

# Gender-Based Violence Against Lebanese Women Journalists

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## Introduction

Journalism is a vital profession that aides us in finding the truth. Journalists work hard to research, compile, and present information that people need to know about events occurring in their nation or across the globe. While journalism can lead to the truth, it can also be used to conceal it. In many nations, journalists are subject to intimidation, censorship, and even physical attacks for reporting on controversial topics or stories that are unfavorable to the government or powerful parties. Moreover, journalists are also at risk from cybercriminals, who may use social media and other digital platforms to spread misinformation and false news, harass, and abuse journalists online. Sadly, many journalists have even been abducted, threatened with death, or assassinated for their work. According to a UNESCO (2022) report, 62 journalists were killed in 2021 and 90% of these murder case are still unresolved. As such, journalism is a dangerous job, but it is necessary to keep the public informed and ensure accountability.

Both men and women are victims of online and offline violence, however, attacks on women are highly sexualized and are largely related to gender (OHCHR, 2021). Women are often the target of online assaults that target their looks, sexual activity, or gender identity, such as trolling, cyberbullying, threats of physical or sexual harm, revenge porn, cyberstalking, and doxing. Offline assaults on women may include rape, assault, stalking, and harassment, as well as physical and sexual violence. These assaults are founded on gender inequality and are used to restrict women's freedom and autonomy. This form of violence is a powerful and oppressive tool that prevents women from reaching their full potential and conveys the message that women are valued solely for their appearance, rather than their knowledge, hard work, and talent. It makes it harder for women to be taken seriously and respected, and it reinforces traditional gender roles. Furthermore, discrimination against women journalists violates their

fundamental human rights, including freedom of speech, safety, and the right to equality and non-discrimination, as established in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights treaties (United Nations, 1948).

Journalists in Lebanon are particularly vulnerable to gender-based violence (GBV), such as harassment, intimidation, and physical violence. During the 17th of October protests, women journalists experienced particularly severe forms of violence. Numerous reports emerged of women being called abusive names, being followed, and even being physically attacked. Additionally, several women reported being subjected to sexual harassment, including unwelcome sexual comments, inappropriate touching, and threats of rape. Unfortunately, when faced with these threats and instances of GBV, female journalists often have little to no support from their own media outlets or the government, which leaves them exposed and unprotected.

The purpose of this paper is to identify the causes of GBV against women journalists in Lebanon and its consequences, with the aim to propose recommendations to reduce such violence. The target audience for any initiatives to reduce gender-based violence against women journalists includes national and international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF), Reporters Without Borders (RSF), and the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ). At the national level, important stakeholders include Lebanese government officials such as the Minister of Information, Lebanese organizations such as the Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH), and the Lebanese Syndicate of Journalists (LSJ), as well as local media organizations.

This paper is based on an analysis of secondary sources, including civil society reports, testimonials, and interviews with journalists who have experienced GBV. Some quantitative data, specifically statistics on the prevalence of GBV among women journalists, is analyzed as well. A literature review was conducted to analyze the causes and the consequences of the matter incorporating frameworks like patriarchy, gender inequality, and gender roles.

## Overview

Lebanon ranked 130th out of 180 countries in the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) 2022 World Press Freedom Index (WFP), a significant drop from their 2018 ranking of 100th (RSF, 2022). The WFP Index evaluates the degree of freedom available to journalists in 180 countries around the world (UNESCO, 2022). The decrease in Lebanon's ranking could be attributed to multiple factors, such as increased harassment of journalists during the Lebanese protests, as well as online harassment that has led to self-censorship. According to UN Women (El Kaakour, 2021), there has been a significant increase in GBV and harassment of women journalists since the 2019-2020 protests. In their report, all of the eight women journalists interviewed had experienced physical violence when reporting on the protests, while only four of the eight men journalists interviewed reported experiencing violence (El Kaakour, 2021).

Moreover, an analysis of female reporters' accounts showed that they experienced more sexist and offensive comments than male reporters did, even though both genders said they were targets of online violence (El Kaakour, 2021). Examples of the comments

received include: “How much is he paying you per night?”; “I think this country needs more sex to please all those unsatisfied females”; “You are a top model but surely not a reporter”; and “It would be better for you if you stayed in the domain of fashion and makeup.”

Many Lebanese journalists’ experiences were shared across the internet and other media outlets concerning GBV, yet nothing was done. For instance, freelance journalist and editor, Zahra Hankir, experienced numerous threats of rape and death on the internet. Luna Safwan, a Shi’ite journalist, has been labeled a traitor to her religion and country and has been slandered as an agent of Israel for her criticisms of Hezbollah (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022). Dima Sadek, a formal Lebanese Broadcasting Company (LBCI) journalist, had her phone stolen during the protest and harassers continue to send threatening voice calls to her mother who ended up suffering from a stroke due to the immense stress (Arab News, 2019). Furthermore, Dima Sadek faced false allegations of creating pornography and was publicly denounced as an “enemy of God” by religious figures, resulting in her resignation from a full-time position at LBCI. She noted that Pierre Daher, the CEO of LBCI, rather than supporting her, had instead monitored her tweets and informed her that she could only return to the network if she stopped her online activity (Caramazza, 2019). Lastly, the journalist Youmna Fawaz has been subjected to intense online hate for the past decade, receiving vicious insults such as being called a “whore” and a “bitch,” as well as false allegations that she had gotten ahead in her career through exchanging sexual favors or accepting bribes. She has also been mocked for having a lisp, and her family members have been threatened (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022).

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**“[Harassers] try to strip you of your ‘honor’, because they consider that a woman’s honor is between her legs...so, if you’re coming from a conservative upbringing, you’d most likely quit the profession and/or be silenced.”**

Youmna Fawaz, investigative journalist (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022)

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### Analysis

The causes of increased GBV in Lebanon against women journalists are numerous. In Lebanon, traditional gender roles usually assign men the role of the breadwinners and decision-maker in the family and beyond, while women are expected to be modest and submissive and support their husbands. According to UN Women (2017), the majority of women reported participating in chores such as washing clothes, cleaning the kitchen or living rooms, and cleaning the bathroom, while only a quarter of ever-married men reported ever doing those tasks. These traditional gender roles are a driving factor of harassment against women journalists: Because these women are outside of the house, they are actively challenging this system, leading to violent backlash. This has led to cases of harassment against women journalists in order

to silence them and drive them out of their profession and back to their traditional gender roles in the household (OHCHR, 2021). Moreover, traditional patriarchal attitudes persist in Lebanon, leading to the view that women are inferior to men. This is evidenced by the low representation of women in parliament (4.6%) and the high gender gap, for example (UN Women, n.d.).

In addition, many television programs and advertisements indeed portray women in a sexualized manner to get more viewers (Steiner, 2017). This can have a damaging effect on how society views women, as it reinforces the idea that they are only valuable because of their physical attractiveness and can lead to gender-based violence and feelings of inadequacy among women (Araüna, 2012).

All of these factors, among many others, make women far more susceptible to GBV. Nearly 60% of Lebanese women reported having ever experienced some form of sexual harassment in the street (UN Women, 2017). Further, the normalization of violence against women in Lebanon can leave female journalists feeling powerless and unable to speak out against abuse or discrimination, further contributing to the prevalence of GBV against women journalists in the country and perpetuating this practice with impunity.

Finally, political instability has had a negative impact on the safety of female journalists. This political instability has only exacerbated the gendered harassment facing women journalists. For example, even though employees at the OTV station took precautions to protect themselves from verbal and physical harm due to their political affiliation by removing their logos from equipment while covering the protests, they were still subjected to harassment (Arab News, 2019).

GBV against women journalists in Lebanon is a serious issue with far-reaching and long-lasting repercussions. It has the potential to significantly impede women journalists' abilities to perform their jobs and flourish in their profession. According to a study conducted by El Kaakour (2021), 37% of the surveyed journalists reported that their productivity had been adversely impacted due to the violence they experienced during the protests. One of the women surveyed even had to take a break from work for a few months because she felt overwhelmed by the situation. Moreover, this woman expressed fears of the danger she and her family might face as a result of her profession, which ultimately led her to flee Lebanon. It is clear therefore that GBV can lead to a decrease in job satisfaction and a decrease in the number of women in the media industry overall.

El Kaakour's (2021) interviews with female reporters revealed a serious negative impact on women journalists' mental health and well-being due to the GBV they experience. Of the eight women interviewed, five reported feeling sad, angry, and tired, with three of them experiencing trauma and depression. In comparison, only 37% of the male reporters reported feeling these same emotions, with the majority (62%) stating that violence had little to no effect on their well-being. This stark difference reflects the severity of the abuse that women are subjected to as compared to men.

Also during the October 17th protests in Lebanon, female journalists experienced GBV both offline and online. Interviews with female journalists revealed that many

had experienced psychological trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), necessitating medical treatment and time off work due to online GBV (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022). Additionally, survey results showed that 17% of respondents (121 people) felt physically unsafe as a result of online violence, and 29% reported missing work due to the possibility that online attacks might escalate into physical violence (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022). Myra Abdalla, a Lebanese journalist, spoke of her experience: "The day I decided to stop writing was the day I was sent a picture taken from inside my house [by someone who had broken in and was threatening her]; that's when I decided that it was not worth it" (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022). The prevalence of online and offline GBV against female journalists in Lebanon demonstrates the urgent need for adequate protection and support.

As a result, a growing number of female journalists are choosing to distance themselves from public view due to fear of online harassment. A survey of 207 female respondents revealed that 10% had requested to be removed from the air (radio and television) or have their names removed from articles after experiencing GBV. Additionally, 19% of the participants reported avoiding certain topics, and 10% admitted avoiding specific stories to protect themselves from online violence, a practice known as self-censorship (Posetti & Shabbir, 2022).

### Current Legislation Protecting Women Journalists

Lebanon's 1994 Audiovisual Media Law marked a milestone not just in Lebanon but in Arab countries more broadly, but its outdated and inconsistent provisions have rendered it obsolete. The law, which is heavily influenced by the French model of broadcast regulation (Mady, 2015), is riddled with contradictions and fails to provide the necessary guidance to ensure the effective regulation of the media sector. Despite recommendations that emerged during the World Conference on Women and the Beijing Declaration of 1995 (Mady, 2015), gender-specific media policies have not yet been developed in the Arab world. While some deem Lebanon to be the most progressive and Westernized country in the region (Mady, 2015) and believe, therefore, that it has the best potential to implement such progressive policies, the country has yet to take a stand to protect journalists and particularly women journalists.

Worse, the restriction of digital media and content creators on digital media platforms by the Lebanese government has increased over the years, and is a major issue, as it violates both freedom of expression and freedom of the press. This is especially concerning, as the Lebanese Press Law does not protect individuals in digital media and content creation (Bushehri, 2020). The press law that was approved in 1962 and revised in 1977, 1994, and 1999, only covers print media. Broadcast journalists and people who create content on digital outlets, such as web outlets and social media, are subject to criminal law. Even as the use of social media continues to grow among young people, activists, and officials, Lebanon has yet to expand its legislation to safeguard freedom of expression on the internet and digital media (Bushehri, 2020).

Globally, the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity (2016) holds member states accountable for investigating crimes, including violence perpetrated against reporters in both armed and non-armed conflicts, with a special emphasis on the heightened risks experienced by female reporters. Furthermore, the

plan notes that many of these crimes go unreported due to cultural and professional stigma (El Kaakour, 2021). In addition, UNESCO has started to develop plans to protect women journalists against GBV. With a grant from the Swedish Postcode Lottery Foundation, UNESCO launched a project in 2019 that provides capacity-building measures in four countries (Senegal, Mali, Sri Lanka, and India) that includes training for women journalists on safety and their rights, training of media managers, and open dialogues with security forces on freedom of expression and gender topics (UNESCO, 2022).

Taking a more expansive approach, the University of Texas at Austin's Knight Center for Journalism in the Americas, in cooperation with IWMF, is introducing a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) entitled "How to Report Safely: A Guide for Women Journalists and their Allies." This course focuses on the safety of female journalists in both the digital and physical realms and provides them with dedicated safety instructions. As well, it is highly accessible, since it is an online course that anyone can register to take (UNESCO, 2022).

## Recommendations

The protection of female journalists during protests in Lebanon is of utmost importance, and different methods can be taken to ensure this.

1. To address the underlying causes of GBV, such as social and cultural norms that perpetuate gender inequality and discrimination, awareness must be raised and campaigns must be launched to challenge and end it. Lebanese universities should introduce courses in their curriculum for journalism students that specifically focus on GBV in the media, providing an opportunity for students to gain knowledge and awareness of how GBV is depicted or represented, as well as the necessary skills and resources to protect themselves from it.
2. Providing training and support to journalists on how to stay safe while reporting on protests and other potentially dangerous situations: This can include training on how to recognize and avoid potentially dangerous situations, how to protect oneself and others in the event of violence or other emergencies, and how to communicate effectively with authorities and other relevant parties.
3. Ensuring that journalists have access to adequate protective equipment: This can include providing journalists with helmets, flak jackets, and other gear that can help protect them from physical harm while they are on the job.
4. Providing support and resources to journalists who have experienced GBV while on the job: This can include offering legal assistance to help journalists seek justice and protect their rights, as well as providing medical assistance to help them recover from any injuries they may have sustained.
5. Working with local authorities and community leaders to address and prevent GBV against journalists during protests: This may involve engaging with these parties to discuss ways to prevent violence and ensure the safety of journalists, as well as working with them to develop and implement policies and procedures to address GBV.
6. Gender-sensitive laws and policies must be advocated for and implemented to protect female journalists in Lebanon.

Concerning online harassment:

1. Access to mental health support and counseling services should be provided for anyone who has experienced online harassment, and a culture of openness should be established so that employees feel comfortable reporting any incidents of online harassment.
2. The Lebanese law should be analyzed and modified. For example, the law should include digital media in the Lebanese press law, not in the criminal law.
3. Additionally, training programs should be made more accessible for women journalists and should be mandatory for all journalists.
4. Establishing a system for reporting and addressing online harassment. This could include setting up a dedicated email or other means of contact for reporting harassment to a police agency or specialized department, and establishing a formal protocol for reviewing and responding to reports of harassment.
5. Working with online platforms and service providers to address and prevent online harassment. This could involve engaging social media platforms (and their staff) to discuss ways to prevent harassment and ensure the safety of their users, as well as working with these platforms to develop and implement policies and procedures to address harassment.

It's important to note that addressing online gender-based violence and harassment may require a combination of these and other approaches, and that the steps taken will depend on the specific circumstances and context of the situation.

## Conclusion

Gender-based violence is a pervasive issue that affects individuals, families, and communities all around the world, including those in Lebanon. It takes on many forms, including physical, emotional, sexual, economic, and social abuse, and can be perpetrated by both men and women in homes, schools, workplaces, and public spaces. The underlying causes of GBV are rooted in Lebanon's patriarchal society and can have devastating effects on its victims, including mental health problems, fear, and even abandoning their professional aspirations. Journalists, especially women, are particularly vulnerable to GBV because of their occupation. While laws exist to protect women journalists, they are often not enforced or have numerous loopholes. As a result, victims of GBV are reluctant to report their experiences out of fear of retribution or lack of support from their communities. It is therefore essential that measures are taken to ensure that victims of GBV are provided with the resources and support they need to report their experiences safely and confidently. This includes providing safe spaces for victims to talk about their experiences, offering legal and psychological assistance, and ensuring that perpetrators are held accountable for their actions.

According to Byerly (2011), only 26% of Lebanese news organizations had sexual harassment policies in place. Challenging the low and limited prevalence of such policies in news organizations, for example, is a crucial step in ensuring that journalists can safely and effectively practice their profession. Because, if journalists are not protected from harassment and GBV inside their own organizations, how can they be protected when reporting from the field?

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