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## GENDER RISK AND JOURNALISM

Are female journalists more at risk in covering conflict than their male colleagues?

Beck states 'risk is the anticipation of the catastrophe – so it is existent and non-existent'. Is the contention that female journalists are more at risk, knowledge, or a construction of knowledge? Are Editors and journalists who decide that women are more at risk merely anticipating a catastrophe? There is no certainty that women would be more at risk, but the fear that women are more at risk can prevent them from being sent to cover conflict, or force them to decide not to go to dangerous places. It is not possible to say with certainty that women journalists are targeted because they are women or because they are journalists. An IED or rocket fire does not distinguish between sexes. In many situations being female actually helps women journalist in conflict zones.

In this paper we conduct a survey of journalists who work in conflict zones and ask whether it is the job or the gender which is the most dangerous. The question of whether it is more dangerous to be a woman might be debatable, but the survey shows that sexual harassment is a concern for female journalists.

**KEYWORDS** Journalist, gender, safety, sexual harassment

### Introduction

The main question asked in this paper, 'Is it more dangerous to be a woman journalist' raises a huge number of other issues and questions. Can journalism be gendered? What forms a journalist's identity? If you acknowledge qualifications to the role of a journalist will these qualifications impact on decisions made about what a female journalist can cover, based on gender rather than experience or ability?

There is no doubt that the numbers of targeted killings of journalists is rising, so research into the risks for all journalists becomes more pressing, and there is no doubt that a factor in this consideration of risk is gender. Adamczyk writes 'It is beyond doubt that the phenomenon of active aggression towards women journalists, increasingly often resulting in their death, is an indivertible trend. (2014:78).

Active aggression towards journalists is an indisputable trend, but is it possible to claim that the aggression is specifically aimed at the woman or is it aimed at the journalist, and should sexual harassment be considered one of the dangers to women? Variations in the availability of training and safety equipment, and of job security, between freelance journalists and staff are inextricable from these issues.

The survey we conducted not only asks what role gender plays in the assessment of risk to journalists, but also ask what advantages being a female might bring to reporting.

### Journalism and Gender

The increasing danger to all journalists is a feature of similar surveys. The recent International News Safety Institute (INSI)<sup>i</sup> report states that 1,480 journalists and media support workers have died doing their job in the past 10 years (2015). 24 out of the 79 respondents who answered the INSI 2014 survey thought the increasing number of female journalists was an issue in the general rise of risk to all journalists. By 2012 female students outnumbered men by at least 2:1 in many of the most well-established journalism programmes (Franks 2013, 3). Yet as Franks writes, they disappear up the chain (*Ibid.*). This finding is echoed by studies from the Lebanon where on average, four females for every male student enrol in journalism programmes (Melki 2009), yet, in the Lebanese news industry men outnumber women by a ratio of more than two-to-one (Byerly 2011). However, even where women have had a long history of involvement in journalism, men are

still in authority and in control of newsrooms and organisations, and on the whole receive more pay (Bryerly 2013; Franks 2013; Melki and Mallat 2014). There may be more women reporting, but many are still answerable to a male Editor.

The International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) 2010 found that 73% of the top management jobs are occupied by men compared to 27% occupied by women. Among the ranks of reporters, men hold nearly two-thirds of the jobs, compared to 36% held by women. However, among more experienced journalists, women are nearing parity with 41% of the newsgathering, editing and writing jobs.

It is worth bearing the gender balance in mind when considering the differences of experiences of risk to freelance and staff journalists. The International Federation of Journalists (IJF) (2009) report states that freelancers are particularly vulnerable to violence. Dwindling budgets and the closure of foreign bureaux often mean that freelancers and local journalists are excluded from training and the provision of safety equipment.

The problems of the newspaper industry, the new digital economy (Beck 1996) the changing nature of the job market and the drive to freelance work have compelled far more journalists out of staff jobs. Franks also writes of the drift from staff to freelance positions by many women in journalism (2013, 54) where freelancers tend to be paid less. Francesca Borri writes of the romantic image of the freelancer who has "exchanged the certainty of a regular salary' to cover the stories she wants to is completely the opposite". She states: "The truth is that the only job opportunity I have today is staying in Syria, where nobody else wants to stay ... where you ask for \$100 and somebody else is ready to do it for \$70" (Borri 2015).

These are all issues which effect the decision both by the Editor and by the journalist themselves when considering reporting from a conflict zone, and perhaps at the back of their minds will be the question of whether it is more dangerous to be a woman journalist than a man. Should gender make a difference, and does that give Editors and organisations an excuse not to send women to conflict zones, or for women themselves to decide not to go to conflict zones?

It is not possible to say with certainty that women journalists are targeted because they are women or because they are journalists. The Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reports that 24% of the journalists killed in 2015 have been killed by crossfire or combat. However, there is a perception that reporting can be more dangerous for a woman. When Lara Logan was attacked in Tahir Square in Egypt in 2011, Reporters Sans Frontiers urged news organisations not to send women to Egypt after Logan's attack. "It is unfortunate that we have come to this but, given the violence of these assaults, there is no other solution." There was an immediate hostile reaction to this and the statement was amended to "It is more dangerous for a woman than a man to cover the demonstrations in Tahrir Square. That is the reality and the media must face it." (The Guardian, 25 Nov, 2011).

It is increasingly dangerous to be a journalist, but a concern is that all aspects of danger are assigned to gender. Arguably, location, culture, and assignment all contribute to risk. For example. Caroline Wyatt from the BBC, states that the danger (in Afghanistan) was not to do with being female, "but with being foreign, and by local standards, rich (2012, 8)." Likewise, Tina Susman, the Los Angeles Times bureau chief in Baghdad 2007-2009 states:

"Like our male colleagues our main concerns are staying alive and keeping our limbs and brains intact. But as long as most assigning Editors are male, rape will always be one of their big worries.... When a female is sexually assaulted the questions immediately arise as to why a woman was there in the first place, and whether it is wise to have a woman reporting from a dangerous place" (2012, 25).

If knowledge is a construction, and Editors are merely anticipating a catastrophe, there is no certainty that women would be definitely be attacked if they were sent to Egypt. In stating that it is

more dangerous to assign a woman journalist rather than a male journalist, Lindsey Hilsum voices a concern felt by many women journalists:

“It’s one step away from saying it’s our fault, for Christ’s sake ... Of course it’s dangerous, and there are particular risks for women, but it’s not more dangerous as a result. It would be a mistake to let that thinking dominate when preparing for what might happen.” (Neilan 2014)

A feature of risk society highlighted by Beck is that culpability is passed off to individuals, and thus collectively denied (Elliott 2002), so not only does the blame become that of the individual journalist, but when she is female, that also becomes a factor in the blame.

Many of the recent studies have investigated dangers to women, but from looking at women journalists’ experience over many years, there are also clearly advantages. If Editors are considering gender when assigning reporters, the advantages as well as the disadvantages might also be taken into consideration. Maggie O’Kane notes that when she was in Bosnia being a woman gave her good cover. She said:

"I am a woman. Nobody pays attention to me...To the soldiers, I was just a pain in the ass; a funny red-haired creature; a dumb female. They didn't find me a threat...If they think I'm a bimbo, that's just fine. They become less guarded and give me better quotes." (Ricchiardi 1994).

When covering events where you encounter male chauvinism, playing up the ‘only a woman’ label can be a good strategy to get access and stories. Men can be seen to pose a threat or be an obvious intrusion. Alice Martins, a photo journalist who has reported from Syria states that as a woman, she can cross checkpoints without being stopped. "These guys are scary," she says, "but they try to avoid women." (Traub 2014). However, even she has stopped reporting from Syria as the situation there is now so dangerous.

There might be advantages to being a woman, but a factor mentioned by many studies is that women are more vulnerable to sexual harassment, both as a danger to the female journalist in the field, but also in the office, so the risk came both from those being reported on and from colleagues and bosses. The IWMF 2010 report found that more than half of the regions’ newsrooms surveyed have policies on sexual harassment, with the range fairly tight between 47% in Western Europe to 67% in both Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia and Oceania. They state “It is important to emphasize, however, is that many nations’ newsrooms in the study reported having no policies on sexual harassment while other nations’ newsrooms had a 100% showing” (2010, 36).

Meli and Mallat’s study shows that the majority of female journalists in the Lebanon believe that gender discrimination and sexual harassment are serious problems for female journalists (2014, 16). However, many women, especially those on contract or in freelance positions fear to report being assaulted or harassed. Shahira Amin states, ‘I think a lot of female journalists would choose not to raise these issues because of the fear that they might not get sent out’ (2012, 35). Judith Matloff (2007) also argues that women often failed to report assault in case it stopped them getting future assignments or hindered gender equality.

It was also apparent from the many reports from women reporting from conflict zones that there were many occasions when being a woman reporter was actually advantageous. It was these opinions which lead to the desire for a more nuanced investigation into the subject of gender and the risks of reporting. However, as in much research, there is no conclusive answer to the question as to whether it is more dangerous to be a woman than a male journalist. Journalists’ safety depends on many issues such as the type of conflict, its culture and location and the journalists themselves. This study has also not addressed the debate about the inherent masculine practices in

the media such as long working hours, a rigid separation of career and life and a lack of workplace flexibility (O'Brien 2015) which also impact on issues of gender and risk.

### Methodology

We sent out a total of 483 emails with a link to the survey. The majority were sent directly to journalists listed in the Frontline Freelance Register, to the female journalists listed in the INSI book *No Woman's Land*, and to journalists in conflict zones through personal contacts. We also sent general emails to news agency bureaux and organisations concerned with the safety of journalists (NUJ, Reporters without Borders, IFJ, INSI, IWFM, CPJ) asking them to forward emails to journalists in conflict zones. We therefore did not know the total number of individual journalists who received requests to complete the survey, but we had 142 replies using KwikSurvey, a response rate of 29.4%.

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- 76 respondents identified themselves as female, and 66 (46%) male.
- 61 of the respondents were from Europe; 23 from North America; 34 from the Middle East and North Africa; 4 from the rest of Africa; 7 from Central America; 9 from Asia.
- Most were less experienced with 40% having 0-5 years' experience; 31% having 5-10 years, and 29% over 10 years' experience<sup>ii</sup>.
- Respondents were also predominantly freelance: 78% and 22% staff. 49% were female freelancers with less than five years' experience (38% males). More male freelancers (32%) had been in the job longer than 10 years (16% females).

*More dangerous to be a female journalist?* Many women who report on conflict are wary about assigning a gender specific motive to attacks on female journalists, however the perception from this survey when asked whether it was more dangerous to be a female or a male journalist thought that women were more at risk than men.

- In the INSI survey which looked at the main threats and challenges to journalists in 2014, 53% of the respondents (82 out of 154) thought that women journalists and media workers were more at risk than 10 years ago

Figure 1. *Is it more dangerous to be a female journalist than a male?*

In the Cardiff survey 56% (78 out of 140) of respondents said it is more dangerous to be a female; slightly more than the INSI survey.

- Under half, 42% say there are more advantages being a male journalist
- More men than women thought it was more dangerous to be a female journalist (50% of women, and 62% of males).

### **Figure 2. Is being a journalist is the most dangerous aspect rather than gender?**

61% of the respondents, more men than women, said that being a journalist was the most dangerous aspect, (65% of females and 69% of males) rather than gender. When the figures are broken down 77% of the most experienced journalists said being a journalist regardless of gender was the most dangerous aspect; 56% of those with under 6 years' experience also agreed. 69% of freelancers say being a journalist is the most dangerous aspect, compared to 58% staff.

In the Cardiff survey we did not specifically ask which the main threats to journalists were, as this had been covered in the INSI survey. However, it is worth considering the 37% of respondents put 'other' when asked to state whether it was more dangerous to be a female than a male, and that

more of the experienced journalists as well as over half the freelancers thought that the job was the most dangerous aspect.

More men than women thought it was more dangerous to be a women journalist. If more men have senior positions in the media, this might impact on choices of who to assign to conflict zones. Many comments reflected that the danger was contingent on the location, the culture and the conflict. The individual's character was also important.

'There are advantages and disadvantages with either gender. But it's not just gender, it's also true with age, ethnic origins etc. Journalism is about interacting with people, so you will work better in certain cultures or environment or with certain people depending on who you are, your personality etc.'" (Freelance female journalist with 5-10 years' experience from East Africa)

"It all depends on the region you are in. But also, in most conflict zones, it depends more on the journalist's character. There are no advantages. A correspondent is a correspondent. " (Staff male journalist with experience of more than 10 years from Libya)

### Advantages to being a female journalist

We wanted to find out what if any advantages or disadvantages journalists thought there were in being a female journalist and asked them to elaborate on why they thought it might be an advantage to be female, and why it might be an advantage to be a male. In this way some of the features of both gender and profession could be explored.

- More female (63% female) recipients said being female has more advantages whereas 47% of males said being female had no advantages.

### **Figure 3. Do you think there are more advantages being a female journalist?**

Nearly half the recipients (48.4%) and over half of the women (63%) thought there were more advantages to being a female journalist. O

- Over half the recipients (57%) said there were no advantages to being a male journalist.

It would seem that the experience of the women journalists points to the perception that there are definitely advantages to being female, especially in cultures where women and men are segregated, and where it is unusual for a woman to be a reporter. The comments added to this section point to the complexity of the issue where location and culture impact on whether female journalists have an advantage in reporting. 53 recipients mention a woman's ability to gain access to locations and events where a man might not be admitted. The Middle East, and Islamic countries where much of the conflict is now situated, were frequently cited as places where women can access households and families barred to men.

"In certain situations in strict Muslim countries for example, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, for male reporters to talk to local women, particularly without a family member present. Reporting conflict-related crimes such as rape or other forms of sexual violence are also problematic for male reporters. Women tend to open up to other women. Male reporters can often tell only half the story." (Male staff journalist with more than 10 years' experience from the UK)

Related to the issues of access was the perception that female journalists were seen to pose less of a threat than males, which could mitigate general risk and enable greater access. 19 journalists mentioned being seen as less of a threat as an advantage to women.

“Easier to access women in Islamic countries. Seen as less threatening so easier to ask hard questions of officials.” (Female staff journalist with 5-10 years’ experience from the UK)

“Female reporters are generally perceived as ‘less threatening’ and interested in humanitarian stories more than politics which can help defuse suspicions (of being spies, of being biased....).” (Female freelance journalist with 5-10 years’ experience, from France working in MENA)

Allied to this and as the flip side of the coin to the disadvantage of male prejudice towards women, is the perception that male dominated cultures can underestimate women, not only seeing them as being less threatening, but also of not being as professionally acute as men, so interviewees opened up more freely. 10 recipients mention this as being an advantage to women journalists.

“it is totally dependent on the conflict. As a woman in Africa I’ve found that I can gain more access, mostly from being perceived as being stupid or more innocent and using their charm ...” Female freelance journalist with 5-10 years’ experience from the UK).

“There are advantages in terms of access but those advantages derive from a large disadvantage which is that most people underestimate female journalists. This means that sometimes sources will trust you more because they underestimate your ability to do significant or meaningful reporting.” (Female freelance journalist with 0-5 years’ experience from the US).

#### Staff or freelance.

#### **Figure 4. Male/female freelance/staff**

The dominance of journalists who class themselves as freelance (78% of recipients) might be a reflection of the changing nature of journalism. A large number of personal emails were also sent to the Frontline Freelance Register. The higher proportion of female freelance journalists replying to the survey is at odds with INSI’s statistics which show that from the ten female casualties in 2015 only one was freelance. This variation might be an indication of Beck’s ‘anticipation of a catastrophe’ (2009: 118) as mentioned above, but is worth further investigation.

#### **Is being a journalist the most dangerous aspect regardless of gender?**

The INSI survey indicates that journalists think that freelancers are more at risk (121 out of 154) than staff members, even though only 13% of the journalists killed in 2014 were freelance. The prevalence of staff deaths is perhaps explicable because most of the deaths occurred in countries such as Iraq and Syria where local journalists are mainly staff reporters, but this doesn’t explain the supposition that freelancers were thought to be more at risk. In the Cardiff survey 77% of journalists from Europe and North America were freelancers, while 52% of 52% of journalists from the Middle East and North Africa were freelancers

Figure 5. *Is being a journalist the most dangerous aspect regardless of gender?*

Well over half of the recipients (67.4%) thought that the job rather than gender was the most dangerous. 69% of freelancers and 58% of staff employees say that being a journalist is the most dangerous aspect, rather than gender.

This obviously indicates an area for further research on what people mean by 'freelance', and the nature and responsibilities of organisations for employees. In their study of freelance women Massey and Elmore say 'freelance' includes 'self-employed freelance journalists, subcontractors who do outsourced news work, and temporary or short-term contract news workers' (2011, 673). Some staff journalists also do freelance work. This has an impact of issues of safety as it is perceived that organisations are more willing to spend money on training and safety equipment for staff than for freelancers (IJF 2009).

In the 2014 INSI report, 78 out of the 118 respondents said that they were more likely to use safety equipment, however, the results from the Cardiff survey found that a worrying 74% of freelancers are not supplied with safety equipment. This might be a reflection of the greater number of staff journalists in the INSI survey, but does suggest that the desire for safety equipment among freelancers is not being met, despite some of the international media organisations such as AP and Reuters making efforts to provide equipment and safety training to freelancers covering conflict (Mahoney 2015). It might also be that many freelancers are supplied with safety equipment, but that it is either inferior, or that the journalists have to pay for it themselves. Elia Baltazar, a journalist from Mexico writes that a greater number of female journalists have to resort to training themselves (2012, 148) and this might also cover supplying their own equipment.

### Sexual harassment

Sexual harassment is still a major risk to female journalists. Almost half of the recipients (42%) had experienced sexual harassment. 31% have witnessed it.

#### **Figure 6. Have you experienced or witnessed sexual harassment?**

- Over half of the women in the survey (65%) have experienced sexual harassment, as have 8% of men.

Unlike the IWMF 2013 survey where more than half the perpetrators were colleagues and co-workers, only 15% of the recipients in the Cardiff survey stated that the sexual harassment was committed by co-workers or bosses, whilst 51% of those who had been harassed said it was committed by those they were reporting on. This might be because of increased commitment to anti-harassment policies in the work place, but what is less positive is that:

62% of recipients would not report cases of sexual harassment, and 23% would hesitate to report them.

36% of women and 7% of men said they would hesitate to report cases for fear of losing assignments.

This might again reflect the more precarious employment security of women journalists in that they feel less secure in reporting incidents of sexual harassment. This is echoed by the findings that:

More freelancers (46%) than staff (26%) have been sexually harassed and more staff would report cases of harassment even if it meant not being assigned to similar jobs (70% as opposed to 59% of freelancers).



**Figure 7. Have you experienced or witnessed sexual harassment?**

**Figure 8. Do you or would you hesitate to report harassment in the field for fear of future assignment?**

There were many angry comments about sexual harassment:

“Every single woman that has worked in Egypt, Bangladesh, India, myself included, has experienced sexual harassment and violence on a regular basis... It’s disappointing to me that the question you ask is whether or not we are disadvantaged in this regard, it’s an obvious and exhaustive YES.” (Freelance female journalist with 0-5 years’ experience from Egypt)

“Female correspondents are regularly harassed while in the field and the usual culprits are their co-workers or other journalists, and NOT the locals. There needs to be a structure within these organisations that makes it clear that rape and harassment is not tolerated.” (Female freelance journalist with 5-10 years’ experience from the UK, worked in Afghanistan and Russia)

Despite these comments, the majority of journalists who had experienced and witnessed sexual harassment came from Europe and North America. 47% of the journalists who had witnessed and experienced sexual harassment were from Europe and North America. Only 16% of journalists who had witnessed or experienced sexual harassment were from Asia, South America, and MENA countries. Whether this was because the journalists from the West are more aware of the issue and more willing to talk about it, or that sexual harassment is more prevalent in Europe and North America is a question which also needs more research.

### Conclusion

The findings to this survey on journalists’ gender and safety are not conclusive. The location, culture, conflict and individual all impact on the safety of journalists. However, it is clear that most journalists think that in an increasingly dangerous world it is the profession not the gender which is the most dangerous aspect. For many women in conflict zones, being a woman can be an advantage. Anomalies with the fears and figures of the deaths of freelance journalists suggest that the definition of a freelance journalist and the responsibilities of media organisations to this group are areas in which more research is needed. Digital journalism and changing journalism practice might be opening new arenas for women to report about conflicts, but the freelance world also holds its risks. Many female freelance journalists are also experiencing sexual harassment, but many hesitate to report it for fear of reprisal. If this fear and the fear that it is more dangerous to be a woman journalist become the catastrophe intimated by Beck, the specific advantages that women journalists bring to journalism will be lost, as well as a worrying depletion to the ranks of journalists as a whole.

### Notes

1. Men were found to be significantly more likely than women to hold freelance jobs, as well as to have “other” terms of employment (IWMF 2011: 33).
2. The International News Safety Institute conducts research and training on safety for journalists.

3. See INSI survey: 71% of the respondents had over 10 years' experience; 15.9% had 5-10 years' experience, and 12.8% had 0-5 years.

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