



ARTICLE<sup>19</sup>



# Online harassment and abuse against women journalists in the Iranian diaspora

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This report was produced in collaboration with the Committee to Protect Journalists



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## Introduction

Online harassment and abuse against women<sup>1</sup> journalists is an attack on press freedom and has a serious, chilling effect on the right of women to exercise their right to free expression - on and offline. While men journalists also face threats and harassment in digital spaces, women journalists increasingly and disproportionately face gender-based online harassment and abuse. Women are often targeted as a result of speaking out against government abuses and on women's rights issues, or for reporting on issues traditionally "assigned" to their male counterparts. The negative impacts of online harassment and abuse are exacerbated when gender-based attacks converge with other factors, such as ethnicity, nationality, religion, identity, or cultural and political conditions that place them outside of their country. This is often the situation of women journalists reporting on Iran in the Iranian diaspora.

In March 2021, ARTICLE 19 interviewed a number of women journalists from the Iranian diaspora who cover Iran in various media outlets and face increased and concerning levels of online harassment and abuse as a result of their work. Their testimonies indicate that the attacks they face online often include, but are not limited to, direct death threats towards them and their families and the dissemination of their personal information (doxing). Many of these forms of online harassment and abuse have a clear sexualised and gender-based pattern. Research carried out by ARTICLE 19's partner organisation, the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), [supports this analysis](#). CPJ reviewed and collaborated on this briefing and endorses its findings and recommendations.

Women journalists in Iran are also frequently subject to other severe forms of discrimination, harassment, and - in the case of arrests, torture, and sexual assault - a lack of due process.<sup>2</sup> While the severity of the conditions women journalists inside Iran experience cannot be compared to the experiences we are documenting of Iranian women in the diaspora, we argue that the risks the latter face are

nonetheless serious, and must be prevented. As Quinn McKew, ARTICLE 19's Executive Director, said:

*“For years, we’ve seen Iranian women journalists targeted for their work, but the increasing trend of authorities and mobs harassing journalists outside the country is extremely disturbing. Iranian journalists who face online abuse are not only seeing their work affected, it’s having a huge impact on their lives. The Iranian government must stop its abuse of journalists in Iran and in the diaspora, and the international community, including technology companies, must do more to protect journalists around the world.”*

In this briefing, ARTICLE 19 aims to bring visibility to the different manifestations of online harassment and abuse against women journalists in the Iranian diaspora, as well as their risks and consequences. We provide a set of recommendations for state actors to comply with their obligation to guarantee women journalists' right to report and disseminate information and opinions without violence and fear of retaliation. We further set out a series of recommendations to social-media companies and media outlets.<sup>3</sup> ARTICLE 19 notes that the abusive online atmosphere has a strong precedent of extending to other marginalised journalists, including trans and non-binary people, especially trans women. While this report did not find interview subjects identifying as trans or non-binary, and thus did not capture a snapshot of their experiences, we hope this brief can be a path for further research for those communities experiencing disproportionate and gendered abuse and violence online. We must also note that, to prevent further attacks and negative impacts, all women interviewed have been anonymised.

## Online harassment and abuse against women journalists in the Iranian diaspora

Women journalists reporting on Iran in the Iranian diaspora face different forms of gender-based attacks online, all of which have a significant impact on their enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression and therefore their ability to report and contribute to public conversation online.

### Gender-based attacks

Women diaspora journalists reporting on a wide range of issues in relation to Iran often face gender-based attacks, either directed at themselves or against or in reference to their families. These can include rape and death threats, dissemination of photoshopped pornographic images, doxing, and coordinated and persistent messages containing derogatory slurs.

One journalist at a Persian-language news organisation told us she had experienced harassment, including targeting her son via email and social media with abusive messages relating to her:

*“They were targeting my son with photoshopped images of my head on pornographic images.”*

This type of attack – targeting a woman journalist’s family with misogynist messages about them – is intended to shame and humiliate women. This distortion of the women’s physical bodies is particularly concerning, given that so many of them conduct their work as broadcast journalists, who do not abide by conservative and religious Iranian standards of dress. The indirect "slut shaming" (stigmatising a woman for behaving in a way that is considered sexual or provocative) in this type of harassment indicates the obstacles that negative stereotypes, perpetuated by Iranian social and religious norms, impose on women who decide to play an active role in informing societies about what happens in their country.

A number of women journalists we spoke to confirmed that gender-based online attacks they have experienced have often involved rape and death threats. These create fear and leave women journalists feeling unsafe in their homes and lives. One explained:

*“There is so much violence in some of the harassment, I try to ignore the threats or else I would lose my mind. My most recent threat was a post telling me I’ll find myself in a pool of acid. If I think about this I won’t be able to do my work. But it has affected different considerations, like what type of home I live in for example, never a ground-floor home, or anywhere where I won’t feel safe walking from my car to my front door.”*

Another said:

*“I’ve been targeted numerous times online; the attacks involve threats of sexual violence, including rape and misogynistic language, swearing, and really bad insults. I’ve also received death threats.”*

The doxing of women’s personal information, including their address, exacerbates these threats and increased their fear and risk of being physically attacked. For example, a freelance journalist who regularly reports on Iran told us:

*“The man who posted my address and photos of my home said that my family should feel unsafe and he felt confident enough to do this with his own name and photo. I found his contact information online and provided it to the police, yet he still has his account on Twitter and continues to smear me and my family.”*

This journalist has experienced other serious threats against her life on social media that, compounded by this doxing incident, have led her to seriously fear for her physical safety. She told ARTICLE 19 she has sought out the involvement of local police forces to protect her family. These types of abuse – doxing, threats of

physical and sexual violence, and targeting of family - are intended to create fear for not only women's personal safety but also the safety of those around them, so as to deter them from speaking publicly on Iran and continuing their work as journalists.

One of the journalists interviewed described an unbearable emotional toll resulting from the combination of the difficulties of reporting on serious human-rights issues and the abusive nature of direct attacks:

*“It was 3-4 months of me living with death, interviewing victims and families. It was very dark and consuming work, and then online I was facing attacks. I had to go to therapy for the reporting I was doing, as well as the effects of coming online and being called a slut.”*

This particular journalist told us she had refrained from using her social-media accounts since this traumatic period. Social media can be a vital professional tool for journalists, and is often an expected part of their role, so refraining from social-media use has a potential impact on their career.

While not exhaustive, the testimonies of the women interviewed provide an important insight into the frequency and severity of online abuse experienced by women journalists reporting on Iran from the diaspora.

### Smear campaigns and tactics to undermine credibility

Women journalists reporting on Iran from the diaspora also face smear campaigns, intended to discredit them and undermine their journalism. Those we spoke to described campaigns targeted specifically at women journalists to discredit them.

One journalist noted that, in addition to other forms of abuse:



*“the attacks also involved misinformation and lies about me and other female journalists, which are clearly an attempt to discredit me and my work.”*

These efforts to discredit can take the form of manipulated images and photos, which people who present themselves as "opposition activists"<sup>4</sup> (against the Islamic Republic of Iran) use in coordinated campaigns to portray these journalists as Iran's "agents" or "propagandists". In the context of Iranian politics, these messages and campaigns create distrust, in terms of news and information, and put these women at risk of physical assault, harassment, and mental stress. A lot of the women we spoke to described similar campaigns, seemingly led by the Islamic Republic of Iran, to delegitimise their critical reporting about Iranian institutions or the Iranian state.

These targeted efforts to discredit women journalists are often accompanied by, or part of, the abuse they receive. One journalist gave us the following account of her experiences:

*“I face harassment and smearing because opposition activists equate my organisation as part of the Islamic Republic of Iran. It went as far as these opposition activists doxing my mother’s address in Iran, saying to me: ‘If you’re not working for [them], how come the Islamic Republic hasn’t taken over your mother’s house?’ On the other hand, from what seemed like Islamic Republic of Iran trolls or agents, I recently received this threat: ‘Under [redacted] Bridge you might just find you’ll meet the same fate as Ruhollah Zam’.”<sup>5</sup>*

One online campaign, led by self-proclaimed opposition activists, suggested that one particular journalist is part of the propaganda apparatus of the former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's administration. Threats of gendered violence and physical harm against her were coupled with criticism against her reporting, and,

while the latter is part of public debate, it should be noted that journalists' lives and physical integrity should not be at risk as a result of their work.

The same journalist experienced coordinated online attacks a few years earlier, when she was targeted with a gendered smear campaign from elements connected to Iran's Revolutionary Guards.

### The source of the abuse

It is extremely difficult to identify the specific sources of online abuse and harassment against the women journalists we spoke to. The abuse tends to come in the form of messages or public posts sent from a variety of individual social-media accounts and their networks/followers. These accounts often promote particular hashtags, misinformation, and abuse targeted towards women. While the political context of Iran appears to be a contributing factor, women journalists in the diaspora who report on Iran face online harassment and abuse regardless of the issue they cover or the approach they take to reporting on various Iranian topics.

Women journalists are targeted by both those who publicly support the Islamic Republic of Iran (or its various factions) and those who identify as Iran's "opposition" (or, rather, who advocate for the downfall of the current regime). Several women diaspora journalists we interviewed questioned whether actors tied to the Islamic Republic of Iran drive some of the attacks, [disguising their attacks as "opposition"](#) to sow division and distrust. There is also uncertainty about the extent to which these campaigns are manipulated and coordinated as opposed to "organic" online conversations.

One journalist explained:

*"I believe regime supporters or agents could be behind some of the attacks, even behind the [hacking attacks we face](#), but some in the opposition who*

*have been pushing for a tough line against Iran appear to be involved in the increasing online harassment that female journalists have been experiencing.”*

### The impact on women journalists

ARTICLE 19’s interviews highlight that women diaspora journalists reporting on Iran are working under conditions of fear and confusion, which have a serious impact on their sense of safety, mental health, and wellbeing – and, in consequence, their ability to exercise their right to free expression.

In particular, the ambiguity and uncertainty over the identities of their attackers complicate women journalists’ ability to accurately evaluate the probability of online harassment and abuse leading to physical harm. One journalist said:

*“Generally, one of the most disorienting things about the online harassment I face is confusion over who is targeting me and [therefore] how to assess the real-world threat. I’m not sure if these threats are coming from agents or trolls of the Islamic Republic or radical opposition activists who don’t think I am being harsh enough on the Islamic Republic in my journalism.”*

Despite the uncertainty over the identity of the attackers, it is clear that the online harassment and abuse these women journalists face is intended to intimidate them, to stigmatise Iranian woman who challenge gender stereotypes, and, ultimately, to pressure them to stop their journalistic reporting and online commentary on issues related to Iran - or more broadly.

*“It’s obviously very unpleasant to come online and be called a whore for doing your job. It’s clear their aim is to create fear and silence women journalists.”*

Attacks on individual women diaspora journalists also have wider implications for women, and can function as a deterrent, leading to fewer women's voices reporting on critical issues. One journalist noted she fears emerging women journalists would see her harassment online as a reason to leave the field.

Other women we interviewed also relayed these chilling effects to us. Online harassment and abuse result in self-censorship: to mitigate risks, women diaspora journalists sometimes resort to staying quiet on sensitive or controversial topics. A woman diaspora journalist at an international Persian-language media outlet told us:

*"I do consciously watch what I say online and try to avoid topics that would lead to me wasting my energy and time dealing with the gendered threats, abuse, and harassment that so many of my colleagues face."*

Some journalists transition from self-censorship to bearing online attacks as an additional burden for their reporting. One explained that she used to censor her online speech but has since stopped, as she views online harassment and abuse as inevitable. She conceded, *"of course, this does wear me out, but what is there to be done? This is a battle I have to endure."*

Permanent fear for their physical safety and that of their families has meant many of the women journalists we spoke to dedicate time to tracking and understanding the online abuse. ARTICLE 19 found that documenting the various forms of abuse and harassment is important to the majority of the women we interviewed, who see it as necessary to prevent and mitigate risks of physical harm to themselves, their loved ones, and colleagues. They described how the burden of keeping track of the attacks

has compounded the trauma of being subject to abuse and threats, placing them in a situation where they must always revisit the experiences to document the attacks, and prove the extent of them, for the police, employers, or social-media platforms.

Further, the language and context in which the women work and receive abuse add to the challenges they face when seeking support from their newsrooms. Most of the women we spoke to said that, for their management to offer support and mitigate risks, they are often required to document and translate the threats and abuse themselves. Many told us they either avoid this process or carry it out to the detriment of their mental health.

### Responses from social-media platforms

While states and media houses have a crucial role to play in ensuring tailored responses to women facing online harassment and abuse, social-media companies play a key role in either supporting women facing abuse or disregarding the risks of harassment campaigns held on their platforms, depending on the tools and rules governing their platforms' content and practices – and how effectively or consistently they implement them. This is particularly important for women journalists covering Iran, as Sherif Mansour, CPJ's Middle East and North Africa Program Coordinator, points out:

*"Covering Iran, even from outside the country, can be a dangerous beat for any journalist. For women journalists in exile, the burden of fearing for their lives is amplified by smear campaigns and relentless online abuse. Protection by law enforcement and support from social media platforms are critical for them to carry out their work with any sense of safety."*

One of the biggest problems women reported was inconsistent responses from social-media companies to their reports, and having to rely on insider connections with the companies to see action.

Major social-media platforms have rules and policies in place to make decisions on moderating content that may amount to different forms of online harassment and abuse against journalists, as well as mechanisms to enable users to report such content and behaviour. However, their enforcement is often slow, confusing, and difficult to access, as well as being hugely inconsistent and lacking in transparency. Difficulties in relying on companies' actions worsen when platforms do not have adequate language or contextual assessment resources to inform their decisions.

Many of the women journalists ARTICLE 19 spoke to clarified that companies seem to lack the linguistic resources to either translate or capture the context of threats and abuse they receive as a result of reporting about Iran.

Women journalists received little response from companies to the incidents of harassment they reported. In the exceptional cases where they had insider connections in the companies, and were therefore more able to attract sufficient attention to the abuse they faced, they felt the additional burden of documenting, translating, and following up with the platforms about each and every incident of abuse.

ARTICLE 19 has raised concerns about the lack of options communities have without insider company connections; often, exclusive access to effective reporting mechanisms is reserved for those whose media houses or professional networks know staff at the social-media companies directly. Further, we are concerned that companies fail to allocate sufficient resources to assessing threats, risks, and abuse in the languages and contexts in which women journalists face online harassment, particularly the Persian language.

## Why should online harassment be treated as a serious freedom-of-expression and equality concern?

### Converging risks

Gendered online harassment and abuse targeted at women diaspora journalists reporting on Iran compound an already difficult environment in which to carry out their journalistic work. They report on their country in Persian media abroad at the expense of not being able to return to their homes and families in Iran. The gross human-rights violations the Iranian state commits against journalists and human-rights defenders in Iran generate fear, uncertainty, and anxiety. Many wonder whether the threats they face might follow the same pattern of so many other women journalists, who experienced physical attacks after prolific online targeting, or whether Iranian authorities may target them more directly in the future. The case of online threats and harassment against Iranian-American activist and journalist Masih Alinejad [reached fever pitch in July 2021](#), when it was revealed that [the Islamic Republic had plans to illegally kidnap and extradite her](#). The cases of Iranian authorities harassing and intimidating the Iran-based [families of BBC Persian journalists](#) in the diaspora have already been brought to the [UN Human Rights Council](#).

In this context, threats and harassment have the potential to move offline and impact on the day-to-day safety of women journalists and their families or colleagues. Even when this is not the case, the conditions in which women diaspora journalists experience different forms of online harassment and abuse have a psychological and physical impact, which has deep ramifications for their mental health, sense of safety, and ability to conduct their journalistic work.

## Women's participation in challenging inequality

Technology has been used to silence women and lock them out of public debates through different forms of attacks. These attacks not only reinforce inequality but also have a severe impact on freedom of expression; they drive women offline, limit their journalistic reporting, and inevitably reduce their ability to challenge discrimination and inequality, including in societies where Iranian diaspora might live - even those that seem very open and inclusive.

The different manifestations of online harassment and abuse described in this report often lead to women journalists self-censoring, choosing to change their reportage topics to mitigate risk, or going offline for a period of time - all of which have a direct impact on their personal development and professional work. They can also deter other women from entering or staying in the journalistic field. All of this leads to a loss of women's voices in the media sector and the loss of the unique and valuable perspective women bring to telling stories and holding governments to account. There should not be such a high cost to women's participation in society. Women's right to freedom of expression is not enjoyed in equal conditions as a result of the proliferation, and often disregard, of these forms of online abuse.

## Free-speech-compliant approach to online harassment and abuse

ARTICLE 19 believes that the respect and full enjoyment of the right to freedom of expression is essential to tackle the problems resulting from the phenomenon of women journalists experiencing online harassment and abuse. Creating an environment where women can participate in online and offline debates will not only counter online harassment but also protect their freedom of expression, benefiting women and society at large.

While a broad range of terminology is used to describe different forms of discriminatory expression and other forms of complex abusive behaviour online, it is



important to note that, while the characteristics and intentions of the various forms of online harassment and abuse<sup>6</sup> vary, they all constitute barriers to women's equality and impede the exercise of women's right to freedom of expression. As such, online harassment should be clearly distinguished from other forms of expression that fall under the broad scope of the right to freedom of expression, including criticism about, and unpopular opinions of, journalistic work.

## Role of the media in promoting gender equality

The media and journalists themselves have an important role in promoting gender equality and non-discrimination, alongside the broad protection of freedom of expression. The core values of journalism - independence, accuracy, fairness, and balance, as well as respect for privacy and minimising harm - are inscribed in international and national codes of ethics. Journalistic codes of conduct oblige journalists to be aware of the danger of discrimination, prejudices, and inequality based on - among other things - gender, and to ensure that, in their work, they do not reinforce existing social relations and the status quo, and do not perpetuate stereotypes and prejudices.

As this briefing has highlighted, journalists - and especially minority and women journalists - are under attack for their work, and such attacks must be vigorously opposed. However, it should also be recognised that genuine criticism or scrutiny of the news media or individual journalists who fail to uphold ethics and values should not be equated with attacks against the media. No publication is immune from unethical or unprofessional reporting, and the media and journalists must recognise that they have a role to play in addressing gender inequality, stigma, and prejudices, as well as online harassment and abuse against women. Media and individual journalists must also recognise that they have a moral and social responsibility to promote equality and non-discrimination.

## Recommendations

ARTICLE 19's conversations with women journalists reporting on Iran from the diaspora highlighted the severe impact of online harassment and abuse on women journalists' rights to freedom of expression and equality, as well as their wellbeing and that of their families.

Governments, social-media platforms, and media houses should take seriously the consequences of this type of abuse, and take action to address it, to protect freedom of expression and women's rights - online and offline. We therefore set out below a series of specific recommendations to these actors on how to better respond to women journalists' concerns and protect free expression.

We also reiterate our calls on the Iranian government to end its persistent efforts to silence press freedom, suppress individuals' right to express themselves online and offline, and police women's expression. The wider context of the Iranian state's repression, [both within and outside its borders](#), is a major contributing factor to the risks faced by women journalists reporting on Iran.

### Recommendations to social-media platforms

- Provide clearer guidance about – and ensure timely and consistent application of – their policies on harassment and abusive content, and any other rules that apply to the different forms of online harassment and abuse that women diaspora journalists face.
- Develop specific sections of their content rules dedicated to this issue, explaining what rules are applied, and conduct gender impact assessments in the development of their content rules and policies on implementation to ensure they are responding appropriately and consistently to abuse.

- Allocate sufficient resources to assess, moderate, and respond to threats, harassment, and other forms of abuse in the local languages of Iran, and in contexts where women journalists face disproportionate online harassment as a result of their journalistic activities, including by hiring more linguistic and cultural-dialect experts to review reports, and escalating circumstances that may put women's journalists' lives at risk. Given that algorithms currently have very limited ability to assess context, they should, at the very least, ensure human review of content flagged as harmful, such as the various forms of harassment and abuse.
- Improve transparency reporting, including publishing detailed information, consistent with the Santa Clara Principles, about gender-based harassment and abuse. This should not be limited to statistical information regarding removal of content but should also include data about the number of appeals processed, and their outcomes.
- Provide detailed information on how content rules are applied in practice, in particular with regard to handling gender-based harassment and abuse. This should include providing case studies or more detailed examples of the way in which they apply their policies to gender-based harassment and abuse.
- Work closely with women journalists and civil-society groups to develop solutions to gender-based harassment and abuse, support journalism initiatives that promote gender inclusion, and support efforts to counter narratives against gender equality.

## Recommendations to governments

Under international human-rights law, states must ensure all women fully enjoy both the right to freedom of expression and the right to equality.

ARTICLE 19 calls in particular on governments - including the United States, Canada, and European Union countries, as well as other countries where Iranian diaspora journalists are reporting from - to take specific measures to support them and tackle online abuse and harassment, including by:

- Publicly, unequivocally and systematically condemning all attacks against journalists, including online harassment and abuse against women journalists.
- Recognising that online gender-based harassment and abuse against women journalists in the Iranian diaspora who are targeted for exercising journalism activities is a serious problem, and adopt integrated prevention, monitoring, and response mechanisms, including in public policy.
- In cases where online gender-based harassment and abuse reach the level of severity prohibited under criminal law, governments must ensure a prompt, expeditious, thorough, diligent, and comprehensive investigation is carried out, and that perpetrators are held accountable. To enable this, states should ensure that relevant laws are comprehensive, and train law-enforcement actors on states' international legal obligations and commitments on the safety of journalists.

## Recommendations to media organisations

Media houses should make all possible and available efforts to support women journalists facing online harassment and abuse as a result of their journalistic work. They play a part in challenging gender inequality in the media ecosystem. Therefore, they should:

- Develop and implement clear guidelines and protocols on preventing and addressing online harassment and abuse against women journalists, including clear reporting mechanisms, security protocols and training, and access to legal and/or psychosocial support. When language represents an obstacle to providing adequate and timely support, additional assistance should be provided for translation and documentation. These measures should be discussed and agreed together with the women journalists facing harassment and abuse, to decide what is more efficient and effective for the purposes of preventing and responding to the attacks.
- Monitor and document online abuse and harassment of women journalists employed by or working with them to ensure collection of data on this type of abuse, in compliance with privacy and data-protection standards, which enables preventative measures. Media organisations' measures should avoid placing the full burden and unnecessary additional distress of documenting harassment and abuse onto women journalists.
- Seek to promote media diversity and inclusive approaches to the responses they design to confront and prevent online harassment and abuse by recognising and considering the racial, cultural, migratory, or any other background of women journalists in the design of these measures, in the support team, in news, and in interviews; acknowledging the active role women play in political, economic, social, and cultural life in coverage;

addressing gender bias and stereotypes in reporting; and hiring women journalists to ensure women's perspectives are reflected in news reporting.

- Ensure diversity and non-discrimination pervade all aspects of reporting, from the coverage of individual journalists to the fact-checkers the organisation employs, in line with the core values of journalism.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that, when it comes to online harassment, this applies to all women, including transgender women.

<sup>2</sup> In 2019, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) [named](#) Iran the biggest jailer of women journalists.

<sup>3</sup> In 2020, ARTICLE 19 published three policy briefings on the issue of online harassment and abuse against women journalists. They address: (i) states' obligations to adopt and implement measures to protect and promote both the right to freedom of expression and gender equality; (ii) the policies and practices of three dominant social-media companies and their role in addressing online harassment and abuse against women on their platforms; and (iii) the scope of state obligations to address online harassment and abuse of women journalists, and to conduct effective investigations into the serious forms of online harassment and abuse.

<sup>4</sup> It should be noted that ARTICLE 19 is not implying that this is attributable to all opposition. We also are not able to determine the genuine political orientation of many of these accounts.

<sup>5</sup> Ruhollah Zam was a citizen journalist who ran a highly popular and influential opposition Telegram account. Iranian authorities tricked him and subjected him to extraordinary rendition, and the Islamic Republic executed him in a sham trial in December 2020. This situation, and the threat it represents to others speaking on Iran from abroad, has created a particularly toxic environment: Every form of expression and reporting needs to be accompanied by a calculation and anticipation of risk.

<sup>6</sup> See ARTICLE 19, [Investigating online harassment and abuse of women journalists](#), November 2020.