

IFEX Submission: Call for inputs on the safety of women journalists

*Submitted to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)
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[IFEX](#) is a global network that promotes and defends freedom of expression and information as a fundamental human right. It is a nexus for free expression expertise contributed by over 120 member-organisations, spanning 90 countries and committed to collaboration and transformative advocacy. Synergy with local members is essential as IFEX seeks to highlight threats, channel efforts and offer solutions that strengthen the exercise of freedom of expression and access to information globally.

We are pleased to present this submission to the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights in response to the call for submissions to the report on the safety of journalists, particularly women journalists online and offline, to be presented by the UN Secretary General at the 78th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2023.

Introduction

Rapid advances in technology have shaped the development of the Internet as an online space that enables greater engagement in free expression and wider access to information. However, offline realities of violence, including discrimination based on gender and other vulnerable factors, are being [reproduced online](#) (paras. 14 and 20) through various platforms. Online harassment, intimidation, hacking, surveillance, and hate speech have become common for women - particularly women journalists who often see a disproportionate amount of violence compared to their male counterparts. This has had a bigger impact on their rights to freedom of expression, access to information, public participation, and personal lives.

For some, self-censorship and withdrawal from the public sphere have been a necessity; this not only diminishes the plurality of voices but also shrinks access to information while exacerbating social divides such as gender and race. This submission includes in its focus on women journalists those with intersectional identities, such as women of varying racial and ethnic identities or that are LGBTQIA+, as they face additional challenges to their safety when carrying out their work. The failure of States and tech companies to address and act on online gender-based violence diminishes the participation and perspective of women in the public sphere. This threatens media freedom, democracy, and civic space.

Drawing on the expertise of IFEX's global network of member-organisations, this submission will focus on some of the key trends reported and shared by members that have affected online freedom of expression and access to information with a particularly detrimental impact on the safety of women journalists. Trends including election-related online harassment; growing threats to digital safety from surveillance, hacking, and doxxing; and the failures of social media and tech companies to effectively protect journalists online exacerbates online gender-based violence and creates an increasingly restrictive environment for women journalists within an already-hostile climate for journalism and context of weak national legislation and mechanisms. The submission highlights important recommendations and actions from IFEX members to combat this environment and improve the safety and protection of women journalists.

Legal and normative landscape for the safety of women journalists

States have an obligation to eliminate violence against women and girls online and offline under international human rights law but have been [slow to act](#) on online gender-based violence against women journalists, despite the range of international [legal and normative frameworks](#) for combatting online violence against women journalists. In addition to violations of Articles 3 and 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), this also contravenes Articles 2, 3, 7, and 11 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The recent ten-year anniversary of the [UN Plan Of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#) provided an opportunity to evaluate the progress of States towards creating a free and safe environment for journalists and media workers. While IFEX [observes](#) there have been successes, States have broadly failed to act on their commitments. This is particularly the case for women journalists. Although some gender considerations are included in the Action Plan, in the last ten years, the understanding of the differentiated impact of violence against women, LGBTQI+ people and other vulnerable groups has evolved significantly. Consequently, in its current form it [fails to address](#) the unique situation of online gender-based violence against women journalists, as well as others with intersecting social identities. To address this gap, IFEX, in partnership with a wider coalition of civil society organisations, produced a [Call for Action](#) that includes concrete recommendations to States to address digital threats and gender-based attacks against journalists and thereby improve the implementation of the Action Plan in the years ahead.

Regional frameworks have also shaped the landscape for addressing the safety of women journalists. The Inter-American Court of Human Rights' (IACtHR) notable ruling in [Bedoya Lima et al. v. Colombia](#) has been considered historic for recognising the unique risks women journalists face due to their gender and that acts of violence against them is a consequence of structural discrimination (paras. 49-50). The ruling highlights the persistent cycle of violence against women journalists, combined with systemic impunity due to inadequate criminal investigations, has fuelled implicit messaging that journalism is not a job for women (para. 51). It emphasises the loss of women's voices and perspectives affects pluralism, leading to a bigger gender gap in the field of journalism (paras. 112-113, also highlighted in IFEX's [amicus curiae](#) submitted to the IACtHR). Although only applicable on a regional level, the IACtHR calls for States to include a gender perspective in the risk analysis and implementation of safety measures, and establishes two positive obligations for States: first, to identify and investigate with due diligence the special risks suffered by women journalists; and second, to adopt a gender approach when adopting protection measures for women journalists, including preventive measures and protection from reprisals. The case provides a normative precedent for States and international and regional courts to draw on, and can be kept in mind when considering the landscape of impunity for online gender-based violence against women journalists.

On a national level, IFEX members have reported a lack of policies, legislation, and mechanisms to address online gender-based violence. For example, [Zamleh-The Arab Center for Social Media Advancement points out](#) "lack of national (local) legislation criminalizing online gender-based violence reflects the reluctance to consider harmful acts enabled by technology as violence". They emphasise the failure of the Palestinian Authority to take a gender-sensitive approach to their legislation has limited avenues to accountability for women. [Red en Defensa de los Derechos Digitales](#) (R3D) reports two out of ten users in Mexico have been victims of gender-based digital violence, with the majority of these users being women and people from the LGBTQIA+ community. They attribute this to insufficient legislation and enforcement due to a lack of social and technical knowledge about the digital environment and a deficiency in implementing the gender perspective. [Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa](#) (CIPESA) notes an absence of national laws across the Africa region to specifically address online gender-based violence, combined with the lack of sufficient in-country reporting mechanisms, [keeps many women offline](#) or in self-censorship. ARTICLE 19 [highlights](#) there is a lack of clarity in how to pursue legal accountability for online gender-based harassment, leading to the adoption of overly broad laws that can be detrimental for freedom of expression. They also observe uncertainty among States on how to implement recommendations in practice.

Civil society efforts have made a difference in pushing States to strengthen their own efforts to address online gender-based violence. [Strategic litigation](#) by IFEX member [Fundación para la Libertad de Prensa](#) (FLIP) led a judicial authority in Colombia to recognise a distinct pattern of online violence on social networks against women journalists, particularly when coming from political authorities. The court's ruling established regulatory bodies to sanction political leaders, parties, and movements for using or allowing this type of violence in the exercise of political and electoral participation.

Key trends in online expression for women journalists

Online harassment

Compared to men, women journalists are more likely to receive attacks of a gender-based and highly sexualised nature. This includes threats of rape and sexual assault, gendered hate speech, disinformation, smear campaigns, and



others. Online harassment is a pervasive threat that is increasingly urgent to address given the trend of political leaders and ruling parties attacking journalists online. President Nayib Bukele of El Salvador has used Twitter to [target women journalists](#), leading them to receive threats of sexual violence and harassment online, in addition to the discrediting and obstruction of their work. IFEX member, the [Media Foundation for West Africa](#) (MFWA), [reports](#) women journalists in Guinea-Bissau have been insulted over social media by pro-government supporters who do not agree with their political views. In Pakistan, IFEX members the [Media Matters for Democracy](#) (MMfD), [expressed solidarity](#) with women journalists who were targets of online abuse after they criticised government policies while the [Pakistan Press Foundation](#) (PPF) [condemned](#) the recent “pro-government viral smear campaign” launched against a freelance woman journalist. The consistent online attacks and harassment of women journalists creates a repressive and stigmatising environment that reinforces misogynistic views and curtails women journalists’ rights to exercise freedom of expression. It also fuels threats to democratic processes as the risks of experiencing this kind of online harassment is noticeably heightened in the lead up to, during, and after particularly contentious election periods.

During the general elections in Brazil in 2022, IFEX member the [Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism](#) (Abraji) [reported](#) an increase in attacks against the press, particularly women journalists who were stigmatised and attacked through social media. Those who voiced criticism against then-President Jair Bolsonaro during this time were attacked by supporters online using profanity and sexually explicit images, targeted [misogynistic comments](#), and [rape and death threats](#) through messaging apps. Attacks on women journalists, as well as journalists that are trans and non-binary, have been brewing in the country for years; Abraji’s 2021 report [“Gender violence against journalists”](#) recorded 119 instances of gender-based violence, representing an average of one attack every three days. By the end of 2022, Abraji [recorded](#) 145 attacks on journalists in Brazil, with 96.5% of them being women (of which 0.7% are trans) and 31% of cases related to gender. From the 16 journalists [attacked](#) during the 8 January riots, four of them were women.

Tensions around elections makes it more likely that threats against journalists will thrive and this can be particularly dangerous for women; IFEX member the [Media Institute of Southern Africa](#) (MISA) has already expressed concerns that Zimbabwe’s general elections in 2023 will see an increase in online gender-based violence against women politicians and journalists. To combat this, MISA has proposed to carry out digital safety and security training for women politicians and journalists, as well as capacity-building of local law enforcement on digital rights who can be tapped to assist in investigations and prosecutions of online gendered attacks. Similarly, in anticipation of violence against journalists around Nigeria’s general elections in February, fellow IFEX member the [International Press Centre](#) (IPC) has published a [Safety and Professional Advisory for Journalists](#) and [Nigerian Media Code of Election Coverage](#) to support journalists in carrying out their work. Beyond elections, IFEX has produced a simplified [advocacy tool](#) in partnership with ARTICLE 19 to protect women journalists by informing them of the responsibilities and obligations of States to protect journalists under international human rights law.

Digital security and safety

With an increasingly dangerous online environment, digital security and safety are a growing priority for women and other vulnerable groups experiencing gender-based violence. For women journalists, this is particularly concerning as issues like surveillance, hacking, and espionage add a layer of privacy violations to the gender-based violence they experience. They can be exposed to defamation, blackmail, and doxing. This not only has an impact on their reputations, private lives, and their families, but also affects their physical safety if their location is exposed, as well as that of their confidential sources. It also hampers their jobs and limits their ability to access information.

In El Salvador, almost half of the 35 journalists [targeted](#) by Pegasus spyware were [women](#). One of the journalists emphasised there are higher stakes to being targeted as a woman; since their public image could be denigrated, it makes intimidation and silencing easier. The risk of this is particularly dangerous for women journalists who work in repressive countries or come from more conservative cultures. IFEX member [Mizzima reports](#) that while some women journalists in Myanmar have continued their work despite threats to their safety from the junta, others have fled to continue reporting from abroad. In an interview with IFEX member [Free Press Unlimited](#), one of the journalists [states](#) they face online threats to their safety, even from abroad: “We are threatened directly via Facebook messenger, our accounts are even hacked, despite 2-factor authentication.” Consequently, they have had to develop secret online identities to protect family members that are still in Myanmar who risk being persecuted by the junta for their journalistic



work. This throws up roadblocks to the work of women journalists; by hampering their ability to access information freely, this affects the plurality of voices and diminishes the public's own access to information.

In their report to the Facebook Oversight Board on [doxxing](#), IFEX member [Social Media Exchange](#) (SMEX) found vulnerable groups and individuals, including women, journalists, human rights defenders, dissidents, minorities, and LGBTQIA+ and gender non-conforming people, to be frequent targets of doxxing in the Middle East and North Africa region. They find doxxing has had a disproportionate impact on women and LGBTQIA+ people and recommend the Board prioritise responses to the doxxing of activists and journalists. A Turkish woman journalist who reported on Kurdish issues [had her number shared](#) on a Russian dating website. She received a barrage of calls and texts, verbal abuse, and harassment, and her Twitter account was hacked. Although online harassment constitutes a crime under Turkish law, the hostile environment for press freedom in the country weakens accountability by limiting the options for legal action. Her only recourse has been to ensure her social media accounts are as secure as possible.

As governments increasingly crack down on media freedom and actively engage in the online harassment of journalists, women journalists have limited recourse for legal action. Without States taking responsibility and implementing measures for the online protection of journalists, and in some cases failing to develop national legislation to criminalise online gender-based violence, the safety and security of women journalists is increasingly being left in their own hands. IFEX member the [Electronic Frontier Foundation](#) has developed a [number of tools](#) to empower journalists to address digital threats such as surveillance and online tracking. MISA, in collaboration with other civil society organisations, has developed a [surveillance toolkit](#) in response to surveillance threats across the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region. However, IFEX members note that challenges remain around how to create adequate solutions to digital risks and provide an effective response where traditional mechanisms are not available or effective.

Platforms and companies

Social media and tech companies play a significant role in tackling the aforementioned digital threats that women journalists face online. Policies and practices such as reporting and complaint mechanisms, content moderation and takedowns, account suspensions of perpetrators, and two-factor authentication have been employed to curb online violence and address digital safety threats. However, such actions have had their own drawbacks; for example, IFEX member [Global Voices Advox highlights](#) reporting and complaint mechanisms can be used as an avenue for abuse via malicious and targeted actions that aim to remove particular social media profiles thereby infringing on freedom of expression.

Companies have also [failed](#) to address context-specific online risks and threats in content moderation. ARTICLE 19 [reports](#) the failure to listen to local communities has led to weak content moderation that allows discrimination, hate speech, and disinformation to flourish online. 7amleh's report "[Violating Network](#)" highlights concerns that companies such as Meta try to adopt a "one size fits all" approach in their policies to the region without considering the varying contexts of the countries. IFEX member the [Albanian Media Institute \(AMI\)](#) emphasises the overwhelming presence of gender-based hate speech on social media and online platforms in Albania has been particularly challenging to address. This is due to the pervasive sexism and misogyny in the country that is exacerbated by the unmoderated and inadequate filtering of comment sections with respect to the Albanian language. IFEX member the [Digital Rights Foundation's](#) (DRF) [policy paper](#) on moderation of Dari and Pashto content finds automated and human-moderated systems fail users from areas where English isn't the primary language. This creates an environment that more easily facilitates online gender-based violence, as well as violence targeting others from historically marginalised backgrounds, and presents further obstacles to women journalists.

In response to this, civil society have developed their own strategies for addressing online gender-based violence. 7amleh's first open source online platform in Palestine, the [Palestinian Observatory of Digital Rights Violations](#) (7or), [monitors and documents](#) the digital rights violations of Palestinians which allows them to track patterns and cases to follow up with social media companies and hold them accountable. The platform [collects data related to gender-based violence](#), including attacks against trans and non-binary individuals, and accounts for gender in other forms of digital violence, including hate speech and smear campaigns. In June 2022, DRF [launched](#) a [complaint cell](#) for women journalists in Pakistan in collaboration with the National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) to collect information on the landscape of online violence against women journalists and combat issues of online harassment and violence,

surveillance, and [gendered disinformation](#), among others. Members of the IFEX network have also expressed the importance of social media platforms and tech companies to actively work with civil society. Without direct contact and/or direct communication, it's difficult to have a timely, effective, and informed response when defending the rights of users and journalists.

Conclusion

In the male-dominated field of journalism, women often bring gendered and intersecting perspectives that have an impact on how information is shared and what kind of stories are reported. Their journalistic work is vital for amplifying different voices, as well as ensuring the public has access to information on a wider scale. Yet the growing trends of online gender-based violence identified in this submission present a serious threat to the safety of women journalists, with implications for their rights to exercise freedom of expression and public participation. We've seen how women journalists are specifically and uniquely harassed and attacked online — often for speaking out on issues such as environmental destruction, racial and gender inequality, and abuses of power by wealthy individuals. This has the broader impact of shrinking the diversity of voices and perspectives, diminishing pluralism, blocking free and open access to information, and threatening a healthy democracy and civic space.

Online gender-based violence against women journalists has systemically flourished with impunity in a context of government hostility towards journalists, insufficient measures for protection on social media and other online platforms, social and cultural pressures, intersecting discriminations, and the lack of criminalisation and national frameworks to address online gender-based violence. To combat this, a holistic approach to ensure the safety of women journalists is required and goes beyond the existing efforts of women journalists and civil society that have been detailed in this submission. Social media and tech companies need to develop context-specific safeguards that prioritise cracking down on online gender-based violence, improve reporting and complaint mechanisms to prevent misuse and abuse, and increase transparency and consistency in online content moderation. States must also take a gender-sensitive, intersectional approach to developing stronger national frameworks and legislation to ensure the prevention, protection and prosecution of crimes against journalists. Finally, where governments have failed to step up, civil society efforts strive to protect women journalists by holding States accountable for their inactions and responding to threats in the absence of proper responses from tech companies and States. While civil society organisations should not replace action by States and companies, they show what can be achieved when States and companies do their part.

We request the UN Secretary-General's report to the UN General Assembly (GA) make recommendations for States to:

1. Strengthen the protection of women journalists by reinforcing the existing language on the safety of women journalists in previous GA resolutions;
2. Uphold their international human rights obligations under the ICCPR and CEDAW to respond to, address, and pursue accountability measures for online gender-based violence facing women journalists, recognising States have the ultimate responsibility to address systemic impunity for crimes against women journalists;
3. Enhance efforts to implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, including through appropriate policy frameworks, regulations and the development of national action plans on business and human rights, to encourage social media and tech companies to meet their responsibility to respect all human rights as stated in the Guiding Principles and other applicable standards; and
4. Recognise the essential role of civil society organisations in protecting women journalists and guaranteeing an enabling environment for their work to ensure the safety of women journalists.

