

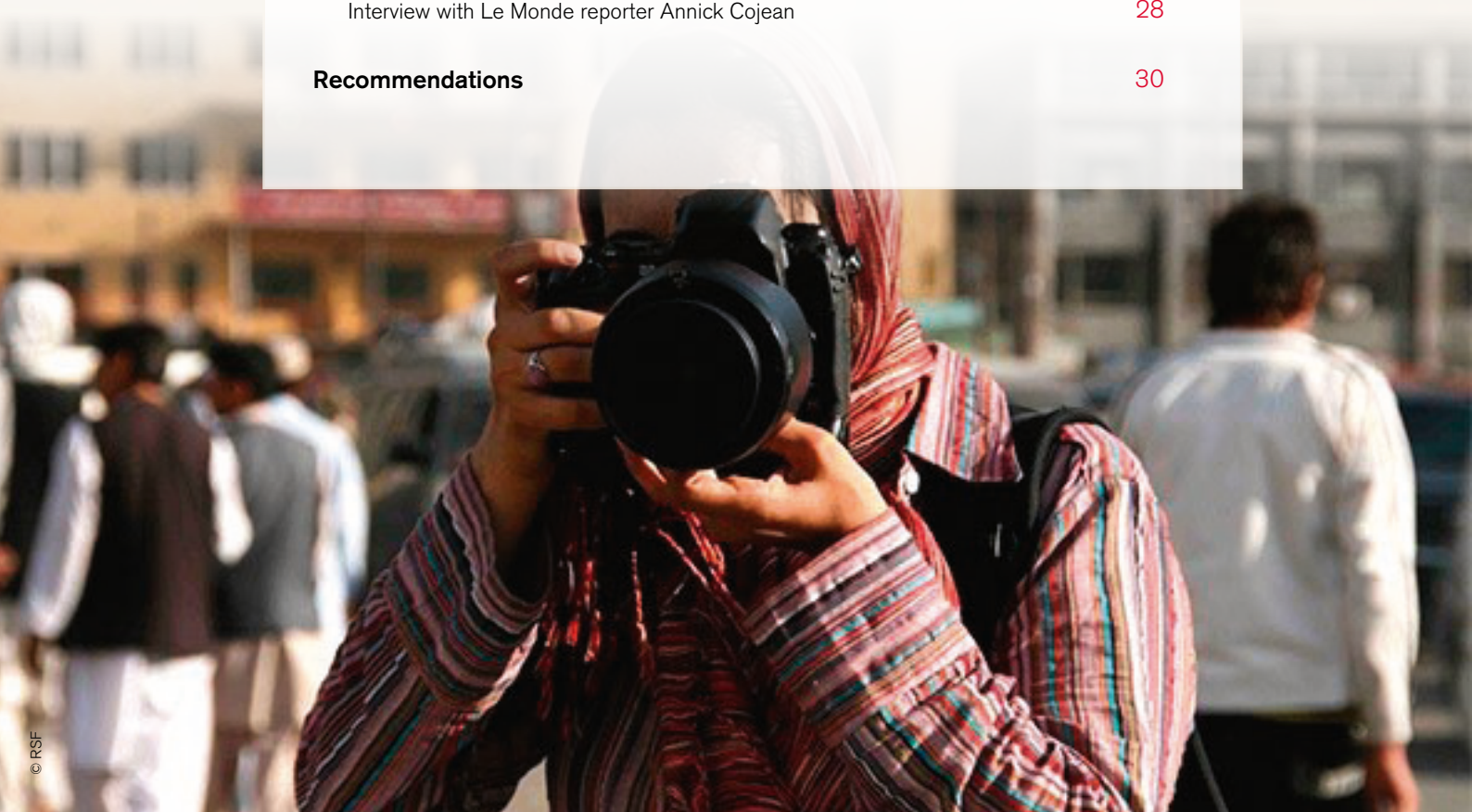


**WOMEN'S  
RIGHTS:  
FORBIDDEN SUBJECT**

**REPORTERS  
WITHOUT BORDERS**  
FOR FREEDOM OF INFORMATION

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## INTRODUCTION

*“Never forget that a political, economic or religious crisis would suffice to call women’s rights into question,”* Simone de Beauvoir wrote in *The Second Sex*. Contemporary developments unfortunately prove her right. In the United States, outraged [protests](#) against President Donald Trump’s sexist remarks erupted in early 2017. In Poland, a [bill banning abortion](#), permitted in certain circumstances since 1993, was submitted to parliament in 2016. In Iraq, a bill endangering women’s rights that included [lowering the legal age for marriage](#) was presented to the parliament in Baghdad the same year.

Covering women’s issues does not come without danger. A female editor was murdered for denouncing a sexist policy. A reporter was imprisoned for interviewing a rape victim. A woman reporter was physically attacked for defending access to tampons, while a female blogger was threatened online for criticizing a video game.

For International Women’s Day, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) wants to turn the spotlight on violence against journalists covering these issues. This report does not address the status of women journalists, equal employment of women in journalism or sexist (or non-sexist) attitudes in the media. These issues have been widely covered and debated elsewhere. This report focuses specifically on threats and violence against both men and women reporters covering women’s rights. In 2016 and 2017, RSF registered more than 60 cases in more than 20 countries of the rights of journalists being violated in connection with reporting on the condition of women. Almost 90 cases have been registered since 2012.

This data has allowed us to classify the kinds of violence: murder, imprisonment, verbal attacks, physical attacks and online aggression. Cyber-harassment represents more than 40% of the cases registered.

In RSF’s view, [the information predators](#) responsible for this violence fall into three main categories. Some are religious groups. They target journalists who challenge their propaganda by advocating the emancipation of women. Some are criminal organizations that object to media meddling in their affairs by denouncing their exploitation of women. And finally, there are autocratic governments that are determined to defend their patriarchal societies.

Censorship, harassment, threats, and attacks all take a dramatic toll on journalists in countries such as Afghanistan, where many are forced to abandon the profession or even flee abroad for safety reasons. But despite the threats, many other journalists have redoubled their efforts in defence of freedom of expression. RSF has focused on several of these resistance figures. *“It’s not the issue that is dangerous but the society in which it is tackled,”* said Nadine Al-Budair, a Saudi journalist based in Qatar.

# 1

## COVERING WOMEN'S RIGHTS

## CAN KILL

*“Writing about women’s rights can prove dangerous in certain countries when it means undermining traditions and arousing awareness in minds that have been subjected to a machista society,”* says Juana Gallego, the head of [Spain’s Gender Equality Observatory](#) and a lecturer in journalism at the University of Barcelona, explaining the degree to which journalists can find themselves exposed by the fight for women’s rights.

### **The more than 60 cases of threats and violence against journalists**

covering this issue that RSF registered in 2016 and 2017 undoubtedly fall short of the real number because many victims are too scared or resigned to report incidents, but the data sheds light on the different forms that these abuses take.

### **MIROSLAVA BREACH AND GAURI LANKESH, JOURNALISTS WHO PROVOKED**

Covering gender issues can kill. This is RSF’s alarming conclusion from the number of murders in the past two years. Eleven of the reporters covered by this study – 12% of the cases – have been killed in connection with their work since the start of 2016, including two leading investigative journalists in 2017, Mexico’s Miroslava Breach and India’s Gauri Lankesh.

**Miroslava Breach**, a reporter for the *Norte de Ciudad Juárez* and *La Jornada* newspapers in Chihuahua, in northern Mexico, [was shot dead](#) in her car as she drove her son to school on March 23, 2017. Eight gunshots ended the life of “*an intelligent and ethically irreproachable woman*,” her colleague Olga Alicia Aragón wrote in a tribute published in *La Jornada* the day after this “*horrible crime*.” Known as “Miros” by her colleagues, Breach had been a reporter for more than 20 years, covering [organized crime in Chihuahua](#), one of Mexico’s most violent states, and the many murders of women in Ciudad Juárez (see details on page 15).

The *Norte de Ciudad Juárez*, a daily that had been operating for 27 years, closed eight days after Breach’s murder. In its last issue, headlined “Adios!” on its front page, the powerless owner Oscar A. Cantú Murguía wrote: “*There are neither the guarantees nor the security to practice critical, balanced journalism.*”

Five months later, **Gauri Lankesh**, the 55-year-old editor of *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*,

a secular and feminist weekly founded by her father, [was killed in Bangalore](#), in southern India, on September 5, 2017. Two men on a motorcycle shot her in the chest and head as she was entering her home. Her murder triggered an outcry and a wave of concern about media freedom. Courageous and outspoken, she had known her life was in danger. She openly criticized the Hindu nationalist government, accusing it of defending not a religion, but a “*system of hierarchy in society*” in which “*women are treated as second-class creatures.*”

The media are constantly denigrated in India and, a few months before her death, Lankesh was sentenced by a lower court to six months in prison in a defamation case brought against her by two senior members of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). “*I hope other journos take note,*” the BJP’s media officer said at the time.

“*These killings are premeditated executions,*” says Abeer Saady, an Egyptian journalist who is vice-president of the International Association of Women in Radio and Television ([IAWRT](#)) and author of a [safety manual for woman journalists](#). “*The journalists are selected and targeted.*”

The staff of [Tolo News](#), an Afghan 24-hour TV news channel that focuses on



→ Mexico City, on March 25, 2017.  
Protest after the murder of the journalist  
Miroslava Breach.  
© ALFREDO ESTRELLA / AFP



→ Mumbai on September 6, 2017.  
Rally condemning the killing of journalist Gauri Lankesh.  
© PUNIT PARANJE / AFP

women's issues in much of its reporting, [was targeted](#) on January 20, 2016. Seven of its employees were travelling in a *Tolo News* minibus when it was rammed by a vehicle loaded with explosives on the Dar ul-Aman road in west Kabul. All were killed by the blast, which was claimed by Islamists. It was the first time an Afghan media outlet had been targeted in this manner since the Taliban government fell in 2001.

Other journalists were killed for similar reasons before 2016. **Nawras Al-Nuaimi**, a 20-year-old journalism student who covered women and youth-related stories for *Al-Mosuliya TV*, [was gunned down](#) by armed men near her home in Mosul, in northern Iraq, on December 15, 2013. RSF said at the time that it was "*stunned and appalled by her murder.*" Photographer and cameraman **Dwijamani Singh** was killed in Imphal, in northwestern India, on December 23, 2012 when police opened fire on a crowd demonstrating their support for an actress who had been the victim of sexual violence.

According to [Abeer Saady](#), these deaths show that, "*journalists can be shot in cold blood, even when they are not in the battlefield.*" And the deaths are all the more appalling when they go completely unpunished.

"Journalists  
can be shot  
in cold blood,  
even when they  
are not in the  
battlefield!"



→ Studios of the Afghan private TV channel Tolo news.

© Yosuf Mohseni



→ Demonstration against violence targeting reporters outside the Attorney General of the Republic building, in Tijuana, northwestern Mexico.

© GUILLERMO ARIAS / AFP

## MURDERED WITH IMPUNITY

7

No investigation was ever conducted in Iraq into [Al-Nuaimi's death](#). “Failure to prosecute after a crime of violence against a journalist is tantamount to encouraging the perpetrators to continue,” RSF said, deploring “the failure of the local and national authorities to respond to the deadly campaign against journalists.” Iraq is ranked 158th out of 180 countries in RSF’s 2017 [World Press Freedom Index](#), while [Afghanistan](#) is ranked 120th.

In Mexico, the investigations into [Miroslava Breach's murder](#) have been chaotic. After dragging their feet for nine months, the Chihuahua authorities announced on December 19, 2017 that the presumed killer, Ramón Andrés Zavala, had been killed. The federal police announced six days later that they had arrested the murder’s presumed instigator, Juan Carlos “El Larry” Moreno Ochoa, a member of the Los Salazares crime organization. This appeared to constitute significant progress but it fell far short of satisfying Breach’s family, who are convinced that the Chihuahua authorities were involved in her murder. The family has only recently been given access to see the judicial file on her case. According to the Mexican Institute for Competition, more than 95% of violent crime goes unpunished in [Mexico](#), which is ranked 149th in the [World Press Freedom Index](#).

In India, which is ranked 136th, the government announced the creation of a special team to investigate Gauri Lankesh’s murder, but those responsible are still at large. A few weeks after the murder, the government of Karnataka, the state where it took place, said the killers had been identified but “evidence is still being collected to prove their guilt.” In a press release issued at the time, RSF called on the Indian authorities “not to compromise in any way in rendering justice to a journalist who was completely uncompromising,” and to establish a national plan of action for the safety of journalists and for preventing dangers and threats against them. This request has not as yet received any response.

“These murders send a message to the other journalists in order to discourage them from doing their job,” says Abeer Saady. “Journalists experience intimidation. When they are not killed, they can be put in jail or threatened.”

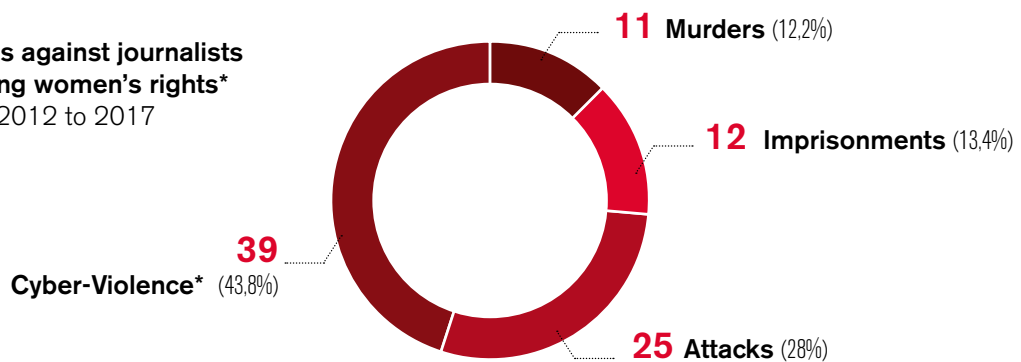
# 2

## A RANGE OF ABUSES TO SILENCE JOURNALISTS

### THE FIGURES

#### Abuses against journalists covering women's rights\*

\*From 2012 to 2017



In the past eight years, RSF has registered more than 20 cases of verbal, physical, or sexual attacks in connection with coverage of women's issues. "*We are going to cut you,*" **Mae Azango**, a Liberian journalist who writes about genital mutilation, was told by telephone in 2010. **Sajeev Gopalan**, a reporter for the Indian daily *Kalakaumudi*, [was attacked at his home](#) in April 2017 after writing about two young girls who had been sexually assaulted by the police.

During the revolution in Egypt, when sexual assaults were particularly common, the predators were "*very selective about the targets,*" says Abeer Saady, who used to be vice-president of Egypt's journalists' union. The targets were "*mainly women activists or journalists*" that they wanted to silence.

It was in this extremely aggressive climate that **Natasha Smith**, a 22-year-old British reporter studying at Falmouth University, was raped in Cairo's Tahrir Square in November 2012 while making a documentary on women's rights as an end-of-course project and for *Channel 4*. "*I was tossed around like fresh meat among starving lions,*" she said. "*Men began to rip off my clothes. I was stripped naked. Their insatiable appetite to hurt me heightened. These men, hundreds of them, had turned from humans to animals.*"



## PROFILE

### ELENA MILASHINA – PRICE ON HER HEAD

Some call Elena Milashina the heir of [Anna Politkovskaya](#), the Russian investigative journalist who made a name for herself by covering human rights violations during the war in Chechnya, in the northern Caucasus. When Politkovskaya was murdered in 2006, many of her peers decided to keep their heads down and avoid sensitive subjects. But not Milashina, a fellow Russian reporter for the Moscow newspaper [Novaya Gazeta](#). “Writing about flowers never interested me,” she said at the time. “I want to be useful and find out about things that are not right. That’s my nature.”



Elena Milashina

One of the subjects she investigated and covered was the murder of [Natalia Estemirova](#), a fellow journalist and human rights defender based in the Chechen capital of Grozny who was found dead in neighbouring Ingushetia.

In April and May 2015, Milashina visited Chechnya to investigate the story of a 17-year-old girl who was being forced to marry a Chechen police chief 30 years older than her. In her article, Milashina revealed that the police chief, an associate of Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov, already had a wife and had threatened reprisals against the girl’s family if she rejected his marriage proposal. Although human rights groups campaigned for the Kremlin to intervene, the wedding finally went ahead. The police chief warned Milashina: “We have you in our sights.”

A few days after the wedding, *Grozny-Inform*, an online news agency created by the Chechen information ministry, posted an editorial alluding to Milashina that was headlined, “The United State moves its pawns.” It said: “If you had to dig into Milashina’s biography, you would find points in common with Politkovskaya. She uses the same tactics and she will probably end up like her, only this time it will not come from the Caucasus.”

Milashina had already been threatened [for drawing attention](#) to the many human rights violations by Chechnya’s pro-Kremlin leader. She was the first to write about the purge of gays in Chechnya and, as a result, had to leave Russia for a few weeks as a safety precaution. But she lost no time in going back to covering Chechnya.



→  
Moscow on July 16, 2009.  
Commemoration rally  
in honor of the Russian  
activist of human rights  
Natalya Estemirova,  
murdered in Ingushetia.

© OXANA ONIPKO / AFP

## ONLINE THREATS

Aggressive comments and insults also fly around social networks. “Presstitute,” an amalgam of “press” and “prostitute,” is widely used to insult women journalists in India. “*I have been called a whore, a bitch and ‘presstitute,’*” said **Barkha Dutt**, an Indian journalist who was trolled online after the publication in 2015 of “*This Unquiet Land - Stories from India’s Fault Lines*,” a book in which she describes the abuse to which she was subjected as a child and adolescent. “*My mobile number has been shared publicly on multiple online platforms urging people to send me abusive and threatening messages,*” she told the *Hindustan Times*, which devoted a series to cyber-harassment entitled “[Let’s talk about trolls.](#)”



→ Television talk show host Oprah Winfrey poses with Indian Journalist Barkha Dutt during the DSC Jaipur Literature Festival in Jaipur on January 22, 2012

© Prakash SINGH / AFP

How could an award-winning journalist, one who was elected personality of the year by her peers in 2012, end up being threatened with rape and murder online? It is the feeling of omnipotence that social networks create among their users that is to blame according to Bobby Ghosh, who was *Hindustan Times* editor until last year. “*It gives people the licence to behave in a way that they would not dare to do, or even think of, in a non-digital world,*” he said.

In all, RSF has registered 39 cases of cyber-violence, representing 43% of the cases examined in this study. It is the most common form of abuse suffered by journalists covering women’s issues. This bane of journalists will be the subject of a separate report by RSF that is to be published in March. Cyber-violence is a phenomenon that knows no borders, that affects the poorest countries and the most democratic ones alike. RSF has found many cases in India, the United States, and France.

All of the online attacks mentioned in this report targeted women journalists – a trend that seems to be confirmed by a survey that the think-tank Demos conducted in the United Kingdom in 2014. This survey found that women journalists received about three times more inappropriate comments than their male colleagues.

“What is important to notice is the violence of these messages,” says Elisa Lees Muñoz, the executive director of the International Women’s Media Foundation (IWMF). **Anita Sarkeesian**, a blogger critical of the way women are portrayed in video games, was the target of a hate campaign in Canada in July 2012 that included rape and death threats and sexist insults. “Most of the threats and insults against women are sexual” and come “crashing down on women,” says Abeer Saady.



Anita Sarkeesian  
©Youtube / Feminist frequency

Sarkeesian received many pornographic drawings showing her being raped by video game characters. But worst of all was the Flash game that was created with the sole aim of allowing players to digitally beat her up. She ended up filing a complaint and fleeing her home. “The video game community and the geek community in general are really sexist,” the French blogger known as **Mar\_Lard** said in an [article](#) that led to insults and threats against her as well.

The threats are sometimes especially direct and precise. In France, the journalist Nadia Daam was the target of a [cyber-harassment campaign](#) orchestrated by trolls on the Jeuxvideo.com website’s “Blabla Forum” for 18 to 25-year-olds in November 2017 after she used her morning spot on *Radio Europe 1* to criticize the sabotaging of an “anti-jerk” emergency number set up by feminists for women who are the victims of harassment.



Nadia Daam  
© DR

She was immediately deluged with rape and death threats and insults on social networks and via her email accounts and mobile phone. Attempts were made to hack into her instant messaging and social network accounts. She received emails informing her that she had been registered on porn and paedophile websites with her home address. When she accessed private chat areas on Discord, an app used by this community, she discovered that information had been gathered about her. One person said he had checked out the neighbourhood where she lived. Another talked of the possibility of “raping her corpse” and mentioned her daughter. One said he would hammer on her door in the middle of the night. Because of such specific threats, the police advised her to stay somewhere else for a few days.

RSF is concerned to see cyber-harassment being used as a way to pressure journalists to shut up. “These online conspiracies taking advantage of the virality of social networks now pose a threat to journalists that must be taken very seriously,” RSF said.

...She was immediately deluged with rape and death threats and insults...

Those who harass online can easily hide behind pseudonyms or disappear into the throng of Internet users. But in the physical world, those who prey on women and journalists are more easily identifiable. Religious groups, organized crime, and authoritarian governments are often among the first to target journalists whenever they cover women’s rights.

→  
[www.hindustantimes.com](http://www.hindustantimes.com)  
“Let’s Talk About Trolls | Online abuse a weapon to silence women: Barkha Dutt”  
© Rahul Krishnan



# 3 LEADING PREDATORS

## RADICAL ISLAMISTS

*"In many countries, journalists receive threats from Islamists,"* says **Nadine Al-Budair**, the Qatar-based host of a Saudi TV discussion programme who expresses feminist views in a fairly direct manner. *"The Islamists always accuse us of the same vice, defending a western vision of the society and women."*

When the Taliban seized control of the city of Kunduz in northern Afghanistan in September 2015, they raided [Radio Shaista](#), the first state-owned radio station to be run by women, and removed all the equipment from its studios and its newsroom, forcing the station off the air. The target was carefully chosen. *Radio Shaista* was created with the aim of *"encouraging women to change their lives and helping them to defend their rights,"* according to its director, **Zarghoona Hassan**. It interviewed Afghan women who were studying or who wanted to become pilots. It also interviewed the mothers of Afghan fighters who urged their sons not to fight.

Fortunately, the attack left no victims because the radio station was empty at the time. Kabul-based *Tofo TV* was not as lucky. Seven of its employees were killed in a targeted bombing on January 20, 2016 that was claimed by the Taliban. Once again, the target was carefully chosen. Four months before the attack, the Taliban had criticized the TV channel for its coverage of women's issues and called it a "military target." All of its reporters and other employees *"will be regarded as enemy personnel, all their centres, bureaux and field equipment (...) will be eliminated,"* the Taliban said in a communiqué on October 12, 2015.

*"The Islamist insurgents want to silence the media because they regard them as a threat to their propaganda strategies,"* said Farida Nekzad of the Centre for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists ([CPAWJ](#)), which was created at RSF's initiative in March 2017. The attack turned 2016 into the deadliest year ever for media that cover women's issues.

Reporting in the field has become [a real challenge](#) and women reporters are exposed to verbal and physical violence in the street (and in the workplace) much more than their male colleagues, says Nekzad, who regrets the lack of government figures on such an important issue.

This climate of violence is to be found in all countries where Islamist groups have a strong hold. *"Before the rise of radicalism, we were freer to speak,"* Saudi TV journalist Nadine Al-Budair said. *"It was the Muslim Brotherhood who created the wave of misogyny in my country, for example. They incorporated it into the Salafist movement and the result is disastrous. They have brainwashed Arab youth in recent*

The attack turned 2016 into the deadliest year ever for media that cover women's issues.



→ Logo of the Center for the protection of Afghan women journalists (CPAWJ)

© CPAWJ

decades and have created a generation of men who want to destroy women, even to eliminate them from the map. They want to control women completely and are ready to do anything to get their way.”

Yazidi Kurdish TV producer **Nareen Shammo** had to leave Iraq in 2015 after the publication of her stories about Islamic State-organized sexual attacks and rape against members of her community.

There is also the issue of the safety of witnesses and sources. This is “*an immense responsibility*,” says *Le Monde* roving reporter Annick Cojean, who has written [many stories](#) about [wartime sexual violence](#). “*We establish close relations, the women gradually confide in us about this event, this earthquake, that has overturned their lives and which they have related to almost no one, not even their mothers or husbands. And we leave with their precious account, conscious of their gift to us and above all of the challenge. But then we go on to cover other news stories while they stay there, weighed down with their torment and pain, and sometimes exposed to the danger of being killed for revealing their secret. So, it is absolutely essential to protect their identity because they put their lives in our hands.*”

“I was too scared for the women. I thought it would be too dangerous for them”

When filmmaker Manon Loizeau suggested that they work together on a documentary about rape in Syria ([The Stifled Cry](#), 2017), Cojean was initially reluctant. “*I was too scared for the women. I thought it would be too dangerous for them and that TV would be unable to protect them and would expose them to reprisals.*” But Loizeau ended up convincing her by showing her all the ways to protect their anonymity: having them wear a veil, showing just their silhouette or pixelating their faces. It turned out that several of the women interviewed wanted to show their faces to the camera because they were shattered by their experience and felt they had nothing to lose.

It was nonetheless decided, several days before the documentary was shown in France and Switzerland, that the Syrian interviewees should be relocated as a safety measure. “*We couldn’t take the risk*,” Cojean said. Abeer Saady, a specialist in safety for women journalists, added: “*To protect witnesses and sources is essential in journalist work. There is no big issue that deserves to put people in danger.*”

In war zones, it is usually women journalists who cover stories involving women. “*In the past, wars were usually covered by male reporters who had not even thought of looking at the situation of women in war time*,” said Cojean, who also recognized that it is harder for men to open certain doors. “*They tell me that meeting women and interviewing them is almost impossible because they are rarely allowed to talk to strangers.*”

So, it is important to send women reporters to difficult places in order to show the war from a woman’s viewpoint. “*Until now, part of the population escaped the media’s radar or was poorly described*,” Cojean said. “*Everything is changing and that is for the better. But constant attention must be paid to this. There is often a tendency*



→  
Kabul, Afghanistan - May 24, 2017.  
Afghan camerawoman from Zan TV films a morning programme at the Zan TV (Women’s TV) station

to say women's stories are a niche interest, but they concern one out of every two persons."

Covering women's issue can even prove dangerous for journalists in countries regarded as leading democracies. In the United States, for example, covering the issue of abortion is not without risk for reporters.



→ Pro-life activists before the Supreme Court of the United States - Washington, DC, January 22, 2017.  
© JIM WATSON / AFP



→ Pro-life activists protest outside the US Supreme Court against the 1973 decision legalizing abortion, during the 44th annual March for Life - Washington, DC, January 27, 2017.  
© ZACH GIBSON / AFP

## PRO-LIFE

According to a [report](#) entitled "*The stakes are so high*," published in the medical magazine *Contraception* in August 2017 and based on interviews with journalists covering abortion, more than 80% of those interviewed said they had been harassed by "antis" (anti-abortion activists) because of their reporting. The harassment ranged from "nasty tweets" to "death threats," they said.

Brenna, a 41-year-old woman reporter, said: "*Antis tweeted out my home address. So that was an issue for me as a writer and it did have a chilling effect (...) It made me really terrified.*" Most said they were initially "*devastated*" or "*overwhelmed*" but gradually accepted that the harassment was something that came with the terrain. The report said their editors were surprised by the level of violence.

"Antis tweeted out my home address. (...) It made me really terrified."

"*We get emails from people telling us we will go to hell, some get things sent to their homes or offices by strangers,*" said **Robin Marty**, a Minneapolis-based freelancer [who specializes in this subject](#). "*The biggest issue is social media, where we will be inundated with gory fetal photos on Facebook or Twitter,*" she said.

Abortion has been legal in the United States since 1973, but the country is still very divided "*between the religious and the secular,*" Marty said. "*Those who are of no organized religion are growing in number, and it threatens those who are religious,*

who are often older, are in more rural locations." According to a Pew Research Centre poll in 2017, 57% of US citizens are in favour of abortion and 40% are against.

But those who are opposed "tend to have more influence over our government," Marty pointed out. Since arriving in the White House, Donald Trump has issued orders blocking public funding for clinics that carry out abortions and for international NGOs that support abortion. "Most of the people in power, whether they are Christians or fundamentalists, claim to think that the country would be best if women stayed home with children," Marty said.

The anti-abortion campaigners are backed by the so-called "pro-life" lobby which scrutinizes publications that defend the right to abortion. Marty has been harassed by the Pro-Life Action League, a group founded in the 1980s that organizes sidewalk protests outside of abortion clinics, sometimes trying to prevent them from opening. Some of these protests have degenerated into violence, leading to fatal injuries.

Referring to one of these protests, Mary said: "For me it wasn't a frightening incident simply because I spend much of my reporting activities embedding with anti-abortion groups, so I don't usually worry about them turning violent on me. They like having a reporter that they know will report their side of events and they trust me at this point to do that, even though they know I adamantly support abortion rights."

But it is not just fundamentalists of different kinds who threaten journalists covering women's issues.

## ORGANIZED CRIME

In Mexico, the northwestern state of Chihuahua is known for its hostility towards media outlets that take an interest in the murders of women in the state, especially in the border town of Ciudad Juárez, since the 1990s. "Whether working for the print media, radio, or TV, almost all the journalists in this state have received death threats in the course of their work," said Ricardo Alemán, who has been a newspaper columnist for 25 years. "Those that haven't have been forced to work with organized crime. In short, they have to choose between the pen and the bullet."

**Patricia Mayorga**, **Marta Duran de Huerta** and [Lydia Cacho](#) all decided to cover Ciudad Juárez's female homicides. All of them have been threatened. "Each time, they make it clear to the journalists that they know all about them, where they live, where they work and who their relatives are", Alemán said. "In recent months, journalists no longer even report receiving this kind of pressure. They prefer to keep a low profile and just censor themselves."

When a motorcycle gunman shot **Miroslava Breach** in March 2017, a note was found at the scene that said: "Lousy police informer governor, you'll be next - The 80." The police said "The 80" referred to a gang boss linked to an organized crime syndicate known as La Línea that operates in the state.

"The areas controlled by the mafia are like a real battlefield," says Abeer Saady. According to [RSF's 2017 round-up](#), Mexico is Latin America's most dangerous country for journalists and the second-most dangerous in the world, with levels of violence comparable to those in Syria and Iraq.

*Norte de Ciudad Juárez*, one of the newspapers for which Breach worked, had provided a great deal of coverage of the city's female homicides until it closed

...almost all the journalists in this state have received death threats in the course of their work.



→ Mexican writer and journalist Lydia Cacho poses investigated on feminicides in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. © DOMINIQUE FAGET/ AFP

down. And it had highlighted the impunity for threats and violence against reporters. Nowadays, no one dares to cover any story related to the crime cartels because, as Alemán said, “*just one word predominates – fear.*”

“just one word predominates – fear.”

When Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto made an official visit to Paris in July, RSF asked him to put pressure on the governments of Mexico's most dangerous states, including Chihuahua, in order to end the violence and to create within [Mexico's Executive Commission for Attention to Victims \(CEAV\)](#) a special unit for journalists who are the victims of violence in connection with their work.

“*The Chihuahua media are at the centre of a perverted system in which they are persecuted by criminal groups and are exposed to Governor Javier Corral's hostility towards journalists,*” Alemán added.

There are also many politicians who don't want journalists to cover women's rights.



# 4 AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

## JUDICIAL HARASSMENT IN IRAN

In [2014](#), RSF identified Iran as the world's biggest jailer of women journalists. It was in 2014 that **Atena Farghadani**, a 29-year-old cartoonist, posted a drawing on Facebook showing Iranian parliamentarians with the heads of animals in order to criticize two bills, one penalizing contraception and voluntary sterilization and the other reinforcing the rights of husbands in divorces.

For this she was sentenced to three months in prison. After her release, she posted a video on YouTube describing how she was mistreated by the women guards while in prison. This led to her being given a 12-year jail sentence, which was reduced in 2016 to 18 months in prison followed by four years of probation.

Many feminist journalists have spent time in Iranian prisons. They include **Mansoureh Shojaee**, who has been writing constantly about discrimination and abuses against women for the past 17 years. She is one of the founders of the "One million signatures" campaign for legislative reform to end discrimination against Iranian women. She was [last arrested](#) on December 24, 2009, when she was accused of

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→  
"One million signatures" campaign for legislative reform to end discrimination against Iranian women.

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Narges Mohammadi  
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Mansoureh Shojaii has lived in exile, (...)but she has not abandoned her fight despite continuing threats and judicial harassment

“anti-government publicity” by collaborating with various feminist websites. She has lived in exile since August 2010, the year that RSF awarded her its Netizen Prize, but she has not abandoned her fight despite continuing threats and judicial harassment.

Last year, she and Nobel peace laureate Shirin Ebadi launched a “Committee to Defend Mothers Imprisoned Iran,” of whom there are many. They include **Narges Mohammadi**, a journalist and human rights activist held since May 2015 who is serving a 10-year jail sentence. Shojaee also works with a leading Iranian women’s rights news website that calls itself the Feminist School. Its founder, [Noushin Ahmadi Khorasani](#), who wants to adapt Islamic law to modern society, has also been imprisoned on several occasions in connection with her many articles for the site. On June 9, 2012, she was given a five-year suspended prison sentence and five years of probation.

“Sentencing journalists to imprisonment or probation fosters a climate of fear designed to reduce them to silence or self-censorship,” said RSF Worldwide, RSF has registered a total of 12 cases of journalists who have been imprisoned in the past two years or are still imprisoned in connection with the coverage of women’s rights. Most of the examples of this disgraceful and arbitrary practice have been in four countries: Egypt, Iran, Pakistan, and Somalia.



Jila Bani Yaghoob  
©JILA BANİYAGHOOB  
(TWITTER)

## PROFILE

### Iranian journalist and blogger silenced until 2040

Nothing stops the Iranian feminist journalist and cyber-dissident [Jila Bani Yaghoob](#). Not even prison. In the course of writing more than 4,000 articles about discrimination, women’s education, and prostitution, [she has been arrested](#) three times: in 2006, after a feminist demonstration outside the University of Tehran; in 2007 while covering the trial of women’s rights activists, and in 2008 on a charge of disturbing public order after a feminist protest.

But she continues to write about women’s rights and in 2007 she wrote a book about her time in Tehran’s Evin prison, where she was interrogated while blindfolded in Section 209, the notorious section for political prisoners. The book was published abroad.

When not in prison, Yaghoob is the target of harassment campaigns. But she continues to write for the website she edits, *Kanoon Zanan Irani (Focus on Iranian Women)*, which specializes in women’s issues.

On June 20, 2009, after then President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s disputed reelection, she and her husband **Bahaman Ahamadi Amoe**, the editor of a business newspaper, were detained and questioned. She was released on bail nine weeks later pending trial but her husband was sentenced to five years in prison for criticizing the government in his articles. She was finally [convicted](#) in October 2010 on charges of anti-government “propaganda” and insulting the president, and was sentenced to a year in prison and a 30-year ban on working as a journalist, serving the jail sentence in 2012 and 2013.

Even while imprisoned she continued to write, this time to her husband. Held in a miniscule individual cell and often interrogated, she managed to send him letters via

an intermediary in order to make up for the four years of separation. The publication of these letters sent a strong message in a country in which religious morality has imposed a taboo on intimacy.

The winner of many international awards including the RSF Press Freedom Prize in 2010, Yaghoob now sidesteps the government-imposed regime of silence by writing about Afghanistan, which she has visited many times. But her preferred subject is still women.

## GOVERNMENT BLACKOUT

**In Somalia**, the government imposes a complete blackout on women's issues, especially sexual violence. *"Every day we meet raped women but we cannot talk about them because we remember what we've faced from the Somali government,"* *Radio Shabelle* owner **Abdimalik Yusuf** said.

In 2013, one of the radio station's reporters, **Bashir Hashir**, filmed a 19-year-old woman (a journalist employed by UN-funded *Radio Kasmu*) describing how she was raped at gunpoint by two journalists with state-owned *Radio Mogadishu*. The two *Radio Mogadishu* journalists responded by filing a defamation complaint, whereupon Hashir, Yusuf, and the 19-year-old woman were all arrested. At the end of a three-hour trial in Mogadishu on December 9, 2013, Hashir was sentenced to six months in prison on a criminal defamation charge, Yusuf was sentenced to a year in prison for "insulting state institutions" and the woman received a six-month suspended sentence. The two alleged rapists were never arrested or charged.

RSF [expressed outrage](#) about the complete lack of media freedom in Somalia although President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud had promised in November 2012 to hold the security forces to account for abuses. "The Somali authorities are more concerned about suppressing criticism of themselves than protecting freedom of expression," RSF said at the time.

*"Talking about sexual assault in Somalia has always been a sensitive topic,"* said **Abdiaziz Abdinur Ibrahim**, a reporter [who suffered the same fate](#) after interviewing a woman who accused Somali government security officers of raping her at a camp for displaced persons in Mogadishu. Once again, the alleged rapists were never arrested or questioned, while the journalist who reported the allegation was arrested, tried, and sentenced to a year in prison on a charge of reporting false information.

*"The government argued that I wanted to tarnish its reputation,"* Ibrahim said. While imprisoned, he was able to listen to the news on a radio set. *"Sometimes I felt hopeful, especially when I heard the prime minister promise media freedom, but the president's speeches were accusatory (...) I lost hope that I would be free any time soon."* He was finally released on appeal after being held for 66 days.

Gender and communication expert Juana Gallego said, *"Sexual violence against women continues to be a taboo that needs removing in many machista societies that use it as a weapon in order to silence them."*

**"The Somali authorities are more concerned about suppressing criticism of themselves than protecting freedom of expression."**



→ Abdimalik Yusuf, head of Shabelle radio and the journalist Mohamed Bashir stand chained near court in Mogadishu on December 9, 2013.

© Mohamed ABDIWAHAB/ AFP

Uwitware was kidnapped at gunpoint while walking along one of Kampala's safest and most touristic avenues.

In **Uganda**, the government did not appreciate being criticized by Gertrude Uwitware, a journalist with the main commercial TV channel *NTV*. In a blog post in April 2017, she defended Stella Nyanzi, a university academic who had just reminded the president of an election promise to distribute tampons in schools. Shortly after posting her comment, Uwitware was [kidnapped at gunpoint](#) while walking along one of Kampala's safest and most touristic avenues.

A man and a woman forced her to get into their car, gagged her, and drove her to an isolated spot several kilometres outside the city where they shaved her head, beat her, and threatened to torture her. Referring to the post about Nyanzi, they also made her delete all of her social network posts for being too critical. They told her they were sparing her life only because she was "*one of ours*" (meaning a member of President Museveni's ethnic group) and that they would otherwise have cut her head off. They finally dumped her at an isolated location where police found her at around midnight.

**RSF** is appalled by the fact that in each of these cases, representatives of the state turned on journalists in order to cover up their own failings or abuses. It is even more astonishing that some countries are strengthening protection for women's rights in their legislation but continue to ensure that women's rights remain off limits for the media.

## STILL OFF LIMITS DESPITE LEGISLATIVE PROGRESS

Şûjin (a Kurdish word for “big sewing needle”) was a feminist news website **in Turkey** that covered violence against women. Launched in January 2017, it was closed on August 25, 2017 under the state of emergency. *“Because Şûjin emphasized the fight for women’s rights and spotlighted the frequent violence against women within families and in the workplace (...) it was targeted and threats were made against the women who wrote for it,”* said Beritan Elyakut, who wrote for the website and experienced this harassment.

Violence against women is nonetheless recognized as a major problem in Turkey. [Since 2010](#), at least 1,571 Turkish women have been murdered by men because they were women. The government seemed to be trying to address the issue in 2011 when it ratified the Council of Europe’s convention on violence against women. The following year, the authorities approved legislative amendments making the convention applicable to all women (single, married, and divorced).

*“We have good laws on violence against women but it’s their implementation that is blocked in practice,”* women’s rights lawyer Hülya Gülbahar said. President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s comments on gender equality, which he described as “contrary to nature” in 2014, are indicative of the government’s real interests on this issue.

Ever since the abortive coup in July 2016, Turkey has been experiencing [unprecedented levels of repression](#) and censorship, including censorship of the subject of violence against women. RSF calls on the Turkish government to stop resorting to ever more repressive measures and to restore pluralism without delay.

But Turkish society is also divided about the role of women. Before its closure, Şûjin often received threatening phone calls from men who had been accused by the site of conjugal violence and sexual abuse of women or minors. In July 2017 alone, the site received dozens of threatening phone calls. *“We identify those responsible for these attacks, whoever they are, and that’s why they threaten us,”* one of the site’s journalists, Sibel Yüklér, said at the time.

Since 2010, at least 1,571 Turkish women have been murdered by men because they were women.



→ Demonstration of Reporters Without Borders in front of the Turkish Embassy, on January 5, 2018, to call for the release of Turkish journalists unjustly detained.

© RSF



→ Demonstration of Reporters Without Borders on October 24, 2017 at the Place de la Concorde in Paris, against censorship and violence towards Egyptian journalists and medias that continues to worsen.

© RSF

**In Egypt, Doaa Salah**, the TV talk-show host of “With Dody,” was sentenced to three years in prison and a fine of 10,000 Egyptian pounds (500 euros) in November 2017 for wearing a fake pregnancy belly under her dress and talking about sex before marriage, single motherhood, and sperm donation in a show that previous July. She was found guilty of “outraging public decency.” At the end of the show, which was broadcast on privately-owned *Al-Nahar TV*, she had said: “*Everyone rejects the idea of pregnancy outside of marriage, that means not everything that happens abroad can happen in our society.*” That did not suffice to assuage her critics. Even before her trial, she was suspended from hosting the show for three months on the grounds that she had “*promoted immoral ideas that are alien to our society and threaten family links in the country.*”

RSF is [concerned](#) about the fate of journalists who cover women's issues, seven years after Egypt's “January 25 Revolution.” **Omar Abdel Maksoud**, a photographer working for the [Masr Al-Arabia](#) news website, was arrested on February 14, 2014 while covering a baby shower for a newly released young woman. She had given birth while handcuffed in prison after being arrested for participating in an anti-government protest. Maksoud was initially released but was arrested again the following April on suspicion of being a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite having heart problems, he has been in prison ever since and has been tortured.

Why has talking about women's rights become so dangerous in Egypt when Egyptian women played such a major role in the mass demonstrations in June 2013 calling for Mohamed Morsi's resignation? Gender equality with regard to all civil, political, economic, social, and cultural rights is enshrined in the 2014 constitution. President Sisi even proclaimed 2017 as Year of the Woman with the declared aim of promoting respect for women's rights in all areas of Egyptian society.

“*Everything Sisi says is hypocritical!*” says Mona Eltahawy, an Egyptian journalist who is a *New York Times* columnist. “*You've got to remember that, above all, he's a military man, and therefore the antithesis of feminism. You should also remember that during the revolution, less than a month after Hosni Mubarak was forced to resign, the army was subjecting women protesters to sexual assaults, forcing them to submit to 'virginity tests.'*” Sisi was head of military intelligence at the time, before becoming head of the military.

Herself the victim of physical and sexual violence in 2011, Eltahawy added: “*One thing is certain: women's rights can't progress in Egypt as long as the military, dictators, religious fundamentalists, or the Muslim Brotherhood remain in power.*” Violence against woman has been on the rise since the political upheavals that topped Hosni Mubarak in 2011 and Mohamed Morsi in 2013.

... the army was subjecting women protesters to sexual assaults, forcing them to submit to 'virginity tests.'

“The situation now reminds me of the situation under Hosni Mubarak,” Egyptian photojournalist Sabry Khaled said. Journalists feel so unsafe that they try not to work alone and permits are needed for everything, even filming in the street, she said. “During the revolution, it was like journalism heaven but the situation now is bad again.”

Egypt’s patriarchal society refuses to allow women to become aware of their rights and does everything possible to keep them in a subordinate role, gender and communication expert Juana Gallego said. According to a [UN Women report](#) in 2013, 99% of Egyptian women have been subjected to some form of sexual harassment.

An enormous gulf also exists in China between legislation on women’s rights and the ability to provide information about this issue.

### “Ubiquitous censorship” in China

Covering feminist issues in China “has always been quite challenging,” said Didi Tatlow, who spent 14 years there as a reporter working for various media outlets, including [the New York Times](#). “You always have to watch what you write to avoid problems,” she said. In 2014, she was invited to talk at a meeting organized by a women’s rights group. “I spotted two spies in the audience who had come to listen to the speeches. They were also there to intimidate us.”

She acknowledges that China has increasingly shown signs of opening up on women’s rights since 2015. In February of that year, the Chinese Communist Party began phasing out the one-child policy that had been in force since the 1970s. Couples can now have two children but not more. Six months later, the government amended the historic 1992 law on women’s rights and interests, so that victims of sexual harassment can file a complaint with their employer or the authorities. The introduction of China’s first law on domestic violence at the end of 2015 sent another strong political message.

But the pressure on journalists who cover women’s rights is still palpable. Tatlow said that in November 2016 she was summoned by government officials who “explicitly told me not to get in touch with leaders in the feminist movement and not to talk to



→  
Chinese President  
Xi Jinping  
© WANG ZHAO / AFP

*this or that person they considered as troublemakers.” She added that she did what they asked because she knew the police were watching the women “and they could have been in trouble.”*

Despite the legislative progress, women’s rights lack a place in the public debate. Tatlow blamed the fact that “censorship is everywhere” and “*the government censors the media and targets all social movements that are trying to make the society evolve.*” Only foreign journalists dare to defy the Communist Party and China’s patriarchal society on this issue. “*Local journalists don’t even try to cover these issues,*” she added.

... women’s rights  
lack a place  
in the public  
debate.

Filmmaker Marjolaine Grappe came to a similar conclusion while making “[\*In the Mood for Life\*](#)” (2016), a documentary about pregnancies in China that are illegal under its family planning legislation. She said she had to film clandestinely for two years “*to avoid surveillance by Chinese officials*” and often filmed at night to minimize the risks. “*When the subject matter does not reflect well on the Party, you have to think of the risk of reprisals,*” she explained.

**RSF** condemns the Chinese regime’s relentless control over news and information, including its censorship directives targeting media outlets and journalists. “*It is high time that the powers that curb media freedom cease to exist,*” RSF said.



# 5 SHUT UP OR RESIST

## EXILE WHEN THE PRESSURE IS TOO MUCH

"I really liked my job but the situation became too critical," said **Shakeela Ibrahimbhel**, a former star journalist with Afghanistan's *Tolo News* TV channel. Her career took off at the start of the post-Taliban era and ended in 2016, a few months after the targeted car-bombing that killed seven of her *Tolo News* colleagues. "I left my country, my family, and my friends against my will!"

According to the Centre for the Protection of Afghan Women Journalists (CPAWJ), around 100 women have given up being journalists because of mounting Islamist pressure. Why so many? "They are pressured by the Taliban but also by their families, which have difficulty accepting their profession," the centre's Farida Nekzad said. Many women want to work for the media but their families oppose this out of concern for their safety.

As a result, the remoter provinces have few women journalists, the centre says. It cites the example of Ghor province, where attacks on Afghan women have been particularly widespread. In Nangarhar province, which is just as dangerous because of an Islamic State presence, most families discourage women from leaving their homes. "They have to persuade their parents, their brothers and their other family members to give them permission to work outside the home," Nekzad said.

The problem of women abandoning journalism is endangering media freedom and democracy. "When there are hardly any women journalists, women's issues are not covered, and that holds up progress in women's rights in society," says Nekzad, pointing out that covering women's issues is rarely a priority for their male colleagues.

(...), around 100 women have given up being journalists because of mounting Islamist pressure.



→ Homepage of the CPAWJ website  
©CPAWJ

Her centre is currently working on the drafting of a bill designed to prevent threats and abuses against journalists in general and reduce discrimination against women journalists in particular. RSF supports this ambitious project and calls on all members of civil society and the government to support and assist the project as well.

Physical danger is the main reason given by women who abandon journalism, but it is sometimes reinforced by the lack of peer support. After writing a story for *HuffPost Brasil* about the lack of women in the geek community, Brazilian freelancer **Ana**

**Freitas**, 26, found her personal details posted online. Packages with contents such as earthworms were sent to her home. But she had to face the danger alone. Her employers ignored her and ceased to commission stories from her, forcing her to change profession. "*The online harassers destroyed my life*," she said.

Other journalists have opted to flee abroad or to a different part of the country to escape danger. After the attack on *Radio Shaista* in Kunduz in northern Afghanistan in September 2015, its director, Zarghoona Hassan, received threatening phone calls in January 2016 in which the rebels accused her of wanting to convert her listeners to Christianity. She left Kunduz with her family.

Something triggers each decision to flee. Patricia Mayorga, a Mexican journalist working for the magazine *Proceso* in the northern state of Chihuahua, did not flee after being the target of threats. But she did later, after the March 2017 [murder of fellow journalist Miroslava Breach](#), who had received the same threatening messages. After receiving very specific threats in August 2012, Lydia Cacho was advised by security experts and a judge to seek refuge. Within minutes, she grabbed a bag and her passport and left her home. She did not return until seven years later, after living in self-imposed exile.

Since 2012, RSF has registered an average of two cases a year of journalists fleeing abroad for safety reasons: one each in Afghanistan, Colombia, Honduras, Yemen, Bangladesh, and Iran, and two in Mexico. The aim is to escape the radar and the potential reach of those making the threats, but it is not always achieved. Bangladeshi blogger Shammi Haque fled to Germany with her fellow journalist husband in 2016 to escape the telephone threats she had been receiving from religious fundamentalists since a blog post in which she proposed organizing a "Kiss of Love" event in Dhaka for St Valentine's Day.

Someone put a price of 1 million rupees on her head

After her departure, "*the threats became more and more pressing and targeted against me*," she said. Islamists began raising funds to pay for the airfare of anyone ready to go to Germany to rape her. Someone put a price of 1 million rupees (13,000 euros) on her head, she said, adding: "*It isn't okay to kiss in public [in Bangladesh] but is perfectly fine when people rape a woman.*"

Shammi Haque cannot envisage going back for the time being, but other journalists have been able to return and resume speaking out.

## RESISTANT VOICES

How should journalists react to threats that can sometimes be very traumatic? Some quietly acknowledge that they have thought twice before working on sensitive women's issues.

But some refuse to be silenced or to be told what to say. Defying those who prey on journalists and denying them the last word becomes one of their defining concerns. RSF has chosen to focus on three of them: Barkha Dutt, an Indian journalist engaged in a "*war of nerves*" with "*keyboard harassers*"; Nadine Al-Budair, who uses humour to try to break down the taboos in her country of origin, Saudi Arabia; and Salima Tlemçani, an Algerian journalist who resorts to roundabout routes to preserve her journalistic freedom.

### **Barkha Dutt** – “war of nerves against online threats”

*“I always refused to be impressed by the keyboard harassers,”* says this well-known Indian TV journalist, who received another volley of criticism on social networks after writing a book in 2015 in which she said she was the victim of abuse as a child. After “a war of nerves” with the trolls, she says she has become so used to troll attacks *“that now I barely notice them”* and describes herself as *having become invulnerable*.

In the past, she reported one particular instance to the authorities and *“was provided security for a short while”* but *“no one was ever able to crack the case.”* Most countries have laws and regulations against cyber-violence but, in practice, enforcing them is complicated. In 75% of countries, the judicial system is unable to take appropriate measures against online aggressors.

Personal resistance is now her mission. *“To talk today is a duty,”* she says. *“My silence would be a disservice to all our women.”* She regards trolls as *“a modern-day weapon of patriarchy”* as *“an attempt to control, intimidate, and eventually silence women”* that she must defy. *“I would never quit Twitter because I don’t want to give them satisfaction. No, I won’t be silent.”*

In 75% of countries, the judicial system is unable to take appropriate measures against online aggressors.

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### **Nadine Albudair** – “wearing a dress is a political act”

*“I have been receiving insults since the beginning of my career,”* says Nadine Al-Budair, a 37-year-old Saudi journalist and TV presenter who lives in Qatar. She began by writing articles for the Egyptian daily *Al-Masri Al-Yawm*, defending women’s rights in an irreverent manner that enraged her country’s conservatives. On one occasion, she urged women to take advantage of the Arab Spring by not wearing the veil. On another, she criticized Muslim polygamy, asking why women shouldn’t be allowed to marry four men. *“I received insulting phone calls and emails. They also targeted by family. They said they wanted to destroy my reputation, because honour is very important in the Arab world, but I didn’t care.”*

Her strength is her ability to remain impervious to threats, while expressing her views in an incisive style in a bid to shatter taboos. As the host of *Ettijahat*, a TV programme in which she interviews Middle Eastern intellectuals, she mocked a guest who in February 2015 suggested bringing foreign women to Saudi Arabia to drive for Saudi women. *“I think that contemporary society, especially mine, needs a good electric shock and I think that must come from the media.”*

Defying Saudi tradition, she does not wear the veil, calling it an *“object of discrimination.”* *“Men can wear what they want but they want us to cover our entire body,”* says Al-Budair, who wears dresses when appearing on TV. *“Above all, this is a political act,”* she says. Previously employed by the pan-Arab TV news channel *Alhurra*, she explains: *“I did not leave my country because of the threats but for professional reasons.”* Although her programme often receives awards, she continues to be the target of virulent criticism from conservatives throughout the region.

### **Salima Tlemçani** – “using tricks”

Algerian journalist Salima Tlemçani knows a lot about intimidation and criticism. In the course of her 26-year career, she has been accused of encouraging prostitution and has received death threats, with the result that she now writes under a pseudonym. Discretion has become the only way she could retain the freedom to express her

views and to provide information. *"I cannot openly advocate the freedom to terminate a pregnancy,"* she regrets. *"That could trigger reactions from readers and my fellow journalists, who would accuse me of encouraging women to abort."*

Although the topic is off limits for the media in Algeria and the penal code punishes women who obtain abortions and the doctors who provide them, a bill that would open the way to abortions on medical grounds was submitted to the national assembly in December 2017. *"This continues to be a very sensitive subject in Algeria and you have to use a great deal of circumspection in order to refer to it"* Tlemçani says she resorts to tricks and reporting in roundabout ways. *"For example, I describe how women go to Tunisia to terminate a pregnancy,"* she says. *"Or to refer to the Koranic verse-based heritage in Algeria, I get academics to talk about the problems of interpreting religious texts."*

It's not just readers who are sometimes uncomfortable with stories focusing on women's issues. Editors are too, even in western countries.



Annick Cojean  
©Youtube 28Minutes

### **Interview with Le Monde reporter Annick Cojean** **"It's hard to get editors to take a story about rape"**

Before working with Manon Loizeau on "The Stifled Cry," a documentary with interviews of women who had been raped in Bashar al-Assad's jails, *Le Monde* reporter Annick Cojean wrote about wartime rape during the Libyan revolution (Gaddafi's Harem, 2012).

**In October 2011, on the eve of former Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi's capture, you arrived in Libya to cover the role of women in the revolution. You also tried to show that rape had indeed been used as a weapon of war. What difficulties did you have working on this subject?**

I found observers in the field who told me: *"I'm not sure that this is a real subject; be wary of exaggeration..."* But I eventually found a young woman, Soraya, who had been kidnapped and raped by the Libyan leader for years. Then women began trusting me. Some came to see me in my little hotel, taking care to wear a veil. *"I am entrusting my life to you, I am risking my life,"* one told me. It was then that I realized the enormous value of her account because it was exposing her to the possibility of death. It was also then that I got the measure of what was happening in Libya, that rape was a weapon of power, a weapon of war.

This was a non-subject for the UN as well for years. As women did not talk, it was the perfect crime. They could say they were tortured but not raped. An incredible wall of silence exists around rape in both Libya and Syria. Raped women cannot talk about it in their family or their village. It's a question of honour. In France, it could be called a taboo subject but it's much more than just a taboo in these countries. It reaches into people's very core because of the patriarchal culture combined with the religious component. In other words, it's a difficult and almost impossible subject to cover. I nearly headlined one of my articles, *"impossible investigation."* A lot for a journalist!

**Is it hard to pitch such stories at editorial meetings?**

Stories about the suffering endured by women always pose a problem. Or at least until the Weinstein affair. Obviously, no editor would admit it officially, but *"women"*

were regarded as somewhat of a niche, as a small segment of the population, about which there was no reason to expound at length or write lots of articles, especially in our war coverage or post-conflict coverage. It's disconcerting, even appalling, because it's always forgotten that, far from being a minority that is granted the occasional article, women constitute more than half of the population.

So, pitching an investigative about rape is double complicated. Three years ago, I did a two-pager about rape in Bashar al-Assad's prisons. The following year I also did a long investigative piece about the rape of Yezidi women by Islamic State in Iraq. When I proposed going back to the subject of wartime sexual violence on Syria, they responded, "*again?*" The previous article had been two years before and yet they were saying, "*again?*"

A story about "torture" would be easier to get approved. The word "rape" seems to bother and embarrass many of my fellow journalists, probably unconsciously. It's striking that the term "wartime rape" is more easily accepted nowadays, as if the word "*wartime*" somehow ennobled the subject. But I continue to think that this subject is not given the importance and the space it deserves.

### **Do you think stories about women don't enjoy the same visibility as other stories?**

Last November, I obtained a very moving interview with a Syrian woman who had been held for many months in Bashar al-Assad's jails, who had been raped herself and who had witnessed rapes and unbearable acts of barbarity. She said she'd had to act as midwife and deliver, on the ground in the prison, many babies who were the product of rapes. This woman gave her name, said she'd documented all the abuses she'd observed, and wanted to testify one day to the International Criminal Court. I found her and know she is trustworthy. She risked her life by speaking out. It was her decision.

But her story did not get the smallest mention on the front page. For the first time ever, I wrote to my editors to complain. I know that getting a story on to the front page is complicated, that there are last-minute decisions and that [French novelist] Jean d'Ormesson's death disrupted things that morning. But all the same! What was said in this interview about what thousands of Syrian women risk and endure deserved the utmost prominence. My editors responded that, in the absence of a front-page headline, they promoted the story on social networks. This is true. But I wanted to make a point, I needed to react.

Wartime rape is a crime against humanity. It's an abomination. A "*weapon of mass massive destruction*," Dr Mukwege says. And I think that aside from investigative reporting, the subject deserves a front-page editorial by my newspaper. As well as speeches and solemn undertakings by the leaders of our democracies.

### **Have you seen any change since the Weinstein scandal?**

The Weinstein affair is a moral, political, and societal revolution that has also affected news organizations. Editors who weren't previously open to this subject matter now agree to promote articles on this issue. We are seeing a kind of fad. If they've been converted, so much the better. But for some it's probably just an opportunistic way to boost sales. I hope that our newspapers and TV channels will now be less nervous about tackling this subject, that they will be bolder and more open to the idea.

The word "rape" seems to bother and embarrass many of my fellow journalists, probably unconsciously.

Wartime rape is a crime against humanity. It's an abomination.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Amid growing dangers for journalists, RSF published a new edition of its Safety Guide for Journalists in 2015. It is available in English, French, Spanish, Arabic and other languages. An update taking account of the specific needs of women journalists was produced in 2016. See the guide.

### For news organizations

- Promote coverage of women's rights
- Take account of the specific needs of covering women's issues
- Ensure that journalists are aware of gender practices
- Take initiatives to create gender-related positions (e.g the New York Times created the position of a gender editor in October 2017)
- Take account of the specific nature of attacks on journalists – mainly women journalists – who cover stories related to women's rights
- Establish an internal emergency procedure for cases of threats
- Take screen shots of threatening messages on social networks
- Do not hesitate to report threats or attacks to the authorities

### For journalists

- Get to know your subject matter in order to be able to evaluate the dangers before going into the field
- Find out about cultural and social practices in the country where you are going, how journalists are perceived and what security is like on the ground
- Decide together with your editors who is the best person to cover this kind of story: man/woman
- Try to work in a team when in dangerous places
- Ensure that sources are protected
- Delete all information of personal nature from laptops, smartphones and tablets
- Secure professional data that could compromise you or your sources
- Ensure that stories are not published until you have left areas controlled by militias or armed groups to avoid being spotted

*For more details about cyber-safety, see RSF's recommendations [here](#)*

### For governments

- **Respect undertakings on press freedom**, including guaranteeing the right of journalists to cover subjects related to women's rights and ensuring that women can work as journalists with complete safety in compliance with international standards (UDHR, ICCPR, CEDAW, Beijing Declaration etc)
- **Establish an environment that is favourable to media freedom, particularly journalistic coverage of subjects related to women's rights, and which combats gender-specific violence against women journalists by:**
  - Creating or strengthening legislation that makes it possible to crackdown on online and offline violence against journalists in accordance with international law on freedom of the press and freedom of expression
  - Publicly condemning violence against journalists who cover women's rights, whether the violence is online or offline
  - Combatting violence and verbal threats by politicians against journalists who cover topics related to women's rights
  - Combatting judicial harassment of journalists who cover women's rights
  - Providing rapid alert and protection mechanisms for journalists who are the targets of online and offline threats, taking account of the gender-specific dimension of this violence, which mostly targets women journalists
  - Developing communication and awareness campaigns on the desirability of covering women's rights and the dangers inherent in this kind of reporting, especially for women journalists
  - Funding research into online harassment mechanisms, encouraging interdisciplinary research

into algorithms, online disinformation, online attacks and cyber-crime

- **Combat impunity for violence against journalists covering women's rights by:**
  - Providing the judicial system with the resources needed to conduct impartial, swift, thorough, independent and effective investigations whenever acts of violence, threats and attacks – online or offline – against journalists are reported, and to prosecute them
  - Establishing a surveillance mechanism for gathering, analysing and examining data about violence against journalists covering women's rights
  
- **Establish reparation mechanisms for violence against journalists covering women's rights by:**
  - Facilitating the return from exile of journalists who have covered women's rights and guaranteeing their safety after their return
  - Providing journalists who have been the victims of online or offline violence with reparations (financial compensation, medical and psychological assistance and so on)
  
- **Create the position of Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General for the Safety of Journalists (SRSJ) in order to facilitate:**
  - Coordination of the various UN bodies and mechanisms on the safety of journalists
  - Adoption of a single, harmonized UN strategy on the safety of journalists, with special emphasis on protecting women journalists and combatting violence against them
  - Provide the UN Security Council with a rapid alert mechanism
  - Monitor implementation by states of UN Security Council Resolution 2222 and of the UN General Assembly resolutions on the safety of journalists, including journalists covering women's rights

#### **For UN bodies and institutions**

- Take account – in debates, resolutions, recommendations and reports on the safety of journalists – of the right of journalists to cover women's rights and of the dangers to which journalists, especially women journalists, are exposed when doing so
- Gather, analyse and examine data on violence against journalists covering women's rights at the national, regional and international level and on the work done by women journalists; increase awareness of the increased and specific dangers to which women journalists are exposed and of the need for appropriate protective mechanisms in accordance with UN General Assembly Resolution 72/175

#### **For online platforms**

- Create an emergency alert mechanism for the targets of online attacks in order to make it easy for journalists to report the online threats and attacks they receive
- Cooperate actively with law enforcement in investigations into cyber-violence against journalists (by identifying those responsible for online violence, and so on)
- Combat "troll factories" (which are partly responsible for online violence) by such measures as increasing the number of human moderators
- Develop communication and awareness campaigns about online violence specifically targeting journalists, and about the methods used to suppress information on subjects related to women

**Our Safety Guide for Journalists :** [https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/guide\\_journaliste\\_rsf\\_2015\\_en\\_0.pdf](https://rsf.org/sites/default/files/guide_journaliste_rsf_2015_en_0.pdf)

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