

Council of Europe Project
“Strengthening the capacities and skills of Belarusian journalists and media actors in
exile”

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POLICY PAPER

Caught in a double bind: The situation of Belarusian women journalists in
exile

*Why is women journalists' safety not seen as a priority in Belarusian exiled media? And
what can be done to change this?*

The role and responsibility of the Council of Europe in protecting freedom of expression has been underlined in the "Reykjavik Principles for Democracy", the [Reykjavík Declaration – United around our values](#).

The Project “Strengthening the capacities and skills of Belarusian journalists and media actors in exile” (the Project) addresses the needs and challenges of Belarusian exiled media community. The key objective of the Project is to support Belarusian journalists and media actors in exile, improve their capacities for unbiased reporting and reaching audiences at home and abroad, as well as strengthen the skills of both experienced journalists and newcomers – those who joined the profession while in exile.

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Purpose and background:

This paper was commissioned by the Council of Europe to identify key takeaways and recommendations for action from an interdisciplinary roundtable “Safety is not a luxury, ignorance is not protection. Why is women journalists’ safety not seen as a priority in Belarusian exiled media?”, conducted in Strasbourg on 19 September 2025.

Despite growing international attention on the safety of women journalists, gender-specific risks are still seen as secondary in exiled media settings. The expert roundtable underpinning this paper was convened to explore the reasons for the failure to prioritise the safety of exiled women Belarusian journalists and explore potential solutions through interdisciplinary collaboration.

According to the Council of Europe, the media freedom situation for journalists in Belarus is the [worst in Europe](#). “More than 500 Belarusian colleagues...detained, arrested and harassed since the total repression started in 2020”, following a fraudulent election which returned the dictator Alexander Lukashenko to power. News organisations were raided, labelled “extremist”, had their operating licenses revoked, and were banned. In mid-2025, there were approximately 40 journalists imprisoned in Belarus and an estimated [500-600 Belarusian journalists were living in exile](#), having fled repression.

But while there has been [considerable international attention](#) on the situation of exiled Belarusian journalists since the situation deteriorated dramatically after the 2020 election, there has been an absence of concern and interventions focused on the experiences of women journalists living in exile and the gender-specific aspects of their hardship. In part, this is a product of a lack of gender-disaggregated data regarding exiled journalists.

As the concept note for the Strasbourg expert roundtable highlighted: “Critical aspects of internal media structures - such as editorial hierarchies, workplace culture, and informal norms - remain under-analysed. Gender equality advocates, while often the first to raise these concerns, are rarely integrated into strategic conversations with journalists, editors, or international media scholars.” This is true generally, but especially in the context of disempowered and exiled Belarusian women journalists.

In addition to gender-based online violence and exploitation, they also experience sexual harassment and discrimination within the dispersed international communities of Belarusian journalists, and within the exiled media outlets they work for. Structural sexism follows them.

They exist within a double bind, and it is essential that their complex, gender-differentiated needs be understood and addressed.

Summary of the Strasbourg interdisciplinary expert consultation

“Belarusian women journalists are those who still keep a connection with the country. We survived prisons, exile, illness, humiliation. But we continue to work, because we know: truth is needed. To survive and to keep speaking, we need your support.” Exiled Belarusian woman journalist’s testimony.

Primary concerns highlighted by the participants:

1. The exposure of exiled Belarusian women journalists to sexual discrimination and harassment – both physical and digital – in the course of their work. “Exile does not mean safety”.

2. The psychological and economic impacts of such discrimination and harassment on exiled Belarusian women journalists who face additional precarity, both in terms of exposure to risk and sustainable employment, and increased burdens associated with caring responsibilities.
3. The gender-based threats associated with ongoing attacks on exiled Belarusian journalists by the Belarusian regime and its Russian sponsors (e.g., extraterritorial sexual violence, gender-based online violence and gendered disinformation).
4. The endemic nature of gender-based discrimination and harassment within the Belarusian media ecosystem which has been exported with exiled Belarusian journalists.
5. The lack of gender-sensitive/gender-specific needs assessments for exiled women journalists.
6. The lack of gender-sensitive support services and systems for exiled women Belarusian journalists.
7. The reluctance to acknowledge and report sexual harassment and discrimination among exiled Belarusian women journalists, connected to normalisation of such abuse and the risk of retaliation. There is a fear of discussing the problem, even in closed groups.
8. The reluctance to accept and respond to complaints about sexual discrimination and harassment, and a culture of cover-up associated with such complaints, within the Belarusian media ecosystem, including within the Belarusian Association of Journalists.
9. The de-prioritisation of issues like sexual discrimination and harassment in the context of the struggle for democracy – the need for solidarity against the regime is used as a justification to protect perpetrators.
10. The Need for access to specialist training to fill gaps created by years of incarceration which already inhibits the ability of exiled women Belarusian journalists to find work outside the ecosystem of exiled Belarusian media.
11. The need for digital and physical security training that specifically addresses the distinct needs of women journalists, including exposure to sexual assault, gender-based online violence and gendered disinformation.
12. The risk of complainants being labelled “difficult”, further inhibiting the women’s employment prospects and making them more vulnerable: “Employability depends on silence”.
13. The risk of being rendered invisible: “We understand there will be difficulties: competition, criticism...but we are not separating from solidarity, we are separating from invisibility.”
14. The specific need for a network serving exiled Belorussian women journalists which is culturally and linguistically geared to support them.
15. The lack of gender-disaggregated data related to exiled journalists, including Belarusian journalists.
16. The expectation within the community of exiled Belarusian journalists that the women among them should provide emotional support/labour for their male colleagues.
17. The urgent need for the Belarusian Association of Journalists to rebuild trust with the women journalists it represents following successive scandals associated with gender-based harassment and abuse.
18. The lack of gender policies among exiled Belarusian media and the need for the same, along with accountability mechanisms associated with their implementation.

19. The poor levels of knowledge about gender theory and terminology among exiled Belarusian media and their representatives.
20. Limited understanding among Belarusian civil society support networks about international legal frameworks, norms and standards, along with the legal protections and responsibilities in the countries of exile.
21. The need to train Belarusian civil society organisations to develop and execute gender-transformative programming and services.

Recommendations for future action

The following recommendations are proposed to improve safety of exiled women journalists:

1. Systematise data collection regarding the situation of exiled Belarusian journalists and disaggregate the data according to sex and gender.
2. Conduct a survey-based needs assessment of exiled Belarusian journalists with a specific emphasis on gender, allowing for data disaggregation along gender and sex lines. This survey should be fielded in partnership with trusted international and exiled Belarusian civil society organisations and academic partners.
3. Ensure that the gender-based aspects of Russian and Belarusian regime-led campaigns targeting exiled journalists (e.g., sexual violence, gender-based online violence and gendered disinformation) are accounted for.
4. Tie funding to gender-responsive interventions and monitoring. Ensure that programming responding to the situation of exiled Belarusian journalists involves:
 - Codes of conduct regarding sexual harassment, abuse and discrimination which participants and intermediaries are required to abide by and implement.
 - Zero tolerance for sexual discrimination, harassment and abuse.
 - Safe and secure reporting and escalation mechanisms for participants experiencing sexual harassment, abuse or discrimination (online or offline).
 - Gender-responsive programming that addresses disadvantages associated with responsibilities for women journalists who are also primary carers (e.g., childcare support for participants).
 - A requirement for implementing partners and grant recipients to report against gender-specific outcomes and goals.
 - Include training on gender-related safety and press freedom threats for participants and implementing partners (e.g., training on responding to gender-based online violence and sexual harassment prevention).
5. Foreground the lived experiences of exiled Belarusian women journalists in advocacy campaigns through storytelling. Centring the women's voices helps empower them, and this approach can motivate gender-responsive action.
6. Adopt an interdisciplinary approach to gender-responsive interventions, drawing on expertise from press freedom, legal, psycho-social and digital security perspectives.
7. Support the establishment of a Belarusian women journalists' network with financial aid for a coordinator.
8. Facilitate connections to international women's media networks to aid mentoring and advocacy.

9. Draft principles for gender-responsive interventions to support women journalists in exile, using the Belarusian case as an example.
10. Consider partnerships with other intergovernmental organisations supporting and advocating for exiled journalists and the safety of women journalists (e.g., UNESCO and the OSCE).