M20 Policy Brief 7: Escalating assaults on journalists' safety are a threat to democracy

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Overview

Attacks on journalists worldwide are a monstrosity for democracy's existential commitment to information integrity. Solidarity is needed with the frontline fighters for information integrity; Sustainability is required so they can do their work without fear; and Equality is necessary so that journalists have the right to justice and there is an end to impunity for those who violate human rights.

The M20 is an opportunity to "showcase" to the G20 the increase in killings, murders, kidnappings and detentions of journalists around the world – especially in war zones such as Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, Syria, DRC, among others. These increases have been noted this year by organisations that include the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), Reporters Sans Frontières (RSF) and UNESCO.

Powering the surge in attacks is the 20-year trajectory (from 2006-2024), where 1700 journalists were killed. The majority of these crimes – 85% – go unpunished (UNESCO: 2 November 2024). The second monstrous layer of the anti-democracy trajectory is online bullying of women journalists (especially black, and LGBTQI+), consisting of intimidation, harassment, doxxing and trolling, threats of rape, murder in the cyber sphere, i.e. social media, which is an emotionally violent zone.

Therefore, this year's G20 themes of solidarity, equality, and sustainability must apply directly to stop attacks on journalists. These G20 ideals cannot be realised unless journalism as a public good, which values Information Integrity, is fought for and

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protected as a treasure to democracy. Alliances with civil society (and governments whose values align for a more peaceful and just world), and international collaboration are needed. While signing multilateral agreements on occasions like World Press Freedom Day is a valuable start, there is a pressing need to take concrete action beyond symbolic gestures.

Proposal to the G20

The proposal to the G20 is to hear, discuss, acknowledge and act against the ever-increasing killing of journalists, as well as online sexual violence against women journalists. The Rio G20 leadership declaration says: "Acknowledging that gender-based violence, including sexual violence against women and girls, is alarmingly high across public and private spheres, we condemn every form of discrimination against women and girls and recall our commitment to end gender-based violence, including sexual violence and combat misogyny online and offline."

Women journalists are adversely affected by bots, trolls and politicians on platforms that are adversarial by algorithmic design and by an absence of content moderation, and which seem to contain no discussion or nuance. They spread hatred of a sexualised nature, often spilling over into real life space, as in the case of journalists Maria Ressa and Ferial Haffajee. In the G20 interpretation of equality, solidarity and sustainability, neither equality (for all genders), solidarity (with all those suffering from war mongers) nor sustainability (healing the planet and ending poverty) can be reached without freedom to do journalism as a public good. Therefore, journalists' safety, protection and acknowledgment of their role in democracy should be an urgent M20/ G20 goal.

This policy brief argues that signed agreements must be followed through with action against perpetrators involving new levels of co-operation between civil society, governments, international and continental agencies such as the United Nations, African Union, European Union, as well as between media freedom and journalist safety networks and advocacy organisations such as the International Centre For Journalists (ICFJ), Journalist Safety Network and SA National Editors' Forum (Sanef).

Defining the critical issue and role of the G20 and key issues

The global state of press freedom is now classified as a "difficult situation", according to the RSF 2025 report. This is the first time in the index's history. While one of the main reasons was due to the "economic factor," i.e. sustainability of journalism, RSF noted that physical attacks continue. The US is leading the economic depression, while it is also recognised as a global leader in Silicon Valley for AI and social media apps. Similarly, online attacks – enabled by Big Tech billion-dollar profit-making companies such as Alphabet (Google's parent company), Meta (Facebook's parent company), and platforms like X and TikTok – operate with little to no accountability or regulation concerning journalist safety (Sanef's 2024 submission to the Media and Digital Platforms Market Inquiry).

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Killings, violence and threats

The situation in Palestine (163rd on the RSF index) is disastrous; in Gaza, the Israeli army has destroyed newsrooms and killed nearly 200 journalists (RSF 2025). As of June 16, 2025, CPJ's preliminary investigations showed at least 185 journalists and media workers were among more than tens of thousands killed in Gaza, West Bank, Israel, and Lebanon since the war began, making it the deadliest period for journalists since CPJ began gathering data in 1992. As BBC News, Agence France-Presse (AFP), Associated Press (AP) and Reuters have noted, those reporting the conflict from Gaza now face "the same dire circumstances as those they are covering". That is, engineered starvation.

This unprecedented extreme violence against journalists in conflict zones takes place against a broader assault on journalists globally. For over a decade, research has shown that women and journalists of colour are particularly targeted. Seventy percent of women journalists experienced online and offline threats, harassment, or attacks, and a third have considered leaving the profession as a result, according to a 2019 report by the International Women's Media Foundation.

Africa: Online bullying and cybermisogyny

Women journalists in certain African countries have encountered extreme online harassment due to their journalism and/or for having a public profile, according to a 2014 study (Barton & Storm). This has not abated, with 73% of women journalists saying they experienced harassment and bullying on platforms such as X and Facebook, according to 2022 research by Julie Posetti and Nabeelah Shabbir in their study, *The Chilling: Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists*. The ICFJ/UNESCO study reveals that deep-dive research into attacks on journalists in African countries includes online harassment, disinformation and smear campaigns, sexist and hateful speech, as well as trolling with threats of rape and death.

In some African and other countries, this occurs against the backdrop of authoritarian regimes that place the free press under attack.

Studies reveal patterns vis-à-vis the digital harassment of women journalists on the continent, including self-censoring and exiting the journalistic field. The research found that 75 percent of women journalists surveyed in Kenya experienced online harassment, particularly when covering politics and sport. Harassment not only leads women to stop using digital tools but also to withdraw from the profession (Obiria, 2019). Those who resist face being silenced further (Ordway, 2018; Daniels, 2021).

Globally, cyberspace reflects and amplifies harassment, sexism and other forms of discrimination against journalists, including homophobia, racism, and religious hate speech.

South Africa

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In South Africa, women journalists of all races who work in the political reporting and investigative spaces have been targeted with threats of rape and murder, and trolling and doxxing. Journalists include: Ferial Haffajee (associate editor), Tshidi Madia (political broadcast journalist), and Karyn Maughan (legal journalist). Political journalist Qaanitah Hunter, writes about her experience of being constantly targeted in a chapter of a book, *Women Journalists in South Africa: democracy in the age of social media*.

"Much like your casual school bully, online trolls will do everything in their power to get under your skin. They will persist despite you ignoring them [...] In 2018, when it became manifest that I will not succumb to social media bullying, the efforts to intimidate me became more direct and sinister. In August 2018, I was sent a picture of a gun by an ANC Women's League leader for sending her probing questions about a meeting she attended. There was an attempt to dox me — an effort to intimidate me by sharing my address — but, thankfully, the post was taken down. But, there were full-blown threats to rape and kill me by Zuma supporters. While my employer and the South African National Editors' Forum (Sanef) came to my defence, I never felt more alone in that ordeal. I knew I was not the only one facing this, and I also knew that my seniors did not know how to navigate this terrain. What do you do in this instance? Do you send legal letters to thousands of bots? By this time, attacks on female political journalists in South Africa had become far, far worse."

Journalists should not simply "suck it up," says Hunter, who links mental health to safety and media freedom in the book. Her vocal advocacy for mental health awareness in journalism earned her the prestigious Nat Nakasa Award for Courageous Journalism in 2019.

Collaborations needed to enforce platform accountability

Platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook have permitted sexism in a vile fashion, and have failed to prioritise dealing with threats against women journalists. Reports of cybermisogyny on social media across the continent indicate that harassment, such as threats of rape and murder, often leads women journalists to leave social media or the industry altogether.

According to one report on women journalists and safety, there is a complete lack of accountability. South African women describe it as a free-for-all, saying they are advised to report incidents to the police – but when they do, the officers appear unfamiliar with terms like "emotional violence" or "cybermisogyny."

It is the responsibility of traditional and Big Tech media organisations, as well as governments and civil society, to take action and effect change. Early warning systems need to be developed to monitor, predict and prevent online violence escalation.

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Research on cyberbullying in South Africa, as referenced in this policy brief, also indicates that currently, only NGOs in the civil society space and some news organisations fully recognise the importance and nature of physical violence against journalists, and are attempting to effect change.

But they cannot act alone. Governments on both the continent and globally must hold Big Tech accountable to curb unregulated online bullying. Pressure needs to be applied for companies to take coordinated action in stopping harassment, identifying offenders, and ensuring they face criminal consequences.

Urgent continental, intercontinental, and global collaborations are needed to tackle Big Tech companies for regulation, naming, shaming and sanctions.

Other recommendations, outlined in *The Chilling*, include the adoption of a more inclusive approach to recognise and call out the intersectional nature of online violence, and for law enforcement agencies to develop gender-sensitive skills to be equipped to tackle these cases.

Proposed text for inclusion in G20 output

For the Heads of State ("Leaders' declaration"):

"We recognise with deep concern the unprecedented rise in physical and online assaults on journalists, and we unequivocally condemn such acts as grave violations of international law and fundamental human rights. We call on governments to demand immediate protection for targeted journalists and unimpeded humanitarian access.

We call upon all governments to strengthen and enhance efforts to ensure the safety and protection of journalists, uphold freedom of the press, and foster an environment where media professionals can carry out their vital work without fear or intimidation, let alone being targeted in war and subjected to generalised starvation. The groundwork for these principles was set out in the 2012 UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists. We thus also call on governments to recognise and respond to the global commemoration of the [International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists](#) *and urge global support for these international mechanisms that are designed to secure accountability.*

For the Digital Ministers declaration:

"We recognise the sizeable role played by large technology and social media companies in the proliferation of online harassment, particularly targeting women journalists. We call on governments to develop and implement robust regulatory frameworks that ensure accountability of digital platforms for protecting safety and human rights online, including of journalists, and empower state organs to effectively respond to online criminal acts."

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Recommendations and Opportunities for G20 media

- A joint campaign opportunity awaits: civil society, with progressive democratic governments, journalist organisations, and international agencies can collaborate to stop physical violence against journalists, as well as emotional online violence.
- The media need co-operation and alliances (with international agencies and national governments) to hold Big Tech accountable.
- Safety measures and equipment need to be provided to journalists in conflict areas and war zones, and there can be no impunity for perpetrators who fail to respect reporters as civilians.
- News organisations need to develop gender-awareness protocols to respond to online violence, to stop victim-blaming, and not to feel restricted or silenced in their response.

Acknowledgements and call for comments

This policy brief was commissioned within the framework of the M20 ahead of the G20 Summit.

The M20 initiative is a "shadow" parallel process set up to intersect with the G20 processes. The M20 seeks to persuade the G20 network of the most powerful global economies to recognise the news media's relevance to their concerns.

As a collaborative M20 document, this paper is a working, live document. Share your suggestions or comments for consideration: M20support@altadvisory.africa.

For more information about the G20 process, which is hosted by South Africa in 2025, visit the website here

Source documents and further reading

- Posetti, J et al (2022) *The Chilling*
- Committee to Protect Journalists (2023-2025)
- RSF (2025) World Press Freedom Index
- Daniels, G and Skinner, K (2022) *Women Journalists in South Africa: democracy in the age of social media*.

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- Hunter, Q (2022) chapter Threats to Rape and Kill me in the book *Women Journalists in South Africa: democracy in the age of social media.* (p. 85),

- Daniels, G and Douglas, O (2024) *It's rife: the online bullying of women journalists in Africa*

    UNESCO 2025

- Journalist Safety Research Network

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