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Promotion and protection of human rights: human rights questions, including alternative approaches for improving the effective enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms

Safety of journalists and the issue of impunity

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report, submitted in accordance with General Assembly resolution [76/173](#), describes the current situation in relation to the safety of journalists and media workers worldwide. It then focuses on the safety of women journalists, online and offline, before providing an overview of the activities of the United Nations inter-agency Network of Focal Points on the safety of journalists. Considering previous reports of the Secretary-General on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity, the present report reiterates previous recommendations and proposes new ones to improve the safety of journalists, including of women journalists.

* [A/78/150](#).



I. Introduction

1. The present report, submitted pursuant to General Assembly resolution [76/173](#), provides an overview of the current situation in relation to the safety of journalists and media workers, with a special focus on the safety of women journalists, online and offline, and the activities of the United Nations inter-agency Network of Focal Points on the safety of journalists, taking into account the United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity and the follow-up thereto.¹

2. The report draws on information provided by States, members of the United Nations inter-agency Network of Focal Points on the safety of journalists and other stakeholders, including United Nations human rights mechanisms and civil society organizations.²

II. Current situation in relation to the safety of journalists and media workers

Killing of journalists and impunity

3. Since the previous report of the Secretary-General on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity presented at the seventy-sixth session of the General Assembly ([A/76/285](#)), threats and attacks against journalists and media workers have continued to increase. Various factors account for this worrying trend. Many of the threats and attacks, as highlighted by the Secretary-General on various occasions, were exacerbated during the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.³

4. Attacks against journalists persist worldwide. According to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), killings of journalists and other media workers increased by 50 per cent in 2022, with a total of 87 journalists and media workers killed globally, representing a sharp increase from the

¹ The current report covers major developments since August 2021, the presentation of the previous report on the safety of journalists ([A/76/285](#)) and the adoption of General Assembly resolution [76/173](#).

² Contributions were received from Armenia, Burundi, Chile, Cuba, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Indonesia, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Mexico, Netherlands (Kingdom of the), Norway, Portugal, Qatar, Tunisia, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) and the State of Palestine; the Department of Global Communications of the United Nations, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the Council of Europe, the Philippines Commission on Human Rights, the Ombudsman's Office of Latvia, Alianza Regional por la Libre Expresión e Información, the Alliance of Independent Journalists, Indonesia, Altermidya Network of the Philippines, the American Association of Jurists, the Geneva Support Group for the Protection and Promotion of Human Rights in Western Sahara, the Amman Center for Human Rights Studies, ARTICLE 19, the Belarusian Association of Journalists, the Brazilian Association of Investigative Journalism, the Cambodian Center for Human Rights, the Cambodian Center for Independent Media, the National Human Rights Commission of Mexico, the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights, the Daphne Foundation, the Foundation for Press Freedom, Georgian Democracy Initiative, Human Rights Centre ZMINA, IFEX Global, the Instituto Prensa y Sociedad de Venezuela, Internet Lab_Brazil, the Digital Rights Foundation, Justice House Egypt, the Kashmir Institute of International Relations, Maat for Peace, Development and Human Rights, the Maharat Foundation, the Media Foundation for West Africa, Propuesta Cívica Mexico, Reporters Without Borders, the Slovak National Centre for Human Rights, Voces del Sur, the Pakistan Press Foundation and the Palestinian Center for Development and Media Freedoms.

³ United Nations, "COVID-19 and human rights: we are all in this together", April 2020. See also [A/76/285](#), paras. 4, 6, 10 and 14.

average of 58 killings per year from 2019 to 2021.⁴ As part of the global reporting on Sustainable Development Goal indicator 16.10.1,⁵ the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), in partnership with UNESCO and the International Labour Organization, recorded a rise in the number of women journalists killed from 6 to 10 (over 67 per cent).

5. The war in Ukraine has contributed to this spike in cases, with 14 journalists killed between the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and 31 July 2023.⁶ Yet, most of the killings of journalists globally continue to take place outside conflict zones. For instance, in 2022 and the first half of 2023, 22 journalists were recorded killed in Mexico.⁷ The Asia and Pacific region and the Latin America and Caribbean region show the highest numbers of killings of journalists between 2016 and the end of 2020, followed by the Arab region, while less than a quarter of the total number of killings took place in Africa, Western Europe, North America and Central and Eastern Europe combined.⁸

6. Of particular concern is the very high global impunity rate for these crimes, with 86 per cent of cases of journalist killings remaining unresolved in 2022.⁹ In a report to the Human Rights Council (A/HRC/50/29, para. 34), the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression noted that high levels of impunity persisted, with many States failing to comply with human rights standards on media freedom and freedom of expression. As of July 2023, the UNESCO database indicated 688 cases of ongoing and unresolved cases concerning the murder of journalists.¹⁰ As highlighted by the Special Rapporteur, the failure of the State to prosecute and punish serious crimes against journalists emboldens perpetrators, denies the victims' families justice and can deter other journalists from reporting high-risk stories (A/HRC/50/29, para. 29).¹¹

Physical violence and intimidation

7. The killing of journalists is not the only manifestation of violence against the media. Numerous cases of attacks against journalists in connection with the coverage of protests, public demonstrations and riots continue to occur in many countries.¹² As noted by UNESCO, in such contexts, the use of non-lethal ammunition by the police, ranging from rubber bullets to pepper balls, has injured dozens of journalists. Many other journalists have been arrested, beaten and subjected to other forms of physical and psychological ill-treatment.¹³ Similar violations also occur during electoral periods. UNESCO registered attacks against journalists related to elections in at least

⁴ According to UNESCO, 57 journalists were killed in 2019, 62 in 2020, 55 in 2021 and 87 in 2022. See UNESCO, Observatory of Killed Journalists database, available at <https://en.unesco.org/themes/safety-journalists/observatory>.

⁵ See www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-and-mechanisms/human-rights-indicators/sdg-indicators-under-ohchrs-custodianship.

⁶ UNESCO, Observatory of Killed Journalists database, available at <https://www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory> (accessed on 31 July 2023).

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ UNESCO, *World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development: Global Report 2021/2022* (Paris, 2022).

⁹ UNESCO, "Knowing the truth is protecting the truth", 2022.

¹⁰ UNESCO, "Statistics on Killed Journalists", Observatory of Killed Journalists database. Available at www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory/statistics.

¹¹ See also submissions by the Digital Rights Foundation, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the Council of Europe Platform to Promote the Protection of Journalism and Safety of Journalists and Reporters Without Borders.

¹² UNESCO, "The role of law enforcement agents: ensuring safety of journalists during public demonstrations and elections", 2023.

¹³ Ibid.

89 elections in 70 countries from January 2019 to June 2022. Of the 759 journalists and media professionals reportedly attacked, 42 per cent were by law enforcement agents.¹⁴ A research study commissioned by PersVeilig, the national platform on the safety of journalists in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, noted that camera operators and photojournalists were disproportionately confronted with aggression or threats.¹⁵

8. Physical attacks against journalists are often preceded by or coupled with intimidation, including in the form of stigmatizing and derogatory speeches aimed at intimidating and discrediting the press.¹⁶ Other patterns of intimidation include the issuing of summons, interrogating journalists as well as members of their families and conducting raids on residential premises or on the workplaces of relatives.¹⁷ The Committee to Protect Journalists has noted that journalists tend to downplay threats, and younger journalists in particular downplay the incidences of harassment and intimidation as being normal or part of the job.¹⁸

Legal harassment

9. Another way to intimidate or silence media professionals is using various criminal law provisions as grounds for arrest.¹⁹ The Committee to Protect Journalists found that the number of journalists detained because of their work had hit a new global record in 2022, with 363 journalists imprisoned worldwide compared with 293 in 2021.²⁰ Both the Secretary-General and the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights have appealed for an end to detention and imprisonment of journalists for exercising their profession.²¹

10. As noted by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, laws – from sedition to censorship – have long been used to punish journalists and suppress media freedom. However, the arsenal of legal weapons has broadened to include criminal cyberlibel, anti-terrorism, cybersecurity and fake news laws (*ibid.*, para. 51). These laws often fail to conform to the strict requirements of legality, necessity and proportionality, as set out in article 19 (3) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.²² Moreover, they are often overly broad and vaguely worded and provide for heavy fines and harsh prison sentences. The Special Rapporteur has expressed serious concern in recent years at such laws as well as the tough sentencing in several countries (*ibid.*, para. 53).

11. The gradual progress towards the decriminalization of defamation has slowed in the past five years. According to UNESCO, at least 160 countries still have criminal defamation laws.²³ In addition, defamation and libel laws are increasingly used to initiate strategic litigation against public participation.²⁴ For example, the Coalition

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Submission by the Kingdom of Netherlands.

¹⁶ Submission by the Brazil Association of Investigative Journalism.

¹⁷ Submission by the Kashmir Institute for International Relations.

¹⁸ Submission by the Committee to Protect Journalists and the Journalists' Association of South Africa.

¹⁹ Submission by the Pakistan Press Foundation.

²⁰ Committee to Protect Journalists, "2022 prison census", Imprisoned Journalists database. Available at <https://cpj.org/data/imprisoned/2022>.

²¹ António Guterres, Secretary-General of the United Nations, message for World Press Freedom Day, 3 May 2023; and Volker Türk, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, "UDHR75 in action: end arbitrary detention", statement on his call for release of all those arbitrarily detained, Geneva, 4 January 2023.

²² Human Rights Committee, general comment No. 34 (2011), para. 30.

²³ UNESCO, "The 'misuse' of the judicial system to attack freedom of expression: trends, challenges and responses", 2022.

²⁴ A SLAPP is a lawsuit that is brought for the purpose of intimidating, burdening, punishing or harassing the defendant for speaking out against the plaintiff on matters of public interest.

Against SLAPPs in Europe noted in a report that the number of cases of strategic litigation against public participation filed was increasing every year.²⁵ The report also revealed that the most affected defendants in such lawsuits were journalists (34.2 per cent) and media outlets (23 per cent). Because of the length of the procedures, the financial pressure and the mere threat of the criminal sanctions involved, strategic litigation against public participation constitutes a powerful “weapon” to silence journalists and other media actors.²⁶

12. Strategic litigation against public participation is most frequently initiated by public officials and business companies. For instance, Daphne Caruana Galizia, at the time of her murder, was confronted with 47 civil and criminal defamation cases brought by politicians and their business associates.²⁷ More globally, the Business and Human Rights Resource Centre released a study conducted between January 2015 and May 2021 that recorded more than 3,100 attacks worldwide against community leaders, farmers, workers, unions, journalists, civil society groups and other defenders that had reported on irresponsible business practices. More than 40 per cent of those attacks consisted of strategic litigation against public participation.²⁸ In a report presented in 2021 to the Human Rights Council, the Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises called on companies to desist from bringing frivolous lawsuits against journalists and human rights defenders ([A/HRC/47/39/Add.2](#)).

13. Some States, such as Lithuania, have adopted legislation to provide protection for journalists, including women journalists, against strategic litigation against public participation.²⁹ Among other positive developments, in 2021, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe tasked a committee of experts to draft a recommendation on strategic litigation against public participation by the end of 2023.³⁰ In 2022, the European Commission launched an anti-strategic litigation against public participation initiative aimed at improving protection from abuse of court proceedings targeting journalists and rights defenders.³¹ Also in 2022, the Constitutional Court of Colombia ruled for the first time that a case bearing the hallmark of strategic litigation against public participation posed a threat to freedom of expression.³²

Surveillance

14. State authorities use sophisticated software to block websites and to conduct surveillance of Internet users. Coupled with this, Internet shutdowns and disruptions are increasingly used to curtail the freedom of the media.³³ Over the past decade, shutdowns have tended to be imposed during heightened political tensions, with at least 225 shutdowns recorded during public demonstrations relating to social, political or economic grievances ([A/HRC/50/55](#), para. 25). Shutdowns were also

²⁵ Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe, *Shutting Out Criticism: How SLAPPs Threaten European Democracy* (2022).

²⁶ Marilyn Clark and William Horsley, *A Mission to Inform: Journalists at Risk Speak Out* (Council of Europe, 2020); and submission by the Cambodian Center for Human Rights.

²⁷ ARTICLE 19 and the Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation, *Tackling Impunity: Lessons from the Public Inquiry into the Assassination of Daphne Caruana Galiza* (2022).

²⁸ Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, “Slapped but not silenced: defending human rights in the face of legal risks”, June 2021.

²⁹ Submission by Lithuania.

³⁰ See www.coe.int/en/web/freedom-expression/msi-slp.

³¹ See https://ec.europa.eu/info/law/better-regulation/have-your-say/initiatives/13192-EU-action-against-abusive-litigation-SLAPP-targeting-journalists-and-rights-defenders_en.

³² See <http://www.poderjudicial.es/search/documento/AN/9924177/sistema%20de%20la%20seguridad%20social/20220412> (in Spanish).

³³ See www.unesco.org/en/world-media-trends.

reported when Governments carried out security operations, severely restricting human rights monitoring and reporting (*ibid.*, para. 27). In the context of armed conflicts and mass demonstrations, the fact that journalists, among others, were not able to communicate and promptly report abuses seems to have contributed to further insecurity and violence, including serious human rights violations (*ibid.*).

15. Frequently, States claim that they require targeted digital surveillance technologies to prevent crime, including acts of terrorism, and companies developing such technologies argue that the use of their surveillance tools is limited to such purposes. However, as recalled by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, extensive evidence has emerged documenting the broad use by States of advanced surveillance technologies to target journalists ([A/HRC/50/29](#), para. 49). For instance, in 2021, the Pegasus Project³⁴ found that at least 180 journalists in 20 countries were potentially targeted by Governments using Pegasus spyware.

16. Women journalists have been disproportionately targeted in some countries (*ibid.*, para. 46). The personal information of women journalists obtained through surveillance appears to have been used in online violence campaigns, including “doxing” (*ibid.*).³⁵ More generally, in addition to affecting journalists’ work and private life, targeted digital surveillance discourages confidential sources from collaborating with journalists, entailing significant chilling effects on whistleblowing and investigative journalism, as pointed out by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression ([A/HRC/50/29](#), para. 47). Along with United Nations human rights mandate holders,³⁶ the High Commissioner for Human Rights, on several occasions, has called upon States to impose a global moratorium on the sale and transfer of surveillance technology until they put in place robust regulations that guarantee its use in compliance with international human rights standards ([A/HRC/51/17](#), para. 19).³⁷ Surveillance technology companies also have not conformed with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Guidelines Governing the Protection of Privacy and Transborder Flow of Personal Data.³⁸ In particular, there has been non-conformity with the requirement to publicly disclose robust human rights due diligence for all proposed transfers and exportation of surveillance technology.³⁹

³⁴ The Pegasus Project is a consortium of more than 80 reporters from 17 media organizations in 11 countries coordinated by Forbidden Stories with the technical support of the Amnesty International Security Lab, see <https://forbiddenstories.org/pegasus-project-articles/>.

³⁵ See also para. 23 of the present report. “Doxing” is the action of finding or publishing private information about someone on the Internet without their permission.

³⁶ Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders, Special Rapporteur on the rights to freedom of peaceful assembly and of association and Working Group on the issue of human rights and transnational corporations and other business enterprises, see Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), “Spyware scandal: UN experts call for moratorium on sale of ‘life threatening’ surveillance tech”, 12 August 2021.

³⁷ See also Michelle Bachelet, United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, statement during the World Press Freedom Day ceremony, Geneva, 3 May 2022. In its submission for the present report, the Council of Europe recommended that surveillance systems, in order to be compatible with the European Convention on Human Rights, contain adequate and effective safeguards against abuses, including independent supervision.

³⁸ See <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-0188>.

³⁹ See also the recommendations contained in document [A/HRC/51/17](#).

III. Safety of women journalists online and offline

17. In 2017, the Secretary-General presented a report to the General Assembly describing the situation of women journalists (A/72/290). The situation remains similar, and women continue to be underrepresented in the media. For instance, in 2021, the International Women's Media Foundation conducted research that revealed that in the 522 media companies surveyed, only a third of the full-time workforce comprised women journalists.⁴⁰ In addition to the gender pay gap, submissions for the present report have highlighted a “glass-ceiling” phenomenon, affecting the professional development of women journalists and involving prejudice and stereotypes that inform the assignment of more serious and important subjects to male journalists and lighter ones to women.⁴¹ Alongside those impediments, the lack of access to senior positions and the nature of the tasks that women journalists are often assigned reinforce a pervasive culture of harassment within newsrooms in many parts of the world.⁴²

18. Women journalists face the same threats as their male counterparts. In line with a general increase in the killing of journalists, in 2022, more women were targeted, with the number of female victims jumping from 6 to 10 compared with 2021.⁴³ Yet, women journalists face additional threats because of their gender. Patriarchal norms and patterns of structural discrimination against women in many societies contribute to that specific trend, as highlighted by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression (A/76/258, paras. 18 and 45).

19. The Alliance of Independent Journalists in Indonesia carried out a study released in 2023, which found that 82.6 per cent of women journalists interviewed had reported having experienced sexual violence in the course of their journalistic careers.⁴⁴ Research conducted by ARTICLE 19 and released in 2022 highlighted that up to two thirds of women journalists had experienced attacks, from rape to psychological abuse and online harassment.⁴⁵ A survey of almost 300 female journalists working in the Kingdom of the Netherlands conducted in 2022 by the platform PersVeiling showed that 82 per cent of respondents had reported having experienced intimidation, aggression or threats.⁴⁶

20. Submissions by four organizations also identified intersectional discrimination against women journalists based on race, sexual orientation, ethnicity, nationality, religion and other areas. Women journalists belonging to the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and asexual community were noted to have suffered homophobic and transphobic attacks linked to their sexuality, appearance, sexual orientation and gender identity more broadly.⁴⁷ Black or non-white journalists were also noted to have suffered intersectional discrimination.⁴⁸ Research by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists showed that racism, religious bigotry, antisemitism, sectarianism, ableism, homophobia and transphobia intersected with

⁴⁰ International Women's Media Foundation, *Global Report on the Status of Women in the News Media* (Washington, D.C., 2011).

⁴¹ Submissions by the Council of Europe and the Media Foundation of West Africa.

⁴² Submission by the Pakistan Press Foundation.

⁴³ The Sustainable Development Goal indicators under OHCHR custodianship are available at www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-and-mechanisms/human-rights-indicators/sdg-indicators-under-ohchrs-custodianship.

⁴⁴ Alliance of Independent Journalists, *Research Report: Sexual Violence against Indonesian Female Journalists* (Jakarta, 2023).

⁴⁵ See www.article19.org/equally-safe/.

⁴⁶ Submission by the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights.

⁴⁷ Submissions by the Brazil Association of Journalists, Reporters without Borders, IFEX and Et-Al.

⁴⁸ Submissions by Internet Lab, Reporters Without Borders, the Digital Rights Foundation and Et-Al.

misogyny and sexism to produce significantly heightened exposure and deeper impacts for women experiencing multiple forms of discrimination concurrently.⁴⁹

21. Women are more frequently subject to threats and harassment in the digital sphere. A total of 73 per cent of the women journalists interviewed in a research study conducted by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists involving 901 journalists and media workers from 125 countries said that they had experienced online violence.⁵⁰ Online attacks against women journalists are exacerbated in certain contexts, including during elections. Reporters Without Borders estimated that, throughout the most recent presidential campaign in Brazil, a journalist was harassed online every three seconds, with 70 per cent of the victims being women.⁵¹

22. As outlined by the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, online gender-based violence includes both harmful speech and behaviour that are often sexist or misogynistic in nature and contain threats or incitement to physical or sexual violence (*ibid.*, para. 20). The joint research conducted by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists similarly showed that, in addition to sexist private messages avoiding public scrutiny, the most common online threat experienced by women journalists interviewed had taken the form of hateful, misogynistic and sexist language designed to denigrate them.⁵² Many respondents to the research study also mentioned being victims of “doxing”, with most of them having their email addresses and phone numbers shared on extremist websites or sites designed to facilitate trolling. Other online attacks highlighted in the research included exposure to surveillance, hacking and “spoofing”,⁵³ with the risk of personal details and sources being revealed.⁵⁴

23. The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression added to the list of online abuses “sextortion”,⁵⁵ electronic sabotage, impersonation of the victim online and the sending of abusive messages in the victim’s name (*ibid.*). She also highlighted that online gendered disinformation campaigns were increasingly being used to deter women from participating in the public sphere, mixing old ingrained sexist attitudes with the anonymity and reach of social media in an effort to destroy women’s reputations and push them out of public life. Women journalists are among those particularly targeted by such campaigns ([A/HRC/47/25](#), para. 27).

24. The Journalists’ Association of South Africa, in its submission, noted that online attacks against women journalists were shaped primarily by a male audience who, notably in Africa, had more access to the Internet than their female counterparts. More broadly, 37 per cent of the respondents to the research study by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists identified political actors as the main reported perpetrators of online attacks against journalists. Yet, attacks by public officials often

⁴⁹ Julie Posetti and Nabeelah Shabbir, eds., *The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence against Women Journalists* (International Centre for Journalists, 2022).

⁵⁰ Posetti and Shabbir, eds., *The Chilling*.

⁵¹ Reporters Without Borders, “Journalism facing hate networks in Brazil: online attacks against the media during the 2022 elections”, April 2023.

⁵² Posetti and Shabbir, eds., *The Chilling*.

⁵³ “Spoofing” is the act of disguising a communication from an unknown source as being from a known, trusted source. It can be used to gain access to a target’s personal information, spread malware through infected links or attachments, bypass network access controls or redistribute traffic to conduct a denial-of-service attack.

⁵⁴ Posetti and Shabbir, eds., *The Chilling*.

⁵⁵ The practice of extorting money or sexual favours from someone by threatening to reveal evidence of their sexual activity.

act as an encouragement for their followers to resort to violence or threats against women journalists.⁵⁶

25. Online abuses breach women journalists' privacy, stigmatize them and assail their self-confidence.⁵⁷ Twenty-six per cent of respondents to the research study by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists underscored the mental health impact of online violence, with 12 per cent of them reporting that they had sought medical and psychological assistance. Similarly, a study conducted in 2022 with 237 women journalists in Brazil by Genero e Numero and Reporters Without Borders found that 24 per cent of interviewees felt more insecure or anxious after an episode of violence and 15 per cent declared having developed mental health problems.⁵⁸

26. Women journalists' anxiety is increased by a feeling of physical insecurity resulting from online violence. In that regard, 20 per cent of respondents to the research study by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists reported having been attacked offline in connection with the online violence they had experienced. This includes physical attacks and offline harassment that are seeded online, as well as legal harassment enabled or reinforced by online violence. Consequently, women journalists who are victims of online abuses and related offline violence often miss work to recover, sometimes quit their jobs and even, in some cases, abandon journalism, as highlighted in the above-mentioned study. Online violence therefore has a negative impact on their family life, as well as on their ability to perform their job, which threatens their livelihood.⁵⁹

27. The research by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists also showed that 30 per cent of respondents had self-censored on social media as a result of online violence. In the Kingdom of the Netherlands, for instance, the study conducted in 2022 by the platform PersVeiling showed that, in fear of online harassment, 52 per cent of female journalists interviewed had chosen their words more carefully, 23 per cent had avoided certain social media platforms and 19 per cent had no longer published on certain topics.⁶⁰ Such self-censorship has a direct impact on the pluralism of opinions and information and restricts freedom of expression.

28. Self-censorship can also lead women journalists to remain silent about the online violence that they might have been victim of. Only 25 per cent of respondents to the research study by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists mentioned having reported online abuses, with 10 per cent of them having received no response from their employer.⁶¹ In some instances, there is a lack of reporting mechanisms in media outlets. In Indonesia, for example, 57.2 per cent of respondents to the study conducted by the Alliance of Independent Journalists stated that their offices did not have standard operating procedures to deal with sexual violence against female journalists.⁶² The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression also called on news media employers to ensure training and support for women journalists, including freelance contributors, who are less keen to report on incidents than their colleagues with

⁵⁶ Submission by the Pakistan Press Foundation.

⁵⁷ Submissions by Reporters Without Borders, Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain and the Media Foundation of West Africa.

⁵⁸ See <https://rsf.org/pt-br/brasil-desinforma%C3%A7%C3%A3o-e-ataques-nas-redes-contra-mulheres-jornalistas-imp%C3%B5em-s%C3%A9rios-desafios-para> (in Portuguese).

⁵⁹ Posetti and Shabbir, eds., *The Chilling*.

⁶⁰ Submission by the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights.

⁶¹ Also highlighted in the submissions by the Netherlands Institute for Human Rights and the Media Foundation of West Africa.

⁶² Alliance of Independent Journalists, *Research Report: Sexual Violence*.

longer-term contracts.⁶³ As highlighted by the Digital Rights Foundation in its submission, in most cases of online violence, women journalists resort to self-protection measures such as reporting or blocking the perpetrators on their social media accounts or simply ignoring the abuses directed at them.⁶⁴

29. The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression, while indicating that the ultimate responsibility for ensuring that women journalists are safe from online violence rests with States, underlined that, as the main vectors of online attacks, social media companies should also exercise due diligence and take measures to ensure the safety of journalists on their platforms in accordance with the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights ([A/HRC/50/29](#), para. 39).

IV. United Nations inter-agency Network of Focal Points on the safety of journalists

30. The year 2022 marked the tenth anniversary of the United Nations Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, pursuant to which the United Nations inter-agency Network of Focal Points on the safety of journalists was established. To celebrate that anniversary, UNESCO, with the support of OHCHR, organized a series of regional and thematic consultations to take stock of achievements and lessons learned.⁶⁵ The consultation process culminated in the conference “Safety of journalists: Protecting media to protect democracy”, which was organized by the Government of Austria and held in Vienna in November 2022.⁶⁶ All the recommendations gathered, in addition to two regional road maps adopted in Africa and the Arab States, will serve to guide the next decade of implementation of the Plan of Action. On the occasion of the conference in Vienna, which brought together over 400 participants, a political declaration was signed by more than 50 countries,⁶⁷ and over \$100 million was pledged towards strengthening the safety of journalists worldwide.⁶⁸

31. OHCHR and UNESCO, the two co-chairs of the United Nations inter-agency Network of Focal Points on the safety of journalists, strengthened their cooperation during the reporting period. Following a financial pledge by the Government of the Kingdom of the Netherlands made during the 2020 World Press Freedom Day, OHCHR and UNESCO developed a joint road map called the “Global Drive for Media Freedom, Access to Information and the Safety of Journalists”.⁶⁹ Stretching over 2021 and 2022, the road map is aimed at fostering public recognition of the value

⁶³ The study conducted in 2022 by the platform PersVeiling showed that incidents involving female journalists who worked as freelancers were more likely to go undiscussed (45 per cent) than those involving female journalists with a permanent or temporary contract (28 per cent).

⁶⁴ Submission by the Digital Rights Foundation.

⁶⁵ See UNESCO, “Outcomes of the regional and thematic consultations to mark the 10th anniversary of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity”, 2022.

⁶⁶ See www.bmeia.gv.at/en/european-foreign-policy/human-rights/priorities-of-austrian-human-rights-policy/safety-of-journalists/safety-of-journalists-protecting-media-to-protect-democracy-high-level-conference-vienna-3-4-november-2022/.

⁶⁷ See www.bmeia.gv.at/fileadmin/user_upload/Zentrale/Aussenpolitik/Menschenrechte/SoJ_2022/Political_Declaration.pdf.

⁶⁸ See www.bmeia.gv.at/en/european-foreign-policy/human-rights/priorities-of-austrian-human-rights-policy/safety-of-journalists/safety-of-journalists-protecting-media-to-protect-democracy-high-level-conference-vienna-3-4-november-2022/pledges/.

⁶⁹ See OHCHR, “Global Drive for Media Freedom, Access to Information and the Safety of Journalists”, 2023.

of access to information, as well as furthering the prevention of and protection from violations against journalists, with a special focus on women journalists.⁷⁰

32. With a view to raising awareness on freedom of the media and the safety of journalists, UNESCO coordinated activities around the international commemorations of World Radio Day on 13 February, World Press Freedom Day on 3 May, Global Media and Information Literacy Week in October, International Day for Universal Access to Information on 28 September and International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists on 2 November. In 2022, those events led to the adoption of important commitments such as the Tashkent Declaration on Universal Access to Information⁷¹ and the Arusha Declaration on Journalism under Digital Siege.⁷² Also, a model law on the safety of journalists was proposed for the Latin American continent during the 2022 World Press Freedom Day to serve as a guide for countries seeking to adopt regulations and protocols to protect the lives of journalists. The model law was presented to the congresses of Chile, Mexico and Paraguay.⁷³

33. In the light of challenges posed to freedom of expression, access to information and the safety of journalists in the digital sphere, throughout 2022, UNESCO conducted consultations to prepare a global conference on the regulation of digital platforms. Entitled “Internet for Trust – Towards Guidelines for Regulating Digital Platforms for Information as a Public Good”, the conference was held in Paris in February 2023 and led to the drafting of guidelines for a multi-stakeholder approach to regulating digital platforms, which is subject to further consultations and is expected to be finalized in the second half of 2023.⁷⁴

34. On 24 February 2022, the OHCHR Regional Office for Europe held in Brussels a United Nations/European Union high-level policy dialogue that brought together some 100 participants to discuss media pluralism and strategic litigation against public participation.⁷⁵ Notably, the discussions informed the directive against strategic litigation against public participation published by the European Commission in April 2022.⁷⁶ Pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution 51/9, OHCHR also organized a seminar held in April 2023, which brought together 17 experts to discuss legal and economic threats to the safety of journalists, including strategic litigation against public participation. A summary report of the event will be presented at the fifty-fifth session of the Human Rights Council.⁷⁷

35. Awareness-raising also takes the form of knowledge and advocacy tools. During the reporting period, OHCHR published briefs on self-protection measures to respond to threats to journalists; international human rights standards and mechanisms relevant

⁷⁰ The Dutch funding was split by half between OHCHR and UNESCO. OHCHR used the funds to develop a specific programme providing for activities in 20 countries and UNESCO channelled the funds towards its Multi-Donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists, which in 2022 provided direct support to 29 countries through comprehensive national actions.

⁷¹ See <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000383211>.

⁷² See <https://au.int/en/pressreleases/20220501/arusha-declaration-world-press-freedom-day-2022-africa-media-convention>.

⁷³ See Florencia Pagola, “Model law for the protection of journalists: a South American proposal for the world”, *LatAm Journalism Review*, 21 March 2023.

⁷⁴ See UNESCO, “Safeguarding freedom of expression and access to information: guidelines for a multi-stakeholder approach in the context of regulating digital platforms”, 27 April 2023.

⁷⁵ See Resource Centre on Media Freedom in Europe, “UN-EU high-level policy dialogue on safety of journalists and media freedom”, 4 February 2023.

⁷⁶ See https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/policies/justice-and-fundamental-rights/eu-citizenship/democracy-and-electoral-rights/protecting-journalists-and-human-rights-defenders-strategic-lawsuits-against-public-participation_en.

⁷⁷ See www.ohchr.org/en/events/events/2023/expert-seminar-legal-and-economic-threats-safety-journalists.

to the protection of journalists; human rights and elections for journalists; and human rights in the context of protests for journalists.⁷⁸ In 2022, UNESCO published four briefing notes on media viability;⁷⁹ the safety of journalists, covering trauma and distress;⁸⁰ journalism and whistle-blowing;⁸¹ and the “misuse” of the judicial system to attack freedom of expression.⁸² UNESCO also produced resources and standard-setting tools on media and information literacy, including the curriculum for educators and learners entitled “Media and Information Literate Citizens: Think Critically, Click Wisely”⁸³ and the massively open online courses “Deep Dive for Policymakers into Media and Information Literacy”⁸⁴ and “Media and Information Literacy for Inclusive and Better Futures”.⁸⁵

36. As co-custodian agencies of Sustainable Development Goal indicators 16.10.1 and 16.10.2, OHCHR and UNESCO monitored and reported on the safety of journalists. UNESCO continued to provide updated information on the killing of journalists through its Observatory.⁸⁶ OHCHR, with the support of the Global Drive for Media Freedom, Access to Information and the Safety of Journalists,⁸⁷ developed an artificial intelligence model to detect and scrape data from online open sources concerning attacks against journalists, human rights defenders and trade unionists. The model will help to strengthen online monitoring of attacks and violations against journalists. This work was featured in webinars organized by the Executive Office of the Secretary-General to mark the 2023 World Press Freedom Day and as a good-use case under the Data Strategy of the Secretary-General for Action by Everyone, Everywhere.⁸⁸

37. The Global Drive for Media Freedom, Access to Information and the Safety of Journalists also helped to further the capacity-building activities of the two organizations. In 2022, OHCHR carried out 32 training activities on media freedom and freedom of expression for some 650 journalists, media workers and professional associations in at least 14 countries. The training covered topics including global trends, digital safety, safety of women journalists and United Nations human rights mechanisms. In 2022, OHCHR also developed, in consultation with UNESCO, webinars on the safety of journalists for United Nations country teams, which started to be delivered in 2023 for country teams in Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Costa Rica, Ecuador, Fiji, Guatemala, Ghana, Honduras, Mozambique, Nigeria, Serbia and Thailand. This initiative complemented the series of online courses and in-person workshops developed jointly by UNESCO and the United Nations System Staff College to strengthen the knowledge of resident coordinators and their offices, in-country representatives of agencies, and other United Nations staff on freedom of

⁷⁸ The briefs are available on the OHCHR website (<https://www.ohchr.org/en/safety-of-journalist>).

⁷⁹ See UNESCO, “Finding the funds for journalism to thrive: policy options to support media viability”, 2022.

⁸⁰ See UNESCO, “Safety of journalists covering trauma and distress ‘do no harm’”, 2022.

⁸¹ See UNESCO, “Journalism and whistle-blowing: an important tool to protect human rights, fight corruption, and strengthen democracy”, 2022.

⁸² See UNESCO, “The ‘misuse’ of the judicial system”.

⁸³ See Alton Grizzle and others, *Media and Information Literate Citizens: Think Critically, Click Wisely!* (Paris, UNESCO, 2021).

⁸⁴ See UNESCO, “Newly launched MOOC ‘Deep Dive for Policymakers into Media and Information Literacy’”, 20 February 2023.

⁸⁵ See UNESCO, “Sign up now! Media and Information Literacy MOOCs Policymakers, Educators, and Learners”, 23 February 2023.

⁸⁶ See UNESCO, Observatory of Killed Journalists database, available at www.unesco.org/en/safety-journalists/observatory.

⁸⁷ OHCHR, “Global Drive for Media Freedom”.

⁸⁸ See www.un.org/en/content/datastrategy/index.shtml.

expression and other related issues, including countering hate speech and disinformation and the role of the media during elections and in peacebuilding.⁸⁹

38. With the support of the Global Drive for Media Freedom, Access to Information and the Safety of Journalists, the UNESCO Judges Initiative to train members of the judiciary on the safety of journalists was extended in 2022 to the Arab States region for the first time. In all, over 20 national training courses were organized across Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean and Asia and the Pacific. Similar training activities were delivered in 2022 by OHCHR for magistrates, prosecutors and lawyers in Cameroon, Iraq and Peru.

39. During the reporting period, through its Multi-Donor Programme on Freedom of Expression and Safety of Journalists, UNESCO responded to urgent needs from journalists in crisis and emergency contexts, such as in Haiti, Ukraine and the State of Palestine, by providing safety training, personal protective equipment and generators, as well as support for the viability of media outlets affected by crises.

40. UNESCO and OHCHR also implemented activities aimed at improving the safety of women journalists. The OHCHR Regional Office for South-East Asia developed an online self-learning course and a series of webinar sessions to train women journalists in the region how to detect, monitor and respond to gender-specific threats. Similarly, OHCHR presences in West Africa, East Africa and the Human Rights Office of the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq organized specific capacity-building activities for women journalists in 2022. The OHCHR Regional Office for Central America brought together 340 journalists from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama, as well as the national human rights institutions of those countries, to assess the functioning of national and regional mechanisms for the protection and safety of journalists, with a special focus on women journalists.

41. UNESCO also continued to advocate for the safety of women journalists throughout 2022. Actions were focused on strengthening physical and digital safety through training courses, the production of guidelines and resources and a global consultation on the safety of women journalists as part of the thematic consultations for the tenth anniversary of the United Nations Plan of Action.⁹⁰ For instance, UNESCO, jointly with the International Women's Media Foundation and the Knight Centre for Journalism in the Americas, developed self-directed courses entitled "How to report safely: Strategies for women journalists and their allies".⁹¹ In cooperation with the Thomson Reuters Foundation, it also developed a set of concrete and actionable guidelines for newsrooms to address gender-based violence.⁹²

42. In 2022, UNESCO also continued to support community media, in particular radios, through activities promoting regulatory policies, building the capacities of duty bearers and community media and encouraging cooperation and knowledge-sharing. The UNESCO Community Media Sustainability Policy Series⁹³ assisted several Governments in providing a supportive regulatory environment for sustainable community media. In 2022, UNESCO also supported marginalized groups through community media activities. Under the aegis of the International Decade of Indigenous

⁸⁹ See UNESCO, "UNESCO and UN System Staff College to support UN field staff in promoting freedom of expression and safety of journalists", 5 January 2022.

⁹⁰ See UNESCO, "Safety of women journalists consultation: on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity", 2022.

⁹¹ See <https://journalismcourses.org/course/reportingsafely/>.

⁹² See UNESCO and others, "Practical guide for women journalists on how to respond to online harassment", 2021.

⁹³ See <https://en.unesco.org/community-media-sustainability/policy-series>.

Languages,⁹⁴ it built the capacity of several Indigenous community media to advocate for Indigenous Peoples' rights and disseminate Indigenous language content using digital solutions. Community radio stations also received in-house training on gender-sensitive reporting and applying the resources contained in the UNESCO *Reporting on Violence against Women and Girls: a Handbook for Journalists*.⁹⁵

V. Conclusions and recommendations

43. On the occasion of the 2023 World Press Freedom Day, the Secretary-General deplored that in every corner of the world, freedom of the press was under attack, highlighting that the situation had continued to deteriorate since his previous report to the General Assembly. In the face of such a challenge, he called for a stop to the threats and attacks against journalists worldwide and for States to stop detaining and imprisoning journalists for doing their jobs.

44. The recommendations contained in previous reports of the Secretary-General on the safety of journalists and the issue of impunity remain relevant. Notably, States have the main responsibility for investigating promptly, effectively, impartially and independently attacks against journalists reported in their jurisdictions. States that have not already done so should also, in consultation with civil society, media outlets and journalists, establish national frameworks for the safety of journalists that include prevention, protection and prosecution components.

45. States that have not already done so should adopt such laws or other measures, or review and revise existing ones, relating to freedom of expression online and offline, to ensure that they are fully aligned with international human rights standards. Any restriction of freedom of expression should adhere strictly to the principles of legality, necessity, proportionality and legitimate aim. In particular, States should review and revise criminal defamation and seditious libel laws and laws criminalizing the criticism of State institutions and officials, where they do not conform with those principles.

46. States should also discourage strategic litigation against public participation against journalists and news outlets by adopting measures that allow early dismissal of such cases, limit the damages claimed in civil defamation suits against journalists and media outlets, permit the defence of "public interest" and "no malice" for journalists and provide legal support to victims of such practices.

47. In relation to the Internet and the digital sphere, States should refrain from resorting to Internet shutdowns given their indiscriminate and disproportionate impacts on freedom of expression and other human rights. Blanket shutdowns in particular inherently impose unacceptable consequences for human rights and should never be imposed. States should always provide thorough public information, in a timely manner, regarding any Internet shutdowns that they may impose, including bandwidth throttling, limiting access to certain communication services and platforms or virtual private network blocking. In addition, States should not arbitrarily ban, block or criminalize the use of encryption or circumvention tools or particular communication channels, such as virtual private networks.

⁹⁴ See <https://idil2022-2032.org/>.

⁹⁵ See Anne-Marie Impe, *Reporting on Violence against Women and Girls: A Handbook for Journalists* (Paris, UNESCO, 2019).

48. States should impose domestic and transnational moratoriums on the sale, transfer and use of surveillance technologies, such as those targeting journalists, among others, until adequate safeguards to protect human rights are in place.
49. In this respect, States should conduct human rights due diligence systematically when designing, developing, purchasing, deploying and operating surveillance systems. States should incorporate adequate safeguards in national laws, including judicial oversight, to ensure that digital surveillance activities do not undermine international human rights, and ensure access to remedies when rights are violated. Where necessary, States should also hold surveillance companies accountable for the use of their technology by their clients in cases where journalists are targeted.
50. Surveillance technology companies should follow the Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights. In particular, they should conduct and publicly disclose robust human rights due diligence for all proposed transfers of surveillance technology. They should refrain from exporting surveillance technology if there is a significant risk that it will be used to commit human rights violations.
51. The safety of women journalists has continued to deteriorate since the previous report of the Secretary-General focusing on that issue. Consequently, the recommendations provided in that report remain urgent. In that regard, States should include a gender perspective when conducting risk analyses to define protection measures for journalists.
52. States should ensure that laws dealing with gender-based violence offline apply equally online. Legislation protecting against incitement, discrimination and hatred should also cover sexual and gender-based violence; and law enforcement officers, public prosecutors and judges should be trained on gender online violence against journalists to empower them to respond more effectively to such abuse.
53. The role of social media companies is crucial, as social media has been a key enabler of threats, abuse and trolling of women journalists. In that regard, social media should intensify efforts to ensure safe online space for women journalists. They should improve their transparency and moderation functions, make it easier to report online violence and create direct, accessible routes for the escalation of complaints. They should ensure that their personnel have the necessary expertise on the safety of journalists, gender-based violence and cultural context.
54. Media organizations should also provide digital safety support for their staff. They should also address gender discrimination and promote diversity by including women and marginalized groups and their perspectives in journalistic work, while ensuring equal employment opportunities for women journalists. This may include, for instance, putting in place channels for journalists to report incidents, including online incidents, of cyberharassment and mechanisms for responding to incidents of violence against their staff.