



**Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe  
Office of the Representative on Freedom of the Media**

**SPECIAL REPORT ON THE FOURTH ROUNDTABLE OF THE  
SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS PROJECT**

**INTERSECTIONAL PERSPECTIVES**

14 JUNE 2023

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## *Foreword*

In December 2018, the Ministerial Council of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) adopted Decision 3/18 on the Safety of Journalists. In this landmark document, the participating States committed themselves to improve the safety of journalists on different inter-related aspects, including physical, legal, economic and online threats and attacks, with a special focus on the distinct risks faced by women journalists. In 2022, the year in which we marked the 25th anniversary of the Mandate of the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media (RFoM), the current RFoM Teresa Ribeiro decided to devote special attention to the topic of safety of journalists and launched a new project.

The project consists of seven roundtables, each covering another aspect of the topic of safety of journalists: (1) data collection, analysis and reporting on attacks and violence against journalists and promotion of journalistic work; (2) secure working conditions; (3) safety of journalists in conflict situations; (4) intersectional perspectives; (5) digital safety; (6) legal harassment; (7) police prevention and fight against impunity.

The fourth roundtable took place on 15 March 2023, with the participation of six distinguished experts: Julie Posetti, Deputy Vice President and Global Director Research at the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ); Jake Bowers, Roma Journalist, Producer and Filmmaker; Lara Scarpitta, OSCE Senior Adviser on Gender Issues; Asha Allen, Advocacy Director for Online Expression and Civic Space at the Centre for Democracy and Technology; Sandra Banjac, Assistant Professor with the Centre for Media and Journalism Studies at the University of Groningen; and Biljana Kotevska, Socio-legal Feminist Researcher.

This report is a reflection of the contributions and discussions from the fourth roundtable, with additional information from supporting material and literature. It does not suggest to be complete in its coverage, but rather aims to provide guidance to the participating States in their endeavour to further journalists' safety.



## *I. Introduction*

“If no equal participation is possible,  
what will our democracies look like in the future?”

Journalists are exposed to threats or harassment not only because of their journalistic work, but very often also because of their personal characteristics and inherent or assumed identity. There has been growing awareness and evidence about the heightened exposure of female journalists to (online) attacks, very often taking the form of sexual or gender-based violence. The Representative on Freedom of the Media has been raising awareness on this alarming phenomenon since 2015, when launching the campaign on the Safety of Female Journalists Online (SOFJO).

A global study of online violence against women journalists published in 2021 by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and UNESCO found that 73% of the surveyed women journalists had experienced online violence in the course of their work. In addition, 41% said they had experienced online violence in the context of gendered disinformation campaigns with the aim to undermine their credibility by using disinformation tactics, showing a clear pattern of misogyny being weaponized against women journalists.

Online attacks against women journalists are not only infringing on their individual human rights, but have a far-reaching impact on diversity in the media and on pluralism of voices in the public space. As one expert underlined during the roundtable, it is important to understand the generational impact that online violence has on women. The reality of online gender-based violence is so prevalent that young women are oftentimes choosing to stay out of public and political life because of the harassment they face online. The expert stressed that this was a question of parity and equal participation in our democracies.

Another expert noted that women from different walks of life who are active in the public sphere – be it journalists, politicians, human rights defenders or peacebuilders – encounter similar patterns of violence and harassment due to their gender. This hinders equal involvement in public life, especially for women coming from minority backgrounds. It was also mentioned that the general rise in nationalism across the globe is accompanied by anti-gender and misogynist attitudes, making women much more vulnerable to prejudice and violence. In the past twenty years, anti-gender opposition has grown to become a powerful global movement attempting to stall women’s rights progress in the name of religion, cultural or family traditions.

However, gender is only one factor that increases the exposure to online threats and harassment of journalists. Other characteristics, such as racial or ethnic background, religion or belief, sexual identity or sexual orientation can increase the risks of online abuse for journalists. The ICFJ/UNESCO global study discovered that racism, religious bigotry, antisemitism, sectarianism and homophobia intersect with misogyny and sexism to produce significantly heightened exposure and deeper impacts for women experiencing multiple forms of discrimination. The study identified that women journalists from minority groups experienced both the highest rates and most severe impacts of online violence. Overall, the data showed that misogyny is the overriding characteristic of online violence, but it intersects and is deepened and worsened in the context of other forms of discrimination.

These findings underline the importance of adopting an intersectional approach when addressing the safety of journalists, in order to better understand the patterns and risks that journalists face, while taking into consideration their diverse backgrounds and identities. The roundtable provided an opportunity to examine and discuss the term “intersectionality”, i.e. different aspects of identity and characteristics, and how it affects the safety and protection needs of journalists, and why it is necessary to adopt an intersectional approach when developing effective policies for the safety of journalists.

One expert highlighted the safety concerns for journalists at the intersection of race and class, referring to experiences of members of the Roma community. Romani journalists face particular challenges, with the vast majority of the Roma population in the OSCE region living in poverty and facing widespread racism and discrimination. Speaking from own experience, the expert noted that when Roma journalists critically cover issues regarding their own community, they are often perceived as enemies by its members. This has oftentimes lead to hostility towards these journalists, the expert added. Moreover, Romani journalists often face racism and discrimination within editorial offices, being pushed into a “broadcasting ghetto” where they are only able to report about their own community and are rarely promoted to higher positions. Other challenges they face include political pressure and lack of trust in their reporting as their objectivity towards their own community is oftentimes questioned, while most Romani journalists that chose the journalistic profession are driven by a motivation to break the negative stereotypical writing about the Roma community and to tell the other side of the story. According to the expert, it is vital to improve media representation of minorities, including Romani journalists, mainly by providing training, promoting visibility and removing barriers for their equal participation and representation.

Another expert at the roundtable, having conducted research on journalism and audiences in different cultural contexts, made similar observations, including the fact that journalists faced

racism, discrimination and sexism within newsrooms from colleagues and editors. The expert pointed to the research findings indicating that there is more disagreement than agreement in the expectations between audiences and journalists from a specific community, underlining that expectations are often unrealistic and impossible to deliver on. Also, journalists from historically marginalized groups often feel excluded from the traditional ideals of journalism. Although they expressed their wish to be agents for social change, writing in a more sympathetic way about their communities, most journalists surveyed by the expert said that they felt held back as this might not reflect what news organizations want and what the main target audience would find interesting.

At the same time, marginalized groups often feel that the mainstream media do not properly represent their needs. They have low trust in journalism, perceiving that media prioritize market imperatives and elite institutions over the public's and their community's interest. In this context, the intersectional lens could expose some of the inherent shortcomings in journalism, taking into account the power structures that enable and perpetuate discrimination and inequalities that people with intersectional identities and experiences.

## ***II. Intersectionality as a tool***

It was Kimberlé Crenshaw, an American civil rights advocate and leading scholar of critical race theory, who coined the term *intersectionality* in 1989, when she analysed the intersection of race and sex as a way to help explain the oppression and discrimination of African-American women in the workforce. Today, the concept of intersectionality is used to describe how different aspects of an individual's identity intersect to worsen the experience of inequality and discrimination, such as race, class, religion, belief, gender, sex, sexual orientation or age.

One of the experts pointed out that intersectionality is an analytical framework that needs to be applied in policy development and must be a constant part of a cyclical policy making process. It is a practical tool – beyond data collection or a mere list-making exercise – that can be used to recognize identity markers and understand that these do not exist independently of each other.

The concept and framework of intersectionality addresses historic and systemic patterns of discrimination. Adopting an intersectional lens in the context of safety of journalists, allows a deeper understanding of how journalists are put at heightened risk of attacks due to multiple forms of discrimination associated with racism, sectarianism, religious bigotry, or homophobia. One expert underlined that there are multiple lenses through which manifestations of intersectionality in the context of online violence can be better understood. The global study



conducted by ICFJ and UNESCO already mentioned before found that women journalists who had faced intersectional forms of online violence experienced stronger psychological impacts of the online threats compared to their male colleagues.

### *III. The way forward*

Against this backdrop, the experts underscored the necessity to support more research based on the intersectional methodology to better understand the scope and impact that inequality and vulnerability to (online) violence has on journalists. Such research should feed into evidence-based policymaking. To ensure meaningful change, intersectionality should also be integrated into human-rights assessments and due diligence procedures of online platforms.

In general, it was highlighted that intersectional approaches are needed to effectively promote gender equality and combat gender-based violence. An OSCE led survey from 2019 showed that, while society expects women to respect their traditional roles, very little is done to protect women in the public sphere, and that violence and harassment hinders equal involvement of women in politics and the media.

Applying an intersectional perspective to the safety of journalists will not only help to understand and address the heightened exposure and vulnerability of journalists from diverse and intersecting backgrounds in relation to their journalistic work, but also to address structural discrimination, historical inequality, and unequal power relations more broadly. It is important to understand the safety risks for journalists with different personal characteristics and inherent or assumed identity in the context of democratic backsliding more broadly; violence and attacks against such journalists are not new phenomena, but rather a continued manifestation of discrimination and inequality.

In order to promote a pluralistic and diverse media space, people from diverse backgrounds need to be in positions of decision-making and policy-influencing, which requires that barriers to education and participation are reduced and that equal representation is guaranteed. While diversity involves having a variety of voices and perspectives represented, inclusion goes a step further to ensure that these voices are actively involved in decision-making processes and have access to different opportunities. It is recommended that these issues are included in university curricula for journalists and trainings for editorial management, with the aim to promote a broader understanding of intersectionality among key stakeholders.

Challenging journalism's dominant ideals, norms and ways of functioning requires a bottom-up process, including through raising awareness among journalism students and young



journalists. At the same time, editorial management needs to be sensitized to be more inclusive and aware of the challenges that journalists from intersectional backgrounds face. It is important to allow journalists from diverse backgrounds to write stories about their own communities and hence not pigeonhole them, but rather provide opportunities for them to grow and expand their carriers.

In parallel, there is a need to improve monitoring of online violence against journalists with different personal characteristics and inherent or assumed identities and to encapsulate intersectional identities, to address racism and religious bigotry, homophobia and other forms of discrimination. In this light, it is worth noting that the OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media is currently finalizing *OSCE Guidelines for monitoring online violence against female journalists*. These guidelines feature 14 research-informed indicators for gendered online violence escalation, one of them focusing on intersectionality. The indicators are designed to be integrated into existing and new protocols for monitoring and responding to threats against female journalists, as well as provide guidance for action at the point of an escalation alert, tailored to specific responders. The main goal of the indicators is to promote effective response mechanisms to online violence and harassment of women journalists and to prevent the escalation of online violence, and particularly any possible offline harms that female journalists may suffer in connection to the online violence targeting them.

Participating States need to ensure that they respond to the different obstacles and risks journalists with different personal characteristics and inherent or assumed identity face in exercising their profession. Journalists' safety should be reassessed through the intersectionality lens, to ensure that proposals addressing the different risks faced by journalists are put forward.

At the same time, it was noted that social media platforms are not doing enough to deal with misogynistic attacks against journalists with different personal characteristics and inherent or assumed identity. These companies also need to better understand how intersectional identities increase the risk of attacks and need to include this assessment in their responses. The tech industry should make improvements in providing a safe and discrimination-free working environment for journalists from different backgrounds. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights could serve as an important tool in this regard.