

Safety of Women Journalists in Bosnia-Herzegovina

Perceptions, Experience and Understanding of
Safety and Gendered Safety Risks



Focus Group Discussions with
Women Journalists in Bosnia Herzegovina

A collaboration between

**FREE
PRESS
UNLIMITED**


BHN • BXH
BH Novinari • BX Novinari

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1. Introduction

Worsening safety situation for journalists

All over the world we see a steep decline in press freedom and an increase of attacks on journalists. These safety risks often have a gendered element where women journalists are concerned as they tend to face the double burden of being attacked both for being a journalist and for being a woman. Not only do women journalists face more risks than their male colleagues but also different types of risks. From newsrooms to reporting from the field as well as online, this violence can take different forms ranging from digital privacy and security breaches, coordinated disinformation and smear campaigns to sexual harassment, assault, torture, and even death. In other instances it leads to self-censorship and women withdrawing from public life, or not reporting a story at all out of fear for reprisals.

Hostile Environment Awareness Training (HEAT)

International press freedom organisations have attempted to address the worsening safety of journalists by offering safety and security trainings for journalists. Most of these trainings, however, come in the form of so-called Hostile Environment Awareness Trainings (HEAT) intended to prepare journalists to cover stories in and from dangerous environments such as a war, protests, natural disasters etc. It is questionable how effective and useful such types of trainings - the content of which is largely military-and-battlefield centered - are for journalists working in non-conflict zones, where they face an entirely different set of risks caused by for instance increasing political polarisation. Furthermore, most safety trainings that are being offered merely focus on physical safety, lacking content on digital security and trauma awareness.¹ Another underexposed element of HEAT trainings is that sometimes there can be a serious lack of after-care after intense simulations such as kidnappings or terrorist attacks, which can have an impact on participants' mental well-being. Nor is it known whether such trainings have a positive effect at all on the safety of journalists, and if so, to what extent.

Many of these HEAT trainings as well as other types of safety trainings fall short when it comes to gender. The majority of safety trainings do not integrate specific gender-related aspects, such as what to do in case of sexual harassment and other instances of gender-based violence.² Over the past years, several organisations have made efforts to address this gap in safety trainings by developing training curricula and other resources specifically targeting women journalists.³ As some of these trainings are fairly recently launched, wider evaluations and other data on the effectiveness of such trainings is currently lacking.

Gaps in safety training

There are obvious gaps in knowledge and research on how safety trainings targeting journalists, and especially women journalists, benefit their safety and how it affects their perception of their safety, the elements influencing their safety risks and the way they deal with them. While there is a universality in the risks women journalists face, they also are influenced by their local contexts, legal framework, culture, ethnicity, religion, age, level of digital savviness and so on, which influence their understanding of what is meant with safety as well as perception of the risks they face and are

1 Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, 2017, Journalists and Safety Training: Experiences and Opinions, retrieved from https://dartcenter.org/sites/default/files/journalists_and_safety_training_-_experiences_and_opinions_.pdf.

2 *Ibid.*

3 For example: <https://www.osce.org/representative-on-freedom-of-media/468861>, <https://journalismcourses.org/course/how-to-report-safely-a-guide-for-women-journalists-their-allies/>, <https://www.iwmf.org/programs/hefat-training/>, <https://newssafety.org/safety/training/types-of-training/>.

exposed to. These elements seem to be hardly taken into account by many of the safety trainings that are available, as they are developed with the said universality in mind.

Very little is known about implicit prevention and coping mechanisms, resources and tools that women journalists, due to lack of a functioning safety network, have developed themselves, the effectiveness of these mechanisms, as well as how so-called life experience and best practices are transferred between women journalists and what media development organisations could learn from this and how they could improve their support to this particular target group. In short, this calls for safety trainings which take into account gendered risks, incorporate the different dimensions of safety (i.e. physical, digital, psycho-social) and are tailored to the regional context and hence risks prevalent in the region.

Focus group discussions

It is this realisation that prompted Free Press Unlimited, in cooperation with BH Novinari, to organise a number of focus group discussions with the main objective to gain more insight and understanding of the complex environment, working conditions and safety risks of women journalists, the way they handle difficult situations at the moment as well as what they need in terms of training. The decision was made to organise focus group discussions in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as this country was especially interesting for a pilot study considering that the majority of journalists (and all of the participants) seem to have never before followed a safety training. The focus group discussions are organised within the framework of Free Press Unlimited's Justice and Safety Programme. The Justice and Safety programme assesses the organisational and individual needs of journalists and works with local and international partners around the world in order to provide journalists in need with tailored aid that focuses on legal support and training.

After explaining the methodology and rationale behind the set-up of the focus group discussions, and the context of Bosnia-Herzegovina within which journalists operate, this report will provide a summary and analysis of the input provided by the participants during the focus group discussions.

Free Press Unlimited

Free Press Unlimited is a non-profit, non-governmental press freedom organisation based in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. Our belief is that everyone has the right to independent, reliable and timely information, which they need to control their living conditions and to make the right decisions. To that end, press freedom and freedom of information are indispensable. That is why Free Press Unlimited supports local media professionals and journalists, particularly in countries with limited (press) freedom. The safety of journalists is an absolute precondition for independent media to function properly and to provide reliable information to the public. That is why safety is one of the cross-cutting themes within Free Press Unlimited.

BH Novinari

BH Novinari is a non-political and non-profit journalist association based in Sarajevo, Bosnia-Herzegovina. It seeks to protect press freedom and the rights of journalists and media professionals in Bosnia-Herzegovina, by supporting its over 750 members with free legal and advocacy support. Part of BH Novinari's work includes monitoring and protecting women journalists' rights, with a focus on online harassment, and publicly advocating for their rights within media outlets and within the public space. Through the Free Media Helpline, BH Novinari monitors cases of all types of violence committed against women journalists and provides free legal support, including psychological support.

2. Methodology

Aim

The objective of the focus group approach was to gain insights into shared and individual understandings of local safety risks for women journalists. The aim of the questions that were asked was to get a better understanding of the understanding and perceptions of risks and safety, women journalists' experience with safety risks and mitigation strategies as well as their needs for safety training, and existing or potential support mechanisms for the safety of women journalists.

Selection of participants and locations

A series of seven focus group discussions were organised in three different cities in Bosnia-Herzegovina: Banja Luka, Mostar and Sarajevo. BH Novinari used its network to select and invite the participants. The selection of the three locations (Banja Luka, Mostar, Sarajevo) and of the participants was not random. It aimed to create a diverse set of participants, in order to gain insights into the various safety risks women journalists face across Bosnia-Herzegovina, in cities varying in size. Sarajevo was chosen as Bosnia-Herzegovina's capital city and largest city. Banja Luka was chosen as it is the largest city of Republika Srpska, whereas Mostar is the largest city of the region Herzegovina. Mostar is especially known for being home to multiple ethnic and religious groups and its ethnic divisions.

The participants were selected based on different ages, ethnicities, levels of experience and expertise in their journalistic work. With regard to the latter element, both investigative journalists as well as journalists covering daily news were invited. Free Press Unlimited and BH Novinari initially aspired to send out a survey to the selected participants, inquiring their past experiences with safety trainings. In this way, a separate focus group discussion could have been facilitated and its insights compared with those with no prior safety training experience. None of the women journalists who got contacted, however, ever followed or were offered training before, which made this distinction not possible.

The selected 24 participants were part of the three following target groups:

1. Women journalists with no previous experience with safety training;
2. Editors-in-chief;
3. Experts (psychologists, lawyers).

Set-up of the focus group discussions

On average each focus group discussion lasted about 1,5 hour. For each target group templates - consisting of an invitation and consent letter as well as a separate focus group discussion guide - were prepared by Free Press Unlimited. BH Novinari suggested and recruited experienced local moderators, as it was important participants could express themselves in their native language.

The focus group discussion guides contained instructions for local moderators and main questions for them to ask to the participants. The recruitment of participants as well as local moderators and the selection of cities and local venues was done by BH Novinari. The focus group conducted in Sarajevo was moderated by BH Novinari's Secretary General, Borka Rudić.

Before the start of the focus group discussions, the participants got an explanation of the programme, were asked to sign the consent form if they agreed with its content, were introduced

to the team of Free Press Unlimited and BH Novinari, and were asked to introduce themselves. The focus group discussions took place in small groups, with no more than five participants at a time.

The discussion guides for the women journalists and the editors-in-chief consisted of four different elements, whereas the discussion guides for the experts consisted of three elements. The questions served to gain insight into the participants' understanding and perceptions of risks and safety of women journalists, the participants' experience with safety risks and mitigation strategies, the participants' potential need regarding future safety trainings, and existing or lacking support mechanisms for the safety of women journalists in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Reflection on methodology

The participants were very appreciative of the set-up of the focus group discussions, the small groups in which they said to feel comfortable to share their experiences, and the interest that was shown in their perceptions and experiences. The focus group discussions thus got the structure and feel of peer-to-peer support groups, which inspired setting up such groups as a follow-up step.

However, even though the group discussions were valuable and enabled the participants to connect to other like-minded individuals, this automatically entailed that the depth of individual perception and experiences was limited, as there was less time for individual experiences than there would have been in one-on-one interviews. Furthermore, this set-up may have also yielded socially desirable answers.

Furthermore, there was a non-random selection of participants, as the participants were already connected to BH Novinari. It would have been interesting to also reach and include journalists that were not yet that well (or at all) connected to the association. When it comes to the participants, it must also be noted that only two experts were consulted (one lawyer and one psychologist).

Even though the data collected was rich, for future reference it is recommended to also include quantitative data collection and conduct a survey prior first (preferable face-to-face), which can feed into the questions that are to be asked during the focus group discussions. In short, a recommendation is to do the research prior to the focus group discussions in a larger time-frame, which can ensure a mix of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Furthermore, it is advisable to collect more information on for example age and exact profession of the participants so the analysis following the discussions can be more rich and yield more accurate and specific conclusions.

3. Bosnia-Herzegovina: short history and media landscape

Short history

Bosnia-Herzegovina is a federal republic located in the Western Balkans with a population of about 3.8 million people. After the Second World War, Bosnia became a constituent republic of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia. An increase in ethnic tensions led to the start of the disintegration of Yugoslavia in 1991. In Bosnia-Herzegovina a war broke out following an independence referendum - in which 99.71% of the voters voted in favour of independence - and the subsequent declaration of independence of the Republic of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Within a month of recognition of Bosnia-Herzegovina as an independent country, the siege of Sarajevo began and continued into horrific ethnic cleansing campaigns between 1992 and 1995. Finally in late 1995 the peace agreement known as the Dayton Accords ended the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Yet, Bosnia-Herzegovina remains to be an ethnically divided state, home to three main ethnic groups: Roman Catholic Croats, Orthodox Catholic Serbians and Muslim Bosniaks. The country comprises two autonomous entities - the Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Republika Srpska - and a third, self-governing administrative unit, the Brčko District.

Media landscape

Facts and figures

- In 2021 BH Novinari registered 72 instances of violence against journalists in Bosnia-Herzegovina.
- 53% of those were cases of gender-based violence against women journalists.
- 43% of the attacks on journalists in Bosnia-Herzegovina are committed by politicians or public officials.
- Only 24% of women in Bosnian media have a leadership position.⁴

When it comes to the protection of journalists the judicial system in Bosnia-Herzegovina is highly flawed despite having good legislative instruments in place. Journalists lack the legal status of a 'public official' and therefore the repercussions for a perpetrator who attacks a journalist are limited. Additionally, the bureaucracy of the judicial system entails long administrative processes after filing a complaint as the institutions are overburdened. Both the considerable length of these processes and the low success demotivate journalists to take legal action.

This lack of protection can lead to self-censorship among journalists, but in a way can also stimulate perpetrators to commit crimes, as they know they will not be sanctioned anyway. This creates a climate of impunity. What ties in with that, is the politicisation of almost all sectors in Bosnia-Herzegovina, including the media sector. It is therefore hard for media outlets to operate independently, as most often some kind of political connection is needed for media outlets to flourish.

Many citizens are also very skeptical when it comes to the media, and overall trust in the media is very low. This is to a certain extent perpetuated by politicians, who might publicly state that a certain journalist is a traitor, or they will state that 'if you are not with them, you are against them'. Oftentimes, journalists are seen as the main culprits for negative events unfolding. The politician's fanbase will internalise this idea and think it is justified (and/or their duty) to attack journalists.

⁴ See interview with Borka Rudić (BH Novinari's Secretary-General): <https://www.freepressunlimited.org/en/current/gender-equality-champion-2022-borka-rudic>.

As a country with high levels of corruption, journalists in Bosnia Herzegovina covering this topic are likely to run into more problems. Politics in that sense is everywhere in Bosnia-Herzegovina due to which political corruption can be found in every area of life when scratching the surface. At the same time journalists receive very little to no safety training or support from their employers. In the field they mostly rely on the experience they have gathered during their career or advice from their peers.

Bosnia Herzegovina's recent history of war also still plays a large role to this day in the form of ethnic tensions due to which journalists of mixed heritage can face additional discrimination and safety risks, for example discrimination or accusations along ethnic lines. A situation that is further exacerbated by the patriarchal structures of Bosnian society that have consequences on how women journalists are viewed (by the public, public officials, fellow journalists, editors, and also themselves). This manifests itself in the trend of normalising gender-based safety risks and violence. Furthermore, women journalists in particular are always under public scrutiny, which is exacerbated by social media, as it has become easier for people to anonymously insult and threaten journalists.

Finally, there are persistent socio-economic problems in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which manifest themselves for instance in low wages and limited job security (temporary contracts) and lead to pressure and peer competition between journalists and editors. Poor labour rights (such as no pay for overtime, limited maternity leave, limited access to psycho-social support) manifest themselves in extra psycho-social stress and can have a strong bearing on the mental well-being of journalists.

4. Findings from the focus group discussions with women journalists

Free Press Unlimited staff carried out three focus group discussions with women journalists, in the cities of Banja Luka, Mostar and Sarajevo. The focus group discussion guides used in three different cities were the same. The sessions in Banja Luka were moderated by an external moderator selected by BH Novinari. The sessions in Mostar and Sarajevo were moderated by, respectively, a project coordinator of BH Novinari, and BH Novinari's Secretary-General.

4.1 Understanding and perceptions of risks and safety

The questions that were asked during the first session served to learn more about how the participants understand and perceive the safety of journalists and the risks they face being a journalist.

The ways in which journalists in Banja Luka, Mostar and Sarajevo described their perception of safety were very similar. The participants viewed safety as the freedom to write that they would like to write, without fear of them or their family being attacked, and with the knowledge that their editorial office and the police will stand behind them in case an incident does occur. They noted that (women) journalists do not enjoy this level of safety in Bosnia-Herzegovina, as they often have to choose between the truthfulness of reporting, or their own safety and that of their family. This does not only refer to their physical safety, but also their legal safety and thus even their economic safety, as many lawsuits are started with the aim of exhausting the defendants' resources and thereby silencing them. Shortcomings of the legal system mean that journalists often cannot permit themselves the luxury of being completely objective and honest.

In Mostar and Sarajevo, cities with a considerably less homogeneous population than Banja Luka, participants pointed out the heavy interference of politics with journalism, and the idea of 'betrayal' that many politicians perpetuate. This idea has a cultural and ethnic dimension to it: a journalist from a certain nationality reporting on someone from another nationality may be perceived as problematic, but this also holds for reporting on someone from the same nationality who might have engaged in misdemeanor. If the judiciary were to prioritise sanctioning perpetrators of attacks against journalists, the public image of journalists might change and the citizenry will understand that it is not acceptable for journalists to be attacked. Impunity for crimes against journalists is now, in fact, being perpetuated, as long as perpetrators are not being sanctioned for infringing upon the safety of journalists.

4.2 Experience with safety risks and mitigation strategies

The questions that were asked during the second session pertained to how the participants deal with the safety risks that were discussed before during the first session.

Banja Luka

Bosnia-Herzegovina has a patriarchal society, in which 'feminist' is considered as a derogatory term. This also affects the journalistic profession. When women are seen as the weaker sex, they are often also seen as an easier target. Furthermore, journalists, and women journalists in particular, tend to experience considerable stress due to the gendered expectations, obligations and responsibilities flowing from the patriarchal society. The stress related to the profession is also related to a systemic problem of a violation of workers' rights. Journalists are journalists even after working hours and even though their working days can be up to 12 hours, they often do not receive pay for overtime.

Despite these pressures, oftentimes women journalists are not aware of the fact that they need or could benefit from psycho-social support, as the pressures are seen as 'part of the job'. The participants noted that in many cases, women add onto each other's stress by undermining and heavily competing with their women colleagues. Besides these threats to journalists' psycho-social safety, women journalists also face physical safety risks, for example when they go out on a field trip and cover, for instance, demonstrations. Currently there is little knowledge on how to best protect oneself for these physical safety risks.

Mostar

The participants in Mostar considered economic security risks to be at the forefront of the threats to journalists and the journalistic profession, as these risks make it more difficult for journalists to be independent. The legal threats and lawsuits that journalists face are also tied to economic security, as these lawsuits often serve to exhaust the financial resources of journalists. In addition to that, everything one does, says and writes as a journalist is under public scrutiny, which leaves marks on one's mental and physical health. Continuously facing safety risks is thus in itself a safety risk. This tends to be exacerbated for women journalists, as they are seen as an easy target exactly because they are women: they are subjected to sexism and misogyny, their words are often twisted and their capabilities are often doubted. These risks that women journalists face are seen as part of the job by a large part of society, including governmental actors (like the police).

Even though editors should be the first pillar of support for journalists, unfortunately this is not always the case. On the contrary, some editors-in-chief even harass or mob their own employees. According to the participants, this has to do with the bigger problem of copy-paste journalism, which entails that today everyone can be a journalist. The same goes for editors-in-chief, who might not necessarily be fit for the job. Concurrently, within the newsroom there is often a so-called 'queen bee' syndrome, meaning that women journalists undermine each other out of a competitive mindset. Other women journalists were thus seen as a 'bigger threat' than their male counterparts, as it was mentioned that the presence of a man can sometimes even heighten the sense of security of women journalists, for example whilst on dangerous assignments. This shows the different elements of safety at play: socio-economic, societal and in the workplace.

Sarajevo

When it comes to gender-specific risks, it is notable that women journalists tend to be subjected to backwards or even sexist and misogynistic comments. Sometimes this even happens within the newsroom. Women journalists also have to be very careful about what they post on social media, more so than their male counterparts. There is a higher chance of any personal data that they share online to be used against them.

Threats against journalists do not only originate from politicians, but also from citizens. Politicians are unlikely to threaten journalists in public, but they will publicly call a journalist a traitor, after which their 'fan base' will consider it justified (as well as their duty) to attack said journalist. According to the participants, this has to do with the fact that politicians tend to interpret each critique as an interference in their affairs.

In terms of preparing oneself for risks, it is crucial for journalists to be familiar with their rights, but this awareness is often lacking. Concurrently, it is important for editors to stand behind their journalists, but often this is not a given either. Some editorial offices do not take safety seriously enough.

4.3 Identification of safety training needs

The questions that were asked during the third session intended to identify potential needs regarding future safety trainings. To reiterate, none of the participants had followed any safety training previously.

Banja Luka

Journalists are not (sufficiently) informed about their rights when they enter the profession, nor are they told about trade unions or organisations, such as BH Novinari, they can join. Even though BH Novinari attempts to reach out to journalists all over the country, this shows the need for editors-in-chief in all parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina to be informed about BH Novinari and to consequently inform their journalists about BH Novinari. Trainings that had been available to the participants previously tended to focus on content production rather than safety. Another barrier to following safety training is the fact that the majority of journalists need to use their leave days for this.

In the absence of safety trainings, women journalists mostly learn from their own experiences and the experiences from others. The participants would appreciate trainings where they can learn tactics for the followings situations:

- What dangers one may face as a journalist and how to react in certain (dangerous) situations (risk preparedness);
- How to recognise safety risks;
- How to take care of one's mental health.

Other groups that would benefit from training, besides journalists, are editors, police officers and representatives of the judiciary.

Mostar

The participants from Mostar noted that safety trainings would be useful for, especially for young women journalists who have just entered the profession. Topics that would be useful are handling weapons, martial arts, risk awareness, and psycho-social support. It would be desirable to have men and women together in such trainings (after a women-only segment of the training). Finally, the participants noted that politicians and authorities could also benefit from training.

Sarajevo

The participants pointed out that it is crucial for women journalists to become more familiarised with certain concepts, such as gender-based violence. If they do not know what it is, they cannot protect themselves against it. Many journalists do not know whether they are facing harassment or whether it is simply part of their job. This is where safety training could play a pivotal role.

Like in Banja Luka and Mostar, the participants noted that training should be extended to other actors beyond women journalists, such as men journalists, editors, media owners, and the judiciary - with the latter said to be the 'weakest link' in the protection of journalists.

4.4 Support mechanisms for safety of women journalists

The questions asked during the fourth session intended to gain insight into the safety support mechanisms that the participants can fall back on, including potential shortcomings of their newsroom, media support organisations or other structural barriers. The participants noted that their editor-in-chief should be their first line of support, but that this is not always the case. Other institutions that can provide support are the Ombudsman in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the legal aid helpline of BH Novinari. However, for the latter, many new journalists are dependent on their editor-in-chief to tell them about the possibilities of accessing support through BH Novinari, which

is not known to all journalists in the field. Yet, this support does help to give journalists the feeling that they are not alone in their struggles.

In addition, according to the participants, a broader international network of investigative journalists would be welcome, to gather information and contacts, and be in touch with other investigative journalists who could potentially complete a colleague's story if her safety would be in danger or if something were to actually happen to her.

Finally, structural barriers that were often mentioned were distrust of the judiciary and thus the hesitancy to approach the police or start a legal procedure in case of threats to one's safety. This climate of impunity which persists in Bosnia-Herzegovina may lead many (women) journalists to the decision to self-censor.

4.5 Conclusions

In the three different focus group sessions, there were many similarities between the answers that were given by the participants in Banja Luka, Mostar and Sarajevo. However, especially in Mostar, and to a lesser extent in Sarajevo, the post-war context was very visible in the responses that the participants gave. More so than the journalists in the other cities, the journalists in Mostar focused on the physical aspect when looking at their safety, and initially considered themselves as safe as they were no longer operating from within a war. However, only after follow-up questions did they conclude that there are also other aspects of their safety that are being compromised.

The discussions highlighted the interconnectedness between the different aspects of safety. For example, it was mentioned that threats to one's legal safety often also have a direct impact on one's financial safety and psycho-social safety. What was not as such anticipated before the focus group discussions took place, was the problem that journalists in Bosnia-Herzegovina face as a result of persistent economic problems in the country as well as the poor observance of labour rights. These economic problems make it more difficult for journalists to be independent, to withstand legal threats and lawsuits, and to be mindful of their mental well-being.

Threats in the workplace usually do not originate from male colleagues, but from other women journalists. It must be noted that an important reason for this is the high concentration of women working in the journalistic profession. In all of the three cities, journalists mentioned the so-called 'queen bee syndrome', which refers to the competition among women journalists which may lead to them trying to undermine each other. Due to their gender, women journalists also feel that they are under more pressure to combine their personal life and their work life, and that they are constantly under public scrutiny, more so than their male colleagues. They are often subjected to sexist and misogynistic comments, often originating from public figures, such as politicians, or the politicians' 'fan bases'. This critique from politicians is prevalent as everything in Bosnia-Herzegovina is said to be highly politicised.

None of the women journalists participating in the focus group discussions had followed any safety training, but they expressed a desire to participate in safety training, and to have more exchanges with their peers. With regard to editors-in-chief, even though they should be the first pillar of support for journalists, they often are not. However, their involvement could play a pivotal role in women journalists feeling more supported and more safe, which was also seconded by staff of BH Novinari. Finally, the participants stressed that other actors, such as the judiciary, should also be trained in- or become more aware of - issues surrounding journalist safety.

5. Findings from the focus group discussions with editors-in-chief

Free Press Unlimited staff carried out three focus group discussions with editors-in-chief, in the cities of Banja Luka, Mostar and Sarajevo. The focus group discussion guides used in three different cities were the same. The sessions in Banja Luka were moderated by an external moderator selected by BH Novinari. The sessions in Mostar and Sarajevo were moderated by, respectively, a project coordinator of BH Novinari, and BH Novinari's Secretary-General.

5.1 Understanding and perceptions of risks and safety

The questions asked during the first session served to learn more about how the participants understand and perceive the safety of women journalists.

Banja Luka

On the topic safety of journalists, the editors-in-chief agreed that it is an underrepresented topic in Bosnia-Herzegovina that is not sufficiently recognised by a variety of actors, ranging from the government to newsrooms. In Bosnia-Herzegovina journalists do not have institutional protection, unlike police officers. That means that an attack on a journalist is not treated in the same way as an attack on a public official. Furthermore, strong support from the newsroom and - if available - a legal team is not given either. However, protection from one's media organisation is crucial if the legal system is not designed in a way to protect journalists.

The participants mentioned that attacks on women journalists may range from physical attacks, to verbal attacks (insults and threats) to legal threats (attempts to sue). The latter often serve to financially exhaust journalists, to drain their resources and to hinder them from doing their job. The verbal attacks often take place online: reportedly, on social media 77 percent of comments are insults, which is facilitated by the anonymity of social networks. Many of these insults relate to women journalists' physical appearance and judgements about women's intellectual abilities if they choose to dress a certain way.

Mostar

For the participants, safety entailed having the freedom to express your opinion without fear. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, this safe working environment is lacking, illustrated by the participants' little confidence in the judiciary, police and other official institutions. The participants felt like ultimately they had to protect themselves, which may take the form of self-censorship. They felt like the rule of law only functions for those who are 'politically correct'. Therefore, even if they are engaged in investigative journalism, journalists will prefer to bypass the bigger mafia and not report on them, if reporting on them is associated with higher risks or if they are more likely to be prosecuted than the mafia.

When zooming in on women journalists, the participants pointed out that in Bosnia-Herzegovina's patriarchal and traditional society, there is more pressure on women journalists. They generally have to work harder to prove themselves and to be able to balance work and family obligations. At the same time, men tend to be more present in management positions and thus more visible and more likely to be taking the credits.

Furthermore, the editors-in-chief pointed out that in some parts of Bosnia-Herzegovina, including Mostar, safety of journalists is strongly related to ethnicity. Journalists of mixed heritage tend to face discrimination and accusations along ethnic lines, such as being called a 'traitor'. Journalists

working for a foreign agency are often called 'spies'. These verbal attacks are prevalent on social media, where comments are usually anonymously posted. Women are called a variety of derogatory names on social media, ranging from fat to whore, which does not happen to men to nearly the same extent.

Sarajevo

In Sarajevo, the presence of political corruption was also mentioned by the participants. They argued that corruption can be found in every area of society after scratching the surface. Journalists covering corruption are likely to run into more problems, but as most sectors are politicised, corruption is everywhere - including culture and sports. The topic that journalists report on has a bearing on their safety. The lack of protection can lead to self-censorship.

Whenever journalists are seen as official public figures (like in Croatia and Serbia), assaults on them tend to be taken more seriously. It is important for a societal message to be conveyed that journalists are not the enemy.

The participants also viewed safety from a psycho-social angle: due to the safety risks that they face, journalists are always under some sort of stress. Some may also suffer from vicarious trauma. This especially holds for journalist who have interviewed survivors of traumatic events, such as sexual violence.

5.2 Dealing with safety risks for women journalists

The questions asked during the second session intended to gain insight into the way that the participants, as editors-in-chief, encounter and deal with the safety risks that women journalists face.

Banja Luka

The editors-in-chief in Banja Luka stressed that they consider an attack on a journalist from their outlet as an attack on the whole agency. They do their best to stress that their door is always open, in order to make their journalists not feel alone. However, it must be noted that many journalists stressed during the focus group discussions that they do not always feel this support from their editor-in-chief.

Whenever an incident occurs, the first two steps that are taken are contacting the legal team for advice, and publishing a public statement, to show to the public that attacks on journalists can and should not be tolerated, and to show to the journalist in question that they are not alone and should not have to suffer alone.

New journalists are briefed step-by-step and not 'thrown to the lions'. The editors-in-chief mentioned that in the last ten years there has been a greater focus on risk preparedness in the newsroom rather than prevention of discrimination against women in the workplace, as there are little complaints internally. Sometimes women journalists are exposed to scrutiny in the workplace, such as questions about their partner or children, or questions on whether they will be able to continue their work after their maternity leave. However, the source of these comments is often other women journalists, as the participants stressed that to a great extent, it is women journalists who undermine other women journalists.

Mostar

The editors-in-chief in Mostar made very little mention of the ways in which they deal with the safety risks that women journalists face. From their responses it became clear that they see the risks

that are part of the journalistic profession as a given, and difficult to mitigate. For a large part, they connected this to the flaws in the judicial system, as part of which journalists have to wait at least a year once they have filed a complaint. They saw self-censorship as the largest problem in their profession.

Sarajevo

Similar to Mostar, the editors-in-chief in Sarajevo noted that safety is not a topic of discussion within the newsroom. Women do not recognise sexual harassment or online harassment as violence. Furthermore, the terminology used against women journalists is different. This fits within Bosnia-Herzegovina's patriarchal society, where women are perceived as the weaker gender. However, harassment does not only come from men - within the editorial office, women are mostly targeted by other women. Most journalists lack (unconditional) support from their newsroom, but it is crucial to have at least one supporter within the newsroom. The participants considered the most important thing they can do as providing unconditional support to their staff members and educating young journalists about safety risks. However, they considered this as something that should mostly be done during the journalism studies, as most young journalists enter the field unprepared.

5.3 Identification of safety training needs and additional support mechanisms

The questions asked during the third session aimed to gain insight into additional safety support mechanisms that the participants and/or their journalists could fall back on.

Banja Luka

According to the participants, ideally new journalists should be briefed step by step, and safety training would be a valuable step in that. Whoever chooses to work as a journalist, should have a realistic image of what the job entails, and thus be prepared for the risks of the journalistic profession and the pressure that journalists tend to face as part of their work. Crucial elements in training would be preparedness for facing a lawsuit, as well as psycho-social preparedness. In addition, in creating a safer work environment for journalists, education of the largely 'media illiterate' public and politicians should be included, as there is little recognition for the task of journalists to be critical and ask questions. This reflects itself in the fact that according to a survey, 25 percent of citizens consider attacking a journalist to be acceptable. Finally, they also highlighted that the awareness of legal experts and court representatives regarding journalist safety should be raised.

Finally, the participants stressed that it is not realistic for journalists to participate in a full, three-day training, as they often cannot afford to miss three consecutive days of work. This should be taken into account when designing a safety training.

Mostar

The participants felt that trainings might be helpful for younger colleagues, but not necessarily for older ones. For them, the trainings would mostly serve as an opportunity to network and socialise.

In addition to training, the participants noted that they would like for international organisations to support women journalists financially, as some noted that economic pressure and the lack of financial independence is the biggest problem. There is less funding available than before, and the funding that is available is usually only available to organisations in big cities. Therefore, their main recommendation was to issue a public call for proposals for organisations, as they believed that working together only with journalists was not sufficient. Additionally, a helpline for endangered journalists would be helpful, including quality lawyers who can help journalists who are facing legal

threats. However, the latter is something that BH Novinari has already developed. Finally, a recommendation was to set up networks to connect women journalists to each other.

Sarajevo

In Sarajevo, women journalists should be educated even during their studies, because they are not fully prepared for the safety risks that may occur as part of their job when they enter the profession. What would be helpful is a code of ethics and a glossary explaining threats, as a way to spread awareness. Training should be supplemented with psycho-social support, focused on burn-out and vicarious trauma.

Editorial management would also benefit from training, but a challenge is to convince members of the editorial management to participate in a training. Moreover, it would be helpful if newsrooms would sign a safety protocol as some form of light pressure, urging them to take the safety of their employees more seriously. Apart from media professionals, police officers should also be educated on the work of journalists and the steps they could take towards protecting their safety.

5.4 Conclusions

Interestingly, when answering the question about what safety of journalists means to them, the editors-in-chief looked at safety of journalists at a macro level more than the women journalists did so. The editors-in-chief had a great focus on the judicial system in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which they saw as being highly flawed and a great barrier to the safety of journalists, more so than the journalists who participated in the focus group discussions. Furthermore, they highlighted that in society the message is being perpetuated - often by politicians - that journalists are the scapegoat, or the enemy. The elements most hampering women journalists to carry out their work safely, according to the participants, are a negative image of journalists - painted by politicians, among others - which leads to a lack of protection of journalists. These are all elements that were also mentioned by the journalists, but the journalists also argued that a lack of support from their newsroom and a lack of preparedness for safety risks was a great threat to their safety. This point as such was not raised by the editors-in-chief who were present during the focus group discussions.

A point that was raised by the editors-in-chief is that many women journalists do not recognise sexual harassment as online harassment as violence. They consider it as 'part of the job' or are used to it, living in a patriarchal and traditional society where the pressure on women (journalists) is high. However, within the workplace women are not always being targeted or undermined by men, but primarily by other women.

In Mostar the aspect of ethnicity was raised and discussed in more detail than in the other two cities. The participants took an intersectional approach in that they discussed that the safety of women journalists is even more so at threat whenever, for example, they are of mixed heritage, or are working for a foreign agency.

The editors-in-chief did recognise that the majority of young journalists enter the field unprepared for the safety risks that may occur as part of their job, but contrary to the journalists, thought this was primarily something that should be addressed during the journalism studies. Whoever chooses to work as a journalist, should ideally be briefed during their studies on the risks of the journalistic profession. Trainings in a later stage, during one's career, would be desirable for younger colleagues especially, but in designing such a training it should be taken into account that a full-time training covering multiple consecutive days is not feasible. Apart from training, setting up networks and peer-to-peer support groups, for example focusing on psycho-social support, would be desirable. Two other key recommendations were to provide training to police officers and

editorial management as well and to issue public calls for proposals for organisations. However, the latter is more due to the economic state of affairs in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

6. Findings from the focus group discussions with experts

6.1 Understanding and perceptions of risks and safety

The questions asked during the first session served to learn more about how the participants understand and perceive the safety of women journalists.

The participants summarised the most pressing problems in the context of the safety of women journalists as poor working conditions (including low wages), poor human relationships, and a lack of support by editors. The biggest problem is the lack of support whenever a journalist faces any type of problem. Journalists are largely left alone; publicly no one will support them, but rather obstruct them. This is a large source of stress. Furthermore, there is a lack of joint organisation through unions, meaning there is no common community response when something happens to an individual. Journalists try to change themselves and their own behaviour due to the lack of support, leading to self-censorship.

6.2 Expert experience with and knowledge of safety of (women) journalists

The questions asked during the second session intended to gain insight into the way that the participants, as experts, encounter and deal with the safety risks that women journalists face.

Safety risks

Both experts looked at the safety of (women) journalists from their own professional angle. The psychologist argued that journalists are more exposed to information and public scrutiny than other individuals. This means they are always flooded with information, which makes them more susceptible to having a burn-out. Continuous public scrutiny especially holds for women journalists, and is exacerbated by social media, as it has become easier for people to anonymously insult and threaten journalists. This has a great impact on the psycho-social safety of women journalists.

The lawyer noted that in Bosnia-Herzegovina perpetrators are in a way stimulated to commit crimes, because there is no sanction from institutions. This also discourages journalists from filing reports or complaints whenever they are harassed. Moreover, there is ignorance among journalists about their rights and whom they can turn to. Whenever journalists do start a procedure, institutions are slow to react, as they are overburdened. The sense of a procedure is lost if it drags on for a very long time. If journalists would have a special status, this might stress their important position and role for a democratic society, and have a bearing on how quickly a case involving a journalist would be resolved.

6.3 Identification of safety training needs and additional support

The aim of the third session was to gain insight into the local challenges and barriers that women journalists in Bosnia-Herzegovina face, and the additional support mechanisms that could support them.

The participants stressed that safety trainings should focus on at least the following topics:

- Dealing with stress, recognising symptoms of stress, burn-out and trauma, striking a balance between private life and work life;
- Understanding gender-based violence;
- Knowing one's legal rights.

The training should not only target journalists, but also editors and management. Furthermore, it is necessary to include the police, prosecutors, judges and other institutions in that chain that make decisions, in order to create space for inter-education. To that end, training in a mixed group would be preferable. All actors have a different outlook, so it is necessary to enter into a dialogue with one another.

An important element of trainings should be psycho-social support. Even though many journalists have a desire to get support, they also have a sense of discomfort, preventing them from seeking support. It is crucial that this threshold to seeking support and mental health treatment is lowered, and that support is made more accessible.

6.4 Conclusions

Both experts had their own perspective on the topic of safety of women journalists, as they both interact with (women) journalists in a different way as part of their work. A similarity in their answers boiled down to the opinion that the best method of prevention was providing information and training. In the case of legal safety, this means knowing one's legal rights, and in the case of psycho-social safety, this means being able to keep a healthy separation between private life and work life and recognising symptoms of burn-out and (vicarious) trauma. The participants recognised that the circumstances in which women journalists operate in Bosnia-Herzegovina are far from ideal, and that therefore it is crucial that journalists receive training where they learn to prepare themselves for the risks associated with their profession and that they build a network of peers and actors they can rely on.

7. Conclusion and recommendations

This report summarised the findings of the focus group discussions, held in November-December 2021, which were organised in Free Press Unlimited in cooperation with BH Novinari. Through these focus group discussions, Free Press Unlimited got a good understanding of the following:

- The participants' experiences with and perceptions on the safety of women journalists;
- The safety risks that are most prevalent in Bosnia-Herzegovina;
- The way that women journalists deal with safety risks and the information they rely on;
- The participants' needs regarding future safety trainings.

Based on all the information that has been gathered, the following should be taken into consideration when developing a safety training for women journalists in Bosnia-Herzegovina:

- **Set-up of the training:**
 - It is to be recommended to include men in the training as well, but not for the entire duration of the training. This would ensure that they gain a better understanding of the ways in which they can support their women colleagues.
 - Local trainers who speak the local language(s) should be included. Free Press Unlimited could play a role in helping to train trainers and thus help build local training capacity.
 - A recommendation is to make use where possible of the presence of experts (psychologists, lawyers) to give practical solutions.
 - A recommendation is to invite politicians, police members and members of the judiciary.
 - The training could be used to foster more trust and a better relationship between journalists and their editors-in-chief. The responses from the women journalists showed that often they do not feel supported by their editor-in-chief, which means there is room for improvement regarding the communication and trust between the two parties.
- **Need for a common vocabulary:** A starting point for trainings should be to provide more information on what gendered attacks, gender-based violence and sexual harassment (in the workplace) are, as these are aspects that some journalists might see as 'part of the job'. The first step towards being better prepared for these risks is understanding them better.
- **Focus on psycho-social support:** Trainings should include the element of psycho-social safety, both addressing (vicarious) trauma, such as traumatic experiences related to war or gender-based violence, as stress and burn-out symptoms.
- **Regional differences:**
 - In bigger cities the need for digital security training is higher. Therefore, a recommendation is to adjust the ratio of digital safety to the actual needs of the targeted women journalists based on their locality. That means that a relatively lower segment of the training will be dedicated to digital safety in smaller cities, and a relatively higher part of the training will be dedicated to digital safety in Sarajevo.
 - Some parts of the country are ethnically more homogeneous than other parts. An example is Banja Luka (and Republika Srpska in general). In less homogeneous parts of the country, verbal attacks based on ethnicity are more prevalent, which is why a greater part of a training should be devoted to ethnic tensions in those regions.
- **Generational differences:** Older journalists have a different perception on safety than younger ones (post-war context). From the focus group discussions it became clear that there is an added value in mixing these groups, as women who have been active in the

journalistic profession for a longer time have valuable experience that they can share with their younger colleagues.

- **Regarding long-term perspective:** an integral part of the safety training needs to be stimulating the participants to develop sustainable solutions themselves (e.g. peer-to-peer networks, etc.).
- **Outreach:** From the focus group discussions it became clear that not all journalists are aware of the work that BH Novinari does and the ways in which BH Novinari could support them. BH Novinari can take steps to reach more media and journalists and raise the awareness of editors, but also of the police and judiciary.