



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
The Representative on Freedom of the Media
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**Recommendations following the Expert Meeting
New Challenges to Freedom of Expression: Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists**

Vienna, 17 September 2015

Online media today allows for the fast flow of information and the public's active participation in sharing ideas, news and insight. An open, free and safe Internet is essential for public debate and free flow of information and therefore 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.

Journalists' safety is a precondition for free speech and free media. Dealing with and minimizing threats to journalists is an essential component of the OSCE participating States' commitment to the protection and safety of journalists.¹

Female journalists, bloggers and other media actors are disproportionately experiencing gender-related threats, harassment and intimidation on the Internet which has a direct impact on their safety and future online activities.

The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media has initiated several activities this year to raise awareness and discuss appropriate responses to the problem.² The Representative's Communiqué on the growing safety threat to female journalists online issued 5 February 2015 was a strong call to the participating States to take action. It offered preliminary recommendations as a starting point for further discussion.³

¹ OSCE Commitments on Freedom of the Media, Freedom of Expression and Free Flow of Information, <http://www.osce.org/fom/99565>

² Prior activities include a survey among female journalists in the OSCE region, summary available at <http://www.osce.org/fom/178796>, and a real-time discussion online (Tweet-chat) involving numerous stakeholders, <http://bit.ly/1LTvsGE>.

³ Communiqué 2/2015 on the growing safety threat to female journalists online, available at <http://www.osce.org/fom/139186>.

Online abuse must be dealt with in the broader context of gender discrimination and violence against women⁴ to ensure that the same rights that people have offline must be protected online.⁵

The expert meeting “New Challenges to Freedom of Expression: Countering Online Abuse of Female Journalists” was organized by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media in an effort to further elaborate on what actions should be taken to respond to these threats. Some 80 journalists, media experts and government and civil society representatives from OSCE participating States gathered in Vienna to discuss the current situation and to bring together best practices, strategies and possible solutions.⁶

The following are recommendations by the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, on how participating States, media organizations and intermediaries can assist in ensuring that female journalists and media actors can work without fear and exercise their human right to freedom of expression.

Participating States should:

- Recognize that threats and other forms of online abuse of female journalists and media actors is a direct attack on freedom of expression and freedom of the media.
- Strengthen the capacity of law enforcement agencies to understand international standards on human rights so they can identify real threats to safety and protect individuals in danger, including providing tools and training on technical and legal issues.
- Refrain from introducing new criminal laws that could stifle freedom of expression, opting instead to apply existing laws that are in line with international human rights standards.
- Commission and support the collection and analysis of data related to online abuse and its effects, including creating a database of specific occurrences and follow-up from law enforcement.

⁴ OSCE Action Plan for the Promotion of Gender Equality, (MC.DEC/14/04), <http://www.osce.org/mc/23295?download=true>, Decision on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women (MC.DEC/7/14), <http://www.osce.org/cio/130721?download=true> and Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence <https://rm.coe.int/CoERMPublicCommonSearchServices/DisplayDCTMContent?documentId=090000168046031c>

⁵ UN General Assembly Resolution 20/8 on The Promotion, protection and enjoyment of human rights on the internet, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/G12/153/25/PDF/G1215325.pdf?OpenElement>

⁶ Attending non-governmental organizations included Index on Censorship, International Women’s Media Foundation, International News Safety Institute, European Federation of Journalists, Committee to Protect Journalists, International Press Institute, One World Platform, Reporters Without Borders, Dart Centre Europe, Ethical Journalism Network, Institute of Mass Information (Ukraine), Article 19, Russian Union of Journalists, Croatian Journalists Association, Lithuanian Online Media Association, Charter 97.

- Establish a network of working groups with participating States, international organizations, media, civil society and Internet intermediaries to develop educational materials, awareness-raising campaigns and create effective structures for dialogue.

Media organizations should:

- Adopt industry-wide guidelines on identifying and monitoring online abuse.
- Ensure that journalists experiencing online abuse, both staff and freelancers, have access to a comprehensive system of support including psychosocial and legal assistance.
- Create a company culture of gender equality and non-tolerance to threats and harassment against staff.
- Put in place clear and transparent procedures related to content moderation, with the view of protecting the right to freedom of expression, and train relevant staff accordingly, while ensuring that male and female staff be equally involved.
- Work with other media organizations and associations to create support systems, including training and mentorship programmes, for female journalists and media actors.

Intermediaries and social media platforms should:

- Inform properly about terms of services, guidelines and best practices in ensuring a safe space for all users.
- Ensure that terms of service, community guidelines and information about their enforcement are proportionate and adequate, clear, understandable and easily available to all users.
- Provide information to users about best practices for online safety and about technical solutions on how to best report abusive content.
- Engage in capacity building with civil society organizations on issues like counter-speech as a response to abusive content.
- Collect data and statistics on online abuse to help facilitate more comprehensive research on online abuse of female journalists and media actors.