

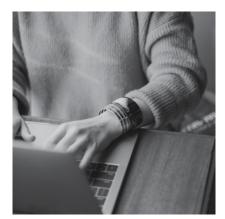




DON'T READ THE COMMENTS:

Enhancing Online Safety for Women Working in the Media



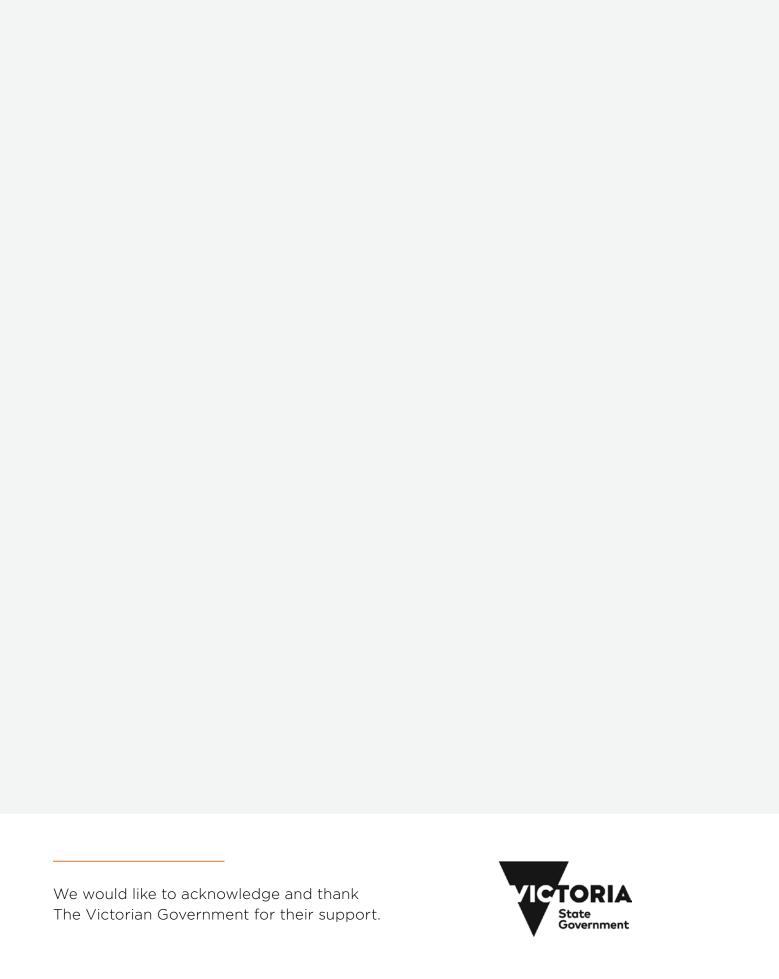












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1. Introduction

In 2016, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance published the findings of a survey of over 1000 journalists, most of them women (MEAA 2016). The "Mates Over Merit" report highlighted that a significant proportion of women journalists had experienced online harassment, trolling and stalking during the course of their work, but only 16 per cent of those surveyed were aware of their workplace having existing policies to address online abuse, with another 32 per cent stating that their employer had no such policies.

These findings reflect a general trend amongst women internet users, who experience online abuse of greater severity and at a higher rate than that of male users (Pew Research Centre 2017), including sexual harassment, image-based abuse, slutshaming, doxing¹, rape threats and death threats. Gendered online abuse of women can have significant impacts on women's health, income and ability to work, and sense of safety and security, with women reporting anxiety, depression, loss of self-esteem, fear and social isolation as some of the multiple negative effects on their wellbeing (Women's Health East 2018). Online abuse can sometimes move offline too, such as when technology is used to access private information that is then mobilised to physically stalk or harm women.

Journalists are particularly vulnerable to online attacks because the nature of their professions means that they often have public profiles and may be seen as 'outspoken' by people who prefer that women remain silent. An active online presence is a critical part of the job for many journalists, and they cannot simply disconnect from the internet to avoid harassment. The Pew Research Centre found that 58 per cent of internet users who have experienced online harassment said their most recent experience occurred on a social networking site or app, such as Twitter or Facebook, while the second most common setting was in the comment section of

websites at 23 per cent - both platforms which journalists are expected to engage with as part of their professional practice (Pew Research Centre 2017).

Online abuse can lead to women journalists self-censoring out of fear for their jobs, their mental health and in some cases even their lives. As one journalist stated, "I'm wary of being 'controversial' without knowing it and it's inhibitive for sure - it impacts what risks you are willing to take and how bold you want to be with your work."

Women who must navigate multiple oppressions as a result of their race, sexuality, class, disability or because they are transgender are even more at risk of online abuse, and their experiences of gender-based harassment are intensified by these aspects of identity. Online harassment targets women from all political, cultural and religious backgrounds and women of different sexualities and abilities, and women who are viewed as being nonnormative (e.g. non-white, non-heterosexual, non-cisgender, etc) often carry a greater load as they face attacks for reasons that are not just based on their gender, but may entwine with their gender. Research conducted on image-based sexual abuse, for example, found that it disproportionately affected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people with a disability, and homosexual and bisexual people (Henry, Flynn & Powell 2019). These identities mediate the type of genderbased abuse that women receive and how it is experienced by them.

¹ Doxing is the Internet-based practice of researching and broadcasting private or identifying information about an individual or organization.

1. Introduction continued

A Muslim woman journalist who was interviewed said that much of the abuse she received was mired in both Islamophobia and misogyny, while another Muslim journalist of colour stated, "Islamophobic comments are the norm for me on any Islam related piece... Social media has been a boon to people of colour writers and perspectives in many ways locked out of traditional media, but who also disproportionately face the brunt of how their disruption is received by those unused to these perspectives." Yet another journalist indicated that her sexuality was used against her in rape threats that suggested that the perpetrator would "rape [her] straight" for an article she did on women's sport. These stories reinforce the need for an intersectional approach to online gendered abuse that addresses the diversity of women's experiences.

Importantly, the impact of online harassment of women journalists extends beyond the journalists themselves to affect 'ordinary bystanders.' Bystanders are people who read and participate in the platforms on which the abuse takes place and may or may not act to support or defend the women being attacked. The Pew Research Centre found that 40 per cent of their American respondents had experienced online harassment and 73 per cent had witnessed it, a staggeringly large cohort (Duggan 2014). Research conducted by Women, Action, and the Media (WAM!) found that 43 per cent of the reports they investigated during their study of Twitter were made by those receiving the harassment on Twitter, 42 per cent were reports from bystanders who did not know the person being harassed, and 15 per cent were reports from delegates. people who know the person being harassed and act as their agents (Matias et al 2015).

These figures highlight the need to consider the role of bystanders in harmful and abusive online interactions, as they are as likely to report incidents of harassment as the targets of harassment themselves, making them potential agents of change. However, the converse is also true, and bystanders can experience direct or vicarious trauma by virtue of witnessing online abuse even where it is not directed towards them, and may feel anxious and less inclined to post online after witnessing online abuse (Pew Research Centre 2017).

This policy document brings together findings from secondary research and consultations with 12 women journalists and media workers and one male journalist from Australia to recommend strategies for media organisations to prevent and respond to gender-based abuse on their platforms. The purpose of this document is to outline strategies that may assist media organisations to improve their comment and content moderation on social media and news websites, and in doing so support the women journalists who work for them and bystanders who engage with their websites, stories and social media accounts. The recommendations listed here cover a broad spectrum of concerns that directly affect women journalists and online bystanders. Given the minimal data available on this issue, it is recommended that these policies and practices initially be trialled and evaluated with a small number of media organisations.





3. Findings

SYSTEMIC SEXISM IN THE MEDIA INDUSTRY

A key finding of this project was that journalists believed that systemic sexism in the media industry contributed to the lack of strong leadership on the issue of online abuse of women journalists. Several of the women consulted argued that there needed to be structural change which incorporated greater and more nuanced understandings of gender-based issues, ameliorated sexism and sexual harassment in the workplace and addressed unequal gender representation at senior levels. This analysis proposes that the abuse of women journalists does not exist within a sociocultural vacuum the gendered harassment that they face replicates, reinforces and feeds off broader gender inequality in society, including in the media industry.

Research shows that media have a powerful role to play in the challenging of gender norms that position women as inferior to men, gender stereotyping and sexual objectification that contribute to genderbased abuse and trolling (UN Women 2011; European Parliament 2018). The 2017 evidence paper produced by OurWatch on the role of news media in the prevention of violence against women highlights that the way media reports violence against women influences community attitudes, with sensationalist language, lack of context and shifting the blame from the perpetrator to the victim being key aspects of some news stories that can negatively affect social attitudes towards women. Importantly, the OurWatch report demonstrates that the role of media extends beyond news reporting and representations of gender in media, and that the entire industry needs to promote gender equality through its practices, policies and workplace culture, stating, "The dominance of men in positions of power in media newsrooms in Australia cannot be ignored, nor can the reported high levels of

sexual harassment" (Sutherland et al 2017, p. 5). This view was repeated by a number of the journalists interviewed.

The lack of women in executive roles, maledominated workplace culture and a lack of critical analysis when it came to gender were all cited as reasons for why online harassment of women journalists was not always seen to be a priority for media organisations. One journalist offered: "This stuff needs a gender analysis, and newsrooms don't know what that means. And if they did, they would have to look at their own culture and apply a gender analysis and realise how many of the problems present in trolling are also encoded in the workplace... Certainly no thought is applied to how gender power imbalances in newsrooms create conditions where sexist content is not only created but celebrated." She continued by pointing out that sexist and unbalanced media reporting on issues affecting women was also partially responsible for gendered abuse online: "One or the things which frustrates me in the whole convo is that the 'threat' is forever presented as being 'out there' like that these are anonymous trolls... But no thought is applied to how those trolls draw their courage from the misogyny evident in headlines or coverage created by the news outlet." This same point was raised by other journalists as well, who pointed out the problem of media outlets giving certain columnists and commentators space to propagate the very same anti-women ideas that fed the online abuse of journalists: "I can't imagine a newspaper that publishes slur pieces against a politician's dead mother would be quite as receptive to it or understanding of what is generally accepted as inappropriate/ unacceptable, if that makes sense."

The sexual objectification of women in media may also play a role in normalising gendered abuse, as research suggests that men are more likely to harass women or view them as incompetent after watching a video in which women are treated as sexual objects.

These viewpoints are important to incorporate into any policy on genderbased abuse online, particularly considering that bystanders' confidence to confront identity-based abuse often hinges on their perception of whether their perspective is one that is commonly shared, a perception that is challenged by the publication of antiwomen pieces. This is further explored in the following section.

THE EFFECTIVE NESS OF BYSTANDER

There is currently limited research available about the effectiveness of bystander action against gender-based harassment online, with the majority of contemporary research focusing on sexual assault, sexual harassment and gendered prejudice on college campuses and other offline settings. This research has demonstrated that bystanders are often negatively emotionally affected by witnessing these forms of harassment (Chaudoir and Quinn 2010; Galdi, Maass and Cadinu 2017; Hitlan, Schneider and Walsh 2006) and highlighted the importance of encouraging and training bystanders to intervene in gendered and sexual harassment and assault (Salazar et al 2014). The findings of this research suggest that bystanders are more likely to act (whether that be through intervening, reporting or distracting) when they are confident that they have accurately identified the abuse (Galdi, Maass and Cadinu 2017) and feel that they are acting in accordance with and not against broader social norms about justice and fairness (Salazar et al 2016).

Significantly, Gramazio et al (2018) found that bystanders are less likely to intervene in cases of sexual harassment where the target is viewed as being "sexualised," which is particularly problematic in cases of slut-shaming and image-based abuse involving nudes.

Because of the limited number of studies on online gendered abuse, research in this area of study relies extensively on research on bystander anti-racism, in other words actions that ordinary bystanders take when they witness racist incidents against another person (Brinkman et al 2015). This makes sense when we consider that both forms of bystander action are concerned with rectifying identity-based prejudice, discrimination, harassment and/or abuse, and are likely to encounter the same dilemmas when engaging in such action. We suggest that at least a number of these barriers may align with the enablers and obstacles that exist when it comes to encountering racism, on which there is a robust body of academic literature emerging. Borrowing from the work of Nelson, Dunn & Paradies (2011), we can surmise that some of the enablers of such bystander action may include:

- Knowing what constitutes sexism and gender-based abuse
- A belief that gendered abuse contravenes social norms
- · Awareness of the harm that is caused by such abuse
- · Belief in both the responsibility and ability to intervene
- · Self-validation and catharsis
- · Desire to aid a target of genderbased harassment
- Self-affirmation



MORE RESEARCH IS REQUIRED TO UNDERSTAND THE **POWER OF BYSTANDERS** IN SITUATIONS OF GENDERED ABUSE. PARTICULARLY IN AN ONLINE CONTEXT WHERE SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS HAVE BEEN CRITICISED FOR NOT TAKING REPORTING OF HARASSMENT AND HATE SPEECH SERIOUSLY.

Obstacles to action, again based on the work of Nelson, Dunn & Paradies include:

- Ambiguous or subtle forms of gender-based harassment may lead to bystanders questioning whether something wrong is actually happening
- Fear for one's safety or being targeted by the perpetrator
- · Lack of knowledge about how to intervene
- The desire to preserve interpersonal relationships in situations where they know the perpetrator
- · Belief in freedom of speech and expression

Some of the women journalists who were consulted for this project indicated that while they often had bystanders defend them on social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook, it was less common on comment sections on websites where the journalist was simply a byline on the story and not an interactive account with followers, profile pictures, mutuals and greater engagement. When it did occur, many were grateful for the support, especially as they were cognisant of the risk involved for the bystanders who may in turn be attacked by the offending accounts. One journalist indicated that that support from a stranger motivated

her, stating "I think it's a great thing when people do and it's certainly in my experience reassuring to have that support raised by someone you don't necessarily have any connection with other than them being an audience member." She added that it was simultaneously frustrating that individuals had to intervene because the systems that were in place to deal with gendered abuse were not always sufficient. Another journalist opined that bystander intervention was not always necessary or desired, saying, "Often female reporters can hold their own and 'clap back'. It's nice to have back up but I think it would be wrong to think you need others to step in for female reporters to 'speak up' for them. Very capable women are used to holding their own, and pretty blatant examples of sexism are called out and quite self evident in the Twitter arena."

More research is required to understand the power of bystanders in situations of gendered abuse, particularly in an online context where social media platforms have been criticised for not taking reporting of harassment and hate speech seriously. It is significant to note that none of the women journalists raised the issue of bystanders on their own accord, although when prompted many of them spoke positively about them. Instead, women journalists who were interviewed tended to focus on the need for structural change in the workplace and in media and news culture more generally, indicating that they believed that the responsibility of addressing online harassment lay with workplaces and social media publishers and not with individuals, as much as the intervention may be appreciated by some.

'ONLINE' AS AN EXTENSION OF JOURNALISTS' WORKPLACES

The prevalence of gender-based abuse can affect women journalists and media workers disproportionately because of how much of their work takes place in public online spaces. Comment sections on websites, Twitter, Facebook and other social media apps have become an extension of the workplace, and it is essential that employers treat strategies for protecting their staff from harassment in these spaces as an issue of workplace health and safety.

In her submission to the Senate Inquiry on the Adequacy of Existing Cyberbullying Laws, journalist and academic Jenna Price pointed out that social media online is a necessary tool for journalists to do their jobs well – online is where they share their stories to obtain more reach, it is where they find emerging stories and connect with sources, and it is also where they connect with other media workers and potential employers in an increasingly casualised and fragmented industry (Parliament of Australia 2018).

This same issue was raised in a number of consultations by journalists who stated that the lack of support from their employers in these situations led to poor mental health, lack of desire to engage, and low selfesteem. One journalist summarised: "Being on social media and developing a strong presence on social media has increasingly become part of the job description for journalists who are already under intense time pressures to produce and share copy. But there's no real help in coping with the emotional and professional fall out from a viral work, public error, or pile-on."

The necessity of being online also means that some of the solutions suggested to women journalists are not financially viable. One journalist stated that when she reported the abuse to a police officer, she was told to avoid the internet, to which she responded, "how can a journalist be expected to stay off the internet - I would have no work then." Another respondent explained that after periods of intense abuse, she would sometimes self-censor herself, like deciding not to write an article about a feminist issue or follow up on a story that was likely to attract online trolls.

Consultations highlighted that not only does online harassment curb women's ability to speak freely and openly about issues that affect women at large, it also has material impacts on women journalists who rely on their ability to communicate such issues with the wider public for an income. Additionally, repeated exposure to online harassment can lead to increased anxiety and depression amongst women journalists, which could affect their ability to write, engage with the public, and be otherwise productive.

Reputational harm caused by defamatory statements online is also a concern for women journalists as if misinformation spread by trolls is believed, it can have serious ramifications on their trustworthiness as perceived by sources, employers and colleagues. These issues underscore the importance of workplaces supporting women journalists and proactively addressing the abuse they experience in the course of their work.



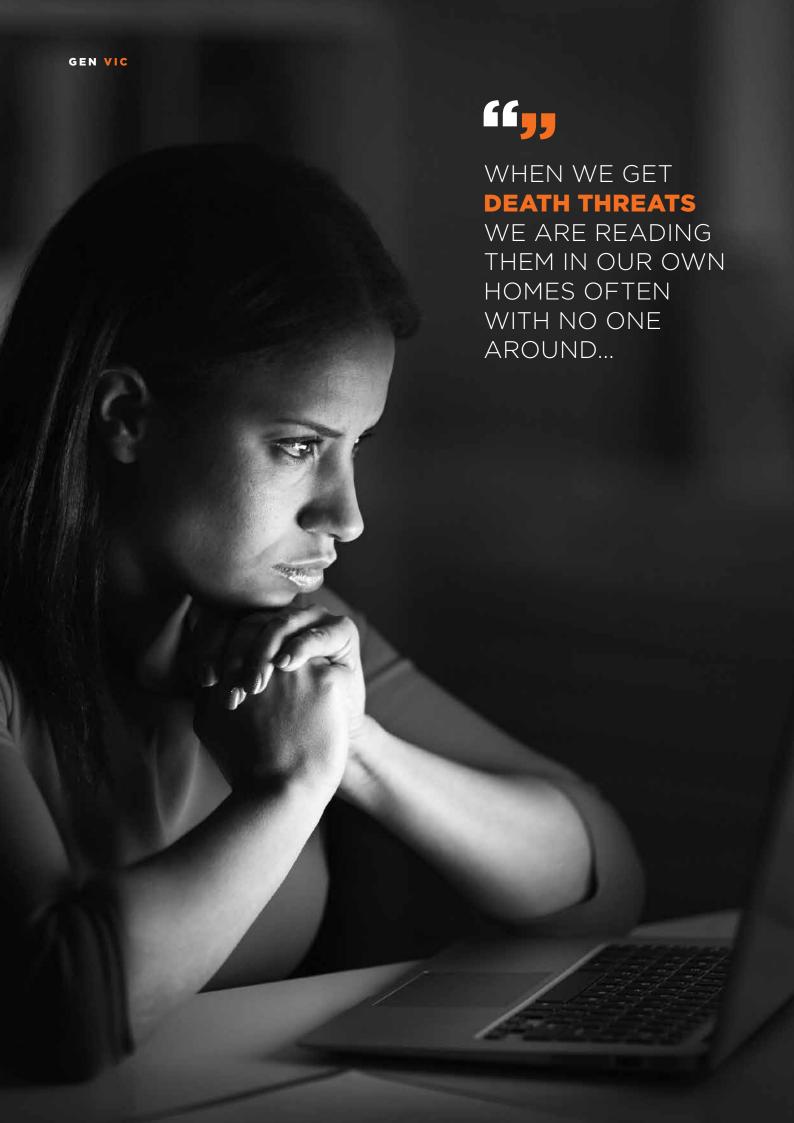
While all journalists should be protected from online abuse by the organisations they work for, it is necessary to specifically address the gendered and sexualised nature of the abuse received by women journalists and to treat it as a form of hate speech and violence against women. Forms of abuse that women journalists experience range from name calling and slurs, sexist comments (for example, being told that women don't belong in sport) and accusations that harm their reputations to rape threats, death

threats, threats against their children, doxing and image based abuse such as sharing nudes (real or faked).

Much of the abuse that women journalists receive reinforces unequal relations of power amongst genders and often relies on narratives that undermine women in society, such as referring to women's sexual activity in negative ways, degrading and dehumanising women, and using the threat of sexual or physical violence to intimidate them.



REPUTATIONAL HARM CAUSED BY DEFAMATORY STATEMENTS ONLINE IS ALSO A CONCERN FOR WOMEN JOURNALISTS AS IF MISINFORMATION SPREAD BY TROLLS IS BELIEVED, IT CAN HAVE SERIOUS RAMIFICATIONS ON THEIR TRUSTWORTHINESS AS PERCEIVED BY SOURCES, EMPLOYERS AND COLLEAGUES.



FREELANCE WORKERS AT MORE RISK OF ABUSE BUT WITH MINIMAL OR NO SUPPORT

Many women journalists are not 'in house' journalists, but instead may write for one or multiple media organisations as freelance journalists. One of the most commonly suggested reasons for why women are more likely to be freelancers than men is that the long hours and large workloads associated with traditional newsrooms do not allow for the flexibility or work-life balance needed for those with family responsibilities, work that often falls to women to do (Horowitz 2015, Templeman 2016). Another reason could be that some women journalists become freelancers when they feel that they are not supported by their employers because of their gender (Massey & Elmore 2011).

Freelance work carries additional risks when it comes to gender-based abuse. Freelancers often work from home and in isolation of professional supports, which means that they are more vulnerable to the impacts of online abuse. They do not have colleagues or supervisors to debrief with or to escalate their concerns to because their contract with their employer is effectively over once the article has been published, and there is no aftercare or support available to them. They are likely to read the abuse and threats they receive in their own home, oftentimes alone, which leads to a blurring of work and home and means that they are unable to ever completely detach from their work or see their home as a safe space.

As one freelance journalist pointed out, "It's a very precarious existence not helped by the fact that when we get death threats we are reading them in our own homes often with no one around, let alone colleagues or bosses." She added that many women journalists who report on gender-based violence and other feminist issues are

freelancers, which adds to the urgency for employers to address the issue:

"So basically those of us who write on feminist topics get targeted the most. We are also the most likely to be freelancers. We are also the most likely to be abuse survivors ourselves - we often end up in this work for personal reasons. And yet we are the least likely to get support... So yes, lots of experience with rape and death threats, no experience of being given support from employers."

The precarious nature of freelance work means that as well as not having colleagues and supervisors to talk to, women journalists who experience abuse online do not have access to counselling services offered by workplaces through the Employee Assistance Program, or paid leave if they are mentally unwell and unable to work - which has a material impact on their ability to earn a wage. The impacts of defamatory comments on their reputation are also far greater for them, as they do not have a guaranteed income to fall back on. They are also more reliant on the internet to find stories and make connections than in-house journalists, as their ability to secure commissions hinges on their networking skills, a concern that salaried journalists do not have.

It is vital that media organisations develop policies and practices to support freelance journalists when they experience genderbased abuse as a result of stories that they publish, including providing access to counselling services to address social and professional isolation.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF MODERATION STRATEGIES

Strategies to address gendered abuse on their websites or social media pages varied between organisations. Many of the organisations who had specific policies in place tended to develop them in an adhoc and reactive way in order to keep up with the rapidly changing media landscape online. Consultations uncovered that there was not necessarily a pattern to which organisations implemented policies to address gendered abuse online and which did not - for example, a large organisation with several hundreds of staff and a prominent social media presence might not have any policies in place, while a smaller, local newspaper did. One reason for this offered by a producer was the size and bureaucratic nature of the large organisation meant that the responsibility to develop organisation-wide policies and guidelines kept being passed from one department to another. Another journalist stated that at the newspaper she worked at, the moderator role did not exist until a woman working there decided to take on the role herself.

Even amongst those that did have policies on dealing with abusive comments on stories there were barriers to effective moderation of gender-based abuse. Sometimes, the policies were largely generic and referred to abuse and harassment in a broad way, and did not offer a gendered framework through which to understand how to moderate hate speech against women journalists. At other times, the organisation did not have the operational resources in place to support the policy and address the comments in a timely manner or provide adequate support to the receivers of the harassment, citing a lack of resources or personnel as a barrier.

A common approach taken by media organisations was to simply not open comments on stories that they felt were controversial or would attract trolls. For at least one organisation, this included any story that dealt with issues of race, religion or gender, as well as other stories that were designated as being "risky." The assessment of which stories should have comments opened was based on the available resources of the day, such as how many members of the moderation team were working that day. These discussions sometimes included the journalists who had worked on the story, but not always, and one journalist said that she often had to argue her case with moderators and editors for why sexist comments should be taken down, which she felt was illustrative of a lack of understanding of gender-based issues in the organisation more broadly, as well as a lack of knowledge about the impact that sexist comments can be harmful to women even if they are not technically abusive.

Interviewees had mixed responses to the strategies of not opening up certain stories for comments, shutting them down when comments became too inflamed, and deleting comments. One journalist resolutely argued that shutting off comments for controversial articles was key to stopping gender-based abuse of women journalists because the types of comments such articles attracted were often hateful. abusive and very rarely offered any valueadd to the debate. Another journalist from the same organisation disagreed, stating that she wished that there was a better way to moderate comments so as to allow discussion about these important issues effecting women in a way that was not harmful or abusive.



The nature of the media organisation may play a role in how they approach this issue. A producer at a public broadcaster suggested that "there is a certain level of obligation on engaging with the public that the commercial networks don't have," which meant that they were less likely to simply turn off commenting or delete comments unless they were very serious or might make the broadcaster liable under defamation laws. Another media worker argued that there is a greater imperative for public broadcasters to develop strong policy around gender-based abuse because they are required to commit to doing what is best for the public, whereas commercial networks may choose greater engagement to increase their profit margins, even though it may negatively affect their workers and other women.

Consultations found that some media organisations did not have designated comment or social media moderators, and either did not moderate comments at all or relied on journalists to moderate comments on their own stories that were posted to Facebook or Twitter, sometimes without any training or guidelines to help them assess the comments and take appropriate steps to address them. A radio journalist who previously worked at one of these organisations stated that she had found it difficult to keep on top of comment moderation in addition to her large workload, and that this was compounded by a lack of training. She suggested that having a designated moderator for their social media would allow for more effective moderation. Another media worker suggested that media organisations could require viewers to complete a simple multiplechoice comprehension guiz before they were permitted to comment, in the vein of Norwegian public broadcaster NRKbeta, which would ideally filter out trolls.

3. Recommendations

The following recommendations are aimed at media organisations who are seeking to develop policies about how to best support women journalists against gender-based abuse that they experience in the course of their work. **Media organisations should consider:**

A

A whole-oforganisation approach to address systemic and structural sexism in the workplace in the form of unequal gender representation at senior levels. workplace cultures that promote harmful or exclusive displays of masculinity (e.g. a 'boys' club') and reporting and commissioning that reinforces gender bias and negative stereotypes about women.

В.

Training on gender, implicit bias and bystander intervention for all staff, not just those responsible for moderating online comments and social media, as one step towards Recommendation A.

C.

Treating gender-based abuse against women journalists on social media and websites as an issue of workplace health and safety and taking responsibility for ensuring that women journalists (both salaried and freelance) are supported in the aftermath.



D,

Moderation guidelines and training that explicitly address gendered and other identity-based abuse as a subset of abuse that requires a strong response from the organisation, both to minimise the risk of harm to women iournalists and bystanders and to send a message that such abuse violates social norms.

E

Requiring audience members to complete a simple comprehension quiz before they are permitted to comment.

F.

Requiring media organisations to provide specific support for freelance journalists even after the story has been published and invoices paid, including training and free access to appropriate counselling services where needed.

4. Conclusions

This project reveals that there is no quick-fix for addressing gender-based online abuse of women journalists or promoting active bystander intervention, but that there is an increasing recognition that media organisations must take responsibility for the safety and security of their employees and commissioned freelancers. Many journalists interviewed called for an overhaul of the media industry and widescale culture change, at the same time that they acknowledged the institutional barriers to doing so.

It is clear that there is a lot of uncertainty about what media organisations can proactively do about gender-based abuse online as they try and keep up with fast-moving technologies that rapidly alter the media landscape, and further research and evaluation needs to be done to fully understand the impact of this abuse on women journalists and online bystanders and develop strong policy to address it.



MANY JOURNALISTS INTERVIEWED CALLED FOR AN OVERHAUL OF THE MEDIA INDUSTRY AND WIDESCALE CULTURE CHANGE, AT THE SAME TIME THAT THEY ACKNOWLEDGED THE INSTITUTIONAL BARRIERS TO DOING SO



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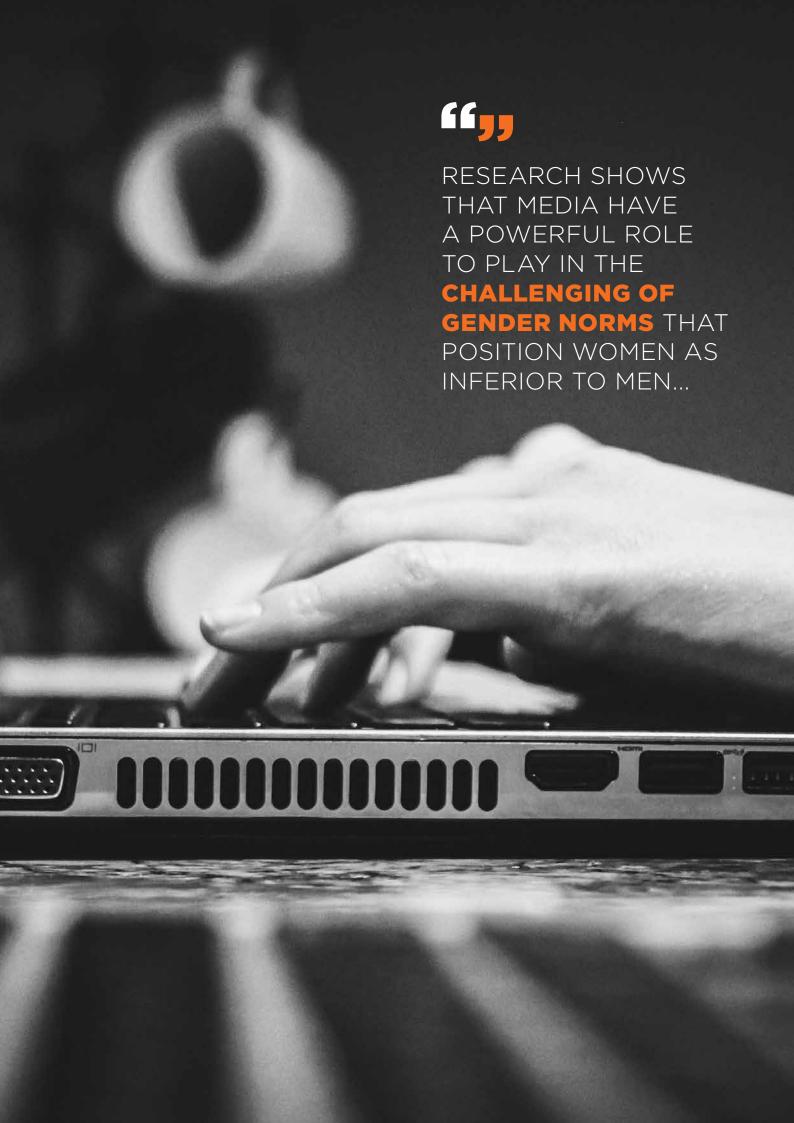
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