

Main Challenges for Women Journalists at Grassroots Level

Submission for the Consultation on
Gender Justice by UN Special
Rapporteur on Freedom of Expression,
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Introduction

Gender justice within the context of journalism is gaining traction within the international agenda. From an increase in reports and studies, to the launch of new coalitions such as the Coalition for Online Abuse¹ (of which we are a member), the specific and difficult position of **women journalists** is being recognized and addressed. The prioritisation of gender equality within your mandate is therefore a development we very much welcome, given the multitude and gravity of challenges women journalists face at this time.

Free Press Unlimited (FPU) works on gender equality in the media and based on its data and experiences, sees that this is a global phenomenon. Violence is increasing across the world and inequalities of women journalists are not addressed adequately and urgently enough. These persisting inequalities in the media tend to perpetuate existing inequalities in societies. Therefore media have an enormous role to play in addressing violence against women and the inequalities that exists.

FPU works together with over 40 media partner organizations, many of which are based in the Global South, to achieve gender equality in and through the media. This encompasses a variety of activities, from capacity building and trainings aimed at improving the safety of women journalists, to projects focused on the promotion of a fair and equal representation of women in (media) content and in leadership positions within media organisations. We are committed to creating an **enabling environment for women journalists**.

In recent years, there has been increased attention and global awareness for the position of women journalists. However, the international discussion is generally high-level whereby the women journalists actually experiencing the discrimination and injustice do not directly take part. We want to use this opportunity **to give voice to the women journalists at grassroots level**.

We want to use this opportunity to **bridge the gap** by engaging the women journalists from among our partner organisations and bring their first-hand experiences to the international discussion taking place. We hope that their experience will inform the gender justice report and the actions that will hopefully follow.

This submission outlines the main challenges as identified by our partners and identifies best practices. In this submission we cover input from our partners in: **Costa Rica, El Salvador, Egypt, Malaysia, Nepal, Nicaragua, Nigeria, Pakistan and Venezuela**.

1 <https://www.iwmf.org/coalition-against-online-violence/>

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1. Issues and Threats

1.1 Gender Discrimination/Injustice in the Workplace

Gender discrimination in the workplace is still a major issue that is experienced by almost all of our partners. The types of discrimination in the workplace reported by our partners can be subcategorized into four types of discrimination:

- 1) **Undermining of competence by male colleagues**
- 2) **Not being allowed to cover “hard news” topics**
- 3) **Wage inequalities**
- 4) **Career development; no women in leadership positions**

The **undermining of competence by male colleagues** is a continued challenge that women journalists have to deal with. In Pakistan, this ranges from male colleagues belittling them, diminishing their work or ideas or telling them there’s no space for women journalists in the sector. In Nepal, the patriarchal mindset is still enshrined in organizations with men dominating decision-making positions. A lot of men simply don’t believe that women are as capable as their male colleagues. Our partners in Nigeria face similar constraints as there is a strong existing culture of the ‘boys club’ from which women journalists often get excluded. In Costa Rica a similar culture exists, where our partners share experiences about being silenced and dismissed by male colleagues when contributing input to a discussion, after which no one spoke up on their behalf. This kind of (in some cases subtle) undermining is often perpetuated by a lack of ‘speak-up’ culture. “Silence is also patriarchal” as our partner pointedly describes.

Another common thread is that often women journalists are **not assigned to cover “hard news” topics** such as politics, foreign affairs, crime and economics. In Egypt women journalists are often kept from covering ‘serious’ news, such as political news coverage, and are mostly allocated to cover entertainment features. Similarly, in Malaysia women journalists have to constantly speak up to ask to cover hard news topics such as business and finance, despite having a specialised degree in economics. In Nepal this discrimination exists as well, where women are often assigned stories related to children, education, health and entertainment. In Nicaragua, our partner describes the same obstacles with harder news topics mostly assigned to male journalists. Apart from being discriminatory, this practice affects the career growth opportunities of these women. By covering “hard news” topics, journalists get more exposure often followed by promotion opportunities in their media organisations.

Wage inequalities are a huge issue that exists in almost every sector for women across the world, as well as for women journalists. Our partners state that women are not paid the same as men, even though they are equally educated, experienced and capable. This even applies to women that have to work longer hours than their male colleagues, as experienced by our partners in Pakistan.

Lastly, there is still a glass ceiling on women journalists’ career development, with the reality still being that **women are heavily underrepresented in leadership positions**. Our partners in Pakistan, Egypt, Nigeria, Nepal, Malaysia, Venezuela and Central America all identified this as a huge impediment to achieving equality. Not only does the imbalance of men and women in leadership positions lead to women journalists being excluded from promotions, but this also affects the diversity within news content. Young women journalists often do not have a role model to look up to and to assist them in advancing their careers.

In Malaysia, Central America and Venezuela our partners report that women journalists often do not continue to work in the media after having children because there is **no culture that supports the combination of children and work**. Similarly, in Nepal, women still hold the responsibility for

domestic duties such as childcare and household chores. As a consequence, priority is given to male journalists who can offer more time. On top of that, most women in Nepal don't drive, which means they don't have as easy access to news sources as their male colleagues, worsening their position even more.

1.2 Harassment

Harassment is a global challenge that affects journalists from all genders. We have seen a strong increase in journalists requesting emergency help through our Rapid Response fund. **Requests of female journalists increased by 170%** in comparison to 2019. However, women journalists carry extra burden of gender-based abuse in addition to potential threats when covering sensitive topics. According to recent studies, 73% of women journalists² say they have experienced online violence in the course of their work.

1.2.1. Online Harassment

A new form of harassment that has skyrocketed is online harassment. **All of our partners stated that they have experienced online harassment**, especially after having covered sensitive topics. Often the harassment is sexual in nature and used as efforts to silence women journalists.

Women face disproportionate levels of backlash when **writing about sensitive issues**. Our partner in Malaysia reports that especially when covering issues related to women's rights – such as teenage pregnancies, forced or child marriages, female genital mutilation, sexual harassment, rape culture, transgender-women and trans-rights – women journalists have to deal with waves of online gender-based intimidation and harassment. This is also the case for topics relating to religious and marginalized issues, such as indigenous land rights, refugees and migrant workers' rights.

The **attacks** are often **targeted and gender-based**. Women journalists, in Nepal and Malaysia for example, have to deal with online stalkers and unwanted spam messages, including sexualised pictures and videos (i.e. of male genitalia or porn sites). Similarly, in El Salvador, women journalists regularly face harassment, consisting of highly misogynistic and hateful content. Even worse, most of the digital attacks in South America come directly from government officials who hold an extra burden not to behave in such a way as they have exemplary roles in societies.

We see a global trend where women journalists today have to deal with unprecedented levels of online violence. Not only do women journalists have to fight and work twice as hard to cover hard news topics (as we describe here above), but when they do cover hard stories of sensitive nature, they are often met with a magnitude of attacks. Next to the severe emotional distress these attacks cause, the chilling effect makes online abuse a **highly effective method to scare off and silence women journalists**.

1.2.2. Offline Harassment

Women journalists often face offline harassment, including verbal and physical violence. What is striking is that our partners report that **most of the offline harassment** women journalists face **comes from their male colleagues**.

A common form of harassment is **verbal abuse**. In the Philippines, women journalists receive comments with sexual undertones, as well as inappropriate jokes, including body shaming and personal questions. Also, in Nepal women journalists often receive rude comments about their looks (hair, face and bodies). Moreover, in both contexts, these comments are sometimes even aggravated by men trying to touch these women. Again, in the context of Nepal, this is worsened by women generally not being able to drive and therefore are dependent on men. During these rides, male

colleagues have tried to make moves on women journalists by asking them out instead of focusing on the news report. Our partners in the Philippines similarly shared that the perpetrators of their harassment are often male colleagues.

Another form of harassment that is a huge issue in the countries where our partners work, is **physical abuse**; ranging from unwanted touching and disrespect of personal space, to rape and murder. In Pakistan, our partners mention that women journalists have been victims of honour killings by husbands or relatives due to their work as journalists. In Nepal, our partner mentioned a case where a woman journalist was raped while she was reporting. In the Philippines, the perpetrators of physical abuse range from male colleagues and crewmembers to people of authority, including government officials and police officers.

Unfortunately, women journalists across the world still face harassment and violence almost on daily basis. This violence does not only occur when women take to the streets to do their jobs, but more often than not comes from within their own work environment. This makes the **work place an unsafe environment** for many women journalists. A first step in tackling (offline) violence is to ensure a safe working environment for women. Internal policies are needed in order to change existing work cultures where male colleagues feel free to harass their female colleagues and more often than not, without any consequences. Accountability mechanisms must be in place, also internally, so women are able to report harassment, perpetrators are held accountable for their actions and that women feel safe to go to work.

1.2.3. Relation Online and Offline Violence

Recent reports show that there is a correlation between online and offline violence against women journalists. The insidious problem of **online violence against women journalists is increasingly spilling offline**, with potentially deadly consequences. Recent studies show that 20% of women journalists³ say they have been attacked offline in connection with online violence.

Some of our partners underline this trend and emphasize the connection between the two. And even though not all online attacks lead to offline violence, the correlation between online threats and harassment must be acknowledged and taken seriously. At the same time, the nature of these attacks must be recognized as misogynistic and gender-based violence and treated as such. A first step that is needed is adequate **accountability mechanisms** – that address the gender aspect of the attacks – for these online threats, as such frameworks are significantly lacking in the world.

1.3 Lack of Policies and Regulatory Framework

A major impediment to achieving gender justice is the **lack of policies and regulatory frameworks** required for achieving gender-equality. Our partners describe both the lack of internal policies within newsrooms as well as the lack in national regulatory and legal frameworks aimed at addressing gender-based discrimination for women journalists.

There is still a **lack of internal gender policies** within newsrooms that **support women advancing to leadership positions**. In Nepal, our partners indicate that there's a lack in policies that bring women journalists to leadership and decision-making positions. It even leads to women journalists leaving the field. Our partners Central America and Venezuela, where it's very rare to find women in management positions within newsrooms affirm this.

A **lack in policies that ensure women's safety** is also a big issue. Our partners, specifically from Nigeria, mention that media organizations are not doing enough to foster greater equality and safety

3 <https://en.unesco.org/news/unescos-global-survey-online-violence-against-women-journalists>

for women in the industry. Furthermore, the working conditions are often unhealthy and unsafe for women journalists, as the organizations are often underequipped when it comes to safety equipment when travelling to volatile areas. In Nepal, a lot of women journalists fear night shifts because of the threatening environment at night, both within and outside of the office. There are no policies that provide transportation facilities for example for night shifts, so the threat of being attacked at night after a work shift is always real. In Venezuela and Central America this is a major issue as well where management have been known to dismiss harassment as ‘part of the risk one takes as a journalist’. Both within newsrooms and in regard to external harassment, policies must be implemented in order to protect women journalists’ safety.

At **national level**, the **lack of regulatory or legal frameworks** for gender-based discrimination and harassment make the environment that women journalists operate in much harder. In Nigeria our partner describes that there are too few safe channels through which women (journalists) can report harassment, either online or offline. Another partner (whose specific details we cannot disclose due to confidentiality) mentioned that she herself experienced sexual harassment and was not able to report it. In fact, she’s even been penalised by HR and her editors for even mentioning it, which led to severe emotional distress.

On top of that, there is a major **lack of awareness** in regard to gender discrimination. This is an underlying issue that perpetuates gender inequality, something our partners underline and experience at first hand. Both within newsroom and within the greater public, gender equality is often not an issue that is discussed or incorporated in (internal) policies. That is why awareness is a first step in pursuing an equal and safe environment for women journalists.

1.4 Role of Legacy Media

None of our partners feel that legacy media is positively contributing to achieving gender equality. On the contrary, some partners even describe legacy media as a huge instigator and contributor of discrimination. Both within newsrooms and within the content they create, **legacy media is contributing to gender inequality**. Not unsurprisingly of course, as a lack of diversity within newsrooms (as described above) leads to a lack of diversity in content.

Within the legacy media organizations, there generally exists a **culture that excludes women**, as these are predominantly male led organizations. As described here above, the lack of internal policies that support women and ensure a safe working environment are a huge issue. In Central America and Venezuela only a few women employees are taken seriously as quality journalists and it is quite rare to find women in a management positions of newsrooms.

In turn, the **content** created by these media organizations is not inclusive and often portrays women in limited and stereotypical ways. Our partners in Pakistan, Egypt and Malaysia all describe the compounding role that this representation of women in media content has in perpetuating gender inequalities. In Central America and Venezuela for example, even though there are a lot of women on TV, these are all women under the age of 35. This perpetuates the stereotypical portrayal of women as ‘just a pretty face’ and undermines the equal representation of women as quality journalists.

A key component in tackling gender-inequalities in societies, is recognizing and addressing the **role of the media**. Media can perpetuate gender inequalities shape societies’ perception of women, but also has the power to challenge and change these existing beliefs by creating **gender-transformative content**; content that actively addresses gender-inequalities and challenges genderstereotypes in societies.

2. Best Practices and Solutions

Based on the experience and input from our partners, we would like to conclude this submission with the following concrete recommendation:

➤ **Create a (trusted) network for women journalists**

Generally journalistic networks are dominated by males, sometimes even actively excluding women journalists. A network specifically designed for women can function as both a great support network and place of empowerment for women journalists. An example of a best practice is from the **Digital Rights Foundation** in Pakistan, that created a trusted network for women journalists: the Network of Women Journalists for Digital Rights.

➤ **Provide financial support for equipment**

Support women journalists with equipment needed for them to work – such as laptops and camera's – in order to gain the experience needed to accelerate at their jobs. An example is the half-rate scheme in Pakistan where women journalists can receive discounts for high quality equipment. Apart from these 'essentials', safety equipment must also be provided when travelling to volatile areas for their work.

➤ **Provide training specifically for women journalists**

Recognize the double burden that women journalists carry when doing their job; for reporting on sensitive issues and for being a woman, and tailor trainings accordingly. An example of a best practice, is the **Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication (AIJC)** and the **International Association of Women in Radio and Television (IAWRT)** that collaborated on two safety training sessions exclusively for women journalists. Also, **Free Press Unlimited** recently launched a training specifically for women journalists, integrating elements on physical, digital and psychological safety (<https://safetyforfemalejournalists.org/>)

➤ **Require inclusive and gender-transformative reporting**

Newsrooms should also include gender in their editorial policy, requiring that reporting is done in a gender-sensitive way and gender-transformative manner, meaning in a manner that not only equally portrays men and women but also actively challenges stereotypes and is used to raise awareness about gender inequalities in societies.

➤ **Require newsrooms to have internal gender policies**

A gender policy is an important starting point for systemic integration of gender in the work of an organisation. Making these internal gender policies mandatory to implement, will accelerate a change in existing male dominated working cultures.

➤ **Stimulate and enable women in advancing to leadership positions**

At national level, regulations must be in place that not only encourage but also require organizations to include women in leadership positions. Quota's for women in leadership positions within media organizations is an example of a concrete mechanism that leads to more diversity within newsrooms. More diversity within newsrooms, in turn, leads to more diversity in content.