



safejournalists.net

Serbia **Women Journalists' Safety** **2024**

Author
Kruna Savović



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— ABBREVIATIONS

CC – Republic of Serbia Criminal Code

IJAS – Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia

LPIM – Law on Public Information and Media

LL – Labour Law

GEL – Gender Equality Law

LPD – Law on the Prohibition of Discrimination



Introduction

During the preparation of this analysis, protests are ongoing in Serbia, initiated by the collapse of the canopy at the Railway Station in Novi Sad on 1 November 2024. From student to civic pro-tests, demonstrations predominantly shape the climate in our society. The circumstances in which female journalists (and male journalists) perform their professional duties have significantly changed. With the changed circumstances, the focus of journalistic attention has also shifted: the topics they cover and the problems they face. This is mentioned to describe the broader context and atmosphere in which the interviews were conducted and in which this research was developed.

This chapter presents the background of the report, scope and structure.

—1.1

ABOUT SAFEJOURNALISTS NETWORK

Supported by the European Commission, journalists' associations from the Western Balkan countries have established the [Safejournalists.net](https://safejournalists.net) platform (SJN)¹ to jointly monitor media legislation and practices in their countries, while actively engaging in efforts to enhance the legal and institutional frameworks that govern the work of journalists and media professionals. Utilizing carefully designed research methodologies, SJN conducts annual advocacy research that provides journalists' associations and stakeholders with reliable, evidence-based data regarding critical challenges and barriers to implementing European Union (EU) standards on media freedom and the safety of journalists in the Western Balkans. SJN employs two complementary research instruments to comprehensively evaluate media freedom and journalists' safety. The first qualitative research tool titled *Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and Journalists' Safety* was developed in 2016 and has been continually refined since. It assesses three key areas: (A) Legal Protection, (B) Journalists' Position in the Newsroom, and (C) Journalists' Safety. In parallel, the Network developed a quantitative research instrument, known as the *Journalists' Safety Index*, in 2020, piloted in the same year and further implemented in 2021 and 2022. This index measures changes in conditions that directly or indirectly

1 See <https://safejournalists.net/>

affect the safety perceptions and practices of journalists and media professionals, structured around four indicator groups: (1) Legal and Organizational Environment, (2) Due Prevention, (3) Due Process, and (4) Actual Safety.

Starting from 2023, SJN integrated both qualitative and quantitative tools into one comprehensive advocacy research framework titled *Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and Journalists' Safety Index*,² enabling a more robust and nuanced understanding of media freedom and journalist safety across six Western Balkan countries: Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Kosovo, and Serbia as well as Croatia. Since 2020, SJN has produced annual advocacy research reports for Serbia³, meticulously documenting and assessing the country's progress and challenges regarding media freedom and journalists' safety.

—1.2 RATIONALE FOR FOCUSING ON THE SAFETY OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS

Despite existing legislative frameworks and international commitments to gender equality and media freedom in all SJN countries, women journalists continue to face significant and disproportionate threats, pressures and intimidation. Violence against women journalists remains a persistent issue globally and in the Western Balkans, including assault, online harassment and death threats and other types of intimidation, increased surveillance, impersonation and various other online and offline threats.

Evidence gathered by the SJN⁴ and other media freedom organizations point out that women media professionals are frequently targeted through different forms of gender-based violence, including digital harassment, workplace discrimination, threats, intimidation, defamation lawsuits, and occasional physical assaults. These ongoing violations not only undermine the rights of women journalists but also profoundly impact their psychological health, professional advancement, and personal safety and well-being.

Data from the *Safety of Journalists Index* reports, prepared by the SJN⁵, reveal that the violence against women journalist is significantly underreported. For example, in 2023, SJN registered total of 195 incidents: 37 incidents were threats and attacks against women journalists, 68 threats against male journalists and 81 against mixed groups (men and women). These reports consistently highlight gender-specific threats and underscore the urgent need for dedicated protective measures and institutional responses.

2 The advocacy research is designed and coordinated by Snezana Trpevska and Igor Micevski, research fellows of the [Research Institute on Social Development RESIS](#), from North Macedonia.

3 All the reports for the countries and organisations part of SJN can be found on the following link: [Publications - SafeJournalists](#)

4 All incidents monitored and recorded by the SafeJournalists Network for Serbia since June 2020 can be found [here](#).

5 Safe Journalists Network (SJN) is a regional informal network that brings together journalists' associations from seven countries of the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Serbia) and Croatia. One of the network's core activities is monitoring the state of media freedom and safety of journalists, which is reflected in an online [database of attacks against journalists](#), as well as annual [national and biannual regional \(comparative\) reports](#).

However, future analysis is needed on the different types of violence and the reasons why women journalists often choose not to report the violence they experience. This report, therefore, explicitly addresses the violation of rights and gender-based challenges experienced by women journalists between 2021 and 2024. It provides a focused analysis of incidents, trends, and impacts, and proposes evidence-based recommendations to strengthen protective frameworks and practices, ensuring safer professional environments for women journalists and media workers.

—1.3 SCOPE AND STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This specialized report analyses the violations of rights faced by women journalists and media workers in Serbia during the period from 2021 to 2024. Using the SJN's established methodology, the report covers the following key areas:

- **Legal and Institutional Framework** – An examination of Serbia's national legislation, policies, and institutional mechanisms relevant to the safety of women journalists, alongside the country's international obligations and standards on media freedom and gender equality. This includes brief analysis of the effectiveness, shortcomings, and structural challenges in addressing the gender-specific threats faced by women journalists.
- **Types and Trends of Violations** – An analysis of physical and verbal threats, digital harassment, workplace discrimination, intimidation, censorship, and legal threats specifically targeting women journalists in Serbia as monitored by the SJN and based on in-depth interviews with women journalists and media workers.
- **Impact on Women Journalists** – An assessment of how these violations affect the psychological well-being, professional opportunities, and personal safety of women journalists, and how these impacts ultimately undermine media pluralism and media freedom. This analysis draws on data from SJN, independent reports, and interviews with women journalists and media workers, experts and stakeholders.
- **Conclusions and Recommendations** – Evidence-based recommendations directed at policymakers, media organizations, law enforcement authorities, and civil society to effectively strengthen protections, promote gender equality, and improve the overall safety and working conditions for women journalists.

By highlighting gender-specific issues and providing clear recommendations, this report aims to strengthen advocacy efforts, inform policy discussions, foster synergies with other initiatives and encourage proactive steps toward a safer, more inclusive media environment in Serbia.



Methodology

This report adopts a qualitative and exploratory research methodology specifically developed by SJN to examine the safety, rights, and professional experiences of women journalists in Serbia. To ensure a comprehensive analysis, the methodology combines desk research, primary qualitative data collected through in-depth interviews and online focus groups. It also incorporates insights from stakeholder consultations and relevant public events. The report is structured to answer the following research questions:

- Which are the safety risks of women journalists and how they affect them?
- Which are the forms of violence against women journalists and discrimination to which women journalists are mostly exposed?
- Why women journalists chose not to report the violence and what is the institutional response and support when they do report?

The desk research formed the foundation of this study, drawing on international frameworks and standards, such as the Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Istanbul Convention, and relevant guidelines and reports from UNESCO, the United Nations, the Council of Europe, and the European Union. Additionally, Serbia's national legislation and strategic documents related to gender equality, violence against women, and media freedom were analysed. This comprehensive review also encompassed previous advocacy research and reports published by SJN.

Primary data collection was conducted between December 2024 and March 2025 through semi-structured interviews and online focus groups.

The data on which this analysis is based were derived from materials collected in interviews conducted within three online focus groups and through a series of seven individual online interviews. The respondents come from a mix of national, regional, and local media outlets. The first two focus groups consisted of sixteen women journalists (seven in the first group, nine in the second). Another focus group consisted of six female and two male editors-in-chief.

Table 1: Individual Interviews Conducted (December 2024 – March 2025)

Name	Position/Role	Media Type
Woman journalist (attacked)	Investigative Journalist	Investigative media outlet
Woman journalist (attacked)	Investigative Journalist	Investigative media outlet
Woman journalist (attacked)	Journalist	Private media, internet portal
Woman journalist (attacked)	Journalist	Non-profit internet portal
Woman journalist (attacked)	Journalist	Private media, TV
Media and legal expert	Legal Expert	Journalists' association
Media and legal expert	Legal Expert	Journalists' association
Representative	Ombudsman	Ombudsman Institution
Lawyer	Legal expert	Lawyer
Associate (woman)	Public Advocacy Program Coordinator	Women's Rights Center

The journalists and editors-in-chief come from two public media outlets (two television stations and one radio station) and from seventeen private media outlets. Individual interviews were conducted with five women journalists, two experts (a representative of a relevant journalists' association and a lawyer working on cases in the field of media law and journalist protection), and two representatives of relevant institutions.

Table 2: Online Focus Groups Conducted (December 2024 – March 2025)

Participant Group	Number of Participants	Main Topics Discussed
Editors-in-Chief (5 mainstream media, 4 non-profit media)	6 (women)	Editorial policies, institutional responses to threats and safety risks faced by journalists
Women Journalists (Group 1)	7	Experiences of violence, discrimination, institutional responses, and support mechanisms
Women Journalists (Group 2)	9	Safety risks, online threats, harassment, and perceptions of safety

All research activities were conducted in accordance with strict ethical standards, ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, and participant anonymity throughout the process. Interviews and focus group discussions were recorded only with explicit consent of participants, then transcribed, anonymized, and securely stored. Where consent was granted, direct quotes have been included. The collected qualitative data were analysed thematically and the findings are organized around three core dimensions: (i) safety risks for women journalists; (ii) specific forms of violence and discrimination encountered; and (iii) impact on psychological well-being, professional opportunities, reporting and personal safety.

While rigorously conducted, the methodology acknowledges certain limitations, including the potential for underreporting due to participants' fears of stigma or retaliation, the voluntary nature of participation, which may affect representativeness, and the inherent difficulty in openly discussing sensitive experiences of violence and harassment. The analysis in this report is further informed by data from recent surveys with journalists in Serbia, as well as additional findings from independent reporting on journalists' safety and media freedom.



Safety of Women Journalists and Gender-Based Violence in Journalism – International Framework

Gender-based violence (GBV) remains a critical concern across numerous professional fields, including journalism.⁶ Women journalists face a distinctive and compounded risk profile, experiencing violence both in their capacity as media professionals and specifically because of their gender. Despite growing global awareness, gender-based violence against women journalists continues to be significantly underreported and insufficiently addressed by societal and institutional mechanisms.

— 3.1 IMPACT OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE ON WOMEN JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS

Women journalists, including freelancers, fixers, and other media personnel, frequently face physical threats, psychological intimidation, and digital harassment that are explicitly gender-related. These forms of abuse have a profound impact on their professional performance and personal well-being, often resulting in lasting trauma and inhibiting career advancement. Intersectional factors, such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, or freelance status further compound these vulnerabilities, highlighting the need for inclusive and tailored institutional support.

In response to escalating global threats, UNESCO launched the *Journalism without Fear or Favour* initiative in 2020⁷ to specifically address sexual harassment, discrimination, and gender-based violence faced by women journalists worldwide. Subsequent UNESCO research revealed a troubling prevalence of victim-blaming attitudes among newsroom management when women journalists report online harassment.⁸ Furthermore, the World Association of News Publishers has emphasized that sexual harassment and gender-based violence

6 Violence against women is defined as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life' (Article 1 of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women).

7 See [here](#).

8 UNESCO, [Gender-sensitive safety policies for newsrooms: guidelines + checklist](#) (Paris: UNESCO, 2021).

within news organizations carry serious organizational implications.⁹ These include decreased productivity, weakened teamwork, diminished staff trust, higher employee turnover, and substantial financial costs associated with attrition. As a result, media organizations face considerable reputational risks, which can erode public trust and credibility. Addressing gender-based violence, therefore, requires a comprehensive approach, including effective internal policies, robust reporting mechanisms, and intersectional support frameworks.

According to the *Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women, Its Causes and Consequence on Combating Violence against Women Journalists*, adopted by the UN Human Rights Council in 2020,¹⁰ violence against women is a global epidemic affecting one in three women worldwide during their lifetime. This widespread violence fosters a culture of normalization and tolerance, meaning that women journalists and media workers often operate in environments where systematic and structural gender-based violence is part of their daily reality. They are subjected to different forms of gender-based violence and abuse, including rape and sexual harassment in the newsroom and in the field, and other forms of intimidation, including threats to their family.

Women journalists covering protests and riots face an increasingly high risk of sexual assault, with many experiencing groping and harassment; yet, only a few have come forward to report these ordeals. Those reporting on feminist issues are also targeted because of the nature of their work, often covering stories that have helped shift public attitudes and contributed to the growing rejection of gender-based violence as a human rights violation.

— 3.2 INTERSECTIONALITY AND SPECIFIC VULNERABILITIES

Women journalists with intersecting identities and vulnerabilities, including freelancers, fixers, ethnic and racial minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, younger journalists, and those working in rural or marginalized areas, often encounter heightened safety risks and discrimination. These compounded vulnerabilities become particularly pronounced when journalists report on politically sensitive topics, such as corruption, human rights abuses, or conflicts.

Moreover, these intersectional risks are exacerbated by newsroom cultures often shaped by hegemonic masculinity. In such environments, harassment frequently takes the form of derogatory, sexualized commentary, attempts to undermine professional credibility, and systematic exclusion from high-profile assignments, editorial decision-making, and opportunities for career advancement. These practices not only

⁹ See [here](#).

¹⁰ See [A/HRC/44/52](#)

delegitimize women's professional contributions but actively discourage their participation in public discourse, thereby undermining media pluralism and democratic representation.

— 3.3 INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS TO ELIMINATE GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE

The CEDAW¹¹ explicitly defines gender-based violence as encompassing harmful cultural, ideological, and political practices directed at women professionals, including journalists, politicians, and human rights defenders. CEDAW obligates signatory states to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and requires them to implement awareness campaigns through mass media aimed at dismantling gender stereotypes and barriers to women's active public participation, thus indirectly supporting women's roles in journalism.

In this context, it is also important to highlight CEDAW General Recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women¹², which affirms that harmful practices and crimes against women human rights defenders, politicians, activists or journalists constitute forms of gender-based violence against women shaped by such cultural, ideological and political factors.

Another critical legal framework addressing gender-based violence is the Council of Europe's Istanbul Convention,¹³ adopted in 2011. While the Convention does not explicitly reference journalists, its comprehensive provisions effectively extend protection to women journalists in their professional roles. As the most detailed international treaty on the prevention of violence against women, it offers a broad and inclusive approach, addressing physical, psychological, sexual, and economic violence in a comprehensive manner.

In monitoring the implementation of the Istanbul Convention, the Group of Experts on Action against Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (GREVIO)¹⁴ has raised significant concerns about online and digitally facilitated gender-based violence. According to GREVIO Recommendation No. 1, digital gender-based violence disproportionately affects women journalists, human rights defenders, political figures, and individuals with high public visibility, such as social media influencers. GREVIO explicitly recognizes this phenomenon not merely as a form of gender-based violence but also as a serious infringement on women's broader human rights under international law.

The systematic targeting of women journalists with online violence is further confirmed by the UNESCO-ICFJ survey, in which nearly three quarters (73%) of the respondents

11 See [CEDAW](#)

12 See [CEDAW General Recommendation No.35](#)

13 See [Istanbul Convention](#)

14 See [GREVIO](#)

identifying as women reported experiencing online violence in the course of their work.¹⁵ GREVIO also emphasizes that although online violence may not always be explicitly criminalized, it can result in severe psychological harm due to its repetitive nature, mob dynamics, and the rapid spread of harmful content through digital platforms.

Moreover, GREVIO highlights the need to confront entrenched, male-dominated power structures within media institutions and calls for structural reforms that promote equality, diversity, and the safety of women journalists, especially those experiencing intersectional vulnerabilities.¹⁶

The United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists¹⁷ has significantly influenced global efforts to push countries to establish legal frameworks that protect journalists from both online and offline threats, with particular attention to the vulnerabilities faced by women journalists. Notably, the Plan advocates for a shift in terminology, from “violence against women journalists” to “gender-based violence in journalism”, to more accurately reflect intersectionality and acknowledge the diverse experiences of individuals in the journalism profession who face compounded risks.¹⁸

Further reinforcing international commitment, the UN General Assembly Resolution 72/175 explicitly calls on member states to recognize and proactively address attacks that disproportionately affect women journalists.¹⁹ Similarly, the UN Human Rights Council (HRC) Resolution 33/2 (2016)²⁰ unanimously condemned targeted attacks on women journalists, explicitly denouncing sexual and gender-based discrimination, violence, intimidation, and harassment occurring in both digital and physical environments.²¹ Additionally, the Declaration on Human Rights Defenders²² obligates states to take all necessary measures to protect individuals, including journalists, from violence, threats, retaliation, and discrimination arising from their legitimate work in defending human rights.

— 3.4

EUROPEAN UNION FRAMEWORKS FOR PROTECTING WOMEN JOURNALISTS

The European Union has established robust policy and legal frameworks designed to strengthen the safety and empowerment of women working in journalism and the broader media sector. The EU Commission Recommendation (EU) 2021/1534 on the protection, safety, and empowerment

15 Jordaan, L. (2023, October 9). [Global guidelines for monitoring online violence against female journalists](#). WAN-IFRA.

16 GREVIO. [General Recommendation No. 1 on the digital dimension of violence against women](#), p.24, 2021.

17 See [here](#).

18 UNESCO. (2022). [Outcomes of the Regional and Thematic Consultations](#).

19 Article 19 (2019) Ending Impunity. [Acting on UN standards on the Safety of Journalists](#).

20 See [here](#).

21 Human Rights Council (2020). [Combating violence against women journalists](#) - Report of the Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Its Causes and Consequences.

22 See [here](#).

of journalists and media professionals²³ explicitly acknowledges the critical role played by civil society and news organizations in combating both online and offline harassment, threats, discrimination, and incitement to hatred, particularly those targeting women journalists, minority groups, and those reporting on equality-related issues.

Furthermore, the EU Directive 2024/1385 on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence²⁴ marks a crucial legal advancement in ensuring comprehensive protection for women and girls, including specific provisions addressing violence in digital spaces. For women journalists, this directive imposes a clear obligation on EU Member States to adopt and enforce policies safeguarding them from harassment and abuse, both online and offline, thereby enhancing their safety in professional settings. Complementing these instruments, the EU Gender Action Plan (GAP III, 2021-2025)²⁵ advances gender equality and women's empowerment through an explicitly gender-transformative and intersectional approach. Collectively, these EU frameworks underscore the need for proactive institutional and policy responses. Despite robust international standards and sustained advocacy, gender-based violence in journalism remains widely underreported. This is largely due to persistent cultural stigma, fear of professional repercussions, and inadequate institutional responses. Breaking this "culture of silence" demands structural reforms, accessible and transparent reporting mechanisms, effective enforcement of protections, and broad societal and organizational change.

23 [Commission Recommendation \(EU\) 2021/1534](#) of 16 September 2021 on Ensuring the Protection, Safety and Empowerment of Journalists and Other Media Professionals in the European Union.

24 See [Directive \(EU\) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 14 May 2024 on Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence](#).

25 See [here](#).

IV

National Framework

The positive regulations of the Republic of Serbia do not in particular regulate the safety and protection of women journalists. The existing legal framework—comprising the fundamental principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Serbia and laws specifically addressing the prevention of violence against women, protection against discrimination, and gender equality—provides comprehensive legal protection for women, including women journalists.

— 5.1

CONSTITUTION OF THE REPUBLIC OF SERBIA²⁶

The Constitution of the Republic of Serbia guarantees the equality of women and men, developing the equal opportunities policy.²⁷ The protection of women's rights (as well as the rights of men) is ensured through provisions related to the prohibition of discrimination, freedom of expression, security and the right to legal protection.

Prohibition of discrimination is one of the key constitutional principles.²⁸ This principle guarantees the equality of all citizens before the law and prohibits any kind of discrimination, including gender discrimination. The Constitution also guarantees freedom of opinion and expression,²⁹ as well as freedom of the media and prohibition of censorship,³⁰ which are of key importance for the protection of women journalists' rights.

In addition to the above, the Constitution protects the right to personal safety and protection from violence, thereby ensuring the inviolability of the physical and mental integrity of each person.³¹

26 "Official Gazette of RS", No. 98/2006 and 115/2021

27 Article 15 of the RS Constitution

28 Article 21 of the RS Constitution

29 Article 46 of the RS Constitution

30 Article 50 of the RS Constitution

31 Article 25 of the RS Constitution

— 5.2

CRIMINAL CODE³²

The Criminal Code recognises public information work as an activity of public importance, which entails increased security risks for those performing it. Although the Criminal Code doesn't specifically protect women journalists, the legislator has prescribed three criminal offenses that explicitly provide protection for individuals performing public information tasks pertaining to the tasks they carry out. This refers to the more serious forms of criminal acts: endangerment of safety,³³ serious bodily harm³⁴ and aggravated murder.³⁵

In addition to the aforementioned criminal offenses, the Criminal Code also defines two offenses to which women are particularly vulnerable. These concern the criminal offense of stalking³⁶ (persistent following, i.e. attempts to establish contact with a person contrary to their will) and the criminal offense of sexual harassment³⁷ (each instance of verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour that is aimed at or that is a violation of dignity of a person in the domain of his/her sexual life, which causes fear or creates a hostile, degrading or offensive environment). The provisions of both criminal offenses also apply when the acts are committed using digital tools in the online space. There is no special qualifying criterion for these acts when they are committed against journalists.

If the cause for the criminal offense is hatred motivated and based on race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, gender identity, or sexual orientation, this hatred will be considered an aggravating circumstance during sentencing (unless it is already an inherent element of the offense).³⁸

Based on the Agreement on Cooperation and Measures to Improve the Level of Safety of Journalists,³⁹ a Standing Working Group for the Safety of Journalists was established at the end of 2016. The Agreement was signed between [Republic Public Prosecutor's Office \(RJT\)](#), [Ministry of Interior \(Mol\)](#), [Journalists' Association of Serbia \(JAS\)](#), [Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia \(IJAS\)](#), [Independent Journalists' Association of Vojvodina \(IJAV\)](#), [Association of Independent Electronic Media \(ANEM\)](#), [Media Association \(AM\)](#) and [Association of Online Media \(AOM\)](#). The goal of the Agreement was to establish a system of measures to ensure more effective criminal law protection for both male and female journalists. The members of the Standing Working Group are authorised representatives of the signatories of the Agreement.

32 "Official Gazette of RS", No. 85/2005, 88/2005 - corrigendum, 107/2005 - corrigendum, 72/2009, 111/2009, 121/2012, 104/2013, 108/2014, 94/2016, 35/2019 and 94/2024

33 Article 138 para. 3 of the CC

34 Article 121 para. 6 of the CC

35 Article 114 para. 1 item 8 of the CC

36 Article 138 paragraph a) of the Criminal Code

37 Article 182 paragraph a) of the Criminal Code

38 Article 54 paragraph a) of the Criminal Code.

39 <https://bezbedni-novinari.mpanel.app/storage/files/documents/sporazum-o-saradnji-i-bezbednosti-novinara.pdf>

The Standing Working Group for Journalists' Safety has created a comprehensive list of the criminal offenses that (along three criminal offenses that explicitly provide protection for individuals performing public information tasks pertaining to the tasks they carry out: endangerment of safety, serious bodily harm and aggravated murder) demand urgent actions from the police and prosecutor's office if these offenses were committed against journalists and media workers.⁴⁰ Some of those criminal offenses are: minor bodily injury, coercion, stalking, as well as the following criminal offenses, but only if they were committed by officials during the performance of official duties: infringement of inviolability of home, violation of privacy of letter and other mail, unauthorised wiretapping and recording, unauthorised photographing, unauthorised publication and presentation of another's texts, portraits and recordings, unauthorised collection of personal data.⁴¹

— 5.3

LAW ON PUBLIC INFORMATION AND MEDIA⁴²

The Law on Public Information and Media guarantees freedom of information, which ensures the free practice of the journalistic profession without censorship or political influence. The Law explicitly prohibits direct or indirect discrimination of programme editors, journalists or other persons involved in the public information sector based, in particular, on their political choices and beliefs or other personal characteristics, also prohibiting any physical assault on an editor, a journalist or other persons involved in gathering and publishing information through the media.⁴³

Moreover, LPIM provides that the freedom of public information shall not be violated by abuse of office or public powers, ownership or other rights, or by exerting influence or control over the means of printing and distribution of papers or over electronic communication networks used for the distribution of media content, and/or platforms used to distribute media content.⁴⁴

The Law on Public Information and Media stipulates that the Media Register,⁴⁵ must be submitted, among other things, with a document outlining internal measures and procedures to achieve gender equality, as well as a document prescribing measures and procedures to ensure a safe working environment for journalists and media workers.⁴⁶

40 Republic Public Prosecutor's Office, [Mandatory General Instruction O No. 10/20, adopted 24 December 2020](#).

41 ["Journalists Safety and Protection Guide"](#), Krana Savovic, Tara Petrovic, Vukasin Obradovic, Civic Initiatives, 2021.

42 "Official Gazette of RS", No. 92/2023

43 Article 4 of LPIM

44 Ibid.

45 The Media Register is maintained by the Business Registers Agency. The Register's purpose is to provide data on media outlets and media content producers to the public.

46 Article 47 of LPIM

— 5.4

GENDER EQUALITY LAW⁴⁷

Gender Equality Law ensures equal opportunities for participation and equal treatment of women and men. This law stipulates the measures for the suppression and prevention of all forms of gender-based violence, as well as the obligations of public authorities, employers and other social partners to integrate a gender perspective in the area of their operation.⁴⁸

This law obligates every person, public authority, employer, association and institution to report any type of violence based on sex or gender and violence against women in the private and public spheres. Public authorities shall be obliged to report without delay to the competent police administration or public prosecutor's office any violence that they have learned about in the performance of tasks within their competence, or in the performance of their activities.⁴⁹

The victim of violence shall be entitled to psychosocial assistance in compliance with the law and to free social and health care as well as to free legal aid, in compliance with the law governing free legal aid.⁵⁰

State institutions in the Republic of Serbia provide free legal assistance to women who are exposed to gender-based threats, harassment, or violence. The availability and accessibility of assistance depend on the type of violence and the victim's financial situation, which can pose a problem.

According to the [Law on Free Legal Aid](#), victims of domestic violence have the right to free legal assistance regardless of their financial status. However, for victims of other forms of gender-based violence—such as sexual harassment, stalking, or economic abuse—the right to free legal aid is not automatically granted. In order to obtain the right to free legal assistance, victims must meet certain financial eligibility criteria. This can create a barrier for women who are not classified as economically disadvantaged but still lack sufficient resources to afford legal services.

The social and economic status of male and female journalists is not favourable. Their labour rights are often not guaranteed. The contracts they work under do not offer job security (these are not permanent employment contracts; journalists are often employed outside of employment relationship – under temporary service agreements or freelance contracts). Regarding salaries, the research found that in 41.4% of cases, journalists' earnings were below the average salary in the Republic of Serbia.⁵¹

47 "Official Gazette of RS" No. 52/2021

48 Article 1 of GEL

49 Article 53 of GEL

50 Article 54 of GEL

51 Research "[Serbia: Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and Journalists' Safety Index for 2023](#)", Authors Marija Babic and Rade Djuric, NUNS, 2024; "[Survey Women in Media, 2023](#)", Peaceful change initiative, 2023.

Due to the methodology employed, which is based on official income data, the eligibility for free legal aid is narrowing, which means that many women journalists are left without a possibility to exercise this right.

In addition, the institutions relevant for matters of violence against women failed to establish regular services for provision of information on safety measures and legal support for women journalists, and they still do not have specially designated persons to communicate with the endangered women journalists⁵².

— 5.5

LAW ON THE PROHIBITION OF DISCRIMINATION⁵³

This Law shall regulate the general prohibition of discrimination, the forms and cases of discrimination, as well as the methods of protection against discrimination.⁵⁴ The Law prohibits harassment, humiliating treatment and sexual and gender-based harassment aiming at (or constituting) the violation of the dignity of individual or a group of individuals, on account of his/her or their personal characteristics, especially if it induces fear or creates a hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.

Sexual harassment shall be any unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical behaviour, aiming at or constituting the violation of the dignity of individual or his/her personal integrity, especially if it induces fear or creates a hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment.⁵⁵

This Law shall establish the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, as an autonomous, independent and specialised state organ. The primary tasks of the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality are: to prevent all forms, types and cases of discrimination, to protect the equality of natural persons and legal entities in all spheres of social relations, to oversee the enforcement of antidiscrimination regulations, and to improve realization and protection of equality.⁵⁶

LABOUR LAW⁵⁷

Labour Law – for the same work or the work of the equal value performed with the employer – every employee is guaranteed equal salary. It also ensures equal working conditions and opportunities for professional development and advancement, while prohibiting all forms of discrimination based on gender.⁵⁸

52 "Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and Journalists' Safety Index for 2023", Authors: Marija Babic and Rade Djuric.

53 "Official Gazette of RS" No. 22/2009 and 52/2021

54 Article 12 of LPD

55 Ibid.

56 Article 1 of LPD

57 "Official Gazette of RS", No. 24/2005, 61/2005, 54/2009, 32/2013, 75/2014, 13/2017 - CC decision, 113/2017 and 95/2018 - authentic interpretation

58 Articles 104 and 18 and Article 20 of the LL

— 5.6 STRATEGIC CONCEPTS

NATIONAL GENDER EQUALITY STRATEGY FOR THE PERIOD 2021-2030

The National Strategy for Gender Equality aims to achieve the following objectives: improve the economic status of women by increasing their employment; to reduce the gender gap in wages and pensions and promote women's entrepreneurship; to decrease gender-based violence by strengthening institutional protection mechanisms; to promote gender equality in education and culture, eliminating gender stereotypes from the education system and media, and fostering a culture of gender equality; to focus on strengthening institutional mechanisms for gender equality by enhancing the capacity of institutions to implement gender equality policies and monitor their impact.

THE STRATEGY FOR THE PREVENTION AND PROTECTION AGAINST DISCRIMINATION FOR THE PERIOD FROM 2022 TO 2030

The primary goal of the Strategy for the Prevention and Protection against Discrimination is to ensure that individuals belonging to groups at risk of discrimination are provided with the conditions to fully enjoy all human rights and freedoms on an equal basis with others. The specific objectives include: the improvement of the normative framework and policies for the prevention and protection against discrimination; strengthening the capacities of institutions and civil society organisations to implement anti-discrimination measures; raising public awareness about the importance of equality and non-discrimination; and improving the situation of, and reducing discrimination against, vulnerable social groups.

THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE CONVENTION ON PREVENTING AND COMBATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

The Republic of Serbia ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention) in October 2013 by adopting [the Law on the Confirmation of the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence](#). The Convention came into force on 1 August 2014.

Since the ratification of the Istanbul Convention, certain reforms have been implemented in the area of preventing violence against women, and the adoption [of the Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence](#) in 2016 and the Law on Gender Equality in 2021 were crucial.

The Law on the Prevention of Domestic Violence prescribes urgent, effective, and coordinated protection for victims of domestic violence by implementing immediate protective measures, which include: the temporary removal of

the perpetrator from the residence and a restraining order prohibiting contact with the victim; mandatory risk assessment, which involves evaluating the likelihood of repeated violence and implementing protective measures; coordination among institutions, entailing cooperation between the police, prosecutor's office, courts, and social welfare centres; as well as prevention and support for victims in the form of psychosocial assistance and free legal aid.

The Law on Gender Equality promotes gender equality in all areas of society and prohibits discrimination based on sex and gender identity. The key objectives of the law are: to ensure equality in education, employment, political, and public life; to prohibit all forms of gender-based discrimination and sanction offenders; and to provide protection against gender-based violence, which includes preventive measures and support for victims.

Amendments have been made to the Criminal Code to harmonise the legislation of the Republic of Serbia with the Istanbul Convention and international standards. Certain offenses related to gender-based violence have been criminalised, and these offenses include: stalking,⁵⁹ sexual harassment,⁶⁰ coercion into marriage⁶¹ and mutilation of female genitals.⁶²

Although it has been in effect for over a decade, civil society organizations express concern about the implementation of the Istanbul Convention. They point out that, despite certain laws being aligned, strategic documents adopted, and individual cases resolved, the Convention has not been fundamentally integrated into the legal and institutional framework, meaning its consistent and effective application is lacking in practice.

59 Article 138 paragraph a) of the Criminal Code

60 Article 182 paragraph a) of the Criminal Code

61 Article 187 paragraph a) of the Criminal Code

62 Article 121 paragraph a) of the Criminal Code

VI

Data Analysis

The data analysis is divided into two parts. The first part involves the analysis of statistical data, while the second part focuses on qualitative data.

The statistical data covers the number of cases reported by journalists to the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (IJAS) between 2021 and 2024. The data is differentiated by gender (women, men, and media editorial teams/groups of journalists) and by type of violence (death threats, other threats, actual attacks, and attacks on media houses). Regarding attacks on journalists, it is important to note that a significant number of these reports were filed by two male journalists. In cases involving attacks on groups of journalists, it should be noted that these groups were predominantly composed of women.

The main topics discussed include: the safety of women journalists and the risks they face; violence against them and gender-based discrimination they experience; necessary mechanisms for ensuring the protection of their safety; and both their need for, and the provision of, adequate support.

— 6.1 STATISTICAL DATA

The number of cases recorded in the SafeJournalists database from 2021 to 2024.

Categories	Gender	2021	2022	2023	2024	Overall Total
Non-physical threats and harassment	Men	2	4	9	9	18
	Women	6	3	1	7	17
	Group/media organization	1	2	0	5	8
Threats against life and physical safety	Men	18	9	19	30	76
	Women	6	3	7	18	34
	Group/media organization	28	15	9	36	88
Actual physical attacks on journalists	Men	6	5	9	11	31
	Women	0	5	2	8	15
	Group/media organization	0	6	6	7	19

Categories	Gender	2021	2022	2023	2024	Overall Total
Total alerts (per year)	Men	26	18	31	50	125
	Women	12	11	11	33	67
	Group/media organization	29	23	15	48	115

According to the SJN database, the number of all types of attacks against women journalists clearly increased through 2024, when the total number of recorded attacks tripled compared to 2023.

According to records from the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office, during the first nine months of 2024, 44 cases related to threats and attacks involving 39 male and female journalists were established. Among them, 17 (44.59%) were male journalists, and 22 (56.41%) were female journalists. For the first time since 2016, the percentage of women exposed to threats and attacks has exceeded 50%. Women journalists are particularly vulnerable to online threats (accounting for 70% of all such cases).⁶³

The trend of women being more exposed to threats continued throughout 2024. Based on filed criminal charges during that year, 62 cases were opened involving 65 victims. Among them, 49 individuals work in public information affairs, with 22 men (44.9%) and 27 women (55.1%). Women journalists were particularly vulnerable to online threats, accounting for 67.86% of all such cases).⁶⁴

Several factors may contribute to the increase in the number of cases where women journalists are victims of threats and violence. These include the increasingly complex political situation marked by a rise in protests, greater participation of women in the journalism profession, and the presence of anti-gender narratives.⁶⁵

When it comes to the ways women journalists are threatened, sexual harassment is certainly one of them. For example, one journalist received sexually explicit threats via the social media platform X (formerly Twitter). The individual who threatened her was quickly apprehended and admitted to the offense. He was convicted of the criminal offense of endangering safety. He was sentenced to one year in prison, which was ordered to be served under electronic monitoring at his residence. Additionally, he was prohibited from approaching the journalist or her home closer than 200 meters. At the same time, all communication with the journalist was banned.

On the Telegram platform, groups have been detected where women journalists are subjected to sexually suggestive messages. However, the Special Prosecutor's Office for

⁶³ [Media Scene Monitoring in Serbia for October 2024](#)

⁶⁴ [Statistics from the Supreme Public Prosecutor's Office on attacks against journalists from 2016 until the end of March 2025](#), were published on 10 April 2025, on the Safe Journalists website.

⁶⁵ **Reporting Diversity Network, the network** which monitors hate speech in the media across the Western Balkans, reported that the situation in Serbia remained unchanged from the previous period – covering 1 May 2022 to 31 December 2023. This means that hate speech in Serbia is predominantly based on gender, accounting for 24.8% of cases. The Report is available here: <https://www.reportingdiversity.org/resources/monitoring-report-on-hate-speech-in-serbia-2/>

High-Tech Crime has not shown adequate understanding of this type of harassment, often failing to recognize the elements of the offense necessary for prosecution *ex officio* or to acknowledge it as a criminal offense.

— 6.2 QUALITATIVE DATA

6.2.2 SAFETY AND RISKS

When it comes to safety, women journalists perceive it as the absence of feelings of threat—both physical and mental. This means coming to work with a sense of freedom, without fear or discomfort. It also means not feeling threatened due to her work anywhere – at home, at work, and in any other place, without the fear that someone might enter their personal space without permission. While carrying out their journalistic duties, women journalists should not be burdened by the consequences they might face because of their work. Women investigative journalists, in particular, highlight SLAPP lawsuits as a source of pressure. They should not have to worry whether the topics they cover pose a threat to their safety or the safety of their families – true safety excludes censorship and self-censorship. Furthermore, women journalists should not be burdened by concerns about financial security, as safety also encompasses material security ensured by the job she performs.

Factors influencing safety include: attitude of colleagues towards a woman journalist (solidarity is expected); attitude of editors-in-chief towards her (support and a non-discriminatory approach are expected); stance of the media outlet towards her (taking a clear position in support of the journalist's work is expected); attitude of relevant state authorities (it is expected that government bodies do not comment—especially not in a threatening tone—on the journalist's work, and that they ensure a safe working environment and respond quickly if the journalist's safety is threatened. When it comes to women journalists working in independent media, ruling structures often maintain a particularly problematic attitude towards them, which significantly jeopardizes their safety.)

The interviewees point out that, given the current circumstances in Serbia, it is difficult to become fully aware of all the risks associated with the journalism profession. A woman journalist working at a media outlet specialising in media noted that women journalists in that newsroom, due to the nature of their work, have a good understanding of the risks they face. It is well known which topics provoke the most comments and the harshest criticism (women journalists' experience provides insight but does not lead them to self-censorship, they are prepared to face the risks they are aware of).

Safety is especially compromised for women journalists working in media outlets that often take a critical stance towards the government.

The safety of women journalists can also be jeopardized by the media outlet they work for—particularly those outlets that are continuously vilified by public officials and pro-government media. One interviewee noted that just because a media outlet is considered close to the government, it doesn't mean that the women journalists employed there face lower security risks. Their freedom of expression and right to work can be threatened precisely within their own media organisation, meaning that women journalists may experience workplace censorship and mobbing.

Women journalists working in media outlets not close to government are aware which topics pose risks to their safety. Organised crime is particularly dangerous. If the crime is connected to the state, a journalist covering that topic may be accused of working against her country. Awareness of the risks—whether immediate or gained over time—generally does not lead women journalists to self-censorship. However, they do try to avoid unnecessary risks.

Reporting from the field is especially challenging. Decisions on how to respond to an interviewee's remarks must be made instantly, leaving insufficient time for a full risk assessment. Women journalists mention the example of removing the logo of their media outlet while in the field for safety reasons.

Investigative women journalists are sometimes not fully aware of the risks they face or consciously ignore them because they want to prove themselves and challenge existing stereotypes.

Women's journalist collectives provide benefits in terms of a sense of security for women journalists due to mutual understanding and solidarity. Conversely, precisely because journalistic teams are predominantly female, it is often not possible to completely eliminate gender-based security risks. However, this does not mean efforts should not be made to reduce those risks to the minimum.

Some men and women editors, especially in smaller newsrooms, are willing to make personal sacrifices by assuming security risks themselves in order to protect their female colleagues. One women editor-in-chief who was interviewed noted that women journalists generally do not ask for exemptions out of fear for their safety.

An expert from a relevant journalists' association sees the security risk for women journalists in media campaigns against them, conducted through tabloids and social media. These campaigns—where female journalists are targeted more often than their male counterparts—are usually sparked by malicious statements from politicians. In some cases, these campaigns escalate into acts of violence.

A representative from an institution relevant for journalist safety points out that threats are directed at both female and male journalists, but the types of crimes they face differ: men are more often threatened with crimes against life and body, while women are threatened with crimes against sexual

freedom. Regarding the safety of both female and male journalists, the respondent identifies the public perception of the specific media outlet as the main risk factor.

6.2.3 FORMS OF VIOLENCE

The forms of violence women journalists are especially exposed to include psychological violence and technology-based violence. Physical and sexual violence are also present, but not so such great extent. One female interviewee notes that the long-term effects of such violence can lead a woman journalist to lose, or even give up, the will to report. Another woman journalist highlights ongoing anxiety and entering a phase of self-doubt. Some women journalists cope better with such effects, while for others it affects their health and personal lives.

Women interviewed point out the specific social climate prevailing in society. Journalists, especially those working for media outlets that critically report on the government in the Republic of Serbia, are often targeted as “foreign mercenaries” — individuals willing to undermine the foundations of society for financial gain. Because of these accusations, journalists from such outlets frequently face threats and attacks.

When it comes to the difference between attacks offline and those in the online sphere, women journalists hold differing views. Some see greater danger in attacks occurring in the virtual world. What makes online threats more dangerous is the anonymity of the perpetrators, who often use anonymous profiles, and the fact that such threats are harder to prosecute. Women journalists facing physical threats report greater severity of threats, mainly due to fear that these threats may escalate into violence. (One interviewee noted that some online threats can be “kept to oneself.”) One interviewee reported feeling safer when near a camera (it is less likely that someone will attack her when there is a possibility of the attack being recorded).

Before reporting on them begins, that is, before the article (report) is published, those who have the most reason to be reported on try to intimidate the women journalists. Threats and attacks usually come from people connected to those individuals who are being reported on. In some cases, women journalists (as well as male journalists) are followed by state security personnel. Threats are often orchestrated (known as bot attacks). Although self-initiated threats also occur, such are typically driven by the interests of persons being reported on. Besides physical threats, psychological abuse happens frequently but is rarely discussed.

Men most often threaten women journalists, while women more often insult them—this applies both online and offline. On the field, their physical “inferiority” is sometimes exploited, and during assignments, they can even be physically pushed aside by their own colleagues. One interviewee noted that when she goes to the field with a cameraman, in most cases, threats are directed at her, not him. Male

journalists are most often threatened with murder and beatings, while women journalists are threatened with rape.

The interviewees do not report that violence and gender discrimination affect their productivity (which they explain by a strong sense of determination that motivates them). However, often after a period of increased productivity—stimulated by the feeling of doing the “right thing,” positive reception, or awards—women journalists experience a “breaking point” (a feeling of exhaustion that may pass but can also lead to changing jobs).

6.2.4 GENDER AND SEX DISCRIMINATION

Women journalists are discriminated against based on their appearance, age, marital status, and whether or not they have children. Some women journalists are unaffected by this pressure; however, not all are equally resilient.

Sexism directed at women journalists comes from various sources. Sexist remarks are sometimes made by colleagues, and other times by interviewees or sources. A woman journalist may be asked about her marital status, have to defend herself against interlocutor’s assumptions that she is flirting, endure supposedly polite comments like “I’ll tell you because you’re so cute,” and deal with hugs, pet names, kisses on the head, infantilisation, and comments implying she “doesn’t understand” simply because she is a woman. Sometimes, a journalist might lose a source because she wasn’t “nice enough” or because she “turned down a drink.” On the other hand, her politeness may be interpreted as having “ulterior motives”. A woman journalist sometimes faces the misuse of her personal data by individuals (in the role of a source) who obtained that data through official channels, all with the goal of making contact with her as a woman.

As an example of manipulation, respondents mention the phenomenon where members of state structures send certain individuals to flirt with women journalists in order to compromise them. At times, the focus of interest becomes the profession of the journalist’s partner or husband. It is observed that women journalists are treated with greater respect if their husband’s occupation is considered “more powerful.”

Verbal attacks on women journalists are often gender-based. Comments posted on social media are frequently overtly sexist. Women journalists are regularly subjected to remarks about their physical appearance—whether they’ve gained or lost weight, whether they are “fit” to appear on television, or whether their choice of clothing was “appropriate.” They also point to a specific pattern in tabloid campaigns, where women are often shamed by being portrayed in vulgar or sexually explicit contexts.

Respondents believe that societal attitudes toward age, geographic location of the office, ethnicity, marital or family status, sexual orientation, or belonging to the LGBT community

are deeply ingrained in all aspects of society. Age does not serve as a barrier to making offensive comments, threats, or insults. Being part of the LGBT community presents additional challenges in journalistic work—particularly in public-facing roles. Respondents agree that women journalists working in local settings face greater obstacles, largely due to the conservative values often prevalent in smaller communities. At the same time, such communities are also characterized by close-knit social networks—family, friends, and godparent ties. As a result, a woman working in sports journalism is often seen as someone looking for a “good marriage opportunity,” while investigative women journalists find it significantly harder to conduct research, precisely because of these interpersonal ties.

When it comes to gender, two opposing views emerge: some believe it does not affect a journalist’s work, while others argue that “gender realities” must be better acknowledged in the future in order to improve the status of women journalists.

Women journalists are fully aware of the power they hold within their profession—recognition and awards serve as a proof of that strength. However, women journalists point out that leadership positions are often “reserved for men”, although this does not mean there are no women in such roles. Our female respondents note that they are often paid less than their male colleagues and that interviewees frequently show more respect when addressing male journalists.

Marriage and motherhood can place pressure on women journalists, both professionally and publicly. If a journalist is unmarried, she is often asked why that is (“but she’s so pretty”), when she plans to marry, and how old she is. If she is a mother, her parenting is subject to scrutiny. If she does not have children, that too becomes a topic of commentary—she is advised to have children and told not to “marry journalism.” When reporting on topics such as birth rates, youth, family, and similar issues—especially in local settings—women journalists without a spouse or children are often verbally discriminated against.

The position of a single mother working as a journalist is often exploited. One respondent, a single mother, received an indirect threat: “I know where you live, I know which school your child attends.” It is assumed that single mothers are easier to pressure, as both they and their children rely on the income from their work. A single mother in journalism is often forced to work more, without fair financial compensation. She is not in a position to risk losing her job. One respondent was under the impression that the status of single mothers is not adequately discussed within media organisations.

In addition, the vulnerability of pregnant women and new mothers returning to work is frequently exploited. Women journalists often do not have permanent contracts, which can limit their access to healthcare services. There is little understanding for the needs of small children, or for a mother’s obligation to stay home when her child is ill. This lack of understanding can discourage women

from pursuing motherhood, as it may impact their career advancement, income, and opportunities. Unlike motherhood, fatherhood does not seem to be viewed as an “obstacle,” according to women journalists.

Certain topics—such as sports—are still seen as distinctly male domains. The experience of women reporting on these topics is far from positive. Very few are allowed to cover issues like gender equality or sexual violence in sports.

Gender discrimination against women is sometimes perpetrated by women themselves. A paternalistic attitude toward women journalists is common—phrases like “sit down, let me explain” are used, and their understanding of a topic is often questioned. Female journalists are frequently treated as if they are infantile while male journalists are favoured (“somebody must’ve sent that blonde”, but “this guy came here to work”)

Gender-based discrimination is not limited to media organisations. It is also carried out by interviewees and sources. The same source may treat a female journalist and a male journalist very differently—behaving more calmly and respectfully toward the man. However, it is not uncommon for trauma survivor sources to place greater trust in a female journalist than in a male one.

Women journalists are usually threatened with lawsuits before any are formally filed—but it happens less frequently to their male counterparts. To access the same number of sources as a male journalist, a woman journalist typically has to put in significantly more effort. They are often perceived as less “capable” or “powerful” to deliver a story. Editorial leadership and other managerial roles are usually given to men, based on the assumption that they command more trust and authority. Some male journalists, even those not in editorial positions, feel “more powerful” than their female colleagues.

One female respondent takes note of “injustices that are insufficiently visible.” Women take on the harder parts of the story writing—such as the investigative work—while their male colleagues simply “follow up” and “present” the story. At local events, there tend to be more female journalists present than male. However, interviewees often doubt a woman journalist’s independence, if she is capable of passing it to the editor-in-chief, and look for a male colleague they consider “more suitable” to speak to.

A woman editor-in-chief noted that the same source behaves differently toward a male and a female journalist—showing much more courtesy even when rejecting the male journalist. Another woman editor-in-chief observed gender-based manipulation carried out by individuals in positions of power: female supporters or members of the ruling political party exert pressure on women journalists and later discredit them. Another form of pressure she identifies is “soft pressure,” embodied in a “powerful” man who offers protection to the woman journalist.

A male editor-in-chief interviewed confirmed the existence of gender inequality in journalism. He also pointed out the (mis)use of religious identity in expressing misogynistic attitudes toward women journalists—for example, a woman journalist from a religious minority in Serbia may be accused of attacking or insulting a “Serb” simply by asking a question.

Experts—including a representative of a prominent journalistic association and a lawyer specializing in media law and journalist protection—identified several factors that impact the safety of women journalists: ethnic background (especially when clearly indicated by name and surname), LGBT identity (even when only suspected), age, marital status, and geographic location.

One of the experts noted that the most prevalent form of violence is verbal threats and insults in the online sphere. The insults directed at women journalists are significantly harsher, more repulsive, and more explicit. While most threats toward women journalists come from men, women are not excluded as those threatening. Experts believe that such threats usually come from public officials or individuals closely connected to them.

The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality notes that women journalists are most commonly subjected to threats, violence, and attacks—whether physical, verbal, or psychological. Age, geographic location, ethnic background, marital and family status, and sexual orientation all influence the safety of women journalists. The institution of the Commissioner does not have the authority to act *ex officio*, but has issued public warnings in cases of hate speech, insults, threats, and other forms of abuse directed at women journalists.⁶⁶ As part of efforts to combat discrimination, a handbook for journalists titled “Media in Serbia: From Discrimination to Equality” was developed. The Commissioner notes that she is authorised to intervene in cases where gender discrimination is established—for example, when a woman journalist is paid less than a male colleague for performing the same job. These interventions involve strategic litigation, which uses the representation of an individual’s personal interest to fight for broader societal interest. Court rulings in such cases can lead to changes in legal practice and public policy, and help improve the position of marginalized social groups.⁶⁷ However, women journalists have not reached out to her regarding such issues.

6.2.5

MECHANISMS FOR SAFETY PROTECTION – NEEDS AND SUPPORT

Women journalists believe that their safety cannot be ensured by merely respecting regulations and codes of conduct.

66 [Public Warning • Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Warning Regarding Sexist Posts on Social Media • Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Warning Regarding Threats Against a TV N1 Journalist • Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Public Warning Concerning Insults Directed at an RTS Journalist • Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, Public Notice Regarding the Complaint Filed by the Company Adria News d.o.o. and Journalist Natasa Kovacev Against the Serbian Orthodox Church – Diocese of Backa • Commissioner for the Protection of Equality, The Commissioner Condemned Attacks on Women Journalists: Unacceptable Communication Is Becoming Common Practice](#)

67 <https://ravnopravnost.gov.rs/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/szsp.pdf>

They often have more faith in public protection than in institutional protection. They consider that condemnation of attacks on women journalists must be consistent, and that fostering collegial solidarity is essential.

Some respondents point out that the media organisations they work for do not do enough to protect the safety of women journalists (one respondent noted that employers tend to distance themselves from journalists if they believe offering support might harm them), while other respondents (especially those working in investigative media, where safety is a priority issue) do not share this view (within their organisations, risks are assessed and agreements are made on how to approach meetings with sources or interviewees, and special safety measures are taken when necessary). Among self-protection mechanisms, women journalists mention the “fearless” attitude they adopt. A local respondent noted during the interview that, for safety reasons, whenever possible, she preferred to interact with female sources. Additionally, to further protect herself, she carries pepper spray and uses taxi services whenever possible.

Larger newsrooms are better positioned to develop internal mechanisms to protect against all forms of violence, including discrimination. When it comes to discrimination, these mechanisms often remain merely formalities (such as adopting acts, organising trainings...). There is awareness of the need to conduct a risk assessment with regard to the gender dimension; however, this does not mean that such an assessment is always carried out, nor that it is always possible to do so (the rule is that whenever possible, a cameraman, usually a man, accompanies the female reporter).

A male respondent-editor-in-chief gives an example from his newsroom where a female journalist, in addition to a cameraman, also has an assistant, and for riskier events, security personnel are engaged.

After an attack occurs, the procedure is the same for all media outlets: the journalist reports the attack to the designated person (usually the male or female editor-in-chief) responsible for handling such cases. Further steps depend on the resources available to the specific newsroom, such as lawyer office services or other forms of support. Information about the incident is publicly disclosed and forwarded to relevant journalists’ associations (both domestic and international). The reaction of journalists’ associations can also be proactive, meaning it may occur without prior notification from the journalist.

Women journalists emphasize the importance of activities undertaken by journalists’ associations and consider these activities beneficial. However, they point out that statements and announcements should be complemented by concrete actions—for example, when a larger group of journalists halted reporting on the activities of the President of Serbia due to his inappropriate behaviour toward one woman journalist). The statistics compiled by journalists’ associations are necessary for implementing preventive measures, but these measures alone

cannot stop a specific attack. Female respondents highlight the particular importance of psychological support provided by some associations. The mere availability of such support gives women journalists an added sense of security. It is emphasized that the support from journalists' associations should be made more accessible to journalists working in local areas.

Women journalists stress the necessity of institutional responses and that such reactions be timely. Punishment, improved record-keeping, education through concrete examples, and the establishment of good practices all contribute to increasing journalists' safety.

There is a general impression that institutions often fail to act within their legal powers, but public pressure can sometimes prompt them to respond even when they might not otherwise. Inadequate responses by state authorities have discouraged some female respondents from reporting threats. Those who have not been discouraged do report threats but generally do not expect much from institutions.

Experiences with specific members of the MoI can be very positive, but this does not necessarily imply a positive experience with their institution as a whole. Women journalists say that police officers behave responsibly, understand their concerns, and do not diminish their feelings of insecurity. Unlike the police, the prosecutor's office often dismisses threats simply because they are not direct.

So far, no mechanisms have been established to help protect young journalists without intimidating them (although the practice of having conversations with young journalists does exist, as one respondent pointed out).

An expert representing a relevant journalists' association believes that existing institutional protection mechanisms are not deficient but are applied selectively (with the authorities favouring journalists who are unconditionally supportive of them). A quicker response usually follows if an attack occurs in the physical world and is documented. However, this does not guarantee that the attack will be adequately prosecuted. In the case of attacks in the virtual world, if they come from anonymous profiles, the effectiveness of prosecution is completely lacking. The respondent notes that women journalists most exposed to attacks accept these risks as part of their job. They report attacks significantly less often than their male counterparts.

A woman expert specializing in media law and journalist protection believes that, in cases of attacks, there is not a strong enough sense of collegial solidarity among journalists from different media outlets. The female respondent feels that the competent institutions often trivialize and undermine threats and attacks. The protection they provide is not at a satisfactory level and is mostly declarative.

The Commissioner for the Protection of Equality states that the existing institutional protection mechanisms are not sufficiently effective.

VII Conclusions

—7.1 SAFETY AND RISKS

- Women journalists mostly do not feel safe because they know their safety is not adequately ensured by the competent institutions. Those working in independent media feel particularly unsafe. This is because those who should protect them are often the very “ones” contributing to their lack of safety. Representatives of public authorities often target them, and in doing so, they seemingly give “justification” with their authority to anyone who might want to threaten their safety.
- Women journalists are aware of safety risks to some extent but feel the risks are greater than they can comprehend and may be hidden in unexpected places.
- Safety is most threatened for women journalists working in media outlets that critically report on the government and for those living and working in smaller communities.
- Security risks to women journalists mainly come from public officials and individuals connected to them.

—7.2 VIOLENCE AND GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN JOURNALISTS

- Women journalists are especially exposed to psychological violence and technology-based violence.
- Threats directed at female journalists are significantly harsher and more explicit than those aimed at male journalists.
- Forms of violence against women journalists include targeting and various campaigns led by tabloids.

- Women journalists feel threatened both offline and online.
- They experience discrimination within their work environments—from female and male colleagues, as well as from interviewees and sources.
- They notice that discrimination is becoming normalised, often taking the form of supposed kindness.
- Women journalists observe that men mostly occupy leadership positions in their field, although this does not mean that there are no women in those roles.

—7.3 MECHANISMS FOR SAFETY PROTECTION – NEEDS AND SUPPORT

- When it comes to safety, women journalists do not believe that simply following rules and codes can protect them. Compliance with regulations guarantees safety only where strong institutions exist to ensure and protect women journalists' legal right to perform their duties. A social climate where it is clear that there are boundaries, the crossing of which entails facing appropriate sanctions, builds a sense of security.
- Women journalists trust public protection more than institutional protection.
- The work of state institutions responsible for safety protection is assessed by respondents as ineffective and inadequate.
- Support (legal and psychological) offered by journalists' associations is important to women journalists, and this support is mostly available in larger media organisation. Women journalists believe this support should be made more accessible to those working in smaller communities.
- Activities undertaken by journalists' associations (such as issuing statements) are helpful to women journalists.
- Women journalists working in larger newsrooms note that internal procedures exist within their organisations aimed at protecting journalists from discrimination and attacks. Women journalists working in smaller media outlets say that their organizations are not able to establish such procedures, but that does not mean they do not fight for the protection of journalists' safety within their means.
- Investigative newsrooms are particularly dedicated to developing mechanisms for enhanced safety protection.
- Some respondents pointed out discriminatory behaviour within the organisations they work for. This was reflected in inappropriate comments based on physical appearance, gender, and sex.

VIII Recommendations for Improving the Protection and Support of Women Journalists

— 8.1 SAFETY AND RISKS

- Education within media houses on all issues that may jeopardize the safety of women journalists.
- Development/improvement of internal mechanisms that help prevent safety risks and define the steps to be taken when safety is threatened.

— 8.2 VIOLENCE AND GENDER-BASED DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN JOURNALISTS

- Education aimed at recognising all forms of discrimination, especially the more subtle ones.
- Develop, both within media houses and journalist associations, the capacities for legal and psychological support provided to journalists or support that should be provided. It should be made continuous and more accessible, especially to women journalists working in smaller communities.
- Strengthen cooperation between journalist associations and organisations that provide assistance to victims of gender-based violence to empower support for women journalists exposed to such violence.
- Insist that the state provides adequate financial support to journalist associations so they can offer continuous legal and psychological support to women journalists who have suffered any form of discrimination or violence.

— 8.3 PROTECTION MECHANISMS, NEEDS, AND SUPPORT

- Amend legislation (Criminal Code, Misdemeanour Law) to introduce additional protection for journalists. In this regard, it is recommended to introduce qualified forms of criminal offenses such as stalking and sexual harassment if committed against journalists.
- Work on improving the efficiency of competent state institutions' procedures. Take into account all approaches that can enhance efficiency (such as a gender-sensitive approach).
- Strengthen solidarity among colleagues and familiarise them with both domestic and international examples of good institutional and collegial practices.
- Develop support for local organisations by ensuring funding for their basic operating costs, building their capacities (through education, strategic planning), ensuring sustainability and independence, and enabling support in advocacy and public activities.
- In cases of gender discrimination (e.g., unequal pay between female and male journalists for the same work), appeal to the Commissioner for the Protection of Equality to initiate strategic lawsuits.
- Work on networking newsrooms, both foreign and domestic, to exchange experiences and good practices gained.
- Develop mentorship programs involving experienced journalists to educate their less experienced colleagues. Considering the very poor financial situation of women journalists (and journalists in general) in Serbia, such additional engagement by experienced journalists would improve their income and provide less experienced colleagues with perspective.

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Author
Kruna Savović

Associate
Rade Đurić

Reviewer
Neda Čalovska-Dimovska

Translation
Anica Milenković

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Andrija Vukelić

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