



## ABSTRACT

*Technologies have contributed positively and also negatively to the empowerment of women in the media. Some female media entrepreneurs have set up online media firms or online blogs, which have helped to close the gender gap in media ownership, but this has presented challenges. This study investigated the online harassment of female journalists in Nigeria in this era of press freedom. The study employed the Social Responsibility theory of the media, arguing that when a journalist maintains professional and personal ethical principles in the discharge of his/her duties, his/her primary consideration will be*

# PRESS FREEDOM AND ONLINE HARASSMENT: FEMALE ONLINE JOURNALISTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES IN NIGERIA

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## Introduction

Attacks and harassment affect journalists globally. Journalists are sometimes murdered, assaulted, or threatened because of the news stories they report. Female journalists and other media workers face a range of online harassment which threatens their freedom of expression. According to Ferrier (2018), online harassment is more prevalent than physical harassment. Ferrier (2018) further states that most of the threats that female journalists receive on Twitter, Facebook, and other online media are sexist in nature, designed to intimidate or shame the female journalist. The attacking comments challenge the intellectual rigor and professional credentials of women. UNESCO (2017) explained that the most frequent forms of online violence against women journalists and media workers include monitoring and stalking, posting personal data, trolling, smearing, defamation or disparagement, and viral hatred. Some of this online harassment could also come as personal attacks through online comments, threatening emails, or threatening comments on social media platforms (Koirala, 2020). It is obvious that while the internet is an important tool for female journalists to acquire and disseminate information, it is also used for public shaming, cyberbullying, and intimidation, among others (Koirala, 2020). As a result of the news that female journalists cover, they may become targets of online harassment. Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2018 p.29) states that, according to the Secretary General of the United Nations, "Women who cover topics such as



*to what extent the content of the news stories affects the percentage of society. The study, relying on interviews of selected female online journalists, examined the experiences of selected online female journalists as they relate to online harassment and freedom of the press. It argues that social media content helps to foster inclusive dialogue and expressions of opinions. Also, the media sets the agenda for the masses, and because these female online journalists adhere to the objectives of journalism, the media content should not be questioned since the information relayed assists the masses to form an opinion and also assists in sustainable development.*

**Keywords:** Online harassment; Press Freedom; Female Online Journalists; Lived experiences; Social Responsibility

politics, law, economics, sport, women's rights, gender, and feminism are particularly likely to become targets of online violence." Female journalists and other media workers face a range of online harassment which threatens their freedom of expression. This online harassment might be silencing the diverse voices needed for a well-functioning democracy, thereby not fostering inclusive dialogue and expressions of opinions. This study examined the experiences of female online journalists and bloggers faced with online harassment and how their experiences affect press freedom.

#### **Statement of the Problem**

Online harassment of female journalists is on the rise as the majority of them experience harassment, threats, and abuse while carrying out their duties (UNESCO, 2020). Globally, journalists are regular targets of online attacks. Female journalists are not left out. There are threats of rape, physical violence, personal attacks through online comments, intimidation, and more (Koirala, 2020; Mapping Media Freedom, 2019). Some of these online harassments go unreported to police or unions due to fear of death or the belief that speaking up will exacerbate the situation and lead to more abuse (MMF, 2019). Free media might be hindered from operating as it should, negatively affecting the democratic process. Harassing female journalists/bloggers in the digital space will affect the free flow of information and the ability of these female journalists to exercise their democratic rights.

#### **Research Questions**

This study investigated online harassment of female journalists and bloggers in Nigeria in this era of press freedom.

RQ1. What is the nature of online harassment faced by female online journalists or bloggers?

RQ2. To what extent does online harassment of female journalists and bloggers affect their personal and professional lives in Nigeria?

RQ3. To what extent does online harassment of female journalists or bloggers affect freedom of the press in Nigeria?



### **Literature Review**

Female journalists face harassment of all kinds, both offline and online. Women who cover news most of the time deal with harassment in news rooms and in other places ranging from rape, death threats, physical assaults, cyberbullying, and others, which could have an effect on news coverage and job satisfaction (UNESCO, 2020; North, 2016; Barton and Storm, 2014). According to UNESCO (2020), the Secretary General of the UN reporting to the UN General Assembly on "The Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity" in 2017 stated that, "Women who cover topics such as politics, law, economics, sport, women's rights, gender and feminism are particularly likely to become targets of *online violence*."

Eckert (2018) interviewed 109 female bloggers in Germany, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Three-quarters of the female bloggers interviewed said that they had negative experiences online after covering news on feminism and maternity politics. The forms of online harassment they experienced ranged from negative comments to rape and death threats. The story most often identified in association with increased attacks on women journalists was gender, followed by politics and human rights and social policy (UNESCO, 2020).

In their study on cross-cultural perspectives on how online harassment influences female journalists, Chen, Pain, Chen, Mekelburg, Springer, and Troger (2018) interviewed 75 female journalists from Germany, India, Taiwan, the United Kingdom, and the United States to understand whether and how online harassment affects their ability to do their jobs. The study found out that attacks on female journalists were more common when they covered stories on topics most often associated with men and controversial issues such as immigration, race, feminism, or politics. The study further found out that some of the respondents focused on coverage of positive news and avoided including upsetting details in their news stories to prevent being harassed. According to the UNESCO (2020) study, some of the women (30%) studied self-censor on social media, 20% withdraw from all online interactions, and 18% avoid audience engagement when faced with online harassment. This showed that harassment of female journalists can affect how they report news. Journalists often face so many negative online comments and name-calling. Some of the names they are called are sluts, fat, ugly, and others (Pain and Chen, 2018). In a study on online harassment of women journalists covering technology, Adam (2017) found out that 40 percent of the abuse women reported occurred online, either in the comments section of a news story or on social media. According to UNESCO (2020), in their study, 73% of the respondents (women journalists) said they have experienced online violence and Facebook is the least safe of the top five online platforms. Unfortunately, according to UNESCO (2020), most women journalists do not report or make public the online attacks they experience, and many media employers are still reluctant to take online violence against their female journalist employees seriously.

This study, anchored on social responsibility theory, explains that the theory moves beyond simple "objective" reporting (facts reporting) to "interpretive" reporting (investigative reporting). The total news is complete facts and truthful, but the commission of the freedom of the press stated that "No longer giving facts truthfully rather than give a necessary analysed or interpretative report on facts with clear explanations". The theory further explains that everyone should be allowed to say something or express their opinion about the media, and also allows community opinion, consumer action, and professional ethics.



Female online journalists/bloggers in their roles as journalists are expected to report news without bias and unfairness, thereby being objective and responsible to the public. But do they do this?

### **Methodology**

The study employed the qualitative research method. It adopted a phenomenological approach. Twenty in-depth interviews (IDI) were conducted using the snowball sampling technique in selecting female online journalists. Their experiences and understanding of the issue were explored, as was the impact on press freedom. The data was analysed thematically, looking for common experiences and threats among the female journalists, coping strategies and effects on press freedom.

### **Findings and Discussion**

Responding to the research questions, the study found out that the nature of online harassment faced by female online journalists and bloggers aligned with other studies done in Western countries.

#### ***The Nature of Online Harassment***

80% of the respondents interviewed agree that they have been harassed online, especially through intimidating messages, name-calling, rape threats, and death threats. According to one of the respondents, "I reported a political issue and it was as if they were waiting for me." I started receiving intimidating messages. Some of the comments even threatened my family members. "I had to lie low for some time." Buttrussing this, another respondent stated that, "I love doing my job as a journalist. I have faced countless online harassment each time. I cover sensitive issues like gender equality, politics, demonstrations, and the economy. I experience this harassment, especially on Facebook and Twitter. It has been worse since last year, and I wonder why we call our country a democratic one. They mainly come in the form of name-calling, sex threats, verbal bullying, and telling you most of the time to go and stay in the kitchen. I feel so discouraged each time I encounter these threats."

These findings agree with UNESCO (2020) that more women journalists have experienced online harassment and Facebook is the least safe of the top five online platforms.

#### ***Effect of online harassment on their personal and professional lives***

All the respondents (100%) agreed that online harassment affects their personal and professional lives. They keep changing accommodation and cannot live freely. They agree that online harassment puts fear in their hearts and affects how they react to issues. One of the respondents stated thus:

*"I keep having nightmares after each cyber threat I receive. I will be looking at my rear view mirror when driving. In fact, I got so afraid that I had to remove every personal contact of mine on Facebook. I could not report it to the police because they do not take the cases up. I now prefer to cover safe news stories rather than controversial ones. I am tempted to leave my job, but I love what I am doing and I especially love investigative journalism."*



The overwhelming majority of respondents agreed that online harassment had a significant impact on them. The experience becomes nightmarish for them, which affects their sleeping pattern. They sometimes consider changing their careers, especially those that are mothers. One of the respondents, a blogger, shared her experience of the effect of online harassment on her personal and professional life. She said that:

*"Some people come to my Facebook account and Twitter to make nasty comments about me. Some abuse me verbally and call me names. Some will tell me to go and get married and stop writing online. I have also received a rape threat. These happen every time I cover news on gender imbalance and girl-child issues. I have been traumatized because of these threats. Sometimes, I will stay indoors and work from home because of fear of what might await me there. I have also refused to post and cover some issues that are sensitive even when my friends encourage me to report them."*

These experiences by the respondents agree with Pain and Chen (2018) that female journalists often face so many negative online comments and name-calling. Furthermore, the findings agree with Chen, Pain, Chen, Mekelburg, Springer, and Troger (2018) that attacks on female journalists were more common when they covered stories on topics most often associated with men and controversial issues such as immigration, race, feminism, or politics.

#### **Online Harassment and Freedom of the Press**

Online harassment of female journalists affects the quality of news content and freedom of expression in the digital space. Information meant for the audience is not investigated properly because of fear of being threatened. According to one of the respondents, *"there is no press freedom or freedom of expression." What I encounter online each time I cover news on the economy and politics has affected my news stories. I now cover general news but not sensitive stories.*" Another respondent further stated, *"I do not report news that I would have loved to report." I am always thinking of the outcomes if I report sensitive issues like women's matters, politics, party artisans, and others.* This finding aligned with Koirala (2020), who found that female journalists who have faced harassment limit their online activities, are cautious about sharing or posting news content on social media platforms, and avoid some topics such as women's rights, feminism, and corruption. Koirala (2020) study further revealed that the abuse affected their opinions and journalistic content as most of them practiced self-censorship in terms of news content.

This shows that the role the media plays as the fourth estate of the realm is in question in Nigeria. It also indicates that online harassment of female journalists is affecting the number of investigative news stories that are reported in the digital spaces. Female online journalists, in playing their social responsibility role, are meant to report news objectively and truthfully. This study showed that social media content is meant to help foster inclusive dialogue and expressions of opinion, but this study showed that this is not the case since female journalists and bloggers are not allowed to report all news; instead they are harassed when they investigatively and interpretatively report/cover news.



### Conclusion

This study has shown that female journalists in Nigeria face online harassment, especially name-calling, rape threats, and death threats. This online harassment is prevalent when certain news stories are covered, and, contrary to popular belief, respondents do not report them to higher authorities. However, this has a negative impact on the content of their news stories, and they end up not reporting in-depth news stories. This shows that online harassment of female journalists affects freedom of the press and the social responsibilities of female journalists.

### Recommendation

This study, based on the findings, recommends that:

1. Media employers should have safety plans for female journalists in their workplace.
2. The government should implement policies that will curb online harassment of journalists, especially female journalists.
3. Anonymity should be limited on social media platforms and online contents should be moderated.

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