Written submission from the International Press Institute (IPI) for the call from the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women, Ms. Dubravka Šimonović, for the forthcoming report on Violence against Women Journalist.

1. The International Press Institute (IPI) is a global network of editors, media executives and leading journalists dedicated to the defence of press freedom and the free flow of news and information. Founded in 1950 by 34 editors from 15 countries, IPI today has members in nearly 100 countries.

2. We welcome this opportunity to provide input to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. Equally, we welcome Ms. Dubravka Šimonović efforts to support media freedom and freedom of expression as fundamental rights that guarantee all other rights and support the functioning of democratic societies.

Women journalists under attack: Online harassment and smear campaigns

3. While it is clear that arbitrary imprisonment, physical attacks and disproportionate laws remain serious threats to press freedom, illiberal- and authoritarian-minded governments are increasingly employing tactics that seek to broadly, intimidate, silence and erode the credibility of independent, critical women journalists, therefore undermining journalism's watchdog role without necessarily resorting to visible oppression. While such methods are not new, their impact in recent years has grown.

4. One clear tactic is the smearing of critical media and journalists who challenge power or question the status quo – activities inherent to the practice of journalism – as threats to security, stability and national identity or as purely political actors whose criticism is ideologically driven and therefore biased**.** The impact of such rhetoric is twofold: on the one hand, it exposes the targeted journalists to online violence and a heightened risk of physical violence and can be used to justify prosecutions and jailings; on the other, the public mistrust that it deliberately generates toward the media also serves to negate the impact of critical, investigative journalism.

5. Closely connected to this development is the phenomenon of online harassment targeting journalists, especially women journalists. While in some cases such harassment may reflect organic expressions of anger at journalist content, in others it is orchestrated – or at least tacitly encouraged – by politicians and political parties. IPI's research has clearly documented the negative impact of online harassment on women journalists' personal and professional lives and the failures of state authorities to hold the perpetrators of online harassment accountable when such conduct rises to the level of a criminal act, as in the case of direct threats.

Nature of the attacks: similarities across countries

6. IPI's work across 45 newsrooms in Finland, Germany, Poland, Spain and the UK, shows that online harassment induces self-censorship and endangers a diverse and pluralistic media, given that women and minority journalists are not only more often targeted in online attacks, but also that the attacks experienced are especially vicious and often highly sexualized. The experts who contributed to the study debated whether women are primary targets of online hate because aggressors take advantage of the misogyny present in society to ensure that their messages attract greater attention and spread more quickly; or because the promotion of misogyny in society is in itself one of the goals of online vitriol. Contributors in all countries, however, agreed that silencing journalists who cover certain politically or socially contested topics, and who express diverse opinions, is the core goal of online attacks. This silencing is achieved, on the one hand, by generating fear and self-censorship among

journalists, and, on the other, by discrediting journalists in the public eye, leading to a loss of trust – journalists' most precious commodity – or loss of employment.

7. IPI's research also found other similarities in the types of online attacks that target female journalists in Europe. These can roughly be divided into the following categories:

7.1. Belittlement: These are messages aimed at belittling the journalistic work of women simply because they are women. The messages are often condescending and question the journalist's competence to carry out her work. This happens most frequently to women covering topics in historically male-dominated fields such as politics, economics, technology and sports. "I have the impression", one journalist told IPI, "that I'm not entitled to have an opinion just because I'm a woman." Another journalist in Poland recalled receiving messages asking: "How would you know about history in Poland if you are woman?". In some cases, use the name of the journalists in the diminutive. "Never have any of the colleagues who preceded me (in the Spanish nation-wide news radio show 'Hoy por Hoy' on Cadena SER) had their work criticised by using the diminutive of their name", Spanish journalist Pepa Bueno explained." With me, when they want to belittle an opinion that I have expressed in the morning editorial, I am called 'Pepita'. This is very frequent. Let's say this is what they call 'light' harassment."

7.2. Sexist insults: These are messages aimed at humiliating journalists for their physical appearance, without necessarily referring to their journalistic work. Female journalists in Poland, for example, described how most of the abusive comments they received referred to them as "fat" or "ugly" or as a "slut" or "whore" in connection with their style of dress. This pattern is among the most common observed across all countries.

7.3. Explicit and veiled threats of sexual violence or death: Explicit threats are intimidating messages that express an open desire for the death of, or physical violence against, the journalist or that are direct warnings of death or physical harm. Veiled or indirect threats tend to be apparently innocuous messages, but which the receiver interprets as threatening. The intimidating nature of these messages is usually deduced from the context that surrounds them.

7.4. Threats and insults to family and relatives: Journalists also reported that family members and colleagues might also be the recipients of threats, insults or humiliating messages. In addition, female journalists have been targeted with messages threatening or mentioning their children, an aspect seen much less often with male journalists. For example, an anonymous user wrote to a journalist who was receiving lots of criticism and insults on Twitter at the time: "By the way, you recently gave birth, how is your son?". "In the case of mothers, when violence reaches your children, you no longer just feel vulnerable yourself", Spanish journalist Cristina Fallarás said. "When you receive a message at 7 in the morning saying, 'let's kill your children who are five and 10 years old', of course … that changes your life."

7.5. Campaigns aiming to discredit journalists professionally: These are messages whose objective is to question content that the journalist has published, either by referring to her intellectual capacity or by alluding to the fact that said content reflects the personal or partisan interest of the author. This type of attack is also observed against male journalists, but in the case of women the attacks are usually accompanied by messages of a macho nature, belittlement and humiliation. Another type of attack specifically aimed at disparaging the work of a female journalist is to link her job success to her love life. Many of the journalists who took part in this study stated that they had received many comments on social networks relating to the alleged "sexual favours" that they must have given to reach the positions they currently hold.

8. The situation can be compounded further if the journalist operates in front of a camera and her face is recognizable to audiences. "The problem is that this hate is now spilling onto the streets: Journalists are being attacked", Dunya Hayli, a well-known German television journalist said in 2016. Hayali, who has been the target of vicious online campaigns while covering the so-called refugee crisis, described how a person had approached her while she was shopping and shouted in her face. Mònica Terribas, a renowned radio journalist with the Catalan public broadcaster, became a target of social media attacks by far-right groups amid the ongoing debate around Catalan independence. The online campaign against Terribas eventually resulted in an incident on October 27, 2017, when dozens of far-right protesters attacked the outside of her studio with stones. The experiences of journalists such as Dunja Hayali and Mònica Terribas show how fast online harassment can turn into, and even legitimize, physical attacks.

9. Interestingly, numerous contributors to the study pointed out that the attacks targeting women are often similar in nature to those directed at journalists who – on the basis of their names or physical traits – are perceived to have foreign origins or to belong to ethnic or religious minorities. In Poland, for instance, journalists perceived to be Jewish have been targets of violent waves of online attacks because of their (occasionally mistaken) religious identity/belief. In Germany, those coming from Turkish families, or from the wider Muslim community, have received violent online attacks more often than their colleagues, especially if they cover migration issues. For woman journalists who also identify as members of ethnic or religious minorities, the harassment can become even more extreme. For them, covering a contested topic essentially means deciding to face an avalanche of online hate and threats. In an interview with IPI, Layla-Roxanne Hill, director of the Scottish investigative journalism cooperative The Ferret and chair of the Scottish Trade Union Congress Black Workers' Committee, pointed out that if one is a person of colour "people find an extra dimension to attack you". "You will find women writers, particularly Muslim ones, who will be charged with trying to promote certain religious ideology by simply raising awareness of things that are happening to them or to their community", Hill said. "There is always the 'otherness' that will take precedent over you being a woman and a journalist, when you experience online abuse, […] so the emotional toll is one of isolation, loneliness and anger."

Topics triggering online attacks

10. While journalists have faced harassment for covering all sorts of issues, in the five countries analysed in the study, journalists said that online harassment tends to be connected with the coverage of certain particularly sensitive and divisive topics. These topics differ from country to country but share some commonalities. Coverage of refugees and migration, for example, has been a trigger for sustained harassment in Finland, Germany, Poland and the UK over the past four to five years. The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has been a particularly contested issue in Finland and Poland. Recently in Spain, discussion around the Catalan independence movement has generated attacks on journalists from across the country. Coverage of abortion tends to ignite attacks in Poland; the same can be said of coverage of far-right movements in Germany and Finland. Stories perceived as being supportive of LGBTQ+ rights, or of the "feminist agenda", appear to trigger a backlash in the online spheres of all countries studied, especially in Spain following demonstrations in support of gender equality in main cities coinciding with International Women's Day on March 8, 2018.

Coordinated campaigns of online violence

11. While journalists seem to be acutely aware about the topics that are likely to generate online vitriol, the more difficult question to answer remains whether the harassment they receive is coordinated, i.e., whether the messages of hate are disseminated by bots or by myriads of real

aggressors; and whether the aggressors are expressing sentiments that they genuinely hold and/or are acting in support of a specific agenda, possibly even in exchange for financial compensation.

12. It is worth noting certain patterns that have emerged from IPI's years-long research into online harassment campaigns. Generally speaking, a coordinated attack is not just a reaction to an opinion expressed or a piece of information disseminated by a journalist, but rather part of a more concerted effort to take control of the narrative. Online harassment campaigns usually stem from a tweet or a post by an influential figure, typically a representative of a political party or of a movement, either openly naming the targeted journalists, or providing information that makes them easily identifiable. The message is immediately further disseminated by a group of users close to the influential figure. In the next phase, the followers and fanbase of the previously described users organically spread the message further, turning it into a trending topic. In this phase, it is also common to find large numbers of anonymous accounts, typically recently created, that take part in distributing the message. These accounts are usually computer-generated social media accounts, also known as bots. Eventually, websites and news media close to the original influential figure or that support a similar ideology will cover the widespread criticism of the targeted journalists, giving credibility to the online campaign and reinforcing the idea that the journalists targeted and the news and opinions they share are not to be trusted. This also legitimizes further attacks.

13. Revelations about the existence of "troll factories" and organized online hate campaigns, in various countries in Europe, make it difficult to assess how much of the hate disseminated online is a reflection of actual societal sentiments, and how much of it is generated as part of a coordinated effort to intimidate and discredit journalists. Understanding the identity and motives of aggressors is an issue of interest to many targeted journalists, even to the point where it becomes a type of coping mechanism. Journalists interviewed by IPI as part of the research recounted having spent a lot of time analysing the possible identities of their attackers on the basis of their online profiles, as part of an effort to take control of the situation by grasping the reasons for waves of highly personal attacks which appear entirely incomprehensible.

The search for solutions: IPI's protocol for newsrooms to address online harassment

14. IPI's research showed that not only is the development of strategies to counter online harassment at an early stage but so, too, is the development of a newsroom culture necessary to tackle the issue in a holistic and coordinated fashion. We found that while an increasing number of hateful and abusive messages directed at journalists, as well as vicious attacks on female journalists specifically, are an indisputable reality for all those who contributed to the study, limited knowledge of countermeasures, the overall novelty of the phenomenon itself, and often limited appreciation of the gender-based nature of the attacks, lead to a degree of apathy, indifference and/or helplessness on the part of some journalists and newsroom managers.

15. IPI Protocol offers a framework for newsrooms to tackle the issue of online abuse and provides a series of specific measures that newsrooms can adopt and adapt according to their particular situation. IPI's protocol outlines a four-step framework.

15.1. The first step is creating a culture of safety within the newsroom around online abuse and establishing clear channels to report it. Editors and managers should make clear that the news organization takes online harassment seriously. All staff members and contributors should know whom to report abuse to and how to report it. A point person (online safety coordinator) with the relevant knowledge and stature should be designated to receive reports and escalate them when necessary.

15.2. The second step is assessing the risk that the online abuse represents for the targeted journalist and the media outlet alike. This means assessing not only the physical harm or psychological damage to the targeted individual, but also the risk of reputational damage to the journalist or media outlet through smear campaigns that seek to discredit independent journalism.

15.3. The third step is implementing support and response measures, which range from digital security support to legal support to emotional and psychological support, as well as online moderation to limit the impact of harassment.

15.4. The fourth step is tracking cases of online harassment to assess how effective the support and response measures have been. This tracking also allows newsrooms to spot new trends of online attacks and adapt their measures consequently.

Recommendations for States

• Raise awareness among public officials, particularly police and judicial authorities about relevant aspects of online harassment, insults and threats, and which legal remedies are available for journalists targeted with online abuse.

• Encourage coordination and mutual understanding among the police, prosecutors and media organizations.

• Assign a dedicated prosecutor, or team of prosecutors, to deal with online threats. Consider gender balance in the selection of the prosecutors due to the often-sexualized nature of online attacks on women.

• Create a country-wide direct helpline for journalists, media organizations and journalists to report online abuse.

• Create an independently managed legal counselling and legal defence fund for journalists targeted with online harassment.

• Ensure public condemnation and prosecution of any member of government or member of any state institution who has either directly issued insulting and threatening messages against journalists or incited and encouraged others to do so.

• Create a database on the number of abusive comments, its content, and details of the targeted journalists.

• Publish regularly reports and analysis on collected data and cases; inform the relevant authorities about these findings.

Further material: IPI's work on online harassment

16. Since 2014, IPI has systematically researched online harassment as a new form of silencing critical, independent media. IPI's work has unveiled patterns of online attacks, analysed the emotional and professional impact on journalists, and collected best practices for newsrooms to address the phenomenon:

16.1. **Legal Responses to Online Harassment and Abuse of Journalists: Perspectives from Finland, France and Ireland**

https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/413552?download=true

16.2. **Newsrooms Best Practices for Addressing Online Harassment against Journalists – The report focuses specifically on women journalists**
https://ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/IPI-report-online-harassment-06032019.pdf

16.3. **Addressing Online Violence Against Women Journalists: Video Interviews with Experts and Journalists**
https://newsrooms-ontheline.ipi.media/online-attacks-on-women-journalists/

16.4. **IPI's Protocol for Newsrooms to Address Online Harassment**
https://newsrooms-ontheline.ipi.media/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/IPI_newsrooms_protocol_address_online_harassment_ok_022020.pdf

16.5. **IPI's Video Tutorials on Online Harassment**
https://ipi.media/ipi-launches-new-video-tutorials-on-online-harassment/

16.6. **IPI's Newsrooms Ontheline platform with dozens of strategies and best practices to address online harassment in the newsrooms**
https://newsrooms-ontheline.ipi.media

16.7. **Restricting free speech to combat online harassment is not worth the risk**
https://ipi.media/blog-restricting-free-speech-to-combat-online-harassment-is-not-worth-the-risk/

16.8. **Feature-Documentary on Online Harassment Against Women: A Dark Place**
https://ipi.media/documentary-film-a-dark-place/