

NEEDS AND GAPS BRIEF NO. 4: SWEDEN

Authored by Maria Francesca Rita



"We know that if you are doing a story on immigration, feminism, women's rights, you know you will be threatened."

Kersti Forsberg, Director of Fojo Media Institute

"Local newsrooms are under such immense, immense economic pressure, I think that's like overshadowing everything else at the moment, like they're struggling to survive."

Leonard Wallentin, J++ journalist

In Sweden there is a strong legal framework for freedom of expression and media pluralism, which are guaranteed by the Constitution through the Fundamental Law on Freedom of Expression and the Freedom of the Press Act which dates back to 1766. Sweden is by tradition a newspaper reading country, and public broadcasters represent the other fundamental element of the media market. Alternative information sources, such as online media, are becoming a more and more serious competitor. The Covid-19 pandemic negatively affected the media market. Revenues from advertising have decreased and paid subscriptions and subsidies have become the main source of financing.

Sweden is among the most advanced countries in the world for gender equality. The high level of gender equality in the society is reflected in the media sector. However, gender equality is not mentioned in media legislation, nor in self-regulatory mechanisms. Although the condition of women journalists in Sweden appears to be less tough than in other EU countries, surveys reveal that women journalists are particularly exposed to certain categories of threats that their male colleagues do not receive, such as online harassment and hate speech. Moreover, the misogynist discourse is visible in terms of subjects, as gender issues are often triggers of the intimidation episode. Another element that should be considered is the lack of gender-inclusiveness in the Swedish hate crime legislation which facilitates Internet trolls to deny their actions or to claim them to be 'jokes'. Most severe threats online come from unidentified private individuals and right-wing extremist groups.

Local and regional newspapers are able to reach almost every part of the country. In the past 10-15 years, newspapers are becoming more regional than local due to the crisis of legacy media, connected to a decline in coverage and in staff. The remaining journalists have to produce more, have less time to spend in the field, and are becoming more dependent on easily accessible sources. The strong ownership concentration is the reason why there has been no massive closing of local newspapers in recent years. One issue that makes this trend even more relevant is the lack of legislation limiting media ownership. The centralisation of production that characterises these groups means that fewer contents are dedicated to the coverage of local issues, which is usually limited to crime and accidents. To counter the loss of local coverage, a differentiated spectrum of hyperlocal media is developing. A tendency towards de-professionalisation is taking place because of the increased involvement of non professional journalists.

Facts

30%

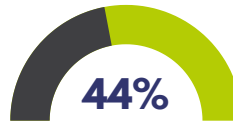
Swedes who pay for online news (Reuters 2021).

9

Alerts recorded on the Mapping Media Freedom Platform between 1 January 2020 and 31 December 2021 (1.1% of the EU27 total).

1 ST

Sweden ranks first in the EU in the Gender Equality Index 2021.



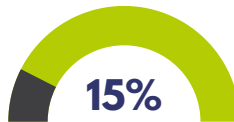
Reporters who are women (6th Global Media Monitoring Project).



Women journalists who received sexist comments (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016).



Women journalists refrain from reporting on particular matters after receiving threats (Lomba et al., 2021).



Women journalists threatened with forms of sexual violence (Löfgren Nilsson and Örnebring, 2016).

> 150

Daily and weekly newspapers in Sweden, a vast majority of which is local (Lindén et al., 2021).



One municipality in four has really weak local coverage or no local journalist at all (Nygren et al., 2018).



Staff reduction in local newspapers in the last twenty years (Nygren et al., 2018).

Recommendations

For Swedish media outlets

- Adopt and commit to gender policies related to both personnel issues and programming content.
-

For unions and national support centres

- Develop mechanisms to support women journalists in the fight against online harassment and hate speech.
 - Work for the recognition of the risks journalists face at the local level (e.g. organising training for local authorities).
 - Increase the provision of training opportunities related to safety issues, digital threats, and legal protection outside of bigger cities.
 - Collect relevant data on media and gender equality.
-

For international actors

- Advocate for the adoption of rules on the transparency of media ownership.
- Compel big tech to take responsibility for what happens on their platforms in a more systematic way.
- Advocate for the amendment of the hate crime legislation in order to include a gender component.