# No women, no peace

Media's role in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda

*Published in March 2025*

IMS

**No women, no peace: Media's role in the Women, Peace and Security Agenda**
Published by IMS in 2025

**Editor**
Malin Palm
Laura Gil

**Design**
Safana Baqle

**Cover Photo**
Safana Baqle

**© 2025 IMS**
The content of this publication is copyright protected. International Media Support is happy to share the text in the publication with you under the Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. To view a summary of this license, please visit http://creative commons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0.

*Join the global work for press freedom and stay up to date on media issues worldwide*

IMSforfreemedia
InternationalMediaSupport
IMSforfreemedia
IMSforfreemedia.bsky.social
ims-international-media-support

IMS is a non-profit organisation working to support local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition.
**www.mediasupport.org**

IMS

# Contents

6 Introduction

8 Media's role in the UNSCR 1325: an analysis of how the WPS resolutions and national action plans describe the role of the media

14 Derailing the debate: peace, votes and the abdication of editorial responsibility in Colombia

18 Syrian women politicians in the media: to be taken seriously

22 Participation in journalism: what is the right amount?

24 Editorial guidelines for gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism

28 Anonymous sourcing: balancing ethics and responsibility

32 Women social leaders and journalists: an analysis of participatory journalism

34 Colombian women social leaders in the media: visibility or burden?

38 Safety of women journalists

STOP THE VIOLENCE
Would You Abandon Them

# Introduction

## By: Malin Palm

Peace is not sustainable without the full and meaningful involvement of women. This has been established by various research since the adoption of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security (UNSCR 1325) in 2000. UN Women concludes that women's participation increases the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years by 20 percent and the probability of a peace agreement lasting 15 years by 35 percent. Analysis of 40 peace processes since the end of the Cold War shows that, in cases where women were able to exercise a strong influence on the negotiation process, there was a much higher chance that an agreement would be reached than when women's groups exercised weak or no influence. In cases in which women exercised strong influence, an agreement was almost always reached.[1]

The Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda calls for full participation of women in all stages of conflict resolution and peace building; protection of women and girls against sexual and gender-based violence in conflict settings and emergency and refugee sites; prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls; and a gender approach to relief and recovery.

So, what is the role of the media in the implementation of the WPS Agenda? How can the media contribute to amplifying women's voices and making decision-makers aware of the experiences of women in armed conflict and their needs in the peace process?

These were questioning that IMS asked during the onset of the three-year pilot project on the role of the media in UNSCR 1325, implemented in Colombia, Myanmar and Syria in 2018–2021, with an extension phase in Colombia in 2022. The project brought together media, media training institutes and women's peace organisations in the three very different contexts to explore the potentials of the media as a tool for peace and gender equality. After all, women are highly under-represented both as journalists and sources in war reporting. According to a 2023 report by CARE, only five percent of articles between 2013 and 2023 focused on women's experiences in war and only 0.04 percent highlighted women's contributions as leaders in peace processes.[2]

At the time of the project implementation, Colombia was in the implementation phase of the ground-breaking peace accord with the FARC after nearly 50 years of civil war, while fighting was still ongoing with other groups. Myanmar was initially marked by ongoing armed conflict in several of its states, and the military coup d'état that happened during the course of the project radically changed the conditions. Syria was in the midst of full-scale war. All the three countries, like the rest of the world, were also heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, causing challenges for the project, for the media and for the peace process. Despite the very different political and socio-economic conditions, and despite being in different stages of the peace-building process, results were remarkably similar. As a result of the project, editorial guidelines were produced for gender and conflict sensitive journalism, journalists and editors were trained and 129 media pieces were produced to highlight the voices and stories of women as survivors and women as peace builders. In an extension phase in Colombia, an experimental methodology for participatory journalism was carried out, resulting in 16 women social leaders from various conflict-affected regions and marginalised groups being able to produce and publish their own stories in one of the country's leading newspapers.

To mark the 25th anniversary of the UNSCR 1325 Women, Peace and Security, IMS decided to publish for the first time the knowledge and resources that came out of the project, with the hope of inspiring and helping other media to contribute to gender equality and peace. In this publication, readers will find an analysis of the role of the media in UNSCR 1325, the compiled editorial guidelines from the three project countries, discussion pieces on crucial journalistic issues that are questioned in relation to gender and media, useful safety tips for women reporting from conflict zones, a selection of the pieces produced withing the project and much more.

With this, the IMS team would like to show its gratitude for all the hard work, dedication and great ideas by the partners of the project: Consejo de Redacción (Colombia), Alianza Iniciativa de Mujeres Colombianas por la Paz (Colombia), El Espectador and Colombia+20 (Colombia), Myanmar Journalism Institute (Myanmar), Women's League of Burma (Myanmar) and Syrian Female Journalists Network (Syria), and to Norway and the Swedish Postcode Lottery Foundation for the funding of the project and project extension.

---

1. Women's Participation and a Better Understanding of the Political | Global study on the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325
2. Janoch, E. et al., Women in War: Leaders, Responders and Potentials, CARE, 2024, available on: WomenInWar_Report_2024.pdf

# Media's role in the UNSCR 1325: an analysis of how the WPS resolutional action plans describe the role of the media

By: Malin Palm

## What is the WPS Agenda?

The Women, Peace and Security Agenda (WPS) has a transformative potential. It is a powerful tool for moving from exclusive to democratic decision-making, from gender inequality to gender justice and from conflict and violence to sustainable peace.

The WPS Agenda consists of the UNSCR 1325 and its nine sister resolutions, all centred around two main messages: that women and men have different experiences of conflicts and therefore different needs in peace building processes which all need to be taken into account, and that women need to be part of each step of conflict resolution and peace building in order for peace to be sustainable. Research from UN Women shows that peace agreements are 35 percent more likely to last more than 15 years when women have participated in the negotiations.[1]

The media has a crucial role to play in the success of the agenda. The media can make the stories of women and men, girls and boys affected by conflict, both as survivors and as peace builders, known to the wider public and decision makers, increasing the understanding of the multi-faceted aspects of conflict. It can amplify the voices of those belonging to traditionally marginalised or remote communities who rarely participate in the formal peace negotiations. Media has also an incomparable ability to affect the norms and values of a society which, when using a gender and conflict-sensitive journalistic practice, can both de-escalate conflict and contribute to greater equality among people of all genders. Finally, the media can – and should – scrutinise decision makers on all levels to hold them to account for including women in peace processes, as is obligatory under the UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions.

The role of the media as a main actor for change is well known to media development organisations. It was acknowledged, albeit belatedly, by the UN when it began listing media in 2015 as a main actor in the Global Study on the Implementation on UNSCR 1325.

But how is the role of the media described in the WPS resolutions and in the various national action plans on the implementation of UNSCR 1325?

## How the role of the media is described in the resolutions

The resolutions included in the WPS Agenda consist of the following ten Security Council resolutions:

| Resolution (year) | Key issues and core provisions |
|---|---|
| UNSCR 1325 (2000) | Representation and participation of women in peace and security governance; protection of women's rights and bodies in conflict and post-conflict situations. |
| UNSCR 1820 (2008) | Protection of women from sexual violence in conflict: zero-tolerance of sexual exploitation and abuse by UN Department of Peacekeeping Operations (DPKO) personnel. |

[1]. Women's Participation and a Better Understanding of the Political | Global study on the implementation of UN Security Council resolution 1325

| Resolution (year) | Key issues and core provisions |
| --- | --- |
| UNSCR 1888 (2009) | Creation of office of Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Sexual Violence in Conflict (SViC); creation of interagency initiative against sexual violence in conflict; establishment of team of experts and appointment of women's protection advisers (WPA) to field missions. |
| UNSCR 1889 (2009) | Participation of women in peace and security governance at all levels; creation of global indicators to map implementation of UNSCR 1325. |
| UNSCR 1960 (2010) | Development of monitoring and reporting arrangements on conflict-related sexual violence. |
| UNSCR 2106 (2013) | Challenging impunity and lack of accountability for conflict-related sexual violence. |
| UNSCR 2122 (2013) | Identification of UN Women as key UN entity providing information and advice on participation of women in peace and security governance; whole-of-UN accountability; civil society inclusion; 2015 High-Level Review of implementation of UNSCR 1325. |
| UNSCR 2242 (2015) | Integration of WPS in all UNSC country situations; establishment of Informal Experts Group on WPS; addition of WPS considerations to sanctions committee deliberations; links of WPS to counter-terrorism and extremism. |
| UNSCR 2467 (2019) | Strengthening of prosecutions/punishment for SViC; possibilities for sanctions against perpetrators; survivor-centred approach; provision of reparations to survivors. |
| UNSCR 2493 (2019) | Calls for member states to promote women's rights; encouragement of the creation of safe operational environment for those working to promote women's rights; calls for full implementation of all previous WPS resolutions. |

Though none of the resolutions directly mentions the media, resolutions 2122 and 2493 are interesting due to their focus on civil society, to which the media can belong. UNSCR 2122 takes note of the critical contributions of civil society to conflict prevention, resolution and peacebuilding and stresses the importance of sustained consultations and dialogue between decision makers and civil society. Though dialogue can take place in many different fora, the media is a principal channel for communication between decision makers and the public. The importance of the media as a bridge between the public and decision makers increases the more marginalised or remote the community is. UNSCR 2122 also encourages Member States to develop funding mechanisms to support the work and enhance the capacities of organisations in order to provide sustainable assistance to women and girls affected by armed conflict and post-conflict situations. Many civil society-run media outlets are women-led and work with the specific aim of catering

information to specific communities – including media by women for women – providing their audience with information on gender equality and women's rights in both peace and conflict settings. These media outlets also determine when to break the taboos on conflict-related sexual violence that hinders survivors from seeking assistance, helping them self-identify as victims and empowering them to seek the support and reparation they are entitled to.

The last resolution of the WPS Agenda, UNSCR 2493, strongly encourages Member States to create safe and enabling environments for civil society, including formal and informal community women leaders, women peacebuilders, political actors and those who protect and promote human rights, to carry out their work independently and without undue interference – including in situations of armed conflict – and to address threats, harassment, violence and hate speech against them. Journalists, especially in conflict situations, are human rights defenders through the way they monitor violations, inform about rights and hold decision makers accountable for the protection of these rights. Furthermore, many women peacebuilders and political actors use the media as a tool for their work. At the same time, journalists, and especially women journalists, face threats, abuse and violence due to their work. According to UNESCO figures, the killing of women journalists is increasing at an alarming pace, accounting for six percent of killings in 2020 and 11 percent in 2021.[2] Women journalists also face myriad gender-based threats, ranging from rape threats to hate campaigns. Gender-based threats have exploded online, where 73 percent of women in a UNESCO survey stated that they have experienced online violence.[3] Safe and enabling environments for the media to operate in, including the safety of journalists and freedom of expression, are crucial for any peacebuilding process.

## How the role of the media is described in National Action Plans

As of January 2023, 107 UN Member States (55 percent of all UN Member States) have adopted a National Action Plan on the implementation of UNSCR 1325.[4] In 44 of them, the role of the media is mentioned, although it ranges from brief mention of the media to an elaborated role in peacebuilding. Most commonly, the role of the media is described as a communication and information tool (33 NAPs), followed by the ability to affect norms and values in favour of gender equality and peace (10 NAPs), early warning and otherwise as a source of information for decision makers (4 NAPs), gender parity in the media and capacity of journalists (9 NAPs); only one (1) NAP describes the role of the media as a fourth estate/power.

## Media as a communication and public education tool

This is by far the most commonly referred to role of the media in the national action plans. It first and foremost includes various information or public information campaigns, either on the WPS Agenda and the NAP in particular or more generally on issues such as women's rights, gender equality and gender-based violence.

In the category of media as a communication and public education tool, we find, for example, the NAP of Spain (2017–2023), which includes specific communication campaigns in national media for the dissemination and promotion of public debate and action on the problem of violence, and Estonia (2015-2019), with targeted campaigns in the media to increase the number of women in positions related to peace and security. Some campaigns have direct public information and education aims. An example of this is the NAP of Rwanda (2018-2022), which sets out to educate the population on the legal consequences of committing gender-based violence. Another interesting example is the Estonian NAP (2015-2019), which sets up media awareness campaigns focusing on a fair sharing of responsibilities between men and women in relation to the care of the family and household, including promoting the use of parental leave by men. Estonia has thus recognised the general inequality between men and women as an obstacle for peace and the unequal division of household work as a root cause of inequality between women and men and realised the potentials of the media to change the traditional gender roles.

Rather than direct campaigns, the NAPs of Ghana (2012-2014) and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (2019-2022) include training of journalists in better covering gender-based violence with the aim of the public getting more adequate information. The Serbian NAP (2017-2020) is another interesting example of realising the potential of the media while not reducing it to a tool for the government's dissemination of information. Serbia sets out to support the production of media contents in the field of public information on the importance of prevention of violence against women. Enhancing the public interest media is done through competition-based co-financing of the production of media content on international humanitarian law, the international law of armed conflict and the work of national and international judicial institutions, with the objective presentation of prosecuted cases of rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy and other forms of sexual abuse of women committed during the wars in former Yugoslavia.

---

[2]. Knowing the Truth is Protecting the Truth | 2022 Report on the Safety of Journalists and the Danger of Impunity (unesco.org)
[3]. The Chilling: global trends in online violence against women journalists; research discussion paper - UNESCO Digital Library
[4]. 1325 National Action Plans – An initiative of the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (peacewomen.org)

## Normative role and combatting stereotypes, promoting culture of peace and equality

Closely connected to the role of media in public education, but less focused on specific issues such as gender-based violence and women's participation, is the ability of the media to affect social norms and cultural values. The EU Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (2019-2024) describes how "the reach of the internet, the rapid spread of communications technologies and the wide diffusion of social media have presented new opportunities for women to make their voices heard and to raise awareness on a number of issues. However, while technology may have the power to connect and empower, it can also reinforce and normalise gender roles and cultural customs and create new pathways for violence and abuse. The online world is not just a mirror image, but a 'hall of mirrors' of the offline world, reflecting and amplifying the positive and negative. For women and girls, this mirror image often reflects a culture of misogyny, marginalisation and violence."This has been addressed in the NAP of Lebanon (2019-2022), which includes activities to train the media to promote fair portrayal of men and women to help eliminate gender stereotypes and promote gender equality (in order for women to be perceived as equally legitimate and effective political leaders as men). Similarly, the German NAP (2017-2020) includes activities to work towards dismantling discriminatory and violence-related stereotypes about gender roles, especially among men and boys. The German NAP also recognises how the media risk perpetuating sexism and portrayals of women that reduce them to their sexuality, and therefore includes activities to sensitise media audiences and dismantle these harmful roles. The NAP of Sudan (2015-2020) includes some specific focus on the stigmatisation of sexual violence survivors and includes media programmes to overcome taboos, while the NAP of Senegal (2011-2015) concludes that accurate information could contribute to building peace.

Some NAPs, such as those of USA (2016) and Bangladesh (2019-2022), focus specifically on the role of the media in promoting counter narratives to extremists and terrorists and "foster moderate voices" as it is put in the US NAP. The NAP of Bangladesh reasons that "in recent years women have been impacted by an increasing trend of violent extremism. Women are often the primary victims of the denial of human rights by violent extremist groups. Some, although very few, women are also perpetrators, playing a role in recruiting men and other women, in fundraising and in executing violent acts. Many more are, however, on the frontlines of prevention efforts, influencing community and family values, identifying early signs of radicalisation and using different forms of media to promote counter-narratives."
The media-related activities of the Lebanese NAP (2019-2022) are specifically focused on women being perceived as "equally legitimate and effective political leaders as men" by, among other activities, training media to promote women's participation and leadership political and public life through fair portrayal of men and women to help eliminate gender stereotypes and promote gender equality.

## Source of information and early warning

Media is an important source of information, including early warning about radicalisation or increased public tensions and escalating conflicts. Often the media has channels to the most remote regions or closed communities and can provide information on ongoing events and sentiments. Escalating conflicts can also be seen in the media coverage. The UN Matrix of Early Warning Indicators of Conflict-Related Sexual Violence[5] lists sexist or degrading portrayals of women from specific ethnic or other groups, media-driven hate speech campaigns that denigrate women, gender-based or misogynistic propaganda in the media and public incitement to or condoning of sexual violence as contextual factors for media-related indicators.

However, due to the stigma, fear of reprisals and lack of journalists skilled in ethical and professional reporting on sexual violence, very few survivors are willing to speak publicly about their assaults, particularly in conflict contexts. Therefore, the absence of media reports does not necessarily mean absence of sexual violence. Journalists might need training in how to look for early warning signals, how to speak to survivors without risking secondary trauma and how to report on sexual violence, this being taboo in many parts of the world. Unfortunately, very few NAPs recognise the role of the media as source of early warning. Only the NAPs of Gambia (2012) and Liberia (2009-2013) include training of journalists in gender sensitive conflict early warning reportage. The Liberian NAP pays particular attention to training women media personnel in early warning reportage.

Furthermore, journalists, especially when trained for this purpose, can contribute to collecting evidence of human rights violations and atrocities, including sexual violence. Only the South Sudan NAP (2015-2020) includes using the media to expose the atrocities of sexual violence, and also includes activities to train journalists and media practitioners on sexual and gender-based violence "so that they are able to responsibly report on its occurrence and other violations against the rights of women and girls and protect the identity of survivors."

5. MatrixEarlyWarningIndicatorsCSV_UNAction2011.pdf

## Holding decision-makers accountable

One of the most important roles of the media is to scrutinise power and provide the citizens with the information they need to hold decision makers accountable. Perhaps surprisingly, only one single NAP has captured this. The Serbian NAP (2017-2020) establishes that "independent monitoring should continue to be performed by the public, which should be provided, through the media, with information on all stages and results of the implementation of the National Action Plan."

## Women's participation in the media

Globally, women count for only 12–16 percent of the news subjects in news on war, military affairs and peace building, and in the stories related to war and military affairs, only one percent include stories on gender equality. These are also among the bottom 10 of the stories most likely to be reported by women, which further highlights the male dominance in war reporting.[6] It constitutes a severe problem as the knowledge and perspective we, and decision makers, get about conflict resolution and peace building will inevitably be male biased.

Among the existing NAPs, only the NAPs of Uganda (2008), Iraq (2014-2018) and South Sudan (2015-2020) address the issue of women's participation in the media. The Iraqi NAP notes that women are absent in media, and the Ugandan NAP concludes that "women's unequal access to media may mean that their interests, needs and perspectives are not represented and discussed." The NAP of South Sudan is a promising example of addressing the issue of women's under-representation in the news by setting out to promote a gender-inclusive media and communication environment that guarantees gender equality in media organisations, unions, media education and training institutions, media professional associations and media regulatory boards, ensuring that women are well represented in positions of power and decision making, and adopting ethical principles and policies are in place supporting gender equality and increased safety for women working in the media, particularly during coverage of armed conflicts and at the frontline.

## Conclusions

Although 41 percent of all the NAPs that have been adopted as of today mention the role of the media, the vast majority fail to see any other role than as a tool for their own communication, and thereby miss out on the full potential of the media in the implementation of UNSCR 1325.

Journalists and the media are important sources of information on the realities and views of conflict-affected women and women peace builders, early warning of civil unrest and escalating conflict – especially from remote or marginalised communities – and evidence of atrocities and war crimes, something that only four of the 107 NAPs foresee.

National Action Plans on the implementation of UNSCR 1325 can include activities such as training journalists in early warning reportage, gender and conflict sensitive journalism including reporting on conflict-related sexual violence and collecting evidence of violence against women and war crimes.

For the media to be meaningful and effective in the implementation of UNSCR 1325, women need to have access to the media, as journalists, sources and audience. Globally, and in every country of the world, women are under-represented in news related to conflict and peace. National Action Plans can include policies on gender equality in media houses and training of women journalists with a view to increase the representation of women in the media. States can also appoint women to leadership positions in state-owned media and allocate funding for women-run media in conflict and fragile settings.

A specific obstacle to women's participation in the news is the safety threat, both offline and online. Killings and imprisonment of women journalists continue to decrease women's presence in the media, along with online violence that has led to, among other things, the self-censorship of 30 percent of women journalists, according to the UNESCO survey. States should protect the life and health of women journalists, along with other peace builders interacting with the media through appropriate legislative frameworks and addressing the impunity of perpetrators. Funding should be allocated to safety training and equipment for women journalists to report from conflicts.

Finally, it is especially troublesome that only one of the current NAPs recognises the important role of the media in monitoring and scrutinising the inclusion of women in peace building. States should prioritise information sharing with the media, not only as a means of communication, but for the media to be able to monitor the implementation of the country's NAP or other obligations that emerged from the resolutions.

[6]. GMMP2020.ENG_.FINAL20210713.pdf (whomakesthenews.org) p. 31, 50 and 62.

ANCIA DE GUARDIA

# Derailing the debate: peace, votes and the abdication of editorial responsibility in Colombia

By: Laura Gil

On 24 November 2016, the peace agreement between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP, the most powerful and oldest insurgency in the western hemisphere, was signed. On 2 October, Colombians were convoked to vote in favour or against the negotiated text. The "NO" ballot won by 0.5 percentage points. The media was one actor responsible for the defeat of peace.

The Constitutional Court had decided that, in case of a defeat, the parties had to go back to the negotiating table and present the new text to Congress. They did and, in November 2016, the agreement became law of the land with 122 clauses on gender, 41 of which included an LGBTQ+ component. Most Colombians agree that the question of "gender ideology" had an impact on the election.

The impact of the so-called gender ideology on the peace agreement was not circumvented to social media but made its transit into traditional media. I use "gender ideology" as the pejorative term by which conservatives in Latin America qualify the reforms that benefit women and LGTBQ+ individuals as impositions that threaten traditional Christian values and corrupt society.

This article presents content analysis of journalistic pieces, both in news and opinion sections, in print, television and radio, and information collected in tabulated questionnaires distributed to editors, producers and directors of programmes. Overall, 369 pieces and approximately 50 hours of audio published between July and the plebiscite were analysed. The material was taken from two national newspapers – El Tiempo and El Espectador – three radios stations – Caracol, WRadio and Blu Radio – including morning radio shows and opinion programmes in the evening, two TV talk shows and one weekly magazine – Semana.

## A new low: public debate in downfall

It was reasonable for reasonable men and women to discuss whether a peace agreement provided appropriate levels of justice.

It was reasonable for reasonable men and women to debate whether demobilised guerrillas should be allowed to participate in politics immediately after a peace agreement.

Yet, it was unreasonable to allow public debate over war and peace to be captured by claims that a peace agreement was designed as a secret plan to impose a gender ideology that would "turn heterosexuals into homosexuals".

Alejandro Ordoñez, one of the most important Colombian public officials in the country and head of one of the control agencies – the Procuraduría – stated that gender ideology was secretly encrypted in the peace agreement signed with the guerrilla FARC-EP. This pronouncement made headlines in the main newspapers and radio stations.

An evangelical pastor argued that the act of signing of the peace agreement was a satanic ritual. He was extensively interviewed by the second most important radio stations in Bogota.

That was the level of public discourse in Colombia, in 2016, the year of the adoption of a peace agreement that ended 60 years of war with the Revolutionary Armed Forces and the year this negotiated peace was rejected at the polls.

## Back in time: the beginning of the negotiation

In 2012, when the peace negotiation was publicly announced, not a single woman was part of either negotiation team. Two teams were presented to the public: not a single woman.

It seemed that no one within the government or the Farc had heard of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 or, if they had, cared about it. So, the women's movement mobilised around Resolution 1325. Women negotiators were appointed; women's civil organisations travelled to Havana, the seat of the talks; and a gender sub-commission was created. Such efforts paid off: the Colombian peace agreement became the first in the world to have a gender approach, a success celebrated by UN Women and the women's movement in Colombia and around the world.

Though none of the resolutions directly mentions the media, resolutions 2122 and 2493 are interesting due to their focus on civil society, to which the media can belong. UNSCR 2122 takes note of the critical contributions of civil society to conflict prevention, res-

olution and peacebuilding and stresses the importance of sustained consultations and dialogue between decision makers and civil society. Though dialogue can take place in many different fora, the media is a principal channel for communication between decision makers and the public. The importance of the media as a bridge between the public and decision makers increases the more marginalised or remote the community is. Because the peace process was uniquely participatory – victims of the conflict, women's organisations and representatives of ethnic groups visited Havana to talk to the negotiating parties – LGBTQ+ groups also asked to be heard. They managed to be included in the agreement, mostly with no discrimination clauses. According to the Farc and the government, the gender approach sought "to create conditions so that women and people with diverse sexual identities could access the benefits of living in a country without armed conflict on equal terms." This said, it must be noted that the agreement's gender approach had no implication whatsoever for the debate of today's most controversial issues in many societies, such as same-sex marriage or adoption.

No one spoke of gender ideology then; no one saw a maverick plan; everyone celebrated.

Less than one month later, the Farc and the government turned out to be enemies of families, of heterosexual parents, of the churches – Catholic and evangelical. "Gender ideology", they screamed.

## The political campaign for and against negotiated peace

In order to evaluate the freedom and fairness of elections, it is necessary to look at the freedom and fairness of electoral campaigns. One must particularly do so when the difference between victory and defeat is as small as in this case, that is, 53,284 votes. Many blamed disinformation – over gender ideology, over pensions for retirees, over benefits for the Farc – for the loss of the "YES" vote.

Said the head of the campaign for the "NO" on the referendum: "We discovered the viral power of social media, and we decided to lead a strategy that would make people go vote in anger."

The highest administrative court in the land, the Council of State, concluded in a landmark decision that "there was a general deception that nullified the freedom of the electorate to choose autonomously in the plebiscite… Lies exposed in a massive and systematic way were exposed, especially in relation to issues of gender ideology, elimination of subsidies, affectation of the pension system, impunity, victims and the change to a state model like that of Venezuela."

So, what happened and who was responsible? Was it the unrestrained power of social media, was it an irresponsible opposition willing to push outrageous lies to gain votes, were the citizens a bit too gullible? Perhaps all partook in the debacle of the peace agreement.

Yet it can be argued that a group of Colombians that have fallen under the radar – editors and directors, that is, decision makers at traditional mass media – were also to blame. Editors and directors abdicated their editorial responsibility, and the evidence says much about the Colombian media ecosystem.

## 1. Exhibit A: there was abdication of editorial responsibility because fact was presented as polemic

Whether or not there was gender ideology in the agreement is a question of fact. Traditional media failed to report facts, transforming reality into a he-said, she-said debate. Of the pieces reviewed and published before the vote, NONE clearly stated there was no gender ideology and NONE spoke of the manipulation of public opinion. (Only one in El Espectador on 1 October covered the statements by Ordoñez ending with a definition of "gender approach", much as an afterthought.)

In print, the question was mostly ignored and, when it was covered, pieces in news sections were presented with interviews in two columns, one for defenders of the agreement and the other for opponents, with the same weight for both.

In fact, neither El Tiempo nor El Espectador published a single editorial from their directors setting a position prior to the referendum; El Espectador published one on 12 October, 10 days after. On TV and radio, both sides were interviewed with equal treatment and, thus, were provided the same levels of legitimacy. Morning and evening radio shows organised debates over the issue. Interestingly, more fact-based pieces were published after the defeat on 2 October.

## 2. Exhibit B: there was abdication of editorial responsibility because opinion was allowed to penetrate news

This trend was particularly notorious in live shows on TV and radio, especially morning shows.

On Colombian radio, a number of people sit from 5–10am, reading and commenting on the news. Some are journalists and some are commentators. They report the news from the calls received by their correspondents in the field, the headlines in the newspapers, the TV news and debates of the prior evening, long live interviews and, last but not least, trends on social media, particularly, Twitter, now X.

Then, they comment on them. Morning radios shows are basically long conversations with interviews in between.

All the directors of radio shows who answered the questionnaires coincided in stating that they believe their audiences do not know how to differentiate opinion from news. That is a striking finding.

Editors and directors of programmes failed to delineate a policy on how to report on malicious information provided by one political sector. Everything the "NO" side said about gender ideology prior to the plebiscite was reported as news, not as an unwarranted opinion.

## 3. Exhibit C: there was abdication of editorial responsibility because disinformation was given legitimacy in opinion spaces

On 2 October, the day of the plebiscite, Mr Ordoñez published a column in which he claimed: "As grandfather and father of the family, I will vote emphatically "NO", because under the agreement the intention is to elevate the ideology of gender to the level of a constitutional norm. They invoke peace to steal innocence from children and destroy the family." Not a single column responding to this claim was published that day; no contrary assertion from the newspaper was printed. Ordoñez also affirmed the Farc would buy the votes for "YES".

In Colombia, there is no fact-checking of op-ed columns and, without factchecking, the potential to spread fake news in op-ed columns increases.

Cecilia Orozco is a columnist and director of TV news. "Cecilia Orozco belongs to that group of Colombian communicators who, years ago, stopped being journalists (if they ever were), to become rabid and virulent defenders, first, of their interests and second, of hackneyed ideologies that promote anarchy, chaos and deinstitutionalisation. For Mrs. Orozco and many of her horde of colleagues (among whom there are closeted faggots, repudiated children, compulsive drug addicts, traumatised human beings, insufferable depressives and people without love…)." That chain of insults was published as an op-ed column in a respected regional newspaper. The author was a prominent member of the "NO" side who, ironically, was later removed from the same paper for inviting the killing of Nicolás Maduro. No protest by journalists ensued; no challenge to the editor followed.

Case law by the Constitutional Court has established that columnists respond for the entirety of their writings and left the newspapers off the hook. Editors and directors understood the jurisprudence as a means to relieve their workload and abandoned the conversation with columnists.

As for TV and radio talk shows, all producers claimed that they strive to ensure diversity on their teams, that is, political diversity. As one aside, it must be noted that the question of diversity in Colombia is posed solely in political terms, and the lack of diversity in newsrooms is not a matter of concern yet in a country with about 4 million Afro- and 1.5 million indigenous Colombians.

As many commentators in talk shows are there to represent a political voice and play a role, not only do they often rely on questionable information pushed by their political side, but they show more loyalty to their politics than to the facts and end up defending the indefensible. To make matters worse, because they were, in fact, hired to show "the other side", they may have not even been free to be true to the facts, even if they had wanted.

## 4. Exhibit D: there is abdication of editorial responsibility when everything can be a subject of debate

When editors and directors do not use common sense to direct and conduct radio and TV talk shows, the most extreme radical voices may end up being normalised. In this case, debates were organised in which conservative commentators argued that gender ideology was part of the Farc's plan to destroy Colombian democracy, homosexuality was a deviance to be treated medically and camps for homosexuals had to be re-established. When such things are said as part of a debate, they become part of the political conversation.

Everything may be object of coverage and everything may be object of scrutiny, but not everything should be worthy of debate. A media outlet may find space to cover the flat-earthers; does it need to place them in a discussion? Last year, one morning radio show had a short debate on whether a rape was provoked by the rousing clothing the victim was wearing.

Ultimately, it is the responsibility of each outlet to draw the red lines in a manner that would protect freedom of expression while remaining true to democratic values.

A final word about civility. Diana Muntz, in her work entitled In-Your-Face Politics, demonstrated that uncivil talk shows raise levels of attention and optimise comprehension and recall, thus seemingly contributing to democracy by increasing levels of interest. Yet, she also clearly showed that uncivility reaffirms the consumer of the news on his or her own views, radicalising positions even more and making conversation even more difficult. Incivility, in the end, is bad for democracy.

## Beyond the referendum: lessons learned and the work ahead

In the fight against disinformation, opinion journalism falls through the cracks. What's the point of fighting disinformation if fake news turns out to be legitimised by opinion leaders? Factchecking initiatives are costly and have limited impact. More attention should be paid to the jump of disinformation from social to traditional media through opinion spaces.

In the search for a polarised opinion debate, outlier radical positions that do not necessarily represent the majority of society are legitimised. Democracy thrives in the greys and democratic deliberation is possible, if at least the theoretical possibility of an agreement exists. Modern radio and TV talk shows are designed to award the unreasonable and render the occasional coincidence of views impossible.

Media literacy puts the burden on consumers of news so that they "shop" better; training does so on journalists. Neither group is making decisions about time and resources in a media outlet. Editors and directors are the link between consumers of news (the reader, viewer or listener) and makers of news (the journalists). Why would they fall under the radar?

In Colombia, the media sector is due to begin a conversation with editors on:

1. Factchecking opinion in print and on radio and TV.
2. How to report on disinformation when it is a powerful political sector that distributes it.

To finalise, a question: why do the laws of the market not work on political commentary? Those same commentators who claimed that the Farc would steal the congressional vote, impose gender ideology and turn us into Venezuela are still being hired by the most respected traditional outlets.

# Syrian women politicians in the media: to be taken seriously

By: Rula Asad and Hayma Alyousfi

Twelve years after the 2011 Syrian revolution, women continue to be under-represented in politics. The ongoing conflict, coupled with patriarchy and traditional gender roles, restricts their political participation. Violence and discrimination further hinder their engagement. Notably, insufficient media coverage becomes a prominent barrier, hindering the visibility of women's political endeavours. This article examines media's portrayal of women politicians in Syria and the impact it has on them, drawing insights directly from these political figures.

Navigating the complex political landscape, the women politicians of this study encountered challenges both as decision-makers and subjects of media attention. Through the To be taken… seriously research, conducted by the Syrian Female Journalist Network (SFJN) in 2021, nine women politicians candidly shared experiences, revealing the obstacles they confronted. This article delves into media portrayal, stereotypes and personal attacks that Syrian women politicians continue to face, with the aim of fostering a more inclusive political environment for women in Syria.

To understand the media's treatment of women politicians, we applied critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA delves into issues such as power, ideology and social inequality, guiding our feminist exploration of how Syrian media depicts gender and power, specifically in the context of women politicians.

## Marginalisation: media's focus on gender over expertise

Marginalisation emerged as a significant repressive practice in our analysis of media discourse, involving the exclusion of individuals or groups to secondary importance, effectively pushing them to societal margins. This is notably evident in the media's treatment of women's issues, often framing them as individual and private concerns. Our exploration of media discourse about Syrian women politicians exposes the extent of their marginalisation in the political landscape. This marginalisation manifests through several key facets.

On one hand, it involves treating women politicians as a monolithic category, homogenising their opinions and representations without considering diverse contexts and experiences. On the other hand, the media appears to emphasise their sexual, social, regional and religious identities, perpetuating a dichotomy of "us versus them".

Thirdly, it reproduces narratives that reinforce gender biases, objectifying women by disproportionately focusing on their appearance.

An example of media coverage: "To the right of Nasr al-Hariri [a man politician], the short-black-haired woman has the front seat in the pictures of the press conferences of the Geneva 4 Conference, which ended its meetings on Friday, 3 March." The woman referred to was the well-known politician, Alice Mfarrej. This is an example of how Syrian media focus on men while marginalising women politicians.

In our selected sample of the research, marginalisation resonates through the media discourse, further solidifying gender disparities and perpetuating stereotypes. Many interviewed women politicians stressed that when media outlets invite and host them, it's often primarily because of their gender, irrespective of their accumulated expertise in politics, law or human rights. Even when their qualifications surpass those of their man counterparts, they perceive that their expertise is frequently ignored.

One of the women politicians in the study, Dima Moussa,[1] shared that "there is a fundamental problem in the media; when journalists cover a political topic, they don't consider women but rather contact any man assuming that he is qualified and has expertise in politics, economics and law. Meanwhile, stereotypes persist for women and their expertise and interest in politics are often ignored."

This lack of recognition not only diminishes women's contributions but also perpetuates the gender bias that continues to plague the political landscape. It is essential for media outlets to acknowledge and to recognise the qualifications of women politicians and provide them with equal opportunities in the media as their men counterparts.

[1]. A Syrian politician. She studied and practised law in the United States until the end of 2012. She joined the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces 2016, and served as Vice President for two consecutive terms (from May 2018 to July 2020). She later served as a representative in the Constitu tional Committee, in the Small Body (the mini-committee) of the opposition. She is one of the founders of the Syrian Women's Political Movement in October 2017.

## Vulnerabilisation[2]: stigmatisation and misrepresentation

The choice of words plays a pivotal role in creating stereotyped images, stigma and deepening vulnerability. This manifests through repressive media practices including objectification, marginalisation, invasive coverage of personal lives and undermining women's agency, resulting in a sense of vulnerability.

The women politicians participating in the study raised issues of representation and competence, with media publishing comments about them such as: "They do not represent us, they are not legitimate. Why are they talking on behalf of Syrian women?" This issue not only undermines the credibility of women politicians but also perpetuates a narrative that women are incapable of holding leadership positions.

As highlighted in the research, women are consistently reduced to "victims" or "eyewitnesses on the ground" in the media, neglecting recognition for their active participation in politics or in leadership roles. This misrepresentation is a significant concern expressed by some Syrian women politicians.

Our analysis also revealed specific journalistic practices that contribute to the vulnerabilisation of women politicians.

Firstly, there is a trend in reproducing concepts of custodianship and guardianship, framing women politicians as dependent and incapable of independent action. This manifests through various practices, such as highlighting a woman politician's domestic role or emphasising personal sacrifices, talking about balancing family and career, focusing on appearance rather than her political accomplishments, as well as attributing success or access to men mentors or supporters and questioning women's leadership abilities.
Additionally, while men politicians are presented with full titles, the media tends to ignore the titles of women politicians, thereby contributing to both professional and gender stereotyping.

These media practices that contribute to the vulnerabilisation of women strip women politicians of agency, depicting them as subservient and relieving them of responsibility for their choices or decisions.

An example embodying all the aforementioned practices is a story in which a woman politician was viewed solely in relation to her male relatives. The journalist describes: "The granddaughter of the former Mufti of Syria, Ahmed Kaftaro, and the wife of the prominent preacher Muhammad Habash is also on the Advisory Council. She left Syria two years ago with her husband, and we did not monitor any statements of her opposing or supporting the Syrian regime."

Finally, women politicians expressed frustration at being pigeonholed into specific roles by the media. "The media likes to show women talking about humanitarian issues, aid and assistance, and they are not presented as decision makers but as a means for empathy," Mariam Jalabi observed. This not only limits their contributions but also reinforces traditional gender roles that women have been fighting to break free from.

## Media incitement and online violence

Engaging with women politicians reveals the disturbing truth of them encountering violent reactions on social media, encompassing intrusion into their private lives, defamation, insults and threats. These issues extend beyond individuals, impacting their families and close circles. The online harassment takes a severe toll, with the incitement to violence in some articles being life-threatening, showcasing the tangible consequences on women politicians' wellbeing, physical safety and careers.

Rima Fleihan[4] explained that she received serious death threats due to some articles she had written: "Some of the articles published on websites were life-threatening and might have gotten me killed... I received personal threats because of these rumours, which was a devastating time for me. Even today, I still suffer psychologically from that, and that's one of the reasons why I decided to stay away from working in politics."

Beyond the online realm, incitement of violence in the media and harassment affect the personal choices and habits of women politicians, fostering an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. Rooted in political differences, these attacks focus on personal aspects such as clothing and appearance, habits like smoking and allegations of incompetence, infringing upon their privacy. Women politicians express legitimate concerns about media outlets potentially exploiting details from their personal lives, heightening the caution they feel about any aspect being weaponised in the public sphere.

We also uncovered significant barriers to media visibility for women politicians, arising from a "hostile" media environment and a lack of trust. This "hostile" environment, characterised by biased portrayals, negative framing, invasive coverage, double standards, online harassment and under-representation in the media, results in mistrust among women politicians in media outlets and their reluctance to participate or appear in the media. This reluctance stems from the fear of public scrutiny and personal attacks, highlighting the profound impact of media inconsistency.

---

[2]. A writer and activist in the field of human rights and women's rights. Executive Director of the Syrian Women's Lobby.
She co-founded and was the spokesperson of the Local Coordination Committees for three years. She was a member of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.

[3]. A political activist. She joined the political arena with the Damascus Spring and co-founded Jamal al-Atassi Forum for `the Democratic Dialogue, where she held the position of Chairwoman for two non-consecutive terms. She contributed to the establishment of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and held the position of Vice-President of the Coalition for two consecutive terms. She co-founded the High Negotiations Commission and was part of the negotiating delegation in Geneva 2 and 3. She headed the Assistance Coordination Unit.

Many women politicians, including Rima Flihan and Suhair Atassi,[4] criticised initially supportive media outlets for later giving in to political polarisation, using women when convenient and attacking them as needed, driven by donor agendas or station owners' ideologies. For example, it was mentioned during interviews that the adherence of some media outlets to Islamic ideologies and alignment with certain perspectives led to the targeting of secular women politicians, or when the donor/owner tended to support armed groups that contributed to the unjust vilification of politicians who supported non-violence. This inconsistency leaves women politicians feeling like tokens in a larger political game, emphasising the pivotal role of the media in shaping public perception and political discourse and its profound consequences when not aligned with the interests of women in politics.

Nagham Ghadri[5] explained that instead of addressing the opinions of the women politicians, private and personal matters are used against them. “Because we have seen how well-known women are treated, many women fear facing the same. When women make mistakes, for example, or express an opinion that does not align with the political stance of certain influential individuals, they are targeted personally…Women are singled out based on private and personal matters, not their professional work or political stance. This is why women withdraw to the back seats.”

## Language and hidden power relations

Language and hidden power relations represent an essential dimension of our feminist analysis. Feminist studies have long documented how language, influenced by masculine bias, has led to distorted knowledge regarding the division of roles between men and women. This distortion has manifested in linguistic structures that favour men over women.

Gender blindness is a manifestation of masculine bias, and the term is used to analyse the gender biased aspects and the denial of the space required for women to express their active, or passive, participation in human production processes.

Gender-blindness extends to disciplines such as history, as the writing of history has marginalised the roles of women in building states and societies. To illustrate this point, let's consider a case from the coverage in Syrian media, which describes how “The Head of the Syrian National Coalition, Riad Seif, spoke at the opening session. The participating delegations gave successive speeches, starting with a speech by Hassan Abdel Azim on behalf of the National Coordination Committee, Jamal Suleiman from the Cairo Platform, Mahmoud al-Kasr on behalf of the independents and Basma Kodmani on behalf of the participating women.” This practice of male bias is repeated; in addition to grouping women and implying that one woman represents all women participants, no man represents all the men. It is also remarkable that the woman politician’s intervention was placed at the end of the list. This is a matter that the media can address and criticise from the perspective of power dynamics in the hierarchy of presenting the speeches and women-related interventions that women politicians usually make, typically placed at the end of the sessions.

Media can be an effective tool for influencing the discourse and creating positive change, particularly regarding women’s effectiveness and involvement in public affairs such as political action. While the media reflects on the social reality, it also shapes the very same reality, influencing what people think through the information it chooses to present and the way it is presented. The media uses language and images to ascribe – and create – meaning to groups, practices, events, conditions and even things. This meaning permeates the societal discourse and it has the power to perpetuate privilege and mainstream particular viewpoints. Because these views are influenced by their origin and ideology, which in turn influence our perceptions, there will always be competition among groups over what should be considered a correct or favourite depiction.6

In conclusion, Syrian women politicians face multifaceted challenges in their interactions with the media, encompassing issues such as marginalisation, misrepresentation, incitement and targeting. These challenges underscore the enduring struggles within their political careers.

While some women politicians advocate for increased accountability and preparation from journalists in media interactions, others attribute challenges to shifting priorities and agendas of media outlets. Regardless of the root causes, it is clear that these issues significantly affect women's willingness to engage in politics and their overall relationship with the media.

To address these challenges, recognising and amplifying the voices of women politicians, providing equal opportunities and fostering a safe online environment are crucial steps for a more inclusive and equitable media discourse in Syria.

Moreover, employing critical discourse analysis from a feminist perspective offers a robust framework for unravelling power dynamics, gender inequality and societal biases in media discourse, particularly concerning women in politics. By highlighting marginalisation, vulnerabilisation and the sub-

**[4]. Opposition politician and former Vice-President of the Syrian National Coalition. She co-founded the Latakia Coordination Committee in the revolutionary movement and joined the Political Bureau of the Syrian Revolution General Commission. She joined the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces and was a member of the political committee. She was then elected as Vice President of the Coalition and held this position for two consecutive terms.**

**[5]. Khalaf, Rana, Rula Asad, Roua Altwael. 2016. Women in Emerging Syrian Media- 2016-2011. Study, Stichting Female Journalists Network (SFJN).**

**[6]. The term vulnerabilization is used to describe the outcomes of processes, driven by systemic factors beyond the control of the individual or population, where people of various social identities face increased, unjust and preventable risks to their safety, health and wellbeing.**

tle influence of language, this analysis empowers us to challenge the status quo, advocate for gender equality and promote a more inclusive society. The insights from this study pave the way for meaningful change and the dismantling of oppressive structures perpetuating gender disparities.

**The research was conducted by the Syrian Female Journalists Network, with financial support from Women's International League for Peace and Freedom – WILPF**

To read the full report in Arabic:
https://media.sfjn.org/media_and_women-politicians/

To read the full report in English:
https://media.sfjn.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/To-Be-Taken-Seriously.pdf

# Participation in journalism: what is the right amount?

By: Laura Gil

During a period of three years, IMS experimented in Colombia with different degrees of participatory journalism for gender and conflict-sensitive reporting. While discussing the pros and cons of promoting the participation of women social leaders and human rights defenders in content production, this article seeks to identify the optimal level for their involvement in order to obtain credible and balanced journalism that guarantees the public right to know, covers marginalised groups and forgotten issues and commits to a gender-sensitive approach in the midst of armed conflict.

"Implementing UN Security Council Resolution 1325 through the media" conducted in Colombia, Myanmar and Syria in 2019–2021, sought to train journalists for the publication of gender and conflict-sensitive pieces. UNSCR 1325, the landmark resolution adopted in 2000 that became the cornerstone of the women, peace and security agenda, recognises that men and women experience war and conflict differently and, if peace is to be sustainable, women must be involved in all steps of conflict resolution. Funded by the Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation, the project was derived from the conviction that UNSCR 1325 left out an essential instrument for women's participation and influence in the peace process – the news media.

Editorial guidelines were drafted and distributed, five regional workshops were conducted, journalists were trained and pieces were produced. In this first phase, women social leaders and human rights defenders acted as guides in identifying the topics in need of reporting and orienting coverage through their knowledge of the region and the topics. The journalistic production process did not cross the conventional lines of classic journalism, with these women treated as mainly sources.

The partnership with women's organisations to advance the work began tapping an unrealised potential: both IMS and partners began suspecting the added power of journalism when women social leaders and human rights defenders were not treated merely as sources but also as partners. Along the way, IMS found a national outlet driven to expand the limits of traditional journalism by testing new, innovative and gender-sensitive approaches: El Espectador, one of Colombia's oldest and most reputed newspapers.

Thus, the second phase of the project involved teaming up with women social leaders and human rights defenders from a number of grass-roots organisations. Two types of work methodologies were followed. In one, journalists from El Espectador engaged with the women and gave them some level of editorial control over elements. Journalists and women jointly selected the medium for the piece – video, print or podcast – defined lines of the stories and decided on sources and experts. Journalists partnered with women but, in the end, remained in charge. In the other methology, journalists devolved full editorial control to women social leaders and human rights defenders, intervening mostly to ensure quality control, thus warranting full partnership.

uring a third phase of the project, women social leaders and human rights defenders were trained on the basics of citizen journalism and encouraged to produce their own pieces for publication. The project provided an editorial adviser available for consultation before the piece was turned in to a media outlet.

These three phases show different levels of participation: from source to partial editorial control to full editorial control to citizen journalism. The analysis of the content and debriefings of participants that followed showed the following.

## Nothing about women without women

At all levels of participation, women involved in the projects expressed satisfaction because their voices mattered and were reflected in the end product. Their interventions guaranteed a diverse selection of topics, especially featuring those who are marginalised, with special attention to intersectionality, covering issues relevant to them and including proposed solutions they viewed as suitable and possible.

## Leaving no woman behind

The increased relevance of women's voices in the production process also served to support a more intersectional approach. Intersectionality recognises that diverse identities accumulate to deepen discrimination and inequity. Thus, a rural Afro-Colombian gay woman may experience war in a dramatically different way than an urban white gay woman. Journalists reported that it was the women social leaders and human rights defenders who were particularly sensitive to the exclusion of the most marginalised and advocated for their inclusion.Impact of the pieces

on public debate
Several of the pieces produced with partial and full editorial control by women were publicly debated. Practically all print pieces were published in the paper version of El Espectador, with several the main feature of the cover page. Most of these pieces were discussed on morning radio shows and at least two had follow-ups by investigative TV reports. Conversely, only one of the pieces of citizen journalism, the one on obstetric violence during the armed conflict, had repercussions. This is the single piece of citizen journalism that El Espectador considered of a quality high enough to be published by this outlet. Most citizen journalism pieces were reproduced by small local community media or women's and human rights websites.

## Satisfaction of the journalists

Journalists conveyed more gratification in their jobs when they were involved in a partnership of partial or full editorial control. The breaking up of the verticality that characterises the relationship with a source in traditional journalism unleashed waves of creativity. Journalists developed tight connections with the women, gained their trust, worked together, explored the unexplored and became mentors as much as mentees. For many, this was a lesson in humility. Asked about what they had done differently as journalists, one participating reporter answered "everything". This experiment leads to the belief that horizontality with the sources may be personally rewarding and professionally productive for journalists.

## Doing no harm

The "do no harm" principle for international development and humanitarian interventions also applies to media development. The selection of women social leaders and human rights defenders to be trained as citizen journalists has to be surgically targeted to those most motivated and with the skills to engage in a challenge of this sort. Otherwise, the risks of affecting the self-esteem of the women would not be minimal. Some women resented the pressure, and many wished to desert, even though ultimately no one did.

In the end, women social leaders and human rights defenders are experts in leading and defending and journalists in reporting. The best gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism is produced when both join forces, recognise each other's strengths and partner together. Participatory journalism, rather than citizen journalism, can contribute more to the implementation of UNSCR 1325 for sustainable peace.

# Editorial guidelines for gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism

By: Laura Gil

## What is gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism?

The media plays an important role in de-escalating conflicts and deconstructing patriarchal attitudes and social prejudices about women's ability to engage and participate in decision-making and peacebuilding. Therefore, it is necessary to have balanced and fair media content that is gender- and conflict-sensitive as it relates to the depiction of women, their rights and their issues through the various forms of conflict coverage. It is also important for the media to host different perspectives on how to achieve social justice and sustainable peace including the views and visions of men and women politicians, experts in the field and representatives from historically marginalised populations, as each of these groups is concerned with and may have a differentiated take on the prospects of the peace processes and political solutions.

Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism seeks to challenge gender stereotypes and prejudices. By questioning what is newsworthy, it widens its scope and focuses on issues of importance for people of all genders and those from historically marginalised groups and it seeks to include a wide variety of voices and perspectives. It allows for people to self-identify and choose their own narratives in the media. Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalists do not settle for merely reporting on events but seek to explain root causes and explore potential solutions to conflicts. This is why gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism has the potential to become transformational for a given society.

Due to the disproportionate use of sexualised and gender-based violence in armed conflict, gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism naturally pays attention to these crimes, but while doing so, making sure that survivors are treated with respect and dignity in both the interview situation and in the reporting and after publication or transmission. Conflict-sensitive reporting is always carried out with an aim of explaining and seeking a way forward rather than fuelling conflict and injustice.

These guidelines for gender- and conflict-sensitive reporting are a compilation of the editorial guidelines that were produced by IMS' partners Consejo de Rédaccion in Colombia, Myanmar Journalists Institute in Myanmar and Syrian Female Journalists Network in Syria. In each of the three contexts, wide consultations were held with journalists, editors and women's and LGBTQ+ organisations for the development of comprehensive editorial guidelines on gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism. Despite the socio-political differences, these are the guidelines that were identified as crucial in all three of the countries. The fact that a common core of recommendations was shared in such different political situations speaks to the common challenges women face in the context of armed conflict.

## Guideline 1: Ensure gender-balanced media coverage of conflict, peace and security issues

There is a lack of women sources on war, peace and security issues in the media. When women are included, it is often as victims of the conflict and rarely as experts or peace builders. Often, it's argued that "there are no women experts in the field", which is very rarely true. Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism makes space for women and amplifies their voices in line with the ambition of UNSCR 1325 to have women participating in all steps of peacebuilding.

### Gender-balanced media coverage can be ensured through:

- Regular monitoring of the number of men, women and non-binary people that are visible in the news and opinion spaces, including as experts or decision-makers. Monitoring should not only include the number of people of different genders, but also the timing, length and sections of the content they are included in.

- Construction and use of databases of women experts on various topics related to conflict, peace and security issues as an effective way of debunk-

ing the myth of a lack of women and providing fast and easy access to women experts when needed.

- When possible, consultation of women's civil society organisations when reporting on conflict, peace and security. Not only do they often have expertise on the matter, but they often also have close ties to the communities they serve and can assist in both identifying sources and assisting in creating trust and confidence in the media.

## Guideline 2: Diversify voices in the news coverage

"Gender" should not be understood as an excluding term to refer to women. Neither should it assume that all women share the same experiences or opinions. On the contrary, gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism understands this term as a relationship that includes men, women, boys, girls and non-binary people and recognises the intersecting identities that affect them.

For example, sexualised violence against men in conflict has been largely hidden or ignored, as has conflict-related gender-based violence against gay and trans men. Women who are members of ethnic, racial, religious or indigenous communities often experience violence both as women and as members of these groups.

### Diversified media coverage can be ensured through:

- Actively seeking out sources among minorities and historically marginalised groups, even on topics that are not specifically about them.

- Considering the disparate impact of conflict and peace processes on various social groups when writing news stories and when researching the causes and roots of any issue, so that the focus is on the areas and groups most affected.

- Emphasising proposals, ideas and recommendations of marginalised groups for conflict resolution.

## Guideline 3: Avoid gender stereotypes

The media plays a significant role in shaping norms and ideas on the roles of men, women and non-binary people. In a conflict context, gender stereotypes typically entail depicting men as strong, brave and self-sacrificing and women as helpless victims, mothers of future soldiers and committed caregivers. This creates a wrongful image of the reality and hinders effective conflict resolution. Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism not only avoids reproducing gender stereotypes but also actively challenges them.

### Media coverage free from gender stereotypes can be ensured through:

- Paying close attention to explicit as well as benevolent stereotypes, biases or interpretations of women's and men's characteristics and their roles in society and avoiding or challenging them in the reporting.

- Seeking a variety of men and women sources in different roles and capacities, such as women as defenders and men as victims. Gender stereotypes in the media are often reproduced by an exaggerated focus on men or women in the roles in which they are over-represented.

- When writing about women and LGBTQ+ people who have suffered violence in conflicts, it is critical to portray them as survivors and not just victims. Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism must escape the trap of portraying women and LGBTQ+ people as passive stakeholders and, rather, show their agency as rights-holders and their capacity to process or even overcome their victimisation. A gender- and conflict-sensitive story never ends with the victimisation of women without giving them space to reflect on the violence and begin with their empowerment.

- When reporting on women and LGBTQ+ people in armed conflict, it is not necessary to report their age, marital or family status, or detail their personal lives if it does not provide an element relevant to understanding the story. Their physical appearance should not be emphasised or, many times, even mentioned. Motherhood should not be the only defining characteristic of women and not all women and LGBTQ+ survivors are poor and displaced.

## Guideline 4: Use gender-sensitive, inclusive language

The words, expressions and images chosen in the media can contribute to hate and inequality and fuel conflicts. Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism uses inclusive and non-discriminatory language, rejects warmongering expressions in reporting situations, is particularly careful to avoid using popular sayings that show sexist and racist attitudes, discards hate speech and never resorts to inflammatory words.

### Inclusive language is ensured through:

- Abstain from using "he" as a generic pronoun. To ensure gender inclusion, one could use "he/she", "they" or alter the text to remove the need for pronouns. In languages where this is applicable, do not use the masculine plural to denote a group that also contains women, as this excludes women and belittles women and their contributions.
- Avoid using "man" or "mankind"

when referring to a profession or humans/persons in general. Avoid, for example, expressions such as man-made, police man and say instead human made, police personnel, etc.

- Use the right terms and expressions when talking about violence to avoid ambiguity and an apologetic tone that may justify violence or remove the responsibility from the perpetrator. Write, for example, the correct term "forced marriage of minors" instead of the apologetic "early marriage", write "he raped her" instead of less severe crimes such as "he assaulted her" or euphemisms such as "he deceived her" and write "the (alleged) rapist" instead of "the husband" or "the father" when the focus of the story is the crime.

- When necessary to refer to a person's sexual orientation or gender identity, use the terms preferred by the person in question and do not hesitate to ask respectfully. The same applies to the pronoun of a person (he/him, she/her or they/them). Where this is impossible, the most widely accepted terms are lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans, while all sensationalist or derogative terms and descriptions should be avoided

### Gender-sensitive images can be achieved by:

- Avoiding images that perpetuate the imbalance between genders or reproduce gender stereotypes. Be mindful of the angle of the photo, to not create a scenario of looking down on women by having the camera higher than her head and of images that show men as active and powerful and women as passive and weak.

- Paying special attention to the LGBTQ+ population, avoiding the publication of sensationalist photographs that reinforce discriminatory attitudes.

## Guideline 5: Pay attention to gender-related topics

Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism pays specific attention to gender issues related to conflict and peace processes, such as conflict-related gender-based violence, women's rights and women's agency as peace builders, in addition to in-depth coverage of issues of gender equality/inequality with a critical and analytical view.

### Enhanced inclusion of gender-related topics can be ensured through:

- Questioning and re-evaluating what is newsworthy and for whom. It is not rare for topics to have differing degrees of importance to men, women and non-binary people as well as members of historically marginalised groups. Gender- and conflict-sensitive media make sure that stories of marginalised groups get a fair share of visibility/reach in coverage.

- Engaging in a dialogue with different community representatives on what issues are important to them.

- Recalling that the UNSCR 1325 is legally binding to all UN member states, and that the media should use its scrutinising role to hold decision-makers accountable for its implementation, by highlighting the role of women in conflict resolution and the lack of women in peace processes.

## Guideline 6: De-normalise conflict-related gender-based violence

Sexualised violence in conflicts should not be presented as part of the inevitable dynamics of war. It is often a practice of one or more parties to the conflict that commanders may not have explicitly ordered but which they condone or promote because it has strategic value both as an instrument of terror and control and as a denial of the feminine. Attacks by armed stakeholders against women and LGBTQ+ people can be understood as a means of imposing the masculine over the feminine.

### Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism contributes to the de-normalisation of conflict-related gender-based violence by:

- Describing the sexist contexts, patterns, practices, decisions and attitudes of the party or parties involved and their response and investigation – or lack thereof – of allegations of sexual violence.

- Placing the survivors rather than perpetrators at the centre of the story.

- Putting conflict-related gender-based violence in a historical and legal context that emphasises the violence as a crime against the victim and against humanity.

## Guideline 7: Engage in survivor-centred and rights-based reporting

Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalists do more than simply report stories of violence; they also report on available resources and routes to obtain help and ask sources and survivors to propose solutions. Many victims lack both psychosocial support and legal aid, but in the best practices, the encounter with gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism becomes both healing and empowering. Sharing the story of conflict-related gender-based violence in a gender- and conflict-sensitive way also contributes to affecting the attitudes to such violence and the restoration of people affected.

### Survivor-centred and rights-based reporting is ensured by:

- Avoiding victim blaming and unnecessary focus on the whereabouts of the survivor; focus instead on the actions of the perpetrator. Use of active voice rather than passive voice when reporting acts of sexualised and gender-based violence. Don't write "she was raped", but "he raped her". The use of the passive voice to describe incidents of gender-based violence, especially sexualised violence, erases the perpetrator's responsibility and reinforces harmful myths regarding the victim's responsibility. Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism strives to break these myths down and never puts the responsibility on the survivor.

- Avoiding re-traumatisation and re-victimisation. Re-victimisation means making people relive trauma. Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalists avoid this by being empathetic listeners, focusing on survivors' voices and wishes and moving at their pace. They spend as much time as it is needed with the survivor, do not pressure them to talk and avoid seeking unnecessary descriptions, for example, of graphic details on experiences of sexualised violence. Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalism is time-consuming.

- When it comes to publishing photographs, gender- and conflict-sensitive journalists prefer images of resistance and resilience over those that show victims crying, beaten or physically abused. Images of women screaming or crying should be included only if absolutely necessary to tell a story (during an interview, for example, which cannot be edited out).

## Guideline 8: Safety first

Speaking to the media can put women human rights defenders, LGBTQ+ persons and survivors of gender-based violence, as well as their families, at risk for both violence and social stigmatisation. Gender- and conflict-sensitive journalists keep the safety of the source as top priority and seek to minimise these risks and follow them up after the publication of news pieces.

### The safety of sources can be increased by:

- Taking the time to explain possible negative and positive outcomes and reconfirming the informed consent of the sources throughout the period required to finalise the interview(s) or coverage as many survivors of sexualised and gender-based violence may have difficulty anticipating or understanding the possible consequences of telling their stories. Gender and conflict-sensitive journalists are ready to accept that consent may be suddenly withdrawn.

- Preferring to keep the anonymity of survivors of sexualised and gender-based violence, even if they consent to reveal their identity. The reason is that many survivors are traumatised and might reason that they have nothing left to lose, while a media story can contribute to the stigmatisation of them and their families long after publishing. Discuss in extensive detail risks and benefits of the publication of the real name of the survivor, omit personal details and don't take photos which might make her or him recognisable.

- For LGBTQ+ persons, avoid revealing their sexual orientation and gender identity if not relevant to the story and only upon their informed consent. Be aware that even other details such as symbols or the location, for example if it is a place frequently visited by LGBTQ+ people, might unintentionally "out" LGBTQ+ people.

- Most importantly, gender- and conflict-sensitive journalists recognise that sometimes it is necessary to sacrifice a story to protect the interests of survivors.

# Anonymous sourcing: balancing ethics and responsibility

By: Rula Asad

Conversations with Colombian women social leaders form the basis of this article, providing insights into their interactions with the media.

The article explores the complex matter of source anonymity, navigating the fine line between traditional journalism ethics and the more empathetic approach of feminist media, with a particular focus on reporting from contexts of conflict. At its core, it champions the inclusion of women's voices, drawing strength from their lived experiences to create a narrative that is not only balanced but also profoundly inclusive. With a particular emphasis on women's voices during and after armed conflicts, it underscores the importance of safeguarding their identities as sources while shedding light on the injustices they witness and experience.

In the realm of media ethics, the utilisation of anonymous sources remains a thorny and pivotal issue. It requires a delicate dance between upholding journalistic integrity, promoting transparency, protecting sources and guaranteeing the public's fundamental right to information. This complex network of ethical considerations becomes even more challenging when viewed through the lens of feminist media, which is dedicated to amplifying the voices of the marginalised and addressing issues like gender-based violence, discrimination and inequity.

In the field of conflict reporting, ensuring the anonymity of women sources becomes a recurrent endeavour. The heightened safety risks, censorship challenges and the pressing need to protect their wellbeing make safeguarding their identities more often than not imperative. Anonymity can empower women to share their experiences openly, free from the fear of backlash, and it contributes to a more inclusive narrative, ensuring that often-marginalised voices in conflict zones are not further silenced.

Many women social leaders and activists are motivated by a desire to expose the injustices they witness or experience firsthand. Their unwavering stance against state and armed groups' violence constitutes also a confrontation against patriarchy, which often comes at a personal cost, not just to themselves but also to their loved ones. They see the media as a vital tool for shedding light on these issues and believe in its power to magnify their message and drive change.

How, then, are the principles of informed consent and accountability to be interpreted in order to guide a journalistic production that handles anonymous sources responsibly? The answers presented in this text provide a number of recommendations to unravel the complexities of engaging with anonymous sources, all the while adhering to the foundational principles of journalism, particularly as viewed through the feminist media perspective.

## Playing fair: the risks and benefits of unseen advocates

In the pursuit of fairness in traditional journalism, it serves as a core principle to avoid allowing sources to offer anonymous information and opinions about matters and other issues. Unidentified sources are to be included sparingly in reports and never to be permitted to either criticise or commend individuals without attribution. While there may be cases where off-the-record information is deemed valuable, it is crucial to weigh the fairness of including a source's information and opinion when his or her identity is hidden. Of course, there are exceptions, notably for whistleblowers and those making allegations of sexual assault.

Nevertheless, in certain contexts, like post-conflict zones, activists – especially women – may be at risk due to their outspokenness against the status quo, violence and any kind of oppression. These women play a crucial role in exposing corruption, state violence and legal injustices. In such scenarios, fairness entails protecting the source and avoiding any information that could jeopardise her life or subject her to retaliation.

## Adding transparency: the need to justify the use of anonymous sources

Transparency remains a foundational principle of all ethical journalism. Maintaining sources "on the record" should be a primary consideration before incorporating such information into a report. When considering anonymous sources, it is imperative to ask essential questions. Is the source credible, reliable and knowledgeable? Is there a significant journalistic justification for using

information without attribution? In situations where source anonymity is crucial for the safety and security of individuals, it becomes vital to explicitly clarify in the story why the source opted for anonymity and, when applicable, to disclose his or her underlying motives. When considering sources, we must recognise that women's lived experiences and perspectives hold valuable insights and knowledge and thus acknowledge that including the voices of women aligns with traditional journalistic ethics related to source credibility, reliability and knowledge.

## Guideline: our word is binding

For women activists, the importance of carefully handling their anonymity cannot be emphasised enough. They often operate on the frontlines of exposing injustices within their communities and societies. They take significant risks to speak out and shed light on issues that have been buried in darkness for far too long. The assurance of anonymity can be a lifeline for them, allowing them to share their experiences and insights without fear.

However, it is essential to recognise that the legal protection afforded to journalists regarding source identities and confidential information may not always be foolproof. Courts can compel journalists to reveal such information, potentially leading to legal consequences, including fines and even imprisonment.

To mitigate these risks, conduct extensive discussions with the media outlet and the source. This underscores the gravity with which one should approach the act of granting anonymity.

Consult supervisors and the legal team before promising confidentiality. This discussion should encompass the necessity of the promise, the precise scope of confidentiality, conditions under which the source might release you from this commitment and potential risks involved. The goal is to ensure that any promises made can be upheld.

Also dedicate as much time as needed to talk to the source. She should understand the risks and benefits of anonymity and the extent to which you can grant it. Disclosure of the source's identity should only occur if she has provided explicit consent under a specific and agreed set of circumstances.

## Guideline: safeguarding extends to the online landscape

In today's digital age, many source interactions occur online, through emails and social media platforms. It is crucial to ensure that the source is fully informed about what parts of the conversations are on-the-record. The need to keep records of digital interviews should be communicated explicitly to potential sources when initiating contact with them, whether anonymous or not. When choosing to withhold a source's identity, refrain from creating fictitious pseudonyms and employ pronouns and descriptive details to attribute her statements or actions, ensuring that factual and not fabricated information is provided about her. This approach ensures transparency while preserving a degree of anonymity.

However, it is necessary to be mindful of the digital landscape's potential pitfalls. The digital age offers various possibilities for information exposure, and this could inadvertently lead to the identification of a source who should have been kept anonymous. The digital trail left behind can sometimes be exploited to unveil identities. Therefore, while leveraging digital communication is essential, it also comes with the responsibility of doing the utmost to protect the sources, through the most advanced technological means available, recognising that women’s perspectives hold valuable insights and knowledge.

## Guideline: clear attribution when citing sources

When acknowledging the sources of information, it is imperative to provide clear and unequivocal attribution. If you are crediting information to anonymous sources, it is assumed that these sources are your own, and you have personally obtained the information from them. However, in cases where this assumption is not accurate and you are referencing reports from other news organisations that rely on their own anonymous sources, you must be diligent about crediting the information to those specific news outlets. Additionally, it is essential to furnish as much detail as possible regarding the identity of those sources. If you use information from women activists who have chosen to remain anonymous, consider acknowledging their contribution in the article. While they may not have a byline, you can make a note of their role or position in providing the information, where appropriate.

## Guideline: what to avoid in handling anonymous sources

There are several key “don't” pieces of advice to keep in mind. Firstly, it is crucial to refrain from making negative comments about the source’s character, reputation or personal qualities, or derogatory statements about an institution, when utilising anonymous sources in your reporting. These types of content should generally not find their way into your stories, except in rare circumstances.

An exception to this rule is when an individual is exposing significant wrongdoing or making allegations of sexual assault or sexual/gender-based violence. In such cases, careful consideration should be given, and the decision to include such claims should be

made in consultation with senior news managers, taking into account the safety and wellbeing of the source.

Secondly, disguising the identity of a source who provides information on the record may be acceptable if revealing her name could put her in danger, subject her to legal issues or pose other serious threats. In such cases, you can refer to the individual without using her last name, provided she is comfortable with such a level of anonymity and the situation aligns with media criteria for granting anonymity. This practice is particularly crucial when it comes to ensuring the safety and security of women sources.

Additionally, offering information from sources who agree to share it only if it remains unattributed to them is a sensitive matter. Journalists should exercise their discretion to assess whether the information justifies such a decision while giving top priority to the safety and wellbeing of the sources.

## Guideline: the role of supervisors in disclosing anonymous news

It must be remembered that individual journalists, including reporters and producers, lack the authority to unilaterally guarantee that information provided anonymously will be featured in the media outlet they represent. In the course of reporting, valuable information may be acquired under the condition of being "off the record". However, the decision regarding whether this information will be disseminated by the media outlet can only be reached through consultation with an editor.

The more critical the information, the higher the level of the editor involved in the deliberation. While there may not be a strict rule in this regard, editors should consistently lean towards prudence when uncertainty arises and engage with the editor positioned above them. In situations where a reporter and editor are aware in advance that a pivotal interview requires granting the source anonymity, preliminary discussions with a senior editor should take place, allowing the presentation of a case for this concession.

Amid the complexities of anonymous sourcing, ethics and responsibility are the guiding stars. It is a landscape where context and the diverse identities of sources play a pivotal role, considering the trauma they may have experienced. The feminist perspective on anonymous sourcing within journalism adds a multifaceted dimension.

In summary, the feminist perspective on anonymous sourcing underscores the need to protect and uplift marginalised voices, especially in contexts where gender-based issues are at the forefront. It harmonises ethical journalism principles with the imperative of empowering and safeguarding those who have historically been under-represented. In this balancing act, journalism retains its ethical compass while ensuring that the most vulnerable among us are heard and protected.

# Women social leaders and journalists: an analysis of participatory journalism

By: Laura Gil

The content produced by social leaders themselves and social leaders working together with a traditional outlet – the national newspaper El Espectador – in an unprecedented effort in the country to produce participatory journalism, contributed to the implementation of United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 through the media at a time of upheaval for journalism.

The current transformation of journalism is driven by societal and technical changes that have confronted political forces intent on making a genuine battlefield of media renewal rather than a space for adaptation. Colombia has not escaped this global trend; albeit a prolonged history of internal armed conflict, a fairly homogeneous national composition and a lack of connectivity in the most disputed areas of the country among remaining guerrillas, drug dealers and criminal gangs, have given particular nuances to the debate on the duties and rights of the media.

According to media analyst and gender expert Paul Amar, three epochal crises are taking place simultaneously: the rise of heteropatriarchal regimes of nationalist populism, the struggle for universal healthcare in a time of pandemic and the battle for ownership, surveillance and mining of digital data. Certainly, Colombia faces all three.

The health crisis provoked by the pandemic, handled with the limitations of a country of the Global South, brought once again to the political and therefore also journalistic forefront the debate on a health agenda defined by one relevant fact: a population of 45 million with approximately 90 percent coverage of health insurance but little access to services, especially in rural areas. The commitment of the first Colombian leftist government to undertake a health reform has put the media at the centre of the political debate in the midst of a confrontation with the public administration, given the mostly negative coverage of traditional media.

The other two turning points mentioned by Amar are defined in Colombia by the consequences of war and a complex post-conflict transition.

One must note that the discussion on electronic surveillance has been on the media agenda for decades, even long before the United States-led war on terrorism, initiated after the September 11 attacks. Anyone outside the mould, including the binary heterosexual model of patriarchal societies, could have been subjected to the mining of personal data for surveillance in the framework of an armed conflict advanced since the 1950s under the banner of national security. The debate surrounding the technology that makes social control possible has only been intensified by the global conversation in recent years.

With respect to Amar's other significant shift, it should nonetheless be emphasised that, while most of the world is witnessing the rise of heteropatriarchal regimes, Colombian feminist and LGBTQ+ movements are seeing an opportunity for their weakening in the post-conflict transition in the country. The respect for women's rights and the valorisation of sexual diversity have become a battleground to define the characteristics of a new society arising after the signature of the peace agreement with the insurgent group FARC-EP. The preoccupation with the abandoning of patriarchal values – reaffirmed by the conduct of by war – and their replacement by new ethical standards defined by communities living in peace constitutes the spinal cord joining together the media content produced by the IMS project.

For Amar, in the midst of these defining moments, journalism is undergoing three shifts that open possibilities as much as present dangers for the feminist and queer movements: an opinion-driven reframing of narratives by citizen journalists, a combination of multi-modal and crowd-sourced platforms, and a prismatic space of intersecting circuits of social media and influencers.

Social media influencers pushing women's and LGBTQ+ issues do exist in Colombia and do, in fact, have widespread impact. They have, especially, kept alive a #MeToo movement that has extended to question the past of political figures. The women participating in the project, however, lack this profile and, most often, feel distant from these disputes, undertaken firstly in a virtual realm to which they have little access. The country recognises them as social leaders – a Colombian-specific term that describes human rights defenders working in local communities – most of whom are more concerned with their contiguous piece of land than with online debates. Nor are they fighting against heteropatriarchal values vented through a nationalistic manifesto. Colombia is ethnically diverse, with strongly empowered Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities, but fairly homogenous in terms of national origin. Right and far-right wing discourses are potent; yet, they are not tainted by elements of national supremacy of one group over another.

## The media content produced by the social leaders evidenced the following:

### 1. An obsession to protect women's lives

The content brings to light the work of social leaders to protect women's lives and the integrity of their bodies and to fight impunity for crimes committed during the conflict. Sexual violence occupies a notable place, for example, in a piece about the self-defence groups and their abuse of young girls in the community of Riachuelo and in another about the efforts of non-governmental groups to bring a paramilitary commander to justice in the community of Libertad (Las condenas contra los jefes paras que logró la Iniciativa de Mujeres por la Paz). A number of articles centre on the use of sexual violence as a means of domination of a territory, be it by guerillas, self-defence groups and even state bodies. Thus, the prevention of sexual violence in armed conflict is brought forward as a line of work.

The social leaders do not appear attracted to dealing with the issue of abortion, one of contemporary interest of Colombia insofar as the Constitutional Court has legalised it up to 24 weeks. One article does indeed mention the dilemma women survivors faced when they became pregnant after rape by an illegal armed actor. Some chose abortion, and many are still dealing with the physical and psychological trauma of this decision. Others chose to carry the pregnancy to term and are struggling, along with their children, to come to accept the past. Yet, the interest of the social leaders points to a much more primary concern: not the current debates around women's autonomy over their bodies but the protection of women's bodies from the damage of the arms of the illegals.

### 2. A battle against patriarchy

An undercurrent lies beneath the message of each media product: men made war; women are due to build peace. In that sense, all products show the effort of women social leaders to build communities based on non-patriarchal values such as solidarity, companionship and collaboration. In a multimedia piece about the region of Sumapaz (Sumapaz: la historia de las mujeres que se abrieron camino en el liderazgo social), the women of the region describe their confrontation with the men when they decided to participate in local politics. Sumapaz had been an area dominated by the Farc with little presence of state institutions. Now that the area is fairly peaceful, the women have decided not to allow the national police to enter the region. One of them says on camera: "We can solve our problems ourselves through peaceful conflict-resolution mechanisms; we want along the borders of our municipality to ensure that weapons do not enter the area." Needless to say, the combination of uniforms and arms embody patriarchy. Notably, the women managed to convince the men to keep the police out. Today, Sumapaz remains police-free and peaceful.

### 3. An attachment to the territory with a focus on political participation

The pieces show the willingness of social leaders to cross over from civil society into politics. Several media products describe this transition, such as the one on Sumapaz mentioned above and one on unionised women and their candidacy for electoral posts. Social leaders emphasise that, in the end, they measure the impact of their work on whether or not they were able to shape public policy for the incorporation of a gender approach. Most of all, their desire is directed at changing their territory, a real space with precise coordinates and populated by the people they know, and not to fight battles in virtual realms with unknowns in order to influence national policy-level decisions. The social leaders of this project are indeed influencers but with an influence limited to countable people in countable acres.

### 4. The redefinition of the politics of care with social consciousness

Women are portrayed as caretakers. The social leaders of this project have redefined care to the service of social change. The women seen in the projects care for the protesters, for the environment, for the disappeared. One piece analyses how women got together to tend to the injuries of the students during the massive marches of 2021; another two media products describe how women organised to collect garbage, keep water sources clean and set up recycling programmes and yet another shows women caring for the unidentified dead, protecting the corpses until state institutions could move to exhume and identify. Therefore, women social leaders broke the stereotype of caretaking by turning caretaking into a revolutionary activity.

In summation, the media content produced by the project Implementing United Nations Resolution 1325 through the media shows that the work of women social leaders can be on the media agenda and thus maximise its effect in alliance with journalists who sympathise, are willing to relinquish full editorial control and understand the gender-differentiated impacts of public policy. Women social leaders in Colombia, attached to their territories, with little access to connectivity and unfamiliar with the language of social media, are unlikely to produce their own citizen journalism in the sense that we know it and is used by Amar. Nonetheless, teamed up with professional journalists willing to innovate, women social leaders can transfigure the media agenda to make women's and LGBTQ+ people's rights an essential element of the transformation the country needs. They, and Colombia, need more participatory journalism.

# Colombian women social leaders in the media: visibility or burden?

By: Rula Asad

his paper is a summary version of a larger, unpublished, research focusing on Colombian women social leaders' perspectives on media coverage and its impact on their lives and public leadership.

## Background

Although Colombia is technically a post-conflict state as of 2016, when the Colombian government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC-EP) signed a peace agreement, organised violence in the country continues. Particularly in rural territories, guerrilla movements, paramilitary successor groups and narcotraffickers clash with one another and with state security forces as they aim to expand their control over illicit economies, including illegal cocaine production and gold mining. In these areas of Colombia, the presence of state institutions remains limited, and citizens lack access to formal systems of justice and social protection.

As they seek to consolidate their power, these armed groups target social leaders who mobilise community resistance to their violent territorial and social control. Since 2016, thousands of activists and demobilised guerrillas from the FARC-EP have been attacked and killed, with 181 assassinations of social leaders and human rights defenders in 2023, according to the Office of the People's Ombudsperson. The perpetrators are further guided by the logic of militarised masculinity which does not look kindly on women who transgress traditional gender roles. While men social leaders are more likely to be murdered, women social leaders are often targeted in highly gendered ways. In other words, they are more at risk of being subject to certain forms of violence and other violations such as femicides, prejudice, exclusion and repudiation than their male counterparts, while their families become targets for threats and violence as well, with the aim of discouraging women social leaders from pursuing their work.

According to the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), women social leaders in the Colombian context are in great need of support and protection. Therefore, it is essential to recognise the specific challenges that women social leaders face to strengthen protection mechanisms and responses to their particular concerns on both local and international levels. Prompt investigations of intimidation, threats, violence and other abuses against women social leaders, whether committed by state or non-state actors, should be undertaken. The situation in practice, however, often leaves women social leaders without effective protection mechanisms.

Against this background, the performance of the media, which is the focus of this report, becomes crucial, as it is a powerful tool for affecting discourse and bringing about change. Based on the views of women social leaders, this article will address whether women social leaders' media presence in Colombia creates positive visibility for them and their cause or turns into a burden that deteriorates their security situation even further. Using feminist epistemology and the critical discourse analysis (CDA) framework, it will analyse the portrayal and positioning of 1. women social leaders' identities in the media and 2. the impact of media coverage on Colombian women social leaders' lives and public leadership.

## Methods and data collection

Following a qualitative approach, the research method used was a focus group discussion that was held online with eight Colombian women social leaders who have experience with media. This method provided a deeper perception of participants' experiences with media and a better understanding of the situation through shared experiences. The platform used was Zoom, the languages used during the discussion were Spanish and English combined with consecutive translation. Additionally, a transcript of the discussion from Spanish to English based on the record of the discussion was used.

The focus group took place to hear women's perspectives and to consult and seek their recommendations on how media can improve their work when engaging with Colombian women social leaders.

## Women social leaders' perception of their portrayal in the Colombian media

According to the critical discourse analysis employed, the power over discourse in the portrayal of women social leaders in any medium is attributable to one or more of the following factors: 1. the context; 2. the ideology and hidden power relations; and 3. the invisible pressure of being in the media. All three were present in the portrayal of women social leaders in the Colombian media.

The contextual factor determining the power over discourse is, of course, embedded in the situation of armed conflict, post-conflict and the Covid-19 pandemic, which accentuates the pre-existing authoritarian, patriarchal and censored order. The second factor is subject to the language and strategies used by media producers to frame women in their texts, whether these are utilised knowingly or unknowingly. The third factor is triggered by the media themselves, in terms of their coverage of women's issues and in terms of the extent to which their mode of operation ensures that women have an equal partnership in their production roles and processes

## Authoritarianism, patriarchy and censorship

Providing misinformation is one of the most repeated issues observed by women social leaders concerning their representation in the media, meaning the media gives either wrong information or obscures details vis-à-vis what has been provided by the women social leaders themselves and their participation in the peace process and efforts towards change.

Besides the misinformation, the media further use mistakes made by some women's groups to generalise the whole women's movement. Often, the media misinform and take advantage of this information to create mistrust and influence the peace process to fail.

Another negative practice of the media is the perpetuation of nepotism and favouritism. Nepotism heavily influences the local media, making it difficult for women social leaders to be represented in the media if they do not have any connections within the media sector. For example, when roundtables for "victims-survivors" take place in municipalities, women are not considered relevant and the chairperson of the table, most often a man affiliated with a specific political group and connected to media people does all the talking.

Generally, the amount of coverage of women-related topics is low. Occasional coverage increases seasonally in line with events and national or/and international occasions, such as International Women's Day on 8 March, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on 25 November or Human Rights Day on 10 December, or when a woman gets recognition, such as receiving an award. This practice is obviously perceived as negative by the women because it limits their presence in the media, gives the impression that women's issues are important only on these international days and merely pays lip-service to the cause the women are fighting for by obscuring the actual problems.

Self-censorship practised by journalists is another challenge women social leaders face regarding their portrayal in the media. Journalists' lack of preparation creates an impression that women social leaders' work is not taken seriously, wasting the interviewees' time asking for general information. Thus, interviews tend to provide general information instead of specific details. Women social leaders are not satisfied with the final result and the audience is not informed accordingly. A social leader comments: "I feel that the final result looks a bit empty, so you feel unsatisfied thinking that you were not able to say as much as you wanted. This happens with media that do not support us. When media are supporting us, we can talk more freely, express our opinions better, then we feel that the interview was good and are satisfied with the result, but this is not always [the case]."

This unprofessional practice from journalists costs women social leaders extra labour and responsibility to educate the audience. Another stated: "We need to go to the media to fully explain what the 1325 resolution is and why we supported all child victims of the armed conflict."

Women social leaders are taken less seriously. Women are being asked simplistic questions, disregarded, disempowered and undermined by the media. Therefore, many women social leaders avoid being in the media because they are afraid that the media is searching for "la chiva" (breaking news). Moreover, women believe the media do not care and downplay the fact that women social leaders can be attacked and threatened after giving an interview.[1]

## Language and hidden power relations

To promote increased gender equality, it is important to assess the meaning one creates through language with regard to women. For instance, the ongoing representation of women as victims and the exclusion of their views can serve to frame the public's view of women as helpless and lacking agency in society.

Using binary language of "us/them" creates a division between two groups: the women social leaders and the media reflecting various power relations. This is often accompanied by particular ideas, such as claiming that one group is more advanced than another. A social leader says: "The media do not identify with us, but the information they use is mainly to misinform; they do not show the real essence of [us] the women's movements in the municipal or cities in the country. They just show

[1]. For more information on women social leaders' safety, see the annex.

what is good for them."
While personalisation – in particular, naming a woman – can be used to give extra weight to media coverage, depersonalisation can be used to conceal certain issues. A social leader says: "We [women social leaders] got awards on international days, like on 8 March and 10 December. Annually, they bring women to public spaces on those days to give them a dinner and a moment. But we said, we are not going along with this media game… if we are not getting what we need, which is a public policy [more policies supporting women rights] in La Guajira."

Depersonalisation can be analysed as a generalisation that can act as a double-edged sword by politicising or depoliticising topics. In this case, women's rights and women's movement demands can be present in the media as a soft and nonpolitical topic.

Language could be used to individualise, which attributes the responsibility for a particular action to a specific actor, vis-à-vis collectivisation which may obscure responsibility. Individualisation may also have other effects, such as connecting structural abuses like corruption, to individuals rather than institutions, armed groups or systems. A social leader said: "In Guajira department [territory], each time we [women social leaders] present a new project, or we have a different opinion regarding the government, we are targeted and revictimised, even threatened…We always raise our voices, and, when we raise our voices in the departments, they give me an award. Still, for me, this makes no sense. I think they are doing that to keep us [women social leaders] silent, not as a way to share the reality of our work as women."

Coverage can be superficial way and insensitive. A social leader gave an example of media coverage during a campaign for non violence. She said: "They [journalists] are not trying to understand the meaning of the symbolic act,[2] they are only focusing on the person they are interviewing, asking 'why are you doing that?' or commenting 'how beautiful'. So superficial questions do not convey the importance of the real meaning of the act. Also, they say something like, 'How nice that this should be done in all municipalities'…They just took the picture with the breaking news and the party moment."

Through a particular use of the language, aggregation might occur. Aggregation is the treatment of participants in a story/coverage as statistics. While this is not always negative as it can be used to confirm a thesis, it may depoliticise a topic such as gender-based violence. A social leader gives an example of what the journalist focuses on when they report on violence against women: "[They ask] how many of them die, they only ask for numbers, if we know the victim and what was our relationship with the victim. But there is no deeper context relating to what is happening in the country."

## Invisible pressure of being in the media

Due to the journalists' behaviour while covering women's issues and due to the media discourse around women social leaders, many of the women social leaders feel disempowered and undermined by their presence in the media. A social leader shared the following: "Honestly, I am not keen to be in the media. I prefer that other people deal with the media. I am not a person to deal with them because I am afraid, and I do not like it."

Many social leaders expressed their discomfort and annoyance with the journalists' attitude when they gave interviews. A social leader added: "What annoyed me is that the journalist asked me questions without looking into my eyes. They posed the question and started to make some other things while we were replying like a machine, it didn't look like a real conversation."

Another unseen pressure women social leaders face when they deal with the media is the assumption that they must have media skills, which is a burden to them that does not allow them to feel comfortable when giving an interview. They also expressed their preference for dealing with local media over national "elitist" media in terms of comfort, the depth of the conversation and support to the local women's movement. A social leader declared: "There are media that have a different view, more democratic and more open. Those media are more local and quite specific for small communities or indigenous/natives' communities. It is different when they know the territories, which allows better discussion, not as hegemonic as the national ones."

According to the group, one of the media's repeated practices is ignoring collective work and the community by focusing systematically on interviewing the same people, talking about the same issues and giving legitimacy to the same persons. As a social leader stated: "For example, if someone is going to talk about sexual violence, then it is Jineth Bedoya, like she is the only one who can talk about that; or when it relates to feminist history and then it is Olga Amparo Sanchez. People don't recognise the collective feminist [work] but just one WOMAN." That practice results in doubting not well-known women voices' legitimacy when they talk about women's rights, with the media pressuring them to justify themselves.

Hence, social pressure, mental load and emotional labour should be considered when women social leaders must be in media, especially on TV. If this situation is to change, women's views need to be a constituent part of shaping the discourse about their lived experiences, in addition to ensuring that the discourse on women is positive and enables the strong agency of women. The implication is that women must have the means, through the media, to challenge the inequalities that disempower them.

**2. One of the symbolic acts was to write down on paper all the violence that women participants face and then to put them in a pot andv burn them.**

# Safety of women journalists

By: Rula Asad

In the past decade, awareness that women in the media are subject to gender-based violence has grown as a number of ground-breaking reports have been published, establishing that violence and threats against women journalists have reached endemic proportions. Three out of four women journalists have now been subject to online violence, and the killings of women journalists have increased at an unprecedented speed.[1] Along with this awareness has come a greater understanding that these threats pose a serious challenge to media freedom and development.

Addressing the safety of women journalists is not only a matter of protecting individuals but also a means of safeguarding democratic values, human rights and the richness of media representation. It is essential for fostering an environment where all journalists can work freely, contribute to informed public discourse and play a vital role in shaping the societies they serve.

In September 2016, the Human Rights Council unanimously adopted resolution 33/2 on the safety of journalists, which condemns unequivocally any specific attacks on women journalists in the exercise of their work, including sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence, intimidation and harassment online and offline, thus highlighting the need to address gender-specific threats faced by women journalists.[2]

## Un/seen threats that women journalists encounter

As concluded in the IMS report The Safety of Women Journalists: Breaking the Cycle of Silence and Violence from 2019, the threats against women journalists are two-fold. As journalists they are threatened by the dangers all journalists work under but are also targeted for the simple fact that they are women taking on a public role.

The safety of women journalists from a gender perspective refers to ensuring the physical, psychological and professional wellbeing of women journalists. This concept includes protection from the violence, harassment and discrimination that threaten women journalists and hinder them from carrying out their work. From a feminist perspective, the safety of women journalists involves examining and addressing power dynamics, structural inequalities and gender-based violence. A feminist perspective allows us to dismantle patriarchal systems that upholds discrimination, oppression and violence against women. This perspective is crucial to understanding and addressing the unique challenges faced by women journalists. The safety of women journalists, whether they work as contractors for media houses or as freelancers, can be categorised in three broad groups. Physical and sexual violence includes killing, physical abuse and detention, but women journalists are also more often targets of sexual violence than men journalists. Verbal threats and abuse, particularly online, include, in high volume, explicit threats of sexual violence, personal insults and circulation of private information or demeaning images. Workplace harassment, discrimination and social inequality manifest in unequal pay, low numbers of women able to advance to the decision-making levels and a tolerance or lack of protocols for handling sexual harassment by colleagues, sources or interviewees. Social pressure against women in the media and family obligations also disadvantage women in the field.

In 2021, the percentage of women journalists killed rose to 11 percent from six percent the previous year. This concerning increase may reflect the growing trend of women journalists facing online gender-based attacks that esca-

Gender-based violence (GBV) is an umbrella term for harmful acts that hurt, threaten, violate, force or restrict a person, that are directed at an individual or a group based on their gender and that are based on

[1]. "The Chilling: Global Trends in online violence against women journalists (Research discussion paper), UNESCO (2021).
[2]. "Combating violence against women journalists - Report of the Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences", Human Rights Council (2020).
[3]. "Knowing the truth is protecting the truth: highlights of the UNESCO Director-General's report on the safety of journalists and the danger of impunity published on the occasion of the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists 2022", UNESCO (2022)

late into offline violence, thereby endangering their safety.[3]

Women journalists reporting on or originating from conflict zones face an elevated risk due to the harsh realities of the conflict, particularly due to the widespread availability of weapons, the presence of militias and the absence of legal structures. They may face physical threats to their safety, involving intimidation, kidnappings, threats of rape, harming family members, causing disabilities, stealing or destroying equipment and, in extreme cases, even assassinating women journalists and citizen journalists.

During the military coup 2021 in Myanmar, women journalists were arrested while reporting the news and during house raids. The arrests included mothers of underaged children. They encountered acts of violence and threats during the arrests and interrogations, and communication with families was prohibited for a prolonged period during interrogation and detention. The detainees were deprived of the protection of law and were charged and sentenced under unjust laws. Once released, they were unable to return to their professions in the news and media communities.[4]

ince 7 October 2023, Palestinian journalists have been operating under extremely challenging conditions. Among the journalists walking that taxing tightrope between work, family and safety is Mona Akal, who reports for Palestine TV from inside of Gaza. She has a young daughter, whom she is trying to take care of while doing her work. "The pressure has been so immense, navigating two responsibilities: the responsibility of work and the responsibility of family," she says. "There are many difficult situations. We are here every day. We die a million times because we see and live the pain of all the people, and we have seen things that might take years to forget."[5]

While sexual violence remains largely under-reported due to social stigma and shame, the UNESCO Global Survey on Online Violence against Women Journalists found that 18 percent of women journalists have been threatened with sexual violence. Sexual violence against women journalists can occur in detention, in crowded places and elsewhere and be perpetuated by sources or coworkers during assignments alone.

Online harassment on social media platforms and online spaces can become arenas for harassment and abuse directed at women journalists. Women journalists are frequently targeted with online harassment, cyberbullying and misogynistic attacks. According to a report published by UNESCO in 2021 on global trends in online violence against women journalists, 40 percent of "personal attacks" were sexist and misogynistic.4 This can include hate speech, threats, doxing (publishing private information online) and the spread of false narratives or stories about their lives. The anonymity provided by online platforms can embolden harassers and make it difficult for women journalists to trace or confront their attackers.

Some individuals or groups may engage in organised trolling and discrediting campaigns, including gendered disinformation and sexist hate speech, against women journalists. These campaigns aim to undermine their credibility, professionalism and reputation by spreading false information, conspiracy theories or misleading narratives. For more information on online gender-based violence, see IMS' Intersectional Feminist Media Development Learning Brief no. 2.[6]

Being a woman journalist entails specific challenges, as does reporting on women's issues. In 2016 and 2017, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) registered more than 60 cases in more than 20 countries of journalists' rights being violated in connection with their reporting on the issues faced by women.[7] In Colombia, women reporting on human rights issues such as land right and environmental problems are particularly targeted with often fatal attacks.

In IMS' report on women journalists' safety from 2019, sexual harassment in the workplace was cited as a safety threat to women in nearly all nine countries of the study (Afghanistan, Colombia, Indonesia, Iraq, Kenya, Nepal, Pakistan, Somalia and The Philippines).[8]

**CASE**

## Kalfadhi connects young Somalis with their paliamentarians

Across Somalia, 49 media houses have signed the Gender Declaration developed by the Somali Women Journalists Organisation (SWJO) in 2018. Signatories have pledged to implement 19 concrete and actionable points, ranging from enabling equal opportunities in their workplaces to implementing measures against sexual harassment. One significant impact is that the Gender Declaration has created an entirely new space for dialogue and discussion around issues relating to gender, and more specifically around the sensitive topic of sexual harassment in the workplace.

As a result of those discussions, two media houses proceeded to instal CCTV cameras to provide a safer working environment for women journalists, and in one instance caught sexual harassment taking place on video and later took measures against the perpetrator. The cameras not only provided evidence but also prevented new cases

4. "Detained women journalists during the military coup", Myanmar Women Journalists Society (2021)
5. The Silencing of Gaza (IMS): The silencing of Gaza | IMS (mediasupport.org)
6. Ibid, UNESCO (2021)
7. Women's rights – forbidden subject, Reporters without borders
8. The safety of women journalists: Breaking the cycle of silence and violence report, IMS, 2019.

and provided more security and safety for women journalists.

Furthermore, three media houses have introduced paid maternity leave and others have established gender desks and prayer rooms reserved for women. IMS, together with Fojo Media Institute, has worked with SWJO since 2016.

Other forms of GBV are microaggressions and sexism, which are subtle and often unintentional discriminatory remarks or behaviours and can be a constant challenge for women journalists. Sexist comments, stereotypes and everyday sexism may be pervasive in the workplace and contribute to a hostile environment. Unequal pay, limited opportunities for career advancement and exclusion from important assignments may persist as unseen threats affecting their professional growth.

In Afghanistan, Khujesta (not her real name), an Afghan woman journalist, acknowledges that the challenges she faces are two-fold. Since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, the country's media outlets have faced self-censorship, limited access to information and restrictions on the topics they can report on. But women journalists must also navigate restrictions on their rights as women, such as the closure of the journalism education for women, limitations on employment and freedom of movement and specific dress codes mandating women in the media to cover their faces – which further limit their ability to report.[9]

Women journalists may be subjected to gendered stereotypes and objectification in which their appearance and personal lives are emphasised over their professional capabilities. Women journalists may also be subject to tokenism in which they are included in newsrooms primarily for the sake of appearance or to have woman in the team rather than for their expertise. This form of marginalisation can make it challenging for women to be taken seriously and to have their voices heard on important issues. A frequently overlooked issue pertains to the subtle effects of gaslighting and manipulation, a form of psychological control that seeks to instil doubt in individuals regarding their perceptions or mental wellbeing. Within the professional sphere, women journalists may encounter gaslighting as constant, low-to-moderate volume abuse and harassment that burns slowly but can be cumulatively devastating.[10]

Applying an intersectional feminist perspective allows us to delve into the safety of women journalists from multiple angles, considering how factors like gender, race, class, age, abilities, geography, ethnicity and more reinforce each other. The UNESCO study from 2021 shows that women journalists identifying as Black, Indigenous or Jewish experience online harassment to a significantly higher degree than white women journalists, and lesbian and bisexual women journalists to a higher degree than heterosexual women journalists. Arab women are also alarmingly more at risk of experiencing offline attacks than all others.[11]

Among these overwhelming challenges, women journalists, especially those who operate as contractors for media houses or as freelancers, face a lack of support and solidarity from their colleagues and media organisations. This absence of support can engender feelings of isolation and reluctance to report incidents of threats, harassment or discrimination, fuelled by the fear of potential repercussions on their careers. Inadequate resources for training, mental health support and legal assistance further contribute to a hostile working environment.

## Why is ensuring the safety of women journalists crucial?

Ensuring the safety of women journalists is fundamental to upholding press freedom, a cornerstone of democratic societies. Journalists play a vital role in providing information, fostering public debate and holding those in power accountable. When women journalists face threats, violence or harassment, it undermines the free flow of information and weakens democratic principles.

Women journalists contribute to diverse perspectives and voices in the media landscape. Ensuring their safety is essential to fostering an inclusive and representative media environment. When women cannot work safely, it limits their ability to contribute fully to journalistic endeavours, resulting in a less diverse and enriched media landscape.

The safety of women journalists is a matter of human rights. Every individual, regardless of gender, has the right to work in an environment free from any sort of violence. Protecting the rights of women journalists aligns with broader efforts to promote human rights, equality and dignity for all.

Addressing the safety of women journalists is integral to advancing gender equality. It involves dismantling systemic barriers and challenging cultural norms that perpetuate discrimination and violence against women in the media sector. A safe working environment allows women journalists to thrive professionally and contribute to shaping public discourse.

The safety of journalists, including women, is linked to the credibility and trustworthiness of the media. When journalists face threats or violence, it can lead to self-censorship, compromising the ability to report on critical issues without fear. A safe environment enables journalists to fulfil their role as watchdogs, contributing to a more informed public.

Women journalists often cover issues that affect societal wellbeing,

9. The stories of Afghanistan's women journalists (afghanwitness.org)
10. ibid UNESCO (2021)
11. ibid UNESCO (2021)

including women's rights gender-based violence, and social justice. When their safety is compromised, it can negatively impact the quality and depth of reporting on these critical issues, preventing societal awareness and progress.

Addressing the safety of women journalists contributes to preventing impunity for acts of violence and harassment. Creating mechanisms to investigate and prosecute those responsible for attacks on journalists sends a clear message that such actions will not be tolerated, fostering a safer environment for media professionals.

## What can media development organisations do?

Addressing the safety of women journalists requires a comprehensive and inclusive approach that involves media development organisations, tech industries and advocacy groups.

1. Proactively adopt and enforce policies that promote gender equality, prevent discrimination and address harassment in media houses. These policies should be clear, accessible and include transparent mechanisms for reporting and addressing complaints.

2. Advocate for and actively work towards stronger legal protections against gender-based violence and harassment in the workplace, including advocating for the ratification and implementation of the ILO Convention concerning the elimination of violence and harassment in the world of work (C190). Legal frameworks should encompass both online and offline spaces to ensure comprehensive protection for women journalists.

3. Organise training programmes designed to raise awareness about gender-based challenges and equip journalists with tangible tools to mitigate these issues effectively. This could involve scenario-based training, digital safety modules and circles of exchange intersecting across various contexts.

4. Recognising the power of solidarity, establish tangible support networks within the journalism community both nationally and regionally. Implement mentorship programmes that pair seasoned journalists with newcomers, providing guidance and a platform for sharing experiences. Additionally, consider forming alliances and forums where women journalists can collaboratively address challenges and advocate for their rights.

**CASE**

## Syrian Female Journalists Network (SFJN)

SFJN, a Syrian exile feminist media development foundation and long-term IMS partner, addresses the multifaceted challenges encountered by Syrian women journalists. According to SFJN's Protection Programme Coordinator, Nada Al Jendi, these challenges span various contexts, including within media institutions, fieldwork environments and the online space. She says: "As women in the media sector, they experience different forms of violence and discrimination, including societal rejection that limits women to specific professions. The media sector is not immune to such biases. Frequently, these threats aim to dissuade them from pursuing journalism careers." Within media institutions, gender-based discrimination is common, with limited job opportunities, biased hiring practices favouring men and the absence of protective policies. In the field, security risks such as bombings and shelling pose significant dangers, compounded by societal non-acceptance of women in media. Obtaining press cards is difficult, hindering their work and exposing them to security threats. In Turkey, exiled Syrian media outlets face obstacles obtaining work permits and press cards, putting them at risk of arrest and deportation. Online, the digital space is deemed generally unsafe, especially when covering taboo women's issues, leading to offensive comments, smear campaigns and cyberbullying.

SFJN's protection programme provides support to Syrian women journalists and human rights defenders facing violence and gender-based discrimination. It includes a case management mechanism, emergency grants, referral systems, knowledge production and training on protection and safety procedures and wellbeing techniques. Additionally, the programme collaborates with Syrian media outlets to improve their working environments by developing protection policies and procedures.

## Do you want to know more?

### Suggested reading:

- Knowing the truth is protecting the truth: highlights of the UNESCO Director-General's report on the safety of journalists and the danger of impunity published on the occasion of the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists. UNESCO, 2022.
- The Chilling: Global Trends in online violence against women journalists (Research discussion paper), UNESCO (2021).
- Legal frameworks: The nexus of gender-based violence and media, IMS, 2020.
- The safety of women journalists: Breaking the cycle of silence and violence, IMS (2019).

### Resources for media and journalists:

- Making invisible visible, ARTICLE 19, 2021:

  **Guideline 1**: An intersectional gender guide to monitoring and documenting attacks against journalists and social communicators.

  **Guideline 2**: Advocating on emblematic cases of attacks against journalists using an intersectional gender approach.

  **Guideline 3**: An intersectional gender guide to protection training.

- They came together not to be silenced, Kvinna Till Kvinna, 2023.

# Thank you to our donors:

*IMS (International Media Support) is a non-profit organisation supporting local media in countries affected by armed conflict, human insecurity and political transition. Peaceful, stable societies based on democratic values rely on ethical and critical journalism that aims to include, not divide. Good journalism. Better societies.*

IMS

GOOD JOURNALISM | BETTER SOCIETIES


CONTACT
info@mediasupport.org

VISIT
www.mediasupport.org

CONNECT
forfreemedia
InternationalMediaSupport
IMSforfreemedia
IMSforfreemedia.bsky.social
ims-international-media-support