

“It Comes with the Job”: How Journalists Navigate Experiences and Perceptions of Gendered Online Harassment

JOÃO MIRANDA

University of Coimbra, Portugal

MARIA JOÃO SILVEIRINHA¹

University of Coimbra/ICNOVA, Portugal

SUSANA SAMPAIO-DIAS

University of Portsmouth, UK

BRUNO DIAS

BIBIANA GARCEZ

University of Coimbra, Portugal

MATEUS NORONHA

University of Beira Interior, Portugal

This article examines how online abuse is experienced and tackled by journalists in Portugal, and addresses the prevalence of online harassment and violence against women journalists and their perceptions of the issue. Theoretically, the article bridges the research on online harassment and gender in journalism. Empirically, it draws on a nationwide survey of journalists combined with data from semi-structured interviews conducted with 25 women journalists to explore the gendered experiences of online abuse. Journalists feel an increasing hostility aggravated by the digital environment. Half of the surveyed professionals experienced online abuse, including sexual harassment. Journalists evidenced low trust in protection mechanisms and feelings of resignation towards online abuse, seen as intrinsic to the job. The interviews further revealed a perceived connection

João Miranda: jmiranda@uc.pt

Maria João Silveirinha: mjsilveirinha@gmail.com

Susana Sampaio-Dias: susana.sampaio-dias@port.ac.uk

Bruno Dias: bsndias@gmail.com

Bibiana Garcez: bibianagarcezs@gmail.com

Mateus Noronha: mateusnoron@gmail.com

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between gender and online abuse: women recognized the sexualized nature of online abuse, which they linked to the broader cultural context of gender inequality.

Keywords: online harassment, women journalists, gendered online abuse, online safety

Social media and digital journalism have heightened the proximity between journalists and audiences, creating conversations and fostering debate opportunities. Journalists are now more visible and accessible than ever. However, the possibility for audiences to comment or easily access journalists safely behind a screen has also become a trapdoor, as not all publics engage in constructive commentary (Löfgren Nilsson & Örnebring, 2016). Indeed, a growing body of data has shown a continued interference in journalists' daily work through implicit and explicit threats to them (Binns, 2017; Holton, Bélair-Gagnon, Bossio, & Molyneux, 2023; Lewis, Zamith, & Coddington, 2020; Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021). The consequences extend to public life, as the abuse of journalists may limit the types of stories and topics they cover (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022). Waisbord (2020a) reflects on the scope and consequences of these issues through his concept of "mob censorship."

By using violent rhetoric intended to silence rather than critique, attacks target journalists' work and often in ways that reflect their personal characteristics. Further, research has shown that women journalists are preferential targets of trolls (Adams, 2018; Barão da Silva, Sbaraini Fontes, & Marques, 2022; Chen et al., 2020; Davis Kempton & Connolly-Ahern, 2022; Edström, 2016; Martin, 2018; Nadim & Fladmoe, 2019) and that there are differences in the quantity and nature of harassment, depending on journalist's gender: while male journalists are mainly criticized based on their professional capacities, female journalists are more often targets of abuse that is usually more vicious, more personal, and frequently sexual in nature (Trionfi & Luque, 2020). Thus, women journalists receive a double dose of attack both for being journalists and for being women (Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, 2018).

While these issues span nations, local realities must be studied in specific contexts, as cultural attitudes add significant nuances to our understanding of the issues at stake. Although important work has been done on online hate speech in Portugal (Amaral & Simões, 2021; Coelho & Silva, 2021; Silva, Gonçalves, Coelho, & Brites, 2021; Simões, 2021), little is known about online violence against journalists and women journalists in particular. Given that research is limited in the context of Portuguese journalism, both in scope and scale, a comprehensive overview of these problems is critically needed. By exploring both quantitative data and more finely-grained accounts of journalists' experiences and perceptions of online violence, our research aims to evaluate how online harassment affects national journalists in general and women journalists in particular.

We report on findings arising from a mixed-methods study, including a nationwide survey of journalists and a series of semi-structured interviews with some female journalists about their experiences of online and offline harassment.

Context: Journalism, Violence, and Gender in Portugal

While Portuguese journalists enjoy relatively high levels of freedom and safety in their practice—ranking seventh in the RSF Index (Reporters Without Borders, 2022)—the country has not been spared from global trends of hostility and threats against reporters. The 2021 parliamentary and local elections were marred by the actions and words of a new far-right party, Chega (Enough), which held a campaign characterized by violent incidents against journalists, preferentially targeting female journalists. In the report of these incidents, the Portuguese Journalists' Professional License Committee (CCPJ) concluded that these attacks were face-to-face and on social media, reiterating harassment messages and direct threats, particularly against female journalists (CCPJ, 2021a). As reporter Miguel Carvalho explained, the rise of the far-right parliamentary representation contributed to the exposure of a "strategy that clearly aims to intimidate journalistic scrutiny" (as cited in Coelho & Silva, 2021, p. 44). This hostility extended to the online public, and online harassment became more visible to audiences and journalists.

Given our interest in the gendered aspect of online harassment, other contextual factors are worth mentioning. Although the last decade saw a rise in the number of women entering journalism, their progress to an equal place in the profession is still incomplete (Subtil & Silveirinha, 2021). In 2014, women comprised younger journalists, had higher qualifications, tended to have smaller pay, and were not in decision-making positions (Miranda, 2017).

Regarding gender attitudes, a study of how sexist beliefs have progressed in Portugal from 2009 to 2019 has highlighted how "sexism is more deeply rooted than we would like to admit and adapts to social discourse" (Gomes, Gonçalves, Sousa, Santos, & Giger, 2022, p. 2161). A 2015 survey shows that women's tolerance of unworthy treatment, such as sexual harassment and bullying, decreased from 34% in 1989 to 14.4% in 2015 (Torres, Costa, Sant'Ana, Coelho, & Sousa, 2016). However, Amâncio and Santos (2021) stress that "sexual harassment is still perceived as a relational problem rather than a manifestation of asymmetrical power" (p. 3).

Although Portugal's ranking has improved since 2010 on the Gender Equality Index, it currently ranks 15th, 5.8 points below the E.U.'s average score (Eige, 2022). Regarding online violence, the Safe Internet Line of the Portuguese Association of Victim Support received 216 reports of online hate speech in 2020 (24 in the previous year) and 260 reports about other online attacks (sharing of photos, privacy intrusion, extortion, etc.), an alarming increase from 22 cases in 2019. These numbers (mostly women) should be higher, given that many situations were not reported (APAV, 2021).

Theoretical Framework

In recent years, online harassment and aggression have been extensively researched in psychology, sociology, philosophy, and political science. In media and journalism studies, discussions are often framed within a broader conceptual background, including other intercepting issues. Harassment is evaluated as an external interference over journalists' work (Hiltunen, 2021). Waisbord (2020a) views online harassment as resulting from "the combination of "citizens' relatively easy access to journalists through

digital platforms, the ubiquity of trolling cultures steeped in cultures of hate, and populism's demonization of the press" (p. 1031).

The first factor relates to digital journalism's potential for interaction and closer participation of the public. Social networking sites were welcomed as potentially offering a new democratic role to audiences, as users were allowed to participate in public life in what was considered a new form of digital press criticism (Carlson, Robinson, & Lewis, 2021). Journalism adapted to new digital formats by prioritizing news values, such as interactivity and participation, and reporters became increasingly encouraged to engage with readers on social media. Nevertheless, this brought new opportunities for the harassment of journalists, and much of the optimism became recognized as somewhat naïf (Lewis & Molyneux, 2018). A growing body of literature explores a "dark participation" (Quandt, 2018) of the public on social media, namely in news comments (Frischlich, Boberg, & Quandt, 2019).

The rise of populist and authoritarian leaders is another key factor in the disturbance of civil relations between journalists and audiences. Although there is a long history of attacks against the press by ordinary citizens, current forms of harassment are now performed in a historical conjuncture that inextricably links the growing success of populist ideas to the emergence of the disinformation phenomenon and the damaging effects of the internet and social media on democratic politics. Thus, as populist politics gained citizens' support worldwide, the digital revolution allowed sophisticated forms of disinformation to flood the global public sphere with falsehood—a situation aggravated by the global pandemic and consequent surge in conspiracy theories, fake news, and anti-science claims (Papadopoulou & Maniou, 2021; Posetti, Bell, & Brown, 2020; Tumber & Waisbord, 2021).

Furthermore, populist environments tend to aggravate the toll on women. Despite the increasing number of women involved in populist parties (Kantola & Lombardo, 2019), populism is always, in the words of Julie Mostov (2021), gendered and dangerous to women: "Populism organized as a binary of us and them, roots out potential 'traitors.' Women are, invariably, among them; still indispensable to the reproduction of the nation, and always suspect in their loyalty to it" (Mostov, 2021, para. 12).

These factors negatively affect journalists' environment and their work, as they face increasing harassment in their contact with sources and in the spaces where they build individual and organizational visibility. Hostility towards journalists takes a particular toll on women, as they are more likely to experience different forms of online harassment (Chadha, Steiner, & Guha, 2017; Ferrier & Garud-Patkar, 2018; Koirala, 2020; Lewis et al., 2020). Women journalists, therefore, face old problems in new spaces because these online spaces where they work are the very same spaces where they are verbally attacked, criticized, and even threatened based on their gender (Holton et al., 2023). These attacks on journalists are part of coordinated collective actions and an aggregation of independent actions that, combined, show the efforts of ordinary citizens to exert power over journalists through discursive violence. These acts of violence are further targeted at minority groups and are gender-based:

Trolls use degrading language to express their sense of (gender, racial, sexual, ethnic, religious) superiority. Their purpose is to cow journalists into silence by using language

that marks them as different, lesser human beings based on their perceived social identity. (Waisbord, 2020a, p. 1036)

Considering the interplay between women journalists' perceptions of their roles and values is essential. Research has evidenced ambiguities linking professional and gender identities, showing that "women largely adopt journalism's structures as part of the profession and choose to embrace its reward system" (Steiner, 2019, p. 457; see also Lobo, Silveirinha, Torres da Silva, & Subtil, 2017).

Literature on women and journalism has long documented how gender divides continue characterizing the sector, how the glass ceiling keeps women from key decision-making jobs, and how women television journalists are routinely sexualized (e.g., Chambers, Steiner, & Fleming, 2004). Likewise, gendered harassment is not new (Miller & Lewis, 2022; Walsh-Childers, Chance, & Herzog, 1996), but the digital environment has created new opportunities for gendered aggression.

Misogyny, sexism, racism, xenophobia, and homophobia are at the root of many identity-based forms of hate speech that target vulnerable groups based on gender, ethnicity, race, religion, or sexual orientation (Chiril, Pamungkas, Benamara, Moriceau, & Patti, 2021). This multi-target approach can also be adapted to understand online violence against female journalists who are preferential targets of trolls (Adams, 2018; Claesson, 2022; Everbach, 2018; Ferrier & Garud-Patkar, 2018; Nadim & Fladmoe, 2019; Posetti & Shabbir, 2022; Sarikakis et al., 2021).

When incivility, cyberbullying, flaming, or trolling are directed at women as journalists, it is often because journalists are part of a collective that often suffers hostility (Miller, 2021). However, female journalists are also part of a group historically subjected to misogyny and violence based on their identity as women (Edström, 2016). This dual approach is essential to assess how female journalists can be disqualified as journalists (when comments are directed to the news they produce) and/or as women (when they are personally attacked through misogyny and dehumanization).

In the United States, Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington (2020) found that online harassment was pervasive and unequal among journalists, with women journalists receiving most of the abuse. Other studies found that this abuse against female journalists was mostly sexual and based on misogynistic ideals (Chen et al., 2020; Gardiner, 2018). In a study conducted in 125 countries, the International Center for Journalists found that approximately three-quarters (73%) of female participants experienced online abuse, harassment, threats, and attacks, increasing significantly in the context of the "shadow pandemic" of violence against women during COVID-19, disinformation, and populist politics (Posetti et al., 2020). Intersectionally, this hostile environment affected women journalists both as women and as members of ethnic groups (Oh & Min, 2022).

A survey by the International Women's Media Foundation and Trollbusters found that 70% of women journalists experienced multiple forms of harassment, making it their primary safety concern (Ferrier & Garud-Patkar, 2018). Other studies reached similar results, showing that violence against women journalists "ranges from pernicious, gendered online harassment to overt, targeted attacks that frequently involve threats of sexual violence" (Posetti & Storm, 2018, p. 76).

It is mainly women who report reacting to harassment, either through the use of "emotion management" strategies online and offline to manage and mitigate the emotions caused by the incidents (Miller & Lewis, 2022) or by changing their interactions with audiences, using "avoidance as a coping strategy" (Stahel & Schoen, 2019), limiting their engagement with audiences and social media platforms or closing their accounts. Furthermore, the consequences are not only to female journalists' psychological well-being but also to public life, as it may lead to self-censorship and a "chilling effect," limiting the types of stories and topics they cover (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022; Townend, 2017).

Finally, research shows that regarding online harassment, newsrooms are often environments of trivialization and skepticism, where female journalists fear not being believed or being told to get a "thicker skin" (Chen et al., 2020). This may be even more problematic if there is no common linguistic and cultural framework for naming, defining, and interpreting situations where women are the targets of sexist comments, misogynistic rhetoric, and/or insulting attacks (Amaral & Simões, 2021).

Methodology

Considering international research on the harassment of journalists, particularly female journalists, and on national gender attitudes and violence against women as discussed above, this study aimed to comprehensively understand the frequency, nature, and effects of online harassment as experienced and perceived by Portuguese journalists and to examine its gendered nature. Thus, this paper explores the following research questions: How do journalists experience and perceive the nature, extent, and attitudes towards online violence? Are there gender differences in these experiences and perceptions? How do journalists perceive their safety and autonomy when confronting online harassment, and how do they cope? How do women journalists experience, perceive, and negotiate the pressure and impact of online violence?

To answer these questions and generate comprehensive knowledge of online harassment and its gendered dimension, the research draws on data from a survey of national journalists and from a set of semi-structured interviews with women journalists. Not only did we want to produce findings that were broad in scope and as representative as possible, but we also sought to triangulate our quantitative data with richer, in-depth qualitative data about the gender dimension of harassment through interviews with women journalists.

The online questionnaire survey was created using the LimeSurvey tool and emailed by CCPJ in November 2021 to registered holders of professional licenses or equivalent. It used a variety of question formats, including Likert scale, multiple-choice, and open-ended questions, thus allowing participants to provide long-form qualitative data. The questionnaire covered sociographical and socio-professional characteristics, perceptions, and attitudes regarding online violence against journalists, including experiences and responses to online harassment. The sample includes 411 respondents, i.e., 6.0% of the universe of professional license holders with the following sociographic representation, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Sociographic Representation of Sample and Universe.

	Sample	Universe (CCPJ)
	n / %	n / %
Gender		
Male	231/56.2%	4312/62.7%
Female	179/43.6%	2562/37.3%
Other	1/0.2%	-
Age		
18-30	61/14.8%	970/14.1%
31-40	85/20.7%	1084/15.8%
41-50	122/29.7%	2104/30.6%
51-60	89/21.7%	1663/24.2%
61-100	54/13.0%	1053/15.3%
Professional License Category²		
Professional Journalist License	329/80.0%	5415/78.8%
Other categories	82/20.0%	1459/21.2%

Note. Source: CCPJ (2021b) and authors.

Descriptive and comparative statistical analysis was performed using SPSS Statistics 26. Differences in the frequency of answers between male and female respondents were tested by Pearson's chi-squared test for each question. Where the expected frequency of each cell was less than 5, Fisher's Exact test was applied. In all statistical tests, a level of significance of 0.05 was regarded as statistically significant.

In addition to the survey, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 25 female journalists regarding their experiences and views of online and offline harassment. This sample of participants was gathered purposefully and snowballed. Journalists were formally contacted via email or phone, and interviews took place in January-February 2022, lasting 60–90 minutes. Oral consent and permission to record the conversations in video and audio were obtained before each interview. Despite the predefined questions, the semi-structured approach allowed participants to develop key points and interviewers to follow up on specific questions. These journalists worked for national and local newspapers, broadcasting, and digital-only news outlets in Portugal. The youngest journalist was 24, and the oldest was 61 years old.

The statistical analysis of survey data was then combined with qualitative data from interviews and comments sections of surveys. This qualitative data was inductively approached in a recursive process that involved alternating between data analysis and the existing literature to interpret texts by identifying key aspects of the data and themes, using the research questions as the lenses (Azungah, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006).

² In addition to the Professional Journalist License, the CCPJ issues other categories of professional license, such as Intern Temporary License, Collaborator ID Card, Equivalent to Journalist ID Card, etc.

Due to the lack of a locally established vocabulary naming online abusive behaviors against journalists and other individuals, in both the survey and the interviews, we used a range of interwoven terms such as online harassment, abuse, violence, or attacks to refer to what was generally thought of as unwanted and unprovoked aggressive online approaches to journalists.

Experiencing and Making Sense of Online Abuse

Approximately half the surveyed journalists (46.2%; $n = 190$) reported having personally experienced online violence. There is no statistically significant difference ($p = 0.676$) in the reports of experienced online attacks amongst female (48.6%; $n = 87$) and male (44.6%; $n = 103$) respondents. Furthermore, 58.9% ($n = 242$) of the respondents reported knowing about cases of online violence against other journalists. These particularly concern female colleagues from other newsrooms (61.7%; $n = 150$) or from their own (40.7%; $n = 99$), when compared to male peers from other media (41.6%; $n = 101$) or from the same newsroom (30.9%; $n = 75$). Furthermore, amongst the respondents who took a position on this issue ($n = 299$), 67.6% completely or partially agreed that there was more online violence against women journalists. There was no statistically significant association between the gender of respondents and the degree of agreement with this perception ($m = 71.6\%$ vs. $f = 64.2\%/p = 0.174$).

This first set of data points to a complex coexistence of experiences and perceptions: Although both men and women report incidents of harassment, there is a broadly equal perception among journalists (including the ones that have not experienced harassment) that women receive most of the abuse. This reveals the need to examine further the nature of the attacks and the particular dimensions of online violence against female journalists.

It also shows a nuanced picture between journalists' perceptions of and attitudes toward online violence and harassment. For some, the issue is recognized as a complex problem involving interrelated factors that include broader cultural gender practices. For example,

It has become more serious because there are more users on social media, and there are people who focus on us and stalk us from news to news, email editorial managers, write about us in forums [...] There are, in particular, ultra-misogynist users who take pleasure in tormenting female targets and putting all sorts of suspicions upon us. (Comment, female, 41)

However, data also suggest journalists believe online attacks are "part of the job." They mostly attribute online attacks to their work and not to identifying traits such as gender, age, ethnicity, or sexuality, as seen in Table 2. This part of the survey allowed respondents to select more than one option; for journalists who experienced attacks, the perception was that they were due to intrinsic aspects of the profession. This resonates with the idea that online violence is caused by the nature of the job. Interestingly, out of 190 respondents, only 27 acknowledged their gender as a cause of the attack. Simultaneously, as the data in Table 2 shows, journalists' age and, more evidently, gender were the only categories where there were statistically significant differences between men's and women's answers. This will be further explored below.

Table 2. Perceived Causes of Attack(s) Among Female and Male Respondents.

	Female respondents		Male respondents		P-value*
	n	%	n	%	
News topic	56	64.4	71	68.9	0.506 (a)
News angle	41	47.1	58	56.3	0.207 (a)
Being a journalist	45	51.7	53	51.5	0.971 (a)
Journalist's gender	25	28.7	2	1.9	0.000 (a)
Journalist's image	10	11.5	8	7.8	0.382 (a)
Journalist's age	8	9.2	2	1.9	0.046 (b)
Journalist's ethnicity	2	2.3	2	1.9	1.000 (b)
Journalist's sexuality	1	1.1	3	2.9	0.626 (b)
Other	5	5.7	4	3.9	0.387 (a)

Note. N female respondents = 87; n male respondents = 103 (Respondents who experienced online attacks); *Pearson's chi-squared test (a) or Fisher's exact test (b).

(De)gendering Online Violence

In the survey's comment section, some respondents recognized the problem but denied a gendered layer to it. One journalist said:

I don't feel different because I'm a woman - no more, no less: I am a journalist [...]. Therefore, when I get certain negative reactions, I do not interpret it as because I am a woman, [but] because of my profession [...] I'm not a man, I'm not a woman, I'm a journalist. (Interview, female, 61)

This tendency to disassociate gender as a root cause can further explain the low number of journalists who attributed the attacks they suffered to their gender (27 out of 190), as seen in Table 2. However, as international evidence shows that online harassment generally affects women more strongly than men (Chen et al., 2020; Gardiner, 2018; Posetti & Shabbir, 2022), these feelings of disassociation suggest that the double burden of being attacked for being a journalist and for being a woman (Høiby, 2020) is not always a clear-cut issue.

Nonetheless, the comments section of the survey unveiled specific nuances that highlight the gendered dimension of the problem:

I am harassed in my day-to-day life in varied situations. As I see it, this is due to a single factor: being a woman. I believe that should I have any other profession, I would also be harassed [...]. Online violence is harsher and more common against women, whether they are journalists or not. (Comment, female, 31)

Given these particular comments, we explored the possible nuances of experienced violence within the survey's comments and interviews with women journalists. They expressed a more detailed view of the

reasons for online attacks against them, pointing to intersectionality in their identification as women and journalists, as seen in this excerpt:

Negative news commentary tends to be more aggressive (not necessarily threatening) when women are the writers. On social media, many people comment [...] without even opening the news [link], but when the journalist's gender is in fact at stake, they are mainly condescending and sexist (rather than aggressive) with women journalists. (Comment, female, 31)

Although the following reporter believed that her profession was the cause for having been attacked, she mentioned the sexualized nature of the insults, circling back to the gendered aspects of online abuse:

I've gone through cases of online stalking and threats, but I don't understand them as being caused because I'm a woman, but because of my work as a journalist. Of course, the insults always end up using the fact that I'm a woman [...] Like insinuating that I have affairs and that I am someone's lover, and that I am defending the interests of such and such because I'm a bitch, etc... But I think it essentially has to do with my work as a journalist. The type of offenses that people use against me take into account the fact that I am a woman and this type of language, a vocabulary to be used particularly with women. (Interview, female, 53)

Regarding the types of attacks, the respondents who experienced them pointed to different forms of online violence, such as personal attacks, threats, and/or sexist speech, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Types of Attacks Experienced at Least Once.

	Female respondents		Male respondents		P-value*
	n	%	n	%	
Insults and/or expressions of direct/indirect aggression	81	93.1	96	93.2	0.571
Attempts to damage professional or personal reputation	74	85.1	86	83.5	0.740
Direct/indirect threats of physical violence	42	48.3	62	60.2	0.059
Direct/indirect sexist remarks	52	59.8	24	23.3	0.000
Threats against friends, family, co-workers, or employers	22	25.3	41	39.8	0.027
Online disclosure of private information	16	18.4	20	19.4	0.908
Online dissemination of fake images of the journalist	8	9.2	15	14.6	0.268
Rape threats	8	9.2	3	2.9	0.064

Note. N female respondents = 87; n male respondents = 103 (Respondents who experienced online attacks); *Pearson's chi-squared test.

Female and male respondents agree on the perceived types of attacks. However, we identified statistically significant differences in “threats to people close to them,” which were reported mostly by men, and “sexist observations,” reported mostly by women.

For interviewees, these comments tended to be understood as part of society’s general representations of men and women. As mentioned here: “It’s much easier to think that you can insult a woman as a journalist and by that, I’m not saying that male journalists aren’t insulted, obviously, they are—it’s easier because there’s a lot of condescension” (Interview, female, 30).

This survey respondent expressed how the issue affects women differently: “It seems to me that there is more hatred against news/work done by women journalists than men. When there is no “more hatred” per se, this hatred is more explicit against “the journalist” than against the theme/topic/subject” (Comment, female, 40).

Furthermore, of all 11 respondents who admitted receiving rape threats, eight were women, and three were men. Six were threatened more than once.

Specifically, 13.4% ($n = 55$) of the respondents admitted having been the victim of remote sexual harassment or object of unwanted conduct of a sexual nature in online communication. While it affects both women and men, our data suggest a higher prevalence of reported cases among female respondents (19.5% vs 9.6%; $p = 0.005$).

Finally, ethnicity or sexuality appeared as a reason for abuse only residually. Still, one surveyed journalist particularly commented on the intersection of gender and ethnicity: “Female journalists are often an easy target [...], and it becomes even more serious if they are black” (Comment, male, 48).

While, as seen above, there are no substantial discrepancies in male and female respondents’ experiences of online harassment, how they perceive the roots and impact of online violence against journalists paints a mixed picture. When asked if the digital environment aggravated hostility against journalism and/or journalists, excluding the neutral responses, both men and women somewhat agreed that the digital environment aggravated hostility against journalism and/or journalists ($m = 78.2\%$ vs $f = 83.6\%$ [$p = 0.175$]); however, there were statistically significant differences between the percentage of male and female respondents who concurred to some degree that violence against journalists is a relevant problem ($m = 88.1\%$ vs $f = 94.3\%$ [$p = 0.32$]). This difference suggests a higher level of awareness and concern amongst female journalists, which, in itself, may be linked to the continuum of violence that women are generally more exposed to in their offline lives. It also suggests that more research is needed on these links.

From Normalization to the Need for Protection

In the survey, journalists identify ordinary citizens and coordinated collectives as perpetrators of the abuses and acknowledge self-censorship due to the pressures of mob censorship (Waisbord, 2020a). Most respondents who reported being victims of online violence (51.1%; $n = 97$) referred to audience members as the perceived perpetrators of the attacks. To a lesser extent, bots and fake accounts (28.4%; $n = 54$), individual

members of political groups or organizations (26.3%; $n = 50$), and organized groups (25.3%; $n = 48$) were indicated as the source of the attacks. Overall, these figures consolidate the discursive power that ordinary citizens and coordinated collectives exert over journalists in an attempt to silence and discipline them, embodying the spirit of mob censorship (Waisbord, 2020a) that thrives through online pressure.

Regarding the implications of online violence on physical safety and professional performance, most respondents believe it can encourage offline violence: only 6.6% ($n = 27$) disagree on some level with that premise. A significant number of respondents admitted that online violence can have a self-censorship effect (58.9% agreed, $n = 242$; 19.5% strongly agreed, $n = 80$). Furthermore, threats to physical integrity and the reactions of self-censoring cause a chilling effect (Townend, 2017) and perpetuate a structure of violence that may extend to the offline environment.

Placing online violence in the broader social life, this interviewee sees women's vulnerability to harassment as connected to the failure of both offline and online protection arrangements:

How many women die every year, in Portugal, because of domestic violence? And we continue to have perfectly pathetic court decisions. Nobody defends us. And I believe that as long as women don't defend, firstly, themselves, and secondly, their gender, it's not going to improve. (Interview, female, 35)

Despite acknowledging the central role of regulators in assuring online protection, our survey points to a general lack of trust in the mechanisms for protection against online violence or unawareness about the existence of such, but also underlines contrasts in the standpoints of female and male respondents. When asked if the Portuguese law was adequate to handle the issue of online violence, excluding non-responses, only 6% ($n = 9$) of the women and 17.5% ($n = 36$) of men ($p = 0.001$) agreed to some degree with the statement.

Furthermore, a high percentage of respondents (68.7%; $n = 217$) showed some level of agreement regarding their media outlet not having adequate instruments to protect against online violence. This conception is stronger amongst women (75.0%). In addition, most respondents (94.8%; $n = 364$) believe to some degree that their news organization should take more concrete steps to protect them - a view more pronounced among women than among men (97.6% vs 92.2%; $p = 0.021$). This distrust is also reflected in the responses about the adequateness of organizations' mechanisms to protect journalists from online violence, social media platforms' mechanisms to deal with reported comments, and decisions to report online violence to regulators or professional bodies. Once again, asymmetries in responses between men and women may relate to a stronger awareness of women regarding online violence and the perceived fragilities of their protection.

Regarding actions of respondents who reported having been victims of online violence ($n = 190$), 35.8% ($n = 68$) admitted having reported the case to their media outlet, 41.6% ($n = 79$) reported the case to social media platforms, and 9.5% ($n = 18$) reported the case to the police authorities. Few journalists acted more formally (exposing their cases to regulators or unions or taking legal action), which further suggests low confidence in exposing cases of online violence: 40.5% ($n = 77$) of respondents acknowledged

having done nothing about the case or devalued it. Indeed, 34.4% ($n = 33$) of the respondents who had been victims of online violence chose not to report it to their employers because they thought it was “an inevitable consequence of their job.” The same reason was given by 19.2% ($n = 33$) of those who did not report it to police authorities. This lack of initiative, we argue, can be a sub-product of the tendency for the normalization of online harassment (Chen & Pain, 2017; Miller, 2021) and “tough-it-out culture” (Claesson, 2022), allowing the thriving of trolling and censorship.

The value of engaging with readers is often at odds with the potential for emotional violence and disruption. The survey responses show that journalists prefer to navigate through this environment with the strategies afforded by the platforms using individual agencies to control or deal with offensive comments. A significant number of respondents, 43.8% ($n = 180$), consider actions such as deleting comments and blocking users as somehow effective, and 21.4% ($n = 88$) find these actions effective. Contrarily, 54.7% ($n = 225$) find responding to comments ineffective.

Coupled with this sense of distrust in the formal protection mechanisms, our survey further points out a generalized sense of unimportance or understatement of attacks perpetrated online. For this interviewee, this devaluation is rooted in broader beliefs:

Online threats tend to be disregarded. There’s this prejudice that they are part of life, that they are acceptable, that they have always existed, and that we’re the ones who must build our shells and it’s our responsibility to resist them, and so there aren’t very clear consequences of hate speech. It will take a long time to realize that hate speech is dangerous speech and that what happens online has consequences in offline life. (Interview, female, 30)

In survey comments and interviews, journalists further raised that this issue is not often discussed and thus, they are usually unaware of how to deal with it: “We do not talk about our problems. We do not talk when journalists are attacked [although] sometimes we report the extreme cases—journalists who are killed ...; We don’t talk when the journalists are victims of harassment” (Interview, female, 40).

This links with the sense of journalistic identity, as pointed out by one respondent: “The worst nightmare of any journalist should be to be news [themselves]” (Comment, male, 38).

The following two comments, in contrast, undervalue online violence as a problematic issue. These can be seen as a reflection of the disregarding of violence within the class, as journalists mentioned above, that contributes to the normalization of online violence and ultimately considers it to be “nothing more than a storm in a teacup” (Comment, male, 57). Interestingly, these comments were written by men:

The fact that I recognize that I have been the target of attacks on my professional reputation and attempts of sexual harassment does not mean that I see myself as a victim or that I find such situations significant. They weren’t. Sexual harassment is normal when it does not reach grounds of persecution or aggression. The reputational attacks affected me psychologically, but after a few days, I came back, and I recovered. (Comment, male, 40)

I dispute the use of the expression "online violence" to define what most of the time comes down to idiotic insults and crazy attacks. Being a journalist, like in many other professions, has its downside aspects and it carries risks, and among them is the misunderstanding and hostility of readers. Journalists must toughen up and show a better capacity for self-criticism because some animosity against them is based on legitimate reasons, although often materialized in primary and gross ways. (Comment, male, 63)

Despite this pattern of undervaluing online violence, most respondents believe that news organizations need to strengthen measures to protect their workers against online violence: 40.4% agreed ($n = 166$), and 48.2% ($n = 198$) strongly agreed, as expressed here:

Media regulators and legislation are becoming obsolete regarding the challenges that social media pose today, and they are letting professional journalists be discredited. The legislation and policies need to be updated, otherwise, we soon risk not having real journalism, and the social media spaces will be filled with "on-demand news" and false information. (Comment, female, 49)

Conclusion and Future Research Directions

Having a presence online is expected if not required from journalists today. While digital media help to establish connections and reach a wider community, they also expose media professionals to abuse (Waisbord, 2020b). The study aimed to explore this issue and its gendered nature in the Portuguese context.

Our survey of journalists of all genders suggests that professionals feel an increasing hostility aggravated by the digital environment and a lack of trust in protection mechanisms. The survey data shows that nearly half of the surveyed journalists reported having experienced online violence, harassment, and/or sexual harassment, including rape threats with no gender-significant differences in the frequencies of these self-reported cases. Safety, however, should not be measured only in terms of self-reported cases. How journalists perceive the broader phenomenon should also be accounted for, and harassment's gender dimension comes into play in these perceptions.

Journalists acknowledge other cases of harassment of colleagues, these being mostly women. Both men and women agree that harassment affects more women journalists than their male colleagues, underlining their feelings of insecurity. This perception highlights a need for scrutinizing perceptions of specific gendered attacks. In addition to the quantitative stage of the research, which gave us a comprehensive understanding of online abuse by both women and men journalists, the qualitative data allowed us to gather richer insights into the gendered nuances of the problem.

For female journalists, online harassment has added layers of complexity that touch their very gendered condition as women journalists. Indeed, in interviews and survey comments, female journalists often discursively rely on their professional status to articulate their attitudes towards harassment. Nevertheless, they also acknowledge the unbalanced allocation of power in the industry and society. Overall, their perceptions and interpretations of online harassment are situated in a continuum that links the

affirmation of their professional identity and their perceived status as women. How they understand the relationship between these two aspects determines, at least in part, their sensemaking of online harassment. Overall, we argue that online harassment against journalists (and women journalists in particular) can be considered an empirical manifestation of a structure of hostility supported by historical issues of intolerance, misogyny, and the lack of effective safety protection.

Our results are not without their limitations. First, given the low response rate, we could have captured the most motivated journalists, who are more sensitive to the issues raised by online exposure. Additionally, it does not allow us to generalize the results to the population of Portuguese journalists. As such, results remain preliminary and, in some places, exploratory. Despite its limitations, this is a pioneering study on the online harassment of Portuguese journalists, offering valuable trends and insights regarding this phenomenon. The findings highlight the impact of gender as a macro-social category and corroborate the results of much previous international research worldwide. At the same time, although specific contextual elements—such as the rise of a new extreme right party, the relatively recent and limited inclusion of women in journalism, and cultural or historical aspects particularly related to gender inequalities—help explain the findings, more research is needed for inquiry into these specific aspects. Thus, future research should engage in an in-depth analysis of what makes journalists perceive harassment as a (non) problem and, as one reviewer of this paper suggested, consider specific aspects such as the separation between what journalists perceive and what they get for demographic reasons (e.g., generational relations), as well as the relative weight between being a journalist and being harassed, and being a woman journalist and being harassed. Furthermore, an intersectional lens will allow a better understanding of the unique forms of a journalist's vulnerability to harassment.

Our findings show feelings of resignation towards online violence, seen as intrinsic to the job or, worryingly, demonstrating a sense of unimportance of the attacks. Because of this normalization, journalists may not report their experiences but may acknowledge a general environment of hostility towards them. This tension consequently allows media organizations to remain inert, hampering perpetrators from being brought to justice. More generally, harassment must be seen as a systemic rather than an individual issue (Holton et al., 2023). Future discussions on self-regulation and protection mechanisms must, therefore, advance beyond individual victims and cases to involve and hold accountable the professional collective, the public, the news organizations, and other entities.

Furthermore, the susceptibility of journalists' position in digital environments brings to light employers' responsibility to create or strengthen protection mechanisms for employees. As one journalist wrote,

Fear is a very dangerous self-censorship mechanism in a democracy. And when it comes to women journalists, violent sexist threats are still recurrent, making it crucial for agencies and regulators to act quickly. Creating a safe environment for journalists [...] is as important as creating decent working conditions for journalists: these are all factors that will lead to better job performance, better mental health, and, ultimately, better democracy. (Comment, male, 26)

In the pursuit of protection strategies, organizations will find inspiration not only in existing online best practices but also in innovative news production forms already created by journalists working under difficult conditions. As experience and research on violence against women have long taught us, a proactive attitude is needed for structural and, in the case of journalism, organizational protection against online violence, one that inspires debate and helps break the cycle of normalization fed by undervaluing and resignation.

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