

No to sexism Hate Speech, Pamela Morinière, EFJ

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Introduction:

The IFJ has just released its **annual killed list 2015** where 112 of our colleagues lost their lives. Among these killings, there were 6 women journalists. **These colleagues died because they were doing their jobs, as journalists.** Many had been subject to targeted intimidations before they were assassinated.

This report shows again how freedom of the press comes at a price. It also highlights that as long as impunity for crimes and attacks against journalists will remain, freedom of speech will be gravely challenged and the public's right to know will also be impacted.

Only one murder of media professionals in ten is investigated. You can well imagine the amount of impunity that surrounds other attacks on journalists such as intimidations, death threats or sexist hate speech...

The EFJ has a long tradition of fighting against hate speech. Most of the time, the issue is tackled from an ethical perspective: journalists must bear an ethical responsibility to speak out against hate speech and any form of intolerance. All codes of ethics reproduce one of the guiding principle of the **IFJ Code of practices**, that is, that there should be no discrimination based on race, religion or sex.

The EFJ has started talking about sexist hate speech but we have no definition as such so I am using the one shared by the Council of Europe. In particular, **sexism hate speech can be described as as discourses and behaviours used to humiliate women and destroy their reputation.** This time, we are not only talking about ethical responsibility in the way journalists must convey the news, we talk about women journalists' working conditions and their health and safety. It is a union issue.

Sexism hate speech not only imperils freedom of speech, it also put the health and well being of our female colleagues at risk.

Our role is to make sure there is no impunity for these behaviours.

1) Sexism hate speech- some examples and findings

The issue of sexism hate speech is particularly acute for women journalists both off and online. Perpetrators can be anonymous. They can also be colleagues or bosses.

In 2013 the **IWFM/INSI** study showed that almost half of the respondents of their study on women journalists said they had suffered **sexual harassment** in different forms. About sexual harassment, the report shows that the majority of the attacks were led by supervisors, colleagues.

In the UK, a study conducted by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) in 2014 in **broadcasting news staff** reveals the appalling treatment some women face in their work places, **43% reported sexist behaviours** in their workplaces while 45% experienced sexist attitudes from their management.

A most recent phenomenon is **online sexism hate speech**. Women media professionals are 3 times more likely to receive offensive comments on social media than men.

This phenomenon can be seen as **a way to downgrade female emancipation**. Our society has greatly evolved, women take on new role in society, they participate in political debates, lead enterprises, newsrooms. Some men have difficulties seeing this evolution and see women as threat when they express themselves in social media.

The online sexism hate speech takes 2 forms:

- **online impersonation**. Cyber abusers can produce fake tweets and facebook pages, purporting to be the journalist and send abusive remarks in the journalist's name
- **Insults, threats and harassment** through emails and social media.

Here are **some examples** shared by some colleagues.

In Germany, several popular TV-Journalists like Anja Reschke (ARD, Panorama) or Dunja Hayali (ZDF, Frühstückfernsehen), who have been reporting on **Germany's Refugee Policy**, received thousands of hate mails, threatening them with rape or slandering them personally as sluts, calling them liars or whores .

A **journalist from Norway** reports that she is called frigid, that she is premenstrual, that it's a long time since she has been laid, that she is ugly, hates men, and so on.

In 2012, the Norwegian union of journalists and the Editors' guild's published their **bi-annual research/survey of the working environment for journalists**. It showed that an increasing number of journalist (**39%**) had experienced **harassment and threats** because of their profession.

In 2014, another research looked into sexual harassment of female journalists and whether it influenced journalism and reduced freedom of speech. 1 in 5 of the respondents say they felt gagged.

A book with the results was published in May 2015. It says that:

- The **amount of harassment** received by women journalists had increased further.
- **Multicultural young women** were most targeted – with all kinds of threats, harassment and insults – in particular the ones working TV.
- 6 out of 10 journalist/editors think the increasing number of harassment and threats has become a **democratic problem**.
- Not surprisingly – the **main difference between the threats and harassment** that women and men receive, is that the threats against women are often sexual.

2) What can be done to counter sexism hate speech against media professionals?

- **Need to moderate online comments and prevent hatred comments and insults.**

Journalists are strongly encouraged to get online and use social media and blogs.

Most media houses have developed guidelines on how and what to tweet. However,

little is done to respond to the impact of cyber-bullying and online harassment. Media

employers must exercise a **duty of care** and put in place measures that deal with

hateful comments. In particular, web sites should inform perpetrators that they will be

prosecuted. The reaction of the **RTBF** last week (Cologne Carnival attacks against

female journalist- complaint lodged by RTBF) is a good example and a good signal

that media organizations stand by their employees when harassment occurred.

- **Unions have a role to play** in raising awareness and developing **policies** together with media organisations as well as keeping **data** of cases of sexist hate speech.
- There is a need to **change the newsroom culture** towards more gender awareness and promote open discussion on harassment to ensure that both staff and freelance journalists can receive support and speak up freely.
- **Journalists must abide by ethical standards:** Don't publish readers' comments that might provoke intolerance and hate speech. Do not publish unverified information. Speak out and confront hate speech.
- **Newsroom should reflect on gender portrayal** and how women and men are presented in news content. It has a real influence on the public's perception of roles encompassed by women and men in society. The latest GMMP results are appalling. They show that women only make 24% of people seen, heard or viewed in the news. The impact such figures have on the public's perception of women's place and role in society is disastrous. It is a serious concern that media managers should take very seriously.
- **The council of Europe's Platform** to promote journalism and the safety of journalism is a good mean to denounce cases of online sexism. Since the launch of the platform in April 2015, at least 105 cases of serious threat to press freedom were reported to the Council, including the case of Kadhija Ismalova in Azerbaijan. The EFJ and IFJ reported last week the incident of the Belgian journalist in Cologne.

3) Journalists' unions started responding to sexism hate speech

The NUJ provided a list of guidelines for victims of online abuses (2013)

- 1) Continue to post online and don't stop using social media.
- 2) Tell other people that you are being targeted. Get support.
- 3) Never respond to an abuser with abuse. It would weaken your case if you go to the police.
- 4) Report the abuse on social media sites.
- 5) Keep evidence and report the abuse to the internet service provider (ISP)

Norway: A female TV correspondent for in the Middle East, gets a lot of hate mail. **She called one of the really bad mailers on the phone**, talking directly to him, asking him how he could act like he did. He was almost crying, very, very sorry, asked for forgiveness and had not imagined that she would take his mails "seriously".

NJ (together with the editors) has worked on media workplaces and editors to help them being better prepared. They developed a **toolkit** and guidelines on how to tackle threats and harassment received by their employees: understanding that the damage can be serious, the discomfort that may follow, when to report to the police, why this should be taken seriously.

Conclusion: I think the most important issue when tackling sexist hate speech is to remember its seriousness. This must be understood by media owners, colleagues and the public at large, and there can be no impunity for sexist offenders.

I will end with a quote from the NUJ:

“We believe it is strange that the authorities can take someone to court for making a joke about a bomb in an airport on twitter but the same can't be done in cases where women journalists and commentators have received abuse which details, for example, which parts of a woman's body should be raped, how she should be violently murdered and/or what time a bomb will go off outside her house”.

Food for thought...