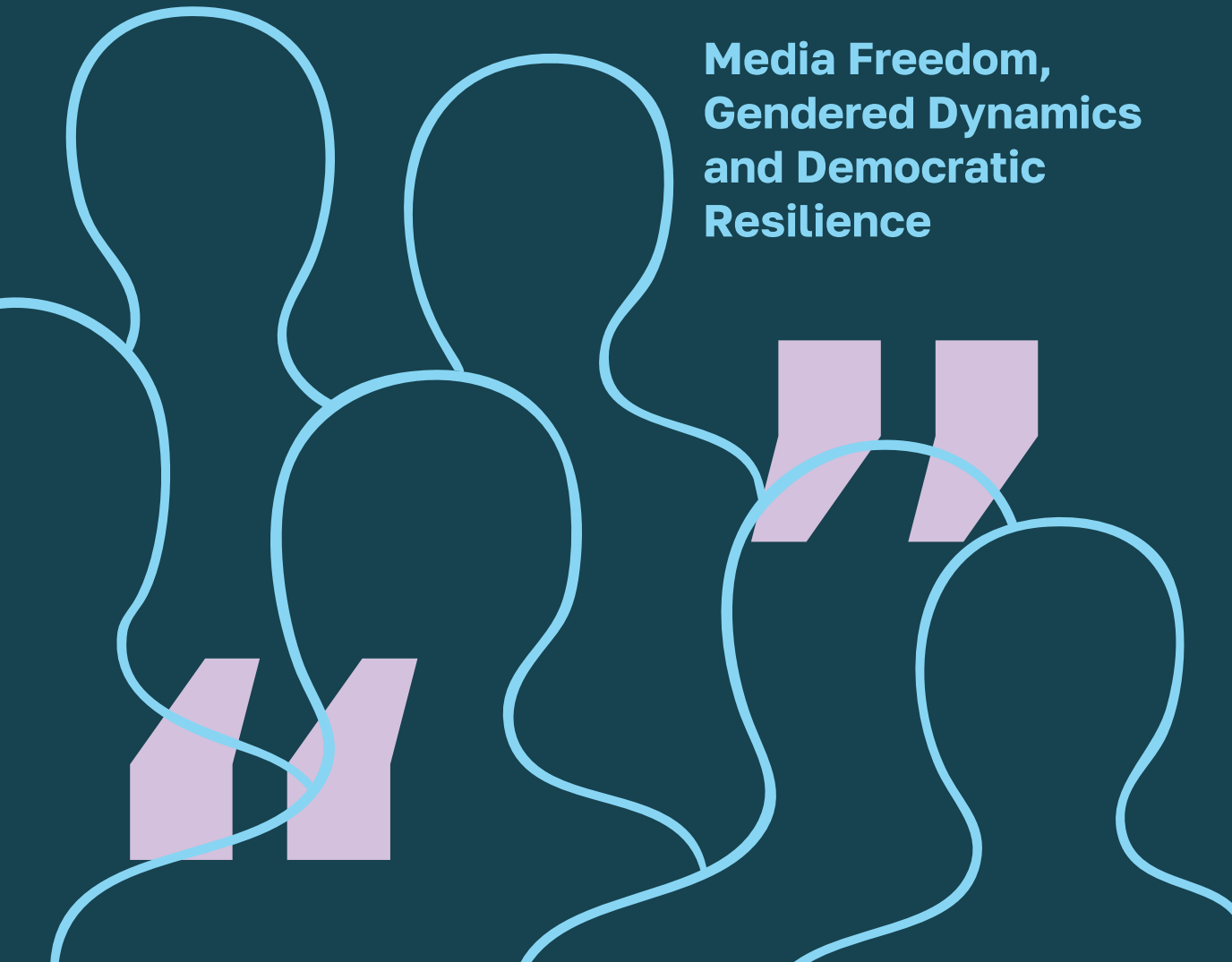
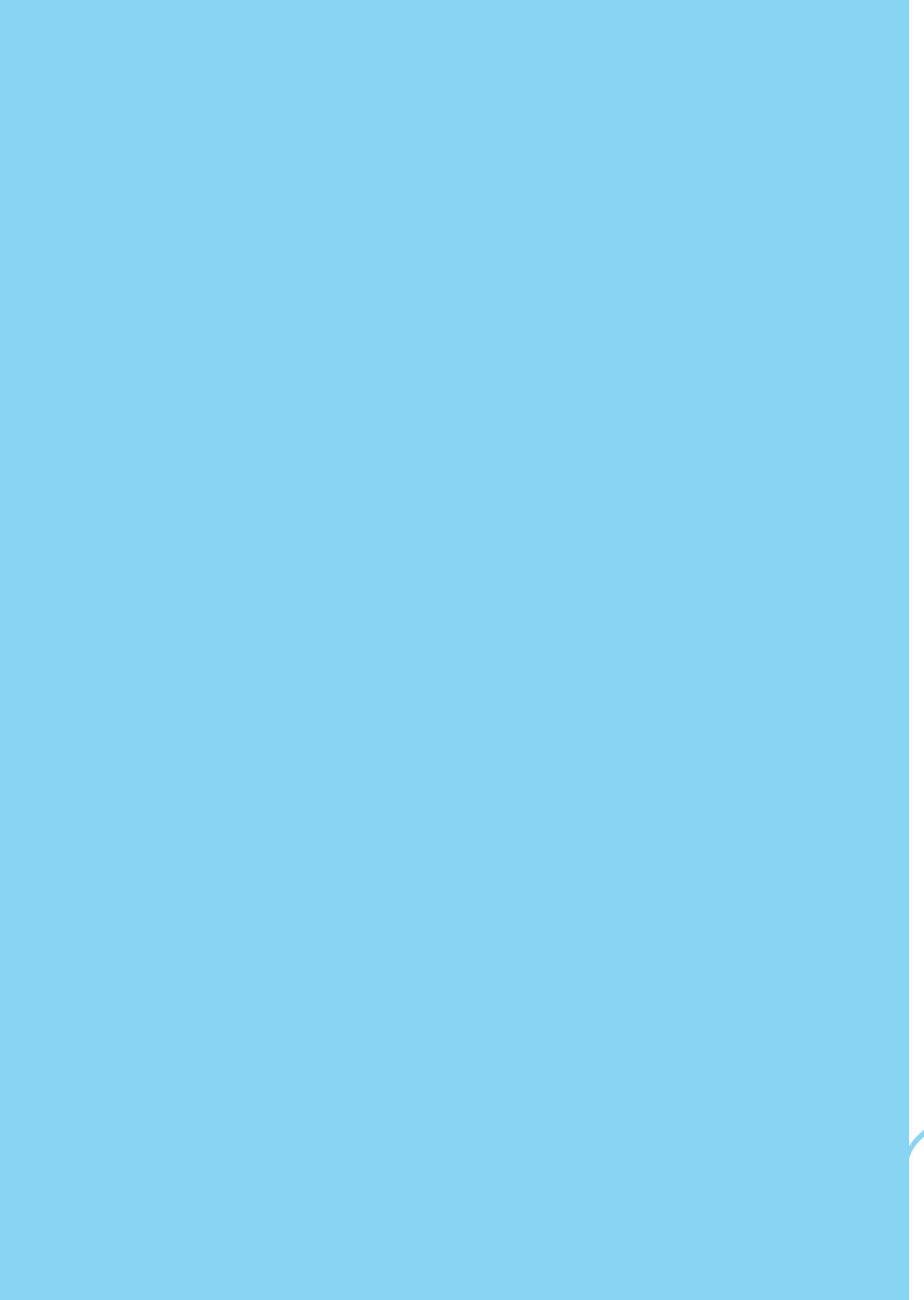


LOCAL JOURNALISM AT RISK:

Media Freedom,
Gendered Dynamics
and Democratic
Resilience





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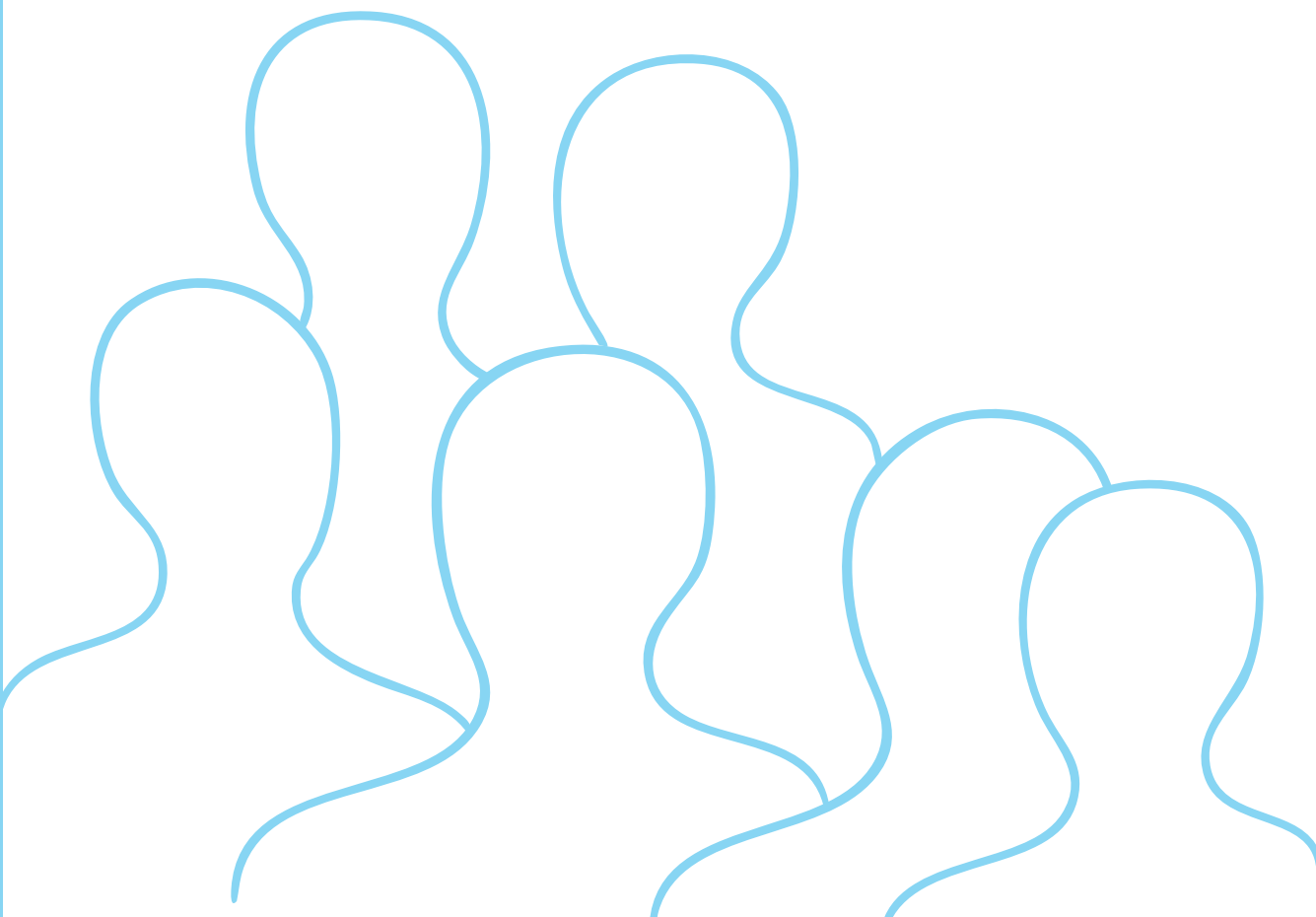


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Local Journalism at Risk:

Media Freedom, Gendered Dynamics and Democratic Resilience



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INTRODUCTION



According to the latest Reporters Without Borders (RSF) report, journalists in North Macedonia do not face a systematically hostile environment; yet **political influence, disinformation and the increasing devaluation of the profession** continue to undermine their capacity for independent, in-depth reporting and to erode public trust in the media.¹ Independent and local outlets are particularly vulnerable to threats, intimidation and economic pressure, while government officials often display dismissive or hostile attitudes towards journalists² - conditions that can be felt most acutely outside the capital, where resources are scarce and proximity to power is unavoidable.

In such a climate, **the democratic function of the media** as a civil watchdog – to scrutinise power, ensure transparency in public administration and give visibility to injustices that affect people’s lives – becomes increasingly difficult to uphold. When institutions are weakened by corruption³ and the media sector itself is marked by precarious labour conditions,⁴ full editorial independence may appear like a distant ideal. Yet, it is precisely in these constraints that journalism retains its most crucial democratic purpose: **illuminating abuses of power in the name of public truth and accountability** and sustaining democratic resilience at the community level.⁵

This role is particularly vital in contexts where corruption is not an abstract governance problem but a lived reality shaping everyday interactions between citizens and institutions. **Corruption remains a critical challenge for North Macedonia.** According to Transparency International’s 2024 Corruption Perceptions Index (CPI), the country is ranked 88th out of 180, with a 40/100 score, marking a drop of 12 places compared to previous year.⁶ Recent assessments further indicate that one in three citizens in North Macedonia has paid some form of bribe to complete an administrative task, reflecting the extent to which corruption permeates everyday life.⁷ Only consistent, independent reporting can expose the hidden practices that sustain corruption, yet such reporting depends on a media environment that safeguards editorial autonomy, access to information and protection from political and economic pressures.⁸ The urgency of this need was tragically exposed in March 2025 when a pyrotechnics fire broke out in the Pulse nightclub in Kočani, killing 63 people and injuring many more.⁹ Subsequent investigations revealed a chain of omissions and illegal actions by officials, including a lack of safety compliance, the absence of valid licensing and corruption in the operation of the venue.¹⁰ The tragedy triggered nationwide mourning and

¹ Reporters Without Borders: North Macedonia. <https://rsf.org/en/country/north-macedonia>.

² *ibid.*

³ Ristovska, J., Cvetanovska, T. & Trpovska, S. (2025). *Corruption Assessment Report for North Macedonia 2025*. Macedonian Centre for International Collaboration. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/bp8drpch> on December 23, 2025.

⁴ Spirovski, M. & Todorovska-Kostovska V. (2025). *North Macedonia: Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and the Journalist Safety Index 2024* [„Северна Македонија: Индикатори за степенот на слободата на медиумите и Индекс на безбедноста на новинарите 2024“]. AJM: Skopje. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/dshpvtuu> on December 15, 2025.

⁵ Bondarenko, O. S., Utkina, M. S. & Kolesnikova, M. V. (2021). “The Role of Mass Media in Preventing Corruption”. *The Law, State and Telecommunications Review*, 13(1), pp. 70-93. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/msuhzajj> on December 15, 2025.

⁶ Transparency International Corruption Perceptions Index: North Macedonia. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/5n8csrsx> on December 15, 2025.

⁷ Ristovska, J., Cvetanovska, T. & Trpovska, S. (2025). *Corruption Assessment Report for North Macedonia 2025*. Macedonian Centre for International Collaboration. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/bp8drpch> on December 23, 2025.

⁸ Rana, M. P. (2013). “Organized Crime and Corruption: A Theoretical And Empirical Analysis”, University of Calgary. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/mr8bktsp> on December 15, 2025.

⁹ Smith, H. (March, 2025). “Nightclub fire in North Macedonia kills 59 and leaves more than 100 injured”, [online] The Guardian. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/yc5h32v7> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁰ Trajkovska, M. (2025) “The Kočani Fire and the Systemic Collapse of North Macedonia”, Media Diversity Institute. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/39muh4ky> on December 15, 2025.

anti-corruption protests, as citizens demand accountability.¹¹ In the months that followed, (local) journalists proved vital in reporting and uncovering layers of local clientelism, regulatory failure and institutional neglect that might otherwise have remained invisible.¹²

Corruption and organised crime are inherently intertwined, operating through networks that maximise personal or political gain while minimising accountability.¹³ Investigative and analytical journalism play a critical role in exposing these networks. Their work goes far beyond daily reporting: it involves tracing hidden practices, contextualising complex schemes and providing the public with information necessary to demand institutional action.¹⁴

At the same time, journalism operates within an information environment increasingly polluted by disinformation. The saturation of anti-democratic narratives, including anti-Western and anti-EU disinformation campaigns, further destabilises public trust and complicates the work of credible media.¹⁵ In a context where falsehoods circulate faster than verified information, where media literacy remains low and coordinated disinformation campaigns blur the line between propaganda and news, independent and critical journalism becomes indispensable.^{16,17} These dynamics are particularly consequential for **younger generations**, who primarily consume news through social media (influencers) and digital platforms, where sensationalism, algorithmic amplification and paid content frequently displace verified reporting, i.e. ads are sold as “facts”.¹⁸ These pressures are further amplified outside the capital. **Local journalism operates in an ecosystem where proximity to political, business and institutional actors is greater, while resources are far more limited.** Many local outlets lack the financial stability, editorial autonomy and staffing required to operate sustainably, let alone to pursue reporting on corruption, organised crime or abuse of power.¹⁹ This economic strain coincides with the steady erosion of local journalism, leaving large parts of the country without regular, reliable news about

¹¹ Dimoski, A. (2025). “Protesters demand systemic change, justice after Kočani tragedy”, [online] MIA News. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/yeufjria> on December 15, 2025.

¹² Investigative Reporting Labs (2025). “Kochani Fire – Behind the Flames”. [Video] YouTube. Retrieved from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DwbWj1qqzoe> on December 15, 2025; Through unpublished investigation documents, the video story done by the independent media organisation revealed the abuse of power done by inspectors, prosecutors and politicians alike. Two months after the release, the two Public Revenue Office inspectors exposed in the documentary were arrested and are now under investigation for bribery and abuse of office.

¹³ Ballegooy, W., Zandstra, T. (2016). “Organised Crime and Corruption: Cost of Non-Europe Report”, European Parliamentary Research Service. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3x9re6xu> on December 24, 2025.

¹⁴ Schauseil, W., Zúñiga, N. & Jackson, D. (2019). “Media and anti-corruption”, Transparency International. Retrieved from: <http://www.jstor.com/stable/resrep20465> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁵ Metamorphosis (2024). *Disinformation Trends and Narratives in the Western Balkan Region: Media Monitoring Report* (October – December 2024). Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/y3csauan> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁶ Tuneva, M. (2024). Among Challenges and Solutions: A Guide to Media Integrity in North Macedonia [„Meѓy предизviците и решенијата: Водич за интегритет на медиумите во Северна Македонија“]. UNDR. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/dr9s5bun> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁷ Serafimovska, E. & Trajkoska J. (2023). *Vulnerability to Disinformation Among Different Groups of Citizens in North Macedonia* [„Ранливост на дезинформации кај различни групи граѓани во Северна Македонија“]. Institute of Communication Studies. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/ms9ux2ud> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁸ Popovska, V. (2021). *The Influence of Social and Mass Media in the Creation of Public Opinion and Its Consequences Expressed Through the Construction of Stereotypes, Discrimination, Bullying and Hate Speech Among High School Students* [„Влијанието на социјалните и на мас-медиумите во креирањето на јавното мислење и последиците од него изразени преку градење стереотипи, дискриминација, булинг и говор на омраза кај средношколците“]. Institute for Human Rights. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/4yupe5sw> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁹ Spirovski, M. & Todorovska-Kostovska V. (2025). *North Macedonia: Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and the Journalist Safety Index 2024* [„Северна Македонија: Индикатори за степенот на слободата на медиумите и Индекс на безбедноста на новинарите 2024“]. AJM: Skopje. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/dshpptuu> on December 15, 2025.

their own communities. While the correspondent networks once formed the backbone of national reporting, they have now been reduced to a symbolic presence of a few fully employed and several freelance correspondents.²⁰

As a result, **local stories rarely enter the national public sphere**, enabling political opacity, unchecked corruption and the near invisibility of everyday issues faced by citizens outside the capital. In such environments, where proximity breeds familiarity and dependency, journalists face informal pressure, reputational attacks and direct risks when covering corruption or misuse of public resources.

These pressures are not experienced evenly: they intersect with labour precarity, geography and gender, producing differentiated risks and vulnerabilities, particularly for women journalists working in local media environments.²¹ Women journalists must therefore navigate not only professional retaliation but also gendered harassment and discrimination, a pattern widely noted in both international and national assessments of media freedom.^{22 23}

Despite their crucial democratic role, local journalists working outside the capital remain largely absent from research, policy debates and media development programmes. Recognising this **knowledge gap** as central to understanding media freedom and the distribution of power in North Macedonia, this research examines the experiences, vulnerabilities and gendered dynamics shaping local journalism today.

Positioning the Research and Key Objectives: Bringing the Local into Focus

The decision to shift the analytical focus to the local level, while integrating a gender-responsive, participatory perspective, has resulted in research that contributes new, context-specific insights to existing studies on media freedom and journalists' safety in North Macedonia. While previous research largely centres on national media, formal legal frameworks or isolated incidents of harassment, this study examines how structural precarity, political pressure and gendered dynamics intersect in the everyday working lives of local journalists.

By foregrounding the everyday struggles of journalists outside the capital, the research reveals how economic dependency, informal power relations and weak institutional protection shape both editorial decision-making and personal risk. It demonstrates that **labour conditions, safety concerns, gender and disinformation** cannot be treated as separate issues, but as mutually reinforcing factors that

²⁰ Koka, F. (2021). *The Situation With the Correspondents in MRT* [„Состојба со дописниците на МРТ“]. AJM. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/5n6zkbxk> on December 15, 2025.

²¹ Janevska, U. (2024) “Women journalists from local media under an avalanche of discreditations” [„Новинарките од локалните медиуми под канонада дискредитации“]. [online] PINA.mk. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/5n7amwtu> on December 15, 2025.

²² Posetti, J. et al. (2022). *The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists*. International Center for Journalists. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/47vbytma> on December 15, 2025.

²³ Spirovski, M & Todorovska-Kostovska, V. (2025) *Challenges and Developments: Women Journalists' Safety in North Macedonia 2024*. [„Предизвици и напредок: Безбедноста на новинарките во Северна Македонија 2024“]. Safejournalists.net. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/2t38zp5t> on December 15, 2025.

undermine local journalism and its sustainability and connection to younger audiences and future media workers. In doing so, it fills a critical gap in the evidence base and provides grounded insights for more targeted, context-sensitive interventions aimed at strengthening media freedom, gender equality and democratic accountability at the local level.

This study therefore seeks to:

- Get to know the experiences, needs and priorities of the intended beneficiary groups (local journalists, especially women). Determine the forms of professional precarity and pressures, as well as (gender-based) harassment, threats and discrimination that local journalists face, particularly when reporting on corruption, governance, crime and human rights.
- Identify the challenges and limitations of newsroom capacities (technical, financial and managerial) and how these affect the quality, independence and sustainability of local journalism.
- Investigate how local journalists respond to harassment, pressure and institutional shortcomings, including reliance on peer networks, informal solidarity and coping mechanisms.
- Analyse policies and regulatory frameworks applicable to local media and identify loopholes and opportunities for improving the working conditions, safety, editorial independence and gender equality in local journalism.
- Ascertain the perspectives and priorities of key stakeholders in the media ecosystem, including editors, media owners, unions and civil society and institutional actors, regarding support for (local) journalism and gender equality in the sector.
- Examine how legal frameworks, institutional mechanisms and professional unions, such as the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers (IUJM) and the Association of Journalists of North Macedonia (AJM), are experienced by journalists, their accessibility and indispensable role in protecting journalists' rights and safety.

Overall, this analysis goes beyond formal compliance to examine how regulatory gaps, uneven implementation and local-level realities create both structural loopholes and underutilised entry points for improving safety, strengthening protection, editorial independence and gender-responsive labour reforms.

Methodological and Ethical Compliance Statement

This study was conducted in full adherence to recognised standards of ethical, methodological and research integrity, particularly in light of the politically sensitive and high-risk context in which journalists operate in North Macedonia. The research design combined qualitative primary data (in-depth interviews, consultations and participatory engagement) with a systematic review of secondary sources, including national and international legal frameworks, policy documents, monitoring reports and prior empirical studies. Primary data collection followed feminist and participatory research principles, prioritising informed consent, confidentiality, risk minimisation and the safety of participants, especially journalists working in small communities where anonymity is inherently fragile.

All interviewees participated voluntarily and were informed about the purpose of the research, the intended use of findings and their right to withdraw or limit disclosure at any point. No personally identifiable information is disclosed, and quotations are anonymised to prevent direct or indirect identification, unless consented otherwise. Decisions regarding data inclusion were guided by a precautionary principle, prioritising participant safety over completeness of reporting.

Analytical claims are grounded either in original empirical material generated through this study or in clearly identifiable secondary sources, including recognised international monitoring bodies, national institutions and professional organisations. Where contextual or historical analysis is provided, it reflects well-documented public records and widely acknowledged assessments, with explicit references included to ensure transparency and traceability.

The research team applied continuous reflexivity throughout the process, critically assessing positionality, power relations and the potential impacts of the research itself on participants and the media ecosystem. This approach aimed to avoid extractive practices and ensure that the study contributes responsibly to evidence-based advocacy, policy dialogue and media development efforts.

The study contains no plagiarised material. All sources are appropriately referenced, and original analysis is clearly distinguished from cited work. Any limitations identified are transparently acknowledged in the report, alongside recommendations for future research.

RESEARCH APPROACH



a. Methodological Principles

This research was conducted in a politically sensitive and precarious media environment, where journalists, especially at the local level, face heightened risks related to harassment, labour insecurity and institutional pressure, as it will be elaborated below. In this context, **participatory and feminist methodological principles** proved essential rather than optional. They shaped the study's emphasis on co-creation, shared ownership and care, while **reflexivity and collective accountability** became central to navigating risk, power imbalances and trust throughout the research process.

Participatory research aspires to transform who produces knowledge and why, while feminist participatory practice engages those most affected by inequality as co-inquirers.²⁴ Therefore, rather than treating journalists solely as research subjects, **we engaged journalists and media experts in shaping research tools, refining interview guides and contextualising findings**. This added a level of participatory inquiry and grounded the research in lived professional realities, attuned to the risks and constraints faced by participants, especially in small communities where anonymity is fragile and repercussions are immediate.

Throughout, **reflexivity** was treated not as a discrete methodological step but as a continuous ethical and political practice, which recognises the researchers' own positionality and questions how research itself may reproduce privilege or oppression. This speaks to Scott-Villiers' idea of "**reflection in action**": learning while doing and staying accountable to those whose risks exceed the researcher's own.²⁵ Keeping this in mind, and in line with feminist epistemologies that emphasise situated knowledge and power awareness,^{26 27} we paid deliberate attention to how questions, formats and outputs could unintentionally reproduce extractive dynamics or expose participants to harm. Building trust meant slowing the pace, adapting research methods as inquiry evolved, co-creating tools with journalists and accepting that some stories would remain incomplete. For example, we decided early on **to prioritise confidentiality over completeness, and safety over data "richness", and allow participants to set boundaries around what could be shared**. Reflexivity requires recognising the limits of scrutiny and how the pursuit of "comprehensive findings" can reproduce extractive dynamics.²⁸

We also recognise that **participation itself unfolds within unequal systems of power**. While participatory approaches seek to democratise knowledge production, they do not automatically neutralise structural inequalities related to gender, professional status or geographic location.²⁹ This was especially relevant in the local media con

²⁴ Cornwall, A. (2008). "Unpacking 'Participation': Models, Meanings and Practices." *Community Development Journal*, 43(3), pp. 269–283.

²⁵ Scott-Villiers, P. (2021). "Reflexivity and Reflection in Action Research." In D. Burns, J. Howard & S. Ospina (eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*. London: SAGE, pp. 323–338.

²⁶ Haraway, D. (1988). "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies*, 14(3), pp. 575–599.

²⁷ Harding, S. (1991). *Whose Science? Whose Knowledge? Thinking from Women's Lives*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ Burns, D., Howard, J. & Ospina, S. (2021). "Challenges in the Practice of Participatory Research and Inquiry." In D. Burns, J. Howard & S. Ospina (eds.). *The SAGE Handbook of Participatory Research and Inquiry*. London: SAGE, pp. 17–33.

text, where shrinking newsrooms, informal labour arrangements and the absence of institutional support limit journalists' ability to openly reflect on discrimination, harassment or editorial pressure. **Reflexive practice therefore involved attending to silences, hesitations and contradictions as meaningful data, rather than treating them as gaps to be corrected.**

Findings from secondary data analysis, expert interviews and early fieldwork informed subsequent research phases, allowing the study to refine its focus on the precarity and silencing of local journalism and the underlying gender dynamics. Thus, the research process took into account emerging risks, shifting political dynamics and participants' needs, while maintaining analytical rigour. Finally, holding reflexivity as an ethical and political commitment in our work has helped us to not only document constraints on media freedom and gender equality, but to avoid reproducing them in the process.

b. Secondary Data Collection

Secondary data was collected and analysed to provide contextual understanding and to inform the design of the primary research tools. This phase involved an extensive review of **existing literature, reports, policy documents and research related to media freedom, labour conditions, journalists' safety and gender-based violence in the media sector**, as well as media literacy, disinformation and public trust in the media. We also looked into national and international legislation that targets journalists and media workers. The aim was to systematise existing knowledge, identify dominant narratives and map gaps that this research could meaningfully address, instead of duplicating previous work.

The review confirmed that a considerable body of research exists on media freedom, journalists' working conditions and online harassment in North Macedonia. While taken together they offer valuable contextual analysis, there still remains a **lack of thorough integration of a gender perspective to labour precarity, newsroom power relations or broader forms of professional silencing**. At the same time, many studies that examine working conditions or media safety do not disaggregate data by gender or fail to explore how gender shapes exposure to risk, access to protection mechanisms and coping strategies.

Another significant gap identified through the review concerns localisation. Existing research overwhelmingly centres on national media or journalists based in the capital, offering **little insight into the realities of local journalism**. As a result, the prevalence, forms and drivers of harassment, pressure and silencing outside major media hubs remain underexplored, as does the role of socio-economic precarity in shaping journalists' vulnerability. This raises unresolved questions about whether gender-based risks manifest differently at the local level, and how limited resources, institutional distance and informal power structures affect journalists' safety and autonomy.

c. Primary Data Collection

In response to the aforementioned gaps, the secondary data analysis was complemented by a more in-depth qualitative exploration, including key expert interviews and stakeholder mapping, which helped refine the research questions and ensure that the primary research would capture nuances not visible in existing datasets. Together, these methods allowed the study to move beyond descriptive accounts and towards a more grounded understanding of how gender, labour conditions and media freedom intersect in local contexts.

In-depth Interviews

In total, 20 in-depth interviews were conducted: 16 interviews with local journalists and/or editors and 4 interviews with editors-in-chief based in Skopje. To ensure inclusive ethnic composition of the sample, two journalists and one editor-in-chief are of Albanian ethnicity.

The interviews with local journalists/editors included 11 women and 5 men. This gender ratio was intentional in order to have sufficient ground to compare the experiences and perceptions between men and women journalists, while maintaining a primary focus on women's perspectives. Participants come from all 8 statistical regions in the country, across 13 cities. The sample of participants included junior, mid-career and senior journalists with varying years of experience in the field. They all work either in independent local media outlets or as correspondents for national or larger Skopje-based media.

It should be noted that professional roles at the local level are rarely clearly delineated. Half of the local interviewees, 8 out of 16, simultaneously perform editorial roles, including editors or editors-in-chief, and 6 are also owners or co-owners of their media outlets. This concentration of responsibilities reflects the structural realities of local journalism, where small teams and limited resources require journalists to combine reporting, editing, management and often technical tasks within a single role. In this context, investigative reporting on corruption and organised crime – often linked to local governance, the judiciary, environmental issues, gender-based violence or party-based employment – does not exist as a separate journalistic beat. Instead, it frequently overlaps with everyday news coverage.

Secondly, to contextualise the findings from local media and enable comparison with larger, centralised newsrooms, four in-depth interviews were conducted with editors-in-chief from Skopje-based media outlets, including three women and one man.

In addition to individual interviews, insights from Skopje-based women journalists were gathered through a facilitated workshop/discussion, which provided space for collective reflection on newsroom dynamics, gendered divisions of labour and experiences of harassment at the central level. While this was not designed as a formal focus group, the discussion generated important qualitative insights that complement the interview data.

The research also included a limited engagement with journalism **students and young people interested in media**, conducted through a workshop on investigative journalism and public-interest reporting. This gave us insight into early professional socialisation, declining interest in the field and perceptions of journalism as precarious and unsafe. While not a core analytical group, these perspectives highlighted generational challenges relevant to the future sustainability of local journalism.³⁰

Consultations with Relevant Stakeholders

To gain insights into the perceptions of relevant civil and institutional stakeholders in the media sphere, we conducted **4 consultations with relevant stakeholders**: (1) a consultation with representatives from the government regulatory body – the **Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AAVMU)**, (2) the **Association of Journalists in Macedonia (AJM)**, i.e., with a representative from the self-regulatory body, the **Council of Honour**, (3) the **Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers (IUJM)** and (4) the informal **women-led network EDNAKVA (EQUAL)**, operating under IUJM.

In addition, we conducted **4 consultations with experts** with comprehensive research experience related to the media sphere, including representatives from the **Platform for Investigative Journalism and Analyses (PINA)**, the **Macedonian Institute for Media (MIM)**, the **Research Institute on Social Development (RESIS)** and an independent researcher affiliated with IUJM.

d. Study Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

While this research adopts a feminist and participatory lens, it does not claim to fully capture the intersectional complexity of journalists' experiences across all axes of inequality.

The analysis looks at gender, geography (centre-periphery) and age as salient factors shaping precarity and professional marginalisation in local journalism. However, due to both methodological constraints and the risks associated with visibility in small communities, other critical dimensions of intersectionality, most notably **ethnicity, socio-economic class and disability, remain insufficiently explored**. These dimensions are particularly relevant in a context such as North Macedonia, where ethnic stratification, class-based exclusion and ableist barriers continue to shape access to employment, institutional protection and public voice.³¹

³⁰ This is further elaborated in the “Methodological Limitations” subsection below.

³¹ The Advisory Committee on the Framework Convention for the Protection of National Minorities (ACFC) (2022). “FIFTH OPINION ON NORTH MACEDONIA”, Council of Europe. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/mw8uf32s> on December 15, 2025.

The absence of systematic data on these dimensions reflects not their irrelevance, but rather **the structural silencing and heightened vulnerability** of journalists positioned at the intersection of multiple marginalisations. Future research would therefore benefit from targeted, trust-based approaches that can safely examine how ethnicity, class and disability intersect with gender, age and locality to produce differentiated experiences of risk, exclusion and resilience within the media sector.

At the same time, the research process included **limited engagement with journalism students and young people in local areas**. While we engaged with youth through university outreach and workshops in collaboration with student unions, the majority of those present were young people who are not necessarily engaged in the media sphere and based in the central region. Addressing the realities of young local or aspiring journalists, being key for the future of local journalism and media freedom, requires dedicated research and interventions that connect journalism education, independent media and local news ecosystems through hands-on investigative practice, mentorship and safe entry points for young people.

Finally, although the study **does not systematically examine the conditions of media and technical workers**, this distinction is blurred at the local level, where journalists routinely perform technical, production and distribution tasks alongside reporting, effectively absorbing multiple roles within a single position. This role overload further exacerbates precarity and should be addressed in future research that would attempt to capture the media ecosystem as a whole, including the interdependencies between journalistic, technical and support roles.

LEGAL FRAMEWORK



Journalists in North Macedonia are formally protected by a complex set of international and national legal instruments governing freedom of expression, labour rights, media regulation and protection from discrimination and violence. These frameworks establish important normative guarantees for journalistic independence, safety and equality, and form a key part of the country's obligations under international human rights law and its EU accession process. However, the existence of legal protections does not in itself ensure effective safeguarding in practice. As this study demonstrates, gaps in implementation, enforcement and institutional coordination, particularly at the local level, significantly shape how these frameworks are experienced by journalists in their everyday work. Against this backdrop, the following sections outline some of the key international and national legal frameworks relevant to journalists' rights and safety, while highlighting the distance that often persists between formal legal commitments and their practical realisation.

International Framework

The European Media Freedom Act (EMFA), entering into force in August 2025, presents a key development for ensuring transparency and accountability in the digital space and the right to access a plurality of editorially independent media content.³² It protects editorial decision-making from external interference and prioritises transparency of media ownership.³³ Alignment between national legislation and the EMFA is key for the country's EU accession path, and will serve to safeguard media pluralism and enable journalists to report on corruption and organised crime without facing obstacles and threats to their personal safety and professional position.

In addition, the **EU Commission Recommendation 2021/1534** sets a comprehensive legal foundation for the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists and media professionals.³⁴ In Article 20, given the high risk of physical threats and attacks against investigative journalists and journalists or media professionals working on cases concerning organised crime and corruption, the Recommendation calls for reinforcing protection measures to ensure their safety.

It also covers issues of gender-based discrimination and violence. The gender-sensitive commitments are clear in light of its alignment with the **EU Gender Equality Strategy (2020-2025) and the EU Gender Action Plan III**. In Article 3, the Recommendation acknowledges the rising number of gender-based violence directed at women journalists, and calls on public authorities to provide an appropriate legal environment, by taking criminal threats against journalists seriously with an appropriate investigation, follow-up and sanctions. Regarding provisions concerning gender equality in the media workplace, as stated in Article 28, it recognises that women continue to be under-represented in the media sector in managerial and top executive positions. It

³² ECPMF (2025). "EMFA in Force: A New Era for Media Freedom in the EU." [online] European Centre for Press and Media Freedom. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/yhfne858> on December 15, 2025.

³³ Official Journal of the European Union (2024). "Establishing a common framework for media services in the internal market and amending Directive 2010/13/EU (European Media Freedom Act)." Retrieved from <https://tinyurl.com/3hap3hpr> on December 15, 2025.

³⁴ Official Journal of the European Union (2021). "Commission Recommendation (EU) 2021/1534 of 16 September 2021 on ensuring the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists and other media professionals in the European Union". EUR LEX. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/bdef4p8p> on December 15, 2025.

recommends measures to ensure equal working opportunities and a safe and inclusive media working environment.³⁵

The EU Gender Action Plan III in itself presents an agenda for gender equality and women's empowerment across the EU's external action. It mentions journalists as women in public life who are often "subject to gender-based violence, including different forms of online violence and even femicide, amid shrinking civic space".³⁶ In line with this, it encourages EU action focused on promoting a safe (online) environment for women journalists, and empowering women as producers of information, and as entrepreneurs and decision-makers in the media sector.³⁷

Furthermore, the **EU Youth Action Plan (2022–2027)**, the EU's first strategic framework for youth engagement in external action, prioritises youth-led initiatives aimed at combating corruption and strengthening democratic governance.³⁸ Although it does not explicitly address media freedom or journalism, its emphasis on youth participation, civic engagement and accountability offers clear entry points for future programming that connects young people with independent media and investigative reporting. Aligning media support initiatives with this framework can contribute to the generational sustainability of journalism by engaging youth as active participants in anti-corruption and democratic processes.

The Convention for the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), ratified in North Macedonia in 1994, defines gender-based violence as "violence which is directed toward a woman because she is a woman or that affects women disproportionately".³⁹ As described in Article 9, "gender-based violence against women" as a term outlines the social, economic and political means by which the subordinate position of women is perpetuated. It situates violent incidents within a wider social context, underscoring the need for a comprehensive response, rather than treating them as isolated, individual cases. Article 14 further recognises that harmful practices and crimes perpetuated against journalists and human rights defenders among others also constitute forms of gender-based violence against women, affected by cultural, ideological and political factors.

The Istanbul Convention, issued by the Council of Europe in 2011, and ratified in North Macedonia in 2018, aims to "protect women from all forms of violence, and prevent, prosecute and eliminate violence against women and domestic violence".⁴⁰ Without specifically mentioning journalists, it nevertheless presents a concrete international legal framework that protects women journalists facing gender-based violence and harassment.

³⁵ Official Journal Of The European Union (2021). "Commission Recommendation (EU) 2021/1534 of 16 September 2021 on ensuring the protection, safety and empowerment of journalists and other media professionals in the European Union". EUR LEX. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/bdef4p8p> on December 15, 2025.

³⁶ European Commission (2020). "EU Gender Action Plan (Gap) III – An Ambitious Agenda For Gender Equality And Women's Empowerment In Eu External Action". EUR LEX. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/bdz98724> on December 15, 2025.

³⁷ European Commission (2020). "EU Gender Action Plan (Gap) III – An Ambitious Agenda For Gender Equality And Women's Empowerment In Eu External Action". EUR LEX. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/bdz98724> on December 15, 2025.

³⁸ European Commission (n.d.). Youth Action Plan. [online] Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/4yvw98xh> on December 18, 2025.

³⁹ United Nations (2017). "Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women". Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/zy3mww4> on December 15, 2025.

⁴⁰ Council of Europe (2011). "Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence. Retrieved from: <https://rm.coe.int/168008482e> on December 15, 2025.

National Framework

The labour rights of North Macedonia's media sector are only regulated through the general labour legislation, which does not recognise journalists and media workers as a distinct professional category with specific protections.⁴¹ However, journalistic work is quite specific and often requires journalists to work during weekends, outside regular hours, and under freelance or fixed-term contracts. Especially for those employed through non-standard contracts, the current legislation fails to capture the full reality of their professional lives. Therefore, further amendments are required in order to ensure that labour regulations ensure stability and reflect the idiosyncratic needs and circumstances of journalists and media workers.

Regarding legislation specifically targeting media sector professionals, **the Media Law** guarantees media independence and freedom of expression, and regulates editorial policies within the newsroom. As of April 2025, amendments to the Media Law expanded its scope to include online media, formally recognising digital outlets as part of the regulated media sector.⁴² Concerning its protections for journalists, according to Article 11.1, journalists are guaranteed protection from any form of discrimination, dismissal or reduction of salary for expressing professional opinions, as long as they are in accordance with professional journalist guidelines.⁴³ This provision aims to ensure that freedom of expression and journalistic integrity are upheld without fear of retaliation.

However, the legislation lacks specific mechanisms that protect journalists from interference by media owners or managers, leaving no concrete pathways to ensure editorial independence. In North Macedonia, powerful political influences can manipulate the media sector by empowering politically-affiliated media outlets, often by reduced scrutiny of their violations, or by informal pressures on editorial decisions through personal networks, intimidation or withdrawal of funding.⁴⁴ In the current legislative context, journalists committed to exposing corruption and informing the public eye find themselves in a deeply precarious position.⁴⁵

In line with this, following the EU acquis, the 2021 amendments of **the Law on Civil Liability** for Insult and Defamation introduced reduced compensation amounts for non-material damages when journalists or editors are found at fault, and additional provisions outlining exemptions from liability.⁴⁶ However, it is key to note that the law is often used as the basis for **SLAPPs (Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation)**. These cases – typically initiated by powerful corporate or political actors – pose significant obstacles to media freedom as they aim to silence and discourage

⁴¹ Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia No. 62/2005. The consolidated text of the Labor Relations Law. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/2jmubtza> on December 15, 2025.

⁴² Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia. Media Law – Editorially revised text. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/55ry5haz> on December 15, 2025.

⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴ Metamorphosis, Foundation for Internet and Society (2023) "Evaluating North Macedonia's Media Law Reforms—A Partial Step Toward European Standards" Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/eb2cxf5u> on December 15, 2025.

⁴⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁶ Spirovski, M. & Nasteska-Kalanoska, B. (2022). *North Macedonia: Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and Journalists' Safety 2021* [„Северна Македонија: Показатели за степенот на слободата на медиумите и безбедноста на новинарите 2021“]. AJM: Skopje. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3farhzxw> on December 15, 2025.

journalists from reporting on cases of public interest.⁴⁷ While the recent legislative changes may somewhat weaken SLAPPs, there is still a need to introduce concrete mechanisms offering legal protections for journalists involved in such legal proceedings. North Macedonia has neither a formal anti-SLAPP framework nor an institutional response to SLAPP lawsuits, which represents an outstanding weakness in the protection of public participation.⁴⁸

Regarding legal protections targeting women journalists specifically, Article 3.3 from **the Law for Equal Opportunities Between Men and Women** outlines that gender-based discrimination and harassment are prohibited in all areas, including public information and the media.⁴⁹ This guarantees equal treatment and protection of women journalists from any form of discrimination or abuse in their workplace. In addition, in line with Article 5, women journalists must have equal opportunities to apply for, obtain and advance in jobs without facing discrimination based on gender.

The Law for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination further delves into the specific scenarios of discrimination. While prohibiting any discrimination on the basis of gender, age, ethnicity, social origins and other personal characteristics, in Article 8, it distinguishes between direct and indirect discrimination. While treating one person less favourably than another in a comparable situation constitutes direct discrimination, indirect discrimination⁵⁰ refers to regulations or practices that seem neutral but in fact position a person or group at a disadvantage. This offers a legal foundation to protect women journalists from seemingly “protective” yet discriminatory practices within media newsrooms.⁵¹ In addition, this instrument offers legal protection against (sexual) harassment and is crucial given that targeted attacks on women journalists, both offline and online, frequently involve comments regarding their appearance or threats inextricably related to their gender.

In support of this legislation, **the Commission for Prevention and Protection from Discrimination (CPPD)** serves as an independent body responsible for responding to citizens’ complaints and realising the competencies set out in the law. According to the CPPD report for 2024, the media sector is listed as one of the prevalent spheres for reported cases of discrimination; however, without delving further into the specific bases for discrimination, such as gender, ethnicity, nationality or other.⁵² In addition, there is a lack of available data on how many women journalists have used this protection mechanism. This obscures the extent to which women journalists report and rely on available protection mechanisms,⁵³ and ultimately limits the visibility of gender-based discrimination in the media sector.

⁴⁷ Metamorphosis, Foundation for Internet and Society (2023) “Evaluating North Macedonia’s Media Law Reforms—A Partial Step Toward European Standards” Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/eb2cxf5u> on December 15, 2025.

⁴⁸ Aleksov, Z., & Hadzi-Zafirov, Z. (2025). “Comparative Analysis of Dealing With SLAPPs In The Western Balkan Region And The EU Vis-A-Vis North Macedonia”. *Initiative for European Perspective* (IEP). Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3ptnkhw5> on December 15, 2025.

⁴⁹ Law on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men. Official Gazette of the Republic of Macedonia no. 6/12, 30/13, 166/14 and 150/15 and Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no. 53/21. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/yxt8rj9v> on December 15, 2025.

⁵⁰ Law on Prevention and Protection against Discrimination. Official Gazette of the Republic of North Macedonia no.08 – 3764/127. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/4b3ypmc6> on December 15, 2025.

⁵¹ This is a finding from an in-depth interview with an expert in the field. To be further elaborated in the following section.

⁵² Commission for Prevention and Protection against Discrimination (2024). *Yearly Report*. KSZD. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/fzswphxc> on December 15, 2025.

⁵³ Spirovski, M & Todorovska-Kostovska, V. (2025). Challenges and Developments: Women Journalists’ Safety in North Macedonia 2024. [„Предизвици и напредок: Безбедноста на новинарките во Северна Македонија 2024“]. Safejournalists.net. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/39r4avcs> on December 15, 2025.

Furthermore, the 2021 amendments to **the Criminal Code** introduced important protections against potential threats and harassment (women) journalists may face. For instance, the list of criminal offenses now includes “stalking” (Art. 144a), with explicit sanctions for online harassment.⁵⁴ This represents a particularly welcome regulatory reform in light of the widespread occurrences of gender-based harassment against women journalists in the digital sphere. Additionally, cases of attacks over journalists or media workers are now treated as attacks over public officials, covered by the Public Prosecutor’s Office with increased penalties for the attackers.⁵⁵ In 2022, the Chief Public Prosecutor of the Skopje Prosecutor’s Office appointed a **special Public Prosecutor to monitor and coordinate the handling of cases related to the safety of journalists**. By 2024, four Prosecutors were appointed across the Public Prosecutor’s Offices in Skopje, Shtip, Bitola and Tetovo, thereby expanding the scope and offering protection for journalists in local areas.⁵⁶

Most recently, given the rising concerns of online threats directed at journalists, the Ministry of Internal Affairs has appointed **local contact points for supporting media professionals in all sectors of internal affairs**, whereas the Sector for Digital Crime and Forensics is responsible for receiving reports of online threats.⁵⁷ A “**Journalist Safety Manual**” has also been developed, offering practical advice to ensure safe reporting, concrete signs for recognizing (digital) threats and mechanisms for protection and de-escalation.⁵⁸ Explicitly recognising gender-based harassment and threats directed against women journalists, it signifies an institutional awareness of the specific challenges women face in the media sphere. In addition, there are currently **preparations to establish a National Committee for the Protection of Journalists**, a multi-sectoral body responsible for preparing a National Action Plan.⁵⁹ The latest institutional responses for addressing non-physical threats and harassment are indeed significant, since prior to this, the Ministry, in cooperation with the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM), maintained a register of purely physical attacks against journalists.

⁵⁴ Bejkova, B. & Dzizgal, S. (2022). *Analysis – Safety and the socio-economic situation in the media: Acting together for greater respect for the rights of journalists and media workers*. [„Анализа – Безбедносната и социо-економската состојба во медиумите: Со заедничко дејствување до поголемо почитување на правата на новинарите и на медиумските работници“]. AJM & IUJM. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/2cp4k67c> on December 15, 2025.

⁵⁵ Spirovski, M. & Nasteska-Kalanoska, B. (2022). North Macedonia: Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and Journalists’ Safety 2021 [„Северна Македонија: Показатели за степенот на слободата на медиумите и безбедноста на новинарите 2021“]. AJM: Skopje. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3farh2xw> on December 15, 2025.

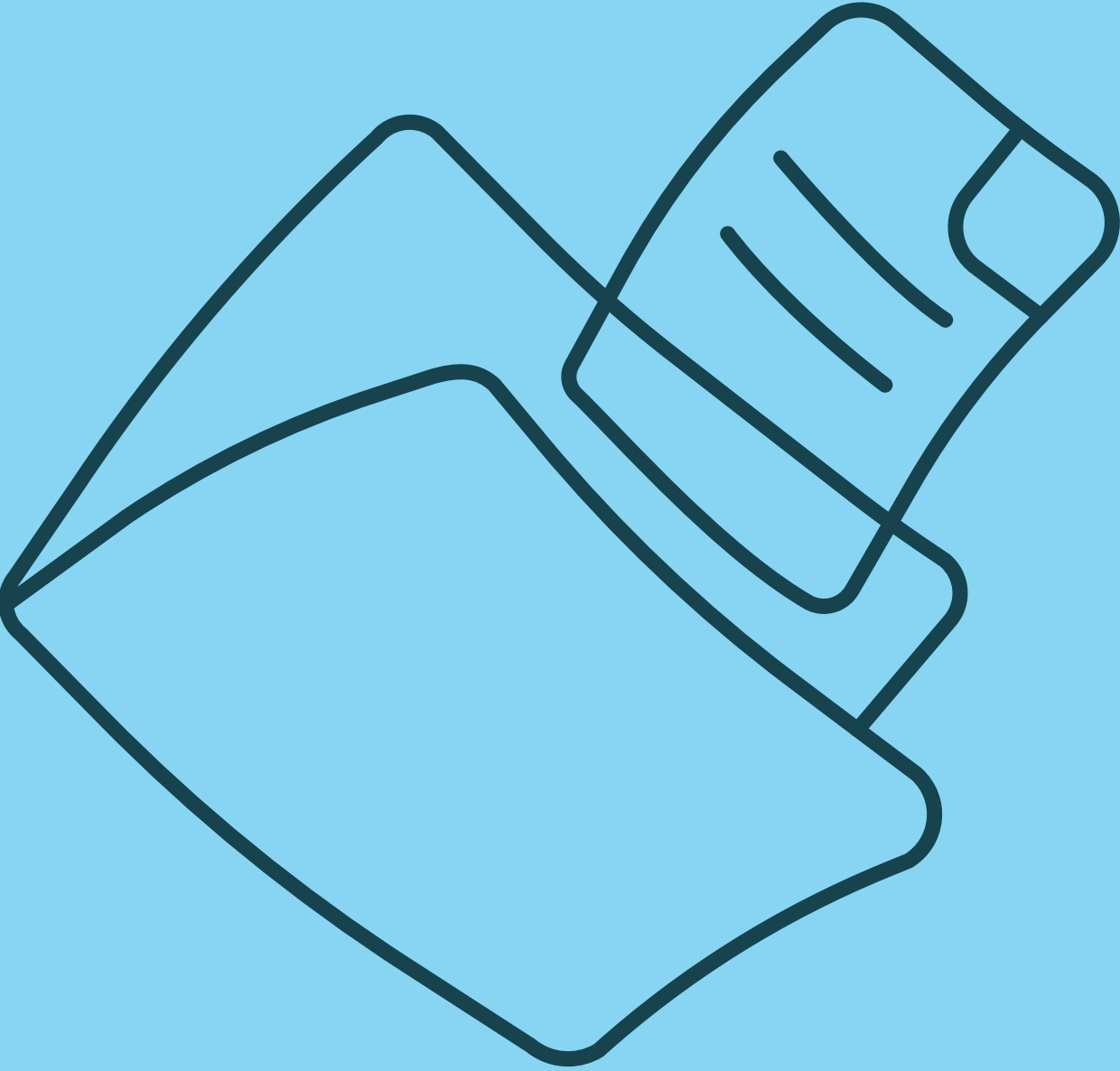
⁵⁶ Public Prosecutor’s Office Of The Republic Of North Macedonia (2024). “Kocevski: I publicly condemn every form of pressure and threats aimed at silencing journalists and influencing their work” [„Коцевски: Јавно ја осудувам секоја форма на притисок и закани кои се насочени кон замолчување на новинарите и влијание врз нивната работа“]. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/yd3hhdzx> on December 15, 2025.

⁵⁷ Ministry of Interior of the Republic of North Macedonia (2025). “The safety of journalists is a precondition for a free society; the Ministry of Interior treats all threats against journalists as a top priority”. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/26686k35> on December 15, 2025.

⁵⁸ Breskovski, I. & Angelovski, T. & Arsovska, B. (2024). *Journalist Safety Manual* [„Прирачник за безбедност на новинари“]. AJM. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/37tk295y> from December 15, 2025.

⁵⁹ Ministry of Interior of the Republic of North Macedonia (2025). “The safety of journalists is a precondition for a free society; the Ministry of Interior treats all threats against journalists as a top priority” [„Безбедноста на новинарите е предуслов за слободно општество, МВР со највисок приоритет ги третира сите закани кон новинарите“]. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/26686k35> on December 15, 2025.

CONTEXT ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS



Labour Rights and Socio-Economic Conditions

Precarious Employment and Contractual Insecurity

Working conditions determine not only the well-being of media workers but also their capacity to report independently and resist pressure. Despite recent improvements, journalism in North Macedonia remains **a precarious profession marked by irregular hours, low pay and job insecurity.**

Data from a survey made jointly by IUJM and AJM in 2022 on 335 media professionals shows that **only a little over half (56.1%) were employed on fixed-term contracts**, underscoring the prevalence of precarious and short-term engagements.⁶⁰ In a 2023 comprehensive report on media working conditions, **around 70% of the 343 surveyed journalists and media workers reported having full-time, permanent contracts.**⁶¹ The slight improvement could be linked to stronger institutional frameworks and union advocacy in recent years, though structural vulnerabilities, such as **high workloads, blurred boundaries between work and rest and the expectation of constant availability** continue to define journalistic labour.

For instance, **over one-quarter (28%) of the journalists reported working more than the legally prescribed 40-hour work week**, highlighting the profession's demanding pace and on-call practices, particularly during breaking news or emergencies. And yet, for such a high-demanding job, earnings remain alarmingly low, with **over half of the journalists (55%) earning below the national average monthly salary, and 38% of them reporting that overtime work was not compensated.**⁶² This makes it hard to attract (or keep!) young journalists into the profession, since, according to our interviewees, including one media union representative, young people are deterred by the low salaries and quickly lose interest in journalism. The number of students enrolled in media, journalism and communications has plummeted over the years; whereas 10 years ago there used to be up to 200 students, in the academic year 23/24, they were only 30.⁶³

The financial situation is especially concerning at the local level, where many outlets are closing and correspondents are dwindling. **Reports show that it is even more common for local journalists to earn below-average salaries and to have to work for**

⁶⁰ Bejkova, B. & Dzigal, S. (2022). *Analysis – Safety and the socio-economic situation in the media: Acting together for greater respect for the rights of journalists and media workers*. [„Анализа – Безбедносната и социо-економската состојба во медиумите: Со заедничко дејствување до поголемо почитување на правата на новинарите и на медиумските работници]. AJM & IUJM. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/2cp4k67c> on December 15, 2025.

⁶¹ Trpevska, S. (2023). *Working Conditions in the Media: Professional Status and Labour Rights of Journalists and Media Workers*. [„Работни услови во медиумскиот сектор: професионален статус и работнички права на новинарите и медиумските работници“]. IUJM & RESIS. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/29suyx3m> on December 15, 2025.

⁶² *ibid.*

⁶³ Nikodinoska, V. & Chausidis, T. (2025). *Poor Media Market, Low Ethical Standards, Need for Effective Legislation*. [„Сиромашен медиумски пазар, ниски етички стандарди, потреба од ефикасно законодавство“]. Macedonian Media Institute, Skopje & “Mediacenter” Foundation, Sarajevo. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3uf6kvdx> on December 15, 2025.

multiple outlets, with 61% of 139 positions in local and regional TV stations being freelance, and only 54 journalists regularly employed across 32 stations in 2023.⁶⁴ Similarly, most of the local journalists we interviewed indicated that they work on a freelance or honorarium basis, whether as correspondents for a national/Skopje-based medium or a local one, leaving them without job security or social protection.

Contracts themselves can include ambiguous clauses, preventing journalists from the right to legally claim payment for their work. As one participant explained:

“Threats of dismissal or other forms of pressure cannot be challenged through a lawyer or a union due to gaps in the law. There have been cases where colleagues left their jobs without receiving their salaries because of these **legal loopholes.**”

These realities underscore the need for amending both the Labour Relations Law and the Media Law to explicitly include journalists and media workers employed under non-standard contracts, as well as those working in online media, as recommended by IUJM.⁶⁵

Salaries for exclusive correspondents are well below average, yet internal policies often prevent journalists from taking on other work. However, low pay, insecure contracts and limited legal protections make relying on a single employer risky. Some local journalists indicated that freelancing also creates space to pursue investigative and, as such, better-funded and large-scale projects that regular employment may restrict. **This turns freelance work into both an opportunity and a response to structural vulnerabilities that shape (local) journalism today.**

Shrinking Teams, Equipment Shortages and Digital Exclusion

Our findings reveal that more often than not local newsrooms are forced to downsize or are unable to recruit new journalists, both due to limited funding and the shrinking pool of people entering the profession, resulting in increasingly small and over-stretched editorial teams. As one local journalist and editor-in-chief explained:

“I barely manage to cover the costs for three people – two employees (myself included) and one freelancer, who unfortunately is the younger journalist we should be supporting in order to keep her in the profession, to help her learn, grow and ensure continuity. But we cannot provide that, and I am very worried. If it wasn’t for some independent projects and project funding, we would have to shut down.”

⁶⁴ Trpevska, S. (2023). *Working Conditions in the Media: Professional Status and Labour Rights of Journalists and Media Workers*. [„Работни услови во медиумскиот сектор: професионален статус и работнички права на новинарите и медиумските работници“]. IUJM & RESIS. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/29suyx3m> on December 15, 2025.

⁶⁵ Atanasova, M. (2022). *Protection and Enforcement of Labor Rights for Journalists and Media Workers – A Comparative Analysis*. [„Заштита и можности за остварување на работничките права на новинарите и медиумските работници – компаративна анализа“]. IUJM & RESIS. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/mtbuaja3> on December 15, 2025.

With journalism becoming a non-lucrative and devalued profession, local media end up with understaffed newsrooms, facing **overwhelming workloads that compromise the quality of their reporting**:

“I often find myself unable to double-check and refine my articles or proofread them... It is completely different when you function as a newsroom with 4-5 people with defined roles, versus when one or two people have to carry all the work just to keep the portal filled with news. As a result, readership drops – there’s no point hiding it. If we had financial resources, we could rebuild the team and work like a real newsroom. But we can only manage that with donor support.”

One recurring issue mentioned by all interviewees was **the lack of adequate equipment**, as most of them use their own cameras and tools to carry out their work. They emphasised the urgent need for increased financial support to cover both operational and personal expenses. Beyond staffing and equipment shortages, local journalists repeatedly emphasised **the lack of access to digital tools, data sources and technical/AI training**, resources that are often taken for granted in larger, donor-supported newsrooms or national media. As one woman journalist explained:

“What I need most is support with technology. I want to be able to search for data properly and do my job as well as I can, but there are so many tools that I simply don’t have access to. I can’t afford paid databases or access to the Central Registry or the Public Revenue Office – that’s something only bigger newsrooms with donors can manage. To obtain basic financial data on a company, I have to pay 400-500 denars. It may not sound like much, but it adds up. I also need to know how to verify information, i.e., how to check whether an image was generated by artificial intelligence, for example. I could easily be misled, and that’s something I need support with.”

In larger newsrooms, these technical tasks are often handled by specialised staff or supported through institutional subscriptions and training. In local media, however, **journalists are expected to manage editorial, technical and verification work alone**, further stretching already limited capacities and increasing the risk of errors, burn-out and professional vulnerability. Moreover, in local TV stations, there have been instances of **unpaid travel costs**, forcing journalists to bear the burden themselves. Many reporters work from home, and field assignments are not always covered by the employer. One correspondent, who is also the co-owner and editor-in-chief of a local media outlet, takes on the role of newspaper distributor herself and delivers papers around town by taxi because the outlet is short-staffed. “It’s often a one (wo)man show”, some of them said with a shrug.

Increasingly, local initiatives that used to foster youth interest in journalism are left without support, as was the case when USAID funding stopped early this year, with the top key areas affected being precisely anti-corruption and media literacy and youth.⁶⁶ This was confirmed by an AJM representative: “These NGO projects encouraged excellent work by enthusiastic media school clubs in the interior, often with as

⁶⁶ Dervishi, J. (2025). “The Impact of the Termination of USAID Financial Support on Macedonian Civil Society: An Analysis of the Consequences of the Withdrawal of USAID Funding” [„Влијанието од прекилот на финансиската поддршката на УСАИД врз македонското граѓанско општество АНАЛИЗА НА ПОСЛЕДИЦИТЕ ОД ПРЕКИНОТ НА ФИНАНСИСКАТА ПОДДРШКА ОД УСАИД“]. МСИС. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3yckvp73> on December 15, 2025.

few as 2 members”. Weak systemic support for youth engagement at the local level thus constrains both young people’s aspirations and the future sustainability of journalism.

The Feminisation of (Local) Journalism and Invisible Gender Barriers

Curiously, the comparison of salary data by gender revealed **no significant pay gap between men and women journalists or media workers**,⁶⁷ suggesting that low pay is a structural issue within the profession rather than a gender-based one. This may also reflect **the growing feminisation of journalism in North Macedonia**, where a profession increasingly dominated by women, who make up 56% of journalists,⁶⁸ continues to be treated as low-status, low-paid labour.

Most of the women journalists from those interviewed were hesitant to openly acknowledge that being a woman makes professional advancement more difficult, perhaps reflecting a perception that overt discrimination no longer exists. Older journalists remember a time 10 or 15 years ago when there were clearer gendered divisions within newsrooms, with women assigned to “soft” beats such as culture, while men covered politics. Today, with more women entering the profession, such rigid hierarchies seem to have diminished at the local level. However, the focus group/workshop discussion with women journalists from the capital revealed that gender divisions remain present at the central level. As one participant explained:

“Topics related to marginalised groups or gender-based violence are treated as ‘**women’s issues**’ because **we are seen as more empathetic**, while men are expected to handle finance, economics or the automotive industry. And when you step into those male-dominated areas, you are told you are not qualified enough to cover them.”

In local media environments, where competition is lower and the journalistic community is smaller, these divisions are less institutionalised. **Rather than reflecting greater gender equality, this often stems from necessity:** limited staff and resources leave little room for specialisation, requiring journalists – regardless of gender – to cover a wide range of topics.

Yet significant **gender disparities persist in decision-making and positions of real power**. While women have recently reached parity on editorial teams, **top leadership roles such as media owners and directors remain overwhelmingly male**.⁶⁹ This reveals a structural imbalance where women dominate the labour force yet remain largely

⁶⁷ Trpevska, S. (2023). *Working Conditions in the Media: Professional Status and Labour Rights of Journalists and Media Workers*. [„Работни услови во медиумскиот сектор: професионален статус и работнички права на новинарите и медиумските работници“]. IUJM & RESIS. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/29suyx3m> on December 15, 2025.

⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁶⁹ АААVMS. (2025). *Structure of employees in the audio and audiovisual media industry in 2024* [„Структура на вработените во аудио и аудиовизуелната медиумска индустрија во 2024 година“]. Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/yfr7f998> on December 15, 2025.

excluded from centres of influence and authority, with little to no power to shape editorial agendas, strategic decisions and the overall direction of the media sector.

Within a deeply rooted culture of sexism and discrimination, women’s labour rights remain further on the margin. In a recent analysis focusing exclusively on the labour rights of women in media, the interviewed women journalists shared experiences of being often treated dismissively and **facing chauvinistic comments and attitudes** – both in the newsrooms and in their professional interactions outside.⁷⁰ One of our interviewees phrased this succinctly:

“If you are bold as a woman, you are immediately labelled with derogatory terms. **Women are scrutinised** for their behaviour and the way they present themselves in public far more than men.”

Age and gender-based discrimination also affects young women journalists. One participant described being repeatedly denied interviews or having to make multiple attempts before being granted access, often requiring intervention from her senior editor. She attributes this to her being a young journalist, noting that people frequently ask, “And who are you again? Who’s your editor?” As the only young journalist in her city, she frequently experiences condescending behaviour from both colleagues and audiences. This shows how youth-related hierarchies intersect with gender to undermine professional credibility early in a journalist’s career.

So despite formal equality in pay or representation on editorial teams, women in media continue to navigate gendered and age-related pressures that constrain their professional autonomy and reinforce structural inequalities within the sector. The qualitative analysis on women journalists’ labour rights warned against **the persistence of discriminatory hiring and employment practices linked to motherhood**. Nearly 28% of the 54 women journalists interviewed said they had been asked inappropriate or personal questions, such as whether they have or intend to have children. Some reported that their contracts were not renewed once they became pregnant, and complained about short maternity leave, inflexible working hours and the lack of remote work options for mothers of young children.⁷¹

In a time when high-office politicians urge the nation to have more children,⁷² **motherhood continues to be penalised across the labour market,⁷³ and newsrooms are not an exception.** As one Skopje-based woman journalist recounted: “Once you become a mother, you become half a person in the newsroom. By telling you that now that you’re with a child you have more important work to do, they [male colleagues] think it’s positive discrimination”. Again, while these discriminatory practices appear most prominently in larger, centralised newsrooms in Skopje, they seem far less visible in local media outlets, where chronic understaffing and lack of journalists shape hiring

⁷⁰ Ozimec, K. (2024). *Labour Rights and Safety of Women in Media*. [„Работничките права и безбедноста на жените во медиумите“]. IUJM. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/mr8rmmxx> on December 15, 2025.

⁷¹ *ibid.*

⁷² AAAMS. (2025). *Structure of employees in the audio and audiovisual media industry in 2024* [„Структура на вработените во аудио и аудиовизуелната медиумска индустрија во 2024 година“]. Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services.

⁷³ Traminovski, B. (2025). “Call for ‘large families’ – a realistic solution or nationalist propaganda: ‘We need a broader social consensus for demographic policies’” [„Повик за ‘многудетни семејства’ реално решение или националистичка пропаганда: ‘Потребен е широк општествен консензус за демографските политики’“]. [online] Lokalno MK. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/4kbkrj2x> on December 15, 2025.

dynamics differently. In our interviews with local journalists, no participant identified motherhood-related discrimination as a current issue, largely because many local outlets struggle simply to attract and retain any staff at all.

Media Freedom and Safety of Local Journalists

The ability of the media to effectively counter corruption largely relies on the level of media freedom. Media freedom means (1) having few government-imposed restrictions on media work; (2) being free from any form of external control, whether governmental or otherwise; and (3) operating in an environment that enables a wide range of ideas and viewpoints to be shared with the public.⁷⁴ Understanding media freedom in North Macedonia, especially on a local level, requires looking beyond newsroom dynamics and examining how political power, economic dependency, regulatory gaps and institutional weaknesses collectively determine the conditions under which journalists operate. It is within this wider landscape that questions of independence, transparency, public trust and the safety of (local) journalists become central.

Recent assessments by RSF and the European Commission show that, despite a formally open environment for press freedom, media independence in North Macedonia remains structurally fragile. **RSF's 2025 ranking places the country 42nd out of 180**, reflecting a slight decline from ranking 36th the previous year, yet highlights persistent vulnerabilities: disinformation, low professional standards, politically influenced narratives and a growing erosion of public trust. While journalists do not operate in an overtly hostile environment, independent outlets continue to **face political pressure, intimidation, economic dependence and hostility from government officials**. At the same time, institutional transparency remains weak, and critical reporting is often met with coordinated political attacks.⁷⁵

The **European Commission's 2025 Country Report** echoes these concerns. It underscores that media legislation is still not fully aligned with EU standards, particularly with the European Media Freedom Act (EMFA). **Transparency of media ownership, independence of regulatory bodies and rules governing state advertising continue to fall short of EU requirements**. The Commission also draws attention to enduring threats to journalistic safety, such as **physical attacks, online harassment, SLAPP lawsuits and targeted pressure** against investigative reporters, especially women, who disproportionately experience digital violence. Despite limited progress, the report stresses that institutions must respond more effectively to such cases to strengthen media freedom and public confidence.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Weaver, D. H. (1977). "The Press and Government Restriction: A Cross-National Study over Time", *International Communication Gazette*, 23(3): 15270.

⁷⁵ Reporters Without Borders: North Macedonia. <https://rsf.org/en/country/north-macedonia>.

⁷⁶ European Commission. (2025). *North Macedonia 2025 Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/benear9t> on December 15, 2025.

Distribution of Power and (Lack of) Transparency and Independence

It is important to note that media freedom in North Macedonia has somewhat improved from the overt hostility journalists faced before and during the period of heightened state capture between 2011 and 2016 when RSF ranked the country in the one hundreds.⁷⁷ For example, in the EU Country Reports of 2013 and 2014, there were concerns about government advertising spending directed only towards pro-government media and OSCE/ODIHR media monitoring showed that the majority of monitored media, including the public broadcaster, were biased in favour of the ruling party.^{78 79} Overall, during this period, the media landscape was marked by systemic state capture: heavy political control that translated into everyday editorial interference, clientelist networks between government and media owners, aggressive state advertising used as reward and punishment and widespread intimidation, as reported by experts⁸⁰ and remembered by senior journalists. One recalled leaving a national medium because her reports and her sources' statements were routinely altered without her knowledge. These dynamics were also widely documented when international monitoring bodies⁸¹ repeatedly identified political control over media ownership, advertising and editorial independence as systemic risks to democratic governance. For example, in 2017 RSF documented repeated physical attacks on reporters, including assaults by security forces and pro-government supporters, as part of the overall deteriorating and dangerous press environment.⁸² One of the clearest indicators of pressure on the media has been the dramatic rise, and subsequent fluctuation, in defamation lawsuits against journalists, as documented by the Association of Journalists of Macedonia (AJM).⁸³ In 2012 alone, following the decriminalisation of defamation, approximately 330 civil lawsuits were filed against journalists and media outlets.⁸⁴ By 2017, this number had dropped to 39 cases, declining further to 33 in 2020, and 20 cases in 2021, before rising again to 54 cases in 2022 and subsequently falling to just 15 cases in 2024. The overall downward trend is largely attributed to amendments to the Law on Civil Liability for Insult and Defamation, which came into force in 2024 and introduced lower compensation thresholds and additional safeguards for journalistic work. However, despite the reduction in the total number of defamation cases, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) have increasingly been used in

⁷⁷ Trpevska, S. & Micevski, I. (2021). "Media Sector Hotspots in North Macedonia: Decisive Reforms Long Overdue", in Esch, V. & Palm, V. (eds.). *Media Freedom in the Western Balkans*. Aspen Institute: Germany. pp.29-35. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/2bt744ms> on December 15, 2025.

⁷⁸ European Commission. (2014). *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2014 Progress Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3kzmtapm> on December 18, 2025.

⁷⁹ European Commission. (2013). *The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia 2013 Progress Report*. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3jkv4ftd> on December 18, 2025.

⁸⁰ Trpevska, S. & Micevski, I. (2021). "Media Sector Hotspots in North Macedonia: Decisive Reforms Long Overdue", in Esch, V. & Palm, V. (eds.). *Media Freedom in the Western Balkans*. Aspen Institute: Germany. Pp.29-35. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/2bt744ms> on December 15, 2025.

⁸¹ RSF World Press Freedom Index (2011–2017), European Commission Country Reports (2014–2016), OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Reports covering the mentioned period.

⁸² RSF (2017). "Journalists repeatedly attacked in Macedonian political crisis". [online] Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/4und5zvs> on December 15, 2025.

⁸³ See in Spirovski, M. & Todorovska-Kostovska, V. (2023). *North Macedonia: Indicators for the Degree of Media Freedom and Journalists' Safety 2022*. AJM: Skopje. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3farhzw> and Spirovski, M. & Todorovska-Kostovska V. (2025). *North Macedonia: Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and the Journalist Safety Index 2024* [„Северна Македонија: Индикатори за степенот на слободата на медиумите и Индекс на безбедноста на новинарите 2024“]. AJM: Skopje. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/dshpvtuu>.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

recent years as a tool to intimidate and silence journalists reporting on issues of public interest.

Senior journalists remember this as a time when “the whole system was working against the media” and are very clear that the climate has shifted and “they are no longer under the system’s boot”, as claimed by a female editor-in-chief from a major national medium:

“I must say that **in the past 6-7 years, the climate has changed drastically, and the pressure has decreased.** It’s one thing when an individual who feels affected tries to influence the media so that their story looks different or it doesn’t get published, and another thing when the whole system is working against you, literally **placing you under its boot.** In the past few years **media have begun to regain their place and role in society;** not all judges and prosecutors are against them, and the government is not at war with them. So we are on some kind of path forward, even though the situation is far from excellent.”

While **the last couple of years have brought measurable improvements,** especially in reducing systemic state pressure, the structural fragility of the media sector means that **freedoms gained can quickly erode** especially in times of (global and national) political shifts. Last year brought a change of government from a center-left to a center-right party, a turn of events that, together with ongoing debates over EU integration, relations with neighbouring states and shifting party dynamics, contributed to a climate of heightened political tension. These frictions inevitably spilt over into the media sphere, where accusations of political interference, selective reporting and renewed pressure on editorial lines became increasingly common.⁸⁵

At the same time, the domestic economy struggled under the combined effects of global inflation, high energy prices and declining market stability. Media outlets were among the sectors hit hardest: shrinking advertising markets, the migration of marketing budgets to digital platforms and the rising cost of operations left many newsrooms facing severe financial precarity. Budgets for investigative reporting were reduced, journalists’ socioeconomic conditions worsened and many outlets became even more dependent on external funding to survive. **This economic fragility created fertile ground for political and corporate influence, putting editorial autonomy under additional strain.**⁸⁶

While these shifts have already begun to reshape the national media climate, the effects are particularly acute in local newsrooms, where the balance of power is far more fragile. Interviews reveal **that changes in political leadership are often reflected almost immediately in changes in editorial policy** – sometimes without explanation and often through subtle forms of internal restriction. One local woman journalist described how, after the recent change of government, serious investigations no longer “pass,” as **editors demand more affirmative or non-critical stories or limit the visibility of sensitive topics by keeping them off social media:**

⁸⁵ Spirovski, M. & Todorovska-Kostovska V. (2025). North Macedonia: Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and the Journalist Safety Index 2024 [„Северна Македонија: Индикатори за степенот на слободата на медиумите и Индекс на безбедноста на новинарите 2024“]. AJM: Skopje. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/dshpptuu> on December 15, 2025.

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

“They decide whether a particular topic won’t air, or it will only air in the news, but not on Facebook or Instagram, or any social media where we know the news is actually read. Honestly, until about a year ago everything was easily approved and we had no problems... I have been working in this media outlet for more than seven years. **Neither me nor my colleagues are used to working this way.**”

Interviewees consistently reported that “sugarcoating” issues at the local level has increasingly become the norm. As one journalist explained, when problems arise, reporting often shifts toward minimising their implications and emphasising institutional “proactiveness,” with narratives such as “they are working on it” or “it has been taken care of.”

Another journalist noted that although local reporters are formally expected to remain close to citizens and scrutinise political failures, these expectations have narrowed in practice. Reflecting on recent changes, she observed that “it’s no longer as it was before; we didn’t have these restrictions,” adding that the current atmosphere “reminds [them] of the period when Gruevski was in power - they are holding back, **they are afraid of something.**” Interviews also highlighted that this sense of constraint is particularly acute in small, local media markets, where journalists often depend heavily on personal networks and reputation for continued employment, heightening the risks associated with critical reporting.

One of the clearest examples of how these political and economic pressures have materialised is found in the regulation of public advertising. With **the 2024 repeal of Article 102**, which previously restricted state institutions, public enterprises, municipalities and other public bodies from financing private media, the system has again become vulnerable to opaque spending practices and political leverage. While proponents defended the amendment as a necessary financial lifeline for struggling media, journalists’ associations and media experts warned that, without a clear, transparent procedure for allocating public funds, the change poses a **serious threat to media objectivity.**⁸⁷

The structural gaps in the regulatory environment have been particularly visible on the local level. With no unified procedure on how municipalities should implement campaigns of public interest, **campaigns can be easily turned into drivers for political influence**, as recent reports have warned. Since the repeal, few municipalities have published detailed information on the contracts signed, the funds spent or the effects of the campaigns carried out, which reduces the possibility for public oversight.⁸⁸

Additionally, the lack of transparency has long enabled the proliferation of (local) online outlets – whose ownership is rarely known or disclosed – created shortly before elections, established primarily to access public campaign funding.⁸⁹ In response to long-standing concerns, amendments to the media law adopted in March 2024 aim to address some of these structural issues by introducing a **voluntary online media registry**. Only those portals that decide to register with AAVMS will be eligible to

⁸⁷ *ibid.*

⁸⁸ Janev A. & Jovanovska M. (2025). *Analysis: Transparency of Local Governance Units for Spending Public Resources in Media*. [„Транспарентноста на единиците на локалната самоуправа за трошењето јавни средства во медиумите (анализа)“]. AJM: Skopje. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/69vame3p> on December 15, 2025.

⁸⁹ Rizaov, G., Richliev Z. & Epis, S. (2025). *Shadow Report on Media Freedom in North Macedonia*. Metamorphosis Foundation & Osservatorio Balcani Caucaso Transeuropa. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/5akyjzwt> on December 15, 2025.

receive public funding and will be required to meet basic transparency obligations regarding editorial structure, financing and ownership. Yet, as noted by the AAVMS representative we consulted, there is still no effective mechanism to monitor whether online portals comply with balanced reporting requirements.

Moreover, the implementation of the online registry had some serious blind spots when it comes to local media. Initial requirements that online outlets employ a minimum of three journalists to register as media were later reduced to two following pressure from local media, many of which operate with minimal staff and limited resources. This oversight captures how **regulatory efforts, when designed without sensitivity to local contexts, risk placing additional strain on already precarious local newsrooms rather than protecting them.**

This climate of media and state dependency, as research goes to show, blurs the boundaries between politics and media, allowing political parties to channel state funds into campaign-friendly outlets, reinforcing patterns of clientelism, corruption and undue influence over independent journalism.⁹⁰ An independent monitoring of 30 online news portals during the 2024 parliamentary elections showed that the randomly selected outlets sharply intensified their coverage of party activities, with those publishing the largest volume of election-related reports displaying **clear bias** in favour of specific candidates.⁹¹

These dynamics are not new. In the past, state advertising was widely regarded as one of the most powerful tools for controlling the media, which is what makes the re-emergence of practices that had once deeply compromised media freedom troublesome for experts and associations of journalists alike.⁹² Instead of serving as independent check-points, the media risk becoming echo chambers for political and economic elites. When such financial and political dependencies become embedded in the media system, they also shape the environment in which journalists operate.⁹³

Reporting on corruption or organised crime can trigger **reprisals and pressures**, a dynamic especially acute in smaller, local-level outlets. Unlike well-resourced media based in Skopje, local media typically operate with far fewer financial, human and technical resources, making them far more reliant on state advertising or subsidies, with powerful actors like government bodies or private business sponsors then having a stake in how they are portrayed. This creates an environment where **critical reporting carries immediate economic consequences**. One woman journalist and editor-in-chief of a local media put it bluntly:

“We are forced, for the sake of the media’s economic survival, **to report affirmatively** and, as much as I don’t want to admit, to act **as an extended arm of the local government**. A big part of our print run is bought by institutions

⁹⁰ Malki, S. C. (2017). “Corruption and media concentration: A panel data analysis” (MPRA Paper No. 81073). Munich Personal RePEc Archive. Retrieved from: <https://mpra.ub.uni-muenchen.de/81073> on December 15, 2025.

⁹¹ Djigal, S., Bejkova B. & Georgievski, D. (2024). *Monitoring of Online News Portals Coverage of 2024 Parliamentary Elections North Macedonia*. Foundation for Internet and Society “Metamorphosis”. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/yc3f54dy> on December 15, 2025.

⁹² Tuneva, M. (2023). *Between Challenges and Solutions: A Guide to Media Integrity in North Macedonia*. AJM & UNDP. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/2s5vybzf> on December 15, 2025.

⁹³ BIRN. (n.a.). “Financial Dependency: Clientelism as modus operandi”. Media Ownership Monitor North Macedonia 2023. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/55wzxmjt> on December 15, 2025.

or companies connected to someone. No one wants to be an annual subscriber and then read that they are being criticised. From the start, **we are pushed towards praise**; everything else gets swept under the rug. The economic element creates a huge self-censorship.”

Thus, economic dependence pushes local media outlets into becoming “lapdogs” instead of “watchdogs”, unable to provide objective coverage. Interviewees linked this dynamic to habits of **self-censorship**, or as one of them explained:

“I have yearly contracts with three public enterprises: waterworks, utilities and road maintenance. The sums are tiny. But those **ads become a brake**: the moment I publish something about trash, dirt, anything people want to see pointed out and criticised, [the enterprises] call me and say, ‘Why are you criticising us? We’re doing our best.’”

One reporter explained that her role “naturally” extends into marketing, too: she must regularly solicit advertisements from businesses, though not from local ones, as her critical reporting has offended nearly all of them (“I have written against every single business in town”). Instead, she is told to seek out large national companies. Unfortunately, hers is not an isolated case, as most of our interviewees shared her concerns.

Disinformation, PR “Media” Content and the Local Media Vacuum

The financial precarity and reliance on (political) advertising, combined with the fear of being silenced if you criticise those who pay you, have given rise to troubling distortions in local media ecosystems.

First, the vacuum created by weakened professional outlets has opened space for **individuals with little to no journalistic training and often with close ties to centres of power to capture the advertising market and present themselves as media**. Interviewees pointed to cases where some public officials open online portals and attract the bulk of local advertising because of their institutional proximity. One woman journalist described a particularly striking example of a police officer from a prominent city in North Macedonia who runs a portal by himself and receives most local ads simply because businesses and institutions see him as the “safer” choice to coalition with. Such practices not only divert scarce resources away from real journalism but also blur the boundaries between public authority, private profit and political influence, further **eroding public trust**.

Second, the economic fragility of local newsrooms has fuelled what many interviewees called “**Facebook journalism**”, i.e., a shift away from investigative work toward **reposting press releases, livestreaming political events and amplifying PR content**. Instead of asking questions, journalists are expected to “follow” local officials going about their daily job, documenting every step for social media visibility. As one interviewee put it:

“This is quite new. In the past, during press releases, we would confront politicians with our own questions. Now it’s all a ridiculous PR show – the politicians speak, and **so-called journalists** just hold the microphone and plat form their speech.”

A parallel trend further blurs the boundaries of trustworthy information: **the rise of (local) influencers who increasingly function as unofficial news sources**. Interviewees noted that these figures – often without any journalistic training, ethical obligations or editorial oversight – nevertheless attract large audiences and receive paid promotions from political actors or local businesses. Their content, framed as community updates or “insider information,” is in fact shaped by opaque interests and personal loyalties. This dynamic not only sidelines professional journalists but also confuses audiences, who struggle to distinguish between independent reporting, sponsored content and outright propaganda.

While disinformation and anti-EU or anti-Western narratives are often analysed at the national level, their effects are deeply felt, and strategically exploited, at the local level.⁹⁴ The erosion of local journalism creates an **information vacuum in which disinformation circulates with little resistance**, particularly in communities with limited access to independent, trusted news sources. In such contexts, politically aligned portals, influencers and opaque online outlets are able to frame corruption and public interest through polarising narratives that undermine trust in democratic institutions and independent media alike. As a result, disinformation does not operate as a parallel threat to media freedom, but as an integral part of the same ecosystem that weakens editorial independence and distorts public debate. This increases the risks faced by journalists who challenge dominant power structures, particularly at the local level.

Beyond these shifts in practice, interviewees repeatedly pointed to the absence of structural safeguards that would protect editorial independence. **North Macedonia still lacks a Fund for Media Pluralism** – an independent mechanism designed to support content of public interest and reduce local outlets’ reliance on political or clientelist advertising. While grant support can provide crucial resources for local journalism, such funding is often unstable and insufficient. Recent cuts, such as the termination of USAID support, highlight the precariousness of this model. Journalists complained in the interviews that competition for limited resources tends to favour well-established, capital-based media, while local media lack the time and capacity to prepare extensive grant applications.

Instead, they expressed strong support for creating an autonomous fund that would provide transparent, merit-based financing insulated from local political influence. The idea has been circulating for years,⁹⁵ but no such fund has been established yet, leaving local media exposed to the same pressures that once enabled widespread state capture. Thus, the growing worry among the local journalists we interviewed was that **truly independent local journalism is increasingly at risk of disappearing altogether**. One woman editor-in-chief warned that:

⁹⁴ Institute for Strategic Dialogue (2024). “Monitoring Influence & Disinformation Campaigns in the Western Balkans (MED-IWEB)”, ISD. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/mtduv95s> on December 18, 2025.

⁹⁵ Spirovski, M. & Todorovska-Kostovska V. (2025). *North Macedonia: Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and the Journalist Safety Index 2024* [„Северна Македонија: Индикатори за степенот на слободата на медиумите и Индекс на безбедноста на новинарите 2024“]. AJM: Skopje. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/dshpptuu> on December 15, 2025.

“Without systemic change, everything independent, or showing signs of independence, will slowly fade out. Very soon we may find the interior of the country empty, with everything concentrated in the national media”

What is at stake is not only the survival of local outlets, but the public’s right to reliable, independent information about the places where they live.

Structural Barriers, Intimidation Tactics and (Gender Based) Violence

Despite the harsh reality of pushing through limited resources, political pressure and shrinking access to information, many local journalists continue to persevere in their critical reporting, i.e., to monitor and report on the behaviour of public officials, on government performance and particular transgressions, in an effort to make citizens aware and urge decisions-makers to take action – yet their work often comes at a personal cost. Those who dare to report critically face a combination of structural obstacles, institutional opacity, direct intimidation and gender barriers. Their testimonies reveal a media environment marked by ongoing resistance to fear, combined with caution and a gradual shift towards self-censorship.

Restricted Access to Information

Interviewees repeatedly emphasised that **access to information fluctuates depending on the political moment**. Several described a pattern: during transitions of power, institutions appear more willing to speak – newly appointed officials are eager to expose the shortcomings of their predecessors. But the longer an administration stays in power, the more closed and distrustful institutions become. One journalist noted that with the adoption of a new government, “everything slows down”: restrictions tighten, civil servants become fearful and communication channels shrink.

Although **the Law on Free Access to Public Information** was recently amended to formally guarantee a 20-day deadline for institutions to respond, instead of the previous 30-day period, journalists described a very different reality.⁹⁶ **Requests are routinely dismissed** with formulaic answers such as “we are working on your case”, repeated indefinitely. One interviewee summarised the problem starkly:

“For many officials, the law simply doesn’t exist. There is only one rule – this information will be given, or it will not be given. If they decide to give it, you’ll get it in one day. If not, you will never get it. They will send you from institution to institution until you give up.”

⁹⁶ Petrussevska, D. (2024) “Numerous obstacles and stumbling blocks on the path to free access to information” [„Бројни препреки и сопки на патот кон слободен пристап до информации“]. [online] PINA. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3yr3kdn6> on December 15, 2025.

Courts are described as the most opaque, with local branches of ministries frequently waiting for approval from central authorities before releasing any information. Despite legislative improvements, access remains slow, inconsistent and dependent on political discretion.

For women journalists, **access is additionally shaped by informal**, gendered networks. Several of them noted that crucial information is exchanged in male-dominated social spaces, such as local cafés, late-night gatherings in bars or ‘kafanas’ or semi-private circles from which women are often excluded. As one woman journalist explained it plainly:

“In this country, things get solved in ‘kafana’. Men journalists have wider access to these circles. As a woman, I can’t just go and sit with them. They’ll look at me side ways. But that’s where friendships form, where information flows.”

Editors also acknowledged that certain high-risk stories are often given to male reporters, not out of doubt in women’s competence but out of concern for their safety. Yet this **“protective” logic**, even when well-intentioned, carries the risk of reinforcing unequal access to opportunities and **subtly masks discrimination as cautionary care**.

At the same time, many participants stressed that women journalists tend to be more persistent, patient and committed to investigative work. Strikingly, every interviewee – men and women alike – described women journalists as “braver” than their male colleagues. Although none elaborated further on what this bravery entails, their reflections suggest a form of **resilience shaped by both gendered expectations and the realities of reporting in small, closely knit communities**.

One journalist noted that this perseverance also translates into a different kind of professional respect on the ground. Working alone, carrying equipment by herself, and insisting on being present in spaces where women are not always expected, she described earning what she called a mix of respect and fear:

“As a woman journalist, when they see me working alone – setting up the camera myself, going out on the field – they respect me more. It’s a kind of **respect born out of intimidation**.”

Threats and Orchestrated Harassment

Beyond institutional barriers, journalists described a pattern of **orchestrated attacks, both online and offline**, designed to intimidate and silence critical reporting. Some outlets have experienced coordinated **digital assaults**, unexpected visits to **newsrooms and anonymous phone calls**. Such incidents often lead to self-censorship: journalists abandon stories they fear could escalate into personal retaliation.

For instance, one local newsroom received a threatening message from a local authority saying: “You already have two yellow cards; be careful not to get a red one”. Individual journalists were labelled “bloodsuckers,” accused of political bias by local party representatives or targeted through smear campaigns. One woman journalist described a man showing up at her doorstep, while others spoke of acquaintances

questioning their spouses or family members about their work.

In smaller towns, social proximity intensifies pressure. Journalists emphasised that everyone is connected to political or institutional actors through friends or relatives, making neutrality risky and isolation common. As one woman journalist opened up by saying:

“This is a small place, and you can’t afford to think in terms of friends. With five people you meet socially, one is a director, another one works in a ministry. You get blocked from all sides, so I try to keep my distance. All my close friends are from the capital.”

Friendships with police officers or officials often come with implicit expectations of favours in return. Some journalists reported pressure from acquaintances urging them to “leave certain topics alone”, while others face subtle extortion, such as offers of advertising, local connections or political protection in exchange for favourable reporting. Similarly, a woman journalist was offered money after “they” [supposedly people working for the local government] found out that her mother was sick.

Across the interviews, local mayors often emerge as key sources of pressure on journalists, as the following case demonstrates:

“We had a problem with the previous mayor. Once, the newspaper published his report on the use of public funds, and then we read a post by an employee from the local government’s finance and budget department, which presented a very different account of where the money actually went. We decided to publish the mayor’s statement on one page and the employee’s on another. After that, all our subscriptions were cancelled, we were hit with a flood of hostile comments, and the employee faced criminal charges for abuse of position and leaking public secrets.”

In another town, a former mayor used to keep a “dossier” on every journalist who “wronged” him, i.e., who wrote something he did not like or agree with. Consequently, these intimidation tactics have resulted in involuntary silencing. As one journalist said in resignation:

“Colleagues from other towns in the interior share that there is a lot of pressure in local communities, and I think we are slowly moving away from topics that concern local powerholders. Looking at the state of the country, and considering everything you could get hit with, like a SLAPP lawsuit, we are all put in a position where we have to measure everything three times before deciding. I haven’t self-censored my writing yet, but I think that at some point I will have to. This isn’t a time for proving oneself; this is a time for survival.”

Hence, even skilled and committed journalists are forced to navigate a landscape where caution often overrides editorial independence, and survival becomes a primary concern. This comes as no surprise, judging by how violence sometimes escalates beyond threats. In one town, the car of a media owner was set on fire after they published an investigative story on predatory lending practices. Yet even in the face of such targeted attacks, journalists often normalise these dangers, **treating threats, harassment and violence as an unfortunate but almost inevitable aspect of their profession.**

Digital (Gender-Based) Violence and Institutional Failure

Similar to in-person or indirect offline intimidation, online harassment of journalists remains pervasive and largely normalised within the profession. Across interviews conducted for this study, journalists consistently described receiving daily negative comments under their articles or through direct messages. These attacks are often ignored as reporting them would require doing so on a nearly daily basis. As a result, threats of lawsuits, job-related retaliation and online abuse are widely perceived as an unavoidable part of the journalistic work.

Survey data corroborate these experiences. According to a 2022 survey conducted by the Independent Union of Journalists and Media Workers (IUJM), 37.3% of journalists—both women and men—reported having experienced threats, predominantly on social media platforms. Despite this prevalence, reporting rates remain strikingly low: only 17.7% of affected journalists contacted journalists’ associations, while just 15.9% reported incidents to the police, reflecting persistent mistrust in institutional protection mechanisms.

Survey data support these experiences. According to a 2022 survey conducted by IUJM, **37.3% of journalists (both men and women) reported having experienced threats, predominantly on social media platforms.** Despite this prevalence, reporting rates remain strikingly low: only 17.7% of affected journalists notified journalists’ associations, while just 15.9% reported incidents to the police, reflecting persistent mistrust in institutional protection mechanisms – especially the judiciary, police and public prosecution.⁹⁷ In one case shared in the interviews, a newsroom received life-threatening calls, yet the police told them they would need to wait up to 14 days for a resolution, leaving journalists exposed and unprotected.

Yet, as one local journalist explained, while minor or “benign” attacks are frequently ignored, more serious forms of institutional intimidation require a different approach. He emphasised the importance of direct, written communication and **leaving a documented trace when attacks come from public institutions**, noting that “if a public institution discredits you, it is important to have written proof that something occurred.”

Despite the existence of laws intended to protect journalists, their effectiveness remains limited. Investigations into threats and attacks are often slow, incomplete or unsuccessful, creating a culture of impunity that enables further violence. Even when sanctions are imposed, they tend to be mild and disproportionate to the severity of the offences. Although the government has introduced measures such as specialised police units and designated prosecutors for cases involving media workers, these efforts are hindered by insufficient resources, lack of training, slow procedures and poor institutional coordination.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Bejkova, B. & Dzigal, S. (2022). Analysis – Safety and the socio-economic situation in the media: Acting together for greater respect for the rights of journalists and media workers. [„Анализа – Безбедносната и социо-економската состојба во медиумите: Со заедничко дејствување до поголемо почитување на правата на новинарите и на медиумските работници]. AJM & IUJM. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/5n8jdtxu> on December 15, 2025.

⁹⁸ Spirovski, M. & Todorovska-Kostovska V. (2025). North Macedonia: Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and the Journalist Safety Index 2024 [„Северна Македонија: Индикатори за степенот на слободата на медиумите и Индекс на безбедноста на новинарите 2024“]. AJM: Skopje. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/dshpvtuu> on December 15, 2025.

While harassment, threats and digital violence affect journalists broadly, women face a distinct and intensifying layer of risk. Globally, it is well-documented **that women in journalism encounter disproportionately higher levels of professional and personal harassment**, often as a strategy of **silencing and exclusion**.⁹⁹⁻¹⁰⁰⁻¹⁰¹ This has also been recognised locally, with the AJM publishing their latest edition of the Safety Index with a special issue on the specific safety challenges faced by women journalists.¹⁰²

In addition to the pressures of reporting on corruption, power structures and sensitive issues, **women journalists are often targeted explicitly for their gender**. This pattern is mirrored locally, where gendered attacks frequently focus less on professional conduct than on personal characteristics. **Insults, intimidation and online attacks weaponise their appearance, morality or private life rather than professional performance**. As one local woman journalist explained:

“Women journalists on Facebook were singled out for dressing **“inappropriately” or having an “immoral” life...** In contrast, male journalists are often framed as corrupt, extorted or “blackmailed” or insulted as stupid and incompetent – their credibility is undermined differently.”

The psychological impact of such harassment is significant, as reflected in the interviews, as well. One journalist described receiving hostile comments and replying in the heat of the moment, regretting her reactions afterwards, but not deleting the posts. She recalled crying in despair to see **her work devalued in such a dehumanising way**, and reflected on the ensuing cautiousness: “If they comment like that, you feel bad, and the next time you start a story, you may be more cautious. It’s not that it doesn’t affect you.”

Worth considering is that many women journalists **report being more affected by indecent online comments than by direct threats from powerful figures**, reflecting the pervasive weight of public scrutiny. Quantitative data underscores the prevalence of online harassment. A national survey found that **81.6% of the women journalists had experienced online harassment because of their work**, again, mostly on social media such as Facebook. Harassment was most often linked to publishing content critical of powerful institutions or individuals (56.6%), covering traditionally “male” topics such as sports or simply being women in the public eye. Attacks frequently included violent and sexist comments, posts using their names and direct messages, with 39% of women self-censoring as a result. What is even more alarming is that **in 16% of cases, harassment shifted from online to offline**, illustrating a clear online-offline trajectory.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Posetti, J. et al. (2022). The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists. International Center for Journalists. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/47vbytma> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁰⁰ Ferrier, M. (2018). “Attacks and Harassment - The Impact on Female Journalists and Their Reporting”. IWJMF, Troll Busters. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/mw654aef> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁰¹ York, N., Posetti, J., et al. (2025). Tipping Point: The Chilling Escalation of Online Violence Against Women in the Public Sphere. UN Women. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3h4hpp7b> on December 15, 2025. The latest report, however, includes not only journalists and media workers but also women human rights defenders and activists, i.e., women in the public sphere, revealing that 70% of the 640 women-identifying survey participants from 119 countries have experienced online violence in the course of their work.

¹⁰² Spirovski, M & Todorovska-Kostovska, V. (2025). Challenges and Developments: Women Journalists’ Safety in North Macedonia 2024. [„Предизвици и напредок: Безбедноста на новинарките во Северна Македонија 2024]. Safejournalists.net. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/39r4avcs> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁰³ Jovanovska, B. (2022). From Normalization to Self-Censorship: Analysis of Online Harassment of Women Journalists in North Macedonia. OSCE & PINA. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/ynkmzflma> on December 15, 2025.

Threats involving sexual violence are a particularly alarming form of harassment targeting women journalists, especially those reporting on sensitive topics, such as corruption, or those with visible public positions on certain social issues. In February 2025, a notable case occurred when Dragan Pavlović Latas, manager of the portal *Večerni*, posted a series of social-media statuses targeting two women journalists (one of them the editor-in-chief) of the Investigative Reporting Lab (IRL).¹⁰⁴ Within hours, these posts triggered a wave of hate speech and calls for violence (rape threats). These threats are commonly used to intimidate women journalists, silence their reporting and undermine their credibility. As a result, the two women hired private security for a month to ensure their own safety – a crucial level of protection that most local or freelance women journalists, especially those outside Skopje, would not be able to afford.

International context confirms patterns of gender-based online harassment and its physical manifestations. UNESCO and the International Centre for Journalists (ICFJ) global survey (2020) found that **73% of women journalists had experienced online violence**,¹⁰⁵ and **20% had been attacked offline in connection with their online experiences**. These findings highlight how misogyny is weaponised in public discourse, particularly in populist and far-right contexts, and underscores the vulnerability of women journalists to coordinated campaigns of harassment aimed at silencing critical reporting.

Despite the frequency of these attacks, underreporting is common: **43.7% of women journalists did not report incidents**. Even more striking, with the exception of six women journalists, **none of the remaining 95.1% requested any psychological support or assistance**.¹⁰⁶ This is quite alarming if we consider that when surveyed about their main job-related concerns, **nearly half of women (42.8%) reported anxiety over their mental and emotional health**, compared to only a quarter of men (25.8%), while 35.5% of women expressed concern for their physical health, as opposed to only 17.3% of men.¹⁰⁷

In 2023, AJM worked with the Ministry of Interior to develop the *Safety Protocol for Journalists Online*, which explicitly recognises that women journalists experience disproportionately higher levels of online harassment.^{108 109} Following the adoption of the protocol, the Ministry appointed a designated contact person responsible for receiving and handling online threats directed at journalists and other media workers, marking an important institutional step toward improving their safety.

¹⁰⁴ Investigative Reporting Lab (2025). “What is Latas afraid of when he encourages you to rape and lynch us?” [„Од што се плаши Латас кога ве поттикнува да нè силувате и линчувате?“]. [online] IRL. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/4djf557> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁰⁵ Posetti, J. et al. (2022). *The Chilling: A Global Study of Online Violence Against Women Journalists*. International Center for Journalists. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/47vbtma> on December 15, 2025. York, N., Posetti, J., et al. (2025).

¹⁰⁶ Jovanovska, B. (2022). *From Normalization to Self-Censorship: Analysis of Online Harassment of Women Journalists in North Macedonia*. OSCE & PINA. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/ynkmzfma> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁰⁷ Trpevska, S (2024). *Labour Conditions in the Media Sector: Professional Status and Labour Rights of Journalists and Media Workers* [„Работните услови во медиумскиот сектор: професионален статус и работнички права на новинарите и медиумските работници“]. IUJM & RESIS. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/29suyx3m> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁰⁸ Association of Journalists of North Macedonia (2023). “AJM and the Ministry of the Interior with a protocol for the safety of journalists on the Internet”, AJM. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/mhpsjebx> on December 15, 2025.

¹⁰⁹ Breskovski, I. & Angelovski, T. & Arsovska, B. (2024). *Journalist Safety Manual* [„Прирачник за безбедност на новинари“]. AJM. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/37tk295y> from December 15, 2025.

However, initiatives such as the Ministry of Internal Affairs' special units for investigations of journalist attacks and public prosecutor appointments for handling journalist safety cases face a variety of challenges. Court proceedings and investigations take a long time, there is a lack of inter-institutional collaboration and police and judicial officials often lack adequate resources and training to effectively handle complex cases of violence against journalists, especially in the digital sphere.¹¹⁰ This was confirmed in an announcement by the current Public Prosecutor responsible for monitoring journalists' safety cases, Ljupcho Kocevski, when he highlighted that cases of physical attacks are easier to process compared to cases of digital threats and harassment. In order to intervene, the Public Prosecutor's Office depends on international collaboration with social media platforms and internet providers.¹¹¹ Yet journalists are sceptical and point to **the existence of a double standard**:

“Whenever a politician is the target, those cases move quickly and get resolved. But when it comes to threats against us, suddenly it’s “impossible” to find who’s behind them, especially online. We keep hearing the same excuse – that the accounts are anonymous or coordinated – and **our cases just stall.**”

Taken together, these gendered dynamics both amplify the psychological toll of the profession and shape the editorial choices women make, influencing what stories are pursued, how they are covered and the very ways in which women navigate their workplaces and communities.

(Fear of) the Erosion of Public Trust

Local journalism plays a crucial role in helping citizens understand how power functions in their own communities. Through investigative, or at least analytical reporting, people learn what corruption looks like in practice and how to hold institutions accountable. As one journalist explained: “The average citizen doesn’t really know what counts as corruption beyond bribery, nor do they understand the responsibilities of local government.”

This gap in knowledge fuels **unrealistic expectations toward journalists**, especially in small towns where people know each other more intimately. For instance, the police send daily reports and the media routinely publish them. However, local journalists reported that many people assume that journalists have direct access to the names of perpetrators or confidential details, so the locals demand this information as if it were a personal service. In some cases, this **misunderstanding escalates into hostility**: one journalist reported receiving life threats from a citizen who believed she was hiding names from the public.

¹¹⁰ Spirovski, M & Todorovska, Kostovska, V. (2025). *Challenges and Developments: Women Journalists' Safety in North Macedonia 2024*. [„Предизвици и напредок: Безбедноста на новинарките во Северна Македонија 2024“]. Safejournalists.net. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/39r4avcs> on December 15, 2025.

¹¹¹ Public Prosecutor's Office of the Republic of North Macedonia (2024). “Kocevski: I publicly condemn every form of pressure and threats aimed at silencing journalists and influencing their work” [„Коцевски: Јавно ја осудувам секоја форма на притисок и закани кои се насочени кон замолчување на новинарите и влијание врз нивната работа“]. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/yd3hhdzx> on December 15, 2025.

Research consistently shows that **public trust in the media remains low and largely stagnant**. The reasons are well-known and widely felt: political influence over editorial decisions, the spread of disinformation, propaganda and hate speech – all of which shape the perception that the media are not fully independent.¹¹² Data from the past three years confirm this trend: only 6-7% of citizens report having high trust in the media, while around half (41-48%) say they somewhat trust them.¹¹³

Yet, despite these challenges, **it is not that public trust is entirely lost**, as quite a few local journalists report that citizens are largely on their side and rely on them to expose the truth. Rather, it is continuously undermined by the wider political climate – disinformation campaigns, party-controlled media and a corrupted institutional system that shapes how citizens perceive all journalists, including those who work independently. This erosion of trust disproportionately affects local journalists, whose proximity to their communities makes their work both more visible and more vulnerable to misunderstanding. **Still, many of them remain committed to serving the public interest, often working under immense pressure to provide accurate, responsible reporting in environments where mistrust has been manufactured around them.**

Protection, Unionising and Solidarity

In a political and media context where local journalists face financial insecurity, structural barriers for reporting on corruption and organised crime, as well as (gender-based) harassment and threats, finding stable avenues and mechanisms for protection is crucial. While formal mechanisms such as unions exist to provide protection, their capacities may be constrained and limit reach outside of the capital. The value and importance of informal networks of support among journalists undoubtedly rises in such circumstances.

Journalist unions such as **the Independent Union for Journalists and Media Workers (IUJM)** and **the Association of Journalists in North Macedonia (AJM)** offer specific avenues for protection for journalists. They both advocate for stronger institutional and legal mechanisms that protect those employed in the media in line with their economic and professional interests. The AJM monitors attacks against journalists, however, these are exclusively based on physical harm. They also provide free legal assistance and psychological support. For instance, in 2024, they provided free legal assistance in 66 cases and psychological support in 11 cases.¹¹⁴ As for IUJM, they also offer free legal assistance to media worker members. Government regulatory bodies, such as **the Agency for Audio and Audiovisual Media Services (AAVMU)** are limited in scope in offering support to journalists as their mandate is primarily focused on regulating broadcasting.¹¹⁵

¹¹² South East European Network for Professionalization of Media. (2022). Media Trust in North Macedonia. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/y945xnbm> on December 15, 2025.

¹¹³ Nikodinoska, V. & Chausidis, T. (2025). *Poor Media Market, Low Ethical Standards, Need for Effective Legislation*. [„Сиромашен медиумски пазар, ниски етички стандарди, потреба од ефикасно законодавство]. Macedonian Media Institute, Skopje & “Mediacenter” Foundation, Sarajevo. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3uf6kvdx> on December 15, 2025.

¹¹⁴ Association of Journalists of Macedonia (2025). “Adopted Declaration on the Protection of Professional Journalism at the Annual Assembly of AJM” [„Усвоена Декларација за одбрана на професионалното новинарство на годишното собрание на ЗНМ”] Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/52pp7ner> on December 18, 2025.

¹¹⁵ Spirovski, M. & Todorovska-Kostovska V. (2025). *North Macedonia: Indicators on the Level of Media Freedom and the*

It is key to note that the extent to which union measures adequately respond to journalist needs and garner their trust and engagement is questionable. **Union membership among journalists is relatively low**, with 58% reporting that they do not belong to any labour organisation.¹¹⁶ Nearly half (45%) attribute this to insufficient awareness of union activities, suggesting gaps in communication and outreach. At the same time, a significant majority of journalists (63%) express concern that unions are vulnerable to corruption or corporate influence.¹¹⁷ This reflects a **broader skepticism toward institutional mechanisms meant to protect workers' rights, suggesting that both informational barriers and distrust in organisational integrity** contribute to low union engagement in the media sector.

These perceptions are further reinforced at the local level, as reflected in interviews conducted for this study, where journalists often feel overlooked by structures they feel are centralised in the capital. Several interviewees from local media described a **sense of being “left on their own,”** noting that union activities, visibility and support mechanisms are predominantly focused on Skopje, leaving local journalists with limited access to information, representation and timely assistance. In this context, distrust in the capacity of organisations such as AJM and IUJM is not only linked to institutional credibility, but also to a perceived disconnect between national-level advocacy and the everyday realities of journalism outside the capital: *“It’s always the same people at the seminars. What am I supposed to think about AJM and IUJM? They operate in ‘cliques’ – it’s a clique-based behaviour. I’m not sure I can fully rely on them.”*

At the same time, some journalists emphasised that, within their limited capacities, unions and professional associations are doing what they can under difficult structural and financial conditions. A few interviewees expressed **appreciation for the trainings, legal advice and psychological support that are available**, noting that while these measures are not always sufficient or accessible, they nonetheless represent an important form of support in an otherwise fragile media environment.

In response to the lack of sufficient institutional protection for women journalists, **the informal women-led network EDNAKVA (EQUAL)** was formed as a separate body under IUJM to prevent workplace discrimination and gender-based harassment and strengthen women’s position in the media sector. In an in-depth interview with Ms Marija Mitevaska, a journalist and President of EDNAKVA, when discussing issues of workplace discrimination and harassment, she claimed that:

“There is definitely a need to work on education and awareness-raising, both across our society as a whole and within the journalist community, as there are cases when even women journalists normalise inappropriate and discriminatory behaviour as simply part of the job.”

The larger sentiment is that journalists’ perceptions of gender equality in the media sector, regardless of their gender identity, is limited to pay equity, as data shows that

Journalist Safety Index 2024 [„Северна Македонија: Индикатори за степенот на слободата на медиумите и Индекс на безбедноста на новинарите 2024“]. AJM: Skopje. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/dshpptuu> on December 15, 2025. <https://tinyurl.com/yd3hhdzx> on December 15, 2025.

¹¹⁶ Тревска, S (2024). *Labour Conditions in the Media Sector: Professional Status and Labour Rights of Journalists and Media Workers* [„Работните услови во медиумскиот сектор: професионален статус и работнички права на новинарите и медиумските работници“]. IUJM & RESIS. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/29suyx3m> on December 15, 2025.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

a significant number of them either do not know (40.3%) or report the absence (18.5%) of internal policies and procedures to ensure gender equality, highlighting the need for more visible, structured and comprehensive measures.¹¹⁸ It must be noted that it is difficult to investigate these dynamics at the local level, since **looking for specific internal policies and procedures that ensure gender equality may prove redundant in local newsrooms with very few journalists or led by a single editor-in-chief**. However, the findings do point to a pervasive culture in the media landscape where a **comprehensive understanding and respect of gender equality is far from the forefront**.

When internal policies and procedures addressing gender equality are largely absent or unknown, it is unsurprising that **mechanisms to respond to gender-based harassment, particularly in digital spaces, are equally underdeveloped**. While newsroom capacities in the capital are already insufficient – marked by a lack of IT teams, training and clear protocols to effectively respond to online attacks and ensure protection for women journalists – the situation at the local level is even more precarious. As one IUJM representative noted in an interview, the union “receive[s] no reports from local areas – **people there handle things on their own.**”

While it is true that for local media, this tendency to “handle things on their own” usually stems from the lack of institutional trust and the frequency *and* proximity of threats they face, this self-reliance does not always mean isolation. On the contrary, **the ensuing solidarity among colleagues becomes an informal yet strong alternative mechanism for protection**. For instance, one of the men journalists recounted how when a woman colleague received death threats, a group of journalists collectively pressured the police to locate the perpetrator. **This joint action led to a successful intervention**, and the man was found only a few hours later and taken into custody. Reflecting on the incident, the journalist noted: “We must protect each other, because if we expect protection from the state, we’ll be doomed.” In such contexts, collective action among journalists becomes a substitute for institutional safeguards.

Solidarity also takes less visible but equally important forms. According to another woman journalist, **colleagues self-organised psychological support** following the traumatic fire incident in Kočani earlier this year. Given the nature of the work in the media sector, she stressed the need for accessible professional mental health support particularly when reporting on traumatic events involving loss of life and collective shock.

These experiences are not isolated. The 2022 AJM-IUJM report reveals that up to 50.5% media professionals have thought about leaving the profession,¹¹⁹ pointing to a cumulative effect of dissatisfaction, financial insecurity and chronic overwork. This was confirmed in our interviews, with one journalist recounting how colleagues gradually withdrew from journalism due to constant stress, pressure and inadequate pay. In the same report, 59% of respondents identified psychological exhaustion and stress as the main risks in their work, and 45.9% pointed to threats and other forms of psychological violence as significant risks.¹²⁰ Referring to potential threats, one local

¹¹⁸ Bejkova, B. & Dzigal, S. (2022). Analysis – Safety and the socio-economic situation in the media: Acting together for greater respect for the rights of journalists and media workers. [„Анализа – Безбедносната и социо-економската состојба во медиумите: Со заедничко дејствување до поголемо почитување на правата на новинарите и на медиумските работници“]. AJM & IUJM. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/2cp4k67c> on December 15, 2025.

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ Josheska, B. & Dzigal, S. (2022). *With Joint Action Towards Greater Respect for the Rights of Journalists and Media Workers*.

woman journalist admitted:

“It [pressure and intimidation] takes a toll on your mind, not that something [violent or bad] is actually likely to happen, but it causes stress. I think that institutions don’t respond properly even in much more serious cases; the law is such that until something severe happens, nothing gets done. Still, there is solidarity among colleagues.”

Against this backdrop of exhaustion, insecurity and limited institutional protection, many local women journalists emphasised **the importance of informal networks and peer-based forms of support**. One such example highlighted by our interview participants is the Women Journalists Programme established by the independent and non-profit Platform for Investigative Journalism and Analysis (PINA), which brings together women journalists from across the country through a mix of collective (online) meetings, mentorship and paid editorial work. As the investigative journalist and president of PINA, Kristina Ozimec, shared in an interview, the programme enables women journalists to develop stories on a wide range of topics – from gender-based issues to local corruption, media freedom and good governance – while receiving direct mentoring, editorial guidance and financial compensation. **For local journalists in particular, these networks help counter isolation, provide access to resources and expertise, and reaffirm a sense of professional belonging in a media environment where many feel left to cope on their own.**

[„Со заедничко дејствување до поголемо почитување на правата на новинарите и на медиумските работници]. AJM & IUJM. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/mzj6wab8> on December 15, 2025.

**LOOKING AHEAD:
LOCAL JOURNALISM
BETWEEN AUTONOMY,
CONSTRAINT AND
POSSIBILITY**



Journalism in North Macedonia is marked by a series of deep and often contradictory dynamics. On the one hand, many journalists continue to experience a sense of professional purpose, autonomy and public relevance in their everyday work. On the other, as this research findings show, they operate within a media system shaped by economic precarity, political pressure, institutional fragility and uneven protections – **conditions that are felt most acutely at the local level and disproportionately affect women journalists.**

These contradictions were confirmed in a national study showing that while a large majority of journalists (78%) report being satisfied with their personal level of autonomy in daily work, **only 18% believe that the media in North Macedonia are fully or largely free.** More than half (56%) describe the media as only “somewhat free.”¹²¹ This gap points to a structural disconnect: individual journalists may feel independent in their reporting choices, yet the broader political, economic and ownership conditions significantly limit the reach, impact and sustainability of that independence. Or as one local journalist says: “It would be more useful if institutions focused more on addressing what we have written about, rather than focusing on the person behind the text.” Instead, journalists report facing personal pressure, threats to their families and long-term consequences that extend beyond the newsroom.

At the same time, despite widespread public distrust toward media as institutions, recent research confirms **that citizens continue to recognise journalism as a cornerstone of democracy and a key pillar of the public interest.** Across generations, there is a shared understanding of the democratic importance of media, even as pessimism dominates assessments of its current functioning – an outlook shaped by political polarisation, corruption and economic instability.¹²² Local journalists themselves confirm this paradox: while trust in media may be fragile, **investigative reporting in particular remains respected and valued by the public.** They say that moments of crisis, such as the Kočani fire, have further intensified public attention toward corruption and accountability, leading to stronger reactions even to smaller, local stories.

Several interviewees described that **what keeps them going is the reassurance that their reporting has managed to produce, or at least instigate tangible changes in their communities** – from the construction of schools and the asphaltting of roads to the building of sports halls and public infrastructure. One local journalist reflected that despite exhaustion and sleepless nights, “it makes me proud and at peace with my work when I see a school built in my village because of what I wrote.” These examples underscore **the unique democratic value of local journalism:** its proximity to citizens, its ability to translate public interest into concrete outcomes and its potential to rebuild trust from the ground up.

Yet this potential is increasingly under threat. **Local newsrooms are shrinking or disappearing altogether, workloads are unsustainable, and journalists are often forced to work alone or across multiple outlets to survive.** Gender adds another layer of vulner-

¹²¹ Trpevska, S. (2023). *Working Conditions in the Media: Professional Status and Labour Rights of Journalists and Media Workers*. [„Работни услови во медиумскиот сектор: професионален статус и работнички права на новинарите и медиумските работници“]. IUJM & RESIS. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/29suyx3m> on December 15, 2025.

¹²² Nikodinovska, V. (2025). *Ethics, Trust and Public Interest are Key in the Digital Age as well*. [„Етиката, довербата и јавниот интерес клучни и во дигиталната доба“]. Macedonian Media Institute, Skopje. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/npx-9m4dm> on December 15, 2025.

ability to these conditions. Women journalists – who now make up the majority of the profession – navigate the same structural precarity while also facing gender-based harassment, discriminatory labour practices and a lack of institutional responses to online and offline abuse. In local contexts marked by chronic understaffing and financial strain, gender discrimination often takes more insidious forms and is rarely named as such: raising gender-based concerns is frequently perceived as a “luxury” in teams struggling to meet basic operational demands. The absence of clear protocols, IT support and protection mechanisms leaves many women journalists, especially in local contexts, to “handle things on their own,” normalising risk as part of the job and reinforcing a culture of silence and self-reliance.

At the same time, journalists have not remained passive. **Informal networks, peer solidarity and women-led initiatives have emerged as critical support mechanisms, particularly where institutional responses are weak or absent.** Local women journalists, in particular, have highlighted the importance of these networks for sharing information, emotional support, mentorship and professional opportunities – spaces where gendered experiences of labour, harassment and burnout can be collectively named rather than individually endured. **These practices point to alternative models of resilience that do not rely solely on formal structures, but they cannot replace systemic solutions.**

Looking ahead, the sustainability of journalism – especially at the local level – raises urgent questions about the future of the profession itself. **Enrolment in journalism, media and communication studies has dropped dramatically** over the past decade, from around 200 students per year to just 30 in 2023/2024. This decline signals not only a crisis of labour reproduction, but also a broader erosion of journalism’s perceived viability as a career. Reversing this trend will require more than rhetorical commitments to media freedom; it demands concrete improvements in labour rights, safety, training, pay and professional recognition, with particular attention to gendered inequalities.

Ultimately, this research suggests that strengthening media freedom in North Macedonia cannot rely on uniform, centralised solutions alone. Local journalism operates under distinct conditions, pressures and possibilities that require tailored approaches rather than the replication of models designed for national media. While existing research on public trust does not sufficiently disaggregate local journalism, the findings here point to its critical democratic role and its potential as a site for rebuilding credibility, accountability and public engagement. Paying closer attention to the unique experiences of local journalists – and especially women journalists – when developing future policy, funding and protection frameworks is not only a matter of equity, but a prerequisite for a more resilient and genuinely democratic media landscape.

¹²³ Nikodinoska, V. & Chausidis, T. (2025). *Poor Media Market, Low Ethical Standards, Need for Effective Legislation*. [„Сиромашен медиумски пазар, ниски етички стандарди, потреба од ефикасно законодавство]. Macedonian Media Institute, Skopje & “Mediacenter” Foundation, Sarajevo. Retrieved from: <https://tinyurl.com/3uf6kvdx> on December 15, 2025.

RECOMMENDATIONS



Develop Targeted Support Mechanisms for Local Journalism

Policymakers and donors should recognise that local journalism operates under distinct and intensified risks compared to national media. Support schemes must move beyond centralised, capital-focused funding models and **prioritise local outlets and correspondents**, particularly in underserved regions. This includes small, flexible grants that reflect the scale and capacities of local newsrooms and reduce their dependency on political or clientelist advertising, **such as rapid-response micro-grants, core operational support or simplified funding windows tailored to local outlets and correspondents.**

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Establish Sustainable Public Interest Funding for Media Pluralism

North Macedonia should prioritise **the establishment of an independent Fund for Media Pluralism** to support public-interest journalism, especially at the local level. While project-based donor funding remains important, recent funding withdrawals demonstrate that reliance on short-term grants is unsustainable and disproportionately disadvantages local media, which often lack the administrative capacity and networks to compete with larger, Skopje-based outlets. An independent Fund for Media Pluralism, **governed through transparent criteria, multi-stakeholder oversight and insulation from political influence**, would play a key role in decreasing political and economic influence (and pressure) in local contexts, thereby supporting critical journalism without professionals having to self-censor to survive.

Strengthen Labour Rights and Legal Protection for Journalists in Non-Standard Employment

Labour legislation and media regulation should explicitly address the realities of freelance, honorarium-based and hybrid roles common in local journalism, including **extending labour protections, social security access and legal safeguards** to journalists working without permanent contracts and those employed in online media.

In parallel, **media regulation should strengthen protections against internal interference by media owners and management**, including clearer guarantees of editorial independence and enforceable mechanisms against internal pressure. **Mandatory registration and monitoring of online media** would support these protections by **increasing transparency of ownership and editorial responsibility, creating a regulatory basis** for addressing internal pressure, labour violations and breaches of journalistic independence, and thereby **strengthening journalists' protection in digital and local media outlets**.

Introduce Gender-Responsive Safety Protocols and Institutional Support

While response protocols for online and offline harassment formally exist, their **implementation remains uneven and insufficiently gender responsive**. Media organisations, professional associations and public institutions should **strengthen and institutionalise mechanisms that specifically address online gender-based threats**, including guaranteed access to legal aid, psychological support and digital safety assistance. This requires clearer mandates, sustainable funding and stronger coordination between institutions, trade unions and professional bodies, particularly AJM and IUJM, to ensure consistent engagement at the local level. Expanding their outreach and presence beyond Skopje is essential, as women journalists in local contexts currently face heightened risks, weak institutional responses and the normalisation of harassment as “part of the job.” Furthermore, it is key to establish newsroom policies and institutional support mechanisms to prevent motherhood from being a foundation for discrimination among journalists, or an obstacle for professional development in the field.

This should include **mandatory gender-sensitive risk assessment and response protocols** within media organisations, alongside **institutional accountability** for failure to respond to reported threats.

Invest in Technical Capacity and Digital Skills for Local Newsrooms

Support programmes should include **practical technical assistance** for local journalists, including access to paid databases, verification tools, basic equipment and training in digital investigation, multimedia production and AI-related verification, with a focus on **practical, newsroom-embedded learning rather than one-off trainings**. In local settings, where journalists often perform editorial, technical and distribution roles simultaneously, strengthening these capacities is essential for quality reporting and professional resilience.

Recognise and Support Informal Peer Networks and Solidarity Mechanisms

The research highlights the importance of **informal networks, peer solidarity and mentorship**, particularly among women journalists, as alternative protection and support mechanisms. Initiatives such as the recently established women-led ED-NAKVA network or PINA's Programme for Women Journalists play a critical role in protecting and supporting (local) women in the media where formal mechanisms are weak or inaccessible. Media support programmes should prioritise strengthening and expanding these peer-based structures through sustained support for mentoring, safe spaces and collective learning, **including small grants, coordination support and recognition of informal networks as legitimate actors within the media ecosystem**.

Prioritise Youth Engagement and the Future Sustainability of Journalism

Declining enrolment in journalism programmes and widespread disillusionment among young people signal a critical sustainability challenge for the profession. The implementation of the broader set of recommendations outlined so far is therefore essential to making the profession viable and attractive to young people. Future interventions should thus **strengthen pathways between education, local media and investigative journalism through mentorship, paid entry-level opportunities and collaboration with universities and student organisations**, particularly in local and regional media outlets. Supporting youth engagement is essential not only for workforce renewal but for rebuilding trust in journalism as a democratic public good.

Improve Data Collection and Research on Local and Gendered Media Dynamics

All things considered, there is an **urgent need for gender-disaggregated and locality-sensitive data on media freedom, labour conditions and safety**. Future research and monitoring mechanisms, **including those led or commissioned by public institutions and donors**, should move beyond national averages and institutional assessments to capture everyday experiences in local newsrooms, including how gender, age and precarity intersect with locality. Attention should be given to areas outside the capital, which remain underrepresented in both research and policy design.

Challenge Harmful Narratives and Normalised Violence through Public Discourse and Media Literacy Interventions

Beyond legal, institutional and financial reforms, **addressing the structural challenges facing local journalism requires sustained efforts to confront and dismantle the harmful** social norms, myths and disinformation that normalise violence, undermine trust and delegitimise journalism, activism and civic engagement. This research demonstrates that gender-based violence, harassment and intimidation, particularly online, are widely perceived as “part of the job,” while journalists and civil society actors are increasingly discredited through false narratives, coordinated smear campaigns and fake news framing them as biased, foreign-driven or hostile to “traditional values.” In a media environment saturated with disinformation and declining public trust, such narratives weaken societal capacity to recognise abuse, demand accountability and support independent journalism. Public institutions, media organisations, educators and civil society should therefore invest in long-term narrative and media literacy interventions that promote critical engagement with information, challenge gender stereotypes and misinformation, and reaffirm journalism as a public good rather than a political or ideological threat.

Without confronting these deeper normative dynamics, technical protections and funding mechanisms alone will remain insufficient to counter the erosion of democratic resilience at the local level.

