

Observations and Views of Women in Managerial Positions in Local Media

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Summary

The Association of Independent and Local Media, “Local Press,” presents a study conducted as part of the project Support Network – Women Managers’ Plenary session in Local Media. The study aims to collect and analyze data on the perceptions and views of women in managerial positions in local media in Serbia, providing insight into the challenges and opportunities faced by women in roles such as directors, owners, and/or editors, while shedding light on key aspects of gender equality in Serbia’s media sector.

Women in leadership positions are very or mostly concerned about their online (approximately 58%) and physical safety (around 42%), identifying online and in-person harassment as the most common forms of attacks. Many often report that they have stopped recognizing these attacks as such because they feel they have accepted them as an inherent part of their job. The data from the study clearly indicate that workplace harassment spills over into their everyday lives, affecting sleep quality, personal relationships, and motivation to continue working. As a result, the findings show that the most common response so far has been self-censorship (around 47% of respondents), followed by considerations of leaving the profession altogether (about 35%).

Half of the women in managerial positions do not report attacks (50%), while those who do are largely dissatisfied with the work of institutions and the outcomes (approximately 83%). Their dissatisfaction stems from encountering ineffective punishment of perpetrators and the inertia of the responsible institutions. Additionally, there has been an increase in targeted media campaigns in which female managers are insulted, attacked, and belittled—initially by individuals in high public office, followed by orchestrated attacks in competing media outlets that report favorably on the government. As a way to counter these targeted campaigns, participants in this study see strengthening solidarity among media professionals as a crucial step in combating such attacks.

The research also reveals significant differences between the responses of women in leadership positions in civil sector media compared to their colleagues in commercial media. The findings indicate that female managers in civil sector media (NGO-affiliated media) have greater concerns about their online and physical safety than those in commercial media. They also face significant economic challenges in their operations, highlighting the need to strengthen their position in the media sector through legislation that would enhance their visibility and protection. Furthermore, the study found that the shorter the tenure in managerial roles and the smaller the number of employees in their teams, the more concerned female managers become about their safety.

When it comes to economic and professional aspects, women in managerial positions are generally satisfied with the progress of their careers. However, although there are more women in leadership roles in local media, this situation is largely a result of the challenges they face in their career advancement and daily work. Frequently losing their jobs—either due to an inability to perform their work professionally and independently or because they are subjected to various pressures in newsrooms—many resort to founding their own media outlets. By doing so, they take control of their businesses, securing greater autonomy and independence.

All of this leads to numerous psychological challenges that women in leadership positions in the media face, highlighting the need for additional support—both from the community and from representatives of media and journalistic associations, as well as their families. Increased anxiety (around 90%) and difficulty balancing professional and personal life (approximately 80%) are particularly pronounced and affect nearly all female managers.

Nevertheless, this research also reveals the remarkable motivation and determination of women in leadership roles at the local level to continue providing their communities with information in the public interest. Despite difficult economic, safety, and professional conditions, they persist in their work, ensuring timely and objective reporting.

INTRODUCTION

At the global level, data confirms that progress toward achieving gender equality remains slow and uneven. Despite significant efforts to advance the rights of women and girls, particularly in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), none of the indicators for SDG 5, which focuses on achieving gender equality, have been fully met yet.¹ At the international level, there is a lack of research monitoring the state of local media, which play a crucial role in informing local communities. This is despite the fact that many countries in Europe and around the world are experiencing a serious crisis in local journalism, often referred to as “news deserts.”² This situation further highlights the importance of research like this, which contributes to understanding the current state and identifying concrete steps toward improvement.

According to the analysis by the Reuters Institute ³, which examined gender representation among top editors in a sample of 240 major online and offline media outlets across five continents, women make up only 24% of top editors, despite accounting for an average of 40% of journalists in the same markets. This disparity highlights the limited opportunities for women to attain leadership positions, while a modest 2% increase between 2020 and 2024 further underscores the slow pace of change. These findings confirm the ongoing presence of the so-called “glass ceiling” phenomenon, where women are prevented from advancing to the highest managerial positions due to organizational and ideological biases or discrimination.⁴ If progress continues at this pace, gender equality among top editors may not be achieved until 2074, highlighting the urgency of taking strategic steps to accelerate progress

1 Progress on the Sustainable Development Goals: The Gender Snapshot 2023, UN Women and United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Statistics Division 2023. Manufactured in the United States, 2023

2 Verza S. et al. Uncovering news deserts in Europe: risks and opportunities for local and community media in the EU, 2024 <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/76652>

3 Women and Leadership in the News Media 2024: Evidence from 12 Markets, Reuters Institute, 2024

4 Watanabe, K. S., & Kwarteng, A. H. 2024. Unveiling the glass ceiling phenomenon and mitigating strategies through organizational justice: a conceptual paper. *Cogent Business & Management*, 11(1). <https://doi.org/10.1080/23311975.2024.2331981>

in this area. According to the latest Women in Media in Australia study from 2024, women in the media sector report record-high dissatisfaction with career advancement. Coupled with financial pressures, many are considering leaving the profession—around 35% of women with mid-to-senior levels of experience in the media sector.⁵

In Serbia, according to the study Gender Structure of Executive and Editorial Positions in News Media, women are more prevalent in news media but are less frequently editors (18%).⁶ This result was confirmed in 2023 in the Media Ownership Monitor. ⁷ In other words, although there are women in managerial positions in certain media outlets, this is more often the exception than the rule.⁸ However, it is important to note that the situation in local media is somewhat different. According to a random sample from the Serbian Business Registers Agency (APR), 45.5% of women hold the position of editor-in-chief in local media ⁹ This aligns with the example of the association Local Press, which has 53 member organizations, where women in leadership positions (owners, directors, or editors) in local media make up 41.5%. However, as previously mentioned, the reason for the higher presence of women in leadership roles in local media is not greater career advancement opportunities but rather their enthusiasm, commitment to professional journalism, and existential necessity.

Various studies have for many years indicated that women working in media worldwide suffer serious consequences of violence and harassment, both professionally and personally. A concerning high risk has been observed regarding online attacks and harassment of female journalists in more than half of the countries monitored annually through the Media Pluralism Monitor.¹⁰ According to the study “Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female

5 Women in Media Industry Insight Report, 2024: <https://www.womeninmedia.com.au/>

6 Milivojevic S. et al. Gender structure of executive and editorial positions in news media, 2021 <https://www.osce.org/files/f/documents/0/c/491866.pdf>

7 Media Ownership Monitor 2023, <https://serbia.mom-gmr.org/en/findings/findings/#!717e16ed45b-3ca7086aea0aed927d1bf>

8 Vibrant information Barometer, 2024, [https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/Vibrant_Information_Barometer_2024%20\(VIBE\).pdf](https://www.irex.org/sites/default/files/Vibrant_Information_Barometer_2024%20(VIBE).pdf)

9 Interview with Irina Milutinović, Researcher for the Media Pluralism Monitor for Serbia (2024 Data)

10 Bleyer-Simon K. et al., Monitoring media pluralism in the digital era : application of the media pluralism

Journalists and Their Reporting”¹¹ which surveyed 579 female journalists and media workers, two-thirds of respondents stated that they had been threatened or harassed online at least once—slightly more often than experiencing threats or harassment in person. Of that number, 40% reported avoiding certain topics as a result of online harassment, highlighting a concerning tendency toward self-censorship.

In 2024, there were 166 different types of attacks on journalists in Serbia, according to the database of IJAS (the Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia)¹². These included physical assaults and verbal threats, both of which increased compared to 2023. It was also observed that state institutions handle reports selectively, leading some media professionals to stop reporting attacks altogether. Additionally, this database does not represent the total number of cases reported to prosecutors across Serbia, and IJAS believes that the actual number of attacks is significantly higher.¹³ When it comes to local media, the latest research indicates that attacks have become less direct but more diverse (with as many as 22 different forms of pressure). Women owners, editors, and journalists are frequently subjected to these pressures.¹⁴ A member of the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists, Ljiljana Stojanović, emphasized that, according to the group’s data, an increasing number of female journalists are reporting threats and attacks.

This research conducted by the business association Local Press focuses on three key aspects of the professional and personal daily experiences of women in managerial positions in local media: safety, economic conditions, and psychological challenges. These aspects were

monitor in the European member states and in candidate countries in 2023, 2024: <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/77028>

- 11 Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting, Trollbusters and IWMF, 2018: <https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Attacks-and-Harassment.pdf>
- 12 Attacks on Journalists – Database, IJAS (Independent Journalists’ Association of Serbia): <https://www.bazenuns.rs/srpski/napadi-na-novinare>
- 13 Beta: IJAS: The number of physical attacks and verbal threats against journalists in Serbia has increased compared to 2023, 2024. <https://n1info.rs/vesti/nuns-broj-fizickih-napada-i-verbalnih-pretnji-novinari-ma-u-srbiji-veci-u-odnosu-na-2023/>
- 14 Blagojev T., Medić D. i Sejdinović N. Research on Pressures on Local Media in the Period from July 2022 to May 2024. <https://cadmus.eui.eu/handle/1814/77371>

carefully selected based on insights into the real problems faced by women in leadership positions in the media, including threats and pressures, gender-based pay disparities, and limited access to resources for professional development. Psychological challenges, such as stress and burnout syndrome, are further exacerbated by the fast-paced nature of the media sector, making these topics essential for deeper exploration to ensure systemic support for women in this field.

The research findings not only provide valuable insights into the specific position of women in local media in Serbia—an area that remains under-researched yet highly significant—but also lay the groundwork for Local Press to further advocate for media freedom and the rights of women in leadership roles. These findings will serve as a foundation for developing concrete measures, including educational programs, support networks, and advocacy campaigns aimed at improving working conditions and reducing gender inequalities. Additionally, Local Press plans to collaborate with national and international media and journalistic organizations to contribute to the exchange of experiences and joint efforts in developing policies that empower women leaders in the media and strengthen gender equality in the sector.

SAMPLE AND METHODOLOGICAL NOTES

Methodologically, the research consists of a survey and focus groups, which provided the basis for relevant conclusions. The sample primarily included members of the Association Local Press, but the questionnaire was also sent to women in leadership positions at other local media outlets that are not part of the association in order to expand the sample. The final group of respondents consisted of 19 directors, owners, or editors of local media, to whom we extend our gratitude. One participant chose not to disclose her exact position or the type of media she works in, indicating her need for additional anonymity protection.

What is your managerial position?

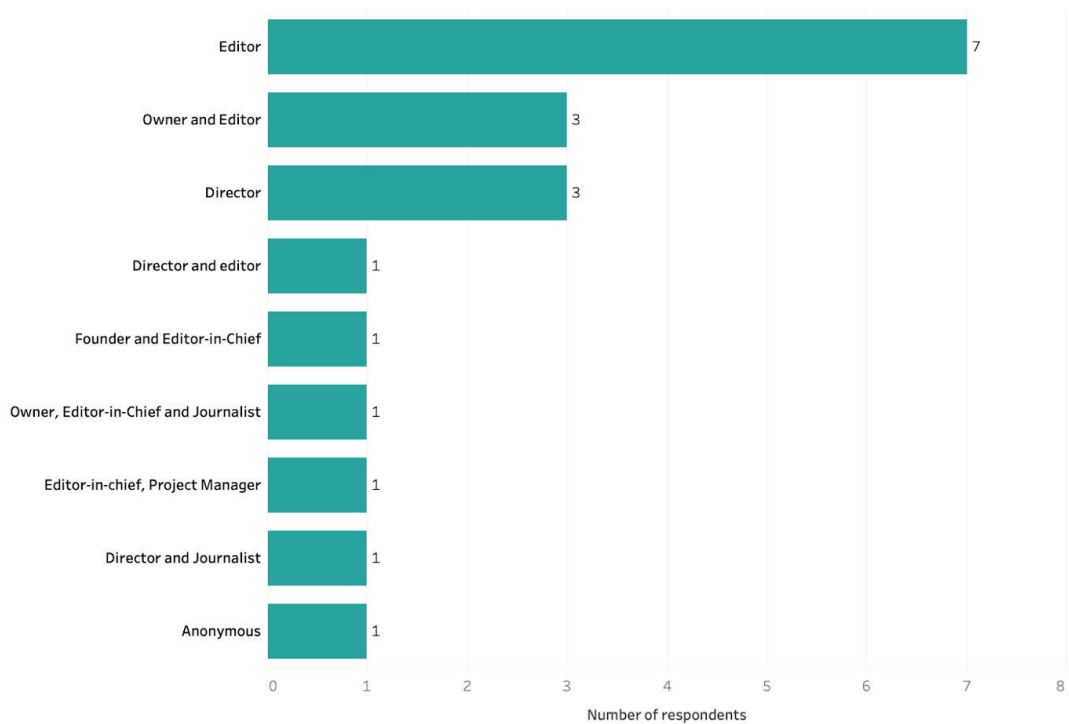
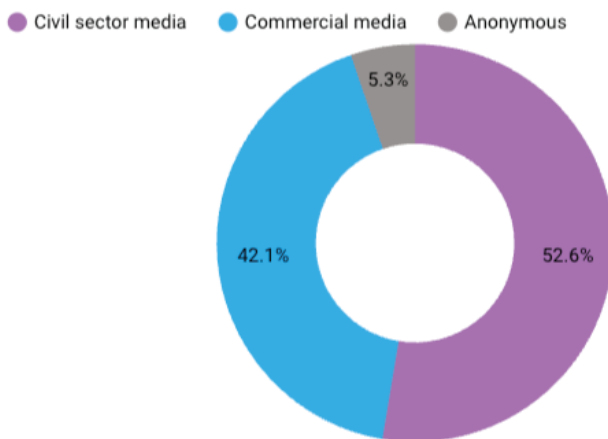


Chart 1: Managerial Positions of Respondents

Just under half of the respondents (42%) hold more than one role, most commonly serving as both owners and editors (Chart 1). This situation is not uncommon in local media, further

highlighting the unique position of women in leadership roles in this sector, which warrants further research. The majority of respondents (84%) belong to the age group between 40 and 59 years. Slightly more than two-thirds (74%) have over six years of managerial experience, while the remaining participants have between one and five years of experience (26%).

Which type of media do you work in?



* The percentage is based on the total number of respondents

Chart 2. Representation of Female Managers by Type of Media

The largest share of respondents comes from civil sector media (about 53%), followed by commercial media (around 42%), while one participant did not specify their media affiliation (approximately 5%) (Chart 2). By definition, civil sector media (community media, CSO media, nonprofit media) represent a distinct type that serves as an alternative to public and commercial media, fostering a unique relationship with their audience. The conducted research aimed to further explore the differences in perceptions and views between these two groups. While the sample is not representative, the findings provide a valuable contribution to understanding the position of women in leadership roles in local media.

More than half of the respondents work in local media outlets with up to five employees (63%). This indicates a smaller working environment with a high workload, as small teams

must cover a broad range of tasks to adequately fulfill the public interest. Additionally, the majority of women in managerial positions tend to choose female colleagues as collaborators. Only 11% of respondents confirmed that they are female managers in media outlets where men are the majority.

The methodology was developed in collaboration with the general secretary of the Local Press association, Snežana Milošević, as the association has been monitoring the role and position of women journalists in local communities for years. The questionnaire was divided into three segments: one focusing on safety, another on the economic and professional challenges faced by women in managerial positions, and a third addressing psychological challenges. Some questions from the safety segment were adapted from the study “Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting”¹⁵ and when it comes to economic and professional challenges, the annual study “Women in Media in Australia” was of great relevance for the adaptation of certain questions.¹⁶

Two focus groups were organized, with a total of ten participants, to place the survey responses in a broader context. Additionally, the Plenary Session of Women Managers in Local Media was held in the second half of January 2025 in Vrnjačka Banja. The Plenary session brought together 15 women managers from 15 local media outlets. They had the opportunity to review the preliminary research findings, provide additional insights, and offer comments. Furthermore, they received professional support and training in techniques for reducing stress, anger, and fear—skills that can help them in both their professional and personal lives.

15 Attacks and Harassment: The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting, Trollbusters and IWMF, 2018: <https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/Attacks-and-Harassment.pdf>

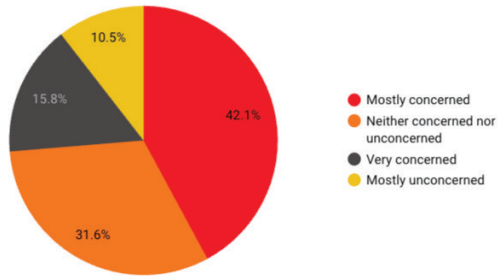
16 Women in Media Industry Insight Report, 2024: <https://www.womeninmedia.com.au/>

RESULTS

The Safety of Women in Managerial Positions in Local Media

As part of our research, we aimed to gain a deeper insight into the safety aspects of the professional and personal experiences of women leaders in local media in Serbia, with a particular focus on different age groups and working conditions.

As a media worker, how concerned are you for your online safety



As a media worker, how concerned are you for your physical safety

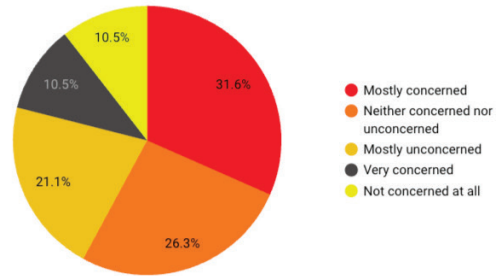
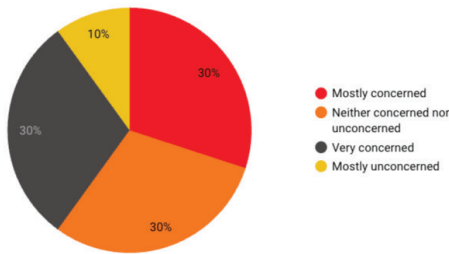


Chart 3: Concerns of Female Managers in Local Media Regarding Their Physical and Online Safety – All Respondents

Women in leadership positions are predominantly very or moderately concerned about their online safety (around 58%) and physical safety (approximately 42%) (Chart 3).

However, the research showed that women working in civil sector media express greater concern for their safety compared to their colleagues in commercial media (Charts 4 and 5). This difference can be attributed to the nature of work in the civil sector, where journalists and managers are often engaged in sensitive topics such as human rights, corruption, and social justice—issues that can provoke stronger reactions from the public and certain interest groups. Additionally, civil sector media often operate with limited and uncertain financial resources, which may result in a lack of formal protection mechanisms and support for employees.

As a media worker, how concerned are you for your online safety



As a media worker, how concerned are you for your physical safety

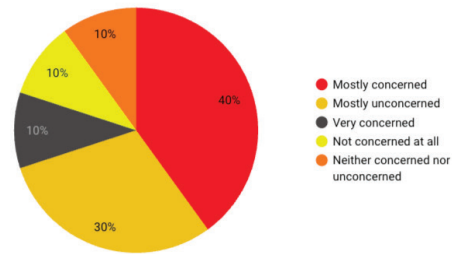
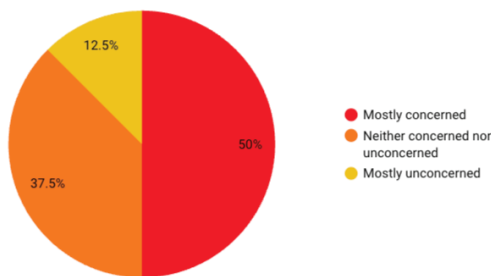


Chart 4: Assessments of Female Managers in Local Civil Sector Media Regarding Concerns for Physical and Online Safety

As a media worker, how concerned are you for your online safety



As a media worker, how concerned are you for your physical safety

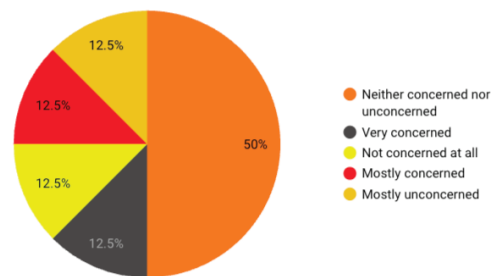


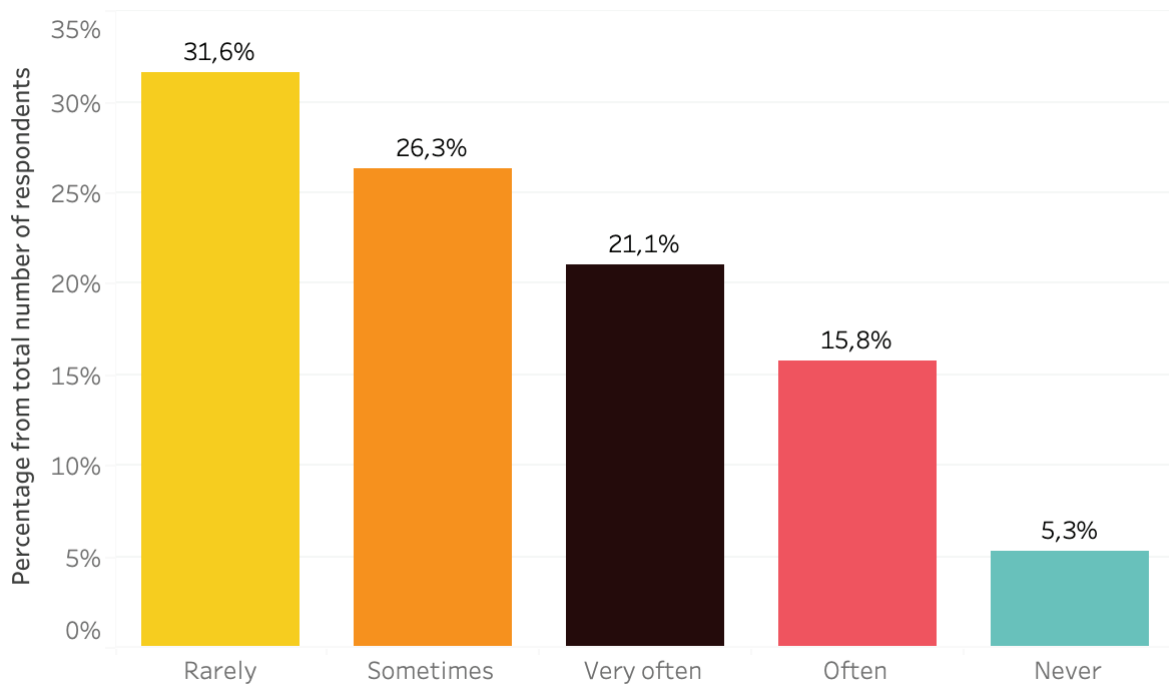
Chart 5: Assessments of Female Managers in Local Commercial Media Regarding Concerns for Physical and Online Safety

Female managers working in smaller teams experience a greater sense of isolation and a higher perception of vulnerability. In smaller newsrooms, institutional support—such as legal assistance or specialized crisis response teams, which are more common in larger media outlets—is often lacking. This sense of loneliness can heighten stress and reduce the willingness to report threats and harassment.

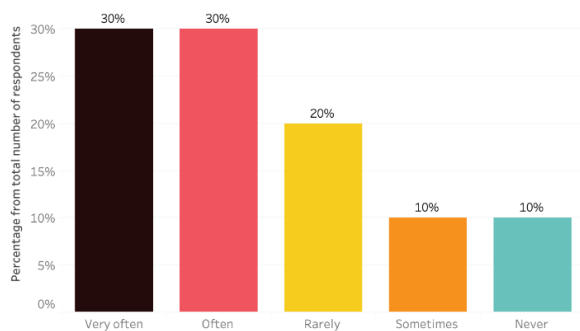
Additionally, respondents with less experience in managerial positions more frequently expressed concerns about their physical and online safety. Less experience may also mean underdeveloped strategies for handling crises and a lack of confidence in dealing with threats. Moreover, women who have recently taken on leadership roles may face additional challenges and biases due to their new position, further contributing to their insecurity.

Regarding the frequency of attacks, around 32% of participants in this study stated that they had rarely been subjected to attacks, threats, or harassment. However, women in civil sector

media reported facing attacks far more frequently (60% very often or often) compared to managers in commercial media (Chart 6). During the focus groups, participants emphasized that female managers in local media often do not even register the extent to which they are exposed to attacks: “I think we’re not fully aware because we accept it as part of our job, as if anyone can address us, however they want, or sometimes older colleagues suggest that we just forget about unpleasant situations we’ve experienced.” Many expressed the sentiment that it is simply easier not to think about it or to ignore it altogether.



Female managers from civil sector media



Female managers from commercial media

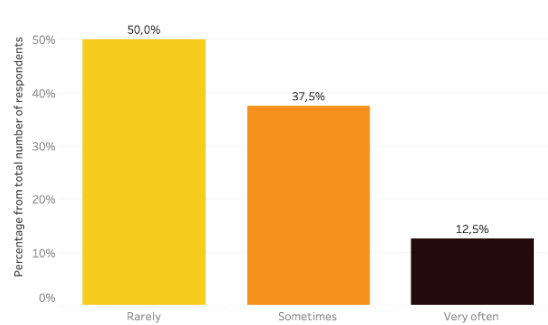
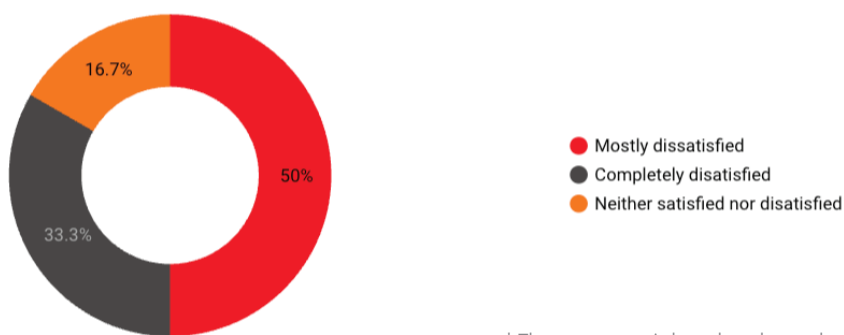


Chart 6: Frequency of Exposure to Threats, Attacks, or Harassment – All Respondents, Civil Sector Media, Commercial Media

One of the key challenges in addressing this issue is the fact that half of the respondents who experienced attacks did not report the incidents to the relevant authorities. “What worries me is that these cases go unreported, but on the other hand, they are not reported because there is no one who will respond to them.” This was a comment from one focus group participant. However, it should be noted that female managers in civil sector media are somewhat more willing to report attacks.

Among those who did report incidents, as many as 80% were mostly or completely dissatisfied with the response from state authorities (Chart 7). This indicates a widespread perception that cases of violence do not receive adequate attention or legal resolution. One survey participant provided a more detailed explanation of this inefficiency: “We reported a serious threat to the police; they called us to give a statement and provide information, but we never received any feedback on the investigation results, and the case is still classified as unresolved.” Additionally, during the focus group discussion, one participant noted her impression that reports filed by women are scrutinized more than those filed by men. For instance, she mentioned that her experience was questioned as possibly being a misinterpreted act of flirtation, whereas the legitimacy of reports filed by men was never doubted.

If you reported the offence, how satisfied are you with the reaction of relevant authorities and current outcome?



* The percentage is based on the total number of respondents

Chart 7: (Dis)satisfaction with the Response from Authorities When Reporting Attacks

Around 55% of respondents who did not report attacks stated that they refrained from doing so because they believed the threats were not severe enough to warrant criminal or misdemeanor charges. More than a third (approximately 33%) avoided reporting incidents out of

fear that it would draw public attention to them, while about a quarter (around 22%) feared retaliation from perpetrators and their supporters or were concerned about negative professional consequences, such as losing job opportunities (Chart 8). According to one focus group participant, discussions with other women revealed that some chose not to report attacks because they feared further victimization and harassment on social media if they did.

An interesting difference emerged in how female managers in local commercial media and civil sector media ranked the reasons for not reporting such incidents. Managers in CSO media cited their belief that the threats were not serious enough to warrant legal action as the primary reason for not reporting. In contrast, managers in commercial media ranked their desire to avoid public attention as the top reason, followed by their belief that the threats did not meet the threshold for criminal or misdemeanor charges.

If you did not report the incident, please select all the reasons that apply to your case

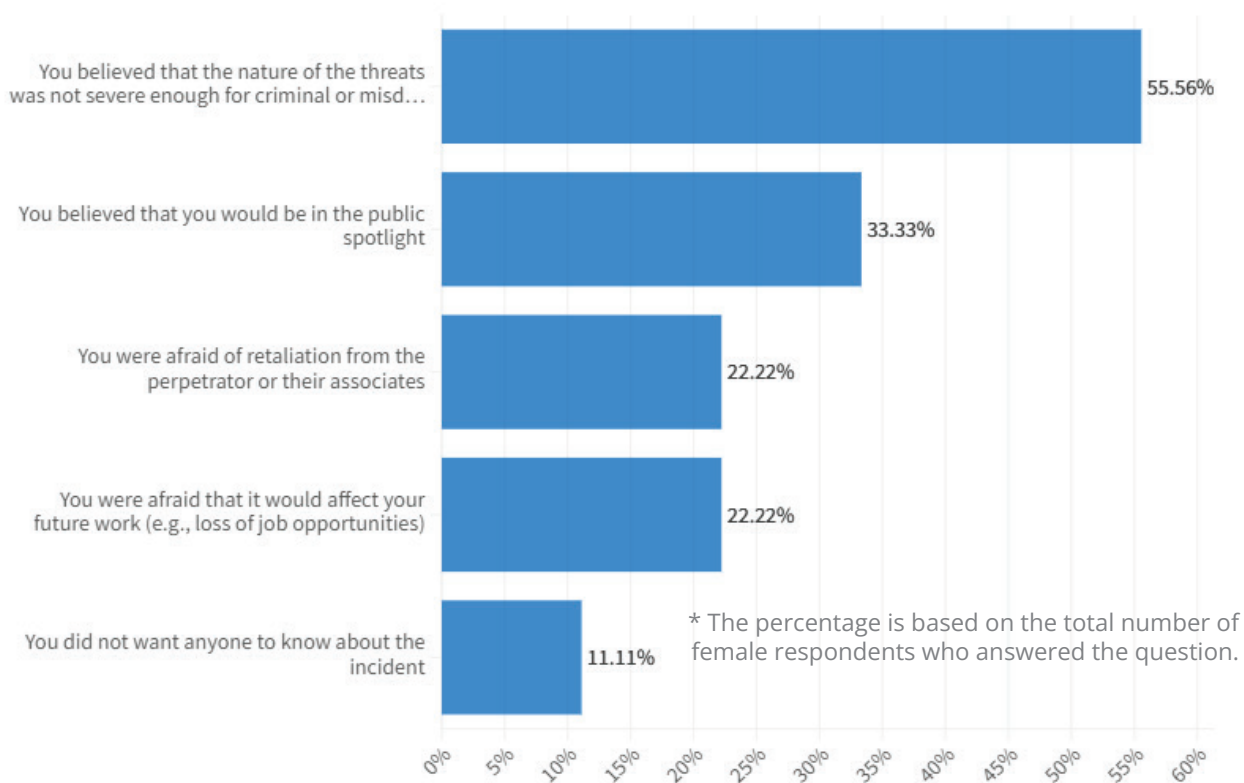


Chart 8: Reasons for Not Reporting Attacks

Types of Attacks, Experiences, and Factors

When it comes to types of attacks, the most common forms are in-person or online harassment, with around 44% of survey participants stating that they had been exposed to this type of attack (Chart 9). These attacks often take the form of insults, belittlement, or attempts at discreditation, with social media being one of the primary channels through which threats are spread. One focus group participant emphasized that attempts at discreditation and gender-based discrimination are frequent. In civil sector media, in addition to in-person and online harassment, threats and public targeting in pro-government media are also present.

Although only two survey participants explicitly stated that they had been targeted by media campaigns, discussions in the focus groups revealed that female managers are far more frequently victims of such campaigns. In fact, these discreditation campaigns follow a systemic pattern: government officials or representatives make inaccurate, and often offensive remarks about female managers during media appearances. These statements are then picked up by other local media outlets—and sometimes even national ones—where they are repeatedly amplified or intensified over time. This highlights a serious issue: the initiators of these attack campaigns cannot be quickly or effectively prosecuted. As a result, victims often assume that this type of attack cannot be reported or even recognized as such. In this regard, it is crucial for these cases to have appropriate legal outcomes, but even more important is fostering solidarity within the media industry. “I can somewhat understand that people might feel the need to comment on our work in other media, but it is our duty to protect one another—which, unfortunately, is not happening,” one focus group participant concluded.

The analysis of attack types highlights the crucial role of digital platforms in the intimidation and harassment of women in leadership positions in local media. According to respondents, the most frequently mentioned platforms used for harassment are Facebook and the comment sections of local news websites. These virtual spaces often blur the line between criticism and threats. Facebook, with its broad accessibility and high level of interaction, enables the rapid spread of information but also creates an environment where anonymous users

can easily post threats and insults. Similarly, comment sections, if not moderated, become spaces for targeted harassment and the spread of negative narratives about women, especially those in leadership positions. “We are expected to endure all kinds of words, especially online, yet there is no one to truly protect us there. At the same time, we don’t even know who we need protection from because people usually hide behind fake accounts,” one focus group participant emphasized. She also noted that, in her experience, the police are unwilling to investigate the identities of these individuals, even when cases are reported.

Have you been subjected to any of the following types of attacks because of your work in the media?

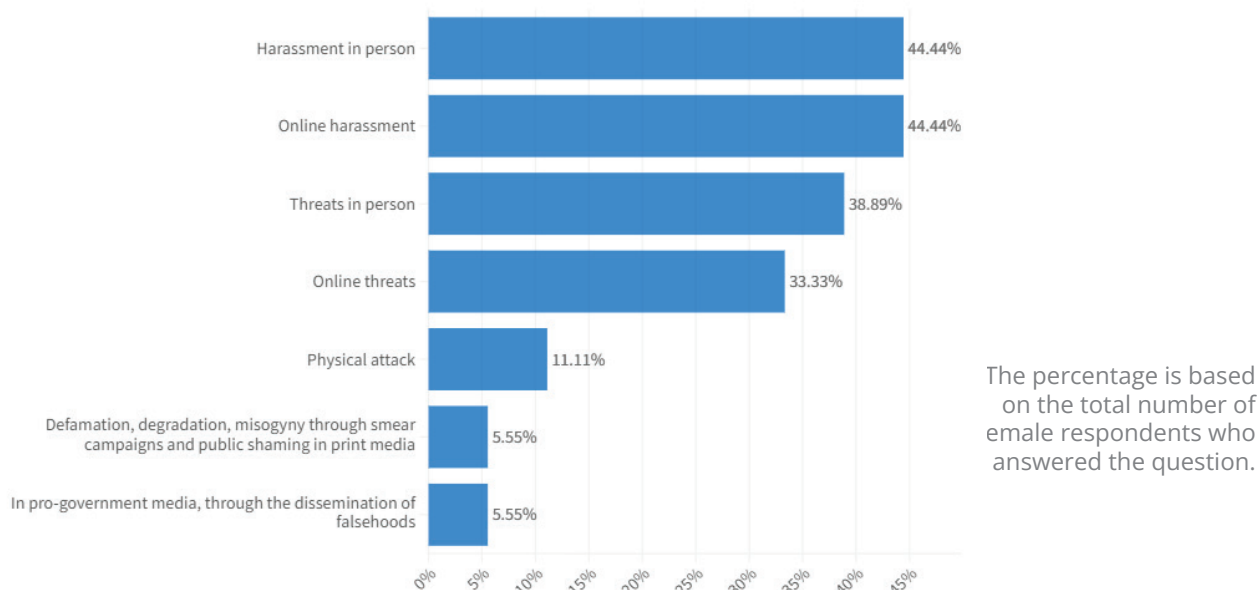


Chart 9: Types of Attacks Faced by Female Managers in Local Media

The most frequently cited reasons for attacks, according to respondents, were editorial policy (around 65%), the negative societal climate (approximately 59%), gender, and the lower visibility of pressure due to the local nature of the media (about 30%) (Chart 10). Differences in responses between female managers in local commercial media and those in civil sector media were also observed. For managers in civil sector media, editorial policy was identified as the primary reason for attacks and threats, followed by the current negative climate and gender. On the other hand, managers in commercial media ranked the negative societal cli-

mate first, followed by the lower visibility of pressure and attacks due to the local nature of the media, considering these factors more significant contributors to attacks than editorial policy. An interesting finding is that both groups recognized political stance as a factor contributing to attacks.

Please indicate which of the following factors you believe contributed to you being attacked, threatened, or harassed

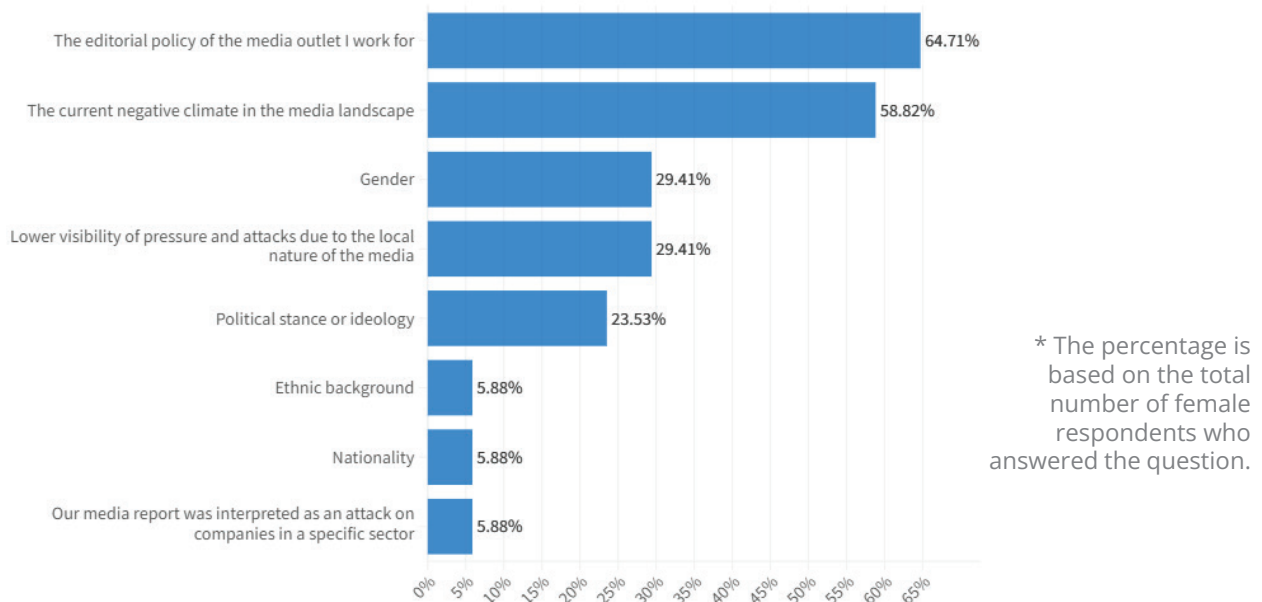


Chart 10: Factors That Contributed to Attacks or Harassment

When it comes to experiences and reactions following attacks or harassment, self-censorship is the most common response, as respondents attempted to avoid certain sensitive topics or stories (around 47%) (Chart 11). The second most frequent reaction was considering a career change (approximately 35%), which could lead to a potential loss of media professionals in local communities—key figures for providing quality public information. Here, too, perspectives differ between managers in CSO media and commercial local media. When ranking their responses, CSO media managers listed the following as their top four experiences: feeling increasingly unsafe, difficulties in business operations, negative impacts on career advancement, and only then avoiding certain topics and stories. This further supports their heightened concern for safety. On the other hand, in commercial media, the situation appears to be

more centered around self-censorship. The top-ranked response was avoiding certain topics, followed by considering a career change, and only then business difficulties. Despite these challenges, focus group discussions revealed that female managers remain committed to their profession because they believe they can contribute to social change. “We all undoubtedly experience highs and lows in terms of our emotions and perceptions of the work we do, but this profession is something we carry within ourselves—the need to contribute to our community through our work,” one participant emphasized.

Have you experienced any of the following as a result of threats, attacks, or harassment?

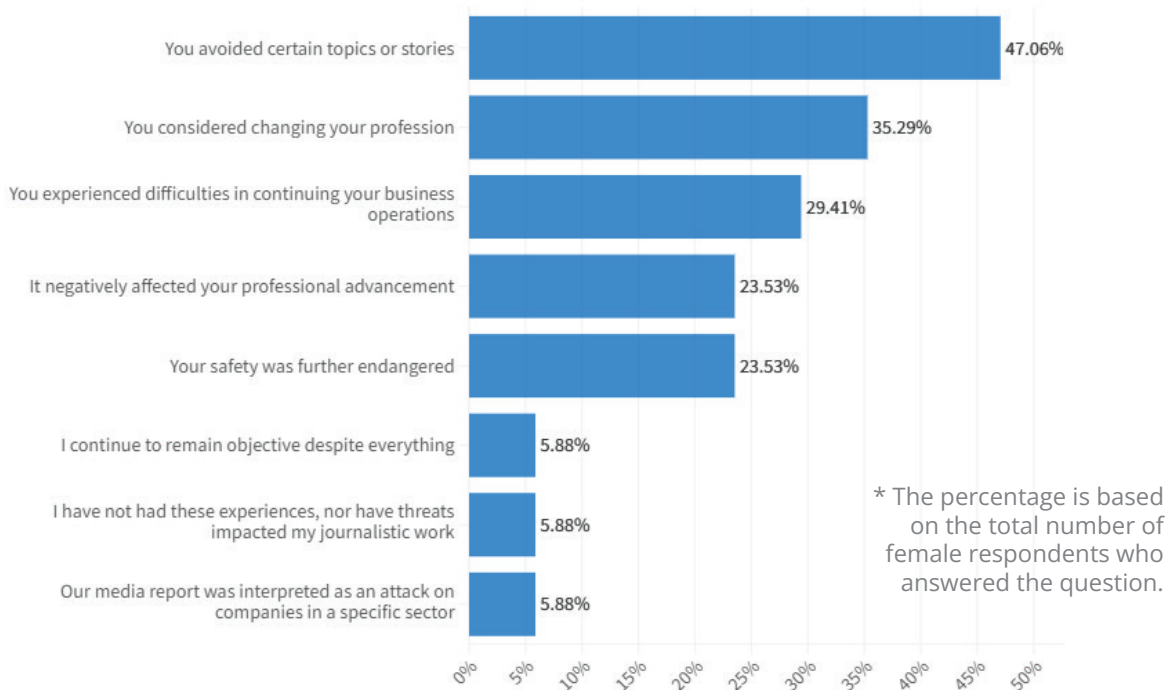


Chart 11: Experiences of Female Managers in Local Media When Facing Threats, Attacks, or Harassment

Emotional Reactions and Concerns

Out of 17 participants in this study (around 90%) who reported being subjected to attacks, threats, or harassment, the most common emotional reactions included: blaming themselves or others for the stressful experience (41%), experiencing emotional numbness—often with strong intensity—and feeling extremely nervous and highly anxious. The intensity of these

emotions was stronger among respondents with less experience in this field, while those with more years in leadership positions appeared to cope with it more easily. Stronger reactions were recorded among managers in commercial media. Anxiety levels were highest among managers who had been in their positions for less than 11 years. Interestingly, anxiety was also greater among those who had reported incidents of attacks, threats, or harassment compared to those who had not.

Just under half of the surveyed respondents (around 47%) believe that, because they are women, they are more frequently exposed to attacks, threats, or harassment. This view was confirmed by two-thirds of respondents from civil sector media, as well as by managers with the least experience (one to five years in their role). One respondent highlighted:

“You can see it in the way they treat my male colleague in the field compared to me—even though we’re from the same media outlet, the negative outbursts are directed exclusively at me.” Respondents from commercial media were less certain in their answers.

According to focus group participants, younger women are particularly vulnerable to threats, attacks, and harassment, as they are perceived as easier targets. “We need to share experiences in newsrooms, talk about these issues, and support one another. If something is serious, it should be reported to media associations and the Permanent Working Group for the Safety of Journalists—nothing should be taken lightly,” one participant concluded.

Around 20% of respondents reported cases of sexual harassment of female managers in local media. However, this percentage should be taken with caution, as discussing such a sensitive topic is often very difficult. In direct conversations, female managers were much more open than in the survey and indicated that such cases are actually more common. This finding requires increased attention from media organizations and relevant institutions to ensure the establishment of protective and response mechanisms.

Just over half of the respondents stated that their close contacts had not been subjected to physical or online violence due to their work in the media. However, despite this response,

threats against family and friends remain one of their biggest concerns—second only to the risk of their website being hacked or blocked. Respondents also expressed significant concern over in-person and online threats, harassment, and targeted media campaigns. All of this points to a deeply troubling atmosphere in the local media landscape, highlighting the urgent need to ensure a safe environment where women in leadership positions in local media can work and report in the public interest without interference.

Economic Conditions and Professional Development

Women in the media industry face challenges regarding both their professional development and economic conditions. Female managers in local media in Serbia largely believe that the media industry is not committed to gender equality (around 42%) (Chart 12).

According to your knowledge, what is your assessment of the media industry's commitment to gender equality?



Chart 12: The Media Industry's Commitment to Gender Equality in Serbia

Female managers from local civil sector media felt that they faced career advancement difficulties specifically because they are women. In contrast, their colleagues from commercial media were either uncertain about this issue or believed they had not encountered such obstacles. Overall, most respondents did not experience barriers to professional development due to their gender. Data from the archives of the Local Press association, which conducts training and workshops for local journalists, show that women make up over 70% of participants in such programs. This demonstrates their strong interest in acquiring new knowledge and skills, as well as their commitment to implement them to ensure the sustainability of their media outlets.

Additionally, in recent years, journalism in Serbia has increasingly become a “women’s profession,” with female journalists outnumbering their male counterparts. As one respondent pointed out: “This isn’t really about gender equality—it’s simply that journalism is a low-paid profession, so more women are in it. Our male colleagues rarely comment on gender equality because there are so few of them.”

Just over half of the respondents in the study are satisfied with their career progression (around 58%) (Chart 13), with this sentiment being particularly strong among women in civil sector media (as many as 80%). Among those who are dissatisfied (approximately 26%), the main reasons cited include limited opportunities for advancement and professional development, as well as a lack of support in their professional environment.

Although at first glance the responses regarding career progress and professional development seem positive, a deeper analysis is needed. One focus group participant pointed out that, based on the experiences of Local Press members, many women who launch local news portals do so because they were dissatisfied with their previous newsrooms, unable to work professionally or advance, and thus decided to start their own media outlets. “The struggle to first establish yourself in a male-dominated newsroom, and then to create space for other women to join, is extremely difficult and exhausting.” However, for most women who took the bold step of founding their own media outlets, the result was a sense of fulfillment.

One focus group participant concluded: “I’m satisfied—I think I made the right decision, and I regret not listening to my family members who told me to do it earlier.”

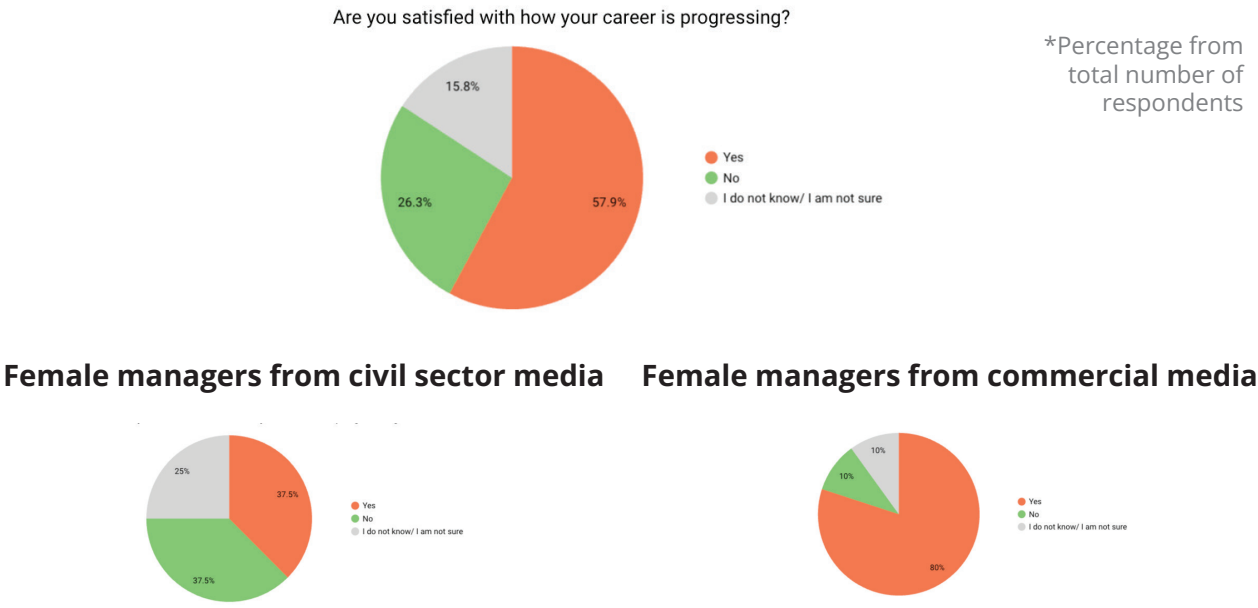


Chart 13: Differences in Career Advancement Satisfaction – All Respondents, Civil Sector Media Managers, and Commercial Media Managers

One survey respondent noted that they often receive criticism from male colleagues for not going to taverns and local events, as it would supposedly make it easier for them to gather information and find stories.

This is not an isolated case. In fact, research from the Czech Republic highlights the presence of the so-called “Old Boys’ Club” in the media industry, where important connections are made, and valuable information is exchanged. Women are aware that they lack access to these networks—either because they are not invited or because family obligations leave them with no time to participate.¹⁷ There is also a clear awareness of unequal financial compensation for the same work. More than half of the respondents who believe they earn less than men in the same positions estimate that they are paid at least 25% less for doing the same job.

From an economic and professional standpoint, the biggest concerns for female media managers in local communities are the lack of financial resources to sustain their businesses, difficulties in balancing work and private life, and a shortage of staff for adequate reporting (Chart 14). As key motivating factors in their professional environment, they primarily highlight access to professional development opportunities, a manageable workload, and fair financial compensation.

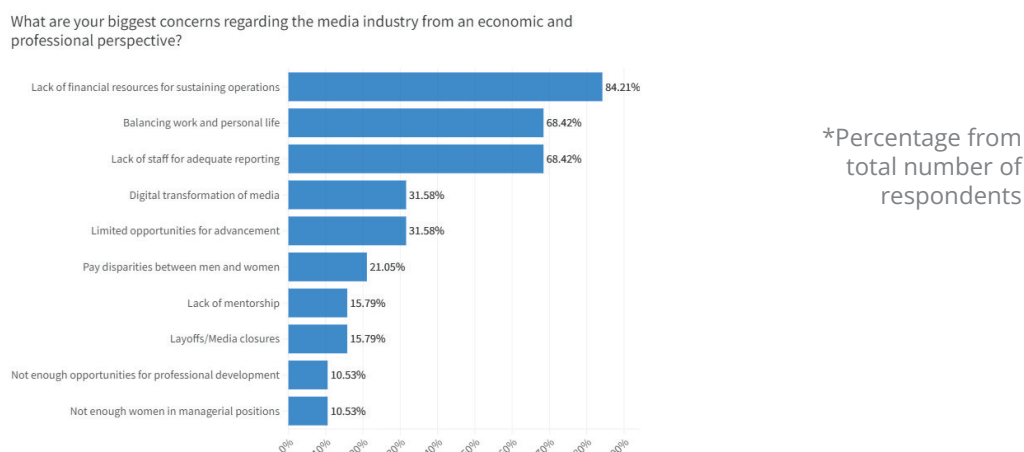


Chart 14: Concerns About the Media Industry from a Professional and Economic Perspective

17 Urbániková, M., & Čaladi, T. (2024). The Many Shades of Sexism: Female Journalists in Leadership Positions Reflect on Barriers to Career Advancement in Journalism. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 0(0). <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990241240119>

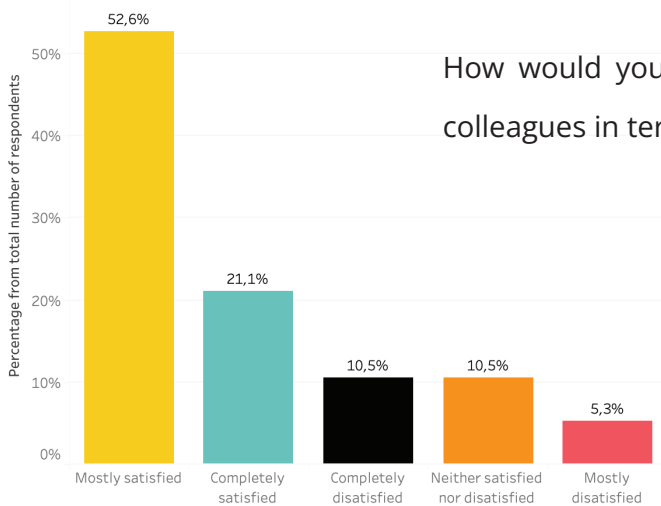
When it comes to the types of training they consider essential, respondents highlighted digital skills as the most important—including the use of artificial intelligence, data journalism, and programming—along with strategic planning and financial management. For the youngest managers (with up to five years of experience), training on legal and ethical aspects is considered the most important.

Psychological Challenges

In such conditions, various psychological challenges arise for women in leadership positions in local media, which we will present in this final section of the results.

According to the survey, most respondents are satisfied with their collaboration with colleagues in terms of respect for their managerial status (Chart 15). The results indicate that the situation is significantly better in civil sector media. As many as 84% of respondents reported facing no resistance in their newsrooms due to having a female superior, and the majority (around 74%) do not feel that their decisions are judged through a gendered lens.

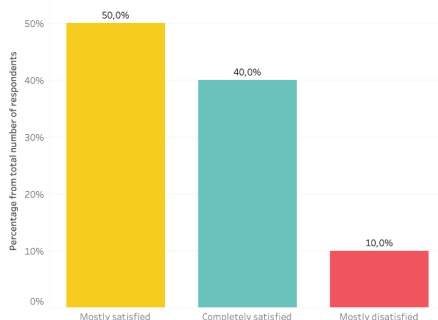
However, one focus group participant highlighted a key challenge: women in leadership positions in the media often find it difficult to share their problems in the newsroom. "When you lead and take care of your colleagues, you suppress your own problems and fears and don't show emotions, which creates additional pressure."



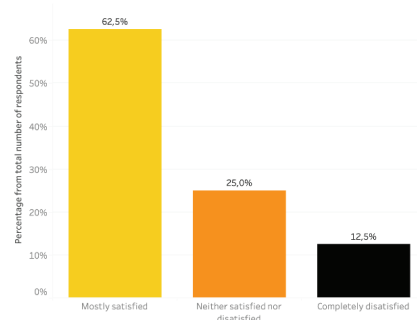
How would you evaluate cooperation with your fellow colleagues in terms of respecting your status?

Chart 15: Assessment of Respect for Managerial Status – All Respondents, Civil Sector Media Managers, and Commercial Media Managers

Female managers from civil sector media



Female managers from commercial media



The participants in this study do not feel that their job is inherently more difficult compared to their male colleagues. The exceptions are female managers working in smaller teams (up to three employees) and those with the least managerial experience, who were less confident in their assessments. The majority of respondents (74%) stated that they had not experienced misogynistic or lewd comments. However, direct conversations revealed that the situation is not as harmless when it comes to belittlement, misogyny, and inappropriate remarks, as these issues often overlap.

Participants shared personal experiences, noting that senior colleagues from other local media have advised them to send younger female colleagues on assignments to obtain information more easily—something they find offensive. They have also been told they should be at home with their families, children, or grandchildren instead of working in journalism.

Additionally, they highlighted cases where other female colleagues had witnessed inappropriate behavior but did not show enough empathy or solidarity.

When faced with these challenges, female journalists most often ignore such incidents, brush them off as jokes, wear oversized clothing to appear less feminine, or attend meetings with interviewees in groups to prevent uncomfortable situations. “By doing this, we are actually still allowing these people to behave inappropriately—we are the ones adjusting our behavior,” said one focus group participant. A common sentiment among all respondents is that those exerting pressure often assume that women will give up on their work more easily simply because they are women. For this reason, many feel that leading their own media outlets and working with female colleagues has made things easier, as they can provide mutual support. Having a supportive family also offers them the emotional stability needed to navigate stressful moments in their profession.

Did you feel stress, depression or anxiety due to work within the last year?

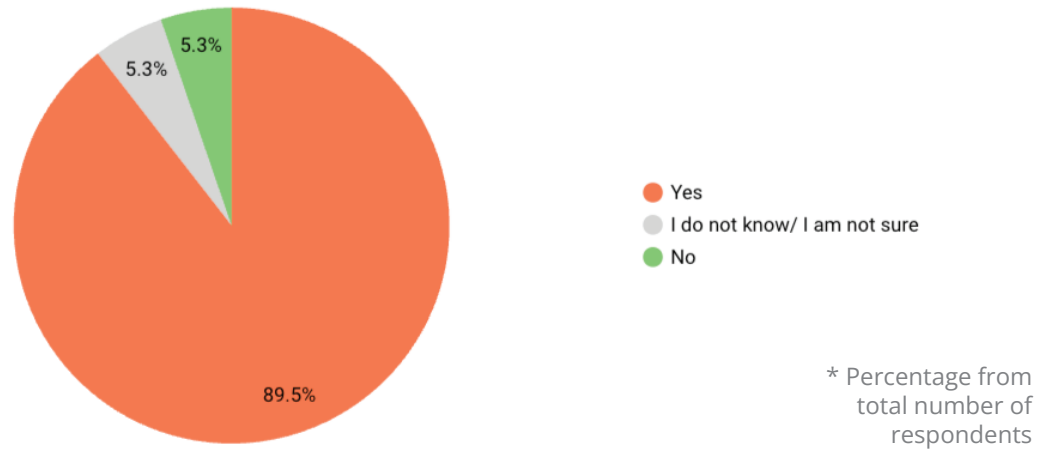


Chart 16: How Anxious and Stressed Are Female Managers in Local Media

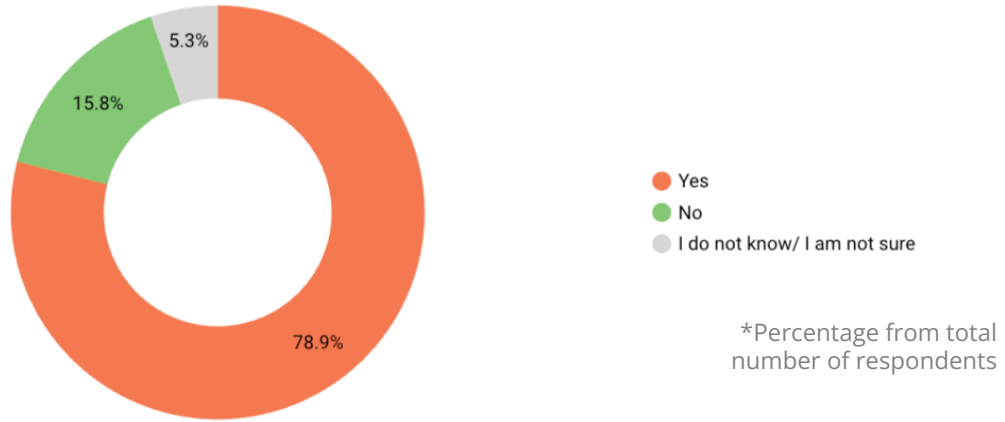
One of the most striking findings of this research is that nearly 90% of women in managerial positions in local media have experienced stress and anxiety in the past year (Chart 16).

One representative from an CSO media outlet stated that she had experienced burnout twice within a single year. Particularly concerning is the fact that all respondents with less than 11 years of managerial experience reported experiencing stress and anxiety.

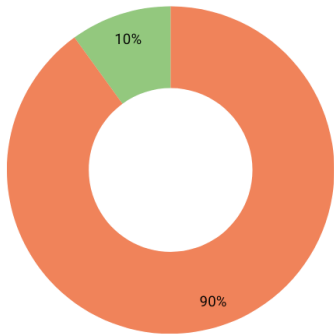
Balancing private and professional life is also a major challenge, with around 80% of respondents (Chart 17) saying they struggle to maintain this balance.

This issue is especially emphasized by participants with six to ten years of managerial experience. The difficulty of maintaining this balance also impacts their career advancement, as the previous set of survey questions indicated that the second biggest concern from an economic and professional standpoint is precisely the challenge of balancing personal and professional responsibilities.

Did you notice challenges to maintain good work/life balance within the last year?



Female managers from civil sector media



Female managers from commercial media

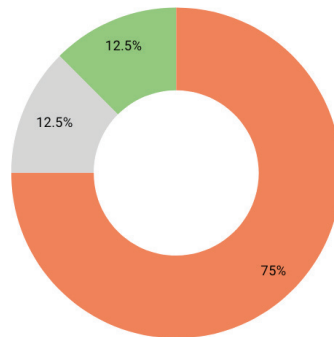


Chart 17: Challenges of Balancing Private and Professional Life – All Respondents, Civil Sector Media Managers, and Commercial Media Managers

In this context, sources of support play a key role in preserving the mental health and professional stability of women in media leadership positions. Their greatest sources of support are family, journalistic/media associations, and friends. Professional associations have the potential to further empower women facing numerous challenges by providing networks, legal assistance, and psychological support.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Women in media, especially those in leadership positions in local communities, face numerous challenges, stereotypes, and prejudices. It is essential to continuously implement measures for their empowerment and strengthening to enhance their resilience and enable them to perform their work professionally and effectively. The conducted research highlights the complex challenges they encounter in both their professional and personal lives, underscoring the need for comprehensive measures to improve their security and professional stability.

The participants in this study expressed that they have come to terms with the idea that they must endure various pressures and threats simply because they work in a public profession. This is one of the reasons why they often choose not to react or report what they perceive as minor harassment or threats. However, this lack of response only increases the level of pressure, as well as the frequency and intensity of threats—something that is undoubtedly concerning. Women tend to be more emotionally driven, eager to help, and often show greater tolerance than their male colleagues to avoid potential conflicts with individuals in their local communities. They frequently feel responsible for the situations they find themselves in. For this reason, it is essential to provide them with support—both within newsrooms and across the media industry—so they do not have to face these challenges alone. Creating an environment where they can carry out their work in their local communities without obstruction is crucial.

The persistence and motivation of the study participants to continue in their profession are truly impressive. In their responses, they emphasized that they do this work out of a desire for justice and truth and “to bring joy to ordinary people who are invisible to the media, yet have wonderful stories that deserve to be told.” They have no intention of giving up because, as they put it, “our work can, above all, help others, bring happiness to people, and contribute to making this world a slightly better place.”

In this final segment of the study, we present key recommendations for improving the position of women in leadership roles in local media.

- Introducing systemic solutions, including clear protocols for reporting and responding to attacks, is crucial for creating a safer working environment for female managers. Raising awareness of their rights and protection mechanisms, as well as the importance of team solidarity, can help strengthen mutual support and resilience within newsrooms.
- Additional support is essential in addressing various forms of attacks and pressures on female managers in civil sector media. Their unclear legal status within the national legislation makes them more vulnerable and exposed to pressure. Although still underdeveloped, this sector plays a crucial role at the local level in promoting values and raising awareness of topics that are often insufficiently covered by other media.
- The need to adapt support mechanisms to different generations of employees has been recognized to ensure adequate protection. Special attention should be given to women working in small newsrooms and civil sector media, where the sense of isolation is more pronounced due to limited resources and a lack of collegial support.
- Strengthening connections among female managers and creating a network is one approach that can actively support women in leadership positions in local media. Regular exchanges of experiences and open discussions can help reduce tolerance for situations where women are belittled. Recognizing misogyny will make them more sensitive to gender discrimination, sexism, and intolerance. Public condemnation of such behaviors, increasing visibility, and openly addressing these issues will contribute to greater solidarity and a shared sense that they are not alone in this fight.
- Within established networks or clubs, using internal resources, mentorship programs can be organized where senior and more experienced professionals provide continuous support to younger colleagues. This would empower and encourage female journalists to take on leadership roles. Media associations play a significant role in these efforts.

- Journalistic/media associations and networks should work to increase the visibility of female managers in local media through planned offline and online campaigns, as well as greater representation of such content on social media.
- By organizing workshops and specialized training programs tailored for female managers, which they show particular interest in, associations and networks also strengthen their own capacities.
- Journalistic/media associations can provide their members with legal and psychological support through training programs that empower women to handle threats.
- It is important to identify and make more visible the situations that lead to anxiety and stress among female managers, as well as to guide them on possible ways to balance work and personal life. Journalistic/media associations can propose models of flexible work arrangements used in other countries, thereby supporting women's ambitions for career advancement.
- In the long run, journalistic/media associations could strengthen gender awareness in their existing programs for young journalists and media professionals. This would help foster a culture of solidarity and sensitivity toward women in the profession and beyond.



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