

Disinformation and hate speech toward female sports journalists

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Abstract

As well as democratizing access to information and strengthening active audiences, the internet also fosters the manipulation of news and the propagation of false and violent content. Although disinformation and hate speech are not new phenomena, they are now expanding out of control, with women, including journalists, among their targets. The aim of this study is to establish the characteristics and magnitude of this problem and determine how it affects Spanish female sports journalists while carrying out their professional activities in the world of sports, a field where male supremacy is evident. This study seeks to identify the most frequent situations where this problem occurs, the types of harassment observed, the profile of the perpetrators, and above all, the consequences for the professional and personal life of these female professionals. A mixed-methods approach is used to measure the extent of this problem and determine the experience and opinion of female sports journalists using an anonymous questionnaire. This qualitative approach is reinforced by in-depth interviews with female sports journalists who have been victims of hate speech. This dual approach enables the identification of paradigmatic models of a cognitive-behavioral nature, with findings that reveal disturbing figures. Indeed, 89.6% of the professionals participating in this study stated that they had been victims of hate speech and other forms of harassment, both through social networks as well as in their work environment, principally questioning their work capacity or mentioning their physical appearance. The profile of the perpetrators was revealed, as well as the perception that this type of aggression is a common practice that can lead to self-censorship. This situation requires that urgent measures be implemented to address this problem, such as the addition of media literacy and gender training to the educational curriculum.

Keywords

Hate speech; Bullying; Disinformation; Journalism; Media; Communication; Social networks; *Twitter*; Gender; Sports; Football; Media literacy.

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1. Introduction

Internet subcultures take advantage of the current media ecosystem to manipulate news and spread hateful ideas and messages, to increase disinformation and radicalize society (Kahan, 2013). Disinformation is not a new phenomenon (Burnam, 1975; Galdón, 1994), and nor is hate speech. Indeed, one does not have to look beyond the twentieth century to see its use in Germany by Nazi officials, in the United States by the *Ku Klux Klan*, or during the Bosnian War or Rwandan Genocide, always with the aim of intimidating, oppressing, or inciting hatred or violence (Bertoni, 2007) according to the gender or social group to which its victims belong (Kaufman, 2015).

The report by Marwick and Lewis (2017) on disinformation and manipulation addresses various aspects of hate speech and establishes its main perpetrators, their objectives, and how they operate. Internet trolls, characterized by a deliberately offensive discourse, are key in this regard because their discourse targets minorities, and women in particular, being based on highly sexist notions of victory and domination (Phillips, 2015). Among such so-called hate groups and ideologues, one can highlight “Manosphere,” a group of blogs and fora composed of men’s rights activists (MRAs), which also includes antifeminists, androphiles, and sexist cavemen [*paleomachistas*]. A recent study on Manosphere warns of its continued radicalization (Horta-Ribeiro *et al.*, 2021).

Social networks, especially *Twitter*, constitute the main forum from which this type of discourse and other violent content emerge, owing to its projection and emotional potential (Klinger; Svensson, 2018; Van-Dijck; Poell, 2013). It is worrying that such wide exposure to violence, especially among young people, leads to its inevitable normalization (Yudes-Gómez; Baridon-Chauvie; González-Cabrera, 2018; Nagle, 2018), partly because ideologies are the main motivating force behind its authors, often combined with other important objectives such as money, status, or attention (Marwick; Lewis, 2017).

The Internet’s power as a vehicle for spreading violent and hateful communication to millions of people, as already warned by Pollock (2006), has consequences for the professional life and career of the victims and can also directly incite physical violence (Miró-Llinares, 2016). Segado-Boj and Díaz-Campos (2020) advocate the need for social media companies to become involved in flagging such content and warning users of inaccurate or false material as a measure to stop this viscous circle.

This is a complex and constantly evolving social phenomenon that has also focused on female journalists. *Unesco* (Possetti *et al.*, 2020) addressed this problem in a study on online violence against female journalists conducted with the *International Centre for Journalists*. It concluded that 73% of the consulted professionals declared that they had suffered violence in their work environment, in 20% of cases identifying it as abuse or physical attacks. This report reveals that such violence ranged from hate speech to threats of sexual or physical violence, leading to self-censorship or (in extreme situations) leaving the profession.

1.1. Hate speech and disinformation

Hate speech is a type of harmful content that directly incites or attacks a person or a group of people on the basis of their identity characteristics, origin, religion, or sexual orientation (Yin; Zubiaga, 2021). New technologies and social networks have led to an increase of hate speech, understood as offensive communication that conveys an ideology of hatred through the use of stereotypes (Chetty; Alathur, 2018) and constitutes a serious problem in many countries since it is detrimental to certain groups of people (Mondal *et al.*, 2018).

“This research is innovative and important as it delves into the reality of hate speech and harassment of female sports journalists in Spain and outlines the most important measures to be taken”

Since the 2016 U.S. election, online disinformation has joined hate speech and other forms of harmful content such as those created to intentionally mislead (Tandoc; Lim; Ling, 2017; Pielemeier, 2020) and which are of great concern given their impact on media credibility (Fernández-Torres; Almansa-Martínez; Chamizo-Sánchez, 2021). Other authors (Wardle; Derakshan, 2017; Ireton; Possetti, 2018; Giachanou; Rosso, 2020) talk rather about disinformation or false information, created with the intention of deception as well as misinformation, which is used to harm a person. Quandt (2018) uses the concept of dark participation to refer to hateful comments, forum manipulation, and fake news fabrication.

In any case, as pointed out by Westlund (2021), social media platforms have lowered the threshold for individuals, groups, and organizations to express their hatred toward someone or something in a coordinated manner. Negative judgments and beliefs about a social group are the motivating element (González-Gavaldón, 1999) with the aim of harassing, intimidating, and encouraging brutality against its victims (Cohen-Almagor, 2011), thereby exacerbating social tensions and inciting attacks with serious consequences that strengthen the relationship between speech and hate crime (Cohen-Almagor, 2018). Data from the *Hate Crime Survey* published by the Spanish *Ministry of the Interior* (López-Gutiérrez *et al.*, 2021) reveal that this type has increased remarkably. More than 50% of participants had received insults or threats on social networks (27% because of their sex or gender), although only 10% filed a complaint.

In this sense, social networks have the ideal characteristics for increasing the risk of criminal conduct, including hate crimes (Tamarit-Sumalla, 2018), making it necessary to ensure more efficient judicial mechanisms to protect victims from

such acts (Piñeiro-Otero; Martínez-Rolán, 2021).

1.2. Women, journalists, and sport

At the beginning of the last century, Pierre de Coubertin, the creator of the Olympic Games, stated that women could only participate in the event for “crowning the winners with garlands”; however, women managed to compete in the 1900 Olympics in Paris. In the 2021 Tokyo Olympics, a historic figure was reached, with 49% participation, albeit not reflected proportionally in the media. In this regard, Fink (2013) demonstrates that differential media coverage negatively impacts audience perceptions of women’s sport and female athletes and stresses that many such images portray highly sexualized athletes. Other authors agree that, although reported, they are underrepresented and stereotyped (Kane, 2013; Rangel-Amo; Ramírez-Alvarado, 2018; Garrido; Zapsi, 2021).

Major sporting events provide an opportunity to showcase female athletes for their abilities and achievements and to promote equality. However, media malpractice, which highlights their physical appearance, stereotypes, or features such as delicacy or fragility, enhances discrimination (Kaskan; Ho, 2016; Solmirano, 2021) and promotes aggressions against them (Allen; Frisby, 2017).

Female journalists, as well as female athletes, are trying to make their way in a field where male supremacy is evident. Peschiera-Chanamé (2016) welcomes the fact that women have filled professional positions, thus weakening stereotypes, even though they remain far from achieving equality and professional recognition. Women, in addition to their underrepresentation in the news, remain far from management and content decision-making positions, which are occupied by men in two-thirds of cases (Perianes-Paín, 2019).

Sports journalism has a male voice and refuses women positions of responsibility, deeming them to have less understanding of the sports world (Pedraza, 2012). This androcentric vision of this field, which prevails in many journalistic companies (Rojas-Torrijos, 2010) that favor physical appearance in the selection process, leads female journalists to become targets of informative manipulation, threats, and attacks in their workplace simply because of their gender. It is therefore crucial to delve deeper into the causes and consequences of gender discrimination for female professionals in sports journalism at different levels, not only personal or professional but also relational, organizational, and social. In this scenario and faced with a clear lack of scientific work addressing this problem, this research is innovative and important as it delves into the reality of hate speech and harassment of female sports journalists in Spain and outlines the most important measures to be taken.

1.3. Research objectives and questions

Considering the aforementioned journalistic context and theoretical framework, it is necessary to identify the problem of disinformation and hate speech toward female sports journalists in order to delineate its scope. To do this, we sought the experience and opinion of journalists working in this field, both women and men, as this was the most direct way to address an issue that has yet to be studied methodically. Specific cases are also examined, through the direct testimony of the victims, in order to identify paradigmatic models, mainly of a cognitive-behavioral nature, that will allow the research community to address future work on this subject.

Thus, this study focuses on the following research questions (RQs):

RQ.1: What are the formal characteristics of hate speech toward female sports journalists?

RQ.2: What is the level of knowledge or awareness of this problem among the professional community?

RQ.3: What are the prevailing situations for, and who are the perpetrators, of hate speech?

RQ.4: What are the consequences for the personal and professional lives of the affected female journalists, and what measures can be taken?

2. Methods

A mixed methodology is applied, combining a quantitative and qualitative perspective, since this approach adds depth to the analysis by starting from complex research questions. It was designed to explore the extent of knowledge and the approach taken by information professionals regarding the object of study and is based on an anonymous survey, a quantitative technique widely used in the social sciences (Ander-Egg, 1993), complemented by in-depth interviews that enable the collection of reliable information on the problem and broaden the qualitative approach of the research by investigating issues related to categories of analysis that are not directly observable, such as the thoughts or feelings of those who have direct experience of the analyzed problem (Miller; Barry, 2016), thus helping to understand their individuality (Robles, 2011). This analysis method, fully consolidated and applied in research in the social sciences (Morris, 2015), can provide wider perspectives and insights.

2.1. Materials

Both the questionnaire and the script used for the interviews were designed to meet the research objectives of studying the characteristics, situations, subjects, and consequences of misinformation and hate speech. Table 1 presents the contents of both methodological tools.

The questionnaire was implemented as a *Google Forms* form, given the versatility and accessibility of this platform. It consisted of 37 questions, 15 based on a Likert scale to assess the level of concern regarding hate speech, its frequency, the environments enabling its occurrence, and the professional and personal consequences for victims.

“ In this research, focused only on Spain, the participation of 88 journalists was achieved, of whom 56 were men while 32 were women. All they recognize the existence and seriousness of the problem ”

Nonprobabilistic sampling was used for both methodological instruments, with the participants being selected at the discretion of the researchers and not randomly, considering that the questionnaire was aimed specifically at sports journalists. The sampling for the interviews was conducted with quotas, since the participants were chosen according to their traits and qualities, from different media, as well as considering their specialization in different sports disciplines. Peer analysis was performed on the results, while thematic analysis was performed for the interviews.

The survey was distributed and the interviews conducted during July and the first half of August in 2021. This method was chosen as it is more affordable and less intrusive while still being responsive (Bernard, 2013). It was sent to associations and professional bodies of Spanish journalists for internal distribution among sports journalists, as well as direct distribution among sports editors and related communication offices. Special emphasis was placed on reaching the important sports newspapers, such as *Marca* and *AS*, as well as radio stations and programs specialized in sports such as *Radio Marca*, *El Larguero*, *El Partidazo de COPE*, *Tiempo de Juego*, and *Radiostadio*, among others. Specialized television channels, such as *Teledporte*, as well as sports-themed television programs such as *Jugones*, *Deportes Cuatro*, *Estudio Estadio*, *El Chiringuito de Jugones*, and *El Desmarque*, were also of special interest.

The researchers applied certain basic principles and ethical standards to ensure that no subjects would suffer any disadvantage by participating in the survey and interview, ensuring the anonymity of the respondents and obtaining full consent from the interviewees.

The survey was completed by 85 professionals, most of them men (65.9%). The highest percentage of participants (84.7%) were editors, broadcasters, hosts, and contributors, while the others held management positions. Of these, the majority worked on the radio (44.7%), followed by national and privately owned television stations and specialized newspapers.

The average age of the participants ranged from 31 to 50 years old, and their educational level was high: only 7.1% had no university education, while 68.3% had completed a bachelor's or master's degree. They also had a high level of expertise in sports, with 61% have specific studies, while they had also accumulated vast experience, with 41.2% having worked in the sector for longer than 20 years. However, this great expertise does not mean that they did not produce other content, which was the case for 74% of them.

Table 1. Survey and interview contents

Anonymous questionnaire, 37 questions	
Section 1 (11 questions)	These questions were used to determine variables such as the gender, age, and level of journalism education of the respondents, the type and scope of the media or company where the respondents work, their position/status, and their professional relationship.
Section 2 (15 questions)	All the questions in this section assessed the degree of agreement (Likert scale) with each statement made, focusing on the research topic and investigating the knowledge about and concern regarding the presence of hate speech and other types of aggression toward female journalists in the field of sports: the frequency of aggressions according to the type of media and company, social networks, sports practices, and type of aggressions. It also addresses the reactions of victims and their environment (complaints/impunity of the perpetrator) and the most common situations (work or sports environment).
Section 3 (11 questions)	These questions aimed to draw a profile of the perpetrator and to establish the main consequences for the personal and professional life of the victims, as well as to establish measures to solve the problem.
In-depth interviews, 27 questions	
Section 1 (6 questions)	These questions addressed the characteristics of hate speech and the personal situations experienced in relation to the problem: the target of the aggressions (gender identity, sexual orientation, ideology, physical appearance, sexual connotation, etc.); the type (harassment, threat, defamation, etc.) of the attacks, how they proceeded, and differences in the current situation with respect to their beginnings in the profession.
Section 2 (9 questions)	The second section focused on the scenarios of hate speech and other harassment situations (the media in which they occur the most, the role of social networks, or the sports discipline where these situations are most common). It also explored whether this situation can be extrapolated to other women involved in sports, and whether the profile of the perpetrator and the identity of the victim (in the case of men) is known, or whether working in sports increases the possibility of becoming a target of such situations.
Section 3 (12 questions)	The main objective of this section was to determine whether hate speech and situations of harassment and bullying have conditioned the professional and personal lives of the interviewees: the support they have found from their environment, whether they reported it or not, and whether they have even thought of leaving sports journalism. Finally, we sought their opinion on freedom of expression and on the consequences for perpetrators of hate speech and other forms of harassment or aggression, as well as the measures they would implement to prevent it.

The interviews were conducted as 90-minute telematic sessions with each of the participating female journalists, following a semistructured script with questions tailored to the stated objectives. With the consent of the participants, the sessions were recorded for subsequent transcription. Three prestigious journalists with extensive professional careers participated, thus capturing their experience, reflection, and analysis on the problem, as well as its variation in recent years. These three journalists gave their consent to be included in the investigation owing to the importance of the subject matter addressed. It was especially difficult to obtain in-depth interviews, which logically requires the identification of the interviewee, which is why the inclusion of these three interviews in this research is particularly relevant to the study.

- Journalist 1: Carme Barceló Crespo. Professional experience: 36 years as a sports journalist. Columnist of the *Sport* newspaper and director of the *Sport&Style* supplement. Contributor to the *AtresMedia* program *El Chiringuito de Jugones*, and of the digital portal *The Luxonomist*.
- Journalist 2: Pilar Casado Biesa. Professional experience: 25 years as a sports journalist. Chief sports editor of the *COPE Network* and basketball narrator at *MoviStar+*.
- Journalist 3: Carmen Colino Colino. Professional experience: 27 years as a sports journalist. Editor-in-chief of *Diario AS*, manager of *Verticals*, and contributor to the *AtresMedia* program *El Chiringuito de Jugones*.

One of the greatest difficulties with this research was to achieve the participation of victims of hate speech or other types of aggressions, even when they considered it to be necessary, which increases the value of the three in-depth interviews carried out, out of the ten requested from journalists who acknowledged being victims. Some of the most frequent justifications included feelings of embarrassment or fear of misunderstanding or reactions from their peers. However, although the number of interviews obtained for this research is lower than originally intended, its importance in examining aspects that could not otherwise be analyzed and in obtaining descriptions, details, and nuances that would be unfeasible using other methodological tools should be emphasized.

In order to better understand the difficulty in this research, it is important to note that the global survey conducted by *Unesco* (2020) on violence against journalists included 901 participants from 125 countries (an average of 7.2 participants per country). Meanwhile, in this research, focused only on Spain, the participation of 88 journalists was achieved (for the two methodological instruments used), of whom 56 were men while 32 were women. This ratio corresponds to the greater presence of men in sports newsrooms, while this level of participation allows the established objectives to be achieved. These findings raise the specter of a serious reality and allow deeper investigation into the problem of misinformation, hate speech, and harassment that affect women in this group of professionals.

3. Analysis of results

Although it is not advisable to generalize (**Hernández-Rodríguez, 2004**), the results obtained do allow for an evaluation of the situation, as well as the establishment of behavioral models and possible measures (**Abreu, 2012**). The most alarming result, which clearly demonstrates the seriousness of this problem, is that 89.6% of the female professionals participating in this study claim to be or to have been victims of hate speech and harassment.

3.1. Survey

The survey overwhelmingly confirms the problem of hate speech and harassment toward female colleagues among the participating professionals or, in the case of women, as direct victims of it. In total, 92.8% were somewhat concerned about the presence of hate speech toward female sports journalists, understood as any kind of instigation to discrimination, hostility, or violence, thereby acknowledging the problem, compared with 7.2% who do not believe it exists, the majority of whom are men. In addition, 99.7% of those who do acknowledge the problem state that it occurs on a regular or very regular basis.

Situations of hate speech occur in all types of media and platforms (Fig. 1); however, social networks are the main channel where it is found. According to more than half of the professionals consulted, specialized sports websites and portals

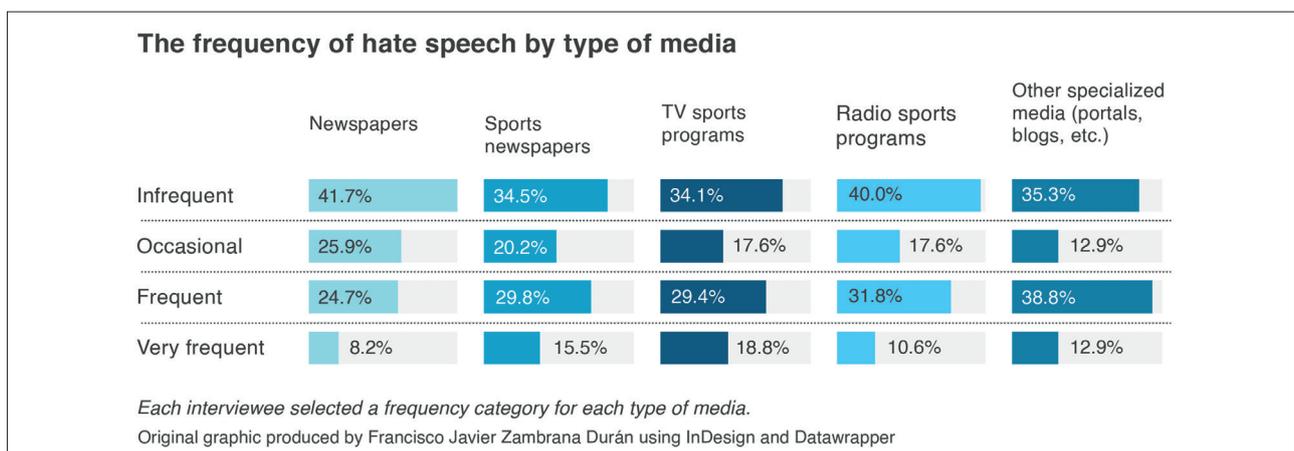


Figure 1. The frequency of hate speech by type of media

account for most harassment against female sports journalists. Among the traditional media, the highest number of cases was found for television, followed by sports newspapers, while the general press is the least affected by this problem.

According to 72.9% of the professionals consulted, social networks are the main setting for hate speech against female sports journalists (Fig. 2). Overall, *Twitter* is the most worrying platform: 98% consider that, according to their experience, this platform is the venue for the highest number of cases, followed in decreasing order by *Instagram* (16.7%), *Facebook* (13.3%), and *TikTok* (6%).

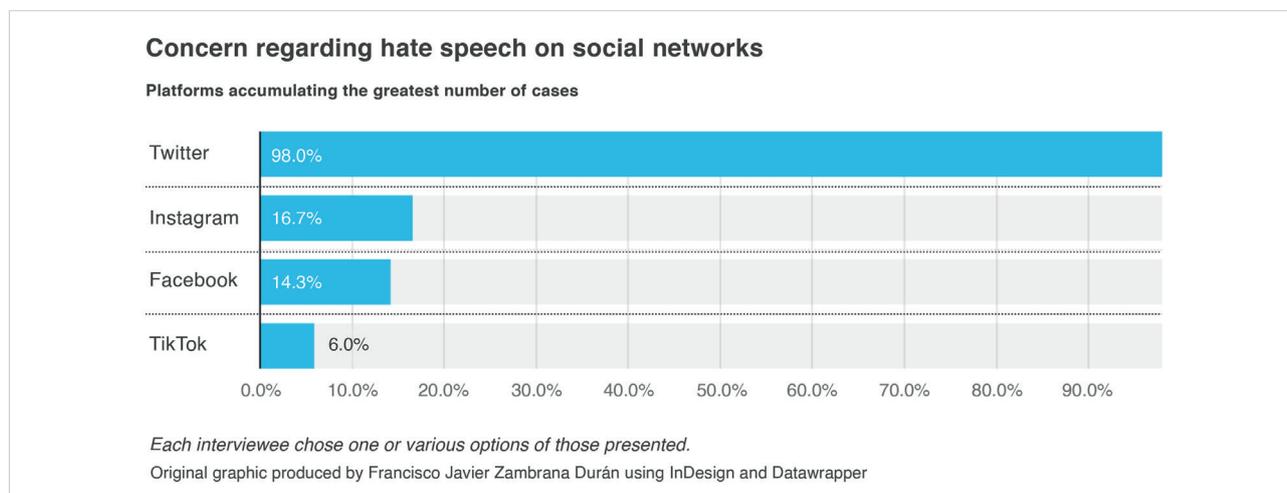


Figure 2. Concern regarding hate speech on social networks

A total of 44.7% stated that a very large number of sports journalists report being victims of hate speech through any of these platforms. For women, this number was much higher, with 71.6% having been attacked in some way. However, we note that this phenomenon also significantly affects men, reaching 28.4%, as hate speech mainly focuses on professional rather than gender-related characteristics. Moreover, victims of hate speech report serious consequences for their personal and professional lives. Female journalists mainly feel coerced by such harassment or the propagation of false content; however, some also fear for their jobs (8.2%) or believe that they are in physical danger (4.1%).

3.1.1. Constant harassment, both directly and in the workplace

The data obtained illustrate the severity of hate speech, manipulation, and harassment against female sports journalists (Fig. 3). Of the studied professionals, 89.6% acknowledged being victims, to a greater or lesser degree, of whom 47.1% claimed to suffer from it continuously. The situations they face are very varied and mainly involve cases of misogyny, discrimination, insults, and harassment as well as reported cases of hostility, defamation, threats, and sexist comments, although no physical aggression was reported. These are not isolated cases: most of them are victims of misogyny (76.9%), but they also suffer from other types, such as discrimination or harassment.

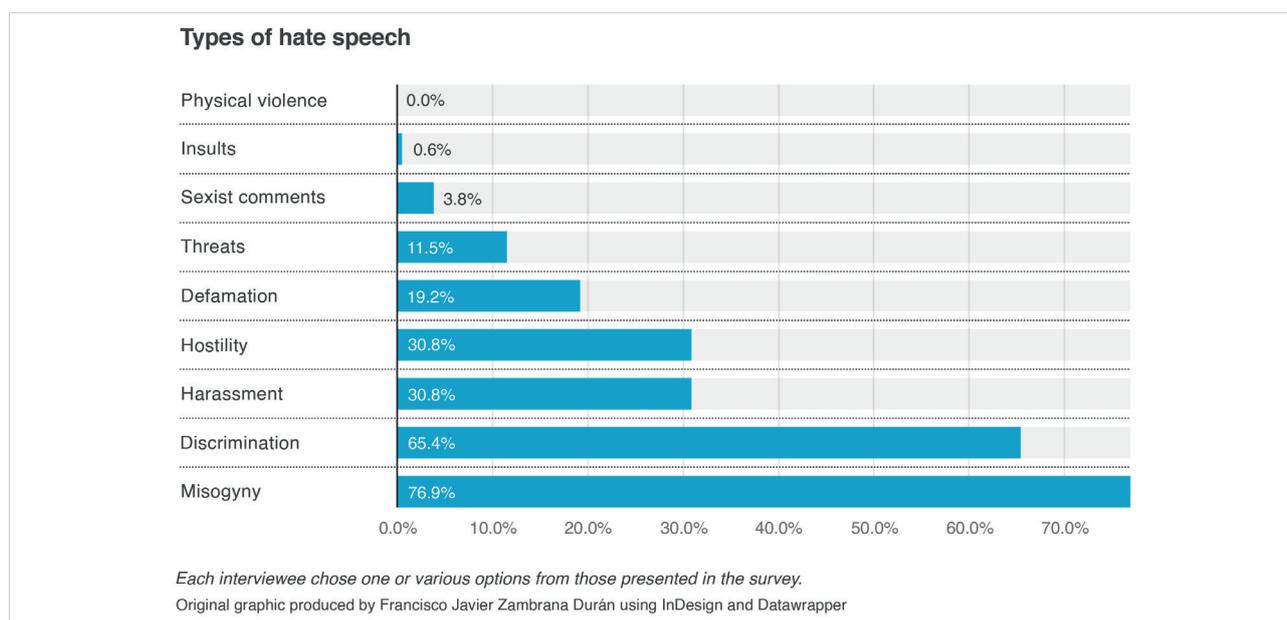


Figure 3. Types of hate speech

According to the victims, the aim of the perpetrator is to discredit them professionally. Their intelligence is repeatedly questioned, while remarks on their physical appearance or of a sexual nature are also made. Social networks were identified as the most common scenario, being indicated by 78.1% and accounting for almost one-third of cases. However, it is also concerning that 34.4% of journalists claimed that these cases of harassment and discrimination also take place directly, and in the workplace. Moreover, this is an environment in which understanding, support, and solidarity may not always be found, as 40% of the victims faced this trauma alone, while the remaining 60% did receive support from colleagues or the company. However, only 13% of them were encouraged to report the incident. Even if sympathetic, the majority (44.8%) dismissed the seriousness of the incident. These data are consistent with the widespread perception of the journalists (74.1%) who participated in the study regarding the impunity surrounding hate speech and other aggressions endured by female sports journalists.

The problem varies across the sports sector and is not caused by the same perpetrators (Fig.4). The data reveal that such aggression is more severe in mainstream sports. In total, 97.6% believe soccer to be the sport with the highest number of cases, followed by basketball and motorsport.

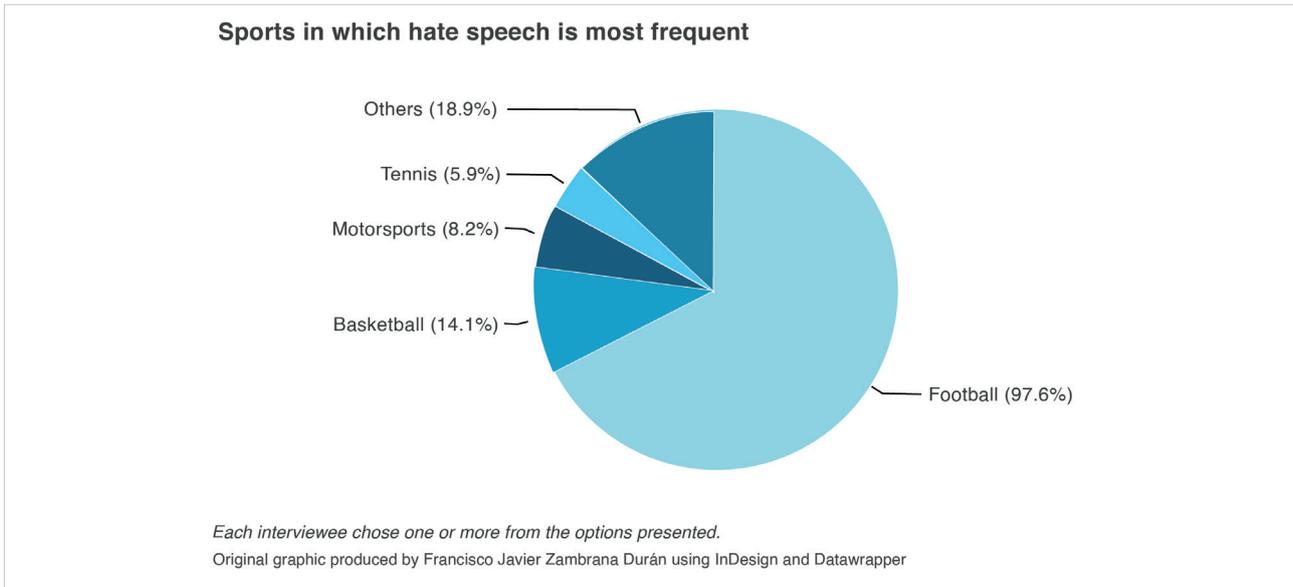


Figure 4. Sports in which hate speech is most frequent

The study data also establish the profile of the perpetrators, corresponding to a man between 40 and 65 years old in 85.4% of cases. Women accounted for 14.6% of the total, being on average under 40 years of age. Most of them are sports fans, with 80% of the perpetrators belonging to this group, with a prevalence of soccer fans. However, the high percentage of perpetrators from journalism and sports management circles, in addition to athletes themselves, is no less serious (Fig. 5).

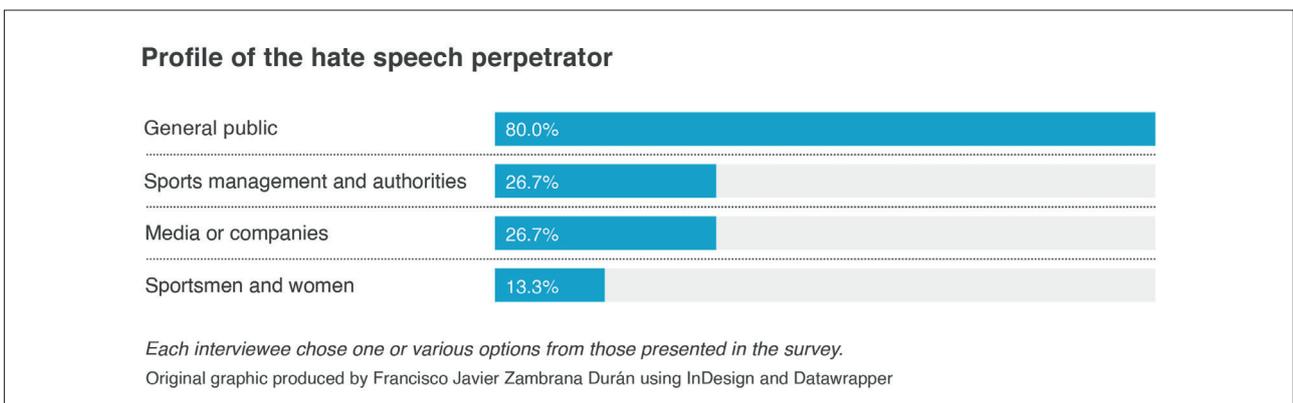


Figure 5. Profile of the hate speech perpetrator

Of the professionals who participated in the study, 67% were directly aware of cases related to hate speech toward a female colleague. Insults, contempt, discrimination, and even some cases of physical violence stand out as the most frequent cases. Almost 27% of the observers did not react or did not think it was serious when they witnessed it, despite being aware of the problem. The rest did encourage the victim to report the incident or reproached the perpetrator. Of these journalists, 86.1% believed that the attacks suffered by their female colleagues are based on false news that

seeks to discredit them professionally and personally, while 78.8% considered that disinformation and false and hateful content against women in sports are the main triggers for such situations.

Aggression suffered by female sports journalists, both through social networks and directly, was identified in this research as a critical issue that requires urgent solutions. In an open question about the different measures to be implemented to improve this situation, almost all of the respondents (93.5%) opted in the first place for education as the main route for solving this problem, especially through media literacy and training in gender issues.

Figure 6 shows a list of solutions, where second place is taken by an urgent need to amend legislation so that cases of hate speech can be treated as punishable crimes, potentially leading to imprisonment in the most severe cases. Regarding the high incidence of the problem on social networks, the respondents considered that this could be easily solved by means of mandatory registration to ensure real identification and prevent perpetrators from hiding behind false accounts. No differences between the responses of men and women were observed regarding the suggestions made.

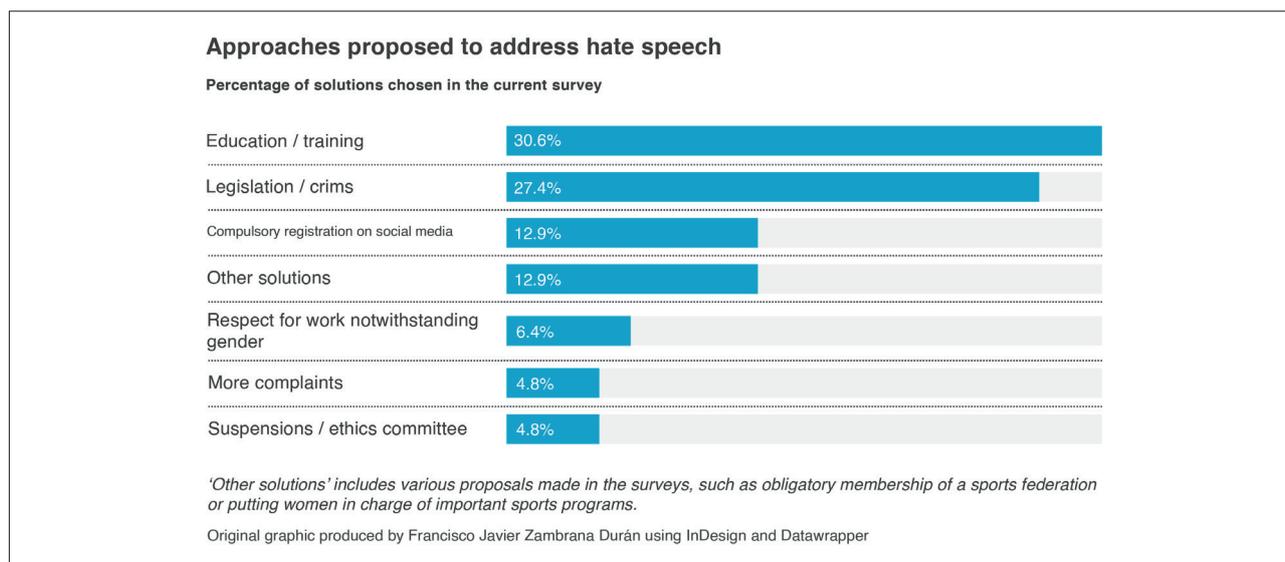


Figure 6. Approaches proposed to address hate speech

3.2. In-depth interviews

Hate speech and situations of intimidation and harassment toward female sports journalists were found in all the reflections, evaluations, and actions reported in the interviews conducted. Carmen Barceló (I1), Pilar Casado (I2), and Carmen Colino (I3) openly declared that they were affected by such situations, reporting them at the time to the authorities or on social networks. Barceló presented two complaints to the Mossos d'Esquadra regarding death threats and constant harassment, also extending to her relatives. Colino made a complaint at a delicate moment for her owing to accusations made against her in relation to the death of a first-degree relative. Casado, on the other hand, filed a complaint for hate speech against a third person. All these actions took place on social media. These three journalists, who are highly regarded in their professional field, agreed to share their experience as victims and to reflect on the problem and its solutions.

3.2.1. Characteristics, perpetrators, and consequences of hate speech

The journalists interviewed identified two main reasons triggering hatred speech: preference for a sports team and being a woman.

"They assume that I support the opposing team; very overt speeches at certain times, such as when there is rivalry between Barça and Madrid" ["*Dan por hecho que tengo los colores contrarios; discursos muy manifiestos en momentos determinados, como cuando hay una rivalidad Barça-Madrid*"] (E2).

"They attack us for being women in an eminently male world, where we have yet to make our mark" ["*Atacan por ser mujer en un mundo eminentemente de hombres, en el que aún no hemos puesto los dos pies*"] (E1).

Both agreed that hate speeches are loaded with sexual discrimination and utter misogyny. Physical appearance, sports training, and sexual connotations are the main focus of the messages they receive, loaded with foul language:

"Fat, asshole, fucker, sellout" ["*Gorda, gilipollas, cabrona, vendida*"] (I3).

"Bitch; go to the kitchen; you're an old woman" ["*Puta; vete a la cocina; eres una vieja*"] (I1).

"You have no idea, go scrub..." ["*No tienes ni idea, vete a fregar...*"] (I2).

The types of hate speech received first-hand include insults, contempt, malicious intent, and hostility. Harassment and threats are also practices referred to by two of them (I1 and I3).

"I have been followed in the street and even insulted by some parents." ["*En la calle me han seguido y hasta algún padre me ha insultado*"] (I3).

Aggressions have taken place mainly through *Twitter*. Colino believes that this social network did not evolve as it was supposed to owing to the presence of hate speech:

“I think that is the reason why it has not grown more, even though *Twitter Spain* has great professionals” [*“Creo que por ello no ha crecido más, aun cuando Twitter España cuenta con grandes profesionales”*] (13).

“The standard profile of the perpetrator, is a man between 40 and 65 years old and a fan of mainstream sports”

These women also reported cases in which hateful actions have been direct, during visits to specific locations or when working for a specific media outlet. Two of them reported receiving anonymous letters (11) or telephone calls (13).

There was a disparity regarding the rest of the media as a vehicle for hate content. Barceló believed that the same applies to all media, while Casado considers television to be the main source of hate speech given its high penetration and visibility, characteristics that Colino also highlights, although she specifies:

“More hate messages are concentrated on social networks, not on TV itself; it’s important to differentiate” [*“Concentra más mensajes de odio en redes sociales, no en la propia televisión; es importante diferenciarlo”*].

All three women are aware of instances of aggression against female colleagues, mostly those who cover soccer. These situations are similar to those they experienced themselves, although with major sexual connotations owing to their younger age. They agree that, the greater the visibility of the journalist, the more hate speech they receive.

Their long experience indicates that hate messages remain the same, while only their power of propagation and viralization have changed through social networks, with savage attacks on professional or physical aspects, as Colino points out:

“Times have changed, but not the modus operandi, and we all have this hate speech in mind, in one way or another” [*“Han cambiado los tiempos, pero no el modus operandi y todas tenemos presente ese discurso de odio, de una manera u otra”*].

Barceló notes that media coverage was infinitely lower prior to the Internet, but she was “looked at strangely” [*“miraban raro”*] on the field and her presence was questioned, occasionally requiring a trainer to certify her as an accredited journalist at a match.

In this way, they experienced many situations at the beginning of their career in which their professionalism was questioned owing to their gender or when they received sexist insults. Casado believes that fans were more polite back then and argues that there is a social component, not just a sporting one:

“It is not an isolated element, but it is a faithful reflection of the society they belong to” [*“No es un elemento aislado, sino que es fiel reflejo de la sociedad a la que pertenecen”*].

She believes that roles in sports journalism have always existed. Thus, female sports presenters or sportscasters are lacking. Barceló points out that we are moving in the right direction toward equality “that does not yet exist” [*“que no existe aún”*], while Colino stresses that there is a deep Spain that “stigmatizes women a lot” [*“nos estigmatiza mucho”*] and hinders any progress.

They consider social networks to represent an evolution, a development that, however, also suffers from drawbacks, such as anonymity or fake profiles, which make it difficult to file complaints. Casado believes that anonymity should be mitigated by requiring registration with an identity card, “not just an email address” [*“no solo un email”*]. She believes that social networks have encouraged hate crime by becoming “anything goes” [*“todo vale”*]:

“We entered like a bull in a china shop, and many journalists have closed their accounts as a result of the consequences” [*“Hemos entrado como elefante en cacharrería y muchos periodistas, a raíz de las consecuencias, han cerrado sus cuentas”*].

She notes the overexposure of private life, which provides arguments and data that encourage hate crimes. Colino stresses that journalists must be very careful with the content they publish and the language they use, since “they are under the microscope” [*“nos miran con lupa”*].

Football, as a result of the greater number of fans, is the sport where hate speech is most prevalent. Barceló claims to receive hate speech to a greater extent than a journalist who covers rhythmic gymnastics or swimming, and underlines:

“Racism and homophobia in the world of football has become a very serious issue” [*“El racismo y la homofobia en el mundo del fútbol se ha convertido en un fenómeno gravísimo”*].

Casado considers herself lucky regarding her followers:

“Following the social media boom, I switched to covering basketball, which has a more peaceful fan base” [*“Con el boom de las redes sociales pasé a cubrir baloncesto, que cuenta con una afición más pacífica”*].

“Hate speech also affects their male colleagues focused mainly on arbitrary, political, or ideological issues rather than physical characteristics”

However, she points out that this issue concerns not only fans but also society as a whole, even though hate speech is often channeled through sports.

According to all three of them, this situation can be extrapolated from female sports journalists to include female referees and athletes, especially female soccer players. Barceló points out that there is a certain stigmatization of girls who play football:

“They have had to jump many barriers. The opposite happens with a boy; he has the support of his family, while a girl footballer is considered to be a lesbian” [*“Han tenido que saltar muchos muros. Con un chico sucede todo lo contrario, cuenta con el apoyo de su familia, mientras una niña futbolista supone que se crea que es lesbiana”*].

Although there are athletes who suffer hate speech, Casado believes that they receive it to a lesser extent than sports journalists.

The journalists also outlined the profile of the person who delivers hate speech. Although anonymity prevails, it is clear that men over 40 years old (“although there are also women” [*“aunque también hay mujeres”*]) and young people predominate. Casado considers that there is “a tremendous degree of cowardice” [*“un grado de cobardía tremendo”*] behind this anonymity. They are aware that hate speech also affects their male colleagues: “they are told outrageous things” [*“les dicen auténticas barbaridades”*] (12), focused mainly on arbitrary, political, or ideological issues rather than physical characteristics. This is a distinguishing element in the recurrent hate speech against women.

“They don’t shout ‘hey gorgeous’ or ‘you are hot’ to my male colleagues; they are not jeered at in the same way, despite having the same exposure as me” [*“A mis compañeros no les gritan ‘guapo’ o ‘qué bueno estás’, no los jalean teniendo la misma exposición que yo”*], explains Barceló.

These female journalists express their concern about the increasing number of women being affected by such messages. While the main perpetrators are men, some insults to female referees come from women. Barceló believes that this happens because the patriarchal culture injects these messages into women themselves: “It is unbelievable that one woman should send another one home to scrub” [*“Es alucinante que una mujer mande a fregar a otra”*]. Colino also states that there are tremendous messages from women and reflects that:

“We should be very proud to be free, to exercise a certain profession, to move forward” [*“Tenemos que estar muy orgullosas de ser libres, de ejercer una determinada profesión, de avanzar”*].

Casado and Colino believe that this type of situation is also found in other areas of journalism.

“The same must happen to female political journalists; if you express your opinion about the opposition, you will be insulted in the same way” [*“A las periodistas que cubren política debe pasarles lo mismo; si opinas de la oposición van a insultarte de la misma forma”*] (12).

In soccer, Barceló believes that criticism in the world of soccer is destructive:

“There is no constructive criticism as in other areas of journalism. The same hate speech would not be produced in cultural, scientific, economic, or other journalism because there is a different consumer profile” [*“No existe crítica constructiva como en otros ámbitos del periodismo. El mismo discurso de odio no se produciría si me dedicase al periodismo cultural, científico, económico u otro porque hay otro perfil de consumidor”*].

Regarding the consequences of hate speech, the three journalists have been affected by it, although they try to ignore it. Colino states that it can do a lot of harm, not only to them but also to their family and friends. All three have always felt supported when they experienced these issues. Casado’s private life has not been affected:

“I try to be cautious to avoid certain comments” [*“Intento tener cuidado para no dar lugar a determinados comentarios”*].

Barceló does not share some ideas on social networks:

“Not because of coercion but because I do what I do and it does not really pay off” [*“No por coacción sino por dedicarme a lo que me dedico y porque no me suma”*].

Self-censorship did not apply in her case:

“All my life I have fought for freedom of expression, and in my home I have been lucky enough to think and say what I wanted. That’s why I’m a journalist” [*“Durante toda mi vida he luchado por la libertad de expresión y en mi casa he tenido la suerte de pensar y decir lo que he querido. Por eso soy periodista”*].

Colino has felt constrained when it comes to showing a photograph or expressing her opinion. She always tries to stay under the radar so as not to be recognized:

“I used to reply to everyone, but now only to those who express themselves with respect and constructive criticism” [*“Antes contestaba a todos, ahora solo a aquellos que hablan desde el respeto y aportan”*].

According to 72.9% of the professionals consulted, social networks are the main setting for hate speech against female sports journalists. Overall, *Twitter* is the most worrying platform

None of them have considered leaving sports journalism due to hate speech.

“You have to be there fighting; if not, there would be no female boxers, soccer players. We must be there because others will come after us, and we have to do it for them” [*Hay que estar ahí luchando, no habría entonces mujeres boxeadoras, futbolistas. Debemos estar porque detrás vienen otras y hay que hacerlo por ellas*] (I1).

“It would set a bad example for the new generations. Every career has its problems” [*Mal ejemplo daría a las nuevas generaciones. En todas las profesiones hay problemas*] (I3).

The use of hate speech in the name of freedom of expression is a serious matter for them.

“There is a limit: insults, disrespect, intolerance, xenophobia, homophobia, violence...; and this is where the law must step in and protect people” [*Hay una frontera: el insulto, la falta de respeto, la intolerancia, la xenofobia, la homofobia, la violencia...; y es aquí donde debe intervenir la ley y proteger*] (I1).

“Freedom of expression has its limits; one’s freedom ends when another’s begins. It’s a very fine line” [*La libertad de expresión tiene límites, la libertad de uno acaba cuando comienza la de otro; es una frontera muy fina*] (I2).

“Freedom of expression is one thing; libertarianism is another” [*Una cosa es la libertad de expresión y otra, el libertinaje*] (I3).

They consider it urgent to establish a legal framework to regulate hate speech and to put an end to the laxity of penalties and the impunity with which perpetrators act, which encourages these practices.

According to all three journalists, combating hate speech and disinformation requires adequate school training and, above all, a good home education, which cannot be provided by schools: we must educate in equality and respect. Casado defends that beliefs acquired within the family are very important, but recognizes that reversing the current situation will require a lengthy process.

Table 2. Main features of hate speech, according to the interviewed female journalists

Hate speech is fraught with sexual discrimination and misogyny.
Physical appearance, competence in sports matters, and sexual connotations are the main focus of the messages that female sports journalists receive.
Two of the interviewees stated that they had suffered harassment and direct threats, as well as anonymous messages and telephone calls.
Hate messages have not changed over time, but their power of propagation and viralization through social networks has, with savage attacks on professional or physical aspects.
They are aware of cases of other female colleagues who have been assaulted, mostly those who cover soccer.
According to the interviewees, a social component is involved in these situations, not only a sporting one, which faithfully reflects society.
This situation can be extrapolated from female sports journalists to female referees and athletes, especially to female soccer players.
The standard profile of the perpetrator is that of an adult male over 40 years old.
These journalists have always felt supported when they experienced situations where hatred was present.
None of them have considered leaving sports journalism owing to experiencing hate speech or threats.
The use of hate speech in the name of freedom of expression is a serious matter for them.
In addition to implementing legal measures, combating hate speech and disinformation requires adequate school training and, above all, a good home education, which cannot be provided by schools.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The present study on disinformation, hate speech, and harassment toward female sports journalists in Spain has allowed us to deepen investigation into this problem, learn about its characteristics, propose possible solutions, and outline the profile of its main perpetrators. It has also corroborated previous studies that analyzed hate speech on social media (Chetty; Alathur, 2018; Mondal *et al.*, 2018; Van-der-Wilk, 2018; Piñeiro-Otero; Martínez-Rolán, 2021). This research provides important insights and reveals extremely concerning figures. Indeed, 89.6% of the female journalists participating in this study had experienced violence at work, half of them continuously. Multiple research findings on the importance of hate speech toward female journalists are therefore empirically validated, such as the most recent *Unesco* study on violence against female journalists. However, despite data collection limitations, the indicators suggest that their incidence is higher in sports journalism.

Hate speech and harassment against female sports journalists are widely known among professionals, who perceive this to be a social problem. There is no strong opposition to this problem, but rather an unacceptable tolerance toward those who practice it, as well as a lack of sympathy and support for those who suffer from it. Minimizing the importance of many hate speech cases reflects how the dominant patriarchal culture within this area of society leads to the normalization of situations of aggression and harassment, masked as admiration for physical traits: allusions and comments of a sexual or stereotyped nature are common.

“89.6% of the female journalists participating in this study had experienced violence at work, half of them continuously”

The main objective of violence against female journalists is, however, to damage their professional reputation and undermine the free practice of journalism (Posetti, 2020) by questioning their level of intelligence and manipulating data to damage their credibility, objectives identical to those of disinformation (Wardle; Derakhshan, 2017; Tandoc; Lim; Ling, 2017). Manipulated messages about female journalists become potential triggers for aggression and harassment, proving the increasing connection between disinformation and hate speech and crimes.

Manipulated messages about female journalists become potential triggers for aggression and harassment, proving the increasing connection between disinformation and hate speech and crimes

This is a serious social problem that many victims suffer in silence. This decision is clearly influenced by the social environment that tends to downplay this phenomenon, as well as the impunity that characterizes these actions, reflected by the low percentage of complaints filed. The fear of misunderstanding, rejection, and even possible consequences at work, as well as the refusal of many journalists to participate in this study, confirms all this.

Hate speech is defined in the Spanish criminal code as an offence of incitement to hatred, violence, or discrimination, and its dissemination through “media accessible to a considerable number of people” [*soportes accesibles a un número considerable de personas*], such as the media and social networks, is an aggravating factor. Determining whether such an offense has been committed has the difficulty of potentially clashing with the fundamental right of freedom of expression, a difficulty that may hinder the willingness to report it. For this reason, adequate regulations to dissuade criminal behavior, encourage reporting, and protect victims are needed to address this problem fully.

The relevance of *Twitter* as the social network that spreads the most fake news and hate speech has also been confirmed in this study (Moreno, 2019). As previously reported by Piñeiro-Otero and Martínez-Rolán (2021), *Twitter* proves to be a particularly toxic and hostile territory for female journalists, especially considering how violence is expressed. Other platforms, such as *Instagram*, *Facebook*, and *TikTok*, do not have as much impact despite their significant percentages, and neither do traditional media, except for television. However, from this latter media, further hate speech is developed and fostered owing to the importance generally attached to the physical appearance of female journalists.

It is evident that social networks, with predetermined design options that multiply their potential, have direct consequences regarding the dissemination of violent content (Harju; Huhtamäki, 2021). In the case of *Twitter*, in particular, the results reveal a general concern regarding the possibility of interacting anonymously, which allows users to use false identities. The solution requires specific regulation to mitigate its effects, end the current impunity, and ensure the safety of female journalists in any situation. These initiatives should consider the participation of social media companies and warn citizens of the presence of hateful content (Segado-Boj; Díaz-Campo, 2020), in addition to reporting them.

Soccer, the main mass sport, accounts for the greatest production of hate speech toward female journalists, with fans as its main vehicle. This behavior reveals a sexist and discriminatory social and cultural reality that is still justified as normal. The profile of the perpetrators mostly corresponds to a man, although there are also cases of female perpetrators. Misogyny also exists among women and is a frequent cause of harassment against female journalists (Miranda-Bustamante; Agudelo-Vizcaino, 2021), primarily from female fans and, to a lesser extent, female coworkers. The purpose of such misogyny is the same as that of other forms of misogyny, that is, to discourage women and exclude them from the public sphere (Lumsden; Morgan, 2018) by questioning their professional worth.

The standard profile of the perpetrator, a man between 40 and 65 years old and a fan of mainstream sports, should not distract us from the high incidence of harassment against female journalists within companies themselves and from sports managers and athletes. It is precisely in these immediate surroundings where the victim remains reluctant to report the problem. Empathy tends to decrease when the aggression takes place in our own environment owing to the potential impact it may have, as opposed to when it takes place through social media, for example, where everyone, in some way, is also a potential target.

The cultural and social roots of hate speech warrant the consideration of media and gender literacy education as the most effective tool to address it. It is therefore essential to provide citizens with tools that will enable them to develop a critical mindset regarding questionable information, understanding how the media works and how to use social media responsibly. As pointed out by Agudado and Romero-Rodríguez (2015), this will also serve to counteract passivity, reluctance, and even naivety in the reception of messages. The importance of media literacy in ending this vicious circle requires its urgent inclusion in the educational curriculum.

Female journalists are emotionally affected by harassment, fake news, and other forms of hate speech, but it also harms their personal and professional reputation and even their work and safety, ultimately restricting their freedom of expression. The findings of this study support sociocultural and behavioral models that account for discrimination, harassment, and hate speech against women in their historically male-dominated workplace.

On the basis of the results obtained, the guidelines proposed to alleviate this problem coincide with those of Baya (2019) in their three main areas of focus: law, technology, and education. Regulatory measures are needed to discourage such

criminal behavior and protect victims; technological measures involving social media companies; and educational measures to enable the development of citizens' training in media consumption and gender issues.

As already stated by **Piñeiro-Otero** and **Martínez-Rolán** (2021), it is essential to exert stricter control over hate speech and misogyny. We believe that combined efforts with the ultimate goal of addressing the problem of disinformation and hate speech are essential today and should be introduced as a priority measure on government agendas. Overcoming this problem requires the involvement of not only social network executives and managers but also the three branches of government, supranational organizations, and the general public. Nowadays, it is crucial to provide countries with judicial mechanisms to protect victims of hate crimes, as well as the development of a manual or good practice guidelines for the management of social media. All these guidelines will not only improve the profession of journalism but also contribute to improving relations between the stakeholders involved in sports communication.

This study offers new lines of research to be undertaken in the future, such as monitoring this issue, assessing whether there has been progress or setbacks in this area, as well as extensions to neighboring countries. This will enable an assessment of how cases of hate speech and harassment affect female sports journalists and how this problem should be addressed.

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“The importance of media literacy in ending this vicious circle requires its urgent inclusion in the educational curriculum. Also, anonymity should be mitigated by requiring registration with an identity card in social networks”

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