

Parliamentary Web Dialogue on Violence Against Women Journalists and Politicians: A Growing Crisis

Wednesday, 10 November 2021, 14:00 – 16:00 CET (online)

CONCEPT NOTE

BACKGROUND AND FOCUS

Violence against women journalists and politicians remains a growing challenge within the OSCE region and in the world. While women have always faced serious challenges when participating in the public sphere, the past decade has witnessed an alarming rise in gender-based violence¹ in the political and media fields, particularly in the online realm.

Challenged in part by the broader global context (e.g. the backsliding and disregard of democratic safeguards; the transition from traditional to new media business models; the growing power of community-driven platforms in conveying information; and more recently, the human, economic and social impact of the COVID-19 pandemic), the well-being of journalists and politicians during and beyond the course of their work has been compromised. In addition, pre-existing patriarchal values have devastating effects on gender equality, encouraging intolerance and misogyny towards women in public life with the goal of creating divisions and cultivating fear.

The free and safe participation of journalists and politicians – both women and men – in their respective fields is essential to the health of any democracy. In particular, independent fact-based journalism is key to combatting disinformation that damages democratic ideals. For example, the recent awarding of the 2021 Nobel Peace Prize to two journalists recognizes their work in defending freedom of expression and its connection to peace and democracy. At times, actors – individuals, organized groups or state-supported groups – spread disinformation with the intent of harming women journalists and politicians; these actors must be held accountable. The Internet, including social media and digital platforms, has become a necessary and often primary tool for journalists and politicians to connect with colleagues, reach out to the public, conduct research, and express themselves. However, despite the immense opportunities presented by the Internet and digital social spaces, it often enables new forms of online violence against women to become widespread. In particular, women politicians and journalists have become increasingly targeted as visible and outspoken advocates of women's rights. Addressing this evolving form of gender-based violence comes with unique challenges. For instance, legislation – such as hate speech laws – must be updated to reflect the unique difficulties in taking action against perpetrators of online violence. Additionally, law enforcement agencies and the legal system need guidance from legislators as to how to respond when women report online violence. As well, legislators must examine the role and responsibility of social media organizations in combating this online hate.

¹ According to the [International Federation of Journalists \(IFJ\)](#) and its Campaign to end impunity for Crimes against Journalists, 999 journalists have been killed since 2010, most of them engaged as local journalists. It states that 2644 journalists have lost their lives since 1990, with justice and compensation being rarely delivered as only 1 out of 10 crimes against journalists are solved.

Social movements, such as the #MeToo movement, have become powerful drivers of global and national action to advance gender equality, reaching wide audiences and demanding strong action against sexual harassment, violence and abuse. As a result, the mindset that sexist remarks or harassment are “part of the workplace” is no longer acceptable, and many women and men are demanding change in the fields of media and politics.

Finally, while both women and men who enter journalism and politics face the risk of abuse, the violence experienced by women in these domains is often gendered and sexual in nature. It has the goal and impact of discouraging women from working in the public sphere. Perpetrators often target women for matters unrelated to their work, focusing instead on the woman’s appearance, personal relationships, and “likeability”.² As well, perpetrators often justify their behaviour with arguments based on preserving traditional gender roles and restricting or preventing the public participation of women as a group. This behaviour is fuelled, in part, by systemic discrimination and a culture of toxic masculinity,³ which generates stereotypical expectations by men to believe that they should control the public sphere and that a woman with influence undermines men’s identity and role in society. As a result, women journalists and politicians experience a range of violent behaviours including physical, sexual, psychological and economic abuse.

Recent research and statistics have provided an indication of the extent of violence against women journalists and politicians. For instance, results from a 2020 global survey of journalists, conducted by the International Centre for Journalists and UNESCO, found that 73% of women respondents reported having experienced online violence, and in 20% of cases, women reported that they had been abused in-person in connection with violence previously experienced online.⁴ According to Reporters Without Borders, the number of detained women journalists increased 35% from December 2019 to December 2020, although the total number of detained journalists held approximately steady.⁵ There are also troubling statistics for women politicians: a 2018 survey of parliamentarians in Council of Europe member states, conducted by Inter-Parliamentary Union, found that 47% had received death threats or threats of rape or beating; 59% had been the target of online sexist attacks on social networks; and 68% had been the target of comments relating to their physical appearance or based on gender stereotypes.⁶

The right of women to participate in public life is an internationally recognized human right. In 2018, the OSCE Ministerial Council adopted two landmark decisions on violence against women, including in the context of professional activities and concerning women journalists in particular.⁷ As well, the OSCE has done important work on the problem of violence against women in journalism and politics. The OSCE Representative on Freedom of the Media, as part of the campaign for the Safety of Female Journalists, launched a new Resource Guide that provides suggestions for State and non-State actors to protect the safety of female journalists online. The OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights has also been working to promote women’s political participation and gender equality.⁸ Despite these excellent initiatives, there remains more work to be done by both the OSCE and the OSCE PA to respond to this growing crisis.

² Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences, “[Combating Violence Against Women Journalists](#),” United Nations General Assembly, Forty-fourth session, 6 May 2020

³ Toxic Masculinity describes the set of attitudes and ways of behaving stereotypically associated with or expected of men, regarded as having a negative impact on men and on society as a whole.

⁴ UNESCO, [The Chilling: global trends in online violence against women journalists; research discussion paper](#), 30 April 2021, p. 12.

⁵ Reporters Without Borders, [RSF’s 2020 round-up: 35% rise in number of women journalists held arbitrarily](#), 11 December 2020.

⁶ Inter-Parliamentary Union, [Sexism, harassment and violence against women in parliaments in Europe](#), 2018.

⁷ These decisions were: MC Decision No. 3/18 on the Safety of Journalists and MC Decision No. 4/18120 on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women.

⁸ OSCE, [Safety of Female Journalists Online](#); and OSCE, [Promoting women’s political participation and gender equality](#).

OBJECTIVES

The event aims to enable an open and thought-provoking exchange of experiences and observations while raising participants' awareness of the topic. It will, on one hand, focus on examining the growing challenges and developments related to tackling gender-based violence in journalism and politics within the OSCE region. To do so, it will consider current issues faced by legislative and policy frameworks of OSCE participating States (pS), as well as real-life experiences of women in the fields of journalism and politics. It will also serve as an opportunity for all policy-makers in the OSCE region to engage constructively with participants and experts and discuss how to better shape human rights-compliant and gender-sensitive policies, institutions and procedures to tackle gender-based violence in the field of journalism and politics.

Proposed discussion points:

1. In which ways can the OSCE pS, including through their parliaments, support women politicians and journalists and tackle the rising rates of gender-based violence directed at women working in these fields?
2. How can the role of parliaments of OSCE pS and the OSCE PA be enhanced to better support women politicians and journalists who are facing violence in the region, and beyond?
3. How can parliamentarians leverage their powers and abilities to respond to the growing rates of violence against women politicians and journalists in the online realm?

Besides legislators from the OSCE region, this meeting will bring together relevant international and regional partners, as well as experts in the field. Finally, the event will also serve as an opportunity to officially launch the 2021 Report of the OSCE PA Special Representative on Gender Issues, entitled “**Violence Against Women Politicians and Journalists: A Growing Crisis**”.⁹

TARGET AUDIENCE

- Members of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly
- Representatives of OSCE executive structures
- OSCE-affiliated diplomatic missions
- Experts in the field of violence against women journalists and politicians

MODALITIES

The session will be chaired by the the OSCE PA Special Representative on Gender Issues, Dr. Hedy Fry, and facilitated by the OSCE PA International Secretariat.

Date and Time: 10 November 2021, 14:00 – 16:00 CET

Language: English

Registration: Please click here and fill out the form by **Friday 5 November 17:00 CEST**.

Technology: The event will be held online, via Zoom conferencing platform.

CONTACT

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⁹ The Report is available here: <https://www.oscepa.org/en/documents/special-representatives/gender-issues/report-17/4247-2021-report-by-the-special-representative-on-gender-issues-violence-against-women-journalists-and-politicians-a-growing-crisis/file>.