

# **The Role of Media in Girls and Young Women's Activism and Participation**

Submission to the OHCHR Working  
Group on Discrimination against  
Women and girls

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# Introduction

**Free Press Unlimited (FPU)** welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the report of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)'s Working Group on Discrimination against Women and girls. Gender inequality still constitutes a major obstacle in realizing young women's and girls' unhindered participation in political and public life, including in the form of activism. Media and journalism (including in its digital forms) greatly impact our perceptions and ideas about the role of women and girls in society, and thus could have the tendency to perpetuate unhelpful stereotypes. Having said that, addressing representation, safety and equality of women in this context then also offers important opportunities for positive change, encouraging greater public and political participation of girls and young women.

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

In this submission we focus on the main trends and challenges that exist for women journalists today. We conclude with best practices and recommendations. The input from our submission is based on our own work experience and on input from our partners.

## Trends and Challenges

### Women are underrepresented in news media

Media today, from traditional legacy media to online media, still hugely influence our perceptions and ideas about the role of women and girls in society. An important trend that we have observed until now is that **mainstream news media tend to perpetuate gender inequality as women remain underrepresented on various fronts, and news stories most often do not challenge gender stereotypes**. The 2020 Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP) shows that at the global average only 25% of news subjects and sources in print, radio and television were women. The report states that "it could be argued that the capacities in which people speak or have a voice in the news symbolize the value placed on their opinion. Gender disparities in these roles or functions suggest the worth accorded to people's voices on the basis of gender identity."<sup>1</sup> Women tend to (be invited to) speak mostly on issues supposedly of interest to them – or gender specific issues, such as sexual harassment against women or income inequality. However, if they appear only to talk about gender-related issues, their voice will be excluded from mainstream or traditionally male-oriented issues (like politics and government), which affect women too. Added to that, the GMMP shows that only 3% of all news stories clearly challenge gender stereotypes, meaning that these stories are as (un)likely to do so as they were 15 years ago. On top of that, the women that do appear in the news media are often portrayed in stereotypical ways, for example as housewives, victims or models, whereas men are typically characterized as powerful and dominant with little room for alternative ideas of masculinity. This is often culturally determined and traditions play a major role in the formation of these ideas.

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1 "Who Makes the News?" 6th Global Media Monitoring Project ([GMMP 2020](#)), p. 32.

## Online harassment against women journalists is surging

A second trend that impacts (young) women's participation in political and public life – including specifically in their contributions as journalists, politicians and activists – is the **growing (online) harassment** that they experience during and in response to their work. When it comes to journalists, harassment is a global challenge that affects those from all genders. Women journalists, however, carry the extra burden of gender-based abuse in addition to potential threats when covering sensitive topics. To illustrate this: in 2020, emergency help-requests of female journalists to FPU's [Reporters Respond](#) fund have increased by 170% in comparison to 2019. Next to the severe emotional distress these attacks cause, the chilling effect makes (online) abuse a highly effective method to scare off and silence women journalists.

We see a global trend of unprecedented levels of specifically online harassment directed at women journalists. Recent research indicates that 73% of women journalists say they have experienced online abuse in the course of their work, especially after having covered sensitive topics.<sup>2</sup> The report in question shows an exponential growth of such incidents, although many women journalists are expected not to report violence of this kind. While online harassment of male journalists is often related to their work, attacks targeted at women are often gender-based and sexual in nature.

With the increased shifting of interactions towards the online sphere as a result of the COVID-pandemic, this trend is only exacerbated. Our partners experience this first hand. In Malaysia and Nepal, our partners report that women journalists have to deal with waves of online gender-based intimidation (for example in the form of online stalkers and unwanted spam messages, including sexualized pictures and videos), especially when writing about issues related to women's rights. Similarly, in El Salvador women journalists regularly face harassment, consisting of highly misogynistic and hateful content. Even worse, most of the digital attacks in South America come directly from government officials who in their exemplary roles hold an extra responsibility to not behave in such a way and which adds an extra layer to feelings of unsafety.

Reports are also showing that **online violence against women journalists is increasingly spilling offline**: a study shows that 20% of women journalists say they have been attacked offline in connection with online violence.<sup>3</sup> This occurs in addition to the offline harassment that women journalists are already experiencing, including in the form of verbal and physical violence. According to our partners in the Philippines, it is not unusual for women journalists to receive comments with sexual undertones, as well as inappropriate jokes, including body shaming and personal questions. The perpetrators of this kind of abuse, and of physical abuse – which extends from unwanted touching and disrespect of personal space to rape and murder – are mentioned to range from male colleagues and crew-members to people of authority, including government officials and police officers.

## Gender discrimination in the workplace

This reference to male colleagues as perpetrators of the harassment that women journalists experience brings us to a third trend impacting women's participation in political and public life: **continued gender discrimination in the workplace**, for example through the **undermining of competence by male colleagues**. A lot of men do not believe that women are as capable as their male colleagues, which results in women journalists being silenced and dismissed when contributing to a discussion. In addition to this, women journalists in Costa Rica describe a culture where no one speaks up on their behalf, further undermining the position of women in the workplace. Another example of discrimination in the workplace is reflected in the **glass ceiling on women journalists' career development**, with the reality still being that **women are heavily**

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2 UNESCO & ICFJ (2020) "[Online violence against women journalists: a global snapshot of incidence and impacts](#)"

3 UNESCO & ICFJ (2020) "[Online violence against women journalists: a global snapshot of incidence and impacts](#)"

**underrepresented in leadership positions.** Our partners in Pakistan, Egypt, Nigeria, Nepal, Malaysia, Venezuela and Central America all identified this as a huge impediment to achieving equality. Not only does the imbalance of men and women in leadership positions lead to women journalists being excluded from promotions, but it also affects the diversity within news content itself. Young women journalists often also do not have a role model to look up to and to assist them in advancing their careers.

## Youth are underrepresented in the media

When looking at young women's (and girls') political and public participation specifically, an important trend is also the relative under-representation of youth in the media. Young people constitute a large and thus significant group in society, especially in developing countries. Faced with complex social problems such as unemployment, conflict, climate change and poverty, youth are often excluded from the public and political debate that aims to source solutions to these problems. **The global professional landscape currently does not include and inform young people adequately.**

# Best Practices and Recommendations

## Inclusive and gender-transformative reporting

In order to promote and increase (young) women journalists' and activists' participation in political and public life and address the challenges they face, an important recommendation is the encouragement of **inclusive and gender-transformative reporting**. This type of reporting should focus on content that includes minority groups and young people, and denounces gender stereotyping. Training and development programs for media-workers and newsroom-staff are important in achieving this. A successful example of gender-transformative reporting comes from our partners in Bangladesh and Nepal, where local radio directly contributed to reducing the amount of child marriages. In the form of humorous radio-soaps and talk shows, the media was able to shape societies' perception of a controversial topic such as child marriage.

The inclusion of women's perspectives and voices, however, is not an end in itself. Women also need more equitable access to knowledge and opportunities to not only be included but be active and heard when included. As mentioned, the media itself must be trained and educated appropriately. Media development programs and editorial policies should thus not only require the equal portrayal of men and women, but it should also actively challenge stereotypes and raise awareness about gender inequalities in society and within news rooms. An example of a practice that promotes the transformative potential of news media is **the inclusion of male voices as examples of women's empowerment**. If women are restricted to speaking only on women-related topics, men are, in turn, excluded from them. The media must include more men who have been involved in female empowerment to enable other men to identify with the broadcasts, underpinning the message that female empowerment does not just concern women.

There are many strategies that can be applied to encourage inclusive and gender-transformative reporting. Interventions that we have seen to be specifically successful in promoting gender equality in the media sector and its content include for example **a database of female experts**, as has been created by our partner UCOFEM in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the DRC, just as we have seen is a trend globally, female voices are often absent in the media. This is not always attributed to an unwillingness to include female experts, but it could also result from the time-pressure that comes with covering a story. Many existing databases consist almost exclusively of male experts. Making an overview of women experts that journalists can consult or interview with

regards to different topics has the potential to increase the weight and voice of women in the news.

A second intervention that could serve as an example is a **quality standard for media companies**. Tuwindi, our partner in Mali, has developed a label that is used to review Malian media organizations on their performance in gender equality. To obtain this [“Gender, Independence and Professionalism \(GIP\)” label](#), the organizations need to fulfill at least 21 of the 30 requirements. For example, women must represent at least 30% of a media company’s leadership and have the same income as men in similar positions. So far, ten of the 34 organizations that were reviewed have obtained the label and even more now have an organizational gender policy in place.

## Tackling online harassment

As we have seen, (online) harassment presents a significant challenge for (young) women journalists to safely do their work. Creating an environment where all people, especially women, are able to exercise their right of expression without being threatened is therefore crucial. On the one hand it is necessary to **implement (effective) accountability mechanisms**, as in the vast majority of cases of online attacks the perpetrators go free and are not held accountable for their actions. This, however, is a complex task with a variety of factors intertwining: a lack of effective cooperation between states, a lack of effective cooperation between states and non-state actors (such as online platforms), a lack of effective frameworks to ensure effective investigations, a lack of legal frameworks to penalize online violence and a lack of representation of women in relevant law and policy maker positions - just to name a few.

In response, civil society groups like the Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) in Pakistan have launched their own projects aimed at facilitating safer spaces. **The establishment of (safety) networks** like the [DRF’s Network of Women Journalists for Digital Rights](#) can play an important role in strengthening the protection of (women) journalists and human rights defenders, both directly and through advocacy efforts. Such safety networks are crucial for mental support for women who have had to deal with online harassment.

## Ensuring the workplace is a safe space

To challenge gender discrimination in the workplace that is still persistent in the media sector, a number of recommendations can also be attained. Most importantly, **internal gender policies that support women advancing to leadership positions** have great potential to address gender inequality in media organizations. In Nepal, our partners indicate that the lack of such policies and thus the lack of women in decision-making positions at times even leads to women journalists leaving the field. Partners in Central America and Venezuela – where it is also very rare to find women in management positions in newsrooms – confirm this. These gender policies have a number of factors to consider, including recruitment practices and the gender balance of staff, equal pay, safe working environments for men and women, and proper work-life balance (including resolving issues related to maternity leave and childcare). **Offering skills, tools and support to women journalists through leadership trainings**, as WSCIJ (FPU’s partner in Nigeria) has been doing through their [Female Reporters Leadership Program](#), has proven to be highly effective. Among the women who followed the fellowship, 59% were promoted or given greater responsibilities in their organizations afterwards. These trainings also led to women feeling empowered to take the lead and starting new initiatives.