WOMEN IN THE MEDIA
ENDING WORKPLACE HARRASMENT

Women in Media:
Mapping the Patterns of Workplace Harassment in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina

- A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW

With gratitude to all women in media who shared their stories and trusted us with their experiences.

Mediacentar Sarajevo, Zavod Krog, the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists, the Trade Union of Culture, Art and Media “Nezavisnost”, the Slovene Association of Journalists, 2026.

Acknowledgements

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Women in Media: **Mapping the patterns of workplace harassment in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina** - Comparative overview

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1 Introduction

This publication represents the first systematic, joint effort by journalist unions, professional associations, and media organisations in BiH, Serbia, Slovenia, and Croatia to examine the working conditions for women in media, and to expose an interconnected cycle of violence they experience on a daily basis. In a field characterized by chronic data scarcity and reliance on estimations and "tell-tales", this evidence-based report sheds light on difficult, harmful, and often violent experiences that are routinely normalized, silenced, and rendered invisible within and outside newsrooms throughout this region. Drawing on original survey data, in-depth interviews, and comparative analysis, the report reveals how labour precarity, gender-based discrimination, toxic newsroom culture, patriarchal norms, ineffective protection mechanisms, and a culture of silence intersect to sustain patterns of harassment, exclusion, and professional insecurity.

The research is conducted as part of the wider "Women in the Media" project implemented by the consortium of five partner organisations: Zavod Krog (Slovenia); the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists (Croatia); the Trade Union of Culture, Art and Media "Nezavisnost" (Serbia); the Foundation Mediacentar Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina); and the Slovene Association of Journalists (Slovenia).

This report moves beyond anecdotal evidence to demonstrate that **workplace violence in media** is real—it is not incidental, but structural. Our findings point to the newsroom as the primary site of harm. Workplace violence is embedded in the functioning of media organisations, labour relations, organisational culture, and distribution of power within newsrooms. Sexual harassment and discrimination are omnipresent in media organisations, existing both in vertical relations (hierarchical power relations with superiors) and horizontal dynamics (colleagues). The survey findings highlight the serious and underreported nature of gender-based violence against women working in media. Women's accounts, and the prevalence of silence surrounding them, highlight the environment of fear, an entrenched culture of silence, and the traumatising nature of these experiences, which often result in long-term consequences for women's mental health.

The core failure is not the absence of rules but the absence of credible enforcement of laws within an unstable and discriminatory labour ecosystem. Harassment and discrimination are not malfunctions of the system—they actually function as governance mechanisms that are enabled and sustained by patriarchal culture, informality which enables abuse of women's rights, and normalisation of abuse that is sustained by poor sensitisation of women, and internalisation of abusive practices, narratives, and a toxic workplace culture. Precarious employment arrangements are widespread, especially in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, with weak and non-credible mechanisms for protection against harassment and violence, and weak reporting mechanisms. Non-compliance with labour legislation and violations of labour rights of women in media are not episodic, but a routine feature throughout newsrooms.

Safety through labour contracts is largely illusory, due to the prevalence of informal and temporary contracts and frequent violations of contractual obligations. Contract insecurity is not merely a violation of labour rights—it also functions as a silencing mechanism, as reporting of such practices is economically irrational, thereby reinforcing the "culture of silence" evident in many newsrooms. Qualitative interviews reveal long-term informal arrangements, delayed or absent contracts, partial payments in cash, and coercive employment practices, including pressure related to maternity leave.

Unequal pay operates as both an outcome and a governance mechanism. Wage disparities between men and women are not just a matter of discrimination, but a structural mechanism that reinforces women's dependency on male decision-makers and editors. Women journalists are very financially vulnerable and dependent on editors and media owners, and often feel intimidated from reporting harassment or discrimination, as doing so constitutes a high-risk act with credible threats of retaliation, job loss, reputational damage, or professional marginalisation.

Many newsrooms function as toxic, hostile, and unsafe environments for women, rather than as spaces of professional integrity and solidarity. They are frequently described as toxic environments in which discriminatory practices, everyday sexism, and harassment are normalised. Hierarchical power relations dominated by men shape newsroom cultures in which silence becomes rational, reporting becomes risky, and accountability remains elusive.

Sexist and misogynistic narratives are pervasive in newsrooms across the four countries, normalising toxic environments, sexist language, and legitimising misconduct against women. The culture of silence in newsrooms both masks and normalises sexist jokes at work, inappropriate language, and discriminatory workplace cultures. Women in media are often told to endure such behaviour or are blamed for lacking a sense of humour when refusing to tolerate sexist jokes. The report documents numerous instances of senior male editors and colleagues frequently deploying sexualised jokes, and intimidating women physically, by raising their voices, sustaining uncomfortable and unprofessional physical proximity, or worse.

Political discourse further amplifies and enables gender-targeted hostility against women journalists in an environment largely devoid of sanctions. Sexist framing, gendered insults, and references to appearance, private life, or morality are used by politicians and public officials to undermine women journalists' professional legitimacy. Such narratives impose gender-specific pressure on women journalists, single them out as acceptable targets of attack, and signal social and institutional tolerance for abuse.

Burnout is reported to be at epidemic levels due to understaffing, chronic exposure to harassment and discrimination, and excessive workloads, all compounded by women's multiple social and family roles. At the same time, women reporters are excluded from important or perceived 'masculine' assignments, frequently belittled, assigned minor or simple tasks, and have their professional qualities constantly questioned and undermined. The report suggests that the harm to women's mental health results from institutional failures rather than individual weaknesses, as is often perceived by women's male colleagues. However, due to lack of mental health support systems and persistent stigma, women are discouraged from recognising and admitting mental health problems.

Underreporting of abuse, violence, and misconduct stems from multiple factors discussed throughout the report. These include a lack of trust in reporting mechanisms, stigma and social sanctioning against women who report violence, and—critically—a lack of sensitisation regarding what constitutes discrimination, violence, and abuse. This dynamic is most evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the report identifies **an underreporting paradox:** the survey data indicate lower rates of reporting, while qualitative research points to extreme examples of abuse and violence. This discrepancy points to gaps in awareness, conceptualisation, and recognition of gender-based discrimination, as well as extremely low levels of trust in institutions, the police, and the judiciary.

Moreover, **the lack of trust in the effectiveness or impartiality of post-reporting procedures** emerges as one of the main reasons women decide not to report violations of their workplace rights (reported by 44.8% of respondents). Protection mechanisms are widely described as "existing on paper only," lacking preventive measures, gender-sensitive design, adequate staff training, or credible enforcement procedures. The lack of effectiveness is attributed to different factors: around 40% of respondents in Slovenia consider such violations too common for reporting to be productive, while participants in Bosnia and Herzegovina most frequently describe reporting procedures and accompanying mechanisms as exhausting and excessively lengthy (26.09%). In this context, underreporting is a predictable consequence, driven by rational assessments of risk and the futility of processes and procedures. Most newsrooms manage harm through containment rather than remedy, prioritising organisational stability and reputation over accountability.

Finally, and most critically, the report identifies **entrenched patriarchal norms as a root cause** shaping the persistence of discrimination, harassment, and abuse against women in media. These norms spill over into newsrooms, inform toxic and harmful organisational cultures, and create power imbalances between the genders, which render accountability for harm and violence almost impossible. The report concludes that both society and newsrooms remain unsafe environments for women journalists, in which structural and systemic discrimination, inequalities, and violence remain largely invisible and unaddressed. The report offers concrete insights into how patriarchal norms enable the continuation of a vicious cycle of violence, reproducing those patterns through digital platforms, political instrumentalisation aimed at silencing the media, and the suppression of the most extreme cases of violence against women journalists.

While this report does not analyse media content directly, it recognises that media practices—through the production and dissemination of stereotypical narratives that minimise women's roles in society and sensationalise violence against women—contribute to a broader social environment in which violence against women in general, and against women in the media in particular, is trivialised, normalised, and framed as an integral part of newsroom culture.

The authors of this research are independent experts working across interdisciplinary fields, including international law, media studies, and gender equality. In addition to the methodology section and a fact sheet presenting survey results, the publication is structured around five core chapters and five grounds of discrimination identified through the analysis. These grounds are closely interlinked and reflect a broader, circular pattern of violence against women in media. The chapter *"The Landscape of Risks for Women in Media"* outlines the broader contextual factors shaping media environments in all four countries. *"Labour Rights and Employment Conditions"* examines gender-based discrimination in working conditions, while *"Gender Discrimination"* analyses newsroom culture, power dynamics, and the normalisation of abuse. *"Sexual Harassment and Gender-Based Violence"* maps sources of violence within and beyond newsrooms, both offline and online; and *"Reporting Behaviour and Mechanisms"* examines the prevalence of reporting, reasons for underreporting, and existing mechanisms. The report concludes with a set of findings and recommendations addressed to media organisations.

We would like to thank all researchers and authors who contributed to this extensive process. We hope that this publication will contribute to sustained institutional efforts to strengthen prevention and response mechanisms, support evidence-based policy development, and advance educational and professional practices aimed at addressing discrimination and violence against women in the media sector.

We also express our sincere appreciation to all women in the media who participated in the research, as well as to media professionals who shared their insights and experiences through interviews, and to legal experts, psychologists, and specialists in the field of gender-based violence. We hope that this study will serve as a useful resource and support our collective efforts to advance further change.

2 Methodology

This publication presents a cross-comparative analysis of four national research reports conducted using a harmonised methodology across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Slovenia, and Croatia. The objective of the research was to determine how assaults and harassment—particularly sexual harassment— against women, and in particular women journalists, are addressed at the regulatory level within media organisations; how such issues are communicated internally with journalists; and how they are addressed at the level of the broader media community and the non-governmental sector. The research further examined which preventive and corrective mechanisms are in place; the key characteristics of assaults and harassment against women journalists in the region (including types of assaults and contexts); the specific characteristics of sexual harassment against women journalists; and the psychological and societal consequences of such assaults and harassment.

On the basis of desk research and in close consultation with six national researchers, a desk-research matrix was developed to collect baseline data on the estimated number of journalists and women journalists, respectively, per country; available data on reported cases of assaults and harassment against women journalists; and relevant regulatory frameworks governing the status of women journalists and their protection against discrimination, harassment, and assault. Researchers also collected examples of existing mechanisms across the media sector, as well as within the public, private, and civil society sectors, aimed at the prevention of and response to gender-based violence and sexual harassment. Drawing on the desk research and expert consultations, an integrated quantitative and qualitative methodology design was developed, incorporating a gender-sensitive methodological approach.

Quantitative data were collected through a survey for women working in the media, which was piloted and reviewed by gender equality experts and media professionals. In addition to demographic variables, the questionnaire was structured around two core thematic areas: (1) workplace assaults and harassment in general, including prevention, protection, and response mechanisms; and (2) gender-based violence and sexual harassment, including prevention, protection, and reporting. The survey also captured data on the broader working environment and newsroom dynamics, as well as assaults occurring outside newsrooms, in the field, and online.

Data collection was conducted in August and September 2025 through a multilingual online survey administered via SurveyMonkey. The questionnaire was disseminated through the internal communication channels of the partner organisations, to media outlets affiliated with journalists' unions (in Slovenia, Serbia, and Croatia), and to media outlets across different regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina. It was also directly circulated to women journalists via targeted email outreach, including journalists who are not members of unions or professional associations, in order to ensure institutional and geographical diversity of respondents. A total of 606 respondents completed the survey. In the open-ended sections of the questionnaire, respondents were invited, on a voluntary basis, to indicate their willingness to participate in follow-up in-depth interviews.

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted with 33 women journalists across the four countries, primarily with journalists who had experienced discrimination, attacks, and harassment. In each country, at least two interviews focused on cases of sexual harassment, or on situations in which the interviewee had witnessed sexual harassment within her organisation. Cases of gender-based discrimination and workplace mobbing also constituted a significant body of qualitative evidence, particularly with regard to the availability and effectiveness of reporting mechanisms. All 33 interviewees reported having experienced online attacks and harassment, a substantial proportion of which contained explicit gendered elements. The majority of interviews were conducted in person through field research, while a smaller number were conducted remotely by phone or online.

In addition to interviews with women journalists, the research was further informed by **targeted interviews with key informants.** A total of 11 experts in the fields of media, gender-based violence, legal support, and psychological assistance to survivors of violence provided substantive input to the study. Their analyses and recommendations were integrated into the conclusions of this publication and informed methodological refinements to the desk research, contributing to a more contextualised and multidisciplinary interpretation of the findings. The analysis was conducted through triangulation of survey results, interviews, and desk research.

By comparing findings from EU Member States (Slovenia and Croatia) and non-EU states (Serbia and BiH), which operate within different media policy environments and levels of press freedom, it was possible to identify a range of correlations. These correlations ultimately indicate that responsibility for both prevention and response lies, to a significant extent, with media organisations themselves, regardless of the broader socio-political context.

All researchers involved in conducting interviews underwent training in gender-sensitive interviewing techniques, together with a journalist experienced in reporting on violence against women. The team of six researchers also received training in the overall research methodology and in conducting interviews requiring heightened sensitivity. The research was carried out in strict compliance with ethical standards, including procedures ensuring informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and secure archiving. No difficulties were encountered in recruiting participants, as many journalists recognised the importance of the study and expressed a willingness to participate and contribute.

2.1 Survey "Women in Media": Sample Information

The regional survey sample included 606 women working in the media across all target countries (Figure 1). Diversity was ensured in relation to age, employment status, and the type and ownership or organisational category of media outlets in which respondents were employed.

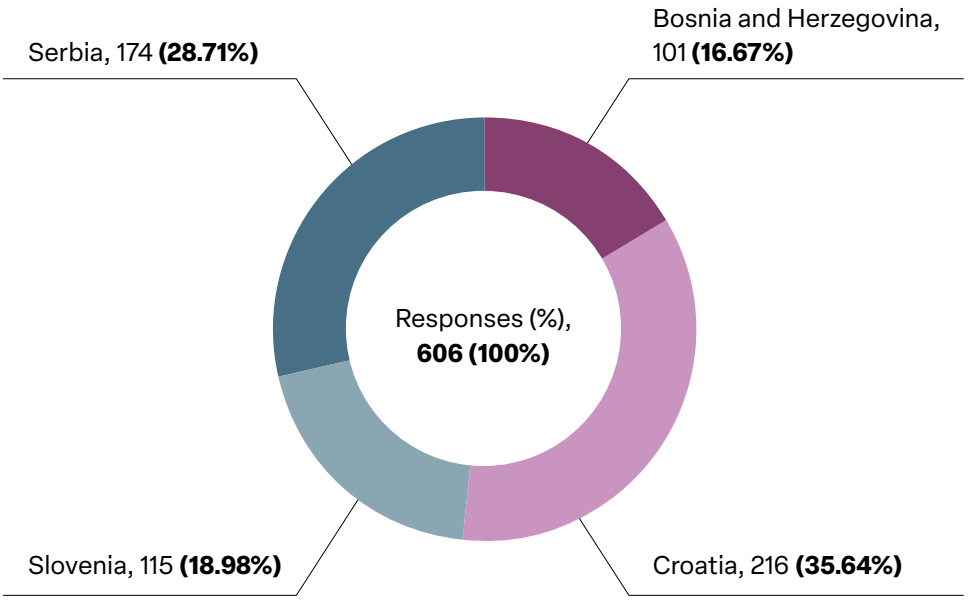

Figure 1: The number and proportion of survey participants, by country in the region

Women in early to mid-career age groups constituted the majority of the sample, with the largest shares in the 38–47 and 28–37 age brackets. While a high proportion of participants were based in capital cities, a substantial number of respondents from smaller cities and towns were also included. For example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 80.20% of participants were based in the most populated cities (Sarajevo, Banja Luka, Tuzla, and Zenica), while 19.80% were from smaller cities and municipalities.

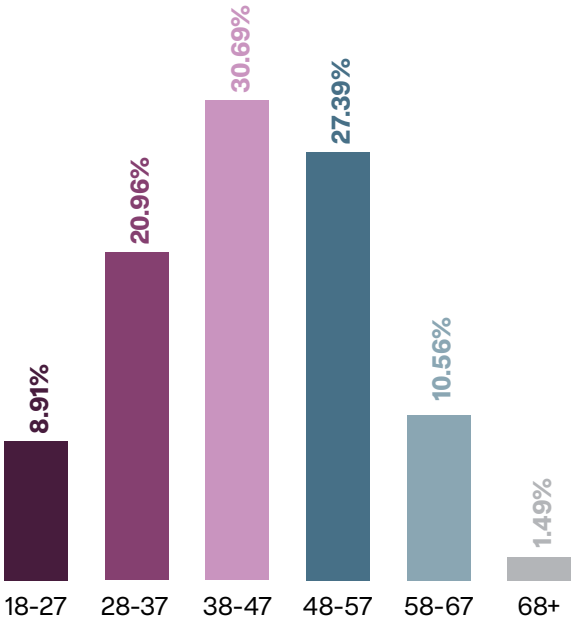

Figure 2: Age distribution of respondents across the region, by age brackets

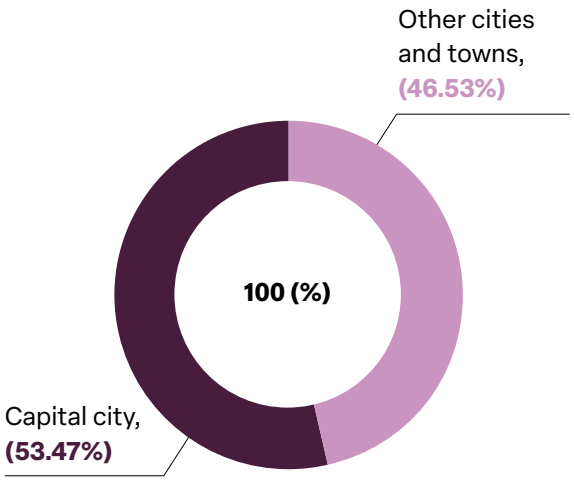

Figure 3: Geographic distribution of respondents in regional capitals compared to other cities

The regional sample was composed primarily of journalists (49.34%) and editors (25.08%). Some women reported holding multiple positions (5.28%), often combining a journalist role with other posts. While most of these multi-role positions were content-related, a few cases indicated a potential concentration of power, with respondents combining the roles of editor-in-chief and media owner. A number of women working in production, whether as crew or as management staff[1] also took part in the survey. Specialised positions, e.g. fact-checker and more administrative roles, were grouped under "Other".

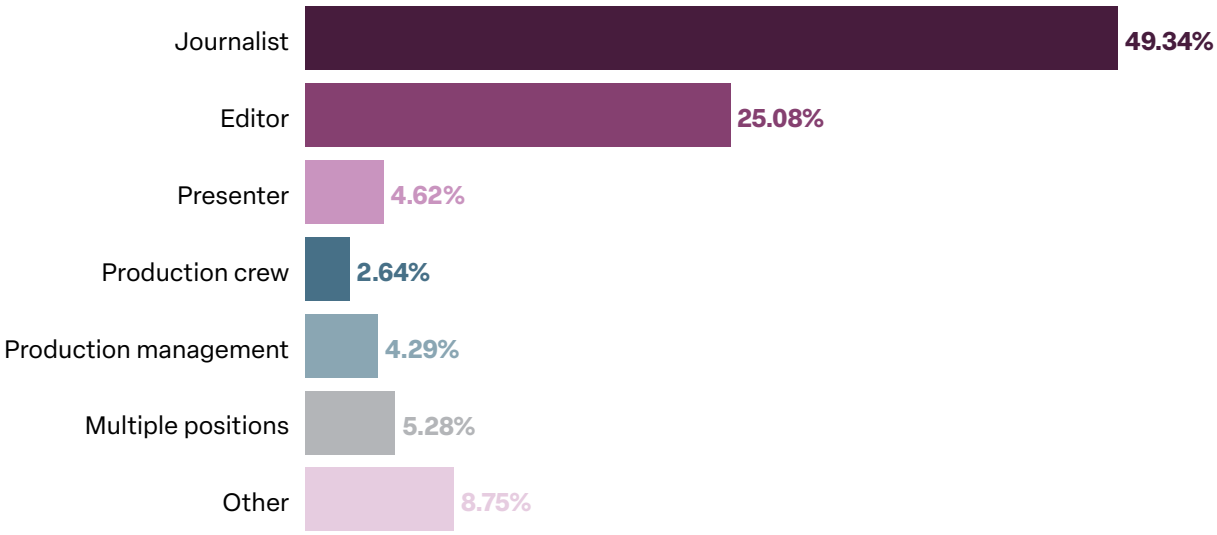

Figure 4: Distribution of positions held within newsrooms, across the region

[1] Production crew encompasses women working with producing content, such as videographers, while production management includes ingests, organizers, etc.

The largest number of regional survey participants reported working, or having recently worked in television media (38.78%), followed by online media (21.12%). With regard to ownership and funding structures, nearly half were employed in public media (49.01%), followed by commercial (27.89%) and non-profit media (13.70%). A notable proportion of participants confirmed working across multiple outlets, spanning different formats (10.73%) and ownership structures (9.24%).

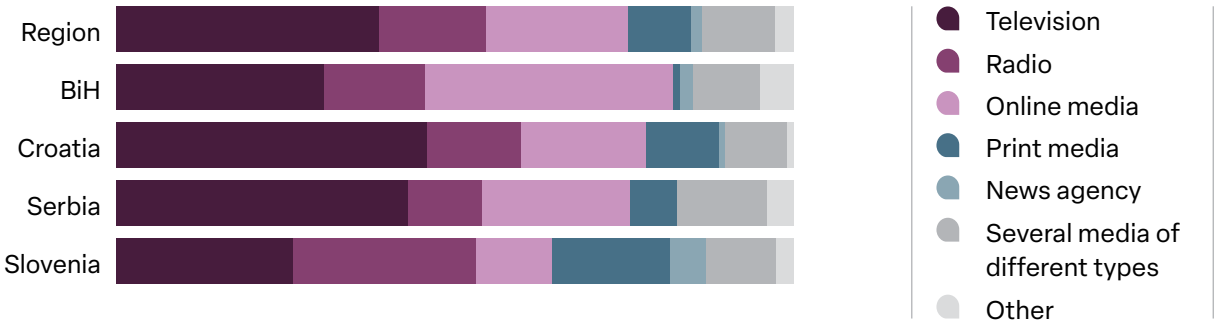

Figure 5: Distribution of types of media outlets respondents have worked for most recently

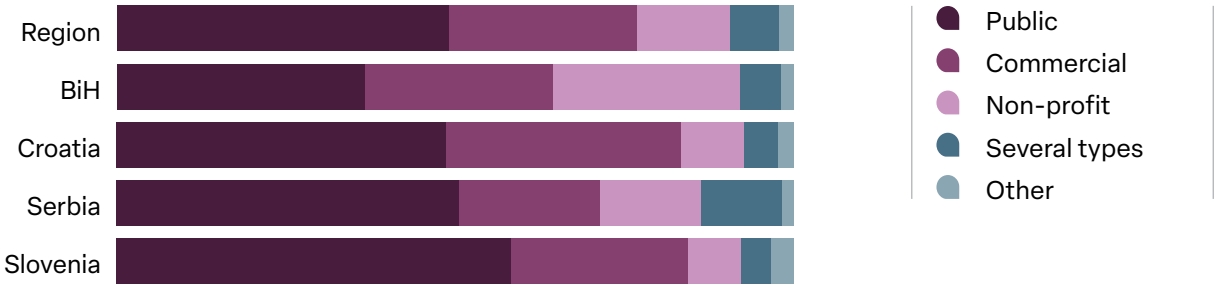

Figure 6: Distribution of ownership and funding models of media outlets respondents have worked for most recently

The prevalence of women reporting membership in trade unions or journalist associations varied across the region. The highest share was recorded in Slovenia, where nearly 90% of participants reported such membership, followed by a majority of participants in Serbia and Croatia. Fewer than one third of respondents in Bosnia and Herzegovina confirmed being members of trade unions or journalist associations.

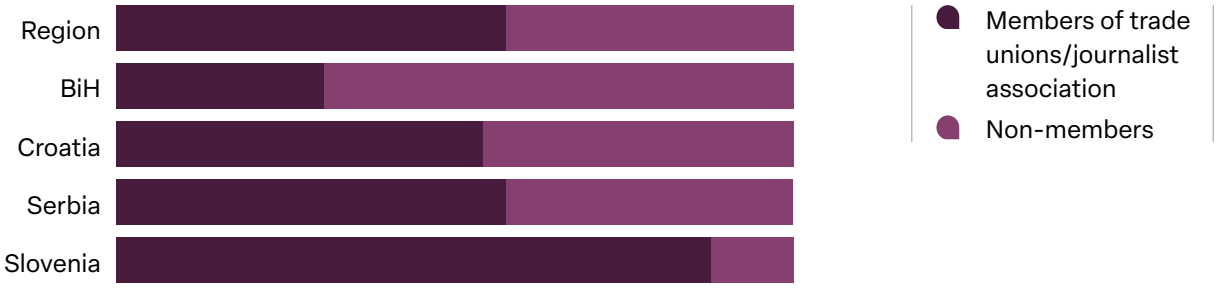

Figure 7: Prevalence of membership in trade unions and/or journalist associations among participants

3 The Enabling Environment: Contextual Drivers Of Gender-Based Violence And Discrimination In Media Organisations

3.1 Global and European frameworks

Efforts to improve the position of women in the media industry globally and in Europe have been ongoing for several decades; however, structural inequalities remain deeply entrenched. Historically, three distinct directions can be observed: an initial normative focus on women's portrayal in the media from the mid-1990s onwards, followed by growing attention to women's labour and employment rights within media organisations in the early 2000s, and subsequently a focus on the position of women in the media in the context of their exposure to different forms of gender-based violence from the mid-2000s onwards.

Persistent patterns of gender disparity and structural inequality in media employment have been consistently documented over the past thirty years by a substantial body of research, largely produced by journalist associations, civil society organisations, and academia. One of the most influential European reference points, the European Institute for Gender Equality's (EIGE) 2013 comparative study of women in the media across EU Member States, identified structural inequalities in the form of under-representation in senior decision-making roles, glass-ceiling barriers to career advancement, and persistent gender pay gaps. The report highlighted vertical and horizontal segregation within media organisations, with women concentrated in lower-status roles and significantly under-represented in technical, leadership, and editorial positions.[2] The International Federation of Journalists' handbook Getting the Balance Right: Gender Equality in Journalism explicitly warned that without structural reforms, ranging from equal pay policies and health-and-safety audits to flexible working arrangements, childcare support, and transparent promotion procedures, gender equality efforts in journalism would remain formal rather than substantive[3].

In spite of evident 'feminisation' of media, a deeply embedded masculine newsroom culture has been recognised by subsequent European and global research, which has consistently confirmed that women's increased presence in journalism does not translate into substantive equality in power, influence, or working conditions. Studies have linked these structural patterns and a masculine newsroom culture to informal "old boys' networks", inflexible employment arrangements, and unfavourable return-to-work policies, all of which contribute to high attrition rates and the systemic loss of female talent from the media sector.[4]

[2] European Institute for Gender Equality. (2013). Women and the media: Advancing gender equality in decision-making in media organisations. https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/MH3113742ENC-Women-and-Media-Report-EIGE.pdf?

[3] International Federation of Journalists. (2009). Getting the balance right: Gender equality in journalism.

[4] North L., Gendered experiences of industry change and the effects of neoliberalism, Journalism Studies Vol. 10, No. 4, 2009, pp. 506–521 in EIGE (2013).

The media sector is also recognised by the Istanbul Convention as one of the preventive actors in combating gender-based violence and a crucial partner in challenging gender stereotypes and promoting non-degrading portrayals of women, while respecting freedom of expression and editorial independence[5]. In comparison to this normative focus on the portrayal of women in the media, systematic research on the actual position of women within the media industry, from the perspective of their exposure to GBV and sexual harassment, began to emerge only later[6].

The broader societal role of the media has been detected through global evidence, which points to both the widespread nature of the problem and the need to prioritise it. A 2022 global study conducted by WAN-IFRA Women in News found that 41% of women working in the media had experienced verbal and/or physical sexual harassment in the workplace. The findings reveal that sexual harassment constitutes an "endemic problem" within the media industry "irrespective of geography"[7]. The study also showed that the vast majority of incidents remain unreported, highlighting the responsibility of media outlets themselves to address this structural failure. The report calls on the industry to adopt a clear zero-tolerance stance towards sexual harassment and to put in place internal policies, reporting mechanisms, and institutional safeguards capable of both preventing abuse and responding effectively when it occurs.

At the level of European Union policy, both Member States and countries aspiring to EU accession are guided by the EU Gender Action Plan III (2021–2027)[8], which serves as the EU's external action framework for gender equality and women's empowerment across foreign policy, development cooperation, enlargement, and neighbourhood policies. GAP III adopts a gender-transformative and intersectional approach and commits the EU and its partners to systemic measures to prevent and respond to gender-based violence. These strategic objectives are supported by binding and non-binding legal instruments, one of which is EU Directive 2024/1385[9], addressing online harassment, protection mechanisms, and victim support. It explicitly recognises journalists as a professional group disproportionately targeted by online violence and links the safety of women journalists to a broader EU framework. Also significant is EU Recommendation 2021/1534 on the protection and safety of journalists which recognises gender-based violence as one of the key risks facing journalists. It calls on public authorities to actively safeguard freedom of expression and journalists' safety by creating an adequate legal and institutional environment, treating threats and attacks against journalists as serious criminal acts, conducting effective investigations, and ensuring that perpetrators are prosecuted and sanctioned in a manner that is effective and proportionate[10].

[5] Article 17. Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention)

[6] Beijing Platform for Action (1995) recognised the media as a critical area for advancing gender equality by representing women in media content and combating gender stereotypes. Only subsequently did scholarly and professional attention shift more strongly from questions of portrayal in media content to the actual position of women within the media industry itself.

[7] WAN-IFRA Women in News (2022), https://wan-ifra.org/2022/01/sexual-harassment-in-newsrooms/

[8] Gender Action Plan III and its key areas of EU engagement: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/gender-action-plan-iii-its-key-areas-eu-engagement_en.EU has reaffirmed its political commitment to the Gender Action Plan by extending its duration from the originally foreseen 2021–2025 period until the end of the current multiannual financial framework in 2027.

[9] Directive (EU) 2024/1385 of the European Parliament and of the Council on combating violence against women and domestic violence. (2024)

[10] Commission Recommendation (EU) 2021/1534 on ensuring the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists and other media professionals in the European Union. (2021).

In addition, the Digital Services Act introduces due-diligence obligations for online platforms to mitigate systemic risks related to illegal content and online abuse, which are relevant for addressing technology-facilitated violence against women journalists. Yet, despite steps taken at the level of EU institutions to advance gender mainstreaming, media industries themselves have largely remained on the sidelines, and the gender equality in media sector continues to depend on the goodwill and willingness of individual media organisations to implement change.

Despite these long-standing policy debates and institutional commitments, **the situation for women journalists has markedly deteriorated in the 2020s**, particularly in relation to safety, harassment, and violence. In 2024 alone, the Coalition for Women in Journalism recorded a 56% increase in reported cases compared to 2023, signalling a rapidly worsening global safety environment for women in media. This escalation aligns with findings from UNESCO's global surveys conducted in 2020 and 2025, which reveal persistently high levels of online violence against women journalists and an expanding spillover into offline harm. Comparative data indicate that 75% of women journalists surveyed in 2025 reported having experienced online violence, up from 73% in 2020, while the proportion of respondents linking online abuse to offline threats or attacks more than doubled—from 20% in 2020 to 42% in 2025.[11]

These global dynamics are unfolding within a broader European and regional context marked by **declining media freedoms and increasing political and economic pressures on journalism.** According to the 2025 Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index, Serbia ranks lowest among the four countries covered by this study (96th out of 180), followed by Bosnia and Herzegovina (86th), reflecting persistently high-risk environments characterised by political interference, weak institutional safeguards, and frequent intimidation of journalists. Croatia, positioned at 60th, illustrates the limits of formal media pluralism in the face of strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs), organised crime, and political pressure, while Slovenia, although ranked highest at 33rd, continues to face fragility in practice regarding journalist safety and media independence.[12]

The following chapters explore whether and how these trends are interlinked across different national contexts, examining potential correlations between gender inequality, violations of women's human rights in the media, and broader structural developments in the media industry, systems of governance, and labour relations. By situating women's experiences within this wider political, economic, and institutional landscape, the report moves beyond descriptive accounts of abuse and aims to develop an evidence-based understanding of the structural drivers that may sustain or exacerbate discrimination and violence against women working in the media.

Recognising and addressing violence against women working in the media is therefore not only a matter of labour rights or professional ethics, but a long-term investment in democratic resilience and social transformation. All forms of discrimination are rooted in social attitudes, prejudices, and stereotypes, while gender-based discrimination in particular reflects entrenched gender norms that continue to shape professional cultures and power relations. Breaking this cycle in the media industry produces long-term benefits that extend far beyond the media sector, strengthening broader societal efforts to combat violence against women and promote substantive gender equality.

[11] UN Women. (2025). Tipping point: The chilling escalation of violence against women in the public sphere in the age of AI - Global report. See: https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/global-survey-reveals-rising-violence-against-women-journalists

[12] Reporters Without Borders. (2025). Country profiles. https://rsf.org/en/country/bosnia-herzegovina

3.2 Contexts Of Power And Vulnerability: How Political And Legal Frameworks Enable Harm In Media

This chapter situates the research findings within the political, legal, and institutional context to demonstrate that harmful practices in newsrooms are not merely embedded in a permissive environment, but are actively enabled, sustained, and reinforced by it.

The latest data from the European Institute for Gender Equality's (EIGE) Gender Equality Index 2024 for **Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina** show quite a significant gap between Slovenia on the one hand, and Croatia, Serbia, and BiH on the other. With 70.1 index points, Slovenia outperforms the other three countries by 10 or more points, and it is very close to the EU average (71.0). The index shows a score of 59.7 points for Croatia in 2024, and 58.0 for Serbia in 2021. While Serbia was the first non-member state to use the EIGE in 2016, it measured progress inconsistently, which is why the most recent data is from 2021. Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH) has only partial 2024 data, reflecting limited availability of data and measurements in only a small number of domains (e.g. Knowledge 58.2; Power 46.3; Work-Participation 61.4), which indicate that the average is well below the EU level.

In spite of this discrepancy in the gender equality index, data collected for the purpose of this report show that the level of violence against women working in the media is at similar levels and receives similarly weak legal and protection treatment in all four countries. Although available data across all four countries remain limited, fragmented and unsystematically collected, the comprehensive evidence collected through interviews and surveys shows that the discrepancy between the reported and actual cases of violence is immense. Results from our survey show that less than 10% of respondents who experienced attacks, harassment, discrimination and violations of rights across the region (N=360) actually reported these assaults to journalists' associations or trade unions. Reporting rates were even lower in cases of physical sexual harassment with only five respondents (2%; N=183) confirming they reported to journalists' associations, **indicating that the actual scope of violence remains largely unrecorded**[13].

Across Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia, variations in political stability, legal effectiveness, and institutional capacity shape distinct media environments, yet all four countries exhibit a persistent gap between formal guarantees of media freedom and the lived realities of journalists, particularly in relation to political pressure, economic insecurity, and personal safety.

This chapter looks at the legal frameworks, reporting mechanisms, and broader socio-political situation and culture to provide a general context which enables violence and harassment against women working in the media. It is a comparative overview of the context in four countries, which situates the data and information collected through the surveys and interviews. One clear indication based on the following analysis is that the legal frameworks in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina lack specific provisions on gender-based violence against journalists. Different treatment is provided in the laws on gender equality, anti-discrimination laws, criminal and labour codes, but their implementation is fragmented and inconsistent throughout the region.

[13] For example, between 2021 and 2024, the Safe Journalists Network recorded 20 attacks against women journalists in Croatia and 31 attacks in Bosnia and Herzegovina. These officially documented cases predominantly concern violence perpetrated by external actors, including politicians, business figures and private individuals. By contrast, the scope, typology and frequency of violence occurring within newsrooms, particularly sexual harassment, gender-based discrimination and other forms of internal abuse, remain largely unrecorded or are captured only at the level of observations. This structural gap in monitoring practices significantly contributes to the underestimation of the prevalence of gender-based violence in the media sector. The SafeJournalists Network (2025) - recently published national reports on women journalists' safety, available here: https://safejournalists.net/

3.2.1 Legal Framework

Gender equality laws are in place in all four countries, although the Law on Gender Equality was temporarily suspended in Serbia in June 2024 by the Constitutional Court, while it assesses the constitutionality of provisions that require the mandatory use of gender-sensitive language in public life. While the law in Serbia prohibits gender-based and sexual violence, which covers both the workplace and public space, its suspension, at the time of writing of this report, creates legal uncertainty and poses a broader risk to effective implementation and may undermine the progress achieved in advancing gender equality standards[14]. In Croatia, gender equality is enshrined in the country's Constitution and a range of laws, including the Act on Gender Equality and the Anti-discrimination Act. The quality of the gender equality laws varies across the four countries. The laws in Croatia and Slovenia, as EU Member States, are more aligned with major EU directives, although the country reports published by the European Network of Legal Experts on Gender Equality emphasise areas for improvement, especially in the area of prosecution of gender-based discrimination and violence against women[15]. While some alignment efforts have been undertaken in Serbia, both Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina continue to face challenges in harmonising gender equality and anti-discrimination legislation with EU rules[16].

Violence against Women (VAW) in all four countries is regulated by national legislation and criminal codes. Despite its high prevalence, all four countries display structural weaknesses in their responses to VAW, shaped by persistent social stereotypes and institutional and social minimisation of abuse [17]. Across all four countries, these structural shortcomings are further exacerbated by the rise of anti-gender movements and politicised attacks on gender equality, reproductive rights and LGBTI+ rights, particularly visible in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia. This backlash, combined with political polarisation and deep-rooted patriarchal social norms, undermines prevention efforts, weakens institutional accountability, and normalises violence against women as a private or cultural issue rather than a systemic human rights violation.

In addition to their national laws addressing violence against women, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia have all ratified the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (Istanbul Convention), although the scope, political context, and effectiveness of its implementation vary significantly across the four countries. GREVIO Recommendations across all four countries point to a shared need to improve administrative data collection and to broaden policy recognition of forms of violence against women beyond domestic violence. The Committee has also warned that legal and institutional responses remain overly focused on domestic violence especially in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, while other forms, such as sexual harassment, rape, stalking, forced marriage, and other harmful practices remain neglected[18].

[14] Krstić, I. Counrty report - Serbia. Reports produced by European Network of Legal Experts in Gender Equality and Non-Discrimination. Available for all four countries at: https://www.equalitylaw.eu.

[15] Vučko, K. (2025). Country report - Slovenia; Martinović, A. (2025). Country report - Croatia.

[16] Krstić, I. (2025). Country report - Serbia; Kadribašić, A. (2025). Country report - BiH.

[17] Expert reports further suggest that such violence is frequently minimised by institutions, particularly in Croatia and Serbia, where the minimisation of abuse coincides with broader political polarisation and deeply conservative, patriarchal social norms.

[18] GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report Croatia, 2023. GREVIO First thematic evaluation report Serbia, 2025. GREVIO Baseline Evaluation Report for BiH, 2022.

In terms of responses to gender-based violence against women in the media, internal regulatory mechanisms have been introduced by some media organisations, most notably in Slovenia and Serbia. However, the research shows that where such acts do exist, in most cases they are not effectively implemented in practice[19]. Designated gender equality or dignity commissioners do exist in some media organisations in Slovenia, Serbia and Croatia; however, the research findings show that they mainly exist as a fulfilment of formal legal requirements, and only a few respondents from this research decided to talk to them, even in discretion.

Freedom of expression and media freedoms are formally guaranteed in all four countries through constitutional provisions and sector-specific legislation, yet the effectiveness of these legal frameworks varies significantly in practice. Bosnia and Herzegovina lacks a comprehensive media law and recent developments with recriminalisation of defamation in one part of the country (Republika Srpska), as noted by many media freedom reports, encourages self-censorship. In Serbia, journalists work in a restrictive legal and political environment, and the country ranks lowest on the Press Freedom Index among the four countries covered by this study. Croatia has a relatively developed legal framework governing print and electronic media, but continues to face serious challenges linked to criminal defamation provisions, weak anti-SLAPP safeguards, and legal mechanisms that can be used to exert financial and procedural pressure on journalists and media outlets. Slovenia benefits from the most stable and EU-aligned regulatory environment among the four, yet political pressures on public service broadcasting and gaps in the protection of journalists from harassment and strategic litigation reveal ongoing structural vulnerabilities[20]. Interviewees from Croatia and Slovenia warned against criminal defamation laws that can also be used against women journalists, a practice that continues to undermine media freedom.

Attacks and pressure by politicians and public officials on journalists who report critically on the government or politicians in Republika Srpska are frequent. In the Federation of BiH, verbal attacks by politicians are also evident. In Serbia, the Law on Public Information and Media (2023) formally guarantees journalists' safety and freedom of expression; however, over the past few years, significant pressure on independent media has been reported. The situation became particularly grave as anti-government and student protests intensified in 2024 and 2025. Women reporting on protests were more exposed to violence and were directly targeted by pro-government supporters and pro-government tabloids, which also violate ethics and often spread misinformation and disinformation. Repressive measures against protesters and journalists have been reported through interviews with experts and journalists.

Finally, none of these national legal frameworks recognises women journalists as a distinct professional group exposed to elevated risks, nor treats gender-based violence as a specific occupational risk within media work.

[19] All data in this report come from primary research unless otherwise stated.

[20] See: Reportes without Borders Index (2025): https://rsf.org/en/index

Labour laws in all four countries prohibit discrimination, harassment, and sexual harassment in a general sense, but harassment and violence based on gender is rarely recognised or reported in practice. Unequal pay and widespread stereotypes against women are reported in all countries, and reports for all four countries emphasise that labour protection mechanisms exist mainly on paper, while implementation remains weak, slow, and inconsistent. Obligatory workplace dignity commissioners exist only in Slovenia, but are often missing outside the public media . Mental health support for victims of gender-based violence, discrimination, or harassment is offered in some cases in Slovenia and Croatia, but at a very low level—only two newsrooms in Slovenia actually offer it in practice. In Serbia, some media outlets have internal acts on harassment, but they do not take preventive measures. In all countries, this research finds numerous examples of women's sick leave, pregnancy, and motherhood being barely tolerated by their media employers, and are seen as limiting women's effectiveness at work. Gender-based violence is not legally recognised as a professional risk in journalism in any of the countries. According to the interviews conducted as part of this study, women have fewer opportunities for leadership and management positions in media. In Slovenia and Croatia, a Collective Agreement for Journalists is in force primarily for public service media, but most private media outlets lack collective agreements.

[21] Appointing a designated commissioner/contact person is considered to be a good practice that seeks to prevent or address bullying, harassment, and discrimination issues at workplace, to providing guidance and facilitate procedures. However, as reported below, they are rarely formally appointed and mainly exist on paper.

3.2.2 Mechanisms for reporting, protection and representation

Trade unions of journalists and media workers at state level exist in all countries except Bosnia and Herzegovina.[22] An overwhelming majority of women participating in this study are members of trade unions or journalists' associations—Slovenia (87.83%), Croatia (54.17%), and Serbia (57.47%), and less than a third of participants in Bosnia and Herzegovina (30.69%)[23]. Although journalists are unionised in Croatia, Slovenia, and Serbia, and they receive some advice and protection, the journalists interviewed stated that the union mechanisms are considered weak. They are especially under-capacitated to deal with gender-based violence and sexual harassment; sensitisation training is rare for union or media employees.

Media in all of the target countries rely more on **journalists' associations, civil society organisations**, and donor-funded projects for their protection and representation. Slovenia and Serbia each have two journalists' associations, and Croatia has one. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Association of BH Journalists—the most active journalists' association in the country—operates alongside several less active associations at the entity level. At least one journalists' association from Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia is a member of the **SafeJournalists network**, which documents attacks, provides support, and advocates for stronger protection mechanisms to improve the safety and rights of women journalists across the region. Journalists' associations in all countries engage in advocacy and protection of journalists, promote media freedom, and uphold professional standards, but interviews with journalists revealed a widespread perception that these organisations lack a sustained focus on and have limited effectiveness in providing long-term protection of women journalists beyond ad hoc initiatives.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Free Media Help Line run by the BH Journalists Association operates as a support and reporting mechanism for journalists who experience threats, intimidation, interference, or violations of their professional rights.[24] The Slovenian Journalists' Association (DNS) provides advisory and advocacy support, offering guidance to journalists who experience attacks, harassment, or other forms of pressure. The association also operates as a platform for reporting attacks.[25] In Croatia, several channels for reporting attacks were identified through this research, including the Croatian Journalist's Association.[26] Complaints concerning gender-based discrimination and sexual harassment in Croatia may also be submitted to the Ombudsperson for Gender Equality,[27] which operates a helpdesk that primarily provides legal advice and assistance in cases related to discrimination and sexual harassment. An SOS phone (24/7) to report threats and violence is run by the Independent Journalists' Association of Serbia (NUNS), in addition to an online reporting procedure[28]. All of these mechanisms rely on voluntary reporting, which explains why the data collected through these tools remain unreliable for accurately tracking the actual number of attacks, threats, or harassment cases.

[22] In BiH, a trade union of journalists at the national level does not exist, as worker unions exist in some larger public media outlets and in Republika Srpska. Sokol, A. (2025). Eroding Media Freedoms, Eroding Democracy. The Future of the Media in Bosnia and Herzegovina. See: https://media.ba/sites/default/files/ourmedia_bih-eng_25-01-22_final.pdf

[23] Mainly members of journalists' associations as journalists are not unionized in BiH

[24] See: https://bhnovinari.ba/bs/linija-za-pomoc/.

[25] See: https://novinar.com/prijavi-napad/

[26] See: https://hnd.hr/prijavi-napad/

[27] See: https://www.prs.hr/contact2/form

[28] See: https://nuns.rs/prijavi-napad/

Beyond media-focused CSOs, several women's rights-focused CSOs operate SOS helplines to enable women to report violence or seek consultations. Free legal aid, at least to some extent, as well as free psychological support, are also available through various channels in all countries, ranging from trade unions and journalists' associations to service-focused civil society organisations.

Police and prosecutor procedures remain the primary mechanisms for reporting cases of violence, threats, attacks, and harassment against women working in the media, but most journalists report low levels of trust in those institutions. This challenge has been recognised in Croatia, where in 2023 the Croatian Journalists' Association and the Trade Union of Journalists signed a Cooperation Agreement, accompanied by two protocols, with the Ministry of the Interior. Nevertheless, journalists participating in this research largely perceived these mechanisms as pro forma and rarely used them in practice. As one interviewee noted, *"It is being used as a fig leaf, and neither the journalists nor the police officers are aware that it exists."* (Journalist, female, Croatia).

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, "contact points for the safety of journalists" have been established within police and prosecutorial institutions as part of a joint EU and OSCE initiative. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms is similarly questioned. Journalists interviewed in this research report uncertainty regarding their purpose and scope, while limited institutional capacity further constrains their practical use, reinforcing perceptions that these mechanisms remain largely symbolic rather than functional.

In Serbia, every Public Prosecutor's Office and every police unit is supposed to have designated "contact points for the safety of journalists". However, journalists and experts interviewed for the purpose of this report claim that police and judicial representatives in Serbia often blame women for provoking or inciting violence or minimise the seriousness of attacks on women journalists. Many reported cases in Slovenia remain unresolved due to the procedures in police and prosecutor's offices being incomplete, slow, and ineffective. The system reportedly lacks institutional pathways and gender-sensitive approaches tailored to the risks faced by women journalists.

Due to the limited effectiveness of the mechanisms described above, a lack of trust in public institutions, the low level of representation of journalists in professional and civic organisations, and, importantly, low reporting rates, there is a lack of consistent and reliable data on cases of violence and harassment of women in the media. This issue has been reported in all four countries, and without accurate data, violence and harassment remain largely invisible to the broader public, making it difficult to design adequate response and protection mechanisms. Incomplete and insufficient reporting can also mislead policy and institutional responses, leaving gender-based violence hidden and unacknowledged. The accountability of perpetrators, as well as that of those responsible for inadequate institutional responses, is difficult to establish, which fosters impunity and perpetuates the cycle of violence against women working in the media.

3.2.3 A Landscape of Risks for Women in Media: Unseen, Unreported, Unprotected

So far, this chapter has outlined a landscape of risks for women in media in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, shaped by systemic failures, weak protection mechanisms, and shared vulnerabilities. The empirical data presented in the following chapters provides ample evidence of the hidden realities women in the media face daily—realities that are hardly ever reported or recognised by the public or institutions. Although Slovenia has the most advanced legal framework, and Croatia has also made some strides towards equality in the media compared to Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, this research shows that implementation in all four countries falls short of European standards for the equality and safety of women. Some patterns of harm are clearly visible in the overview of the institutional and structural barriers to safety and equality in media, illustrating how these institutional failures enable and perpetuate the cycle of violence. Based on the desk review of legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms presented above, the following patterns, trends, and root causes of violence have emerged and will be examined in greater depth in the empirical chapters.

- Gender inequality and power imbalances

Gender-based violence and sexual harassment have become more visible in the public sphere due to their increased incidence, the extreme brutality of several recent cases across the countries under review, the documented involvement of some political and law-enforcement actors in organised networks targeting women and girls, and the amplifying role of social media. However, the evidence suggests that the media, especially social media, are a significant part of the problem, embedded within the cycle of violence against women and, in many cases, perpetuating the problem through victim-blaming and shaming, failure to address the root causes of violence, and sensationalist reporting that reinforces stereotypes and gender bias. By exaggerating or sexualising details of crimes against women, sensationalist content increases women's visibility in harmful ways, making them more likely to be targeted with online abuse, threats, or stalking. This largely pertains to women journalists, whose profession is not recognised within existing legal frameworks as particularly vulnerable to such professional risks and hazards. Furthermore, in several cases reported through this research, it was suggested that the police and other institutions perceive violence as part and parcel of the occupational hazards for women journalists.

As noted above, gender-based violence does not receive adequate treatment in institutional responses in any of the four countries examined. Although certain forms of gender-based violence have been criminalised, poor implementation of those laws and weak institutional mechanisms only show that violence against women generally receives limited attention, while violence against women in the media sector is almost taken for granted and rarely reported.

Unequal pay, workplace discrimination and harassment against women working in the media create invisible power structures that contribute to gender inequalities and perpetuate cycles of violence. Women face barriers to leadership within media organisations, and their editorial and reporting capacities are frequently undermined through the delegation of tasks traditionally associated with 'women's issues', thereby reinforcing and reproducing patriarchal norms within the media. Unequal pay is reported in all four countries, including the two EU Member States, indicating the lower value placed on the professional work of women in the media. Wage inequality also undermines women's collective power to address the underlying causes of discrimination and harassment in their media organisations, which reinforces the tolerance of inequalities and institutionalises them.

Power imbalances are intrinsically linked to inequalities in media organisations, but they spread beyond the internal structural weakness of media organisations. As reported in interviews and the survey, women have less influence on editorial decisions, and their leverage in addressing unfair treatment in their organisations reduces opportunities to address the root causes of inequalities, harassment, and violence within and outside their organisations. It is another vicious cycle in which the economic inequalities and economic vulnerabilities increase the exposure of women to harassment and violence, while also perpetuating their fear of retaliation from their superiors in media organisations. Another layer to this problem is added by non-transparent ownership of the media, which may mask the real perpetrators responsible for discrimination at work, unfair treatment, harassment, and violence, or even expose women to hidden power structures they cannot reveal without a stronger institutional response or for the fear of retaliation.

Harassment of women working in the media is often minimised, and as some cases from Croatia show, women journalists are sometimes blamed for inciting or provoking violence. During recent protests in Serbia, women reporters and journalists were not only exposed to violence, but even targeted by pro-government supporters and tabloids, while institutional protection failed them. Women journalists have been physically attacked in Serbia, Croatia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and in all countries, including Slovenia, social media have been spreading gendered and sexualised content against women journalists. Defamation legislation in Republika Srpska and cases of defamation against women journalists in Croatia add another layer of opportunities for power imbalances to permeate into the judicial and legal systems.

Power imbalances are also enabled by the fact that the media landscape remains fragmented and deeply divided, which is particularly acute in Serbia where political polarisation has led to deep rifts and a culture of blame and victimisation. Although journalists' associations are present in all four countries, respondents reported that these bodies have limited effectiveness in representing the interests of women working in the media and in providing adequate support and protection in cases of discrimination, harassment, and violence.

- Weak institutional responses and culture of impunity

The legal frameworks are unequally harmonised with European standards on equality and media freedoms, with Slovenia and Croatia leading the way. However, weak and insufficient implementation of legislation leaves many cases of harassment and violence against women in media unaddressed and unresolved. Attacks against journalists are generally unrecognised and not given any special treatment in legislation. The poor implementation of laws leads to institutional failures and weak responses to reported crimes, which then lead to the perpetuation of distrust in institutions by women. Procedures are seen as slow and ineffective, and reporting crimes or attacks is seen as unnecessary exposure that may lead to retaliation or escalation of attacks. In complex institutional systems, such as the one in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the reporting mechanisms are almost invisible, although some institutions have introduced focal points to facilitate easier access. The low rates of use of those mechanisms indicate that levels of distrust remain consistent, and more needs to be done to increase women's confidence in the existing mechanisms. It has been reported through interviews in all four countries that women fear retaliation and victimisation, which causes them to delay or refrain from reporting attacks, harassment, and crimes. The fact that many of the existing mechanisms still rely on voluntary reporting diminishes their effectiveness and reliability, not only for research purposes, but for the actual addressing of violence against women in media. Reporting procedures and mechanisms also do not account for the need for discretionary approaches and confidential mechanisms that would offer the women who report crimes and attacks the dignity they deserve when approaching and accessing institutional mechanisms.

- Lack of gender-sensitive approaches

Violence and harassment against women working in the media are often not treated as gender-based violence; these phenomena are not addressed specifically in laws or recognised as occupational hazards for women. In most of the countries, and particularly in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the risks for women working in the media are rarely recognised or discussed in the public space. The sensationalist style of media reporting on crimes against women, including women in the media, subdues the discussion on root causes and instead re-focuses public debates on stereotyping, reinforcing the blame culture against victims—ultimately exonerating the perpetrators. Police and judicial procedures lack gender sensitivity, and their awareness and capacities for recognising harassment and violence against women in media remain weak. Women journalists in all the countries have reported offences by police officers, and complained about the unequal treatment by prosecutorial and judicial staff and institutions.

> Women working in the media are told to take the pressures, be 'tough' and 'hard-skinned', or are blamed for lacking humour when not accepting sexist jokes. This normalises abusive behaviour against women in the workplace and reinforces impunity.

- ## Culture of silence

The analysis of documents presented through desk research points also to a strong culture of silence within media organisations, among professionals, and throughout responsible institutions. The fear of victimisation and retaliation is prevalent in all countries and justified by weak institutional responses and low rates of convictions or legal consequences for perpetrators. Evidence from Serbia and BiH shows that women delay reporting until violence or attacks escalate and become more dangerous for them personally and even harder to report. There is evidence of customary and predominant reluctance to report attacks and crimes, which feeds into a culture where silence and reluctance to discuss violence prevail. Frequent minimisation of crimes by institutions contributes to the culture of silence, so this issue gets buried under the broader problems of gender-based violence or frequent attacks on journalists, without addressing the specificities of problems faced by women in media.

A culture of silence masks and normalises everyday sexism through jokes at work, exclusion of women reporters from important or 'masculine' assignments, and frequent belittling comments—all of which desensitise media organisations to misconduct and discourage women from reporting early-stage attacks, which ultimately leads towards their escalation and institutionalised harm to women in their workplace. Women working in the media are told to take the pressures, be 'tough' and 'hard-skinned', or are blamed for lacking humour when not accepting sexist jokes. This normalises abusive behaviour against women in the workplace and reinforces impunity. The reputation of media organisations is sometimes prioritised over the protection of women, who are discouraged from reporting abuse or misconduct, or even socially punished within their organisation for endangering the reputation of their employers. Women fear being labelled difficult by their peers or superiors in media organisations, and risk being removed from reporting on stories that may receive high visibility. The professional undermining, the potential isolation in the workplace, and the lack of institutional response mechanisms inside media organisations—as reported in all four countries—feel more immediate and more consequential for women's careers than any support they could receive if reporting misconduct.

- ## The noise of digital violence

While a culture of silence continues to characterise many newsrooms, where incidents of discrimination, harassment, and abuse remain underreported and institutionally minimised, the digital sphere presents a contrasting dynamic: a highly visible and persistent noise of gender-based violence against journalists across the four countries. All journalists who participated in in-depth interviews reported social media platforms as the most common external environment in which they experienced harassment and abuse. Nearly one third of survey respondents confirmed being targeted with smear campaigns and sexist and sexual comments by random citizens they have never met.

Newsrooms rarely respond to these types of online comments, and this institutional passivity contributes to the normalisation of public violence against women working in the media and reinforces a self-perpetuating feedback loop in which newsroom silence legitimises online abuse. In response, journalists reported different coping strategies, from disengagement and ignorance to online comments (Croatia, BiH) to systematically documenting social media profiles and comments (Slovenia) to engagement of solidarity journalist networks (Serbia).

- Lack of political support

There are hardly any decision-makers at any level that have voiced their concerns about attacks against women working in the media, and there is little evidence that political parties ever address or discuss those issues internally, nor do they expose such cases through their party platforms. Across the four countries, concrete, high-profile political initiatives focused specifically on women in media are rare, and our research failed to identify any cases of politicians and decision-makers who have voiced their strong support for women in media. This assessment excludes institutions whose primary mandate is gender equality and human rights protection, and points to a broader absence of political leadership on this issue. Over the past five years, visible political leadership specifically championing the safety and rights of women in media has been limited and mostly symbolic, with most concrete progress driven by international organisations, journalists' associations, and CSOs rather than by national politicians themselves. At most, national politicians take part in multilateral and regional initiatives on the safety of journalists, for example the OSCE Joint Statement on the Safety of Women Journalists (2023, Skopje), or the 2024 Belgrade conference on journalists' safety. This indicates a formal political engagement with gender-specific safety standards, which is not backed by strong domestic support or even declarative support by individual politicians.

Moreover, some of the cases presented below show evidence to the contrary. In November 2023, the Minister of Culture and Media, Nina Obuljen Koržinek, publicly and verbally attacked journalist Dora Kršul (working at Telegram.hr) after she published an investigative report exposing alleged misuse of EU funds by the Ministry and associated institutions. The minister dismissed the reporting as "malicious fake news," and attempted to discredit the journalist personally and professionally. The controversy escalated when, in May 2024, the Croatia Prime Minister, Andrej Plenković, also attacked Kršul and her outlet, asserting that their investigation was not journalism but "politically motivated" and "illegal," effectively dismissing both the work and the legitimacy of journalistic scrutiny. Although the initial story by Kršul led to a real criminal investigation by the European Public Prosecutor's Office (EPPO), culminating in the arrest of nearly 30 persons in late 2023, the delegitimisation and intimidation of Kršul continued through a defamation case in the courts.

A case from Serbia illustrates the politicisation of sexism and additional victimisation of journalist Zlatija Labović, a correspondent of B92. During a press event in 2015 then Minister of Defence Bratislav Gašić made a public sexist remark stating that he "liked female journalists who kneel". The incident sparked widespread media debate and public protests under the slogan "Journalists Do Not Kneel," which framed the remark as an unacceptable expression of gender-based humiliation in the public sphere. However, while the episode appeared to result in political accountability at the symbolic level, its aftermath revealed a deeper pattern of institutional failure to protect the journalist concerned.

In the months and years that followed, Labović became the target of secondary victimisation, political instrumentalisation, and professional retaliation. Local representatives of the ruling party in Kruševac publicly accused her of deliberately provoking the minister, questioned her professional conduct, and suggested that her physical posture during filming had "humiliated the profession", thereby shifting responsibility from the perpetrator to the victim. In parallel, she was subjected to online harassment and threats, prompting B92 to notify the police about abusive messages she had received via social media. Labović later testified that the incident marked the beginning of prolonged workplace marginalisation and mobbing, including restrictions on her reporting assignments, delayed payments, and informal pressures not to speak publicly about the case. She emphasised that she was advised by superiors to remain silent in order to avoid further professional repercussions. Years later, Labović described how the episode continued to shape her career trajectory, professional opportunities, and psychological well-being, illustrating how a single public act of sexism can evolve into sustained institutional harm when accountability remains symbolic and victim-protection mechanisms are weak[29].

When such behaviour originates from the highest position of political power, it becomes implicitly legitimised, promoted, and normalised within the broader political culture. It is then imitated by politicians occupying lower positions of power within the ruling party and government, producing a clear "trickle-down" effect in which sexist and derogatory attitudes towards women journalists are replicated across institutional hierarchies. In this way, the conduct of political elites does not merely reflect existing social norms but actively shapes and reproduces them. Rather than remaining isolated incidents, acts of verbal humiliation and gender-based disrespect become embedded within a wider organisational and political environment, contributing to the formation of a culture in which misogynistic language, intimidation and the public degradation of women journalists are treated as permissible.

[29] Interview with Zlatija Labović (2022): https://nova.rs/vesti/drustvo/prvi-intervju-zlatije-labovic-nakon-gasiceve-uvrede-volim-ove-novinarke-koje-tako-lako-kleknu-godinama-sam-trpela-mobing-zabranili-su-mi-politicke-price/

4 Gender Discrimination, Weak Labour Rights, And Poor Employment Conditions

4.1 Uncertain Employment Status, Unequal Pay, Short-Term Contracts, Job Insecurity

As described above, labour law provisions apply to both male and female journalists equally in all countries, but in practice the newsroom experience of female employees differs very much from that of male colleagues. More than one third (37.79%) of women working in the media participating in the regional survey affirmed having experienced gender-based discrimination in the workplace. Interviewees from Croatia and Bosnia and Herzegovina emphasised the low status of journalists regardless of their gender, which includes suboptimal working conditions, low pay, insecure and usually time-bound employment contracts, working part-time with several media outlets simultaneously, working overtime, having significant amounts of unpaid work, and sometimes working without formal contracts. According to most of the interviewees across the four countries, labour rights are almost systematically abused through non-binding contracts, short-term engagements, informal payments, work overload, mobbing, and illegal dismissals—which is precisely why several interviewees resorted to seeking justice through the courts. The more extreme and more systematic examples have been recorded in Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, where even basic labour rights are breached regularly. One interviewee from Serbia described the working conditions as catastrophic, stating that rules exist only on paper, and that judicial institutions often minimise the issue of labour rights and misconduct in the workplace.

The survey data further substantiates the qualitative findings, confirming that labour rights violations are widespread and systematically experienced by women working in the media across the region. More than half of the women participating in the regional survey (57.90%) reported having experienced violations of their labour rights. The first ten years of a journalistic career emerged as a particularly precarious period: over 40% of respondents reported experiencing labour rights violations during this early career stage, a pattern that was also repeatedly emphasised in interviews. While the forms and intensity of violations vary across countries, the data indicate that breaches of women's labour rights are structural rather than exceptional.

More than 40% of survey participants in the region perceived gender as the primary identity-based ground shaping experiences of discrimination and labour rights violations. This perception was most pronounced in Slovenia (50.79%), while it was lowest in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where approximately one third (33.93%) of women identified gender as a significant contributing factor.

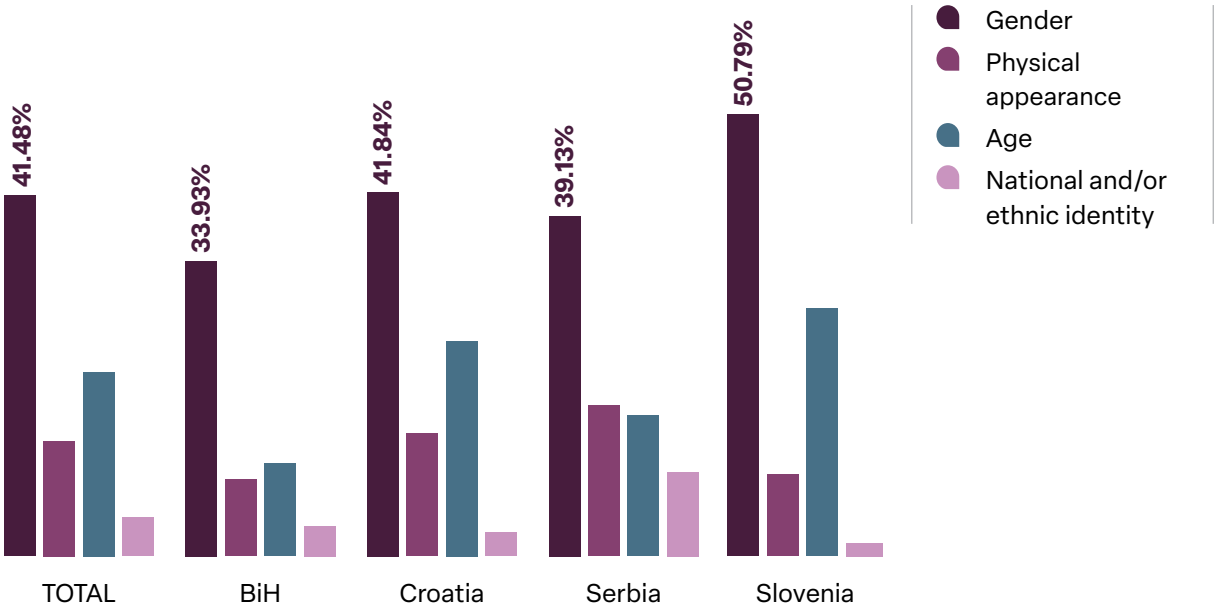

Figure 8: Prevalence of perceived identity-based grounds for discrimination and labour rights violations, as reported by respondents (N = 351)

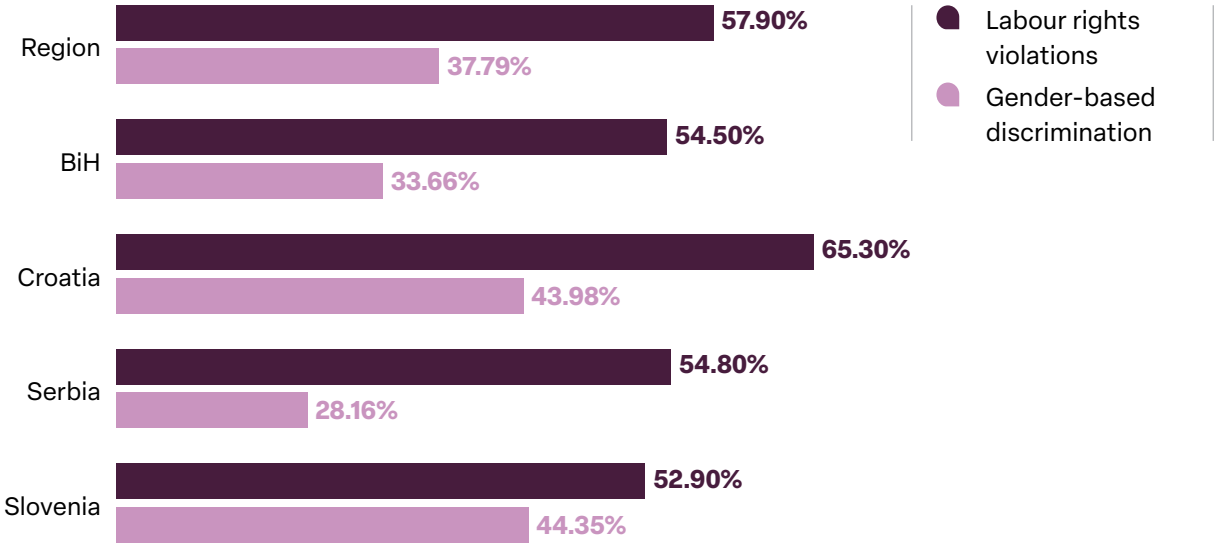

Figure 9: Regional data on the prevalence of labour rights violations reported by participants (N=606)

While the highest number of participants confirmed experiences of gender-based discrimination, the most frequently reported rights violations concerned the right to working hours and rest, followed by the right to an employment contract.

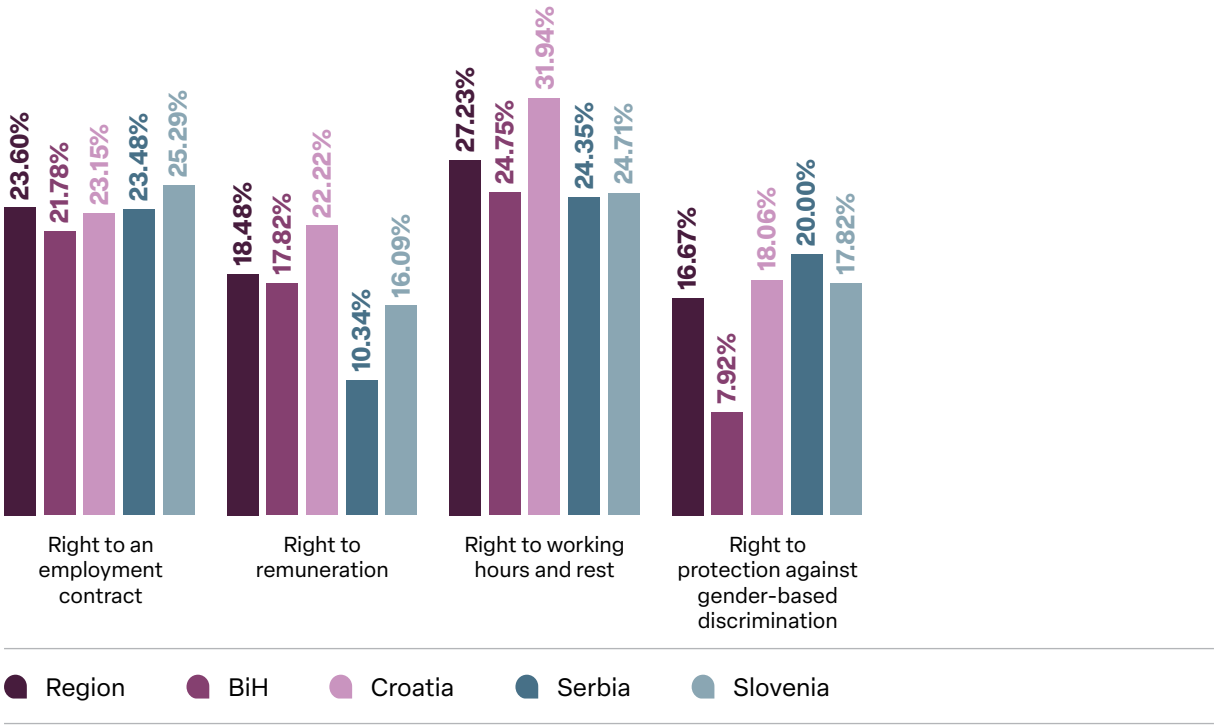

Figure 10: Regional data on prevalence of specific rights violations (N=606)

The discrepancy between reported experiences of gender-based discrimination (37.79%) and the acknowledgment of it as a violation of the right to protection against gender-based discrimination (16.76%) indicates that many participants recognise the occurrence of specific acts, such as unequal pay or pregnancy-related dismissal, yet refrain from categorising them as a formal violation. The highest discrepancy was recorded in BIH, suggesting a lower level of recognition and identification of gender-based discrimination in the workplace, reflecting gaps in awareness, knowledge, and sensitisation among media workers. This interpretation is corroborated by qualitative data from interviews, which revealed that some of the most severe and entrenched labour rights violations, including the most extreme cases reported through this research, occur precisely in Bosnia and Herzegovina. The contrast between low reporting in the survey and the depth of violations documented through interviews suggests that a significant number of cases remain unreported, unidentified, or unarticulated, indicating a broader problem of under-recognition rather than absence of discrimination.

Women working in the media reportedly have **less secure contractual status**, working as freelancers and being put in more precarious positions than their male colleagues across the four countries. High percentages of breaches of the right to an employment contract were probed further throughout our research, and some contradictions have been recorded in that respect. According to survey responses, the majority of participants were employed on a permanent contract basis. The highest prevalence of permanent contracts was recorded in Slovenia (81.74%), and although it is below 70% in Bosnia and Herzegovina, this still indicates a high percentage of women having permanent contracts. The prevalence of permanent employment is reportedly significantly higher in television media compared to commercial, non-profit media, and the dependence on short-term contracts was significantly higher among journalists than among editors. However, deeper questioning revealed a more complex reality. Findings from interviews indicate that the number of women employed with permanent contracts may be overreported. One respondent from BiH pointed out an example of a colleague who had worked for 17 years without a proper contract, as well as cases of women journalists being denied maternity leave or pressured to return before their leave had ended. Working conditions, she stressed, vary widely across media outlets, but younger generations are unwilling to tolerate such insecurity and *"nobody wants to be a journalist anymore."*

Another Bosnian journalist noted that many journalists work illegally or under part-time or service contracts, which forces them to move frequently between media outlets. This affects their professional identity and, in some cases, pushes them out of the profession altogether. It also undermines the reputation of media organisations, as high turnover prevents the development of trusted voices and institutional authority. As a result, journalists' quality of life suffers, with many relying on two jobs just to make ends meet. A Serbian journalist from local media explained that, when it comes to labour and human rights, there is little difference between male and female journalists because most work without employment contracts, and in some places even without freelance agreements. *"Most of us in local media live from project to project, so these basic labour rights of journalists are endangered. This does not depend on privately owned outlets or on us who work as local community media—the circumstances themselves have created this situation. In our newsroom at least, we're all in the same boat; we all share the same fate."*

Further data from the regional survey indicates significant percentages of violations of employment contracts: one in four women from Serbia (25.29%) reported their right to an employment contract being violated, which is closely followed by results from Slovenia (23.48%), Croatia (23.15%), and BiH (21.78%). A journalist from Croatia reflected on the contradiction between journalists' public role and their silence about the breaches of their own labour rights: *"We fight every day—through reports, features, and news articles on online portals—against politicians and entrepreneurs who violate labour rights. At the same time, we turn a blind eye to our editors and to the owners of our media houses. We look away out of fear of losing our jobs or damaging our reputation."*

Irregular and unequal pay has been reported by several participants in each country, and across the region, 18.48% of survey participants reported violations of their right to remuneration. One survey participant from Croatia added that "*as a rule, male colleagues receive higher pay, despite working on simpler, smaller tasks*". Poor financial conditions and unequal pay were featured far more prominently in BiH compared to other countries. More than the others, journalists from BiH emphasised the low salaries journalists receive in general, their irregular and limited contracts, and a need to work for several outlets simultaneously. One interviewee from BiH explained that she had worked for more than ten years on a formally minimal wage, with the rest paid informally in cash—a practice that has been reported by many other interviewees from BiH. Another Bosnian journalist stated that she received a significantly lower salary than her male colleague even though their tasks were equally complex. Within newsroom hierarchies, the interviewee observed that male journalists are promoted faster and more often receive higher pay grades.[30]

A Croatian journalist discovered she was paid less than what was documented on a payroll slip, and filed a complaint. The issue was resolved internally, although in her opinion, this was a serious violation that would have been better resolved by a complaint to other institutions (legal, tax office, etc.). But, because of the powerful position of her employer, cases like these were resolved internally, mainly to preserve the reputation of the media organisation where she was employed. However, she was eventually laid off from the company anyway, without a reasonable explanation, all the while being served demeaning remarks by her employer.[31]

Feminisation of journalism has been reported as producing some contradictory effects; despite the growing number of women journalists, however, this has not translated into greater equality in newsrooms. One interviewee described how, even though women now make up most of the journalist profession in Slovenia, female journalists still face deep structural insecurity and persistent gender inequalities. She noted that working conditions differ greatly: jobs at the public broadcaster feel relatively stable, while those in privately owned outlets, especially ones driven by commercial or political interests, are much more precarious. This instability hits women hardest, particularly women working as freelancers, students, and on temporary contracts, who can be fired far more easily than their male colleagues. She also reflected on the "feminisation" of journalism, saying it is less a sign of progress and more a result of men leaving the field for better-paid careers elsewhere. Women's professional advancement requires greater effort and persistence, and their achievements are often undervalued or formally unrecognised. She described having to pursue legal action twice to obtain recognition of her investigative work.

Despite significant data limitations and the widespread nature of labour rights violations identified across the region, the available **evidence on reporting outcomes** nonetheless points to a limited but noteworthy potential for redress when formal complaint mechanisms are activated.

[30] Excerpt taken from the interview report.

[31] Excerpt taken directly from the interview report.

Approximately, **one in three participants from Croatia** reported violations of the working hours and rest rights.

Approximately, **one in four women participants from Serbia** reported violations of the right to employment contract and violations of the working hours and rest rights.

More than two thirds of women across the region, who indicated that they have experienced discrimination and labour rights violations, did not report such incidents.

Women working in television were significantly more likely to have permanent contracts than those working in commercial, non-profit, or multiple media outlets.

4.2 Workload, Burnout, And Difficult Working Conditions

Workload burnout is said to be reaching 'epidemic proportions' across the region, and in Serbia it has been exacerbated by the coverage of protests, which stretches the limits of newsrooms' capacity to report on many simultaneous events. Our research in Serbia found that women working in the media often have a larger and more demanding workload, resulting in poor mental and physical health. *"It existed even before the recent protests, but the data are now extremely worrying, and I think we need training on how to cover so many events with such a small number of people in the newsroom."* (Journalist, female, Serbia).

Similar experiences have been reported in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Slovenia, where the **mental and physical toll on women** leads to a large turnover of journalists, a lack of motivation, and reputational risks for the specific media outlets. The journalistic profession is generally suffering from some reputational damage, and it is becoming less appealing for young people[32]. Women journalists in Croatia point to a general deterioration of their professional status, where newsroom harassment and toxic workplaces are frequent features of their work, although many exceptions also exist. Experts from Serbia have warned of long-term consequences on journalism, and that many women may leave the profession in order to avoid the risks, pressure, and harassment. Although similar demotivating effects have been reported in Croatia as well, some point to the opposite or paradoxical effect, too—they find such pressures serve as motivation to fight even harder for their cause.

Many interviewees point out the mental toll their profession has taken, and some have sought mental health support. Examples from Croatia and Slovenia point to the newsroom as a major source of psychological strain, which includes sexist remarks, belittling comments, exclusion of women from major stories and tasks, and intimidating behaviour by superiors, including their physical proximity. One interviewee from Slovenia stated that her editor would physically block exits from the office, stand very close to women while threatening them,

[32] The Future of Media in the Western Balkans dataset points to a series of structural trends that are likely to further affect working conditions in the media sector. The study highlights a declining number of journalism students, the anticipated shrinking of newsroom staff, and the growing automation of journalistic work, all of which raise concerns about sustainability, labour precarity, and increased pressure on remaining media workers. Mediacentar Sarajevo and Peace Institute Ljubljana. (2025). https://futureofmedia.seenpm.org/summary/

and maintain an atmosphere of constant fear and unpredictability. Two male colleagues were also exposed to this behaviour, though to a much lesser degree, and the interviewee suggested that male colleagues were targeted primarily to prevent them from intervening in defence of the female staff. She described the experience as one of collective trauma that has left long-term psychological consequences for the newsroom.[33] Similar experiences have been reported in BiH, where workplace mobbing, coercion, and the pressure to keep their jobs have created long-term professional and emotional damage for many women. Survey data from Slovenia show that the most commonly reported consequences of attacks and harassment are psychological and emotional: feeling disturbed, scared, depressed, or exhausted. A journalist from Bosnia and Herzegovina stated that many female journalists require mental health support, while most resort to the use of medication to mask their mental health issues.

The pressure of performing multiple social roles further strains working conditions for journalists generally, and for women in particular as they often handle parallel roles. On top of their professional commitments, women across the four countries carry the burdens of other social roles, caring for their partners, children, parents, and even for the broader community. The use of sick leave to care for themselves or relatives puts them in an unfavourable position in newsrooms, where negative perceptions are often created around sick leave absences. Due to that, many women compensate by investing additional efforts to prove themselves at work, thus creating another vicious circle in which their mental and physical health deteriorate further. But women's use of sick leave is more about perceptions than the actuality of its use in practice. Interviewees from Croatia stated that motherhood is often treated as a "burden" for the newsroom, even if women never actually use sick leave. One journalist from Serbia noted that she worked for a long time in a newsroom where union organising was not allowed. *"You basically have to come to work sick; you are not allowed to take sick leave, and so on. And I know of cases in other newsrooms where female colleagues were subjected to textbook examples of mobbing and belittlement, where editors and middle management denied them the opportunity to work, threatened them with dismissal, and warned them that it is not good for them to "behave like that" because they have children and bills to pay."*

These violations have gender-differentiated impacts, as women frequently shoulder disproportionate unpaid labour and care duties. One survey participant from Croatia noted that gender-based discrimination in the workplace was reflected in her position as a single mother, *"who has to choose to either stay home for a sick child, or to go in the field to cover a story on a car crash in the middle of the night"* (Journalist, Croatia, female). In such cases, women are forced to choose between different forms of labour and care, deepening work – life imbalance and restricting full participation in social and community life. Another example stressed by a Slovenian journalist shows that women who need to leave work early to care for children are met with sarcastic or disapproving comments from editors, whereas similar requests from male colleagues are readily accommodated. This pattern reinforces traditional gender roles and contributes to perceptions of women as less reliable or committed professionals.

Multiple, interrelated risks make the reporting of rights violations more costly for women; job insecurities, low pay, and caring for multiple family members makes the cost of speaking out high not only professionally and socially, but also economically. As a result, the economic pressure becomes a structural tool silencing women in the media.

[33] Excerpt taken from the interview report.

4.3 Gender Discrimination In Task Assignment And Promotion

Based on research evidence from all four countries, and despite a noted increase in the number of women in editorial roles, participants consistently report that managerial and decision-making positions in media remain predominantly held by men. At a practical level, key organisational decisions about task allocation and professional advancement are often concentrated in predominantly male leadership structures. According to participants, such concentration of decision-making power may be misused in ways that sideline or disadvantage women, as numerous examples from this research show. **Across the region, more than one third of women have confirmed experiencing gender-based discrimination in the workplace, such as preferential treatment toward male colleagues in relation to employment, status, pay, and other matters.**

Female journalists from Serbia point to **a lack of opportunities and low likelihood of reaching managerial positions**, which are often reserved for men who play the role of 'father figures' in newsrooms. Such informal networks enable men to act as gatekeepers to editorial policies, assignment of stories, and women's advancement in careers. At the same time, women in leadership roles may themselves become targets of harassment and abuse, as noted by participants in Croatia.

Women are **structurally disadvantaged across media organisations** in all four countries, being given 'less serious issues to report on' or 'soft issues' which are usually associated with traditional or patriarchal roles of women in society. Some male colleagues refuse to engage with women journalists as equals, as reported in BiH, and very often women's physical appearance is the decisive factor in promotion or the delegation of more substantive stories. Women journalists in Slovenia have also been excluded from important assignments, their expertise is questioned, and editorial proposals dismissed, which gives grounds to the claims of male-dominated hierarchies in newsrooms. Women are sometimes assigned roles where their physical presence is decisive over their expertise, even as hostesses to important guests as quoted by one interviewee from Serbia illustrating the degrading treatment by the superior.

One interviewee from Slovenia recalled editorial meetings in male-dominated settings, where men's contributions were prioritised over women's, exemplified by a comment implying that "important topics" would now be discussed once the men began speaking. Another Slovenian journalist stated that male journalists are primarily criticised for the content or quality of their work, whereas women are attacked for characteristics associated with their gender or appearance. This includes comments about their marital or parental status and derogatory insinuations linking their competence to their looks or sexuality. Such forms of criticism, based on identity rather than professional performance, cannot be countered through factual argumentation and serve to erode women's credibility and authority.

The reporting outcomes further illustrate how gender discrimination in task assignment and advancement translates into tangible consequences for the careers and jobs of women journalists. Among the 176 women across the region who reported filing complaints related to attacks, harassment, or labour rights violations, nearly one third (29.55%) indicated that these experiences had negative consequences for their professional development, including deterioration of their position within the media outlet or restricted opportunities for career advancement. This pattern was most pronounced in Serbia (35.90%), Croatia (31.43%), and Slovenia (30.30%), where women more frequently identified direct professional repercussions. Although a smaller proportion of women in Bosnia and Herzegovina (17.65%) reported such consequences, this figure should be interpreted with caution, as qualitative evidence suggests that limited recognition of discrimination and lower reporting rates may obscure the true extent of career-related harm. These findings show that gender discrimination in task assignment is far from symbolic—it has material consequences on women's careers, ultimately reflecting negatively on the possibilities of women reaching leadership positions in the media.

4.4 Sexual Harassment And Gender-Based Violence

Sexual harassment and gender-based violence constitute core forms of discrimination and human rights violations in the media sector. Under the Istanbul Convention[34], "violence against women" is understood as *a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination against women, encompassing all acts of gender-based violence that result in, or are likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm or suffering to women.* The Convention further defines "gender-based violence against women" *as violence that is directed against a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately.* Sexual harassment, in turn, is defined *as any form of unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature, with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, in particular when creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment.*

These legal definitions provide the normative framework for interpreting the research findings of this study. Across the four countries, the prevalence of gender-based violence and sexual harassment among women journalists is both widespread and systemic.

The majority of survey participants (78.38%) indicated that they had experienced some form of gender-based violence. This includes gender-based attacks and threats, discrediting treatment based on gender, verbal and non-verbal forms of sexual harassment, and physical harassment, including sexual violence. These findings show that sexual harassment is not an isolated or marginal phenomenon in the media sector, but rather a structural risk embedded within professional cultures, power relations, and institutional practices that shape women journalists' everyday working environments.

[34] The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the Istanbul Convention).

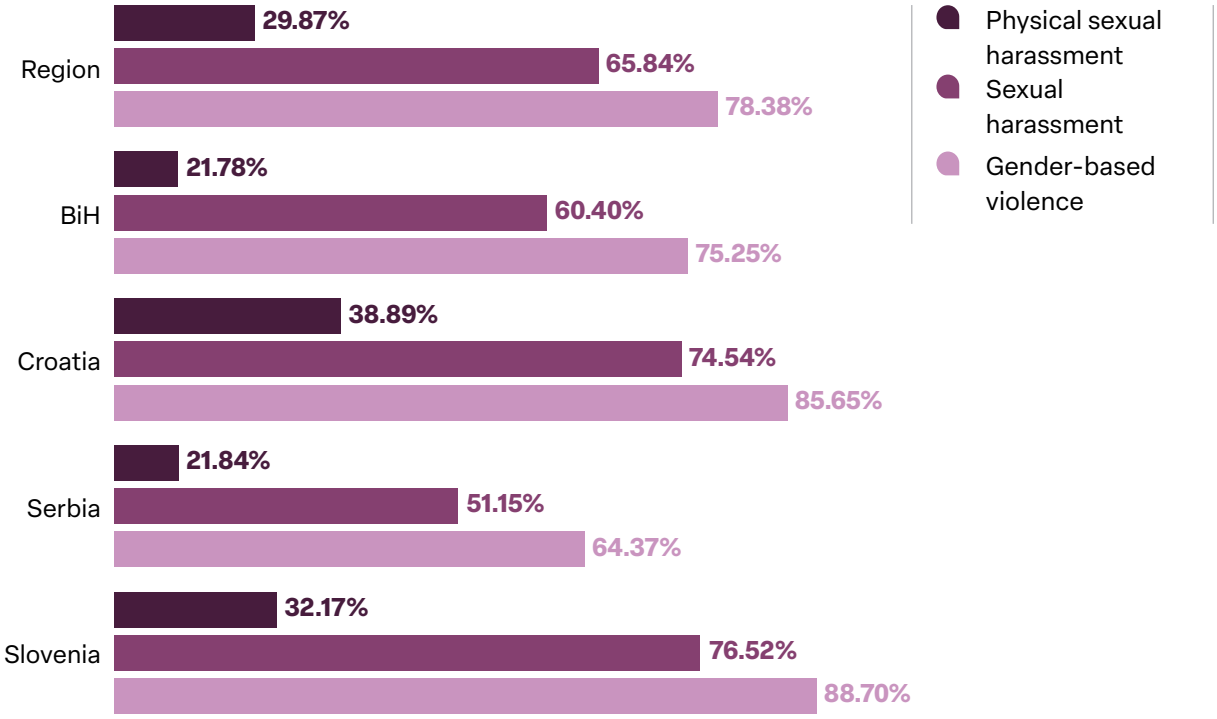

Figure 11: Prevalence of participants who experienced gender-based violence and its sub-types, including country-level data (N = 606)

Gender-based violence comes in many forms across all countries. Two-thirds of survey respondents (65.84%) reported having experienced sexual harassment. The prevalence of sexual harassment experiences was even higher among women who reported working as journalists (N=298, 69.12%). Approximately 30% (29.87%) of women confirmed they experienced physical sexual harassment, including unwanted, inappropriate, and/or violent physical contact.

Unpleasant and degrading comments against women were reported in Croatia, and unwanted advances, persistent messaging, and calls during and after working hours have been reported in Serbia. Serbian interviewees also reported having experienced death and rape threats (against them and their close family), stalking, insults, belittling, online lynching, and daily misogynistic comments. Sextortion—the requesting of sexual acts in exchange for favours—was most frequently reported in Croatia, while the most vulnerable are women in early stages of their career who are endeavouring to find their place in complex work environments. In most cases, incidents of violence and abuse intersect between gender-based violence and mobbing.

The majority of women from Croatia and Slovenia recognised and indicated having experienced both comments and jokes based on sex or female sexuality that were unwanted, degrading, and/or caused discomfort, as well as negative, degrading, or stereotypical comments, while this percentage is lower for BiH and Serbia. However, a key interpretative finding of the survey is that women working in the media often do not recognise certain practices as constituting sexual harassment. Even when they have experienced behaviours such as unwanted sexist jokes in the newsroom, respondents often do not categorise these incidents as harassment, which likely contributes to the somewhat lower reporting figures observed in BiH and Serbia. Additionally, journalists in BiH frequently emphasised labour rights and contractual security as priority issues that they believe would also address other workplace problems, including harassment. At the same time, cases from Slovenia demonstrate that stronger labour protections and formal employment contracts are not, in themselves, sufficient guarantees against gender-based violence and sexual harassment, indicating that legal and contractual safeguards must be accompanied by deeper cultural and institutional change within media organisations.

Table 2: The prevalence of specific experiences of sexual harassment across the region, and by country. (N=606).

Type of harassment	Region	BiH	Croatia	Serbia	Slovenia
Unwanted comments regarding gender or female sexuality that were degrading and/or caused discomfort	48.68%	40.59%	56.94%	39.66%	53.91%
Unwanted jokes based on gender and/or sexuality that were degrading and/or caused discomfort	44.55%	36.63%	52.31%	33.91%	53.04%
Negative or degrading stereotypical remarks about women, either directed at the person or women in general	45.38%	35.64%	50.46%	36.78%	57.39%
Messages requesting sexual acts in return for some favour	5.94%	1.98%	11.57%	3.45%	2.61%
Unwanted pressure to engage in sexual acts	2.97%	1.98%	4.17%	1.72%	3.48%
Showing of pornographic or sexually explicit content	3.47%	0.99%	8.33%	0.00%	1.74%
Sending of pornographic or sexually explicit content via ICTs	5.28%	3.96%	6.48%	3.45%	6.96%
Sounds or gestures with sexual innuendo	17.00%	7.92%	26.85%	9.20%	18.26%
Non-consensual photographing or distribution of personal, degrading videos or images	1.98%	0.00%	2.31%	3.45%	0.87%
Showing of genitalia	1.49%	1.98%	1.39%	1.72%	0.87%
Unwanted, inappropriate physical contact	29.54%	21.78%	38.89%	20.11%	33.04%
Unwanted, violent physical contact	2.97%	0.99%	5.56%	1.72%	1.74%
Actual or attempted rape	0.50%	0.00%	0.93%	0.57%	0.00%

Women reported having received messages asking them to agree to sexual acts in exchange for a favour (36 participants, 5.94%), being pressured to agree to a sexual act (18 participants, 2.97%), and exposure of genitalia by perpetrators (9 participants, 1.49%). Participants confirmed being subjected to tech-facilitated violence, including being sent pornographic or sexually explicit content (32 participants, 5.28%), being shown such content (21 participants, 3.47%), and having personal photos or videos shared without consent with degrading and/or sexual connotations (12 participants, 1.98%).

Among these participants (N=150), 80% and more did not report these cases in BiH (80%), Croatia (80.49%), and Slovenia (66.67%). In Serbia 66.67% of women did not report such cases. Among women who did (N=32), they have mainly done so to superiors or responsible departments within their media organisations, in 25 cases (16.67%). Seven cases (4.67%) from BiH (1), Croatia (4) and Serbia (2) were reported to the police or the prosecutor's office. In two cases, internal mediation was initiated, and the process is on-going.

A higher number of participants (N=179, 29.54%) across the region confirmed being physically harassed through inappropriate and unwanted contact. The highest frequency was indicated in Croatia (38.89%) and Slovenia (33.04%), consisting of more than one third of survey participants, compared to BiH (21.78%) and Serbia (20.11%). The majority of participants who confirmed being subjected to inappropriate and unwanted physical contact identified newsroom colleagues as perpetrators (55.87%), followed by superiors (31.28%). Three women disclosed being survivors of rape, or attempted rape. Two women reported this from Serbia, and one woman reported from Croatia. Two women did not report these crimes, while one woman mentioned reporting incidents to superiors and responsible departments, as well as to the prosecutor's office. In this case, no procedure was initiated in the aftermath.

One survey participant explained that she had experienced sexual harassment and gender-based violence throughout her career, in three different media outlets. This signals that the problem is embedded in workplace cultures where perpetrators feel protected by institutional silence or complicity. She described a range of incidents, including blackmail by superiors in exchange for employment, verbal harassment, and frequent unwanted sexual advances. She reported being shown photographs of an erect genital organ, repeatedly groped in intimate areas while working, and subjected to daily propositions for sexual relations. She also experienced retroactive salary reductions after she had already completed her tasks, which were then followed by offers of sexual relations to *"earn more that month."* She identified these incidents as *"the most impactful experiences"* on her *"life, mental health, and career development."*

Another woman explained that she did not want to share any information about an incident she had experienced because she was still working in the newsroom where she was violated, continuously fearing for her safety: *"I am afraid to talk about it because I still work at that media outlet, just in a different office. I am afraid for my physical safety, afraid of the person, and he also has good connections; everyone knows he has been doing this for years, but no one has ever sanctioned him; on the contrary, he was even appointed to sit on the committee for such cases."* This specific account demonstrates that gender-based violence in the workplace cannot be reduced to individual misconduct, but reflects the organisational and cultural patterns that enable violence.

One interviewee from Croatia noted that sexual harassment was much more common and socially accepted 20 years ago. She believes that the culture has changed significantly and that, although sexual remarks addressing women journalists are still present, they are less frequent and more benign than was the case in the past. However, another journalist from Croatia stated the opposite: she endured, witnessed, and heard about sexual harassment in the workplace almost on a daily basis. She also highlighted that after the #MeToo movement, prominent cases from academia were reported, but not from the field of the media.

One interviewee from Slovenia stated that sexism, misogyny, and disrespect are deeply embedded in the institutional culture, describing a workplace permeated by sexist comments, gossip, and frequent violations of women's personal and physical space. This includes inappropriate remarks about appearance, unsolicited advice on how women should dress, and intrusive personal questions about family and motherhood. She recalled being told by a male superior not to appear "too well-groomed" at work so that other women would not be jealous and *"so that no one would think we have something going on."* Such comments, she explained, illustrate the extent to which women are frequently undermined by sexualised and gendered insinuations. The most serious case of internal abuse she recounted involved a prolonged period of psychological and verbal violence by a male editor, who served as her immediate superior. The harassment included daily yelling, humiliation, vulgar insults, and systematic intimidation of female subordinates.[35] As per the survey results presented earlier, men in leadership positions, but also male colleagues, perpetrate most harassment against women working in the media.

In one extreme case from Slovenia, abuse took place over seven years in a newsroom of around ten employees, mostly women, under the authority of a male editor whose behaviour was characterised by verbal violence, intimidation, and psychological terror. The daily reality involved shouting, insults, sexist and vulgar remarks, door-slamming, and physical acts of aggression such as throwing chairs or blocking exits. Another female colleague became so frightened that she locked herself in a bathroom, prompting the group to finally file a formal complaint. Before this, the interviewee's informal protests were dismissed by the editor-in-chief, who told her to "shout back", reflecting a broader normalisation of inappropriate behaviour in the newsroom. After the collective complaint, the case went to the internal service for reporting mobbing, which suggested mediation as in many previous unsuccessful cases, which the victims then refused, so the perpetrator was merely transferred to another department, and no sanctions or official documentation were ever communicated to them.

One interviewee from BiH described experiencing severe and prolonged sexual harassment by the owner of a media outlet where she worked. For more than two years, he would call her into his office, lock the door, and subject her to behaviour that left her so distressed she began taking tranquilisers before every meeting with him. She spoke openly about the harassment to colleagues in the newsroom because she felt they needed to understand what she was enduring, but she never reported the abuse outside the organisation. Those incidents are not isolated and are part of an abusive culture that goes unpunished. Men shape and sustain patriarchal newsroom norms, in which women need to navigate power from below, and where power imbalances make accountability almost impossible. Such systems create unsafe environments for women to speak, grow, or challenge inequality.

[35] Excerpt taken from the national report for Slovenia.

The survey findings highlight the serious and underreported nature of gender-based violence among women working in the media. The reports from women, and their silence, highlight the environment of fear and the traumatising nature of these experiences. The persistent sense of threat illustrated by the statement of one woman shows the enduring impact of gender-based violence emboldened by impunity and systemic power imbalances. The fear of retaliation, professional repercussions, and the lack of response often silence survivors.

4.5 Toxic Newsroom Culture, Power Imbalances, And Normalisation Of Abuse

Many newsrooms function as hostile and unsafe workplaces for women, rather than spaces of professional solidarity. They are frequently described as toxic environments in which discriminatory practices, everyday sexism, and harassment are normalised. Women journalists repeatedly describe a lack of meaningful support from colleagues, who often respond to harassment with silence, minimisation, or passive acceptance. However, newsroom superiors appear through this research as the most frequent perpetrators of workplace harassment, underscoring the role of power, hierarchy, and institutional culture in sustaining abuse.

Regional data indicate that sexual harassment most frequently occurs within newsrooms, with just over two thirds of reported cases (67.82%) attributed to perpetrators who are either newsroom colleagues or direct superiors. By country, only in BiH was an external perpetrator dominant, with 29.70% of women identifying other citizens, such as on online platforms, as perpetrators of sexual harassment. Newsroom colleagues were most frequently identified as perpetrators in Slovenia (49.57%) and Croatia (50.93%).

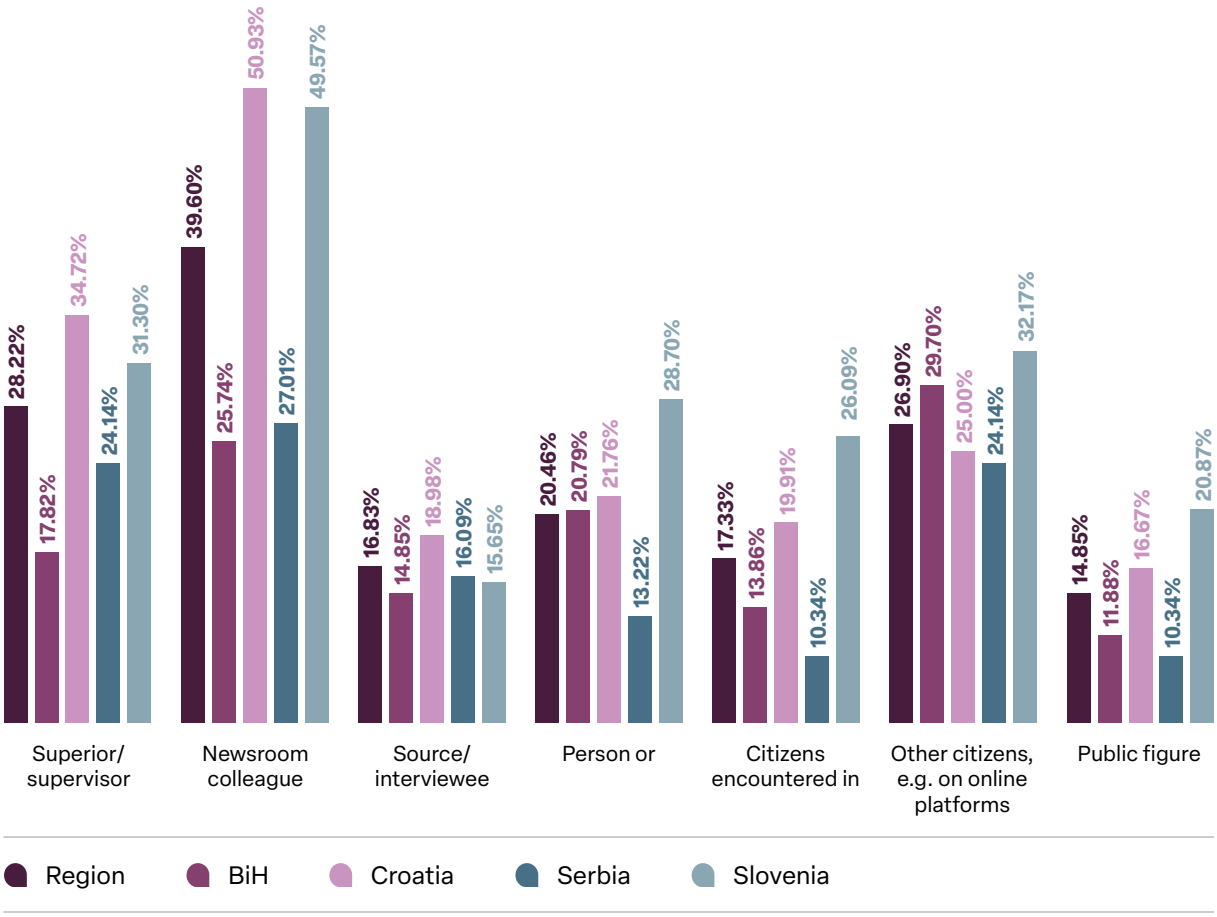

Figure 12: Frequency of identified perpetrators per country, in incidents consistent with sexual harassment

Harassment by superiors was most prevalent in Croatia (34.72%), followed by Slovenia (31.30%), Serbia (24.14%), and Bosnia and Herzegovina (17.82%). Overall, the findings underscore that sexual harassment of women journalists is predominantly an internal workplace issue, implicating both hierarchical power relations and everyday newsroom interactions.

The comparatively lower figures reported by survey respondents from Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia should be interpreted with caution. As evidenced by the qualitative interviews, lower reporting and identification of harassment do not necessarily indicate lower prevalence, but rather reflect limited awareness and recognition of what constitutes sexual harassment, as well as a higher tolerance of inappropriate behaviour that has become normalised in newsroom culture (see chapter 6). In contrast, the higher proportions reported in Slovenia and Croatia likely reflect stronger alignment with international and EU gender-equality frameworks, longer exposure to sensitisation and awareness-raising efforts, and clearer normative standards for identifying harassment. These contexts may also offer relatively greater confidence in reporting and marginally lower fear of repercussions, enabling women journalists to more readily recognise and name such experiences. Overall, women working in the media in BiH and Serbia were much more inclined to recognise and confirm these events when happening outside of newsrooms and online.

Sexist and misogynistic narratives are omnipresent in newsrooms across the four countries, which normalises toxic environments, sexist language, and legitimises misconduct against women. Interviews from all four countries reported at least one, and in most cases multiple examples, of the abuse and harassment they have personally experienced at some point in their career. The culture of silence in newsrooms masks and normalises everyday sexism through jokes at work, exclusion of women reporters from important or 'masculine' assignments, and frequent belittling—all of which desensitise media organisations to misconduct and discourage women from reporting early-stage attacks, ultimately leading to their escalation and to institutionalised harm against women in their workplace. Women working in the media are often told to endure pressure or are blamed for lacking a sense of humour when they do not accept sexist jokes. Widespread sexist narratives present in broader society further feed into the normalisation of sexism in the daily working culture of media organisations. As one journalist from Serbia noted, even though women journalists are more numerous, "*sexist and misogynistic comments towards women journalists are an everyday occurrence. This kind of narrative has been normalised.*"

These narratives are not confined to newsroom environments; they are also present on social media platforms, in the statements of politicians and public figures, who further legitimise and reproduce a climate in which humiliating and sexualised comments about women journalists become normalised. In this way, **institutional cultures, political discourse and digital platforms interact to reinforce broader patterns of gender-based violence**, in which degrading behaviour towards women journalists is rendered socially acceptable rather than publicly sanctioned.

Comments and stereotypes around women's physical appearance is the target of both compliments and insults by both male and female colleagues at work, but it is rarely confronted or reported due to the possibility that it may backfire. Female journalists are subject to continual examinations regarding clothing, hairstyle, and physical presentation, while similar judgments are never directed toward men. One journalist recounted examples of colleagues being mocked or judged for wearing glasses, flat shoes, or trousers, with comments implying that they would look "better" if more conventionally feminine.[36] Such remarks, often made publicly, reinforce stereotypes linking women's professional legitimacy to their physical attractiveness.

One interviewee from Serbia highlighted how body-shaming is a persistent and harmful feature of newsroom culture, disproportionately affecting women journalists. She recalled the example of a colleague who, due to a temporary hormonal issue, had gained a small amount of weight. The change was immediately noticed and became a target of ridicule: *"The comments started right away: 'What will we do now?', 'How will this look?', 'Oh God, look at her, is she falling apart?' Meanwhile, the appearance of male colleagues is never a topic. No one ever says, 'He's handsome and that's enough, he doesn't need to try,' nor, 'We won't give him that assignment because he's too handsome, so he must be stupid and incapable of something more.'"* She added that some women were told *"it's enough if you just show your legs,"* and that studio sets were even arranged so that female presenters' legs would be visible in order to attract viewers. (Journalist, Serbia, female). Her testimony is but one illustration of how appearance-based judgements and gendered double standards not only demean women but also shape professional expectations and opportunities in ways that men simply do not experience.

[36] Excerpt taken from the interview report.

Inappropriate language, remarks, and jokes are an integral part of sexist culture in newsrooms. An interviewee from Slovenia referred to instances of persistent diminutive address and gendered language, where editors used affectionate or infantilising forms such as “dear” or “sweetheart” in written communication, even after being told such phrasing was unwelcome. When one female colleague reciprocated this linguistic pattern toward her superior to demonstrate its inappropriateness, he appeared surprised and failed to grasp the intended message. Many women take the harassment for granted, as an integral part of the media work, and something they ‘need to be ready for’.

Another interviewee from Slovenia described how her organisation’s culture has long tolerated inappropriate remarks, “unprofessional jokes,” and physical intimidation, framing them as personality quirks rather than as violence or harassment. This normalises abusive behaviour against women in the workplace and reinforces impunity, while harassment and violence are projected as part of everyday life in the media sector.

Survey responses from BiH imply that many women adopted a coping strategy rooted in self-management: women described negotiating with themselves, relying on the hope that the behaviour would cease over time, and managed the experience and trauma personally instead of reporting the incidents. Also, not all journalists perceive such instances as unsafe and threatening to women. One journalist from BiH noted that newsrooms are generally perceived as safe, with no explicit sexual harassment reported even though many forms of inappropriate behaviour, such as invading personal space, staring at women’s bodies, or “accidental” touching, are ‘common yet rarely recognised as harassment’. She recognised that humour based on sexist stereotypes is widespread, with frequent comments about women’s appearance, reproductive health, menstrual cycles, intelligence, or technical competence, but she does not think they amount to direct attacks. Instead, she perceives the working environment as filled with subtle discrimination and gender-based stereotyping. Another journalist from Slovenia, thinks that not all inappropriate behaviour can be attributed to sexist and misogynist culture. She recalled a meeting with editors where discussion digressed from editorial content to gossip about personal relationships among staff, for example: “who is dating whom” and “who is in love with whom.” Although such remarks targeted both men and women, she deemed them unprofessional and indicative of poor workplace culture. Importantly, she noted that these incidents did not stem from managerial hostility or coercion, but rather from a lack of professionalism and blurred boundaries in interpersonal interactions. This attitude echoed the views of another Slovenian journalist who downplayed inappropriate comments to mere jokes, “never crossing the line into something more serious”. She also described an example in which an editor preferred to assign a male journalist rather than a female colleague to cover a protest, explaining that such events might involve physical danger and that sending a man would be “safer.” The interviewee interpreted this as well-intentioned paternalism rather than discrimination, reflecting assumptions about women’s physical vulnerability rather than doubts about their competence.

Confusion over the ambiguity of physical gestures and body language, is also heavily reported, which points to a conclusion that the lack of recognition of sexual harassment remains widespread. Gestures such as hugging or touching occur frequently and are often normalised, minimised, or rationalised as collegial or humorous. The line between friendliness and harassment is therefore blurred, leaving many women uncertain and confused about how to interpret or respond to inappropriate behaviour. One interviewee from Serbia stated that she now understands which behaviour is inappropriate, but that it was much harder to recognise misconduct when she was younger and less experienced. One interviewee observed that this confusion sustains a culture of silence in which female journalists prefer to endure discomfort rather than risk professional repercussions: *"Body-shaming is certainly present, often right on the border between a compliment and sexual harassment. Sometimes even the journalist herself doesn't know how to judge whether it crosses the line or not. Various touches, hugs, or kisses can be seen as collegial gestures, but they can also be harassment. Female journalists often say: "What are we going to make a fuss about, just over a hug?". Even an inappropriate remark can be a form of sexual harassment, but I think women prefer to stay silent rather than create problems." (Journalist, Slovenia, female)*

Newsroom culture is seen by a large majority as **competitive, full of vanity and envy**, where male colleagues mostly treat women as unequal, while competition prevails over female solidarity. The predominant sensationalist culture in journalism often relies on exploitative content about women, often by other women, so the broader solidarity among women in media appears to be weak. On the other hand, senior male editors and colleagues frequently deploy sexualised jokes, and intimidate women physically, by raising their voice, and keeping too much of a physical proximity. In one case from Slovenia, a sexual assault was attempted in an elevator by a colleague, which the victim did not report, and in another case, there was sustained sexual harassment of a young freelance journalist by a well-known male journalist. In this case, a formal complaint was filed, but it was "resolved internally" and never referred to the office responsible for mobbing or discrimination, and no disciplinary measures followed.

Such behaviour is rooted in **patriarchal norms**, which sustain stereotypes of men and women, and presume an inherently inferior position of women in newsrooms. Such cultural norms in media organisations stigmatise survivors and victims, rather than ensuring reliable procedures and processes that would investigate and sanction perpetrators. One woman journalist described situations in which newly employed women were invited for drinks under the pretext of informal networking and faced coercive remarks when declining. In at least one reported instance, a senior journalist warned a younger colleague that no one would believe her if she spoke out, emphasising his longstanding position and professional connections as protection in case of reporting. In a case from Bosnia and Herzegovina, an interviewee gave numerous accounts of the "torture" that young and attractive journalists were subjected to at some public service broadcasters, where such practices were described as a "public secret." Women journalists were often forced to choose between preserving their dignity or keeping their jobs. She recounted the case of a colleague who was pressured to spend a weekend with the station's editor or director, illustrating how coercive such environments could become. The interviewee also referred to practices in a local commercial outlet, where women journalists were occasionally taken to business dinners with marketing clients solely to "sit there and be pretty." Another journalist from Serbia stated that men in leadership positions in media organisations sometimes resort to 'trading of influence', making inappropriate and unwanted advancements while offering faster career promotion to younger female journalists.

She stated during the interview: *"I have a young colleague who is only 26 years old and has been working with me for a year and a half. During that time, she has received numerous unwanted advances, persistent calls, and messages that made her uncomfortable—both on her phone and through social media—from at least ten men who work in the same media company as the two of us."* Similar cases have been recorded in BiH, and implied in other countries too. These examples, which she characterises as widely known within the profession, highlight persistent patterns of sexual exploitation embedded in certain newsroom cultures.

Preference for protecting the reputation of media organisations is sometimes given priority over the protection of women, who are discouraged from reporting abuse or misconduct, or even socially punished within their organisation for endangering the reputation of their employers. Women fear being labelled difficult by their peers or superiors in media organisations, and risk being removed from reporting on stories that may receive high visibility. The professional undermining, the potential isolation at workplace, and the lack of institutional response mechanisms inside media organisations—as reported in all four countries—feel more immediate and more consequential for women's careers than any support they could receive if reporting misconduct. Information from Croatia shows that women in managerial positions sometimes reproduce sexist and misogynistic patterns, indicating how internalised norms reinforce the culture of abuse. Moreover, some women in higher positions within media organisations tend to internalise the patriarchal patterns and misogyny, instead of providing support and solidarity to their colleagues.

The professional undermining, the potential isolation at workplace, and the lack of institutional response mechanisms inside media organisations—as reported in all four countries—feel more immediate and more consequential for women's careers than any support they could receive if reporting misconduct.

Normalisation and relativisation of any kind of gender-related misconduct is one of the most important factors in underreporting of abuse. However, some differences have been noted in comparison between responses from Slovenia and BiH, for example. Of the 11 journalist interviewees from Slovenia, only one did not attribute much significance to discriminatory practices or unequal status of women working in the media. On the other hand, out of the eight interviewees from BiH, more than half downplayed or minimised discrimination and harassment in newsrooms, accepting the normalisation of sexist culture in newsrooms. There are many ways in which those differences in responses could be interpreted, some of which may lie in the more favourable social and legal context for gender equality in Slovenia. On the other hand, journalists in BiH and Serbia may have had less and more limited exposure to information and frameworks which help identify discrimination, sexual harassment, and workplace abuse, making it harder for them to recognise harmful behaviour. As visible from some extreme examples from BiH, an abusive culture is largely normalised and accepted through long-standing cultural norms in workplaces, and newsrooms in particular, where such behaviour is accepted as 'part of the job'.

As a consequence of working in such environments and exposure to abusive culture, women tend to internalise such norms and tolerate behaviour that would be otherwise considered as harmful and abusive. A Serbian journalist reflected on how deeply normalised sexist and inappropriate behaviour is in the media sector, noting that many women do not recognise harassment because they have never been adequately sensitised to identify it. This lack of awareness, she explained, is shaped by broader social norms that teach women to accept or overlook such behaviour. *"I don't think awareness exists. I'm from a younger generation, and while I was filling out the questionnaire, I went through some of the questions and realised, 'Look, this is also sexual harassment,' and I went back to reconsider my answers. I myself hadn't registered some situations as possibly sexist or inappropriate. We are not sensitised at all; we've been taught to just get over it because it's accepted."* This issue was also highlighted by a journalist from Croatia who noted that young journalists are especially vulnerable to harassment and receive little support. She sees this as a problem not only with her male colleagues, but with women colleagues as well. Women journalists either accept the situation as something normal or are not informed enough to adequately respond to the harassment.[37]

Patterns of low statistics on reporting sexual harassment further underscore the extent to which it has become normalised in newsroom environments. When 183 women participating in the regional survey reflected on their reasons for not reporting workplace violations, more than one third stated that harassment, attacks, and rights violations occur too frequently for reporting to be meaningful, indicating a perception that such incidents are routine rather than exceptional. In addition, 21.31% of respondents explicitly described harassment and related violations as a normal occurrence in their professional environment. Together, these findings point to a deeply entrenched culture of normalisation and resignation, in which the frequency of abuse itself discourages reporting and reinforces silence, allowing harassment to persist largely unchallenged.

[37] Excerpt taken directly from the interview report.

4.6 Beyond The Newsroom: External Actors, Field Exposure, And The Reinforcement Of Abuse

Beyond the newsroom, women working in the media are exposed to an often-interconnected set of risks and violent patterns of abuse by persons they are writing about, citizens, public officials, and politicians. These conditions rarely end with formal working hours as journalists remain continuously publicly exposed and accessible, while social media platforms further extend professional exposure. According to the journalists interviewed, spaces outside newsrooms are often perceived as unsafe environments in which women are particularly exposed to attacks. Many situate this exposure within a broader context of patriarchal backlash, gender stereotypes about women journalists, and societal narratives in which women occupying public roles are treated as targets.

A journalist from Slovenia described this dynamic as a "backlash of patriarchy": *"In some ways, there is visible progress in women's position in society, but at the same time, there are all these calls for a renewed domestication of women: that we've achieved too much, that we're too bold, that there are too many of us, and that we're too loud."* According to her, these attitudes are reflected not only in social media spaces but also within segments of mainstream media, where male hosts are allowed to question established gender equality and human rights frameworks, while women journalists covering these topics are quickly labelled as "left-wing activists."

Survey and interview data consistently identify social media platforms as one of the most frequent and visible arenas in which the hostility manifests, often in an intensified form. One journalist from BiH described it as the space *"where protection does not exist."* This largely unregulated space, according to her, communicates a sense of impunity to perpetrators. When asked why such attacks persist, she noted that harassment often occurs *"simply because they can."*

Survey and interview data show that citizens on online platforms are the most frequent perpetrators of smear campaigns and sexist or sexualised comments (26.90%), followed by individuals about whom journalists had reported. In the majority of cases, these are degrading sexualised comments whose purpose is, or which in practice represent, a violation of personal dignity and which create fear and hostile environment. Such attacks predominantly take place via social media platforms.

Journalists from Slovenia further emphasised that online attacks directed at women journalists are often more personalised and sexualised than those aimed at male colleagues, frequently focusing on physical appearance, age, or prescribed gender roles, including suggestions that women should prioritise motherhood over professional work. Their male colleagues are more commonly criticised or discredited on the basis of their reporting, viewpoints, or perceived political positions. Whereas such criticism allows for argumentative or professional rebuttal, attacks against women tend to be unrelated to their journalistic work and instead target their gender or personal characteristics, making them more difficult to counter such positions through reasoned debate.

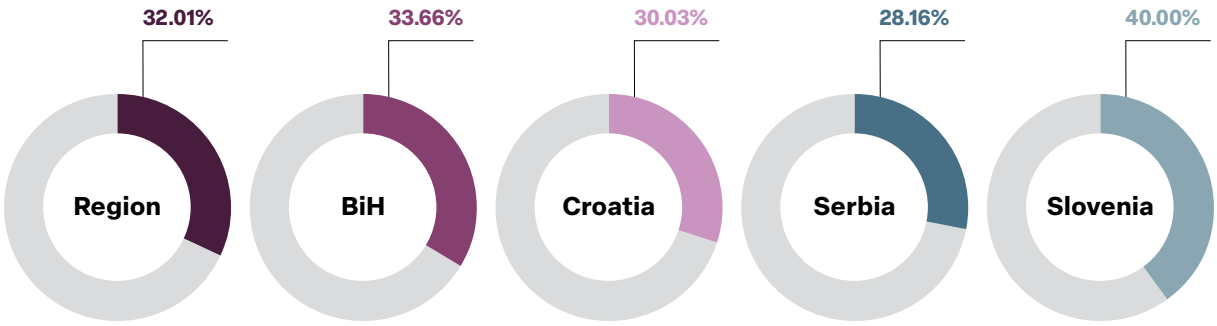

Figure 13: Prevalence of experiences of being targeted with smear campaigns, sexist and sexualised comments by citizens through online platforms, or other indirect channels

There are examples of different coping strategies in response to this environment. Some journalists just stop following comments, a pattern most frequently observed among interviewees from Bosnia and Herzegovina. Others rely on humour as a coping mechanism, as one journalist remarked: *"If I had a dollar for every (hateful) message, I could have bought a decent apartment in Istria."* By contrast, several journalists from Slovenia described systematically documenting every abusive comment as a form of self-protection.

One journalist also pointed out that disengaging from online spaces carries professional costs. Journalists are often among the first actors that citizens contact when facing social problems, frequently before approaching formal institutions. Paradoxically, however, while journalists substitute for weakened or ineffective institutions, they are also subjected to disproportionate levels of criticism and hate speech. As one interviewee from BiH observed: *"Therefore, media institutions are often substituting for the role of other institutions in society because of their corruption or ineffectiveness. However, they are still subjected to much higher criticism and hate speech from citizens."*

Forms of harassment originating from individuals who were the subjects of journalistic reporting account for 20.46% of cases, and in Slovenia this figure reaches as high as 28.70%.

These incidents occur both in person and through technology-facilitated channels. Journalists reported invitations framed as professional follow-ups or consultations that served as pretexts for sexual or romantic advances, a pattern noted in Croatia. Journalists from BiH described frequent instances of flirting and unsolicited comments on their appearance, including remarks such as *"you are not as dumb as you look* (blonde haired)" (Journalist, female, BiH). In several cases, in-person interactions escalated into technology-facilitated harassment and follow-up threats, with perpetrators continuing contact through emails, social media messages, and phone calls. One journalist described such an episode as extremely distressing and invasive.

In Serbia, cases of misuse of photographs and video material are reported, including sexually explicit deepfakes, used to discredit women working in the media. These incidents began several years ago, and journalists expressed concern that the increasing accessibility of AI tools is likely to intensify such practices rather than diminish them. One woman journalist from Serbia described one of several coordinated gender-based online harassment and intimidation campaigns directed against her, which included the circulation of her photograph and the doxxing of her phone number.

Following the publication of her personal contact details, she received multiple threats and abusive messages. Although she filed a formal complaint, the prosecutor's office dismissed the case, stating that there were no elements constituting a criminal offence. The cumulative impact of these attacks adversely affected her mental health and ultimately led her to change newsrooms and reduce her public visibility and exposure to further digital violence.

Public officials and politicians are also perpetrators. Survey data show that 17.16% of participants reported being targets of gender-based violence perpetrated by public figures, while references to public officials and politicians as perpetrators appeared frequently in qualitative interviews across the countries. Interviewees described instances in which public officials made sexually suggestive remarks or propositions during professional interactions (BiH). Several journalists interpreted such behaviour as part of a broader pattern in which conduct by high-ranking political actors legitimises similar behaviour at lower levels of power (Croatia, BiH). As journalist from Croatia observed: *"This dynamic is publicly recognisable with the way the prime minister treats journalists at press conferences. Because he holds such a high position of power, this kind of behaviour is promoted, imitated, and eventually trickles down to politicians in lower positions. In this way, behaviour from men in the highest positions of power contributes to a culture of derogatory and sexist attitudes towards women journalists."*

Interviewees also highlighted the lack of solidarity from women in politics when such attacks happen. One journalist from Serbia recounted an incident in which a senior parliamentary official publicly questioned her ability to report on children's rights because she did not have children, while women representatives from the ruling party laughed at the remark. Although she described the comment itself as poorly articulated rather than deeply offensive, the reaction of women politicians was experienced as particularly disturbing.

Taken together, violence and harassment occurring beyond the newsroom are shaped by intersecting factors: patriarchal social norms, insufficient institutional responses, weak protection mechanisms, unregulated social media platforms, and political behaviour that implicitly legitimises abuse. As one journalist from Croatia concluded: *"Such behaviour has been normalised by politics, and today everyone feels sufficiently encouraged to attack a woman journalist in public, at least verbally. I won't even talk about online spaces. There, people encourage one another towards the most brutal forms of psychological and emotional abuse, which take place every day in the inboxes and on the profiles of our most prominent women journalists in Croatia."*

Violence and harassment occurring beyond the newsroom are shaped by intersecting factors: patriarchal social norms, insufficient institutional responses, weak protection mechanisms, unregulated social media platforms, and political behaviour that implicitly legitimises abuse.

5 Reporting Behaviour, Weak Reporting Mechanisms, And Fear Of Retaliation And Consequences

The normalisation of gender-based violence in newsrooms, combined with the absence of consistent and trustworthy internal mechanisms of protection, creates an environment in which women feel unsafe to report incidents. Fear of retaliation, negative consequences for career progression and job security, and distrust in institutions are among the key reasons why women journalists do not report gender-based violence. Concerns that reporting may harm their careers, that they will not be believed, and feelings of shame and humiliation further reinforce the perception that such situations are inescapable.

When women do report rights violations, only some cases proceed to formal procedures; however, those that do are largely resolved in women's favour. Despite this, significant barriers persist at the earliest stages of reporting, particularly when incidents are raised with newsroom superiors or responsible departments. Internal mechanisms, where they exist, are often inaccessible, pro forma, or applied in an ad hoc manner. Despite the fact that many formal proceedings are concluded in favour of women who initiated it, the risks of professional repercussions, minimisation, and retraumatisation remain discouraging factors for women considering reporting. In such an environment, many women remain silent and isolated, and experiences of gender-based violence remain unreported, unseen, and unresolved.

In line with that, our research across the four countries showed that internal mechanisms intended to prevent and address misconduct, violence, and harassment in media organisations remain uneven, largely ineffective, and characterised by low levels of trust and utilisation. As per the survey results, internal mechanisms for protection against misconduct, violence, and harassment are most present in Serbia (55.75%), but the majority of the journalists interviewed believe the mechanisms "only exist on paper".

The majority of the journalists interviewed believe the internal mechanisms intended to prevent and address misconduct, violence, and harassment in media organisations "only exist on paper".

- Internal mechanisms

According to the survey data, less than half (45.38%) of survey participants across the region affirmed the existence of at least one internal document regulating attacks and harassment in the workplace. More than a third of participants (36.47%) reported being unsure. This percentage was higher only in Serbia, where over half of participants (56.90%) confidently affirmed the existence of such internal documents.

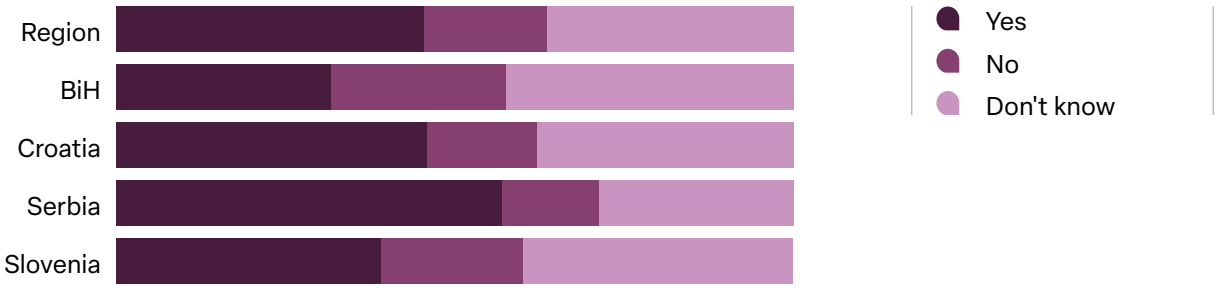

Figure 14: Perception of the existence of at least one internal document in one or more newsrooms they worked for recently

According to the regional survey responses, public and non-profit media are more likely to have internal documents, compared to commercial media. The results also indicate that employees in non-profit media are more confident about whether such documents are in place. However, these policies are in many cases donor-driven and externally imposed, reflecting compliance requirements rather than internally rooted organisational awareness.

Existing arrangements are frequently perceived as **"empty mechanisms"**. Even where protocols formally exist, their use is discouraged or unclear. The largest share of respondents (41.85% across all countries) believe that newsrooms do not encourage the use of internal mechanisms. Less than half believe they do, or do so partially. In this kind of an environment, as shared by the interviewee from Serbia, *"women in the media think they can handle it alone, until it escalates"*; there are several cases where survey respondents shared that they would rather *confide in a friend* then use any formal mechanisms.

Similarly, among women who affirmed the existence of either internal documents, measures and/or mechanisms, approximately half in each country were not sure whether they include protection from sexist and sexual harassment and attacks. Participants who confirmed the existence of said protection mechanisms were most frequently unsure (46.22%) whether they encompass **protection against sexist and sexual harassment and attacks**, while less than a third affirmed that they do (32.87%). They offered similar answers when asked about the existence of mechanisms for the prevention of gender-based discrimination.

One survey participant from BiH explained that they do not know because the document is not available to employees. However, during the interviews, many women journalists expressed negative views about the usefulness of those documents as they are seldom used in practice. One survey participant from Croatia described a disturbing case where *"the abuser was seated on the Ethics Board responsible for handling reports of sexual assault."*

Public media organisations in Croatia mainly have 'dignity commissioners', and ethnic committees, and there are so-called confidants in Slovenia, but the number of reported cases still remains low (Table 3). Mediation and disciplinary procedures are rarely used, with respondents from Slovenia and Serbia confirming a higher number of cases in comparison to Croatia and BiH. Journalists also shared examples of innovative pilot initiatives, such as the use of AI and applications to report discrimination (Croatia, BiH), though this remains experimental and has not yet been operational.

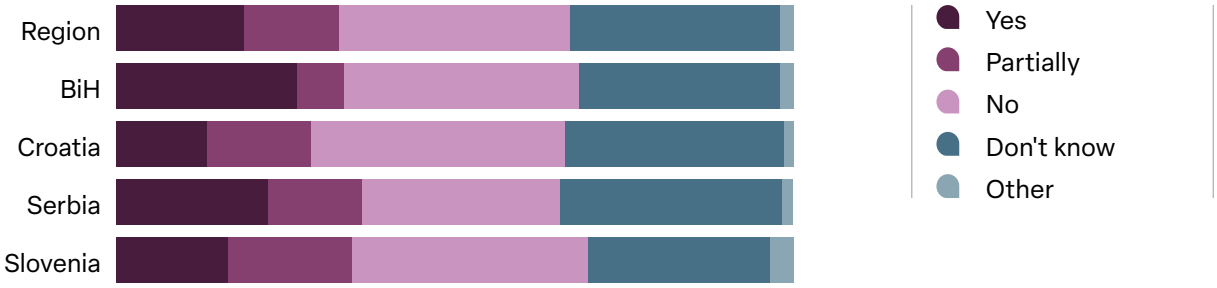

Figure 15: Perceptions regarding whether internal documents, measures, and mechanisms include protection from sexist and sexual harassment, among participants who confirmed existence of any form of protection (N=502)

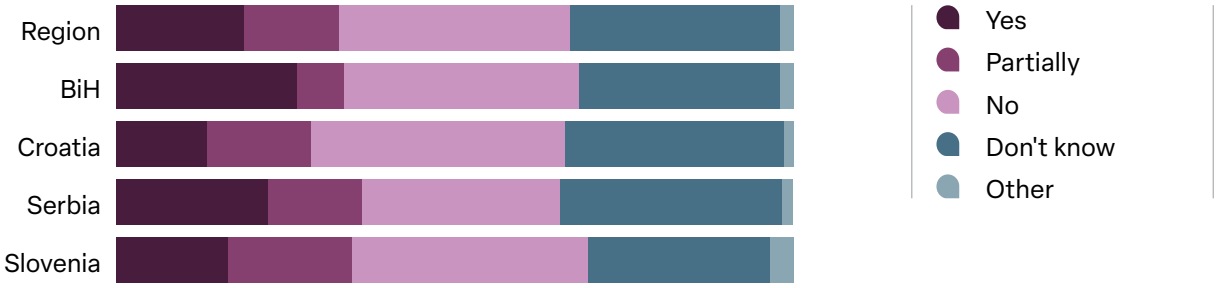

Figure 16: Perceptions regarding whether the media outlet respondents most recently worked for has established mechanisms to prevent gender-based discrimination

- Preventive measures

Preventive measures are short-term, ad hoc, and dependent on project-based funding. In each country, half or more of the participants (55.61%) perceived that preventive measures are not undertaken within newsrooms. Interviewees also confirmed that the prevention action is largely absent. As noted by an expert from Serbia, "preventive mechanisms often depend on ad hoc or project-based funding and typically rely on external psychologists or legal experts rather than stable in-house capacity. In this way it is unsustainable". In terms of available educational programmes and training, based on experience from Serbia, interviewees stated that most of the training focused on safety is related to "safety of equipment and data protection", focused on cybersecurity, which, while important, is not always a priority and aligned with local newsroom reality[38].

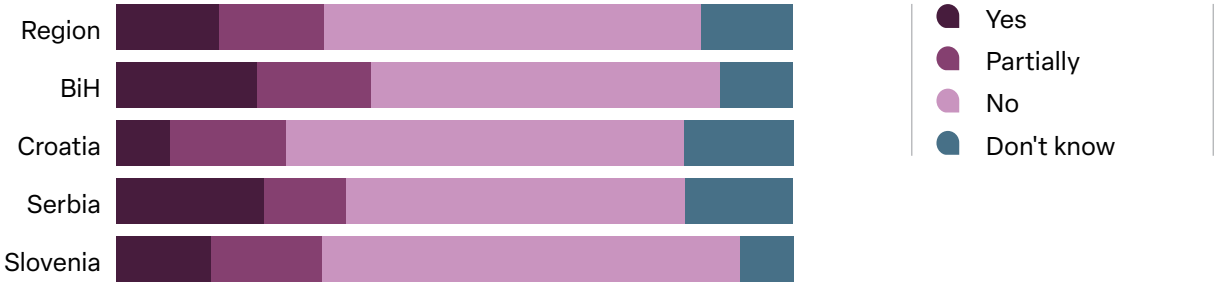

Figure 17: Perceptions of whether the media outlet they currently work for, or have recently worked for, undertakes preventive measures against attacks and harassment in the workplace (e.g. training, sensitisation activities)

In the absence of effective institutional response, women working in the media describe **mutual support and peer solidarity** as one of the supportive responses they trust and can rely on. A local journalist from Serbia described how this moment of mutual support meant a lot to her, *"The solidarity of colleagues I don't even work with helped me the most to feel protected in public. When people see that respected journalists stand behind you, it creates deeper trust." (Journalist, Serbia, female).* Rather than replacing the formal mechanisms, these "networks of solidarity" compensate for their shortcomings by signalling collective response in moments of public exposure and pressure.

In the absence of effective institutional response, women working in the media describe mutual support and peer solidarity as one of the supportive responses they trust and can rely on.

[38] Excerpt taken from the interview report

- Obstacles and minimisation in the reporting of sexual harassment

Reporting rates[39] are particularly low for incidents consistent with sexual harassment among survey participants, when compared to the ratio of reports made regarding attacks, threats, and labour rights violations. The highest reporting rates were observed for incidents involving attacks and threats (61.88%) and discrimination and labour rights violations (32.76%), followed by smear campaigns and sexist comments (25.55%), verbal and non-verbal (20.00%) and physical sexual harassment. This hierarchy of reportability is indicative of the social and legal recognition of sexual harassment, as women working in the media are more likely to feel empowered or justified in reporting physical danger than stigmatised experiences of sexual harassment.

For a number of women, this study was the first time they had disclosed experiences of sexual harassment. While across the region, approximately 80% of women did not report sexual harassment through institutions, or relevant instances within newsrooms,[40] they frequently relied on personal support networks instead. While many women kept these experiences private, 65 respondents explicitly confirmed that they had not spoken about them to anyone—including newsroom colleagues, institutions, friends, or family members—disclosing them for the first time through the survey. This underscores the deeply hidden nature of sexual harassment and the barriers to seeking support, which may include shame, fear of the perpetrator, and the normalisation of abusive behaviour. Other reasons for non-reporting may include a desire to handle the situation privately or the belief that the incident was not serious enough. One survey participant from Croatia, who experienced unwanted and degrading gender-based jokes and comments, stated that she chose to ignore it "because it was not severe enough to report."

For a number of women, this study was the first time they had disclosed experiences of sexual harassment.

[39] This includes women who confirmed reporting attacks/harassment/rights violations to one or multiple entities. This includes superiors and relevant departments within newsrooms, journalist associations, the police and/or prosecutor's office, or other relevant institutions.

[40] The actual data on real responses to cases of sexual harassment are difficult to ascertain, as approximately one quarter of women skipped this question through the survey.

Table 3: Regional survey results showing reporting rates, initiated procedures, and case outcomes in favour of women, by violation types

	Number of women who experienced incidents	Number of women who reported incidents[41]	Number of initiated proceedings	Number of cases determined in favour of women
Physical attacks and threats	223 (36.80%)	138 (61.88%)	46%	19/24 (79.17%)
Discrimination and labour rights violations	351 (57.92%)	115 (32.76%)	35%	24/26 (92.31%)
Smear campaigns and sexist comments	458 (75.58%)	117 (25.55%)	21%	12
Verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment	150 (24.75%)	30 (20.00%)	6%	3
Physical sexual harassment	181 (29.87%)	20 (11.05%)	8%	4

Survey results reflect a **lack of systemic support, particularly in cases of non-physical sexual harassment transgressions.** The lack of support in cases of non-physical sexual harassment in newsrooms is evident in differences between cases reported to superiors and relevant departments, compared to cases where follow-up to reports occurred. Of seven cases involving pressure to engage in sexual acts that were reported to superiors, four were not addressed further through any procedure, while the remaining cases were only partially resolved.

Minimisation of verbal and non-verbal sexual harassment by newsroom superiors was mentioned several times. One illustrative case involves a woman from Croatia who reported harassment to her superiors, only to have the incident downplayed and dismissed. Faced with inaction at the organisational level, she escalated the complaint to the supervisory board, which subsequently forwarded the case to the State Attorney's Office (DORH), reporting both the harassment and the failure of her superiors to respond. This case highlights how institutional minimisation not only obstructs internal resolution, but places an additional burden on victimised individuals.

Several cases demonstrated **uneven and ad hoc responses when sexual harassment occurs** in the field. In one instance, a woman who experienced verbal sexual harassment during an interview was supported by her editor, who ensured that she no longer had to communicate with the individual involved. In another case from Croatia, a journalist described receiving support from her media organisation after being sexually harassed by a colleague from a different newsroom; her employer contacted the other media outlet and requested a formal apology. However, the respondent remained unsure whether any further action was taken, underscoring the lack of transparency and follow-through in such interventions.

Obstacles and minimisation also extend to interactions with law enforcement, as illustrated by cases reported in Serbia. In one instance, authorities declined to initiate legal proceedings, categorising the incident as a sexist threat. In another case, although partial identification of the perpetrators and the responsible online platform was achieved, no prosecution followed. As a result of such experiences, many women exposed to digital violence resort to alternative coping strategies.

[41] Ibid.

Among cases that progressed to concluded procedures, outcomes were most often decided in favour of the women who reported the incident.[42] This suggests that when cases are formally addressed, women's claims are more likely to be substantiated. Of eight cases of physical sexual harassment, four cases were concluded in favour of the victim, and one is still in process. Two cases from Serbia involving unwanted and inappropriate physical contact were addressed via internal organisational procedures. In one case, HR followed the rulebook, but the resolution was perceived by the victim as only partial. In the other case, internal mediation resulted in a formal warning, after which the harassment stopped, and the victim took additional steps to ensure her safety, citing relocation and lingering fear of being contacted through ICTs. These cases highlight inconsistencies in organisational responses and support, and demonstrate that even when harassment formally ends, the burden of managing risk and ensuring safety often remains with the victim.

Finally, it is important to emphasise that, despite the low reporting rates, a significant number of respondents, when asked how they would act and what they would advise others to do, stated in the vast majority of cases that **harassment should always be documented and reported.** The majority of survey participants in the regional survey agree that women should report harassment, attacks, and rights violations to institutions, rather than keeping silent or sharing their grievances only with close ones. The majority believed that reports should be made to superiors or responsible departments for such issues within the media outlet (78.71%), to professional associations such as journalist' associations and unions (68.98%), and to the police and/or prosecutor's office (60.56%).

However, those attitudes towards reporting are not reflected in actual behaviour. The number (N=360) of participants who confirmed experiences of attacks/harassment/rights violations confirmed that the most frequent response (47.78%) is to ignore the incident[43].

[42] Although favourable outcomes were less prevalent among cases of smear campaigns and comments, they constituted the majority of concluded proceedings in that category as well.

[43] The findings in this section do not represent the entire sample, due to the discrepancy between the perception of being subjected to harassment/attacks/rights violations, compared to confirmation of specific experiences that qualify as harassment/attacks/rights violations. For each percentage, the total value is indicated.

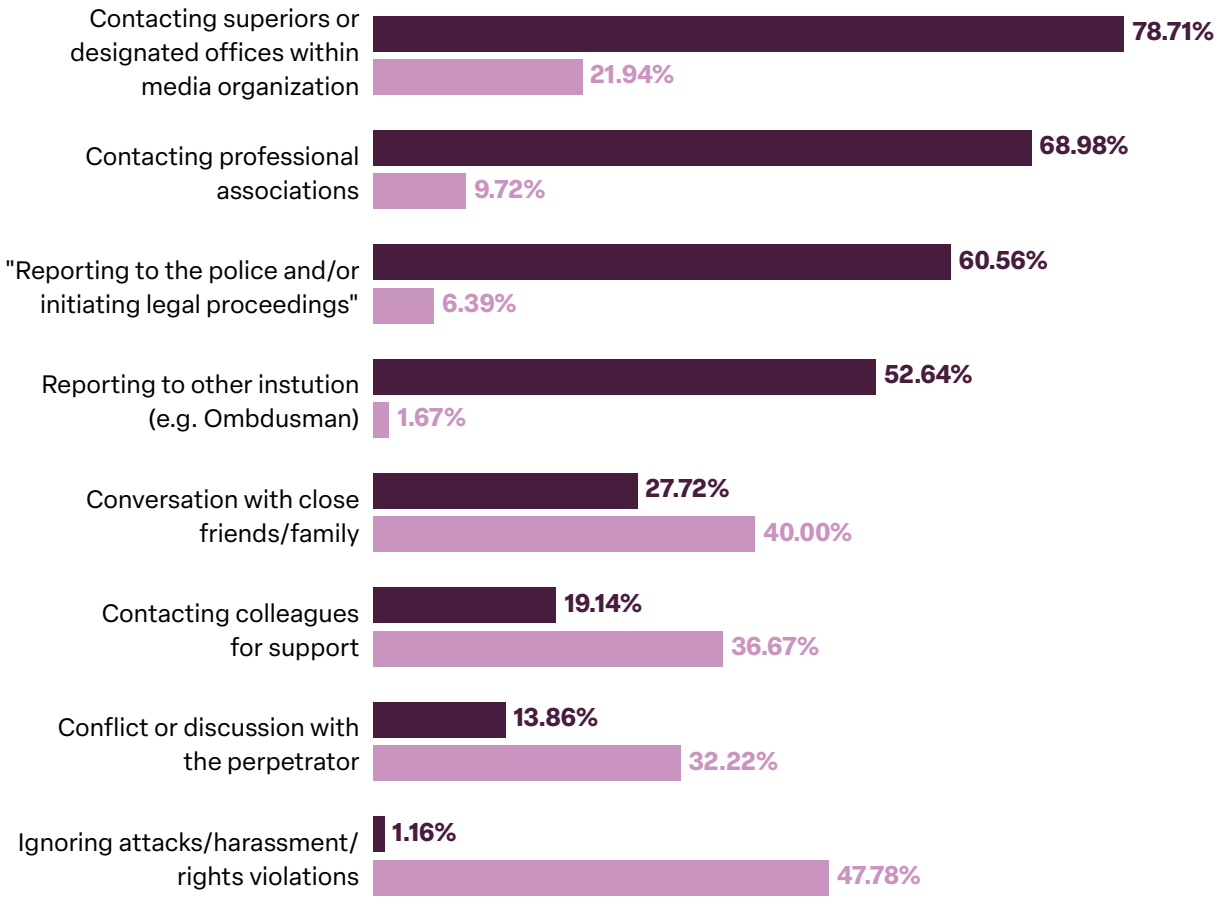

Figure 18: Gap between attitudes about how women should respond to attacks, harassment, and rights violations and actual lived responses to such incidents. The figure compares perceived appropriate responses (N=606) with reported actions taken by women who experienced these violations and did not deny them (N=360).

- Barriers to Reporting Misconduct

The lack of trust in the effectiveness or impartiality of procedures after reporting is one of the main reasons behind women's decision not to report violations of their rights in the workplace (reported by 44.81%). The lack of effectiveness is attributed to different factors: around 40% of respondents from Slovenia consider these violations too common for reporting to be productive, while in Bosnia and Herzegovina, participants most frequently noted that they considered reporting procedures and accompanying mechanisms exhausting and too long (26.09%).

In cases where internal rulebooks on sexual harassment and misconduct exist, they usually include mediation as a mechanism for conflict management, which many interviewees are sceptical about it because it treats the victim and the perpetrator as equally responsible and in a need of bilateral resolution. Almost all interviewees who commented on meditation think that it does not treat the problem in an effective way, and most women avoid it because they do not want another direct confrontation with the perpetrator. Some women expressed a view that meditation only re-traumatises them. A Croatia journalist elaborated further: *"The reasons for not reporting are the absolute certainty that you won't change anything, except for traumatising yourself. You might even lose your job. There is discouragement at every step."*

Fear of victimisation also lies at the core of women's reluctance to use internal protection mechanisms. Many women do not report abuse because they fear being labelled as "weak" or "not up to the job." As a result, despite varying levels of institutionalisation of protection mechanisms, their actual use remains consistently low across all four countries. This can be also attributed to the factors stated earlier, such as the toxic workplaces, patriarchal norms and negative newsroom culture, the culture of silence, and fear of retaliation and backfiring against women who report abuse or misconduct.

One interviewee from Slovenia pointed that in the absence of formal mechanisms, the main support mechanism is the collegial atmosphere in their newsroom. The interviewee described informal discussions and mutual support among female colleagues as the main source of internal assistance. Another journalist stated: *"I have been here for almost 20 years, and I have never received any information from any superior about the existence of protocols for cases of labour rights violations, gender-based discrimination, or similar issues. There is simply nothing — you really have to make a great effort to find this so-called mobbing service." (Journalist, Slovenia, female)*

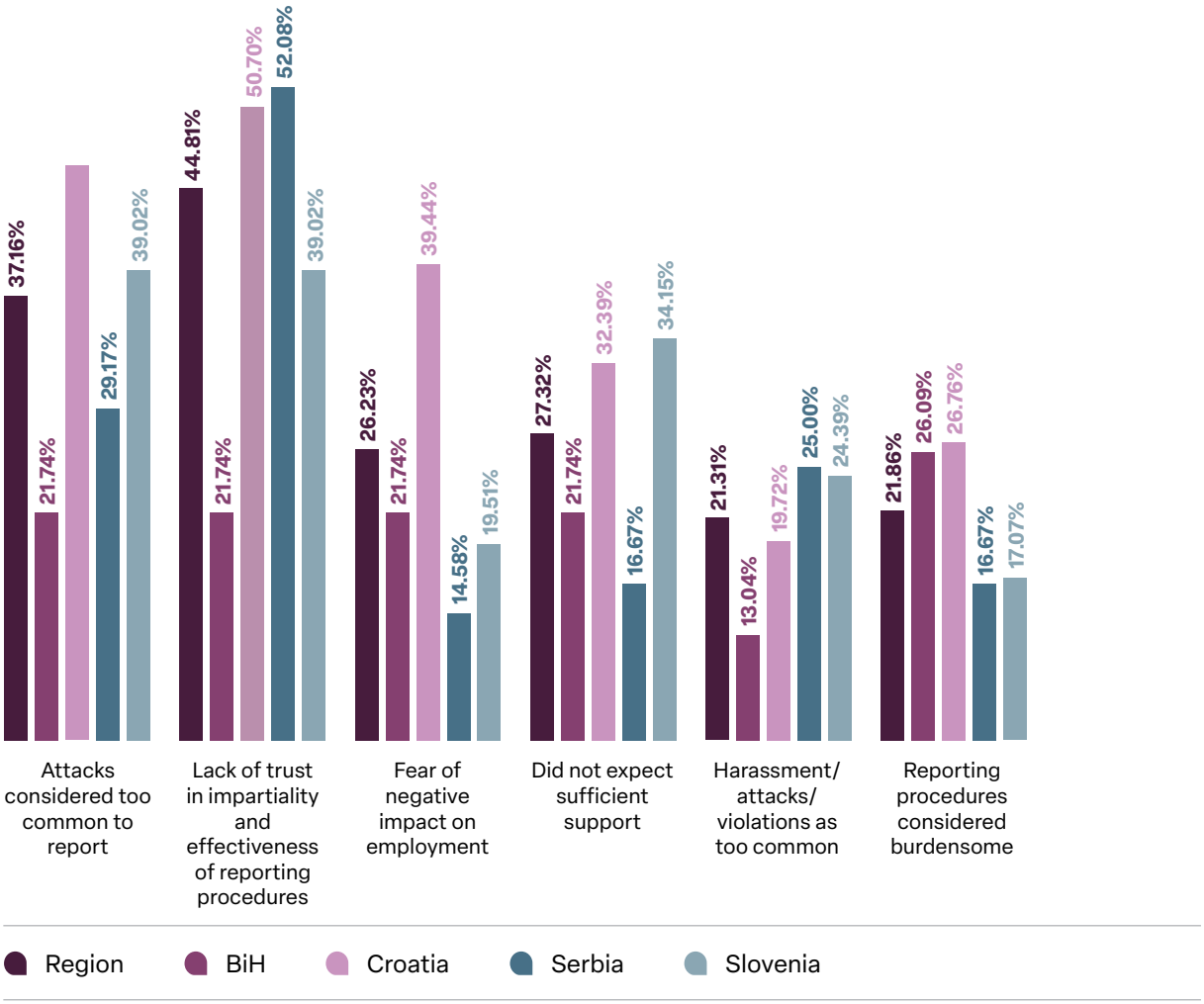

Figure 19: Frequency of indicated reasons for not reporting attacks/harassment/rights violations

Dire consequences experienced by women reporting misconduct and abuse also discourage women from reporting abuse and misconduct, with examples showing that some women lost their jobs after reporting their colleagues or superiors. The majority of women working in Croatian media organisations decided not to report abuse and sexual harassment, and those that did report it feel unsatisfied with the way their case was handled. Similarly in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, women state that the lengthy, exhausting, and ineffective reporting procedures dissuade them from pursuing that route.

"The reasons for not reporting, because there are probably very, very few reports, certainly include the fear of not being believed, the doubt of superiors, and the inefficiency of the protection system. We are all aware, from publicly known cases, that the system is ineffective. Then, I think there is above all the fear of retaliation, since these are people in positions of power. Fear of losing one's job, of harassment, or of being prevented from performing one's work and from career advancement."

Others decide to pull out of such proceedings for personal reasons and to avoid any further interactions with the perpetrators: *"Do you want to get further entangled with such a person or not? At that time, I decided to withdraw, because I just didn't want to have any contact with that person. I understood that our system forces you to provoke such a person even more by standing up to them, which, in my view, is not advisable system." (Journalist, Slovenia, female).*

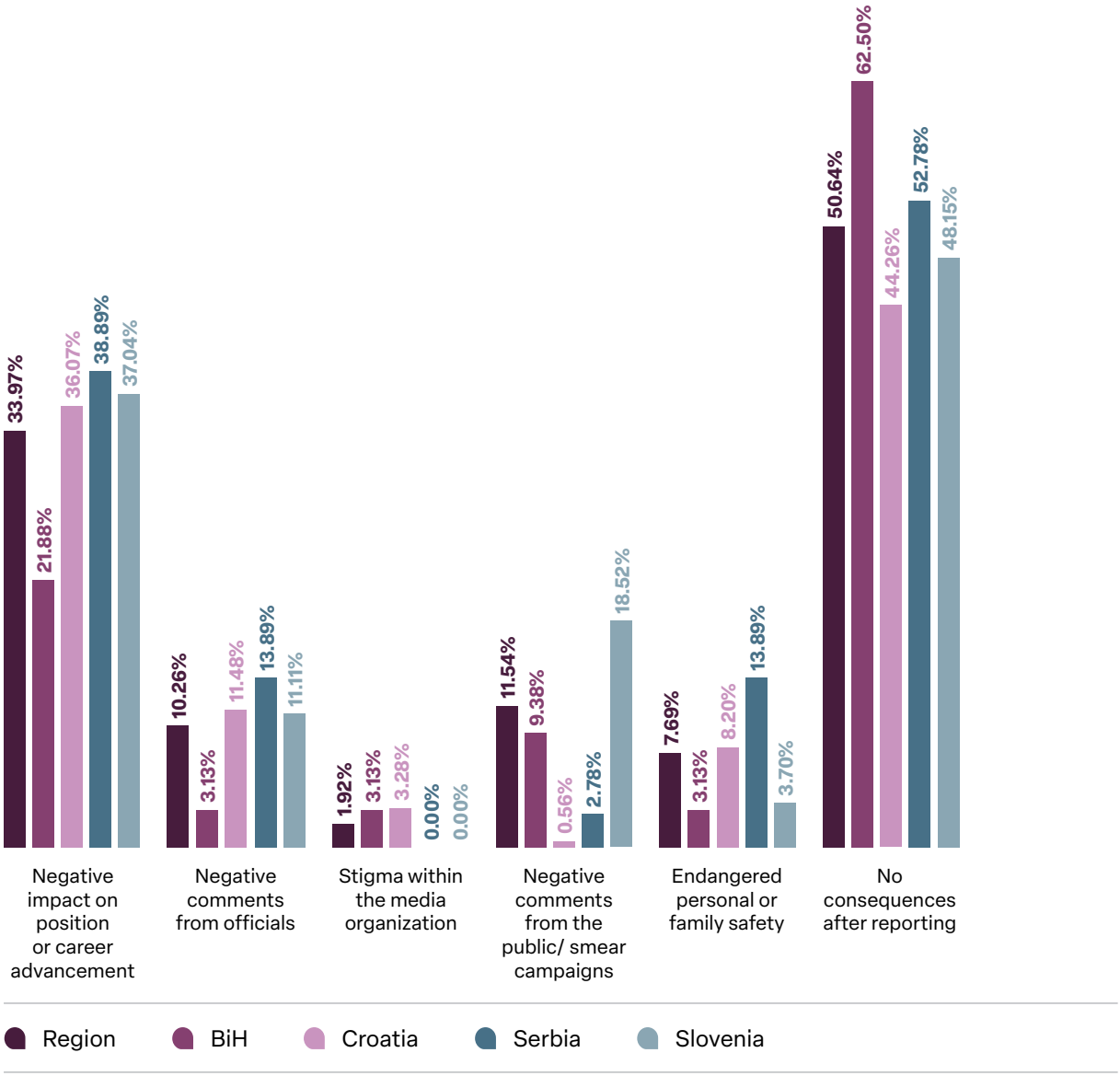

Figure 20: Frequency of consequences experienced by respondents, in the aftermath of reporting attacks/harassment/rights violations

The absence of proactive editorial intervention perpetuates exposure to harassment and diminishes the impact of reporting mechanisms. One interviewee from Slovenia highlighted the critical role of editors and senior management in shaping newsroom culture and implementing preventive or corrective measures. She argued that even consistent reporting and awareness-raising are limited in effectiveness if editorial leadership does not recognise the problem or actively support protective measures for journalists.

Regional survey findings also indicate a tendency of women to under-recognise rights violations in the media sector[44]. Approximately one third (32.26%) of women who initially reported having experienced specific behaviours later denied labelling them as attacks, harassment, discrimination, or rights violations when asked directly in the follow-up question. This applied to 29.68% of women who confirmed having experiences consistent with gender-based violence and 23.31% of those who confirmed experiences consistent with sexual harassment. This pattern was also present in three answers given by women who experienced inappropriate and unwanted physical contact. The pattern suggests that under-recognition functions as a structural barrier to reporting, as many women do not subjectively identify these experiences as rights violations or illegal acts.

Disengagement and deliberate ignoring in response to violence on social media platforms were noted as coping strategies among journalists in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Serbia, while journalists in Croatia expressed scepticism that the hostile online environment would change for the better. Respondents consistently pointed to a high level of harassment on social media platforms, yet many indicated that it was pointless to talk about such experiences at all and, in a significant number of cases, did not document them in any form.

The low number of women reporting gender-based violence is primarily shaped by structural and institutional barriers rather than personal attitudes towards reporting. Under-recognition of gender-based violence—reflecting its broader normalisation, together with isolation and feelings of shame—further contributes to low reporting rates. As a result, decisions about reporting are shaped less by individual willingness and more by assessments of institutional risk, anticipated consequences, and the availability of effective and trustworthy support mechanisms.

[44] This was identified through the use of behaviourally defined questions followed by a control question that offered respondents the opportunity to confirm or deny having experienced attacks, harassment, or rights violations.

6 Key Findings And Conclusions: Structural Drivers, Institutional Practices, And Gendered Outcomes

The analysis across the four countries (Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Slovenia, and Serbia) reveals a systemic pattern of gender inequality, discrimination, gender-based misconduct, violence, and harassment in media workplaces, sustained through interacting structural, institutional, and cultural mechanisms. Rather than isolated incidents, the evidence points to self-reinforcing and intersecting systems in which violations of labour laws, weak institutional accountability, toxic newsroom culture, and gendered professional norms jointly produce persistent discrimination, harassment, silence, and normalisation of violence and harassment. It is a self-reinforcing cycle of gender-based violence and discrimination rooted in unequal power relations and entrenched patriarchal norms. Across the issue areas reported in all countries, the following interlocking systemic loops can be observed:

- Structural precarity – dependence – silence

Labour-rights violations are widespread, and economic insecurity increases dependence on employers and colleagues, raising the perceived cost of reporting abuse and resulting in systematic underreporting, with more than two thirds of women indicating that they did not report incidents.

- Institutional weakness – impunity – internalisation/normalisation

Poor implementation of legal and institutional frameworks, a lack journalist-specific provisions addressing gender-based violence and weak enforcement and sanctioning lead to limited accountability mechanisms in newsrooms. This undermines women's trust in formal procedures, resulting in normalisation and acceptance of harmful practices, where "harassment" is culturally negotiated and applied as a deterrent and a bargaining tactic against women.

- Awareness and recognition gap – measurement gap – policy gap

Qualitative interviews point to severe and persistent forms of abuse, in spite of lower survey data (especially in BiH). This discrepancy indicates under-recognition rather than improved conditions, leading to policy blind spots and inadequate responses. This gap is not just "underreporting," but an institutional invisibility mechanism.

As evidence from this research shows, the core failure is not the absence of rules but the absence of credible enforcement within an unstable and discriminatory labour ecosystem. Harassment and discrimination are not malfunctions of the system—they actually function as governance mechanisms that are enabled and sustained by a patriarchal culture, by informality which enables abuse of women's rights, and normalisation of abuse that is sustained by poor sensitisation of women, and internalisation of abusive practices, narratives, and a toxic culture. In such a context, underreporting is a predictable consequence, caused by rational assessments of risk and futility of processes and procedures. Most newsrooms manage harm through containment rather than remedy, prioritising organisational stability and reputation over accountability. The following findings have been observed across the thematic chapters.

1. Structural preconditions: Weak implementation of labour legislation and a lack of enforcement mechanisms enable rather than constrain abuse

Formal progress does not equal safety in practice.

Even in more aligned legal environments (as in Slovenia), implementation deficits keep risk high. Disrespect of labour legislation and violations of the labour rights of women working in the media is not episodic, but a routine feature throughout newsrooms. It is almost taken for granted by media professionals that informal employment arrangements, unstable contracts, unpaid work, excessive workloads, mobbing, and unlawful dismissals are part and parcel of employment in the media (for men and women). Legal frameworks across all countries lack journalist-specific GBV provisions.

Early career stages constitute a critical risk period.

More than 70% of women reported labour rights violations during the first ten years of their careers, when their experience of workplaces are formative and crucial for their future relationship with discriminative and abusive practices. During this period endurance, silence, and acceptance of mistreatment are learned and internalised by young women; they are then normalised, and eventually accepted as professional norms, which creates a cycle of violence and abuse.

Safety through labour contracts is an illusion,

due to the prevalence of informal and temporary contracts, and many violations of contractual obligations. Contract insecurity is not a mere violation of labour rights—it is also a silencing mechanism, as reporting of such practices is economically irrational, reinforcing the "culture of silence" that is evident in many newsrooms. Qualitative interviews reveal long-term informal arrangements, delayed or absent contracts, partial payments in cash, and coercive employment practices (including pressure related to maternity leave). This discrepancy highlights a concealed informality that is not captured by formal statistics on employment contracts, creating an illusion of employment security for journalists.

Unequal pay operates as both an outcome and a governance mechanism.

Wage disparities do not merely reflect widespread discrimination as reported across the four countries: they also create a structural mechanism that reinforces women's dependency on male decision-makers and editors, they reduce women's bargaining power, and reinforce tolerance of abusive behaviour. This dynamic is especially pronounced in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where informal pay practices and financial insecurity are most visible and widespread.

Economic vulnerability of women working in the media raises the cost of reporting abuse.

Women perform multiple social roles and are often in difficult financial situations, and care for multiple family members, making them very financially vulnerable and dependent on media, even when aware of widespread discrimination. Across all countries, precarious employment transforms reporting of harassment or discrimination into a high-risk act with credible threats of retaliation, job loss, reputational damage, or professional marginalisation.

2. Protection mechanisms: Formalised but non-functional

Internal protection mechanisms exist unevenly

and, where they exist, their use and application are also weak and uneven. Serbia exhibits the highest formal presence of internal acts, while approximately one third of media organisations in Slovenia and Bosnia and Herzegovina report having internal policies. Despite these differences, utilisation remains consistently low across the four countries. This an issue of institutional legitimacy, rather than simply an issue of capacity or resources.

Institutionalisation without enforcement is the dominant pattern.

Protection mechanisms are widely described as "existing on paper only," lacking preventive measures, gender-sensitive design, staff training, or credible enforcement procedures. However, low trust in internal procedures, fear of retaliation, and lack of follow-up result in minimal resolution and limited confidence in outcomes.

Engagement with police and prosecutors is rare,

their procedures are seen as slow, complex and unclear, and outcomes are perceived as ineffective. This reinforces the perception that formal justice offers little protection.

3. Underreporting is a systemic outcome

Underreporting is primarily a rational response by women

to the high cost of reporting, and poor response from protection mechanisms. It is not non-compliance, and it can be partly attributed to poor sensitisation to gender-related abuse and violence. The statistics on underreporting are quite compelling: more than two thirds of women who experienced labour rights violations, harassment, or discrimination did not report them, which tells us even more about the pervasiveness of abuse across the four countries.

Underreporting is deeply embedded in a pervasive culture of silence in newsrooms,

which functions as a funnel through which gender-based discrimination, harassment, and violation of labour rights are channelled and filtered. The rigid hierarchies in newsrooms, sexist narratives, language and culture, and patriarchal norms inhibit women from speaking up. They chose silence for the fear of being perceived as 'problematic', victimised, marginalised, and blamed for provoking abuse. Reporting is portrayed as disloyalty rather than as a protection of rights.

Normalisation of abuse drives, reinforces, and embeds silence.

Over one third of respondents stated that harassment and violations occur too frequently to make reporting productive, while more than one fifth explicitly described such experiences as "normal."

The underreporting paradox is evident in Bosnia and Herzegovina,

where survey data indicated lower rates of reporting, while qualitative research pointed to some extreme examples of abuse and violence. This suggests gaps in awareness, conceptualisation, and recognition of gender-based discrimination, but also extremely low trust in institutions, the police, and the judiciary. At the same time, higher capacity to recognise abuse is evident in Croatia and Slovenia, as indicated by a triangulation through

survey results, interviews, and qualitative research. Example from those countries suggest that longer exposure to sensitisation efforts, clearer normative standards, and a somewhat lower level of fear of repercussions explain the different in reporting rates, and not necessarily in the higher prevalence of abuse in those two countries.

There is structural invisibility of violence and abuse of women working in the media,

which can be attributed to the voluntary nature of reporting, and a lack of systematic data collection on cases of abuse.

4. A toxic newsroom culture sustains and legitimises the patriarchal power relations

The newsroom is the primary site of harm.

Sexual harassment and discrimination predominantly originate within media organisations, implicating both hierarchical power relations (superiors) and horizontal dynamics (colleagues).

Intimidation through vertical hierarchies (from superiors), and horizontal normalisation (from colleagues) go hand in.

Superiors exercise authority through control over contracts, assignments, and advancement, while colleagues contribute to normalisation through silence, minimisation, or participation in sexist practices.

Ambiguity over the meaning of 'normal' behaviour operates as a control mechanism.

Inappropriate and sexualised jokes, comments, body-shaming, positive and negative comments on women's appearance blur the lines between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. This again reinforces normalisation of abuses, discourages reporting, and includes women to participate in sexist practices, playing down their harmful effects.

Sexualised expectations and appearance-based allocation of tasks and assignments in newsroom are customary.

Women's professional legitimacy is frequently evaluated through physical appearance, age, and sexualised expectations. This shapes task allocation, on-air visibility, and perceived competence, while men are evaluated primarily on professional output.

Men operate as gatekeepers to task assignment, so gender discrimination has material consequences for women.

Nearly one third of women who reported violations experienced negative career outcomes, including stalled advancement and deteriorated positions. This effect is strongest in Serbia, Croatia, and Slovenia; lower reporting in Bosnia and Herzegovina likely masks similar dynamics.

Feminisation of journalism has not translated into equality.

Despite women forming the majority of journalists, particularly in Slovenia, the patriarchal and toxic newsroom culture prevails: men continue to dominate leadership positions and decision-making roles.

Managerial authority remains gendered.

Leadership is often associated with male authority figures (perceived even as 'father' figures, which is attributed to the traditional roles of men and 'grey hairs' in newsrooms), while women face barriers to advancement and are channelled into less prestigious roles (e.g. not expected to report on political issues or sports) or they remain in junior/supportive positions.

Women in leadership may reproduce discriminatory norms.

Evidence indicates that some women in managerial roles perpetuate sexist practices, reflecting institutional pressures rather than individual attitudes.

5. V. Poor mental health has systemic consequences

Burnout is reported to reach epidemic levels,

driven by workload pressure, understaffing, the pressures and workload of protest coverage in Serbia, chronic exposure to harassment and discrimination, and the pressure of women performing multiple social roles as well.

Mental health harms are institutional failures, not individual weaknesses,

although in practice the overriding perception is that it is a sign of women's weakness. This perception reinforces the narratives that women are not sufficiently built or equipped for journalism and work under pressure. Support mechanisms are rare, unevenly distributed, and largely externalised to professional associations or civil society organisations.

Due to a lack of mental health support system and stigma, women are discouraged from recognising and admitting mental health problems.

However, while suffering from mental health issues, the psychological strain impacts their productivity and risk tolerance, and results in self-censorship. Women report reliance on self-management strategies, widespread medication use, avoidance, and withdrawal, reinforcing isolation and silence. One of the consequences that women who experience mental health issues, rather chose to leave the media and journalism altogether, instead of seeking support (or not being able to afford it).

Taken together, these findings demonstrate that gender-based discrimination, harassment, and labour rights violations in media workplaces are not isolated or incidental, but are produced and sustained through interacting structural conditions, institutional practices, and organisational cultures. Precarious employment arrangements, weak and non-credible protection mechanisms, hierarchical power relations, and the normalisation of abuse collectively shape newsroom environments in which silence becomes rational, reporting becomes risky, and accountability remains elusive. The persistence of these patterns across all four countries (despite differences in legal frameworks and formal institutional arrangements) highlights the need for interventions that move beyond awareness-raising or formal compliance and instead address the underlying systems through which inequality is reproduced. The following section therefore outlines targeted recommendations aimed at strengthening institutional accountability, labour protections, and gender-sensitive governance within media organisations, grounded directly in the empirical evidence presented above.

ANNEX I - Definitions and Concepts (Methodology extract)

We employ broad definitions to encompass **all types of violence** (physical, psychological, sexual, and economic), and **different bases** of violence against women journalists (i.e. violence based on sex/gender, violence based on sexuality, as well as violence that is not unequivocally based on these two categories).

While some existing definitions of relevant international bodies use the term "harassment" to refer to all types of conduct—verbal, non-verbal, and physical[45]—this is not best suited to the local context. Instead, we will use the umbrella syntagm **"assault, harassment, discrimination, and violation of labour rights"** as it resonates best with local linguistic contexts and is likely to be understood by the respondents in the way that includes all types of conduct that the research aims to address. The term "assault" is here used to signify unwanted physical contact, and the term **"harassment"** to signify non-psychical conduct, including gestures and spoken or written words.

In terms of types of violence, the research addresses *physical assaults* (i.e. unwanted physical contact), *threats* (death threats, threats of physical assault, threats of other harm), and *harassment* (verbal, non-verbal, sexual), as well as *violations of labour rights* (discrimination as well as those violations not unequivocally based on sex/gender). Some of these types and bases of violence may overlap. For instance, threats of releasing personal data/footage might be connected to both sex and sexuality. In the following table we list types of violence, by category (sexual or sex-/gender-based), and provide some examples.

[45] For instance, the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE) defines sexual harassment as "any unwanted verbal, non-verbal or physical conduct of a sexual nature that has the purpose or effect of violating a person's dignity or creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment" https://eige.europa.eu/publications-/toolkits-guides/sexism-at-work-handbook/part-1-understand/what-sexual-harassment?language_content_entity=en.

[46] Article 36 of the Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence defines sexual violence as follows: "a. engaging in non-consensual vaginal, anal or oral penetration of a sexual nature of the body of another person with any bodily part or object; b. engaging in other non- consensual acts of a sexual nature with a person; c. causing another person to engage in non-consensual acts of a sexual nature with a third person".

	Gender-based	Sexual	Other
Physical attacks, understood as unwanted, non-consensual, or hostile physical contact with another person's body, clothing, or possessions	Hitting, pushing, shoving, kicking, pinching, throwing objects at, assault with a weapon, breaking journalists' equipment, etc., in cases when there is no doubt (based on the context and verbalisations during the attack) that the attack is based on, or influenced, by the journalist's sex/gender.	Engaging in all non-consensual acts of a sexual nature, including rape, coercing or physically forcing a person to engage in sexual acts.[46]	Physical attacks (kicking, pushing, hitting, etc), without an unequivocal basis or connection to journalists sex/gender or sexuality.
Threats, i.e. declaring the intention to assault a person, making death threats, threats with a weapon, threats against family, property, job security, or any other aspect of a person's life.	Threats that are based on or influenced by the journalist's gender/sex, such as threats of negative consequences (for instance threats of disfiguring and affecting their appearance, threats of smear campaigns based on appearance and female characteristics, etc.)	Threats of sexual assault (threats of rape, threats of sexual touching), threats of negative consequences (losing a job, status, releasing of personal photos, etc.) in case of refusal of sexual acts	Threats that are not unequivocally based on or influenced by the journalist's sex/gender or sexuality
Verbal harassment, offensive language, personal insults, and obscene and degrading comments with the purpose or effect of degrading and violating person's dignity and creating intimidating, hostile, humiliating, degrading, or offensive environments. Verbal harassment can also include hate speech, understood as all types of expressions that spread, incite, promote, or justify hate based on intolerance against women. Verbal harassment can be inflicted face to face, but also through ICTs.	Verbal harassment based or connected to one's sex/gender (such as hostile and degrading comments related to appearance, femininity, personal or sex life, or to often-associated characteristics such as incompetence, overt emotionality, etc. The comments might concern the journalist or the female sex in general. ***Some examples:*** *"Women cannot report on sports", "You are too emotional to handle hard interviews", "Make us some coffee, you do it so well", etc.*	Sexual harassment, including sexualised comments and innuendoes, whether directly concerning the female journalist, or concerning the female sex in general. ***Some examples:*** *"I love these women journalists that kneel easily", "I would not touch her with a stick", etc.*	Verbal harassment that is not unequivocally, but indirectly might (or might not) be based on, or related to, sex/gender, such as referring to aspects of intersectional identity (such as age, disability, nationality, ethnicity, religion).
Non-verbal harassment, involving gestures, disseminating private information, photos, and videos (including those generated through artificial intelligence tools), etc. Verbal harassment can be inflicted face to face, but also through ICTs.	E.g. disseminating photos in the attempt to mock journalists' appearance, to portray negative characteristics based on prejudices or stereotypes against women, etc.	Sounds and gestures with sexual allusions, such as whistling, sexualised body movements, etc. Sharing photos with sexual allusions, sharing pornographic content, etc.	-
Violations of labour rights	Discrimination on the basis of sex/gender involving discrimination in employment procedures (questions on marital status and children; degrading in comparison to equally or less qualified male candidates, etc.), unequal pay levels, work conditions, unequal opportunities for advancements in workplace, discrimination in journalism topics assigned to female journalists, etc.	Failure to address sexual harassment reports and to provide support to female journalists exposed to harassment.	Our primary focus is on discrimination based on sex/gender, but due to the intersectionality of discrimination, we will partly address (mainly with regard to the statistical data/estimates we collect) all violations of labour rights which are not unequivocally (although they might be) based on sex/gender, such as overtime work, assigning work outside of the job description, unpaid and delayed salaries, unpaid contributions, etc.
Smear campaigns, as systematic efforts to discredit a person and to damage her reputation, often by making false accusations and by using negative propaganda	Smear campaigns that focus on journalists' gender/sex and might address their appearance, their role as mothers and wives, etc., but also involve negative claims often associated with female sex, such as claims about lack of competence, overt emotionality, hysteria, etc.	Smear campaigns that focus on women's sexuality, such as claims about their promiscuity, dissemination of sexualised photos, etc.	Smear campaigns that are not unequivocally based or connected to journalists' sex/gender and sexuality. Such smear campaigns might involve referring to other aspects of intersectional identity, such as age, disability, nationality, ethnicity, etc).

Through the research we address conduct that is directed **against women journalists, precisely and unequivocally because they are women** (e.g. sexist or misogynist comments on the female sex, such as comments concerning their capacities and competences), but also o**ther conduct directed against women journalists,** which is not explicitly (but implicitly might, or might not, be) motivated by sex/gender (referring to journalists age, religion, disability, nationality, etc).

Additionally, under harassment we understand both the **intentional and negligent acts, i.e. conduct that has a purpose and/or effect of** creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating, or offensive environment. For example, sexualised jokes or comments on female incompetence can create a hostile environment, even if the perpetrators are not aware that they constitute sexual harassment. Equally so, our research will equally encompass types of conduct punishable by law, as well as those that might not be punishable, but can be a subject of public condemnation, under an egalitarian and human rights paradigm.

In terms of the context and the profile of persons assaulting or harassing women journalists, in the research we encompass

A) The conduct of superiors or colleagues in work establishments

B) The conduct of interlocutors (public figures, public officials, representative of private companies, interviewed private persons or bystanders)

C) The conduct of the general public (including in direct contact with the journalist and through mass media and ICT)

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About The Project

The project “Ending workplace harassment in the media industry in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina - Women in the Media” directly aligns with the European Commission's 2020 – 2025 Gender Equality Strategy, which emphasizes the need for freedom from violence and stereotypes. It specifically addresses the call CERV-2024-DAPHNE, which seeks to prevent and combat gender-based violence. By focusing on the media sector, the project tackles a crucial area where such violence is present.

The project is being implemented by five partners: Zavod Krog (Slovenia), the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists, (Croatia), the Trade Union of Culture, Art and Media "Nezavisnost" (Serbia), Mediacentar Sarajevo (BiH) and Slovene Association of Journalists (Slovenia), co-funded by the European Union.

The project is supported by the University of Novi Sad, Faculty of Philosophy – Department of Media Studies, the Ministry of Labour, Family, Social Affairs and Equal Opportunities of Republic of Slovenia, Research Centre of the Slovenian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Republic Agency for Peaceful Settlement of Labour Disputes from Serbia, and Faculty of Social Sciences – University of Ljubljana.

The project is designed to combat sexual harassment in the media specifically targeting the public broadcasting services across Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It includes analytical activities, such as cross-national comparative research, development of transferable Rule book (setting standards), identification and exchange of good practices among partner countries, trans-national cooperation of journalists and experts, awareness raising, advocacy and capacity building activities that involve journalism students, male and female journalists and media management.

The project promotes a culture of respect, diversity, and inclusion, critical to achieving long-term gender equality in the media sector in in Slovenia, Croatia, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, including EU and non-EU member states.

About The Partners

- Zavod Krog (Slovenia):

international, non-governmental & non-profit organization that works in the field of human rights protection, humanitarian work, social equality, development cooperation, environmental protection and other forms of inequality, and social exclusion. Zavod Krog is managing the project, leveraging its experience in handling regional projects to ensure effective implementation across different countries.

- Trade Union of Croatian Journalists (Croatia):

has been established in 1996 and since then is a pivotal organization in advocating for the rights and welfare of journalists in Croatia. Trade union members are active in combating for better working conditions of women journalists. They will be in charge of coordinating the overall/joint awareness raising activities and closely cooperate with each partner in the process, providing them the mentorship needed.

- Trade Union of Culture, Art and Media "Nezavisnost" (Serbia):

is a union that aim for protecting the economic, social, educational, professional and cultural interests of its members and employees in the activities it covers. It has a Women's section which regularly deals with these kinds of incidents. They are coordinating the development of the Rulebook, ensuring it aligns with existing legal framework and follow EU standards in the field.

- Mediacentar Sarajevo (BiH):

is an organization dedicated to improving journalism standards and working environment of journalists, protecting and promoting media freedom in BiH and the Western Balkans region. They developed the research methodology for the cross-border comparative research and managed the overall research process.

- Slovene Association of Journalists (Slovenia):

was founded in 1905. It has around 800 members and is also a full member of the European Federation of Journalists (EFJ) and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ). The Association has been conducting journalist trainings in various forms and on various platforms for several decades. Therefore, for the capacity building activities they can provide experienced organisers, and most importantly, access to their membership base, which county nearly 800 members from national, regional, and local media outlets. The Slovene Association of Journalists will lead the development of the training curriculum.

Co-funded by
the European Union

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