



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
The Representative on Freedom of the Media  
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**Communiqué on the growing safety threat to female journalists online**

*Digital media today allows for the fast flow of information and the public's active participation in sharing ideas, news and insight. In this online world, journalists are more exposed and available to their readers than ever before. An open and free Internet is desirable for the creation of public debate and should be duly protected. At the same time, the digitalization of media has made journalists and other online voices more vulnerable to threats and intimidation of different shapes and forms.*

During the past year I have become alarmed by the growing number of reports from across the OSCE region and beyond about how female journalists and bloggers are singled out and fiercely attacked in social media via tweets, Facebook posts and in comments to online articles and blogs.

The female journalists targeted most report on crime, politics and sensitive – and sometimes painful – issues, including taboos and dogmas in our societies. These online attacks tend not to address the content of the articles but instead degrade the journalist as a woman. For some female journalists, online threats of rape and sexual violence have become part of everyday life; others experience severe sexual harassment and intimidation. Misogynist speech is flourishing.

Also during the past year I have known of female journalists who have been forced to close their accounts on social media because of targeted campaigns of threats and intimidation. Verbal stalking online has continued for others with harassment in their physical environment.

I am concerned there is a lack of awareness of the gravity and implications of the problem. So far there is not much research on the topic of harassment and threats against female journalists online, but two independent studies highlight the concern. A global study on violence and harassment against women in the news media published last year found that more than 25 % of the verbal, written and/or physical threats and intimidation the respondents encountered took place online.<sup>i</sup> The same study found that one of the most common ways the respondents were targeted online is through the use of sexual harassment. Another recent study conducted by a British think tank found that female journalists experienced roughly three times as many abusive comments as their male counterparts on Twitter.<sup>ii</sup>

Journalists' safety is a precondition for free speech and free media. Any threat to journalists' working environment needs to be dealt with and minimized. As the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media I view this targeted online abuse against female journalists as a dangerous new trend that needs to be addressed now.

The phenomenon has a devastating and wide-ranging impact on society as a whole because more female journalists and bloggers are likely to engage in self-censorship. Threats and fear of being orally or physically abused may have a significant impact on what and how news stories are reported. It is psychological violence that creeps in quietly and may result in trauma. It may also affect editors' choices of who should report on significant stories out of safety concerns. As a result, female journalists may choose to opt out or stop writing critically online on issues of importance.

From the reports I have received female journalists are starting to develop strategies to deal with online threats and abusive comments. This is encouraging, but the problem also needs to be dealt with on a governmental level. This is why I call on the OSCE participating States to take action.

I recall the UN Human Rights Council Resolution on The Promotion, Protection and Enjoyment of Human Rights on the Internet, adopted on 5 July 2012, where it is acknowledged that the same human rights that people have offline also must be protected online, in particular freedom of expression.

The specific risks women journalists face in the course of their work was acknowledged in the UN General Assembly Resolution on The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity,

adopted on 18 December 2013. In this context, the importance of taking a gender-sensitive approach when considering measures to address the safety of journalists was highlighted.

The Council of Europe Committee of Ministers, in its declaration on The Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists and other Media Actors adopted on 30 April 2014, also has taken on an obligation to address the specific challenges and threats women journalists are confronted with in the course of their work.

The OSCE participating States have committed themselves to safeguard freedom of expression and to take all necessary steps to ensure basic conditions for free and independent media.

With this background, I give my following recommendations:

- Acknowledge the gravity of the problem and put it on the agenda now. In cases of journalists being threatened and intimidated, a strong public condemnation by political and public figures is required in order for the public to recognize that this behaviour is not accepted and will not be tolerated.
- Give priority to improving the conduct of law enforcement agencies. Threats and harassment online that amounts to criminal offenses should be dealt with in the same way as offline offenses. Police need better training and other tools to get a greater understanding of how to investigate threats and other criminal offenses that take place online.
- When new laws are drafted be aware of the chilling effects that laws aimed at restricting speech may have. In most countries, existing criminal legislation and other laws aimed at combating harassment and discrimination can be used to deal with the problem. It is not recommended to require public identification of online speech even though anonymous speech may give perpetrators an added layer of protection.
- Invest in media and Internet literacy to inform and improve citizens' capacities to contribute to healthy and constructive media environments. Encourage and sponsor campaigns raising the awareness of the problem and how to deal with it.
- Encourage more data and research and support non-governmental organizations that address the issue.

I also take this opportunity to call upon the media themselves to pay close attention to the phenomenon. Any threats to journalists must be duly reported to the police. The media may also invest in active participation and moderation of online debates to uphold a plural, free and safe environment for journalists.

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<sup>i</sup>[Study by the International Women's Media Foundation and International News Safety Institute](#)

<sup>ii</sup>[Study by the British think tank Demos](#)