



GENDER-SENSITIVE SAFETY POLICIES FOR NEWSROOMS GUIDELINES + CHECKLIST

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ABOUT THESE GUIDELINES

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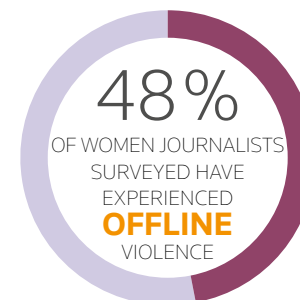
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INTRODUCTION

Women journalists, including freelancers, fixers and other associated media personnel, play an essential role in news gathering and reporting, yet the spaces that they work in, both offline and online, can be hostile. Women media workers around the world are subjected to physical, psychological and digital harassment because of their gender.



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UNESCO report highlighted how gender intersects with other marginalized identities to make journalists more vulnerable.



A 2017 survey from the [International Federation of Journalists \(IFJ\)](#) covering almost 400 women journalists in 50 countries found that **48% of respondents had suffered gender-based violence in their work and two-thirds (66%) did not make a formal complaint.** These past years, sexual harassment in the newsroom has increasingly become a pervasive and global problem. This situation has been exacerbated by a rise in online attacks: 73% of 714 women-identifying participants in a [2020 survey by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists \(ICFJ\)](#) said that they had experienced online violence in the course of the work but only 25% of them had reported incidents to their employer. In addition, [a 2021 UNESCO study conducted by ICFJ](#) highlighted how gender intersects with other identities to make journalists more vulnerable. While some newsrooms are addressing physical, psychological and digital harassment of women employees, this does not appear to be the case for the majority of media organizations. Most women journalists, including freelancers, report a lack of assistance from managers and a newsroom culture that leaves them unsupported and unsure of where to go for help.

Changing the culture of a newsroom so that the working environment is secure, and that best practices and safety policies are created from a gendered perspective is one way to address this issue. States have the primary authority to protect the human rights of their citizens and social media platforms should address hateful content shared on their sites. However, newsrooms are directly affected by gender-based violence against their journalists and therefore, need to be equipped to navigate this challenge. Written for editors and managers, this guide provides advice for creating a culture of safety in the workplace both online and offline around the five key themes below. These are particularly relevant for large or medium sized media organisations. The separate [practical guide on online harassment](#) for women journalists provides further practical and legal tips on security.



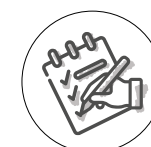
UNDERSTANDING



REPORTING




EMPOWERING



RESPONDING



SUPPORTING



WHAT IS A GENDER- SENSITIVE AND RESPONSIVE APPROACH AND WHY SHOULD YOUR NEWSROOM CONSIDER IT?

01

A gender-sensitive and gender-responsive approach to newsroom safety takes into account that gender often shapes how a journalist experiences their working environment.

- **Today, newsrooms are characterized by pervasive gender inequality.** Men tend to occupy the majority of upper management roles. This means that the newsroom environment, its policies and practices, and its response to gender-based violence may reflect male-biased norms. Upper management may be unaware of the prevalence of gender-based harassment and abuse against women colleagues. Media representatives have recognized the issue of discrimination and violence against women journalists such as the [Inter-American Press Association](#). The [2021 UNESCO study conducted by ICFJ](#) found that in some cases, women journalists who did report online harassment were victim-blamed with management asking them what they had done to provoke the attack. They were also often told to ‘toughen-up’ or ‘grow a thicker skin’. (See the 2018 [IWMF “Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media”](#)).
- **Abuse of women journalists both on and offline is not only damaging for women, but it also has a long-term negative impact on the media outlet.** According to the [World Association of News Publishers \(WAN-IFRA\) report](#), sexual harassment in the workplace leads to decreased productivity, compromised teamwork and trust, and high employee turnover. It also has a financial implication for the newsroom in terms of lower staff performance and the cost of replacing staff who may quit as a result of a hostile working environment. This can also affect the reputation of the medium that they are working in.
- **In addition, abuse of women journalists may give rise to legal actions, which may fall under various criminal qualifications such as psychological harassment, sexual harassment and discrimination.** In such cases, it may be considered an aggravating circumstance that the victim was targeted for their gender. If the victim illustrates that the employer failed to take appropriate measures to address the (gender-based) abuses and to prevent, stop and punish such abuses, legal action may also target the employer, who has a duty of care towards their employees to protect their health and safety.
- **Creating a more inclusive media outlet and putting gender at the centre of newsroom safety is an important step towards addressing the issue.** This involves the creation of policies, internal rules and good practices that are not biased to the experiences of men and that are written in neutral and inclusive language, in addition to training, and effective reporting mechanisms. Such policies should be designed with the active participation of women journalists in the newsroom. These policies should systematically be extended to all levels of the newsroom and shared with freelancers, and have buy-in from upper management and the human resource (HR) department. Gender-sensitive and responsive safety policies should involve preventative measures, as well as planning for incidents and guidelines for response. An [OSCE resource guide](#) offers concrete examples of good practices developed in various newsrooms across Eurasia and North America.



CREATING A CULTURE OF SAFETY IN THE NEWSROOM

Fostering an inclusive environment in the newsroom will involve making changes. The following section guides employers and media managers through steps they can take to ensure that women journalists are better protected and supported both in the workplace and while out reporting.

AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

One way to build a more secure working environment for women is educating employers and employees on what constitutes sexual harassment. This will mean challenging behaviors that may be seen as the norm and establishing a zero-tolerance policy towards harassment in the workplace. **It is, indeed, vital to address implicit bias and entrenched gender norms in regular meetings and trainings - actively addressing that the general culture may be experienced as sexist in regard to jokes, comments, or social spaces and events where women are excluded.**

Harassment issues should be brought up in everyday editorial meetings in order to signal frequently that management is taking the issue seriously.

WAN-IFRA recommends holding informal meetings with staff to speak with them about harassment and what it entails. It is essential to train management and editors about sexual harassment, how to respond to it and how to support staff. In addition, it is essential to involve and train employee representatives on identifying and reporting sexual harassment, so that they can provide assistance to their colleagues when faced with harassment and raise awareness in the newsroom. Managers might want to refer to the Press Forward's guidance on sexual harassment.

It is highly likely that management are unaware of the scale of the problem within their newsroom as women may not be reporting abuse or other issues that reinforce gender inequality. This could be because there is no effective reporting mechanism or because they fear repercussions, such as being pulled off a story or losing their job. To get a better understanding of the problem,



WAN-IFRA suggests conducting an anonymous survey to gather data on physical, psychological and digital abuse in the workplace. This survey should be created with the support of HR and management, sent out to all employees, not just women, and the results should be used to create policies that both protect employees and tackle institutional male bias. Finally, the survey could capture a wide-range of gender-based harassment issues, not just sexual harassment. PEN has a set of sample questions for anonymous surveys on online harassment.

CREATING A SEXUAL HARASSMENT POLICY

Newsroom managers should work with HR, employee representatives and employment lawyers to draw up a sexual harassment policy that clearly defines what sexual harassment is, how to report it, and the consequences of committing harassment. WAN-IFRA recommends that the policy should include examples of harassment as well as details on manager responsibilities and appeals. The document should be written in non-technical language and should be made widely and easily available to staff both online and in print. The International Press Institute (IPI) suggests creating an easy-to-access section on the intranet which staff can access. The media legal team should review the document to ensure that it is legally viable, according to WAN-IFRA. It is also important to have a clear and public policy which underlines that such attacks against women journalists are condemned by the newsroom. The investigations that were worked on by the targeted journalists should continue to be pursued and perpetrators investigated.



CREATING A CULTURE OF SAFETY IN THE NEWSROOM

INCLUSIVE RISK ASSESSMENTS

To better protect journalists while on assignment it is important for editors and journalists to complete a risk assessment. A typical risk assessment will help media workers think about the common risks, physical, psychological and digital, that they may face while in the field. These risk assessments often lack essential questions which could help safeguard women's safety when it comes to dealing with sexual harassment and assault both from colleagues and from people external to the newsroom. Women journalists are often hesitant to broach these subjects for fear that the story will be given to someone else. **If questions dealing with preparing for sexual abuse are built into risk assessments and are normalized then women are likely to feel more comfortable discussing them.**

A [UNESCO and Reporters without Borders report](#) from 2015 gives more detail on the types of risk women journalists may face when on assignment. While it is important to acknowledge the specific risks that certain groups of journalists (such as women) may be exposed to when covering certain topics, it is also vital to acknowledge the agency of the journalist when taking on risky work. Risk assessments should not be used as an excuse to stop assigning high-intensity work to journalists who may already be facing multiple barriers in their professional advancement. Risk assessment should be a collaborative process where the needs and concerns of the individual journalist should be heard. This rationale should be extended to freelancers; the ACOS (A Culture Of Safety) Alliance has developed [specific guidance](#) on this.



REPORTING MECHANISMS

An internal reporting mechanism where women can securely report both physical and online harassment is essential to tackling sexual harassment in the workplace. The same applies to digital attacks such as hacking and surveillance. Not only can it act as a deterrent, but it also builds confidence in the newsroom's ability to take abuse seriously. The reporting system should be standardized throughout the newsroom and staff should be made aware of the steps that will be followed once a complaint has been made. Management should understand that women journalists may wish to report abuse anonymously and a process should be put in place to allow them to do so. **The newsroom should also set up a reporting system that allows women journalists to report safely on managers who may be involved in sexual harassment.** The policy for these reporting mechanisms should be

developed with management and HR and, as with the sexual harassment policy, the steps for reporting abuse should be made widely available to staff. A similar reporting mechanism should be created for reporting online abuse. The IPI has further [guidance](#) on how to do this. PEN also has [recommendations](#) for reporting mechanisms for online harassment.

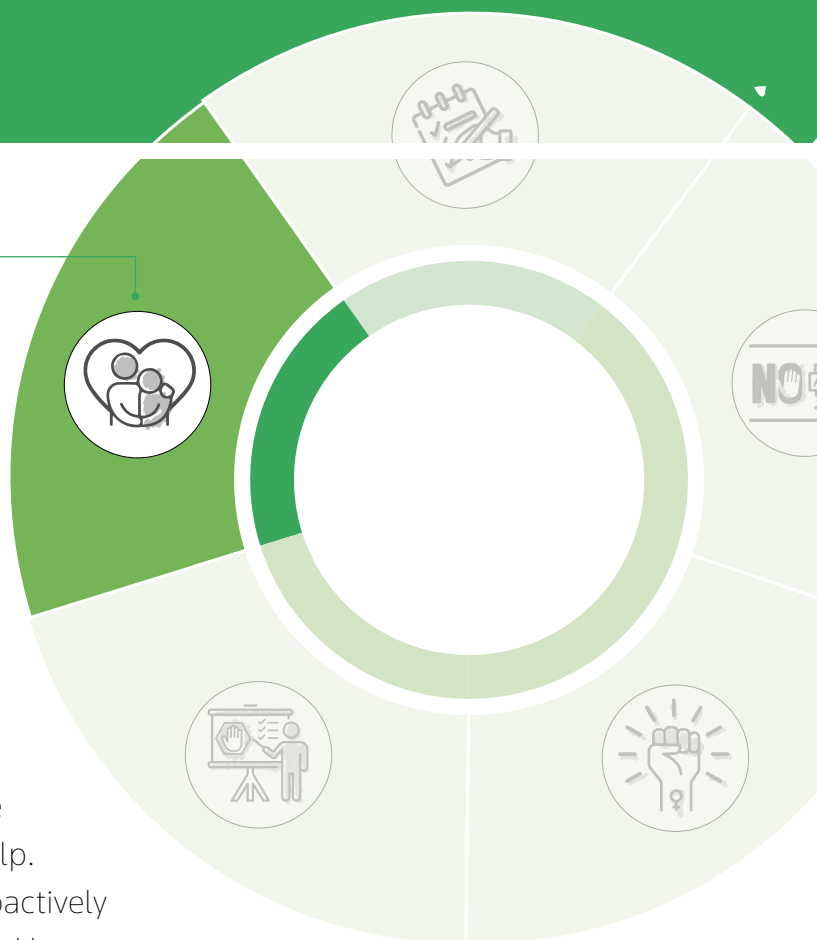
The personal data processed in the context of these mechanisms should be limited to what is necessary for the purposes for which they are processed (i.e. information relating to the identity of the reporting person, of the person referred to in the report and to the facts reported). It is especially important to think carefully about the processing of sensitive data such as that related to racial or ethnic origin, political opinion, religion or beliefs, trade union membership, genetic or health status or sexual orientation although such data may also be relevant to assessing attacks. In any case, the information related to the identity of the person referred to in the report should not be made public without his/her consent, and data should be anonymized or deleted if it is decided that the report will not be acted upon or if the disciplinary procedure comes to an end (or once the statute of limitation of the actions which may be brought against such a disciplinary procedure has expired).

PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT AND PEER SUPPORT NETWORKS

Providing psychosocial support in the form of professional counseling is also an important step for newsrooms looking to support women journalists who have experienced sexual or psychological harassment, or assault in the workplace. **The newsroom should ensure that journalists are given time during work to attend sessions and that managers have received training on the benefits of psychosocial support.**

The newsroom should ensure that it has enough counselors to meet demand. Uptake for counseling sessions will be low if people face a penalty for attending or if there is stigma around seeking help. For this reason, employers must ensure that newsroom culture proactively promotes and encourages counseling. Another good practice would be to train staff to give informal psychosocial support. Newsroom staff who have completed this training can indicate publicly that they are available to serve as a first point of contact for support. The newsroom should further ensure that journalists are given the possibility to raise these issues with the occupational physician on a regular basis.

Building peer support networks specifically dedicated to groups that may be particularly vulnerable in the newsroom can also be an effective way of supporting staff. Support networks can act as a link between staff and counselors and are an important source of support, especially for younger members of staff, who may not feel comfortable speaking with management about sexual harassment. Reuters and the BBC have well established peer support networks that are detailed in the [IPI guide](#). ACOS Alliance and the Dart Centre Asia Pacific have also published [a guide on psychosocial support for freelancers](#).



REUTERS/ Simon Newman

03

RESPONDING TO AN INCIDENT OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND/OR HARASSMENT

In addition to preventative measures, it is important to establish a framework for responding to all forms of gender-based violence. This includes rape and sexual abuse - serious crimes which are punishable by heavy sentences.

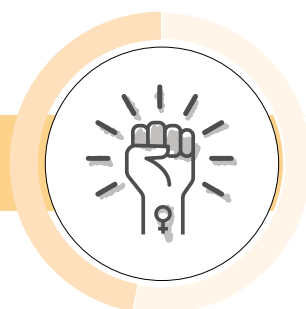
CREATING A RESPONSE FRAMEWORK

This will involve setting up protocols for responding to an incident, including identifying key members of management who should form part of the incident team. Their role will be to liaise with the target of the violence and/or harassment, family members, legal teams, and the authorities. **Setting this framework up in advance will ensure that they are better supported, and that management understands what steps need to be taken.**



PUTTING THE NEEDS OF THE TARGETED INDIVIDUAL FIRST

The newsroom should follow an approach that prioritizes the rights, needs and wishes of the person who has been targeted by gender-based violence. **It should design a framework that is supportive of women journalists and treats them with dignity and respect, avoiding revictimization.** This approach is also shown to promote recovery. A report of gender-based violence should be sent to a designated person within the newsroom who should then implement the correct protocols. Medical and psychological care should be made available to the targeted individual as soon as possible as well as information on legal rights. There should be no pressure for them to report to the police or engage with law enforcement, but clear information on the process should be provided. The Global Interagency Security Forum (GISF), has further details on this in their [guide](#) to managing sexual violence against aid workers.














LONG-TERM PLAN FOR SUPPORTING THE TARGET OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE





The newsroom should put in place long-term plans to support journalists who have been targeted by gender-based violence or harassment. **According to GISF, this should include psychosocial support and a phased return to work based on the needs of the targeted individual.** The newsroom should also carry out an investigation into the incident. It is also worth highlighting that a journalist who has experienced gender-based violence or harassment should not have to be in contact with the perpetrator if the incident involves a work contact. A review of best practice and policy should be undertaken based on findings from the report.



CHECKLIST

The following checklist serves as a guide to newsroom managers and editors who want to implement a gender-responsive approach to newsroom safety.

		01	Understand and acknowledge that the realities women journalists face at work may differ to men when it comes to safety and security
		02	Understand that misogyny and sexism intersect with other types of discrimination such as racism, religious bigotry, sectarianism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia leading to significantly heightened exposure and deeper impacts for women journalists who are also affected by these other forms of discrimination
		03	Learn about the different types of physical, psychological and digital harassment and how it impacts women at work
		04	Carry out an anonymous survey of all staff to get an understanding of the scale of gender-based violence both in person and online in your newsroom
		05	Address intersectionality by disaggregating data further by other characteristics in anonymous surveys (see PEN sample questions for suggestions) and considering all aspects of a journalist's identities and position when conducting risk assessment
		06	Create and enforce robust procedures for anonymously reporting abuse
		07	Educate staff about sexual harassment and gender-based violence, what it is, and how to report it
		08	Train your managers in the sexual harassment policy and reporting procedures

		09	Train your staff to be able to investigate targeted attacks against women journalists as part of the journalistic work of the outlet.
		10	Provide staff with contacts for external actors like press freedom organizations, networks for women in journalism, services like Trollbusters, unions, or other resources where they can seek support outside the newsroom
		11	Include policies to ensure that information about existing protocols and reporting/support mechanisms are given to all parts of the organization, including freelancers
		12	Create mentoring schemes and encourage peer-support networks for women journalists in the newsroom
		13	Create an anti-sexual harassment policy for your newsroom and ensure it is accessible, comprehensive and widely available to staff
		14	Create an incident response framework for incidents of digital, psychological and physical harassment and other forms of gender-based violence
		15	Carry out robust investigations into incidents of harassment and review best practice and policy based on the findings
		16	Facilitate legal support, including strategic litigation, where appropriate
		17	Offer psychosocial support to women journalists and give them time to attend sessions during work if they wish
		18	Have a long-term plan to support women journalists who are survivors of digital, psychological or physical harassment in the workplace



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Back cover photo: People work at the newsroom of Multimedios Television during “A Day Without Women” protest, as part of protests against gender violence, in Monterrey, Mexico March 9, 2020. REUTERS/Daniel Becerril

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