RESPONDING TO THE COMMENTS:
Workplace support for journalists experiencing harassment
We would like to acknowledge and thank The Victorian Government for their support.
THE ABUSE OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS IS A THREAT TO DEMOCRATIC PROCESSES, AND MUST BE ADDRESSED ACROSS ORGANISATIONS.

Online abuse of women journalists threatens democracy because it limits the participation of journalists in the public sphere, thereby reducing the diversity of voices contributing to the media. Media requires a diversity of voices in order to remain relevant to contemporary discourse and engaging to audiences.

Despite the seriousness and prevalence of this abuse, few workplaces are adequately equipped to manage the toll it takes. Gender Equity Victoria’s 2019 report, Don’t Read the Comments, suggested workplaces develop specific counselling and training plans for staff across their organisations to manage the effects of online abuse.

The support recommendations we make here are intended to guide internal policy and planning at media outlets. These guidelines for workplaces have been prepared in consultation with the media union in Australia, the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance, and Australian Community Managers, a professional organisation for community moderators. We have also consulted with journalists and writers from across Australian media to gather a range of perspectives from both freelance and in-house journalists.

Our process in developing these recommendations was to develop a survey, which was distributed to MEAA members and ACM stakeholders and through targeted sampling of key journalists and editors with significant experience and expertise in newsrooms. The survey posed three open-ended questions for respondents to provide their thoughts, ideas and experiences. These responses have been de-identified for privacy and edited for clarity.
WHAT KIND OF COUNSELLING WOULD BEST HELP YOU MANAGE THE EFFECTS OF ONLINE HARASSMENT?

INDEPENDENT COUNSELLOR:

- Most survey respondents would prefer to find their own counsellor and send the invoice to their organisation—some respondents were already accessing counselling and others would approach someone new.

- Using one’s own counsellor would mean any issues, distress or trauma could be addressed in context of an individual’s history.

- Visiting an external, independent provider may help individuals to feel comfortable discussing any grievances with their organisations.

- An individual’s own counsellor may “specially understand the extreme real-life harms [of gendered] cyberhate”.

EMPLOYEE ASSISTANCE PROGRAM (EAP):

- The EAP is a corporate counselling service where employees can access counselling related to their work and personal lives.

- Some survey respondents described using the EAP previously and finding it helpful.

- The main advantage of the EAP is there is no out-of-pocket cost for the person seeking counselling.

- However, concerns were raised over whether EAPs would be able to apply a gendered lens and whether EAPs would ever report back to the organisation.

OTHER COUNSELLING SUGGESTIONS:

“Could counselling be directed to the people doing the harassing?”

“I’ve never been to a counsellor, so have difficulty imagining what form of counselling I’d find most useful. When being harassed, I know I take comfort from the support of other female journalists.”

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COUNSELLING ARE:

1. Women journalists—including freelancers—should be offered the opportunity to find their own counsellor to discuss the impacts of online harassment, the costs of which should be borne by the organisation(s) they were working for when the harassment occurred. The organisation must be responsible for covering the costs of the counselling because it will encourage more women to seek help and assistance.
2. If women journalists would prefer to access an EAP then this should be offered.
3. Managers and editors should consult regularly with their in-house and freelance journalists to assess how well the organisation as a whole is addressing online harassment. This should include calling for suggestions for improvement, which should be duly considered.
IF TRAINING WERE OFFERED IN HOW TO MANAGE ONLINE HARASSMENT, WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE IT TO INCLUDE?

MANAGER/EDITOR-FOCUSED TRAINING:

- Some respondents recommended that managers and editors should be trained, not journalists who are already under a lot of pressure to respond to harassment.
- Training senior staff means they may be better equipped to adequately support women journalists experiencing harassment.
- Training staff across the organisation may also result in better or more effective processes and procedures such as reporting.

“It must be training directed at managers, editors, and news desk editors. They often have no reporting experience or very little, and often have no idea how different the abuse you get as a journalist is compared to abuse you get as an editor... Journalists experiencing harassment are sick of researching and engaging with ways to manage and cope. We want those who employ us to engage and protect.”

“This training should be compulsory in all journalism courses, and newsroom induction processes.”

JOURNALIST-FOCUSED TRAINING:

- Most respondents recommended journalists receive training in how to document, report and respond to online harassment.

“It needs to include definitions of cyberhate, psychology of trolls and how they work PLUS OH&S and support, legal info.”

“Staying safe online, strategies to manage fear and how to take practical steps to report.”

“Collective experiences used to develop greater deterrents for such abuse, through, for example, the eSafety Commissioner.”

“I’d like training on how to minimise the impact of harassment on my mental state, or how to compartmentalise it, so I don’t bring the stress home in my interactions with family and friends.”

“Tip sheets and chat to someone supportive ‘on demand’.”

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR NEWSROOM TRAINING FOR ONLINE HARASSMENT ARE:

1. Organisations should have easy and accessible training and resources detailing strategies to manage the emotional and mental stresses of online harassment for women journalists.

2. Management and editorial staff should complete training that covers what gendered cyberhate is and how it should be managed by the workplace.

3. Organisational training should include a thorough review of all documenting and reporting mechanisms related to online harassment.

4. Women journalists should be aware of what information is needed to make a report to police or the eSafety Commissioner, including the legal steps and processes that may be required if a crime has been committed.
WHAT OTHER SUPPORT MECHANISMS COULD BE OFFERED?

MANAGER/EDITOR/WORKPLACE-FOCUSED SUPPORT:

Most extra support mechanisms suggested by respondents were focused on how the workplace should respond to the harassment. Below are quotes taken directly from survey respondents that show how their lived experience in media organisations has informed how they would like to see organisations respond to online harassment.

“The company reiterating that harassment is wrong and they support the reporter 100 per cent. Developing staff-first policies rather than company protection-first policies. Editors not being afraid to respond to readers that their journalists are busy and do not have to reply, and that being a subscriber/reader/supporter does not entitle them to journalist access and replies. Embedding this statement in sign-up policies when readers donate.”

“When readers subscribe or donate they should get a warning that journalists do not have to respond, engage, or reply on their own social media platforms and that harassment or demanding responses on those platforms will not be tolerated. Posting as such on social media regularly from the company Facebook account. Making it clear journalists have a right to work free of harassment and that their other mechanisms: commenting on the company Facebook page, contacting the readers editor, for them to get in touch.”

“Employers need to recognise the gendered nature of abuse, and respect when journalists choose not to use their own profiles to share specific content. Individual brand journalism, rather than mastheads, has become problematic - for this reason. There is no safe online space for women journalists.”
PEER SUPPORT:
“Trained volunteer support people in workplaces (who understand the issue and are trauma informed - intentional peer support).”
“I also think there should be official peer support for women and POC to be connected to a staff member who is white or a man to take on some of that labour.”

PROFESSIONALISATION OF SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGEMENT:
“I believe that compensation for social media management needs up be looked at. Organisations or employers don’t seem to understand the mental load that it takes. For instance if you [are] required to monitor a corporate account there’s no consideration about your health and well-being in managing nasty, difficult or distressing social media.”
“Monitoring comments is an exhausting and consuming job. Provision needs to be made in news production for this task, and it not just added to the journalist’s workload.”
“I think it would be helpful for editors to be aware of/keeping an eye on the comments being targeted at a writer, and to actively check in and monitor how that writer is reacting, rather than leaving the writer to raise if they’re okay or not.”
“Better moderation with the reporter’s rights at the forefront.”

PERPETRATOR/HARASSER-FOCUSED SUPPORT:
“Some consequences for the commenters.”
“Contact with people who can help identify the harasser would be helpful.”

OUR RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER SUPPORT MECHANISMS ARE:

1. Media organisations need to systematically review their support mechanisms for dealing with gendered online harassment and be open to feedback from journalists about how the organisation could better support them.

2. Regular frequent contact from media organisations to subscribers about the rights of journalists to free time away from their work.

3. Trauma-informed peer support should be set up and coordinated by the media organisation.

4. Emotional and mental load distributed amongst staff, not only shouldered by the women and People of Colour who experience the majority of the abuse.

5. Social media management should be professionalised and considered as a separate role, not necessarily one that gets rolled into a journalist’s existing workload.

6. Repeat offenders should be banned from commenting and/or blocked by the media organisation on social media.
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