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Story Killers | A Global Investigation

These women journalists were doing their jobs. That made them targets.

Tackling difficult subjects and holding powerful people accountable often triggers online attacks that torment and humiliate women journalists. Some even lose their jobs as news organizations struggle to respond to the hate.

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By [Taylor Lorenz](#)

When Gharidah Farooqi interviews a male politician for television, she does research and plans out her questions, as any journalist would. She is professional, well-dressed and asks pertinent follow-up questions.

But every move she makes, every gesture and expression, is scrutinized by mobs of observers online. Everything — the clothing she wears, the questions she asks while interviewing someone — is fuel for an avalanche of mostly anonymous online abuse that for years has ridiculed her and her work.

“I see my male counterparts — they’re also abused, but not abused for their bodies, their genital parts,” she said. “If they’re attacked, they’re just targeted for their political views. When a woman is attacked, she’s attacked about her body parts.”

The ordeal of Farooqi, who covers politics and national news for News One in Pakistan, exemplifies a global epidemic of online harassment whose costs go well beyond the grief and humiliation suffered by its victims. The voices of thousands of women journalists worldwide have been muffled and, in some cases, stolen entirely as they struggle to conduct interviews, attend public events and keep their jobs in the face of relentless online smear campaigns.

Stories that might have been told — or perspectives that might have been shared — stay untold and unshared. The pattern of abuse is remarkably consistent, no matter the continent or country where the journalists operate.

Farooqi says she’s been harassed, stalked and threatened with rape and murder. Faked images of her have appeared repeatedly on pornographic websites and across social media. Some depict her holding a penis in the place of her microphone. Others purport to show her naked or having sex. Similar accounts of abuse are heard from women journalists throughout the world.

A survey of 714 women journalists in 215 countries for a [2021 report](#) by the nonprofit, Washington-based International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) found that nearly 3 of 4 said they had suffered online abuse in their work. And nearly 4 of 10 said they became less visible as a result — losing airtime, bylines or professional opportunities. (The ICFJ-UNESCO survey noted that it was not a random sampling, so results may not be representative of all female journalists.)

“Online violence against women journalists is one of the most serious contemporary threats to press freedom internationally,” the report declared. “It aids and abets impunity for crimes against journalists, including physical assault and murder. It is designed to silence, humiliate, and discredit. It inflicts very real psychological injury, chills public interest journalism, kills women’s careers and deprives society of important voices and perspectives.”

In many countries, women who are targeted in these campaigns are doing some of the most crucial journalistic work in their regions: investigating powerful cultural leaders, exposing government wrongdoing and revealing corruption. Many who are targeted report on the internet itself and how it is being used to bolster extremists.

Social media platforms that optimize for engagement and a media landscape that rewards outrage and hyperbole fuel digital attacks. Online abusers manufacture controversy about specific women, stalking and harassing them and

their families. Time and again, [research shows](#), the news organizations that employ women journalists who are under assault turn against them, depriving them of career opportunities and driving them from the profession.

Farooqi dealt with an especially bad attack in 2019, after she tweeted a news story reporting that the man who gunned down 51 Muslims at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand — and live-streamed the attack on Facebook — had visited Pakistan the year before.

The internet erupted with allegations that Farooqi was trying to malign Pakistan by unfairly linking it with a terrorist attack thousands of miles away. People online called for her abduction, rape and murder. In response, the Committee to Protect Journalists, the International Federation of Journalists, the Digital Rights Foundation, the Freedom Network and Amnesty International all issued statements of support for Farooqi.

The onslaught of harassment became so unrelenting and the threats so constant that for nearly four months, Farooqi rarely left her house, skipping trips to shop or visit friends. She left her house only to travel to and from the office. Each time she stepped out of a car, she nervously scanned her surroundings to see if anyone appeared to be watching her too intently.

Online attacks are amplified in mainstream news coverage.

In October, former Pakistani prime minister Imran Khan [was asked about](#) Farooqi while speaking to a delegation from Pakistan's National Press Club and the Rawalpindi Islamabad Union of Journalists.

Khan [responded](#), "If she would invade male-dominated spaces, then she is bound to be harassed."

Killing of Indian editor sparks an investigation

This article is part of "[Story Killers](#)," a reporting project led by the Paris-based journalism nonprofit [Forbidden Stories](#), which seeks to complete the work of journalists who have been killed. The inspiration for this project, which involves The Washington Post and more than two dozen other news organizations in more than 20 countries, was the [2017 killing](#) of the Indian journalist [Gauri Lankesh](#), a Bangalore editor who was gunned down at a time when she was reporting on [Hindu extremism](#) and the rise of online disinformation in her country.

New reporting by Forbidden Stories found that shortly before her slaying, Lankesh was the subject of relentless online attacks on social media platforms in a campaign that depicted her as an enemy of Hinduism. Her final [article](#), "In the Age of False News," was published after her death.

Even when threats do not escalate to physical attacks, they can be debilitating for women journalists and their ability to report.

The Post spoke to five major journalism advocacy groups that have tracked incidents of online abuse against women journalists around the world, as well as researchers who study disinformation and online hate campaigns. The Post also interviewed 13 women journalists from a wide variety of regions about the effect hate and smear campaigns have had on their careers.

The playbook typically unfolds like this: Powerful people, usually popular online figures or government officials, target a woman journalist who is subjecting them to public scrutiny, often over allegations of wrongdoing. Journalists who have declared themselves feminists or have advocated for more diversity and inclusion in the news industry are particularly popular targets for online hate, experts in online harassment say.

The attacks follow a pattern that is consistent across countries and regions, generating controversy over everything a woman does and says. The endless stream of headlines brands the woman as controversial and difficult, which discourages news outlets from hiring or promoting her. A common tactic is to investigate and speculate on a woman's personal life and relationship status to create controversy.

The result frequently is that the target is pushed out of her job or forced to quit. Others fade away, staying in the business but in less prominent roles. Very few women are able to navigate these waters successfully, experts found in their research.

Aryee Davis, 35, a Liberian journalist, faced a crushing backlash after she reported that a powerful lawmaker had lied about his university degree. The lawmaker claimed to have attended a university in Nigeria that had no record of him as a student.

Since the incident, most of her stories no longer carry bylines. For safety reasons, they describe Davis, instead, as a "contributing writer."

"People felt that I was behaving more like a man than a woman," she said. "They say that story should have come from a man. The media in Liberia is dominated by men. The women who have the courage to join them are harassed, bullied. ... People think a woman should just write human interest stories, maybe a kid in the streets selling something, or a man abandoning his wife."

The attacks against Davis and threats against her family became so intense after her scoop on the politician's university degree that she pulled her children out of school for several weeks for their safety. The Committee to Protect Journalists, which researched her claims, [condemned the attacks](#).

Women journalists around the world report that their employers punish them for speaking about their experiences of online abuse or engaging with those attacking them. The women who are targeted are told to avoid posting on social media, thereby silencing them and taking away their platform, career opportunities and ability to define their own narrative, interviews show.

Maria Ressa, a [Nobel Peace Prize recipient](#) and co-founder and chief executive of Rappler, an online news outlet in the Philippines, who herself has been harassed online and threatened with violence, said that telling women who are targeted not to respond fails to recognize how the internet has transformed the media landscape into a place where anyone with a computer or smartphone can further a smear campaign. "If you don't respond to [the smears and online attacks], the lie told a million times becomes a fact," she said. "It's about power. And the people who held power in the old world [legacy institutions] don't understand the power of the new world."

The [2021 report](#) by the ICFJ and UNESCO found that several women lost their jobs or were punished by their news

organizations after becoming a target of online attacks. Women who took steps to protect children and other family members reported being punished by their employers, who treated their efforts as a public relations problem.

“It’s extremely troubling when you see women journalists being penalized, whether they’re being suspended or sometimes even sacked, in the middle of an online violence campaign, and we see this happen to journalists around the world,” said Julie Posetti, the ICFJ’s global research director. “Heavily partisan pseudo-journalists and disinformation agents trigger pile-ons against particular journalists and lace attacks with disinformation with the view to discredit them. Ultimately, they discredit the journalist not just with their audience but also to their employers, who in the worst cases have pushed them out of their jobs.”

“A corporate PR approach to managing what a journalist says in response to their abuse is deeply problematic,” Posetti added. “It removes the sense of autonomy, it removes the sense of empowerment from a journalist deciding to address online violence.”

Attacks in Turkey, Nigeria, Brazil

The Turkish journalist Amberin Zaman, a senior correspondent for Al-Monitor, has received a stream of death threats and threats of sexual violence — many of them visible to the public on social media — for reporting on the Turkish government and Syria. People manipulate images to depict her being beheaded or hit with a drone strike.

“Social media is the perfect medium for this,” Zaman said. “In the past, when the government wanted to go after me, they’d use the print press or TV. But a news article or TV segment maligning me had nowhere near the reach of social media. It amplifies all the smears.”

Articles about Zaman are circulated by partisan influencers online. What she posts online is monitored and dissected, and has prompted dubious legal claims against her. She says the harassment has robbed her of the ability to speak freely and to express herself on the internet. Her coverage of a U.S.-allied Kurdish group in northern Syria that Turkey considers a terrorist organization makes her especially vulnerable.

“Let’s say I tweet out an interview with a [Kurdish] general who’s a U.S. ally against ISIS [and] who Turkey says is a terrorist,” she said. “I tweet that out, and they construe that as terrorist propaganda, and a ‘concerned Turkish citizen’ will file a criminal complaint against me in Turkish court.”

Several terrorism investigations are pending against Zaman, including one in which an arrest warrant has been issued. She has not returned to her home country in six years. She moved to London and was unable to return even to attend her mother’s funeral in 2020 for fear of being arrested.

“The psychological impact is undeniable,” Zaman said. “On one hand, you’re desensitized — with each new battle, your skin grows thicker — but it takes a toll on you. In the worst instances, sometimes you begin questioning yourself and wondering whether what they’re saying about you is true. And, of course, it’s horrible to have so much violence and hatred directed at you.”

She added, “Nobody wants to be hated. Emotionally, it takes a toll on you. It’s exhausting. It robs time and energy

that would be better deployed researching my stories. I feel physically vulnerable.”

In 2022, the Association of European Journalists, an independent professional network of those reporting on European and international affairs, [condemned the attacks](#) against Zaman.

“Heavily partisan pseudo-journalists and disinformation agents trigger pile-ons against particular journalists and lace attacks with disinformation with the view to discredit them. Ultimately, they discredit the journalist not just with their audience but also to their employers, who in the worst cases have pushed them out of their jobs.”

– Julie Posetti, ICFJ global research director

The Nigerian journalist Kiki Mordi fled her home country after becoming a target of online abuse. After [producing a documentary](#) in 2019 for the BBC on the sexual harassment and abuse of women in the country’s university system, she was met with a wave of vicious online attacks.

The smear campaign has irrevocably damaged her ability to speak freely and do her job, she says. Her social media posts are scrutinized and misrepresented. She has been the subject of multiple conspiracy theories about her work that have cast doubt on her credibility as a journalist. The campaign to discredit her investigation has played out on YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and across the mainstream Nigerian media.

She has changed her residence multiple times after trolls threatened her on social media and published identifying personal details, including her home address, phone numbers and information about her family members and friends.

Attacking women journalists is a fast, easy way to generate engagement on social media, experts say. Platforms reward outrage, and cottage industries have formed around attacking certain prominent women journalists. According to [a 2021 study by Yale University](#), “social media platforms amplify expressions of moral outrage because users learn such language gets rewarded with an increased number of ‘likes’ and ‘shares.’”

“The polarizing algorithms that pull us apart and radicalize us work at a psychological level, at a sociological level, and literally change emergent human behavior,” said Ressa, the Rappler co-founder.

Ressa has been threatened with rape and murder, and relentless online abuse is promoted with hashtags like #ArrestMariaRessa. “Online violence inevitably becomes real-world violence, which is why the tech platforms shouldn’t be allowing this,” she said. “Women, and our countries in the Global South have borne the brunt of it, and the evidence is clear.”

Youtubers and partisan media figures know that posting about certain women is an effective way to get attention and clicks, and so these women’s images are [used in YouTube thumbnails](#) to draw attention to full videos, experts say. The journalists are posted about frequently and are turned into characters on the internet. Nearly everything they do is framed as a controversy. A report issued last year by the Center for Countering Digital Hate [declared](#) that “misogyny is alive and well on YouTube” and “videos pushing misinformation, hate and outright conspiracies targeting women are often monetized.”

Searching Mordi's name on YouTube, for instance, reveals several videos promoting lies about her personal life and career. She said internet trolls have used online tools to swap her head onto pornographic imagery, and they virtually stalk those associated with her. Mordi says this has caused her to back away from the internet.

"I can be searching for something random and I find someone saying something hurtful about me in the results," she said. "I've stopped doing that. I've been grounded with anxiety for days, not being able to work, not being able to focus. The time I was doxed I had to turn off my phone; no one could reach me and I couldn't properly get work done." (Doxing is publishing a person's private information on the internet, usually maliciously.)

She moved to London last year to distance herself from the relentless online attacks. But the internet has no geographic boundaries, and the move failed to separate her from the onslaught. She has stopped focusing so heavily on her own reporting, instead producing documentary films for clients, but the online attacks have made landing jobs difficult.

"Every day I look in the mirror and try to convince myself I'm not silenced, I'm just choosing peace," she said. "But the reality is that I am silenced."

Juliana Dal Piva, 36, has been a journalist in Brazil for nearly 15 years, reporting on political corruption, misinformation, and the rise of far-right political leader Jair Bolsonaro. In 2015, she began to see how Facebook was being leveraged to promote misinformation.

"We understood that people were reading news feed as a media outlet," she said. "They weren't able to understand that anybody can publish anything on the news feed."

The next year, one of Bolsonaro's sons, Flávio Bolsonaro, was running for mayor of Rio de Janeiro. Dal Piva fact-checked a number of his claims on Agência Lupa, an outlet that assesses the accuracy of text, audio and video reports, and the hate rolled in. In the years following, far-right influencers and politicians began spreading lies about her work and her personal life. Someone created a dossier on her with detailed information — including where she worked, where she studied, a photo of her — and distributed it online.

"I remember it was like one comment at each minute, thousands of comments in a few hours, and only on that post about the fact-checking on Bolsonaro's son," Dal Piva recalled. "A lot of comments with hate speech."

She tried to protect her family, asking them to change their names on social media and remove her as a friend. Things calmed down for a while, but when Bolsonaro came to power in 2019, the attacks escalated.

As in other cases of women being targeted, there was a fixation on Dal Piva's relationship status and sexuality. Many right-wing detractors tried to hunt down her personal connections, including whether she had a romantic partner and if she was a member of the LGBTQ community.

Dal Piva's life has shrunk because of the threats. She has fled her residence and is on her guard when she is around people she doesn't know. People monitor her social media posts, she said, and seek to generate controversy around her opinions and reporting. Anyone associated with her, she said, is targeted, including her family, friends and news sources.

She feels that her work has been overshadowed by the smear campaign. “I felt marked,” she said. “I don’t like to feel that this threat and what happened was bigger than my work. My work is what should be known.”

The attacks also have made doing her job more difficult, she says. She no longer feels safe reporting on certain major events. Dal Piva said she was unable to cover the attack on Brazilian government buildings last month because of the level of credible threats against her online.

After the harassment and threats began, “it took me sometimes days to write something I used to do in a few minutes,” she said. “It was difficult to concentrate. I was feeling that if I broke other important stories, everything would happen again.”

When Dal Piva goes out in public, she wears a mask and glasses to be more inconspicuous. She avoids crowds, and she did not cover any campaign events during last year’s election season out of concern for her safety.

She wrote a book about Bolsonaro, but the normal events that go with launching a book became difficult. She had to have security, and gatherings had to be smaller and more tightly controlled. She couldn’t have the large parties and public readings that other authors enjoy.

The need for security guards has made it harder for her to attract and retain sources. “How am I going to meet sources like that, with security all around me? I felt like I was losing something for not being able to be there at these events,” she said. “But my sources have to be safe, too.”

Nine years of online abuse

Farooqi’s troubles began in 2014 when she began covering the Pakistani politician Imran Khan and the rise of the political party he founded, Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf, or Movement for Justice. Khan, who would become prime minister four years later, showed a rare knack for exploiting Twitter.

Pakistan is a particularly hostile environment for women journalists. Only 5 percent of journalists in the country are women, according to the Digital Rights Foundation, a press freedom group, and Pakistan is the second-most-hazardous country for journalists in general, according to the [Press Freedom Index](#).

When Khan took to the streets that summer to lead a long march against the government, Farooqi was thrust into the online spotlight. She did extensive interviews with members of Khan’s party and with ordinary voters, as well. She reported on the rallies and marches, and more and more people began following her work.

“Not many women journalists were out there. I was perhaps the only [woman] journalist out covering that political protest,” she recalled.

That national attention triggered the first, relentless wave of online abuse, largely from supporters of Khan’s political party, some of whom were party members. They instigated an aggressive campaign to discredit her, she said.

People began taking photos of her interviewing powerful political leaders and altering them to make them profane or pornographic. People began accusing her of fabricating stories, of being dishonest and biased, of abusing children and betraying the country. They said she was in journalism only so that she could have sex with powerful men and become famous. The Digital Rights Foundation condemned the abuse.

“Farooqi was facing harassment mainly because she was a journalist, but the kind of engendered harassment she was facing was because she was a woman,” Nighat Dad, a Pakistani lawyer who heads the DRF, said in a statement. “It is highly condemnable that women journalists are frequently subjected to online violence and rape threats, which affect their ability to conduct unbiased journalism, and are tools for their self-censorship, and to silence them.”

Said Farooqi of the abuse: “I tried to ignore it, but it kept worsening and worsening, and there was no stop to it.”

In 2016, Zartaj Gul Wazir, a female political leader in Khan’s party, recorded a video in which she falsely accused Farooqi of having affairs with certain politicians to further her career. She posted it across social media platforms including Twitter, Facebook and YouTube. The video remains online to this day.

At times, Farooqi has tried to seek legal recourse against her online attackers. She filed a report with the cybercrime wing of the FIA, Pakistan’s federal investigation agency. The complaint went nowhere, as did subsequent complaints, she said.

In 2018, when Khan was elected prime minister and his political party gained more power, the attacks on Farooqi intensified. With Khan’s party in control, she said, seeking help from the authorities became an even more fruitless pursuit. Meanwhile, the groups attacking her became more powerful.

Farooqi wrote to Khan and the opposition leader in Parliament seeking help, she said. She wrote to the Pakistani Senate and informed members about the threats and harassment, but the abuse never stopped.

After she suggested online that people should not sacrifice animals to celebrate the Islamic festival of Eid al-Adha, two petitions were lodged against her in Pakistan’s high court accusing her of blasphemy — a serious charge in Pakistan, where it can be punishable by death and where such accusations can lead to fatal vigilante attacks. The investigations against her are still active, and two major TV channels ran segments denouncing her.

Farooqi’s personal relationship status is a particular fixation for online trolls. YouTube videos and tweets speculating on Farooqi’s “secret marriage” went viral online from 2016 to 2018.

Farooqi said that the endless speculation over a woman’s personal life is part of the abuse women endure simply for doing their jobs. “Men are really obsessed with if a woman journalist is single or if she’s married,” she said, “and if she’s married, what’s the status of her marriage, and if she’s divorced, then what’s the reason, and if she’s single, then it’s a crime. In the field of journalism, you can’t be a single woman; you’re suspected with all kinds of nasty ideas. If she’s still single, that means she’s having multiple affairs.”

The ICFJ’s Posetti said the response of a woman’s news organization is critical to protecting her from such harassment. Women journalists should never be compelled by their news organizations or their attackers to reveal or confirm intimate details of their personal relationships, she said, especially when highly credible threats of

violence are involved and family members are under attack.

“You do not have to subject yourself to any kind of perceived right to exposure, as though [the way a woman speaks about her personal life] is somehow going to reflect the transparency or accountability of a news organization,” she said. “Women need to be given the autonomy to determine, when they are targeted, how they respond, and specifically with reference to trying to protect their family members who have nothing to do with the operation of the news organization they work for.”

Until news organizations recognize the purpose of harassment campaigns and learn to navigate them appropriately, experts say, women will continue to be forced from the profession and the stories they would have reported will go untold.

“This is about terrifying female journalists into silence and retreat; a way of discrediting and ultimately disappearing critical female voices,” Posetti said. “But it’s not just the journalists whose careers are destroyed who pay the price. If you allow online violence to push female reporters out of your newsroom, countless other voices and stories will be muted in the process.”

“This gender-based violence against women has started to become normal,” Farooqi said. “I talk to counterparts in the U.S., U.K., Russia, Turkey, even in China. Women everywhere, Iran, our neighbor, everywhere, women journalists are complaining of the same thing. It’s become a new weapon to silence and censor women journalists, and it’s not being taken seriously.”

About this story

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About the project

“*Story Killers*” is a project led by [Forbidden Stories](#), a Paris-based consortium of investigative journalists that pursues the work of assassinated and threatened reporters and editors worldwide. The investigation was inspired by the work of [Gauri Lankesh](#), an editor fatally shot in 2017, a time when she was reporting on disinformation and political extremism in India. This project involved more than 100 journalists from 30 news organizations, including *The Washington Post*, *the Guardian*, *Der Spiegel*, *Le Monde*, *Haaretz* and *El País*.

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