

Violence against women journalists is a threat to democracy

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Recently, we have heard more about the harassment, abuse, intimidation, and violence women journalists endure, especially online. While we have become more aware of it, thanks to the bravery of the journalists who have shared their experiences, this is not a new phenomenon.

It is no secret that women politicians have endured this for years, and there has been plenty of writing and analysis to support this. However, in the last few years, academics and media analysts have begun to write about the abuse of women journalists and the alarming parallels between the two groups.

We have recently undertaken work at Gillian's Place on Responsible Media Reporting of Gender-Based Violence and Gendered Issues. Our literature review found that the experience of being targeted with abuse, harassment, intimidation, and violence is significantly worse (in volume and tone) for racially-marginalized women, gender- and-sexually-diverse people, disabled people, and certainly if one's identity intersects in multiple ways.

It is important to understand the issues faced by women journalists. Based on research conducted by the Alberta Council of Women's Shelters, the tactics of abuse, harassment, intimidation, and violence faced by women journalists and the categories of behaviour and tactics used in intimate partner violence (and how these behaviours can escalate) are troublingly similar.

In a 2021 Ipsos survey, 72% of media workers indicated they experienced harassment while doing their work. The harassment ranged from online threats or harassment to threats or harassment in person or by phone to being physically attacked. Not surprisingly, women, younger people, racially-marginalized people, and gender- and-sexually-diverse people face disproportionately more online harassment. In addition, the harassment takes more severe and personal tones than harassment directed at straight, cis-gendered white men. This reality aligns with Statistics Canada's findings in surveys about experiences of intimate partner violence and sexual violence.

A nationwide study released in May 2022 found that rates of harassment are increasing; non-binary and transgender people are more likely than other groups to experience online harassment; women "encountered harassment and violence at every turn – by email, on social media, in the field and the newsroom;" and women were more likely to be sexually harassed, be on the receiving end of hate speech, and be threatened and intimidated. Most harassment takes the form of sexualized messages or images, physical threats, or comments related to gender identity, ethnicity, or nationality, making the harassment personal rather than legitimate criticism.

In addition to concerns about the potential for the behaviour to escalate, we have to discuss its impact. Women report higher psychological harm from seemingly inescapable harassment, and at least twice as many women as men increased security at work and/or home, left their

residence, changed their contact information, or quit social media. Ipsos reports that "the impact of harassment experienced on the job has severe personal effects and industry-wide consequences."

Online harassment, abuse, intimidation, and violence cost women their productivity and impacts their mental health. Given the nature of our work today, it is not feasible to tell women to remove themselves from social media when doing so could significantly impact their livelihood or ability to communicate their message.

There can be no question that subjecting women journalists to this kind of abuse threatens democracy and a free press.