

Safety of Female Journalists Online: Expanding Opportunities for Freedom of Expression and Media Plurality

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Opening speech, to be checked against delivery

Harlem Désir

OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media

Dear Commissioner for Human Rights, dear Dunja,

Excellencies,

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a pleasure for me to welcome you at the conference “Increasing Opportunities for Freedom of Expression and Media Plurality”, today in Vienna.

And it is a great honor to open this conference together with my colleague and former OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, the Commissioner for Human Rights at the Council of Europe, Dunja Mijatović.

In recent years, the online harassment of female journalists has been escalating in the OSCE region and beyond, with a direct impact on the safety, the working conditions, and the daily lives of women journalists.

We live in a time of many threats against the press and a lot of journalists are exposed to attacks and intimidation, but we have been astonished by the specific type of gender-based violence online that female journalists face, in particular the barrage of sexually-explicit and misogynistic abuse. And we have seen the development of these attacks, in very different contexts, in all the countries of the OSCE region.

This type of intimidation and online harassment is used against investigative journalists in an attempt to have them renounce their work; it targets reporters by exercising pressure on them; it is used against critical voices to try to silence them; but it is also used more and more against female journalists whatever their field of work in the media is.

These attacks are aimed at silencing the voices of the women journalists targeted. They aim at self-censorship.

They are an attack on freedom of expression as there can be no freedom of expression if it is only the privilege of some, at the exclusion of others.

They are an attack on the plurality of voices that we can access in the media; and they are, as such, an attack on freedom of information.

They are an unacceptable threat to the safety of journalists. They are attacks on gender equality. They are an attack on Human Rights.

That's why we are here today with Dunja Mijatovic, who launched the project on *Safety Of Female Journalists Online*, in 2014, to raise the alarm and call for more action against this dangerous trend which has a dramatic impact on both media freedom and human rights.

I want to welcome the fact that the OSCE participating States recognized the importance of this issue last December, in Milan, when they unanimously adopted an OSCE Ministerial Decision on Safety of Journalists, the first in 20 years, which takes into account the specific safety risks that female journalists face online.

I hope this is only a first step, which will be followed by concrete acts.

One of the focuses of this project was to create a network of experts and professionals from the field. And that's why it is so important to have you all here today.

We've had the pleasure of working with many of you on multiple occasions. Most of you have also been working on your own initiatives and I thank you sincerely for the opportunity to hear from you today.

Thanks to the courage of the journalists who have shared their experiences with us during the course of the SOFJO project, including in the documentary *A Dark Place*, we better understand the extent of the online vitriol, its impact on their work and private lives, as well as the devastating results for audiences who lose access to women's diverse voices in the online space.

I would like to use this chance to say: Thank you for being with us and for continuing your work!

Throughout the course of our project, we have gained a better understanding of the double burden that women journalists encounter in their everyday lives and work.

We learned how, in addition to sexist and misogynistic abuse, they face death threats, surveillance, imprisonment and other forms of intimidation that sometimes target their families and can last for years.

We also learned that many of these incidents are not investigated or prosecuted, which further reinforces the idea that abuse on the Internet is tolerated as a natural offshoot of abuse and misogyny in the real world.

It is paramount that effective legislation is developed to ensure that all attacks are investigated and the perpetrators brought to justice.

Let us not forget that many of these online risks were, until recently, perceived as random occurrences perpetuated by individuals acting alone and not a systematic and multi-dimensional problem.

It is encouraging to see that a number of policies adopted in recent years acknowledge the problem, and emphasize that online harassment requires a specific and innovative response from all stakeholders, including in legislation.

For this reason, any meaningful and systematic response must be grounded in a holistic approach that, crucially, requires: the input of those journalists targeted with this type of abuse; the participation of the Internet platforms and social media companies; and also the political will at the highest level to counter it.

What we witness today, is that emerging technologies are too often increasing the potential for online abuse and rarely come with the measures designed to reduce online risks. We have to defend and promote freedom of expression online, but there must be a discussion on the abuse, and the use of certain tools.

Think about algorithms, and automated systems like chatbots, that can flood journalists' accounts with hundreds of hateful messages in an instant.

Think about all the personal information and digital traces that we leave unconsciously behind. Freedom of expression was established for human beings, not for bots.

Think about how often these tools are used against female journalists, in the case of doxing or other malicious online attacks.

It is encouraging to see that media outlets, civil society and others have started to develop online safety protocols, offering psychological and legal support to women journalists.

However, we should not lose sight of the fact that other media actors are self-engaged and work remotely, within their online spaces. Many freelance journalists are, for these reasons, more vulnerable and face greater obstacles, which prevent them from accessing these systems of protection.

What has also caught my attention recently is a plethora of new, alternative, forms of support that are fully operational in the online space.

These alternative mechanisms of support offer female journalists immediate help in terms of providing support for journalists targeted with online harassment.

I am confident that we have much to learn about these and other innovative support mechanisms that can help us in the fight against gender-based violence, and am happy to have a range of experts here today to share their work and initiatives.

Given the immediacy and scale of the problem and the speed of technological change, we need to focus on new recommendations for the coming years. And after this conference my Office will be launching a new Communiqué on Media Pluralism: *Safeguarding Marginalised Voices Online*, which builds on our previous Communiqué on the growing safety threat to female journalists online.

It will provide updated recommendations and advice on how participating States and other stakeholders can more effectively address the safety risks of female journalists and other marginalized voices online and will be enriched by today's discussion.

I would just mention some and hope they will be further discussed and implemented in the conference today :

- The participating States have a special responsibility, and duty, which is to implement the OSCE Ministerial Decision adopted in Milan;

- They should, if necessary, adapt their legislation to better tackle the online harassment against women;
- They should ensure that law enforcement agencies train staff to identify online threats to safety within the framework of the legislation, in line with international human rights standards;
- They should encourage strategic coordination among the police, prosecutors and media organizations, and promote reciprocal understanding;
- We encourage the States to cooperate with non-state actors, most notably internet intermediaries and social media platforms on the means to prevent the risks and improve protection mechanisms;
- All actors should also offer support and encourage new programmes and initiatives to counter the online harassment of female journalists;
- The media outlets, on their side, should have internal policies and mechanism to support women journalists when they face online harassment; such support should also be developed for freelance journalists;
- The media outlets should be attentive that newsrooms reflect the diversity of the societies, so as to contribute to ensuring a multitude of perspectives; Just an example, last week new figures were published for French media outlets: of 470 directors of publication, 372 are men;
- And for all actors, it is crucial that global efforts take not only a gender-sensitive, but also a multi-faceted approach, addressing layers of discrimination and obstacles to participation, to ensure genuine plurality and a diversity of voices.

Ladies and gentlemen,

Before I finish I would be remiss not to thank several important groups of people.

A very special thanks goes to the International Press Institute and Barbara Trionfi for their work on this topic, and for the tremendous assistance and cooperation given throughout this project, including new research which they will be presenting today and which will be published on our website following the event.

As we all know, not nearly enough data exists on this topic. This research will help to fill some of these existing gaps to assist in developing more targeted and sustainable strategies to address online harassment.

I also wish to thank several delegations for their support to the Safety of Female Journalists project: Austria, Czech Republic, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

And again, one more thank you for the female journalists who continue to share their stories with us and continue the crucial work of upholding freedom of expression and our right to access a plurality of voices, despite the tremendous back-lash against them.

I look forward to the discussions that we will have over the course of this conference.

Thank you very much.

I now would like to pass the floor to Council of Europe Human Rights Commissioner—Dunja, the floor is yours.