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Women in War

Challenges and possibilities for female journalists covering wars and conflicts

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Abstract:

The chapter takes as its starting point the notion that journalists' safety is a precondition for free expression and free media. Based on interviews and discussions with experienced female war and conflict journalists from seven countries worldwide, the discussion evolves around questions linked to what particular challenges and opportunities women journalists face, and how their security can best be ensured when covering war and conflict zones. The deliberations are believed to have a direct bearing on debates about female journalists' safety online and offline, the importance of the presence of female journalists covering wars and conflicts, and how their being there may serve as an indicator of freedom of expression, civil rights and media freedom in general.

Keywords: safety of journalists, freedom of expression, conflict reporting, gender perspectives

Introduction

Journalists contribute to the world's experiences of conflicts and crises: from shaping global audiences' perceptions and knowledge about them to affecting our sense of proximity to the distant other (Chouliaraki 2009). Diverse, multiple voices are important to free speech interests in democracy as well as to rationales about knowledge and autonomy. It is not necessarily speech as such, but debate and diversity of ideas that are primary (Kenyon 2014:4). Balanced gender representations in the media increase citizens' possibilities to experience identification and democratic belonging (e.g., Eide and Orgeret 2015). During recent years, particularly since the period of the so-called Arab uprisings in 2010, an increasing number of journalists worldwide have encountered violent aggression while covering civil unrest and demonstrations and many have been killed. If journalists are threatened and attacked, the broader societal effects are grim. Coverage gaps increase as a culture of self-censorship within the media and society grows. There is a common understanding that the escalating threats and intimidation of journalists, in general, and female journalists, in particular, must be addressed (IWMMF and INSI 2014, OSCE 2015). In 2013 and 2014, UNESCO publicly condemned the death of a total of 178 journalists and media workers and social media producers engaged in journalistic activities. The vast majority of these (164 or 92 percent) were men, and men continue to do the vast majority of war and conflict reporting (UNESCO 2015:152-155). Conflict zone reporters face a multitude of dangers unique to their particular form of journalism. Female journalists are more exposed in these conflict settings, which are heavily dominated by men, and hence they are more vulnerable. In the words of former foreign reporter Anna Sebba, it is "more dangerous than ever to be a female war reporter" (Chertoff 2013).

Journalists' safety is a precondition for free expression and free media. Hence, the major questions this chapter engages with are: What are the challenges and opportunities for women journalists covering conflict-related issues? Do women cover violence and conflict differently from men? And what can be done to ensure female journalists' safety while covering conflicts?

The chapter draws on findings from interviews with a number of female reporters from Egypt, Nepal, Norway, Pakistan, South Africa, Tunisia and Uganda who cover wars and conflicts in their home countries and/or internationally. In terms of methods, this chapter presents quotes and excerpts from interviews and dialogue with a selection of reporters. The interviews and talks took place in 2014 and 2015, partly during a conference for female researchers and journalists covering conflict and war in Tunisia in December 2014.

Safety for journalists covering conflict zones

During recent years, the world has become a more dangerous place for journalists and media workers. Several of the journalists interviewed emphasized the fact that some challenges are equal whether you are a man or a woman, while some are different. A female senior war reporter put it like this:

“If you are a woman, don't complain! There might be very little food and water, there are no ladies rooms in a war zone. If you get your period – bad luck. War is war. There is no special treatment of female reporters” (interview 2015).

The interviewees stressed that *all* conflict situations are different, and that it is important to be aware of this when preparing for an assignment. As an example, they gave one ‘rule’ that is just as important for men as for women: prepare before travelling to a new place or to a new security situation. Details about the location and current situation, as well as about contextual factors such as language, history, culture and customs, should be researched so that one can make better-informed decisions when on site. It was also emphasized that all reporters need good colleagues they can trust:

“In a conflict you need good people around you. I believe there is a special place in hell for colleagues who don't help each other in wars, with cables for cameras and computers or other things. It's nice to be a good person of course, but it is also part of a security strategy, you never know when you may need help” (interview 2015).

The need for good equipment, and investing in good and loyal fixers and drivers, was also mentioned as a general rule when covering a conflict. A typical feature of many conflict situations is that the security situation changes abruptly and makes it difficult for reporters to anticipate where violence may break out. Preparing to cover conflicts includes considering whether or not reporting a story might compromise one's own safety. At times the only way to be safe is to decide not to do the story. It may be difficult for an eager and dedicated journalist to turn down the possibility of coverage, but sometimes this is the only solution. Several of the reporters described the trying situation when you have to turn a story down, but agreed that a decision not to go into a conflict area should be seen as a sign of maturity (interviews, 2014, 2015).

Safety for female journalists covering wars and conflicts

Female conflict reporters run the same risks as their male counterparts, plus other risks unique to women (Whitehorn 2014). The fact that a female journalist is more exposed in conflict settings was mentioned repeatedly. For this reason, having helpers one can trust, or travelling with another colleague (male if possible), is of particular importance for a female reporter. Furthermore, for women journalists, being aware of cultural norms and practices is perceived as crucial. A current challenge is how contacts and sources in the field may perceive one, both as a journalist and as a woman. Reporters who had covered conflicts in rather conservative cultures talked about the need to develop a particular situational awareness; some types of conversation may be considered inappropriate and eye contact may be considered flirting. The reporters described techniques such as carrying two business cards – one with real details, another with a mock email and the phone number to the desk – and unmarried women wore fake wedding rings. The interviewees explained the need to always pay attention to what you wear as a female reporter covering conflict situations; a reporter with experience from Afghanistan often used a burqa when moving around. One should avoid ponytails, earrings or anything that can be grabbed. Where to meet sources and the need to pay attention to your body language were also issues of concern. A Norwegian journalist described her experiences from being a woman reporter in Pakistan:

“I blame the Hollywood films! Around the world there are many men who

believe that all Western women are willing. It is difficult to get in touch with male sources when you cannot give them your number. I changed my reporting style the hard way – nobody told me about it in advance: Lower your eyes, don't smile during interviews. Never ever give away your phone number” (interview 2014).

As numerous cases of rape and sexual violence against female reporters covering the Arab uprisings from late 2010 and onwards have shown, covering malicious crowd scenes is often an especially difficult task for female reporters (see also Wolfe 2011). Staying safe when working in crowds is a major challenge, and a female journalist may not even be safe in her own country. One example is how senior journalist Quatrina Hosain was brutally attacked when covering an election rally in Wah Cantt in Pakistan in May 2013. A mob of around 30 men surrounded Hosain and separated her from her camera team before violently assaulting her. Hosain was finally rescued by her colleagues and escaped in a car. It is believed that Quatrina Hosain was targeted for her independent views, as part of a growing intolerance of freedom of expression (Hussain 2014). Hosain herself explained how the horrible attack not only left traces on her body, but also on her mental well-being. For a long period of time she thought that she would never be able to return to journalism again (discussion, Tunis 2014). The journalists discussed how talking about such attacks often feels humiliating and emphasized the importance of strong role models, such as Hosain, daring to break the silence. Few cases of sexual assault against journalists have been reported, probably as a result of powerful cultural and professional stigmas. The fear of being considered ‘a complaining girl’ and less capable than one’s male colleagues was a feeling several of the women reporters had experienced (discussions and interviews 2014, 2015).

Owing to the particular challenges war and conflict reporters face in the field, taking professional training courses was thought to be decisive. However, several of the journalists found that these security courses tended to be tailored exclusively to a male audience. During such courses, the women had experienced some ‘testosterone men’ who used ‘very macho’ approaches (interviews 2014). Since the 1990s, security training courses for journalists have been offered by private firms, staffed mainly by former military personnel (CPJ 2012). There seems to be a market for alternative

training courses that also focus on women journalists and their particular challenges and needs in areas of conflict.

The role of the home institution was also discussed among the journalists. They felt that news organizations should explicitly acknowledge their responsibilities to support their field journalists and keep them informed about important practical details. There is a tendency for women journalists, as they get older, to quit reporting from conflict zones to instead focus on family life in their home country. As a result, many of the female reporters in the field are young and rather inexperienced, and need to be carefully followed up by their organizations. According to the reporters, how good the organizations were at such follow-ups varied.

Online gender-based harassment

Women journalists face additional risks in the course of their work in the field, but also online. An IWMF and INSI report (2014) interviewed nearly 1000 female media workers from around the world and found that nearly two-thirds of respondents had experienced some form of intimidation, threats or abuse in relation to work, ranging in severity from name-calling to rape and death threats. An increasing tendency is digital threats and online abuse. More than 25 percent of harassment of women in news media happen in an online environment (IWMF and INSI 2014), and this is a growing international phenomenon (Henrichsen et al. 2014:43). Studies have also demonstrated that female journalists experience approximately three times as many abusive comments online as their male counterparts do. For some female journalists, online threats of rape and sexual violence have become part of everyday life; others experience severe sexual harassment and intimidation (OSCE 2015). The female journalists interviewed described increasing pressure from their leaders to be ‘visible and active’ on various social media platforms at all times. They saw this as a double-edged sword; on the one hand, using social media was an effective method of reaching out directly to your audience and promoting your stories, but it was also problematic, as a great deal of harassment is perpetrated through these channels.

Covering the Gaza War for the Norwegian public service broadcaster NRK during the summer of 2014, reporter Sidsel Wold received a lot of cruel hate messages for being “too biased” and “Palestine friendly.” A Facebook page entitled ‘We demand Sidsel

Wold be removed!’ spread numerous hateful comments.

“My male colleagues receive hate mails too, but I am more exposed. Almost all of the very hateful messages are written by men. Men who hate women. This [Israel-Palestine] conflict is very special. It’s a mixture of politics and religion and that makes some people very very angry” (Wold 2015).

Wold’s statement echoes the words of the OSCE representative on freedom of the media, who described how the female journalists who are targeted “mostly report on crime, politics and sensitive – and sometimes painful – issues, including taboos and dogmas in our societies.” Wold’s experience feeds into the findings of another Norwegian study, which shows that if one is a female television reporter or news anchor, one’s chances of being harassed are twice that of a man’s (Hagen 2015). The OSCE representative stressed how, ‘these online attacks tend to degrade the journalist as a woman, rather than address the content of the articles’ (OSCE 2015). Such online attacks and harassment are indeed highly problematical, owing to both the personal harm they inflict and their potential to prevent women from engaging in the news media and the public sphere. When back in Norway, Wold also decided to employ a strategy of openness concerning the harassment and hate she had met with. She exposed some of the hateful messages on social media and even called some of the people who had insulted her, asking them, ‘why do you hate me so much?’ (Wold 2014).

The advantages of a hybrid position

Alongside being more vulnerable when covering wars and conflicts, the women reporters also described some important advantages of being female. The Western reporters covering societies with more traditional gender roles referred to how they were often seen as both man *and* woman.

“In the Middle East I am seen as something in between a man and a woman, and that is clearly a professional advantage. I can both speak to the men and I can enter the female areas where not men are allowed” (interview 2014).

Particularly when covering wars and conflicts, there is a need for local and ordinary voices to be heard. This is the point made by Shabbir Hussain, who argued that “though the media, when reporting on government officials, always refer to the ‘ordinary people killed in the conflict,’ they never discuss what happens to the local population when military jets bomb the area and fire missiles” (2014, 6). When common people in a conflict have no voice in the media, elitist and securitized versions have a monopoly on the mainstream media discourse, often at the expense of more peaceful perspectives (e.g., Galtung 2000, Hussain 2014a, Ross 2008). Several of the reporters interviewed emphasized that, in such situations, a hybrid position may be a professional advantage. One of the journalists described the benefit of being a woman journalist in Afghanistan where the genders live particularly segregated:

“I have access to the women in a totally different manner than my male colleagues do. This is an enormous possibility and an enormous responsibility as the general representation of Afghan women in Western media is shallow.” (interview 2014).

The representation of women in war and conflict zones is key, especially because globally many of the traditional female roles are still considered ‘private,’ as opposed to the more public masculine sphere. Access to female sources is important to obtaining a fuller picture, and the reporters from different countries all agreed that talking to women results in a different way of reporting. The reporter from Uganda stated:

“Of course there is a difference between how I as a woman approach conflict and how a man would do it. When I am in the field with my male colleagues, the only things they can think of is when the next battle is going to take place, what military equipment is used, how the war is funded and so on. I’m not saying that as a female I am not looking at these prospects, but I think the most important is the human part. Those are the stories that touch people and with which they can relate. I am not going to count the dead, but I will talk to the woman who has been raped or hurt” (interview 2015).

The women reporters agreed that women often cover wars and conflicts in a different way than men do. This is not necessarily because of their biological sex, but rather because the geopolitics and contextual features provide them with a different role than men have in that particular setting. Some underlined that they have sensitive male colleagues and female colleagues who are ‘adrenaline junkies.’ Some argued that they never saw themselves as a ‘woman journalist,’ but also thought that there were stories they produced that they could not have done without being a woman. What is considered important is that women journalists venture into the field and cover wars and conflicts with access to a broader spectrum of voices and perspectives. This echoes the quote of Katharine Whitehorn:

“We must be grateful for getting a view on troubled times that is not dictated only by men and the military” (Whitehorn 2014).

Conclusion

The right of journalists to work under safe conditions, without fear of being harassed, attacked, raped or killed, is a topic of fundamental importance to freedom of the press and freedom of expression. To ensure that conflict is covered journalistically from as many angles and perspectives as possible, one criterion is that the assemblage of journalists present be as heterogeneous as possible. Efforts should be made by news organizations to include female journalists in such assignments, and to treat them just as they treat male journalists. At the same time, there is a need to acknowledge the particular safety challenges female reporters face in conflict zones, some of which have been discussed here, as well as to recognize that female conflict reporters may need to prepare and act differently and get a different kind of support when covering wars and conflicts. In other words, to borrow from Gayatri Spivak (1988), there would seem to be a need for some sort of ‘strategic essentialism.’

This strategic approach includes the realization that – although great differences may exist between members of the broad group of ‘women journalists’ and although the profession should be much more defining than the gender – it may sometimes be advantageous for female reporters to temporarily "essentialize" themselves and to bring forward their group identity in a simplified way, the goal being to achieve more

awareness of, and support for dealing with, the challenges they face. It is imperative that journalism education and training programs include gender perspectives in their safety and security training for journalists covering wars and conflicts.

Furthermore, additional research is needed on the particular needs and challenges of women covering war and conflict zones, including research on new areas such as gender-based cyber violence. It is important that we continue this discussion and do so with an increasingly nuanced understanding of what gender perspectives in the safety of journalists actually involve.

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