety Institute and Study by the British think tank Demos.

across the OSCE region.[4] Most were journalists that had experienced online abuse and had publicly reported about it. The target group included journalists employed by media organizations and freelance journalists.

A questionnaire, made available in both English and Russian languages, was sent to the target group at end of February 2015.[5] Of the 23 journalists we contacted, 11 filled out the questionnaire, additional three provided comments but did not fill out the form and nine did not respond.[6]

3. Key findings[7]

   a. Threats

Q1: Have you ever received <u>threats</u> online? (Please elaborate; what kind of threats, who it came from and how often)

The majority of respondents confirmed they had received threats online and most of them on a frequent basis. Five of the respondents specifically mentioned that they had received one or more death threats. Other threats specified were related to sexual and other abuse. Threats were sent both through social media (Twitter and Facebook), e-mails and in postings under articles published online.

Two journalists detailed the online threats received in this manner:

> *"Yes, almost on a daily basis […] most of them via Twitter, occasionally I check the Facebook inbox which is loaded by (death) threats, wishful thinking of all sorts of abuse. And although my email address is rather private (apart from the public ones obviously), it is the email threats that affect me most since I do make some sort of efforts of keeping my private email private."*

> *"A user sent me Facebook message where he described in detail the few days I had to live and that my grave was ready…"*

One respondent noted that the threats followed a certain pattern:

> *"There are two broad categories of threats: Those that are made by Twitter account holders who are apparently organized around the ruling […] Party. The usual pattern is that I either write an article or say something on television that challenges the official narrative say on foreign policy […] or the role of Islam. I am then inundated with death threats, abuse and sexually abusive language including rape threats. The second category covers those who are*

---

[4] The journalists that were approached are from following countries: Spain, Austria, Norway, Sweden, USA, United Kingdom, Netherlands, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Bulgaria, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia.

[5] For some of the journalists we had to rely on non-verified contact information we found online.

[6] In addition, one of the respondents sent us five completed forms from female colleagues in her country to whom she had distributed the form. All these responses indicated that online harassment and abusive behavior were not being perceived as a serious or widespread issue and were ignored by those surveyed.

[7] Some of the quoted answers in this article have been slightly edited in order not to identify the respondent.

sympathetic to Islamic State. I have been threatened with death by them including photoshopped images showing me about to be beheaded in an orange jumpsuit by "jihadi john.""

Examples of other death threats mentioned were:

"If an article you have just sent to the editorial office is published, you will meet [Anna] Politkovskaya on the same day."

"You won´t be able to live in this country. Run away if you want to survive."

Another respondent, who noted that during one period she had received death threats on a daily basis, said that their authors informed her that they were aware of her home address and that she was threatened to be either raped or killed.

b. Harassment and other abuse

Q2: Have you ever been <u>harassed</u> online? (Please elaborate; what kind of harassment, who it came from and how often)

Q3: Have you ever experienced <u>other types</u> of abusive behaviour online? (Please elaborate; what types of other abuse, who it came from and how often)

A majority of the respondents elaborated on the different kind of harassment they receive online. Most of them pointed to sexually related harassment, but also other forms of harassment were observed.

One respondent gave the following examples: Her mobile phone number was shared on sex dating websites; her e-mail box and Skype account were hacked; she received messages containing death threats on Skype coming from unfamiliar accounts; the website where her articles were published was hacked and a video containing sex scenes was posted there, accompanied by a message saying that she participated in an orgy; in addition, anonymous articles were posted online containing lies about her and her family; she has repeatedly received e-mails containing viruses.

Other examples include:

"I was raped in imaginations of many […] men and in so many different ways and they have expressed their interest in doing that in person. Also they have promised to do the same to my mother."

Some of the respondents noted that usually the harassment comes from anonymous sources and offered different observations on their probable identity:

"As postings are anonymous (and insulters mostly use false names/email-accounts when they register in the forum) I can only guess who they really are: right-wing people, anti-feminists, women-haters, women who find it amusing to insult other women, people who think it is funny to insult others without risk, bored people, etc…."

> *"Nine out of ten threats are from western born (Dutch, German, Belgian) Islamic youth, boys and girls. The tenth one is a semi-liberal raging about "the war" meaning WWII and comparing me to Eva Braun or whoever comes to mind.*

A few respondents also pointed to the government or government-related groups or networks:

> *"Whoever did this – and I believe it was our government as I was defamed in state papers too – had a very clear intention: to make sure people would despise me for my work with [...]and that is why all of threats and intimidation were focused precisely on me being a traitor and being an [...] agent."*

Other types of abusive harassment and behaviour were also noted. One respondent explained:

> *"From time to time there were campaigns, where many people would write me emails. They also made a Facebook-page "We demand that xx is sent home from the Middle East". Every time someone tagged my name I got to read what they were posting. Like " You are sick, you are disgusting, I feel ill when I see you. Liar. Arab whore. Anti-Semite. Jew hater. Scum. You belong to the gutter."*

On a similar note, another respondent said:

> *"After the appearance on the program, I received a flood of tweets with insults, trying to discredit my journalistic reputation and calling for the verbal aggression against my person. The insults there were about five or six profiles that repeatedly where insulting and insulting, in an attack that in my opinion was orchestrated. They encouraged to each other to insult me and they were acting in a coordinated action."*

    c.   Targeted campaigns

Q4: Have you had experiences with threats and harassment online for a continuing period of time that in your opinion amounted to a "targeted campaign" against you?

About half of the respondent explicitly elaborated on targeted abusive campaigns they had encountered online. A few others left this section blank and instead provided answers under question 1 and 2 that detailed such campaigns.

In all examples given, it was political reporting that had triggered the campaigns.

One respondent noted that during one period she had experienced such a severe campaign against her that she could not sleep because she was expecting a new online attack every day. She said the aim of the campaign was to make her lose her balance.

Another respondent said that after she had received an award for her work, the number of harassing postings online increased drastically. In many of the postings, her dismissal from the newspaper was demanded.

Although not taking place online, another respondent shared an incident of harassment where pro-governmental, right-wing groups published full-page advertisements in the five biggest national newspapers saying she was not to be trusted.

d. Online abuse compared to offline abuse

Q5: Can you indicate approximately by percentage how much of the overall threats/harassment you meet in the course of your work that has taken place in the online environment, as opposed to "the real world"?

All but one of the respondents answering to this questions pointed out that a vast majority of the threats and harassments related to their work take place online (figures include: "I would say 70 online, 30 offline", "90 % online", "95 % online, 5 % real world", "I guess 90 % is online").

One respondent said:

> "There was a period when the ratio of online threats was 90:10, where the internet stands for 90. And this had a direct impact on my real life"

The respondent, who said she experienced more threats and harassment in the field working as a war correspondent than online, noted:

> "But, when I go to the frontline I choose to go and put myself under a situation in which I can be threatened or harassed, under risk in a hostile environment. The problem is to feel this psychological stress in my house when I'm not travelling, only because I'm talking to media when I come back or I give my opinion in twitter or Facebook. It's unbearable."

e. Types of online abuse

Q6: In what online fora (social media, comments section to an online article, personal email account or other) do the threats/harassment most frequently occur?

The majority of the respondents points to several fora where they had regularly experienced online abuse: social media (Facebook and Twitter), comments sections to online articles (published on news sites or blogs), Skype and e-mails. A few respondents also mentioned that they had experienced online abuse on webpages that were hacked.

One respondent noted:

> "I don't argue on the comments section – I totally forgot to mention that. But my pieces are up to huge debate online whenever they're put on FB or just on the newspaper site. I NEVER enter a debate. Sometimes, on a rare event – once a year maybe – I forget I'm reading the comments on my newspaper's FB page and add a comment. That's never a clever thing to do."

f. Topics

Q7: What topics most often trigger abusive comments online?

Most of the respondents pointed to their reporting on political issues, in particular criticism of the government and sensitive issues related to migration issues, human rights, religion, feminist issues, terrorism (ISIS was mentioned by quite a few) and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

A few respondents pointed out that they did not see any link between what they reported and the kind of abuse they received.

g. Involvement/actions from employer

Q8: Has your employer ever been involved in a case of threat/harassment against you? What action was taken?

The respondents described varied degrees of involvement from employers.

One journalist explained that it was hard to get the employer to understand how difficult it was to deal with the online abuse. She stressed the importance of involvement from the employer and support from colleagues when you are experiencing cases of online abuse. She also pointed to differences in dealing with abuse online as opposed to verbal attacks in print media:

> *"My current bosses are better at understanding, as they have seen what people write in the newspapers about me. But still it is difficult for someone to understand the effect, the anger and the feelings it creates. These harassers can really break your spirit at times. If you don't get any support from your work it can be devastating. No one does anything as long as it is online just straight to me. But when it (attacks) appears in the newspapers they (employer) react."*

She elaborated that after an online storm last summer, she had given three important messages to her employer: 1) When there is an online storm, you need to be taken off duty since it takes a whole day to deal with media and everything that comes along; 2) the information unit of the media house needs to be involved and offer advice; 3) It is important that colleagues care: *"I felt alone. Just 4-5 people sent me an sms or email to support me. That is not enough."*

Another journalist, a freelancer, replied that she got support from the media organizations she wrote for. One of the organizations made a public statement and many other media outlets picked it up and wrote about the threats, expressing their support to her. The same organization also consulted with a lawyer.

One journalist was less optimistic about involvement from media outlets. She noted:

> *"I am afraid that most of the online media are quite ignorant to the comments below the articles as far as these comments increase the internet traffic. However, I cannot generalize."*

One journalist who received a lot of threats online and whose strategy was to ignore them, answered to this question:

> *"Thankfully I have bull-headed employers who stand by me whatever I do but I/ we refuse to get intimidated. And if police, terrorism committees, Twitter management and the minister of state calls, we just laugh. I really, really can't be bothered and would not be able to work for someone who does get bothered."*

h. Law enforcement issues

Q9: Have you or your employer (please indicate) ever reported a case of threat/harassment to the police. If so, what was the outcome?

Of the journalists that experienced severe threats only a few had employers that reported the case to the police. One journalist herself reported a threat to the police. Out of those cases that were reported to the police, none were prosecuted.

One journalist answered that the threats she and some colleagues (male and female journalists) received had been investigated by the police for a year before the case was closed. She said that apparently the harassers were untraceable because the server they used was outside the EU.

The journalist who filed a complaint and asked for police protection after receiving death threats said:

> *"Two plainclothes policemen showed up at my house one day asking me to sign a paper saying they had looked around the neighbourhood. And that was it."*

i. Impact

Q10: Have threats or harassment online or fear of being threatened or harassed online had any impact on what you reported or how you reported a story?

The majority of the respondents stated very decidedly that online abuse did not impact their reporting; however, a few of them gave a more nuanced picture. One journalist who said she was frequently harassed by people sympathetic to the Islamic State answered the following:

> *"Yes, I was unable to cover the liberation of Kobane for fear of being targeted by IS."*

Another journalist said she thought a lot about what words and expressions she used in her reporting. She also said she decided to take a break from reporting after last summer, when she covered the Gaza war, and received a lot of hate messages on Facebook, Twitter and email:

> *"But after last summer's storm I have taken a leave for 8 months to write a book. And thank God, now it is quieter. I needed that. But I have really been thinking if it is worth it, to cover Israel-Palestine. On the other side: If you give up, you let the harassers win. And that is also wrong. Now I am working on a book to explain how Israel has changed and turned into a*

different country. It is a book to meet the harassers in a way. I feel pressured to write it. To explain."

Another respondent, who denied that online abuse had any impact on her reporting, said it affected her in other ways:

> *"It affected me psychologically though. For a while it was difficult to feel safe. Even after I came to […] it felt like any minute now someone is going to come out of a corner. And that frustrated me. I think it was more about the frustration of feeling this way than anything else."*

j. Strategies

Q11: How have you dealt with the online abuse? In your experience, what is the best way to address it?

Several different strategies were presented in the responses to these questions. The majority of the respondents pointed out that the best way to deal with abuse was simply to ignore it.

Others pointed to more active strategies like blocking certain email addresses and certain profiles from which abusing comments on Twitter and Facebook were sent.

Some explained they engaged in different ways of countering the abuse:

> *"You just have to live with it, as it will not go away. But to find a way to live with it is important instead of being just passive and get depressed, and lose self-respect and feel that you're just shit. I do things to feel that I am in some control. I post the hate-mails and harass-tweets online and write things like: "Poor guy who has to write this in order to feel brave" or just "Well, well. Feel sorry for him." Sometimes I have called people. I try to ignore it. I delete it quickly to "wash it away." And: I block lots of people on Twitter and Facebook. That has helped."*

Another respondent said that when it came to targeted campaign-like online-mobbing, she had posted herself under a nickname and started a counter-offensive together with friends. The same respondent also noted good results of moderating online discussions:

> *"I and other […]-colleagues also made good experience with intervening personally backed up by colleagues from our user-generated-content (UGC)-department. I made two one-hour-long life-chats concerning asylum-issues, while the forum was looked after by hand (which means that threatening/harassing/insulting postings are filtered out instantly – normally […] uses an automatic anti-harassing-software called Foromat which doesn't react as efficient). Since then the forums concerning my articles are a little more civilized."*

Another respondent said she addressed the abuse by making it public through the media and by informing international human rights organizations. Another respondent also noted she got help from an international NGO to raise her case.

A few of the respondents noted that threats needed to be taken seriously and should be reported to the police.

    k.   Responses from other actors

Q12: What responses should governments; police, the media organizations themselves and NGOs take to address the issue?

None of the respondents saw any clear solutions to the problems, but pointed to several factors that could be improved.

Several of the respondents highlighted the fact that threats online are not taken seriously enough by law enforcement agencies. They pointed to the government's role in this, and said that the government should demand investigations in cases where journalists are targeted with threats and severe harassment online.

About the skills and tools of law enforcement agencies one respondent noted:

> *"Law enforcement agencies have absolutely no idea of how the internet functions and how to investigate such cases. National legislation often does not envision relevant articles which would allow investigating them. But first and foremost, where there is a will, there is a way. Media organizations and media outlets should have developed security policies, rules on how to treat confidential information, rules that apply in case of search/questioning/withdrawal of equipment. A contact for an IT specialist who can provide a prompt consultation on what to do if you suspect that you were hacked must be at hand. Trainings on IT security can also help. In my case, they did."*

A few respondents pointed to the importance of international standards and legislation against online harassment and said such legislation should be prepared at the level of UN or EU and be mandatory.

Some of the respondents pointed to the importance of the work of NGOs, which could be more vocal. One of the participants shared a story where an international NGO raised her case. Another respondent said media organizations as well as NGOs should take a more active role in blocking comments sections when the topic leads the users to anti-campaign. She also called for more resources used for supervision and moderating online forums.

Some of the respondents expressed their distrust in the government and law enforcement agencies. One participant said it was impossible to solve the problem if you were working as a journalist in a state that was "dictatorial." She warned against turning to law enforcement agencies, because they were too tied up in the government's agenda.

Another respondent said that in her country, where the authorities were the source of the threats to the journalists, it was important that the West react strongly to violations of journalists' rights. The authorities should know that the entire civilized world will be ready to react if any independent journalists are affected or any independent media outlet is closed.

4. <u>Conclusions</u>

The impact of online threats and harassment on reporting and journalism must be further explored and addressed. It is difficult to measure the amount of self-censorship of female journalists who were harassed. However, the fact that the journalists questioned spent a lot of time dealing with online harassment in different ways implies a direct or indirect impact on their work.

From the answers received, we have identified the most urgent issues to be addressed as well as possible points of engagement for the Representative's office:

- Most respondents seem to agree that the best way to address online threats and harassment would be to ignore them. However, they described a rather painful and long process to achieve this attitude, which included reading through online comments, sometimes addressing them or their authors, of feeling threatened, experiencing paranoia, sleeplessness, and feeling the lack of support by colleagues and employers. How can their experience be used to help other journalists who experience similar situations?

- There is a general consensus that some kind of threats cannot be ignored, such as death threats, particularly when coming from organized groups. In such cases, respondents affirmed the importance of support from family, friends, colleagues and employers. Particular importance is given to the latters´ awareness and active involvement, e.g. by reporting to the police or by employing internal strategies to address targeted campaigns. The answers received indicated that the media organisations are not as involved as they should. Such internal strategies could be discussed in a roundtable that would look into best practices for employers to support staff members that have been victims of online harassment.

- Freelance journalists are even less supported. How can freelance journalists or bloggers be provided more professional protection and support?

- The lack of ideas of the respondents on how state institutions should address the issue is an indicator that law enforcement procedures are unclear on both sides: One the one hand, victims of online threats and their employers are not aware of what procedures to follow. On the other hand, the lack of efficient law enforcement assistance was pointed out. There is a need to discuss how both can be improved. Discussion points include international police co-operation, legal instruments and technical tools. OSCE participating States need to

be involved in any discussions on strategies to ensure that relevant existing laws are being implemented.

- It is clearly worrisome that several respondents pointed to the government or pro-governmental media as the possible source for online threats and intimidation they had experienced.

- Many journalists might also refrain from being vocal on these issues as they may portray them as weak or put them into a category of "feminism". While there obviously is a need to include gender perspectives in safety issues, what possible implications it may have to single out female journalists as vulnerable should be further discussed.

Undoubtedly, awareness-raising and sharing of experiences in itself seems to be a crucial point. One respondent, who in the second half of 2014 in particular experienced large-scale online abuse, including death threats, commented:

> *"You know this is second time I go back to those months and sharing the story of what happened. I have screen shots of most of the attacks. I also heard so many other things from friends who would write me telling me they had to step in for me, even my cousins had to argue and convince people that I was a normal human being.*
>
> *I just wanted to say that it took me a while to recuperate from that and actually start openly talking about this. And I feel stronger now that I can share my experience."*