



# COMPARATIVE STUDY OF VIOLENCE AGAINST FEMALE REPORTERS AND MALE REPORTERS DURING LEBANON'S 2019 PROTEST MOVEMENT

Violence Against Women in Public Life



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# Executive Summary



In October 2019, hundreds of thousands of Lebanese people took to the streets to protest the imposition of new taxes and the worsening economic, social and political crises gripping the country. Female and male reporters covering the protests, which continued throughout 2020, experienced physical and online violence, threats and harassment.

This study highlights how female reporters covering the protests were disproportionately targeted with more — and more intense — physical and online violence than their male counterparts were. The greater intensity led to female reporters covering the protests enduring greater negative impacts than their male colleagues.

The vitriol directed at female reporters took place in physical and online spaces. Ridiculed for being women and for occupying public positions that are traditionally filled by men, they received a barrage of sexualized insults and threats of violence and were incessantly harassed. Some female reporters and their family members were sent unsolicited pornographic content and had their phone numbers widely shared on social media platforms.

A UN Women study of the 2018 parliamentary elections<sup>1</sup> found that female candidates were subjected to similar harassment and violence because of their gender — for seeking elected positions traditionally held by men. The experiences that female candidates and female reporters withstood highlight the ongoing challenges Lebanese women continue to face when seeking to engage in public life.

This body of work continues to demonstrate the need to adopt gender-responsive approaches to preventing violence against women in leadership and in public life. This report makes it clear that any strategy to end violence against reporters must address the differentiated threats faced by female and male reporters. The report also calls for effective policies aimed at promoting women's safe and meaningful participation in high-profile and public positions.

<sup>1</sup> El Kaakour, H. (2020), Pursuing Equality in Rights and Representation: Women's Experiences Running for Parliament in Lebanon's 2018 Elections, UN Women. Available at: <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2020/04/women%20candidates%20in%20lebanon%202018%20parliamentary%20electionsreport%20design%20adjusted.pdf?la=en&vs=5652>

# Introduction

The safety of reporters affects sustainable development, freedom of expression, intercultural dialogue, peace and good governance and all human rights. According to the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, sustainable development cannot be achieved without public access to information or the protection of the fundamental freedoms guaranteed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. Therefore, protecting female and male reporters, including protecting them from online violence, is essential to sustaining the rights to freedom of opinion, expression and others.<sup>2</sup>

The Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index ranks Lebanon at 107 out of 180 countries.<sup>3</sup> In Lebanon, female reporters have described receiving rape and death threats and general verbal and physical harassment.<sup>4</sup> The gendered violence experienced by female reporters was further underscored during the 2019-2020 protests that swept the country in response to the introduction of new tax measures and long-standing grievances relating to governance, accountability, corruption, human rights violations and a worsening economic crisis.

This is the second UN Women case study to showcase the threats, intimidation and gender-based discrimination that plague women who participate in public life. The first paper, published in 2020, documented the experiences of female candidates during Lebanon's 2018 parliamentary elections.<sup>5</sup> Among other observations, the paper found that during the election period, 78.6 per cent of female candidates had encountered physical or online gender-based violence.

This second study differentiated between violence levelled at female and male reporters who covered the protests through interviews and analysis of their Twitter accounts. The study provides a snapshot of the global trends of gender-based violence against reporters, explains the violence experienced against reporters during the protests and provides insights gleaned from interviews with female and male reporters and from an analysis of their Twitter accounts. It concludes with recommendations on how to develop gender-responsive approaches for preventing violence against reporters and for creating safe environments conducive to women's participation in public life.

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2 Unless expressly stated otherwise, 'violence' (including all forms of threats, harassment, abuse and malicious actions or communications) refers to both physical violence and online violence.

3 Reporters Without Borders, (2021), World Press Freedom Index. Available at: <https://rsf.org/en>

4 Issa, L. (2020), Female reporters in Lebanon Narrate their Run-ins with Gender-based Violence in a New AFE video', Hivos WE4L, 20 January. Available at: <https://womeninleadership.hivos.org/female-reporters-in-lebanon-narrate-their-run-ins-with-gender-based-violence-in-new-afe-video/>

5 El Kaakour, H. (2020), Pursuing Equality in Rights and Representation: Women's Experiences Running for Parliament in Lebanon's 2018 Elections, UN Women. Available at: <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2020/04/women%20candidates%20in%20lebanon%202018%20parliamentary%20electionsreport%20design%20adjusted.pdf?la=en&vs=5652>

# Methodology

Two research phases informed this paper. The first phase involved conducting interviews in March 2020 with 16 reporters who covered the protests on a daily basis for four of the most prominent television stations in Lebanon. Because the media in Lebanon is highly politicized (many television stations publicly support political parties or are owned by political leaders), the study architects ensured that the reporters approached to participate in the study worked for television stations from different points on the political spectrum.

The interviews included eight female and eight male reporters; two from each of the four stations. Researchers asked participating reporters to reflect on the level and frequency of violence they experienced while covering the demonstrations and the professional and personal effects this had on them.

For the second phase, researchers analysed the 16 reporters' Twitter accounts. The analysed tweets spanned from 17 October 2019, the night the uprising broke out, to 21 January 2020, when Prime Minister Hassan Diab formed a new cabinet (which has since resigned). Out of 89,162 total

comments, researchers classified 5,164 of them into two general categories: 'generally offensive' comments and 'sexist' comments.<sup>6</sup> Comments deemed generally offensive were further disaggregated into three groups: 'mockery', 'insults' and 'threats and incitement to violence'. Sexist comments were also broken down into three classifications: 'sexual insult and verbal sexual harassment', 'image pressure' and 'stereotyping gender roles'.

The analysis assessed whether comments received differed for the female and male reporters and identified the degree to which sexist comments were being used as a tool to attack the reporters. A comparison between comments sent to the eight female and eight male reporters showed a difference regarding the intensity and the content of violent comments received by them, with the female reporters receiving considerably more violent and gendered insults than their

<sup>6</sup> Sexist language is language that excludes one sex or the other, or that suggests that one sex is superior to the other. Dictionary.cambridge.org, (2021), Sexist language. Available at: <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/grammar/british-grammar/sexist-language>

broadcasting and their role in promoting diversity.<sup>10</sup>

- [UNESCO's Colombo Declaration on Development and Poverty Eradication](#) (2006) recognizes that freedom of expression must be protected to contribute to poverty eradication. It calls on Member States to include press freedom and the development of free, pluralistic and independent media as core components of their strategies for development, poverty eradication and meeting the Millennium Development Goals.<sup>11</sup>
- [The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity](#) (2016) holds member states responsible for investigating crimes and violence against reporters both in armed and non-armed conflicts. It highlights the increased dangers that female reporters face while carrying out their professional duties, including mob-related sexual violence aimed against reporters covering public events or sexual abuse of reporters in detention or captivity. It further states that many of these crimes are not reported as a result of powerful cultural and professional stigmas.<sup>12</sup>
- [UN Human Rights Council Resolution 33/2 on the Safety of Journalists](#) (2016) acknowledges the specific risks faced by female reporters, including physical and online sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence, intimidation and harassment. It also underlines the importance of taking a gender-sensitive approach when considering measures to address the safety of reporters.<sup>13</sup>

## Global Trends on Gender-based Violence against Reporters

Around the world, reporters are facing increasing danger, harassment and threats. A 2019 UNESCO report found that the number of reporters killed between 2014 and 2018 had increased by 18 per cent compared to the previous five years and that most of these deaths occurred, for the first time, outside conflict zones.<sup>14</sup> During this five-year period, 495 reporters were killed; 30 per cent of these deaths occurred in the Arab States region.<sup>15</sup>

Female and male reporters both experience physical threats and hate speech. However, sexualized hate speech, particularly online, is almost exclusively directed at female reporters. Female reporters are targeted not only for simply acting as reporters but also because of their gender. Former UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova described this as the “double attack” on female reporters.<sup>16</sup>

The gender-based violence female reporters experience affects their right to work safely and their productivity. It can also lead female reporters to self-censor, to only pursue stories that are less politically sensitive.

In 2018, Troll Busters and the International Women's Media Foundation conducted a survey of nearly 600 female reporters from around the world.<sup>17</sup> The survey found that over 60 per cent of respondents had been threatened or harassed online; 58 per cent had been threatened or harassed in person; 26 per cent had been physically attacked; and 10 per cent had received a death threat within the previous 12 months.<sup>18</sup> The survey also revealed that 85 per cent of respondents felt less safe doing their work than they did five years earlier. The survey respondents described facing worse harassment, particularly when covering political news, in the form of unsolicited sexual

10 <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/events/prizes-and-celebrations/celebrations/international-days/world-press-freedom-day/previous-celebrations/worldpressfreedomday200900000/dakar-declaration/?q=es%2Funesco%2Fevents%2Fprizes-and-celebrations%2Fcelebrations%2Finternational-days%2Fworld-press-freedom-day%2Fprevious-celebrations%2Fworldpressfreedomday200900000%2Fdakar-declaration%2F>

11 <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/unesco/events/prizes-and-celebrations/celebrations/international-days/world-press-freedom-day/previous-celebrations/worldpressfreedomday200900000/colombo-declaration/>

12 <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000246014>

13 <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/G16/226/24/PDF/G1622624.pdf?OpenElement>

14 See: UNESCO, (2019), Intensified Attacks, New Defenses Developments in the Fight to Protect Reporters and End Impunity, CI-2019/WTR/3, Report. Available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371343>

15 Ibid.

16 Free Press Unlimited, (2018), Gender-based Violence against Female reporters: A 'double attack', November 23. Available at: <https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/stories/gender-based-violence-against-female-reporters-a-double-attack>

17 TrollBusters.com is “a just-in-time rescue service for women writers and journalists experiencing online harassment.”

18 Ferrier, M (2018), 'Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female Reporters and Their Reporting', Troll Busters and International Women's Foundation. Available at: <https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Attacks-and-Harassment.pdf>



messages and pornographic content, threats of violence, rape or death, or the publication of reporters' private information.

Another study that analysed 70 million comments left on the Guardian newspaper's website between 2006 and 2016 showed that of the 10 most abused writers, eight were women.<sup>19</sup> Globally, women in general are 27 times more likely to be harassed online than men are.<sup>20</sup>

In May 2020, the UN Special Rapporteur on violence against women issued a special report on combating violence against female reporters. In the report, the Special Rapporteur emphasized that online violence has recently exacerbated the causes and consequences of gender-based violence against female reporters.<sup>21</sup> The report found that online violence disproportionately affects female reporters who are already operating in an environment in which systematic and structural gender-based violence forms part of their daily routine. The report concluded that the targeting of female reporters mirrors larger patterns of sexism and gender-based violence, which are a direct attack on women's visibility and hinder their full participation in public life.

Starkly echoing these global trends, female reporters' experiences covering the 2019-2020 protests exposed the discriminatory beliefs towards women (especially those in public life) and tolerant attitudes towards gender-based violence that continue to dominate much of Lebanese society.

## Findings

The UN Women report, "Understanding the Role of Women and Feminist Actors in Lebanon's 2019 Protests,"<sup>22</sup> showed that women and girls comprised at least half of the protesting population. Participants came from across sectarian lines and included diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, ages, professions and physical abilities.<sup>23</sup> Lesbian, gay, bisexual,

trans, queer and intersexual women (LGBTQI) were also openly demonstrating in ground-breaking numbers.<sup>24</sup>

The report documented rampant sexism against female protesters, which included gendered threats and sexist remarks that attempted to intimidate female activists and delegitimize women as political actors.<sup>25</sup> Female parliamentarians, government officials and reporters covering the protests were similarly targets of sexist slander and recurring verbal, sexual and physical harassment. For example, female reporters had their personal details, including their mobile phone numbers, circulated on social media. The harm from these acts was not restricted to the direct target; an online campaign harassing a female reporter resulted in her mother having a stroke after being sent a fake picture of her daughter in a compromising position.<sup>26</sup>

The deteriorating security situation for female reporters covering the protests, especially local female reporters working for Lebanese television stations, led to the Coalition for Women in Journalism issuing a statement expressing concern at the treatment of female reporters.<sup>27</sup> The Coalition condemned the harassment, threats and physical aggression levelled predominantly at female reporters by security forces, sectarian supporters and some protesters.

The treatment of female reporters was compounded by already high levels of sexual harassment in Lebanon. A 2017 survey revealed that 61 per cent of Lebanese women had experienced sexual harassment in a public place.<sup>28</sup> The same survey found that 54 per cent of Lebanese men believed that a woman's most important role is to take care of the home and cook for the family, 53 per cent of men thought women who dress provocatively deserved to be harassed and 38 per cent of men thought women who are out in public places at night were asking to be harassed.

In December 2020, Lebanon adopted its first law criminalizing sexual harassment. This landmark law defines sexual

19 Free Press Unlimited, (2018), Gender-based violence against female reporters: A 'double attack', November 23. Available at: <https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/stories/gender-based-violence-against-female-reporters-a-double-attack>.

20 OHCHR, (2018), 'Human Rights Council holds Panel Discussion on Online Violence against Women Human Rights Defenders', 21 June. Available at: <https://ohchr.org/EN/HRBodies/HRC/Pages/NewsDetail.aspx?LangID=E&NewsID=23248>

21 OHCHR, (2020), Report of the Special Representative on Violence against Women, its Causes and Consequences: Combating violence against women reporters, 6 May, A/HRC/44/52 Available at: <https://undocs.org/Home/Mobile?FinalSymbol=A%2FHRC%2F44%2F52&Language=E&DeviceType=Desktop>

22 Wilson, C, Zabaneh, J and Dore-Weeks, R, (2019), Understanding the Role of Women and Feminist Actors in Lebanon's 2019 Protests; UN Women. Available at: <https://www2.unwomen.org/-/media/field%20office%20arab%20states/attachments/publications/2019/12/gendering%20lebanons%202019%20protests.pdf?la=en&vs=2300>

23 ibid.

24 ibid.

25 ibid.

26 Caramazza, G, (2019), Lebanon's Social Media Looks like the Wild West, and Women reporters are in the Crosshairs', The New Arab, 4 December. Available at: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2019/12/4/lebanons-women-reporters-being-harassed-for-reporting-the-truth>

27 The Coalition for Women in Journalism, (2019), Lebanon: Safety of women reporters in jeopardy amidst protests, 7 December. Available at: <https://womeninjournalism.org/cfwj-press-statements/lebanon-safety-of-women-reporters-in-jeopardy-amidst-protests-84ylc>

28 UN Women and Promundo, (2017), Understanding Masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey in the Middle East and North Africa. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/5/understanding-masculinities-results-from-the-images-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>



harassment as “any recurring bad behaviour that is out of the ordinary, unwanted by the victim, with a sexual connotation that constitutes a violation of the body, privacy or feelings.”<sup>29</sup> Perpetrators can face up to four years in prison and victims are able to seek compensation.<sup>30</sup> Lebanese women’s rights organizations welcomed the adoption of this law as being an important first step. However, they warned that the law, which did not integrate a number of key amendments put forward by women activists, has a number of weaknesses, including a lack of mandated reporting mechanisms and its openness to disparate or dangerous interpretations.<sup>31</sup>

## Box 2: Lebanese Laws on Freedom of Expression and Discrimination

As prescribed in its constitution, Lebanon is a confessional state; political and institutional positions are proportionately allocated based on the country’s different religious populations. As such, Lebanon’s media, while being pluralistic, is also shaped by the political and religious affiliations of different confessional groups. This affects the independence of the media, as media outlet ownership reflects sectarian and confessional divisions. Although freedom of expression is a constitutional right, Lebanese reporters have to contend with a number of limitations.

The Lebanese Constitution enshrines the freedom of expression.<sup>32</sup> In addition, the 1994 Television and Radio Broadcasting Act states, “visual and audio media are free and exercise freedom of information within the framework of the provisions of the Constitution and the laws in force.”<sup>33</sup>

However, legislative decrees allow for censigious practices and beliefs can carry a prison term of six months to three years and comments found to be defamatory against courts, governing bodies, the army or public administrations or officials can carry a prison term of up to a year.<sup>34</sup> Those found guilty of “infringing on public morals” can be jailed for between one month to one year,<sup>35</sup> and those guilty of spreading lies and false and exaggerated news about Lebanon’s financial situation or the Lebanese pound can be imprisoned for up to six months and fined between 100,000 and one million Lebanese pounds.<sup>36</sup> The president, judges, public sector employees, security officers and religious leaders are exempt from these laws.

Freedom of expression activists have commented that Lebanese defamation laws have been used for political ends. Between October 2019 and July 2020, at least 60 people had been arrested or interrogated for their social media posts relating to the protests.<sup>37</sup> In July 2020, human rights and media freedom organizations responded to the escalating attacks and arrests of reporters during the uprising by forming the Coalition to Defend Freedom of Expression in Lebanon.<sup>38</sup>

29 Azhari, T. (2020), Lebanon passes landmark sexual harassment law, Al Jazeera, 21 December. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/12/21/lebanons-parliament-approves-landmark-sexual-harassment-law>

30 Ibid.

31 Karam, C, Abou-Habib, L and Ghanem, M, (2021), Influencing Policy Through Research: The Case of Sexual Harassment Law in Lebanon, The Center for Inclusive Business and Leadership (CIBL) for Women, 11 January. Available at: <https://www.aub.edu.lb/cibl/news/Documents/Influencing%20Policy%20Through%20Research.pdf>

32 Article 13 of the Lebanese Constitution: “The freedom to express one’s opinion orally or in writing, the freedom of the press, the freedom of assembly and the freedom of association shall be guaranteed within the limits established by law.”

33 Article 3 Act No. 382/94

34 Legislative decree 104/1977 (art 17,18,19,20, 21, 22),

35 Article 531 of the Penal Code

36 Article 297 of the Penal Code

37 Human Rights Watch, (2020), Lebanon: New Coalition to Defend Free Speech, 13 July. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/13/lebanon-new-coalition-defend-free-speech>

38 Ibid

# Insights from Interviews with Reporters Covering the Protests

All of the 16 reporters interviewed as part of this study experienced violence and threats while covering the protests 100 per cent, and the majority of perpetrators were men. Female reporters described encountering different forms of violence than their male counterparts; the violence towards the female reporters was considerably more intense and gender-based.

## Figure 1: Breakdown of the Physical and Verbal Violence Experienced by the 16 Interviewed Reporters

- Experienced physical violence in the field: 8 out of 8 female reporters; 4 out of 8 male reporters (50%);
- Attacked by police or security forces: 3 female reporters (37%) and 2 male reporters (25%);
- Targets of sexual harassment while reporting from protests: 5 female reporters (62%) and 0 male reporters (0%);
- Verbally abused while reporting from protests: all 8 female reporters (100%) and all 8 male reporters (100%);
- Received personal sexually based insults: all 8 out of 8 female reporters (100%) and 0 male reporters (0%).

**Personal verbal violence against female reporters (100%). While personal verbal violence against male reporters (62,5%) cursing their mothers and sisters.**

## Physical violence and harassment

All eight interviewed female reporters were targets of physical violence in the field while reporting, whereas only four out of the eight male reporters related having been physically assaulted. One female reporter described having her hair pulled by protestors and security force personnel and being hit by rocks and a full water bottle, which led to her hiding in a nearby mosque. Two of the female reporters were chased by

groups of men and escaped by hiding in buildings and asking people to let them into their apartments. An interviewed male reporter said that while he had been kicked, pushed, had eggs thrown at him and was run over by a car, he still opted to go to the risky places in place of his female colleagues, whom he thought would be at greater risk than him.

Three female and two male reporters were attacked by police or security forces. One female reporter said, "I was not just beaten by coincidence. I heard some guys calling my name and shouting to follow me and I was chased to a building and I hid there until they left."<sup>39</sup>

Five out of the eight female reporters were also exposed to sexual harassment while working in the field (including being groped while live on air), whereas none of the men were. One female reporter recounted, "on the airport road late at night while I was reporting, I felt a hand on my ass, so I stopped filming right away and asked the cameraman to change the location."

## Verbal attacks of a political or sexual nature

All the female and male reporters interviewed were verbally attacked during the protests, but the types of verbal violence they were subjected to differed based on their gender. The male reporters were often insulted or accused of being corrupt, unprofessional or biased in their reporting based on their perceived political affiliations or those of the television station they worked for. One male reporter explained, "I am never attacked for the quality of my coverage but for my TV station's political position, and that's very annoying." Similarly, another male reporter related, "curses were not personal. They were addressed to the TV station I am working for, accusing it of corruption and bias."

While seven out of the eight female reporters were also insulted on the basis of which television station they were working for and accused of being biased or supporting one political party over another, all eight were also subjected to sexually-charged insults. One female reporter said that while reporting at 3am, a man called out, "come on, dance for us stripper." Another female reporter described how unbearable it was that each time she went to the field she was accused of being promiscuous, with one man telling her, "Mr X is your boyfriend, no? I know all about your promiscuous life."

<sup>39</sup> Unless specifically attributed, all quotes in this study were anonymized in order to ensure the safety of interviewees, participants and Twitter users.

## Online Violence

**Figure 2: Snapshot from Monitoring the Reporters' Twitter Accounts**

- Of the 89,162 comments analysed, 5,164 were deemed either to be generally offensive or gender-based offensive comments;
- Of the 5,164 comments, 1,986 were left on the Twitter accounts of the male reporters and 3,178 on the accounts of the female reporters between October 2019 and January 2020;
- Generally offensive comments: 1,906 posted on the male reporters' accounts and 2,954 on the female reporters' accounts;
- Gender-based offensive comments: 80 posted on the male reporters' accounts and 224 on the female reporters' accounts;
- Online death threats: received by 3 female reporters and 3 male reporters;
- Pornographic content and videos: received by 3 female reporters and 0 male reporters.

For this study, researchers analysed 89,162 comments posted on the Twitter accounts of the 16 reporters, spanning the period from 17 October 2019 to 21 January 2020. Of these, 5,164 were classified as generally offensive or sexist; 3,178 were posted on the female reporters' accounts (61.5 per cent of the total), and 1,986 were posted on the male reporters' accounts (38.5 per cent of the total).

The amount of data collected differed depending on the individual reporters, as some actively tweeted during the protests while others did not engage with the social media platform at all. There were also some technical challenges that prevented researchers from being able to view all tweets and comments posted during the selected time frame due to some users' privacy settings, blocked accounts, deleted comments or number of tweets posted. Despite these shortcomings, comparison and analysis of the comments sent to the eight female and eight male reporters revealed a significant difference in the intensity and content of violent comments they received.

Although an equal number of female and male reporters said they were targets of online violence, analysis of female reporters' accounts revealed that they received more offensive, sexist comments than their male counterparts. The female reporters also received more violent threats. Overall, the eight female reporters received significantly more offensive comments than their male counterparts.

## 'Generally offensive' comments received by female and male reporters

Female reporters received 1.5 times as many offensive comments as their male counterparts, and 61.5 per cent of all of the offensive comments posted. Below is an analysis of the types of comments received.

### Mockery

For the purposes of this study, 'mockery' is defined as language used to belittle the reporters while they are expressing their political views or reporting on political events. Comments classified as mockery do not necessarily include vulgar words, but rather show disrespect or an effort to undermine reporters' intellectual abilities and analytical skills. Based on the analysis by the researchers, male reporters were more likely to be mocked than female reporters. Some examples posted on the male reporters' accounts include:

- *Bravo! You are so hilarious, you're making me laugh.*
- *I think you are sleepy and you need to sleep.*

Some examples posted on the female reporters' accounts include:

- *Why are you so sad? Better cry!*
- *Was it you who tweeted or do you have an administrator?*

### Insults

For the purposes of this report, 'insults' are defined mainly as accusations of being unprofessional or biased (typically based on the perceived political affiliation of the reporter or that of the television station for which the reporter works), or of being corrupt, dumb or incapable of reporting political events or understanding them. Female reporters were more likely to receive insults than their male counterparts. Insulting comments also included numerous expressions that compared the reporters to animals or disrespectfully demanded that they remain silent and not express their views.

Some examples posted on the female reporters' accounts include:

- *Stop it, dumb.*
- *Hey donkey, stop your silly tweets.*
- *Please write once a tweet that shows and proves that you are not dumb.*

Some examples posted on the male reporters' accounts include:

- *How much money did you receive to post this tweet?*
- *How is your ally in Saudi Arabia?*
- *You were filmed during your visits to the US embassy, traitor.*
- *Are you sure you are a reporter? Or are you just a political slave who works for a television station?*

### **Threats and incitement to violence**

For the purposes of the study, 'threat' is defined as threats of violence levelled at reporters. Based on the analysis undertaken by the researchers, both female and male reporters received an almost equal number of threats. Some examples posted on the female reporters' accounts include:

- *Don't even think of coming to this area, we will be waiting for you.*
- *Don't you ever dare come to the revolutionary square.*
- *Celebrate because your end is near.*
- *If you dare, come to our area, you intelligence agent.*
- *You deserve to be beaten.*
- *Wish women can meet you on site to pull your hair.*
- *I hope that your possessions and office will be burned.*
- *I hope your tongue will be cut off.*
- *You are provocative and you should be burned. It seems that you're looking forward to being beaten up.*

Some examples posted on the male reporters' accounts include:

- *We kicked out your colleagues, wait for your turn.*
- *Go home... you will go to jail.*
- *People from this area should kill you.*
- *Looking forward to beating you up. We are fed up with you, hypocrite.*

### **'Sexist' comments received by female and male reporters**

Female reporters received 2.8 times as many sexist comments as their male counterparts. The threats and insults directed against male reporters often targeted their family and relatives, especially their mothers and sisters.

### **Sexual insults and verbal sexual harassment**

Female reporters were the only target of online sexual harassment. No instances of sexual harassment against the

male reporters were found through the social media analysis. Further, during the interviews, all eight of the male reporters stated that they had not been subjected to sexual harassment during their coverage of the uprising. In contrast, all of the female reporters faced sexual harassment online. Two of the female reporters reported receiving pornographic pictures and videos on their social media and WhatsApp accounts, with threats that the same will be done to them.

The sexual insults received by the female reporters indicate a clear willingness of certain members of the public to humiliate them. In addition, female reporters were accused of being prostitutes or leading promiscuous lives. Some examples of sexual insults and sexual harassment posted on the female reporters' accounts include:

- *How much is he paying you per night?*
- *Don't play the role of a prude woman.*
- *Yes, sinless woman. We know your history.*
- *Baby, we know you are a nun.*
- *You are used to sleeping each night with an Arab prince or with a Lebanese politician.*
- *You are very hot and sexy, wow.*
- *Come to my chest.*
- *Do you need a husband? Just tell me.*
- *Choose the words you want...may your beauty and form bury me.*
- *I think this country needs more sex to please all those unsatisfied females.*

Moreover, sexual insults often addressed the sexual orientation of female reporters. The subject of homosexuality in Lebanon is still taboo, and many communities frown upon and do not tolerate members of the LGBTQI community. There is a commonly held view that homosexuals are endangering the familial institution. In a homophobic society, people resort to accusing women of actively participating in public and political life of being lesbians in order to intimidate them and tarnish their image. Being called a lesbian is seen as one of the more severe insults that one can direct towards a woman, as it means she is straying from traditional gender norms.<sup>40</sup> "Accusing me of being a lesbian and looking like a man despite the fact that I am married, and not appreciating the quality of my work is disgusting and unacceptable," stated one female reporter during her interview.

<sup>40</sup> UN Women and Promundo, (2017), Understanding masculinities: Results from the International Men and Gender Equality Survey in the Middle East and North Africa. Available at: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2017/5/understanding-masculinities-results-from-the-images-in-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>



Female candidates running in the 2018 parliamentary election were subject to similar accusations, which negatively impacted their campaigns and well-being.<sup>41</sup> Defending themselves using the argument of being married shows that homosexuality is still perceived by female reporters and perpetrators as an attack and not a personal freedom.

Sexual insults posted on the male reporters' accounts addressed their female family members, with comments such as "send me your mothers' number" or accused the reporters of being "pimps." Some of the sexual insults also used gender norms to try and undermine the male reporters, accusing them of not being "real men" for showing emotions or weakness; "you are so sweet, come to us to help you to be a man."

### Image pressure

Globally and in Lebanon, media practices, including the beautification of female presenters, create unrealistic standards of beauty that women, especially reporters, have to meet in order to be successful. As such, the evaluation of women in media is not only based on their professionalism but also on their appearance.

As reported in an article published by the Department of Mass Communication and Journalism at the Lebanese University, female television reporters in Lebanon and elsewhere are routinely sexualized through the explicit scrutiny of their bodies and appearance, and their physical appearance impacts their career path and credibility as reporters.<sup>42</sup> This is a largely female issue, with female reporters suffering more from image pressure than male reporters.

This study shows the flagrant repercussions of image pressure on women. One reporter explained, "I was called a cow many times; I wish they would focus on the quality of my coverage instead of insulting my physical appearance." Another stated, "they attacked me with organized e-armies addressed from one political party telling me to look at myself in the mirror and to see my disgusting physical appearance." Such comments are aimed at belittling women and shaming them based on their physical appearance. Some examples posted on the female reporters' accounts include:

- *This tweet is sponsored by Nader Saab (a Lebanese plastic surgeon).*

<sup>41</sup> Three out of 75 candidates interviewed confirmed that they were targets of rumour campaigns stating that they are homosexuals. Halime el Kaakour (2019). Pursuing Equality in Rights and Representation, Women's experiences Running for Parliament in Lebanon's 2018 Elections. Funded by UN WOMEN. Available at: <https://arabstates.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/02/pursuing-equality-in-representation-in-lebanon-2018-elections>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

- *Keep yourself busy with injecting Botox.*
- *You wake up with full makeup while the country is falling apart.*
- *You are a top model but surely not a reporter.*
- *Your makeup is hideous.*
- *You are pretty with makeup but we don't know what you look like in the morning.*
- *It is 2019, your makeup is not trendy anymore.*
- *Decrease Photoshop in your pictures.*
- *Go on a diet.*
- *You are like a cow who wears eyeliner.*
- *Post more of your photos and less about politics.*

One of the interviewed male reporters was largely perceived as handsome. As such, he received various comments referring to his physical appearance. An example of a comment posted on the male reporters' accounts includes:

- *You are happy to receive compliments from girls while on the field and you tell them that it is hard to be handsome.*

### Stereotyping gender roles

For the purposes of this study, 'stereotyping' comments are defined as those that call for limiting the participation of women in public life and that reinforce gender-based stereotypes. This includes comments that suggest that women's roles should be limited to housekeeping, caregiving and meeting beauty standards. The majority of these comments were posted on the female reporters' accounts. Some examples posted on the female reporters' accounts include:

- *You are a reporter, please just read the text and don't analyse, stay the pretty and gentle reporter.*
- *It would be better for you if you stay in the domain of fashion and makeup.*
- *You were better before talking politics.*
- *If we had justice on earth, you would be in the kitchen.*
- *Leave Twitter and the microphone and focus on your housework.*
- *You have to move from journalism to fashion and cosmetics... you are wasting your beauty in politics.*

Concepts of femininity and masculinity were also underscored in the comments, attributing strength to men and weakness to women. This sexism is reinforced by news outlets themselves; a 2019 research paper on female reporters in Lebanon

revealed a horizontal segregation of journalism in which the majority of political, business, economic and conflict stories were given to male reporters because of the perceived need for “toughness and masculinity” to cover ‘hard’ news stories.<sup>43</sup> Some examples posted on the female reporters’ accounts include:

- *I like your honesty but watch out because too much confidence is affecting and decreasing your femininity.*
- *Tough circumstances require men and not women, you idiot.*

Male reporters were also attacked for not being masculine enough; concepts of masculinity were used to threaten and intimidate male reporters. Some examples posted on the male reporters’ accounts include:

- *Your sweetness is making me laugh; you have to come to our area so we can toughen you up.*
- *Is this the tweet of a cultivated male or an emotional one? Responsibility requires men and not emotions.*

## The Impact of the Violence on Reporters<sup>44</sup>

The violence that TV reporters went through had a significant impact on their well-being. All female reporters (100 per cent) that were interviewed were negatively impacted by the physical and online violence against them. The impact on their well-being ranged from sadness, anger, and tiredness (5 of 8 women, 62 per cent) to trauma and depression (3 of 8 women, 37 per cent). Conversely, five of the eight men (62 per cent) interviewed stated that the violence they faced had no effect on their well-being, with three of the men (37 per cent) stating that the impact on their well-being was relatively light, as they only felt sad and tired for a few days. One male reporter (12 per cent) said that his work productivity was affected as a result of the online and physical violence he experienced and that he needed to take a week off work. He said, “I stopped doing field work after receiving attacks and death threats. I wanted to protect my kids and my family because after all, no one else would feed them.” Part of the low rates reported by men could relate to stigma that men face in admitting to violence and intimidation. However the twitter analysis shows a clear trend of attack women in more ferocious ways than men.

<sup>43</sup> El Hajj, M. (2019), ‘Women Reporters in Lebanon: The Broken Ladder’, Journal of Mass Communication and Journalism, Volume 9. Available at: <https://www.hilarispublisher.com/open-access/women-reporters-in-lebanon-the-broken-ladder.pdf>

<sup>44</sup> This section uses percentages to detail the impact of violence on reports as

Not only did the violence affect the reporters’ well-being, it also impacted their work and productivity. Three female reporters (37 per cent) confirmed that their productivity has been affected badly as a result of some acts of violence they were subjected to. One female reporter broke down and could not go to work for a few months. She explained, “I decided to leave Lebanon because it was too much. My life is in danger and I feel it’s dangerous even for my family.” Another female reporter said that after having been chased by a mob and hiding in a building, she almost quit her job, “I took three weeks off and I almost left work after the empty building incident. I was crying and afraid. I called my boss saying I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die.” Two female reporters also started restricting their movement by avoiding areas considered to be largely in opposition to their television stations’ or their own personal political views. One of the women said, “I decided not to cover events in certain areas and avoided others. There was no need to put my life at stake for nothing.”

In an attempt to reduce the amount of online violence being directed at them, five of the female reporters (62.5 per cent) and three of the male reporters (37 per cent) interviewed tried to self-censor their tweets and reduced their online presence. Six of the female reporters (75 per cent) interviewed also frequently blocked offensive accounts. The two female reporters who did not block accounts were not active on Twitter. In comparison, only three of the interviewed male reporters (37 per cent) reported occasionally blocking offensive accounts. This further highlights the intensity of violence the female reporters were subjected to.

## Television Stations’ Response

Most of the reporters interviewed reported the acts of violence they experienced to their television stations. Six female and five male reporters told their heads of departments about what had happened to them, but in no instance was there a clear procedure to be followed. The reporters said that their television stations had provided them with moral support, reiterated they should stop filming in situations which were too risky, and offered them the option to stop doing field work or covering the demonstrations if they would prefer different assignments.

One television station sued the perpetrators who had intensely abused reporters online and who had shared the reporters’ personal phone numbers on social media. But according to

the interviewed reporters, this did not result in any further action being taken and the lawsuit did not get anywhere.

According to the 16 reporters, none of the television stations they worked for had put any clear strategy in place to protect their reporters or provided their staff with security training, including on how to handle online or physical harassment or working in high-risk environments. Scarcity of funding was suggested by the interviewed reporters as one of the reasons that no such training was provided by their television stations. One said, "I need to get my full salary first before thinking about training."

## Conclusion and Recommendations:

### **Developing Gender-responsive Approaches for Ensuring Reporter Safety and for Promoting Women's Participation in Public Life**

Violence against civil society activists, demonstrators and reporters was a common occurrence during the 2019 protests. Political diversity is a must for a democratic state; it cannot survive without a free, diverse and pluralist media. This means that reporters, publishers and all media actors should be protected in order to work freely without the fear of reprisals.

This study shows that while both female and male reporters were targets of in-person and online violence, female reporters experienced more of each kind of attack and that these attacks tended to be more sexual in nature. Both female and male reporters felt insecure and unprotected despite the moral support and freedom provided to them by their television stations.

Female reporters were targets of violence and harassment that targeted their physical appearance, private lives and professional integrity. It was often inferred that they became reporters as a result of having affairs with prominent politicians or businessmen and that they would not have been able to secure such positions if they had not been in sexual relationships with important men. Female reporters were also attacked in order to silence them from daring to speak out and discouraged from having a political position, which is considered a challenge to traditional gender roles and customs.

The results of this study are similar to those of the UN Women study exploring attitudes and challenges faced by Lebanese female candidates. Both revealed the gender discrimination

and deep-rooted stereotypes that women in public life, including television reporters, continue to face within the patriarchal, political and confessional system. The defence of male political leaders often evoked derogatory comments levelled at reporters.

The misogynistic nature of the violence levied against reporters is clear. An effective response calls for gender-responsive preventative approaches that address the differentiated threats experienced by female and male reporters and media workers. Part of this requires implementing effective legal frameworks to combat violence against reporters, including criminalizing violence against reporters (with enhanced penalties for gender-based violence) ; training law enforcement and judicial officers on gender awareness and press freedom laws; and prosecuting all perpetrators of violence against reporters.

The state is primarily responsible for protecting the safety of reporters, but other stakeholders, including media outlets, reporter and media unions and international organizations should work in partnership with the state in order to protect reporters, the freedoms of expression and press and the right of access to information.

### Recommendations:

#### **The Government of Lebanon should consider:**

- Adopting a gender-responsive strategy aimed at preventing violence against reporters that addresses the differentiated threats and needs of female and male reporters and media workers and that involves all relevant stakeholders such as media outlets, syndicates, educational institutions, NGOs and international organizations.
- Holding law enforcement officials accountable for human rights violations and gender-based violence against reporters, including excessive use of force.
- Training law enforcement and judicial officers on freedom of expression and press freedom laws and their responsibilities in promoting a safe working environment for reporters.
- Reforming laws that limit freedom of expression and press freedom, in particular laws related to defamation, including articles 383, 385, and 386 of the Lebanese penal code.
- Coordinating the ongoing efforts of Lebanese universities, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education and private universities to include human rights courses in university curricula and to include journalism courses on

gender-based violence against reporters and its impact on human rights and democracy.

- Raising awareness of gender-based violence against reporters and creating campaigns to change online and in-person behaviour.

#### **Lebanese media outlets should consider:**

- Adopting an internal policy to address, to respond to and to prevent violence against reporters, including gender-based violence.
- Providing training for reporters and media workers on how to maintain online and physical security, how to prevent and respond to harassment (including sexual harassment), how to report safely in high-risk environments and how to seek emotional support or professional counselling services.
- Stopping the objectification of women in the news and changing the image of the presenters to reflect more professionalism.
- Investigating cases of gender-based violence against female reporters and helping them sue the perpetrators and fight impunity.
- Empowering women in their television stations, fighting internal discrimination against them and adopting clear criteria and policies for their promotion and progress at work.
- Increasing their reporting on sexual and gender-based violence.
- Participating in campaigns aimed at raising awareness about violence against women in public life, including online violence.
- Improving the level of pay and providing healthcare and life insurance for full- and part-time reporters, without discrimination.

#### **Local and international organizations and reporters' unions should consider:**

- Helping female reporters speak about the gender-based violence they experience.
- Developing a syndicate-wide gender strategy to protect all reporters from violence and discrimination.
- Developing guidelines for reporting and responding to gender-based violence against reporters.
- Building a gender-responsive observatory to monitor and register all acts of gender-based violence against reporters.
- Conducting additional studies to measure the online and offline gender-based violence that writers, presenters and reporters in all media outlets are subjected to;



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