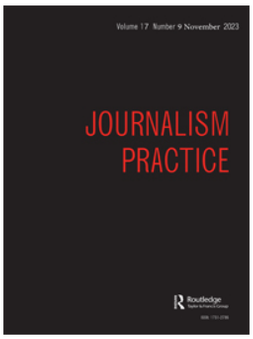

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"Journalists are Prepared for Critical Situations … but We are Not Prepared for This": Empirical and Structural Dimensions of Gendered Online Harassment

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses online harassment against women journalists exploring self-reported incidents, effects, and trust in safety mechanisms. Drawing on twenty-five semi-structured interviews of women journalists in Portugal, we use a feminist and critical realist framework to explore the causal structures and generative mechanisms that explain their vulnerability to online abuse. We identify three overarching themes: increasing visibility in a context of higher hostility towards journalism and insufficient safety mechanisms; intersectional gender inequality and cultural mores that foster it; and (individual) responses to harassment. These themes show that women journalists' actions are both constrained and enabled by existing structures and cultural attitudes. While they tend to deny harassment is caused by their gender, seeing it mainly because of their job, they admit the sexualised and gendered nature of the insults, seeing this as an added offence not experienced by their male counterparts. They also see harassment as a continuation of inequality and prevailing sexism and find the protection mechanisms insufficient and ineffective. As a result, they assume an extra burden of emotional labour to deal with online bullying, admitting self-censoring and the need to develop resilience strategies.

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Introduction

Hostility against journalists has long been acknowledged, but social media's characteristics provide for different practices and pernicious impacts (Binns 2017; Holton et al. 2021; Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020; Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016; Miller 2021b). Online violence has become "journalism safety's new frontline—and women journalists sit at the epicentre of risk" (Posetti and Shabbir 2022, 17). It can take various forms and be addressed under different concepts, "lacking a common terminological framework

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to define these practices" (Simões, Alcantara, and Carona 2021, 367). Miller and Lewis (2022, 81) define harassment as "unwanted behaviours that are sexual, abusive, sexist, or aggressive … [They] may be violent, threatening, verbal, physical, or even just mildly abusive in form, and … may occur online and offline and may be one-time or repetitive", a definition particularly useful for our purposes. Despite some newsrooms having developed social media policies, these tend to benefit the organisation and not the journalists (Nelson 2023), which has a toll on their physical and emotional well-being and their work.

Although male journalists might receive more attacks online (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring 2016), women are more subjected to sexist comments and sexual violence threats (Binns 2017; Miller 2022; RSF 2021) and face more safety challenges online than men (Gever et al. 2023). In this sense, violence is qualitatively different, and women journalists are targeted in chronic and escalating harassment (Holton et al. 2021). For Høiby (2020), violence against women journalists is a result of three interrelated factors: who they are (women), what they do (journalism), and the context they are operating within (online space/regulation), arguing that these issues are "dependent on systematic antipress violence, persisting patriarchal social structures and that the conditions of online space allow harassment to thrive" (109).

Widespread online violence against journalists carries unprecedented complexity. It is a global problem with different regional challenges; journalists are differently targeted, and the attacks, instigated by multiple actors, legitimise anti-press violence (Waisbord 2022). This paper explores its multiple causes, experiences of harm and responses to it, focusing on women journalists in the Portuguese context. Although important work has been done on hate speech and journalism in Portugal (Amaral and Simões 2021; Coelho and Silva 2021; Silva et al. 2021; Simões 2021), little is known about online violence against women journalists in particular.

This paper is part of a wider project that investigates online harassment of journalists. Within this research, we conducted a national survey of journalists of all genders (Miranda et al. 2023). Overall findings show that journalists in Portugal feel an increasing hostility aggravated by the digital environment, and half of the surveyed professionals experienced online abuse, including sexual harassment. Additionally, journalists demonstrated unawareness of how to deal with cases of online harassment, and a distrust in existing mechanisms for protection, legal or organisational. The survey further revealed that journalists (including the ones that have not experienced harassment) see women as the preferential target of abuse.

In this article, we focus on the gendered aspects of online harassment by providing an in-depth qualitative analysis of the problem experienced by women journalists. By centring on the Portuguese context, we also aim to contribute to the study of gendered harassment's broader implications across nations.

We approach the issue through a feminist interpretation (Fletcher 2017; 2020; Grigorovich and Kontos 2019; Lennox and Jurdi-Hage 2017) of critical realism (Archer 1996; Bhaskar 2008; Danermark, Ekström, and Karlsson 2019). This provides a framework to explore how inequality-generating mechanisms may produce harassing situations and how under-regulation, under-discussion, normalisation, and emotional burden shape women journalists' agency towards the various forms of harm experienced. Thus, this study explores the causes and experiences of online harassment through interviews with twenty-five women journalists in Portugal on online violence in their work routines.

Literature Review

Cultural Norms, Journalism, and Regulation: The Portuguese Context

Although the literature reflects multidisciplinary approaches, feminist scholarship has shone the most consistent light on online violence, demonstrating its parallelism with patriarchy and white supremacy in the physical world (Cross 2019). The sexist, racist, homo/transphobic and ageist nature of online harassment is rooted in structural prejudice and inequality that amplify its dehumanising effects.

Stahel and Schoen (2019, 1855) argued that female journalists are more severely attacked than male journalists because they "can be perceived, at least by some sections of society, as violating their gender status". This relates to sexism in its blunt or subtler, nonetheless equally discriminating and disturbing forms. When directed at women journalists, sexism may help to explain why they "endure twice the level of danger and have to defend themselves on another front, a many-sided struggle since it exists outside the newsroom as well as inside" (RSF 2021, 3). Moreover, sexist discourse needs serious attention in anti-oppression politics today (Richardson-Self 2018).

A study on sexism in Portugal from 2009 to 2019 shows that it "is more deeply rooted than we would like to admit and adapts to social discourse" (Gomes et al. 2021, 2). Portuguese society is still rooted in old customs, patriarchal cultural patterns, and sexist attitudes, which, despite progressive laws, promote violence and discriminatory practices against women, reinforcing women's subordinate status in society and contributing to the increasing number of gendered online attacks.

Despite this, women in Portugal are now the best-educated segment of the labour force, and are present in most sectors, reaching near parity in journalism. Compared to their male colleagues, women journalists are younger, have higher qualifications, tend to have smaller pay, and are not in decision-making positions (Miranda 2017). In many ways, women journalists are still seen as "the other" (Lobo et al. 2017). These factors may contribute to their higher vulnerability to harassment.

There are neither official numbers of national cases of online abuse among journalists nor absolute data on online violence in general, according to the Portuguese Association of Victim Support (APAV 2021). Over the last few years, however, they have seen an alarming increase in reports: their Safe Internet Line received 216 complaints of online hate in 2020 (in 2019, there were only 24) and 260 contacts about non-consensual sharing of private images, threats to share photos, invasion of privacy, extortion, etc. (in 2019, there were only 22). These numbers (mostly women) are likely higher, given that many situations are not reported (APAV 2021).

Online harassment has not yet met proper regulation and action by the news sector-specific institutions such as the Portuguese Regulatory Authority for the Media (ERC), the Journalists' Professional License Committee (CCPJ) or the National Journalist's Trade Union. ERC developed action on gender equality and non-discrimination in the media in 2014, publishing the "Action Plan for the Promotion of Equality between Men and Women and the Fight against gender stereotypes". Since then, it promoted regulative deliberations following civil society complaints and supported studies on pluralism and gender diversity in daily news. However, most of these actions disregard online violence. ERC's Directive (2014) on user-generated content is limited to establishing the media's

editorial responsibility for readers' comment sections. Although it has produced deliberations following complaints of homophobia, racism, xenophobia, and hatred in media content, it has not done so on sexist discrimination, having yet to affirm a consistent position in the fight against misogyny and sexism in the media. As for CCPJ, although no concrete initiatives to discuss online violence against journalists were found, it has provided logistical support to academic research on these issues.

The timid efforts to tackle the problem stem from the pressure from supranational federations do not specifically include a gendered dimension, and tend to assign such matters to media organisations, encouraging self-regulation. This cannot be separated from their missing organisational focus on gender equality within the profession. Indeed, unlike unions in other countries, the National Union of Journalists does not have a council or working group on gender issues. This lack of organisational action exposes structural barriers to addressing gendered online violence in organisations (Claesson 2022).

Online Harassment, Women, and Normalisation

Journalists increasingly mention online harassment as a common feature of their working lives, a "new normal" (Waisbord 2020a) and an invisible burden that contributes to experiences of fatigue, anxiety and disconnection from social media as well as their profession (Holton et al. 2021). Yet, there is a tendency to normalise online violence against journalists as "part of the job", something expected as "the price to pay" in journalism (Adams 2018; Chen and Pain 2017; Deavours et al. 2022; Kantola and Harju 2021; Miller and Lewis 2022; Westlund, Krøvel, and Skare Orgeret 2022). This normalisation is associated with increasing desensitisation to common forms of online harassment, like insults (Lewis, Zamith, and Coddington 2020). As with the offline normalisation of harassment (North 2016), undervaluing of online harassment is reflected in low stances of reporting. In their research, Ferrier and Garud-Patkar (2018) found that more than half of the women subjected to online harassment did not report it because they thought it was not "important enough" or that nothing would be done.

Online harassment impacts women and men differently: women are more likely to limit their engagement with audiences, adapt their reporting, and consider quitting journalism (Stahel and Schoen 2019). Women journalists tend to self-censor or reduce their visibility on social media (Miller 2021a; Posetti and Shabbir 2022) despite the job's demands to connect with the audiences and promote personal branding (Molyneux 2019). One way of becoming less exposed is to block or silence harassing users on social media platforms (Deavours et al. 2022; Miller and Lewis 2022).

Normalising violence as part of the job and simply not perceiving it as a problem is what Krook (2020) calls a cognitive gap for women. A driving factor for this cognitive gap is post-feminism, or the neo-sexist "widespread belief in many countries that gender equality has been already achieved" (5). In her work on violence against women in politics, Krook identifies three other gaps that explain motivations for women to remain silent. These gaps are applicable to women journalists. The political gap refers to cases where women recognise violence as sexist, but strategically choose to keep these experiences private to avoid replicating the stereotype of women as "weak" or "angry" and unprepared for the job. The receptivity gap explains that women remain silent due to lacking a receptive audience. In these cases, women are

"gaslit" to believe that their claims are not serious or are an overreaction. Finally, the resources gap relates to the widespread silence about gender violence, inadequate language for women to describe their experiences, and difficulties in identifying abuse situations. These four gaps lead women to adopt various individualised coping strategies to threats and acts of violence.

The emotional impact of online harassment manifests in various outcomes, including demotivation, symptoms of PTSD, and self-responsibilisation (Ferrier and Garud-Patkar 2018). As social media platforms, law enforcement, and news organisations fail to deal with the problem structurally, journalists tend to apply the mantra "mute, block, report, delete" (Posetti and Shabbir 2022, 26). This leads to the employment of emotional labour to deal with the abuse (Kantola and Harju 2021; Miller and Lewis 2022) and stresses the need to tackle this issue collectively and not individually, as "a lack of systemic approach adds a burden to journalists' work that remains unaddressed" (Holton et al. 2021, 12).

Some women journalists are forced to quit social media or leave their job because of the sexist or sexual violence they suffer (RSF 2021). The consequences of this gender-based online aggression are not only to women journalists' psychological well-being but also to public life triggering a "chilling effect" (Townend 2017) that limits the types of stories and topics covered.

Because women are preferential targets of trolling, misogyny, and harassment, these induce an emotional and psychological price that women journalists may feel they must pay (Chadha et al. 2020; Kantola and Harju 2021). The management of these emotions is part of the affective labour that leads to reciprocal relationships, feeds into journalists' work and is directly exploited and used to generate surplus value for their employers (Siapera 2019). In their research with broadcast journalists, Miller and Lewis (2022) explain that women perform significant unpaid emotional labour when dealing with, mitigating and preventing further harassment. The lack of institutional responses and the virtually absent discussion within the class leads women journalists to manage this burden of harassment at work as an individual responsibility, an invisible burden of emotional labour added to the already stressful job.

Critical Realism and Online Gendered Harassment: A Working Framework

Gendered online harassment is a complex phenomenon, requiring a meta-theory suited to uncover how inequality-generating mechanisms may produce harassing situations for women journalists. Our research is underpinned by a feminist interpretation of the philosophical assumptions of critical realism (CR) associated with Roy Bhaskar (2008), Margaret Archer (1996) and others. It also takes an intersectional feminist stance that attends to the simultaneous and sometimes contradictory effects of multiple social structures, such as gender, race, and socio-economic class (Dy, Martin, and Marlow 2020). Critical to our study are the CR-informed studies of journalism (e.g. Lau 2004; Wright 2011) and the research on phenomena such as the harassment of women (Grigorovich and Kontos 2019; Lennox and Jurdi-Hage 2017). CR has inspired feminist research because of its focus on the deep structural causes of individual experiences and social events, and on the nature of the causal structures that produce gender inequality (Fletcher 2017). Social objects define relationships of power from which causal mechanisms emerge in

a stratified depth reality. As Stutchbury (2022, 114) puts it, CR "is about looking for (causal mechanisms) through a focus on what people can achieve (agency) in the social context in which they are operating (structures)".

We can map the layers of harassment onto Bhaskar's (2008) stratified ontology of the social world and its three overlapping levels of reality: the Real (generative mechanisms giving rise to harassment), the Actual (harmful events of harassment), and the Empirical (the subjective experiences of harassment).

Using the iceberg metaphor (Fletcher 2017), the phenomenon's visible tip is the empirical domain that includes those events that are observed or experienced: hostile interactions with journalists and gendered harassment. The actual level is the domain of material existence, comprising things and the events they undergo, whether observed or not. The real level (the unseen part of the iceberg) is the realm of structures and causal (generative) mechanisms producing specific patterns of actual and empirical events. Real generative mechanisms "emerge from intersecting structures of domination that serve to position individuals and groups within social hierarchies" as complex mechanisms that "privilege or disadvantage (enable or constrain) agents in relation to social mobility and material, political, social, cultural, and economic resources" (Dy, Martin, and Marlow 2020, 157).

Critical realist researchers seek to identify causal mechanisms at the level of the real, mechanisms that are manifest at the empirical level of reality as "demi-regularities" or broken empirical patterns observable as events (Danermark, Ekström, and Karlsson 2019). Inspired by these insights, and along with Lennox and Jurdi-Hage (2017) and Grigorovich and Kontos (2019), we explore the "causal level" of online harassment of women journalists.

In our study, social structures include the material conditions of today's digital architecture of journalism, which allows hostile audiences to access journalists easily, limiting their capacity to work freely in a safe space. Institutional structures also refer to the expectation that journalists become more visible and engage with audiences but lack regulation to protect journalists. Structures further include the ideas, values and attitudes that mould situations for agency (Archer 1996). Sexism is a key example, which, in historical interactions with other mechanisms, can produce further inequality (Dy, Martin, and Marlow 2020).

Methodology

This study asked: What cultural, structural and agential aspects of social reality and working lives shape experiences of gendered online harassment as experienced by women journalists? It aimed to understand the experiences of online harassment in Portugal by journalists identifying as women, exploring how they talk about, acknowledge, and deal with online harassment and how this relates to causes of structural inequality and cultural beliefs. To this end, a sample of twenty-five participants was gathered purposefully and snowballed. Journalists were formally contacted via email or phone, and interviews took place in January–February 2022, lasting 60–90 min. Oral consent and permission to record the conversations in video and audio were obtained before each interview. Despite the predefined questions, the semi-structured approach allowed participants to develop key points and interviewers to follow up on specific questions. Participants' ages ranged from 24–61 years (median: 40.32 years), and their

Table 1. Interview respondents.

Respondent ID	Pseudonym	Medium	Position	Age	Working Experience
R1	Joana	Television	Reporter	46	25
R2	Ana	Print/Online	Reporter	24	4
R3	Catarina	Online	Senior Reporter	61	35
R4	Paula	Television	Editor	48	25
R5	Maria	Radio	Editor	37	15
R6	Cláudia	News Agency	Reporter	39	12
R7	Marta	Print/Online	Reporter	26	6
R8	Sara	Print/Online	Freelancer	47	13
R9	Rita	Online	Freelancer	33	8
R10	Mafalda	Online	Editor	34	13
R11	Teresa	Print/Online	Reporter	30	9
R12	Rosa	Local Press	Director	38	12
R13	Francisca	Online	Senior Reporter	29	7
R14	Inês	Print/Online	Reporter	44	25
R15	Elisa	Local Press	Reporter	45	22
R16	Marta	Local Press	Director	48	26
R17	Sílvia	Print/Online	Reporter	55	21
R18	Helena	Print/Online	Reporter	31	8
R19	Carolina	Print/Online	Senior reporter	53	32
R20	Margarida	Online	Reporter	40	10
R21	Luísa	Online	Freelancer	43	18
R22	Clara	Television	Correspondent	39	18
R23	Laura	Local Press	Editor in Chief	50	28
R24	Alice	Online	Reporter	24	4
R25	Mariana	Television	Editor in Chief	44	26

working experience across the media spectrum from 4–35 years (median: 16.88 years), as shown in Table 1.

During the interviews, respondents were asked about their work, perceptions of the online environment, harassing cases, views on gendered online harassment, safety strategies and organisational safety policies. After having transcribed the interviews with the help of artificial intelligence software and corrected them verbatim, transcripts were anonymised and imported to MaxQDA software for data management and analysis. A "directed" coding process was used (Fletcher 2017). Codes were created, adjusted, or eliminated based on existing theory, research question, and data. Two researchers generated codes and themes independently, refined them, and narrowed them down through group coding, finalising codes and themes. The same procedure was followed for each interview, developing similarities and forming the three final themes. The results are not intended to be generalisable but reflect a snapshot of views on the research topics when interviews were undertaken.

A feminist approach to CR's framework allows us a better exploration of how different layers of inequality intercept in online harassment of women journalists and how intersectional aspects of discrimination should also be considered. Thus, themes were read to identify how emergent properties, power relations and particular aspects such as age and work experience intersect with gender to produce and reproduce women journalists' vulnerability to harassment.

The analysis included abduction and retroduction to identify structural, cultural, and personal emergent properties (Fletcher 2017), and how these influenced women journalists' vulnerability to audience harassment. Mechanisms were researched to identify structural and cultural emergent properties (or powers) and their tendencies (e.g. the broader

cultural attitudes to women) and how these are mediated by emergent personal properties (e.g. journalist's normalisation of harassment or engagement with safety strategies) (Lennox and Jurdi-Hage 2017).

Findings

Audience Engagement, Hostility towards Journalists and Unresponsive Mechanisms of Protection

The first theme identified the emergent structural properties of participatory journalism in the context of increasing hostility towards journalists and how these influence the opportunities for harassment. Here, journalists expressed their views about the general working environment foregrounding their understanding of the current issues of journalism and the media. This was key to mapping their professional views of the interfaces between their work, audiences, and identities.

Working in a digital environment and having their work shared on social media was seen as a double-edged process. Several participants noted that working in the digital environment often meant sacrificing accuracy for speed. They also pointed out the advantages of having easier access to background information, beat reporting, establishing contact with sources and disseminating their work. As Joana explained, "I often use them [social media] professionally for sharing information or news reports or things that I do, or that others do and that I think deserve dissemination." For Luísa, social media boosted journalists' visibility: "Journalists were dazzled with social media … . Today, it is impossible for a journalist not to be visible … […] even in print media". Yet, this closer contact with audiences was also considered challenging or even useless by participants. As Marta and Sara explained,

> The door is now open for all: for those who interact in a serious way, and for those who interact in the worst possible way, insulting and attacking, because they feel there are no limits.

> There's this idea of proximity … supposed democratisation of the relationship between journalists and readers, but comment boxes have only created a relationship of greater distance, greater distrust and greater disbelief between journalists and readers.

Participants also linked the pressing need to capture audiences to a disruption of journalism, which, in turn, increased readers' disbelief in the news. This became clear when Paula reflected on journalism's crisis and survival strategies: "[some news] aim to make money, no matter how. And for shareholders, that is good, period. But this contributes to confusion in people's minds about what quality journalism is, and it obviously reflects in journalism as a whole". Luísa explained: "The word (…) jornalixo [trash journalism] comes precisely from this disregarding of the profession". For participants, this added motives to an already aggressive environment towards journalists where hostility was frequent. For Marta, "There is, in fact, a huge, huge hostility. … It is that desire to kill the messenger … Especially at this stage of COVID, the news is bad; people can't handle so much reality. This is hard". But journalists also recognised hostility as organised in an increasingly polarised political spectrum. Laura asserted:

> Things are very polarised, and this is reflected online, and journalists end up taking it from all sides. Because [the journalist] is right-wing, because he [*sic*] is left-wing, because he is a Nazi, because he is a communist – all on the same subject … It's very violent.

To this perception, she added the gender dimension:

> … and I think that with women journalists, it becomes easier … . They [readers] will say much more easily, "You bitch!" whereas directed to a man, this would be a slightly less violent insult. Women are more insulted. It's not just online. It's a reflection of our society—there is a misogynistic culture … . It is changing slowly, but women are easily called whores, and [that] they are where they are because they've slept with somebody important.

Given their exposure to this polarised and sexist culture, participants also discussed protection policies. There was much agreement on views about protection and safety measures and dissatisfaction with organisational inaction or lack of organisational safety measures to deal with harassment, as echoed by Mariana and Joana:

> It is the Licensing Commission [CCPJ], more than the union (…), that should take some kind of attitude. It doesn't.

> I don't think ERC has done anything, for example. These entities have done nothing at all. It's the Union of Journalists I've seen talking most about these issues.

This inaction, Inês noted, is because "There has not yet been a [sufficiently] problematic case to draw attention to the issue".

The causal mechanisms of women journalists' harassment began to emerge from this theme. As a social event, harassment may occur at the interception of several digital working environment properties: a working culture where visibility and closer proximity with audiences are valued (Waisbord 2020b), a polarised political environment, journalism's economic crises, and lack of regulation and protective measures. They all influence journalists' daily work. But when further interacting with cultural gender hierarchies and beliefs, these emergent properties and power relations produce and reproduce women journalists' vulnerability to online harassment. This is explored in the next theme.

Gender, Sexism and Harassment

Referring to the complex relations between intersectional feminism and critical realism, Dy, Martin, and Marlow (2020, 463) propose that "research can identify how intersectional forces are perceived (or not) by individual agents and wider social structures". More than seeing oppression as "the sum total of multiple categories of discrimination", these categories are "mutually shaped by, and shaping, each other" (463–464). Through the interviews, we identify the intersectional forces of categories of difference such as gender, age, cultural attitudes, and ideologies at the levels of individual experience, social practices and institutions. These form a continuum onto which journalists position themselves in interpreting the harassment they suffer. In this section, we paid particular attention to the participants' age and work experience, testing the diversity of the participants' profiles.

When discussing harassment, women expressed different views on its root causes but nonetheless pointed to a continuum of inequality and sexism. Some women journalists disassociate gender as a cause of online harassment. For Catarina, the oldest and most experienced interviewee in our sample, it is what she does, rather than what she is, that originates attacks: "I don't see these as coming from being a woman … I am a journalist, period. I am not a man or a woman, I am a journalist". But age or working experience

does not seem to be the determinant factor here, as the following interviewees demonstrate. Their ages range from 44–53, and their work experience averaged 24 years. Joana, 46, shared: "I wouldn't put it from a gender perspective". However, for Carolina and Inês, 53 and 44, respectively, although professional identity takes precedence as a cause, their gender also shapes the nature of the attacks:

> It always relates to my job as a journalist; I think these attacks are against journalists, and then the type of attack and the vocabulary used relates to the fact of being a woman. But first comes the journalist.

> I don't know if women are more affected than men, but often there is an even more condescending tone … Maybe a man receives a comment that is also very offensive, but the type of offence is different.

Other participants also see a clearer link between gender and online harm. Mariana, 44, compares the double standard for insults:

> This condescending permissiveness towards men [in comments] is curious: "here he is saying nonsense" versus the hostility towards women "she's dumb, she doesn't know anything, manipulative, what she needs is a man, she's ugly, she's fat, she's" …

For Sara, 47, increasing exposure to violence online reflects broader social issues:

> I think this is a mirror of what happens in our society, isn't it? The fact that women are still seen in that sexist way, in that misogynist way … And then it passes on to social media and the digital [environment] … most people are there anonymously and feel at ease to express all their rage.

The interception of inequality, sexism and harassment is evident in the next quotes, some of them by the youngest and less experienced journalists in our sample. Claudia, 39, argued:

> People feel free to do many of these things, and for women, I believe it's a continuation of what happens in the world, on the street, isn't it? There is much more harassment, physical violence, and catcalling of women than there is of men. It is a continuation of what happens in society—into journalism and into the digital environment.

Agreeing that this is part of a broader social issue, Inês believes it is aggravated for women in journalism because of their visibility: "Why wouldn't the world of female journalists be subject to this when other professions are too, right? And maybe for women journalists, it is even worse because they are more visible." When sexism intercepts with visibility, it becomes embodied in the comments of these journalists. As Francisca, 29, and Cláudia explain:

> I feel there is a different level of scrutiny … it has happened to me several times … I felt that the level of [online] commentary on my appearance, or indeed the appearance of all my female colleagues, in television journalism is quite different for male colleagues to whom this does not happen so often, although black men are also more scrutinised.

> People think it's very normal to say, even in public comments, that the eyebrows are crooked, the hair was terrible today, the makeup … Women are very exposed … My friend once told me that after being live on TV, she had several messages on Facebook … one of these said, "Look, my wife can get your eyebrows done. She's a beautician, and the way you show up on TV with those eyebrows is embarrassing".

For Alice, 24, this is also linked with age:

> They attack right away not only because it is a woman but also because of age. I feel like I can talk about it because I'm young. If you are a woman and, above all, young or younger, the attack stands out.

Age was also associated with precarity, which largely surfaced in the interviews. Ana, 24, explicitly focused on how precarity forces entry-level journalists to make themselves visible on social media,

> It is difficult for people like me, who are starting our journey, to have work experience or get a job contract. Most people of my generation, at this moment, are still doing internships, often unpaid … [and] social networks turn out to be very important … I returned to Twitter … because I knew that all journalists and all editors and directors in Portugal had Twitter … . However, I feel it's the most toxic social network because it's where having an opinion is valued the most.

Other more experienced journalists agreed on how precarity was a serious problem even within the newsroom. Paula believes that "precarity and potential disposition to moral harassment are very high … . Much more than … people can imagine. This may not condition editorially, but it does". In her view, this also influenced the ability to respond:

> One of the problems of the profession is that, because it is very poorly paid, it is handed over to "kids" who are free … or cheap labour, because they are in their first job and who, poor things, accept earning next to nothing. The issue is [that] these people don't have the experience and the structure to deal with these situations.

This theme explored how, while discussing cases of online harassment, interviewees often brought up structural and cultural inequalities. For participants, gender or age may not always be acknowledged as one of the primary roots of harassment. There is not enough data to affirm specific tendencies in responses according to age and experience, but, with the nuanced exception of two journalists who see their profession as the main cause of harassment, all interviewees who commented on this particular aspect seem to notice a clear connection between gender and online harm, with perceived aggravated implications for younger women journalists.

Women Journalists' Responses to Harassment

The third theme captured the personal properties of journalists' strategies to respond to harassment. Here, we looked into the aspects of individual agency moulded by elements of the social structure examined in the previous theme. We gathered responses that reflect the labour of managing emotions triggered by interactions with audiences. This emotional work becomes an added task with different degrees of complexity and coping mechanisms. Similarly to existing research, women journalists see online violence as part of their job (cognitive gap) and as an under-discussed issue (resources gap). This combination facilitates the normalisation of online harassment, as said by Inês, "This is something we see as normal, right? Almost as if it comes with the job", and Margarida,

> There is a problem for us journalists; we don't talk about our problems … We only report … extreme cases when journalists are killed … We don't talk when journalists are victims of harassment … We talk about what happens with teachers, nurses, doctors … but we are not allowed to talk about the problems of our profession.

Journalists admitted not having the adequate preparation to deal with such cases of online harassment, which further enables normalisation:

> Journalists are normally prepared for critical situations; we take those courses when we go to a war scenario … to know where and how we must protect ourselves, the type of equipment … but we are not prepared for this [harassment]. (Cláudia)

Ana lamented that, given the lack of tools to mitigate online harassment, these cases often end up being forgotten:

> There is no debate, no effective concern, as to how we can fight this and how we can protect women … who are victims of these attacks. We end up wiping it off, and then we end up not knowing how to deal with it. We don't have those tools, and at the same time, we don't know who to talk to about this. With luck, we have someone in our team who we feel comfortable talking to …

She further noted how this often ends in women self-censoring or hesitating before publishing certain stories,

> I am currently covering a topic that is a bit sensitive … but for me, it is evident that I need to write about it. My fear of people's reactions, especially on social media, made me question if I should continue because I feel I have no tools to deal … with those comments.

Accounts of self-censorship as a response to online intimidation are further associated with gender. For Rita, women are more likely to self-censor due to lacking a supportive audience (receptivity gap): "As in other parts of their lives, women end up being mostly the victims of these abuses, because they are more vulnerable … because it is less likely others would believe them and give them the necessary support." Teresa mentioned how the disregarding of online harm has pushed women to be responsible for their own safety, allowing impunity,

> For our authorities … Online threats tend to be disregarded … There's this prejudice … that we're the ones who must build our shells, and it's our responsibility to resist them, and so there aren't very clear consequences for hate speech. It's going to take a long time to realise that hate speech is dangerous and that what happens online has consequences in offline life.

Journalists mentioned several other forms of managing emotions. The emotional burden of finding, proactively or reactively, forms to cope with online harm was expressed differently. Mariana has a rule for these situations,

> I have got a personal policy of self-preservation, respect and sanity … I do not answer, and I block. Because … this type of hatred is only fed if there is reciprocity. If there is no reciprocity, they run dry.

Other journalists choose strategic disconnection (Bélair-Gagnon et al. 2022) to avoid exposure. Paula, a sports journalist, sees this as an act of self-preservation,

> I decided to shut down Facebook, Twitter … I need scrutiny from my peers … and not from 16-year-old kids … who are crazy about their football teams … I think that one has to protect oneself from that exposure to hatred.

Francisca admitted her vulnerability to online harassment as a reason to disconnect from social media:

> I am emotionally vulnerable to this; it affects me a lot; I can't stop thinking about what people said … so it was an option: I won't expose myself this way. And I don't feel this helps my work … it is just harmful exposure, it hurts me.

Elisa recognised the harm caused by these situations but highlighted the importance of developing a "thick skin" (Chen et al. 2020): "Look, I kind of try to overcome these things. Before, I would be sick with what I was told. But we must leave it behind; otherwise, we don't live". Teresa, however, noted how resilience can fluctuate over time:

> There was a time that coincided with other issues that were happening in my personal life, so I couldn't sleep and felt overwhelming anxiety … precisely because I felt the weight of the online [hatred] we were getting, totally unjustified … Emotionally, I wasn't feeling resilient; and we don't have to be resilient all the time … as much as I tell myself to move on and ignore it, it's complicated; you need to have the strength to understand it.

Rosa explained how she had to use the support of a therapist,

> I am not paid enough to get this [online hatred]. I am at the moment seeing a psychologist for other reasons too, but I know that that was one of the reasons that got me here, the level of hate I receive … When people already have other problems in their lives, this is enough to suddenly make you not feel like getting up that day.

Throughout this theme, we explored journalists' responses to harassment framed as a consequent unequal allocation of power to work free of harassment in a context where hostile interactions are normalised as part of the job.

Discussion and Conclusion

The study finds that online violence against women journalists is a new format for an old problem of structural inequality, facilitated by technological advances, increasing exposure and interaction with the audiences, and rising levels of incivility online, all of which intercept at the different levels of reality compounding women's vulnerability to gendered violence.

Focusing on a national case and drawing on twenty-five interviews, we explored how violence toward women journalists is related to several causes that emerge when different levels of reality intercept individual sexist beliefs, but also encounter patriarchal societal norms that leave women's voices and perspectives unheard. Their vulnerability to harassment is increased by the interception of these cultural norms with organisational structures and work ideologies.

We examined the data through a feminist and critical realist approach aiming "to identify and expose the nature of the causal structures that produce gender inequality in everyday life, with the ultimate goal of promoting positive social change" (Fletcher 2020, 209). Social beliefs and values are real and have an effect on the world, being key to analysing how cultural norms are disseminated across a traditional, patriarchal society. CR assumes an ontological and hierarchical stratification of reality. Thus, harassment is situated at the level of the real, where its generative mechanisms give rise to harm; events of harassment are produced at the level of the actual. Subjective experiences of harassment occur at the empirical level. Looking into the three organising themes of our data, we explored how the deeply embedded structural and cultural mechanisms that generate and perpetuate inequality also enable online harassment. Furthermore, a feminist lens provided insights

into how harassment could be read through intersectionality, namely across gender and age.

Overall, we argue that online harassment of women journalists can be seen as an empirical manifestation of a patriarchal structure of power that perpetuates gendered hierarchies. This structure is actualised through various generative mechanisms, including hostility towards the press, organisational encouragement of audience engagement, normalisation of harassment, lack of effective protection, material working conditions where precarity prevails and cultural aspects such as sexism and misogyny intercept journalist's personal properties, such as gender and age, and shape their vulnerability to harassment.

Younger women journalists highlighted issues of precarity and discrimination or harassment based on their looks. Generational aspects also signalled different perceptions of gender versus work as a main cause for harassment, but age, nonetheless, does not seem to affect the perception of cultural attitudes.

Despite differing in their ontological assumptions, either embracing or devaluing harassment as an intersectional issue, most interviewees connected online violence against women journalists to the problem of structural inequality and misogyny, understanding harassment as a continuation of everyday sexism, and described examples that unveil the sexualised and gendered nature of offences. The interrelationship between structural and cultural emergent powers and their mediation by emergent personal properties demonstrates that harassment from hostile and sexist audiences is a frequent and persistent phenomenon that affects women journalists' ability to work in an equal and gendered harassment-free environment.

Future avenues of policy should consider the difficulties for women to disclose their experiences of violence and the policies of the companies that allow or encourage such behaviours. One of our key findings is the "normalisation" of certain online harassment behaviours and the intimidating effect they exert. The interviews showed a tendency to normalise online harassment, either because journalists see it as part of their job and, therefore, tend to undervalue it or because they refer to it as a problem under-discussed within the class. These conditions explain why women remain silent in most cases of harassment online and reflect cognitive, receptivity and resource gaps, as suggested by Krook (2020). Although the remaining political gap (when women strategically do not speak up, so they are not seen as weak) was not seen in the quotes related to online violence, it was mirrored in reflections women do about other aspects of their professional lives. As Catarina said, "I am not different because I'm a woman. I'm not more, I'm not less". However, several participants recognised the impact on their personal and professional well-being and reclaimed protection as an organisational and political stance. In most cases, women have not reported instances of harassment, fearing and expecting that their concerns would be perceived as exaggerated or unfounded. The allusion to the emotional burden that these experiences represent for women and the way in which they try to cope with them, confront them or deflect them is, therefore, another relevant finding. Women journalists acknowledged the increasing hostility experienced from their interactions with the audiences and referred to the underregulated and ineffective mechanisms for protection. With virtually no specific responses from regulators and unions to tackle this issue, journalists are left to develop their own defence mechanisms, which adds an emotional burden to an already stressful trade. They use various tactics to minimise its impact, either developing coping and resilience strategies, reducing exposure to social media or disengaging with it altogether.

The findings also suggest that women journalists are uncertain about how to best respond to and manage the effects of this kind of violence. They feel vulnerable and unsupported, facing problems in isolation or simply normalising them in the context of acknowledging other structural inequalities. The onus of protection is on them, and women journalists have to engage in an "everyday work of repair" (Das 2006) from the digital violence they are subject to. At the same time, interviewees are fully aware of the need to change culture and news practices around their safeguarding and how difficult this is for them to do so on their own. It is time to go beyond asking for change and argue that this culture needs to be challenged and not normalised. This reveals the structural dimension of online harassment of women journalists and the qualitative weight it entails beyond the individual.

Our research comes, however, with limitations. The interviews do not allow for definitive statements about the industry as a whole or apply to all women journalists in Portugal, and therefore we recognise the paths that this study leaves open. Particularly, a deeper analysis of the issues of intersectionality between online violence, gender, age and experience is needed, which could be achieved through a different sample of journalists. Also, a concrete questioning of the media organisations about their policies (or lack thereof) is needed, as the present conditions seem to sustain a difficult scenario for women to disclose their experiences of violence which, in turn, feeds a systemic normalisation of harassment behaviours. Still, these qualitative insights illuminate the significance of gender as a modifier in experiences of online abuse and gather empirical evidence that can inspire guidelines for a much-needed change in policies (Sarikakis et al. 2021). Thus, and as part of the broader project in which this paper is included, we published the first guide for the prevention of online violence and good practices in journalism in Portugal, directed and available to news organisations, educators and freelancers (Silveirinha et al. 2022).

News organisations are not bystanders in online harassment situations. Despite their duty of care to protect journalists' well-being and provide appropriate support, there has been a dearth of online safety regulations within the sector. Being aware of this abuse as audiences are allowed unmediated contact with journalists, organisations need to proactively and preventively improve and increase the protection systems of all journalists and prepare them in ways that acknowledge that some are preferred targets.

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