

# **The safety of women journalists and media workers - Croatia Brief 2025**

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# Contents

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- 1 Introduction and Methodology
- 2 Protection of women journalists and media workers
- 3 Patterns and forms of incidents affecting women journalists
- 4 Online harassment
- 5 Investigations into attacks on journalists and media workers
- 6 Impact on women journalists
- 7 Conclusions
- 8 Recommendations

# 1. Introduction and Methodology

This brief follows the methodology developed by the SafeJournalists Network (SJN) in the Western Balkans, combining desk research, analysis of quantitative data from the SJN database and qualitative insights gathered through interviews and focus groups with women journalists. It builds on the findings of the 2024 research and provides an updated assessment for 2025, with a particular focus on the implementation of existing legal and institutional safeguards in a context marked by ongoing political pressures and rapid digital transformation. The analysis covers the period from 1 January to 31 December 2025 and examines patterns of risks, forms of gender-based violence and discrimination, institutional responses and their impact on the professional work and psychological wellbeing of women journalists.

In January 2026, a total of 10 interviews were conducted with representatives from different segments of the media sector, including journalists and editors from national television, public service media, national and local online portals, minority print media and a national news agency. The sample also included the President of the Croatian Journalists' Association and the President of the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists, ensuring both professional and institutional perspectives. In addition to the interviews, several focus groups were organised in January 2025. Four focus groups were conducted with female journalists, involving a total of 14 participants. One focus group was held with four editors and three additional focus groups brought together a total of 10 journalists. All focus groups were conducted online.

The research is subject to several limitations. These include the lack of publicly available institutional data, as well as the persistent under-reporting of attacks and threats against journalists. In particular, many female journalists do not report all incidents, as they often perceive threats and harassment as an inherent part of their profession. Existing data, including findings from the Journalists' Safety Index and the Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and Journalists' Safety for 2025, consistently highlight the presence of gender-specific threats and underline the urgent need for targeted protective measures and stronger institutional responses. However, further broader and deeper research is needed to better understand the different forms of violence experienced by female journalists, as well as the reasons why such incidents frequently go unreported.

## 2. Protection of women journalists and media workers

In Croatia, the legal and institutional framework formally recognizes gender-based violence; however, it does not always adequately address the specific risks faced by female journalists. The implementation of the Istanbul Convention, ratified in 2018, has provided a normative foundation through amendments to criminal legislation, as well as the adoption of specific protocols and strategies. Furthermore, amendments to the Criminal Code in 2024 introduced femicide as a distinct criminal offence and recognized gender-based violence as an aggravating circumstance. Although online harassment is not regulated as a separate offence, it is sanctioned under existing legal provisions.

The only publicly available data are court judgments, which may include information on the profession of the parties involved. However, each case must be examined in detail to determine whether it is related to journalistic work. Beyond the data collected by the SafeJournalists network, there are no other publicly available datasets specifically concerning female journalists.

Institutional support is provided by bodies such as the Gender Equality Ombudswoman and the Ombudswoman, as well as by a network of civil society organizations offering legal and psychosocial assistance, including free legal aid. Despite this, the experiences of female journalists point to limited effectiveness of protection mechanisms and a lack of trust in institutions. Attacks and threats often go unreported due to fear of professional consequences and the perception that such risks are part of the job, while responses from state authorities vary and timely protection is often lacking.

The level of institutional sensitivity to the specific challenges faced by female journalists remains insufficient. The situation within newsrooms is also uneven: fewer than half of media outlets have internal protection protocols in place and most do not implement preventive measures or provide systematic legal or psychological support. The research<sup>1</sup> on workplace harassment conducted by the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists further highlighted the vulnerability of women journalists within newsrooms, particularly in relation to sexual harassment and lack of effective internal protection mechanisms. That research indicates a high level of exposure to violence, discrimination and harassment, accompanied by a significant number of unreported cases. Overall, this points to the existence of a formal framework, but also to the need for its more consistent implementation and better adaptation to the specific needs of female journalists.

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<sup>1</sup> Research conducted by the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists for the project „Ending workplace harassment from the media industry”, carried out in Croatia by Emil Čančar and Dr. Dina Vozab; the survey was conducted on a sample of 216 media workers and female journalists in the second half of 2025; seven interviews were conducted with female journalists, as well as three interviews with experts. Data for the purposes of this analysis were drawn from a draft version of the report and Power Point presentation, as the final national research report was not publicly available at the time of this writing.

# 3. Patterns and forms of incidents affecting women journalists

Incident category	Number of cases		Number of cases reported to competent authorities		Number of cases in which formal proceedings were initiated		Number of cases containing gender-based elements
	Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women	
Life threats	6	1	4	1	3	1	1
Other threats	13	7	4	2	3	1	3
Physical attacks	5	3	4	3	4	3	1
<b>Total</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>

Table 1: Attacks and threats against journalists in Croatia, 2025 ([SafeJournalists database](#))

## 3.1 Other threats and harassment

In 2025, a total of 13 cases categorized as “other threats” were recorded, of which seven targeted female journalists, while three contained gender-based elements. These cases point to a pattern of indirect but persistent forms of pressure, including verbal attacks, public discrediting, legal intimidation and institutional pressure. Rather than isolated incidents, they reflect a broader environment in which journalists, particularly women, are exposed to continuous attempts to undermine their professional credibility and discourage critical reporting.

A recurring pattern is the use of public platforms, including social media and political forums, to discredit and target journalists, often triggering waves of online harassment. Another significant trend is the use of legal mechanisms, such as indictments related to reporting in the public interest, which can function as a form of pressure and deterrence. At the local level, institutional pressure by public authorities, including repeated official responses and public criticism, creates an additional layer of intimidation, particularly in smaller communities where journalists are more exposed.

Several cases also indicate patterns of repeated and personalized intimidation, including threats and offensive messages directed at journalists in connection with their reporting. In some instances, these pressures extend beyond national borders, as seen in restrictions on journalists' movement when reporting on politically sensitive events.

### **3.2 Threats to life and physical safety**

Out of a total of six recorded threats involving death or serious bodily harm, one was directed at a female journalist. This case illustrates the severity and gendered nature of such threats. The intimidation was conveyed in an indirect but highly disturbing manner, referencing the murder of journalist and editor Ivo Pukanić by suggesting that he had “lost his head” because of the same type of work she was doing. The threat also included explicit gender-based elements, combining intimidation with sexist and degrading insults targeting her personally.

This case reflects a broader pattern in which threats against women journalists often go beyond professional criticism and extend into personal, gender-based attacks aimed at discrediting, humiliating and silencing them. The journalist was targeted in connection with her reporting on illegal taxi operators, a topic involving public interest and economic irregularities. Acting on information from employees of Jadrolinija and the Port Authority in Split, she reported on unlicensed drivers disrupting port operations and overcharging tourists.

The threats appear to have been retaliatory, highlighting the risks associated with investigative reporting, particularly when it intersects with gender-based hostility. Such cases demonstrate how professional exposure to sensitive issues can trigger not only threats to physical safety, but also gendered forms of intimidation that intensify pressure on women journalists.

### **3.3 Physical attacks**

In the category of physical attacks, a total of five incidents were recorded, three of which targeted women journalists. These cases point to a pattern in which women journalists are not only exposed to physical violence but also to situations where institutional protection is inadequate or inconsistent. The recorded incidents include cases of direct physical assault while reporting, as well as situations where journalists faced threats and intimidation from groups of individuals while performing their professional duties in public spaces. In such environments, verbal abuse, gendered insults and physical aggression often occur simultaneously, creating a highly hostile and unsafe working context. In one case, a journalist was surrounded by a group, verbally abused, threatened with violence and physically attacked, illustrating how quickly such situations can escalate.

Another concerning pattern is the response of authorities. In one incident, despite the police being present or called to intervene, their reaction was perceived as insufficient, raising concerns about the effectiveness of protection mechanisms in practice. In another case, a journalist who initially contacted the police for protection was instead detained, highlighting inconsistencies in institutional responses and the potential for secondary victimization.

Physical attacks are also not limited to individuals but can extend to entire media organizations. One recorded case involved a serious threat sent to a newsroom, creating a broader climate of fear and insecurity among staff. These cases demonstrate that physical attacks against journalists are often accompanied by intimidation, lack of immediate protection and inconsistent institutional responses. At the same time, these recorded incidents likely underestimate the true scale of the problem, as many cases remain unreported due to normalization of violence, fear of consequences and lack of trust in institutional protection.

## 4. Online harassment

A total of eight online threats were recorded, of which one was directed specifically at a female journalist, one was targeted at female journalists in an online campaign on Facebook, while another targeted an entire newsroom that included female journalists. The threat directed at the journalist took the form of a sexist comment on social media, whereas the threat aimed at the newsroom involved a death threat. However, this number does not reflect the actual scale of online threats and attacks that female journalists face on a daily basis. Based on the research findings and interviews conducted with female journalists, it can be concluded that the real number is significantly higher.

Many journalists choose not to report all threats, particularly those they feel they can “endure” or those perceived as not sufficiently serious or immediately dangerous. This normalization of harassment contributes to systemic under-reporting and obscures the full extent of the problem. Female journalists report experiencing a wide spectrum of online abuse, ranging from attacks targeting their professional work to those focusing on their personal characteristics, such as appearance, age and position. These forms of harassment are often gender-specific and reflect broader patterns of misogyny in the digital space, further contributing to a hostile working environment and impacting both their professional performance and personal well-being. This contributes not only to a hostile online environment but also to long-term psychological pressure and normalization of abuse.

Online threats	Number of cases		Number of cases reported to competent authorities		Number of cases in which formal proceedings were initiated		Number of cases containing gender-based elements
	Total	Women	Total	Women	Total	Women	
Life threats	3	0	2	0	2	0	0
Other threats	3	2	1	0	1	0	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>2</b>

Table 2: Online harassment against women journalists, 2025

## 5. Investigations into attacks on journalists and media workers

Investigations into attacks and threats against journalists in Croatia are formally conducted using established police methods aimed at identifying all relevant facts, including the perpetrator, motive and circumstances of the offence. According to available information, such investigations are intended to be thorough and comprehensive and serious cases, particularly those involving physical violence, can be handled promptly and effectively, especially when treated as a priority. For example, in a severe physical attack recorded in late 2024, the perpetrator was quickly identified, arrested and prosecuted. However, in many other cases the process is significantly slower, as criminal complaints are forwarded to the State Attorney's Office, which assesses their validity. This stage can take months or even years, during which victims often have little or no insight into the progress of the case, creating a perception of limited transparency and limited access to justice. While legal mechanisms exist, their implementation remains inconsistent and victims often perceive a lack of timely and effective protection. Additionally, the effectiveness of institutional responses varies across different levels, from the national level to larger urban centers and smaller local communities, where capacities, experience and sensitivity to media freedom issues can differ significantly.

Although investigations are formally conducted, delays, limited transparency and insufficient consideration of gender-based aspects reduce their effectiveness and discourage reporting. While investigations aim to establish motives, it remains unclear to what extent they systematically consider broader contextual factors, such as political motivation or gender-based violence. There is no clear evidence that these elements are consistently integrated into investigative practices, which may limit the understanding of attacks that are directly linked to journalists' professional work or gender. Similarly, according to available information, there is no formal difference in how cases are handled when the victim is a woman journalist, suggesting a formally gender-neutral approach that may not fully capture the specific risks and pressures faced by women in the profession.

There is no dedicated safety contact point for journalists and incidents are usually reported either to the Croatian Journalists' Association (CJA) or directly to the police. Although cooperation between the police, CJA and the Trade Union of Croatian Journalists has improved in recent years, particularly following the 2023 cooperation agreement and the adoption of protocols, communication with victims during investigations remains limited and inconsistent. Victims often need to actively seek information about their cases and access to case files is not automatically granted but depends on formal procedures and legal representation.

Incidents are generally classified as criminal offences, as journalism is legally recognized as an activity of public interest. Threats are prosecuted ex officio under Article 139 of the Criminal Code, while Article 315b provides additional protection for individuals performing activities of public interest. However, despite this relatively strong legal framework, the classification and handling of cases are not always consistent in practice and delays in prosecution, as well as uneven application of legal standards, suggest ongoing structural challenges within the system.

## 6. Impact on women journalists

Incidents of threats, harassment and violence have a serious impact on women journalists' sense of safety and psychological wellbeing. Safety is not understood only as physical protection, but also as economic security, clear newsroom protocols, proper training and equipment and access to legal and psychological support. Many women journalists experience insecurity both externally and internally, meaning that threats come not only from the public, politicians, or online attackers, but also from within newsrooms themselves through discrimination, lack of support and sexual harassment. Online abuse, sexist insults, intimidation and repeated attacks create stress, anxiety, fear and a lasting sense of vulnerability. This is especially pronounced in smaller communities, where women journalists are more visible, have less institutional protection and are more exposed to social isolation and stigma.

These experiences can lead to self-censorship, although this is not universal. Some women journalists continue reporting despite threats, particularly when they have strong editorial backing. However, others avoid certain topics or moderate their reporting in order to reduce exposure to pressure, retaliation, or abuse. The degree of support from editors and media owners plays a crucial role here. Where support is weak or absent, women journalists are more likely to withdraw from sensitive reporting or reconsider publication decisions. Concerns about family responsibilities also influence professional choices, reflecting a broader lack of trust in available protection mechanisms.

Incidents also affect professional opportunities. Women journalists report fewer opportunities for advancement, weaker institutional support when facing harassment and unequal treatment compared with male colleagues. Younger women journalists in particular may be overlooked for recruitment or promotion even when they are equally or better qualified. In some local media environments, hostile management practices and lack of recognition further deepen insecurity and professional marginalization. In the most serious cases, violence or harassment, combined with inadequate institutional or managerial responses, can push women out of the profession altogether.

This also affects media pluralism. When women journalists are more exposed to threats, less protected and more likely to self-censor or leave journalism, fewer women remain in positions to report on high-risk or politically sensitive issues. This narrows the range of voices and perspectives in the media and weakens both gender equality in journalism and the broader democratic role of the press.

## 7. Conclusions

The most important trend in 2025 is the continued normalization of threats, harassment and pressure against women journalists, particularly in the online sphere and within newsrooms, combined with the persistent culture of under-reporting attacks and threats. Many women journalists do not report incidents because they perceive them as part of the job, fear professional consequences, or lack trust in institutional protection. This significantly obscures the real scale of the problem and weakens the effectiveness of existing protection mechanisms. At the same time, insecurity is increasingly recognized as both external and internal, with growing evidence of risks within newsrooms themselves. A significant development in 2025 is the research conducted by the Sindikat novinara Hrvatske on sexual harassment in the workplace, which highlighted the high vulnerability of women journalists within media organizations.

The biggest problem in protecting women journalists is the gap between formal protection mechanisms and their implementation in practice. This includes slow and non-transparent procedures, limited access to information during investigations, insufficient institutional sensitivity to gender-based violence and weak or non-existent internal protection mechanisms within media organizations. Women journalists continue to face higher exposure to online abuse, intimidation and discrimination, which negatively affects their psychological wellbeing, professional opportunities and willingness to report on sensitive topics. This contributes to self-censorship, professional withdrawal and reduced media pluralism, particularly in smaller communities where institutional support is weaker.

# 8. Recommendations

## **Decision-makers / Policy makers**

- Strengthen the implementation of existing legal framework, particularly provisions related to threats against journalists, addressing the gap between law and practice.
- Introduce mandatory consideration of gender-based violence and political motivation in investigations, as these are currently not systematically assessed.
- Reform reporting procedures to ensure protection of victims personal data and reduce barriers to reporting, in response to widespread under-reporting.
- Support and fund further research on violence against women journalists, including workplace harassment, building on the TUCJ 2025 findings
- Develop targeted policies for local media environments, where risks and lack of protection are most pronounced.

## **Police / Prosecution / Courts**

- Ensure faster and more transparent procedures, as current delays and lack of communication reduce trust and discourage reporting.
- Improve communication with victims, including regular updates on case progress.
- Develop and apply gender-sensitive investigative approaches, including recognition of gender-based threats.
- Provide continuous training on media freedom and journalists' safety, particularly in smaller communities.
- Ensure consistent legal qualification of attacks, addressing uneven application in practice.

## **Media outlets and editorial teams**

- Establish clear and mandatory internal protocols for reporting threats and harassment, as current systems are often informal or absent.
- Provide accessible psychological and legal support to journalists, given the documented impact on wellbeing.
- Strengthen editorial backing to reduce self-censorship and withdrawal from sensitive reporting.
- Introduce zero-tolerance policies for sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination, particularly in light of TUCJ 2025 findings.

## **Professional associations and trade unions**

- Expand legal and psychological support services, especially for freelancers and journalists in smaller communities.
- Continue documenting attacks and highlighting under-reporting trends.
- Develop training programs on safety, digital threats and gender-based violence.
- Advocate for stronger institutional accountability and effective implementation of protections.

## **Civil society and international actors**

- Support independent monitoring of media freedom and safety of women journalists.
- Fund further research on underreported forms of violence, including online abuse and workplace harassment.
- Promote regional cooperation and exchange of good practices.
- Support awareness campaigns to challenge the normalization of threats and encourage reporting.