



# CHASING JUSTICE

MALDIVES: STUDY ON IMPUNITY FOR CRIMES AGAINST JOURNALISTS











# CONTENTS

<b>EXECUTIVE SUMMARY</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>ABOUT THE REPORT</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>THE SURVEY</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>KEY FINDINGS</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>CHAPTER 1: A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE AND IMPUNITY</b>	<b>7</b>
Repression by design	7
Fleeting democracy	8
Crushing dissent	8
Journalists pay a heavy price	9
<b>CHAPTER 2: NEW GOVERNMENT, NEW PROMISES</b>	<b>14</b>
A remarkable turnaround	14
Breaking away from a repressive past	14
Impunity marches on	15
<b>CHAPTER 3: SURVEY FINDINGS</b>	<b>16</b>
Lack of safety for journalists	16
Impunity	16
Government failings	16
Government not tackling impunity	17
Media regulators not performing	17
Criminal gangs restrict press freedom	18
Low trust in government	19
More violence online than offline	19
Threats reporting on political corruption	20
Few journalists report attacks or threats	21
Not reporting violence	22
Cases are not investigated	22
Perpetrators enjoy impunity	22
Gender-specific threats	23
Few women report attacks or threats	23
Reported cases not investigated	24
Perpetrators enjoy impunity	24
Self-censorship	25
<b>METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>25</b>



Maldives Journalist Association (MJA) is a non-governmental organization that represents Maldivian journalists. Established in 2009, MJA advocates for journalistic professional rights, facilitates capacity building and professional development, and ensures a safe and free working environment for journalists.

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Front cover: Journalists protest the Defamation Bill in Malé in August 2016.  
 CREDIT: MOHAMED AFRA

Previous spread: Activists protest in 2015, one year on from the disappearance of local journalist and blogger Ahmed Rilwan Abdulla who was only confirmed dead in 2019. The online campaign in 2015 to find Rilwan was called #FindMoyameenaa.  
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## PREFACE

We are pleased to share with you this report on impunity for crimes against journalists in the Maldives, based on a study commissioned by the Maldives Journalist Association (MJA) with support from the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and funding from the British High Commission in Malé.

This research report documents the history of violence and impunity for crimes against journalists in Maldives and the findings of a survey on current threat perceptions amongst journalists in the country.

As with any work of this magnitude, we are sincerely thankful for the support of a lot of people who came together to make this happen.

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**Mohamed Hamdhoon**

President, Maldives Journalists Association (MJA)





## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Journalists in the Maldives have always had to deal with threats of violence while carrying out their jobs, especially under autocratic governments seeking to muzzle critics and control the dissemination of information. Between 1978 and 2008, former president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom ruled with an iron fist, controlling every aspect of the state. Fear of torture, arbitrary arrests, or being charged with terrorism was the lived reality of many journalists and dissenting voices critical of the government. In fact, the following words by an editor of a popular media outlet neatly sums up the state of freedom under the Gayoom regime: “Once, I wrote about a dream and they put me in jail for 117 days.”<sup>1</sup>

Following the country’s first democratic elections in 2008, journalists enjoyed a brief period where they could write about the government without fear. However, the smooth democratic transition quickly gave way to a bitter zero-sum political struggle. In 2012, the government of Mohamed Nasheed fell, with the Maldives sliding back to autocratic control once again.

Between 2013 and 2018, former president Abdulla Yameen led a ruthless campaign to crush dissent. Attacks on journalists and media outlets took many forms: murder, enforced disappearance, arbitrary arrests and detention, direct threats and intimidation, physical assault, and defamation or criminal lawsuits. In many cases, the attacks were carried out in collusion with criminal gangs and gangs radicalized into violent extremism. These groups enjoyed complete state protection and political patronage.

Yameen’s autocratic rule came to an end in 2018 with the election of President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih and his coalition government committed to wide-reaching reforms. Three months into Solih’s presidency, the draconian Anti-

Defamation Act that was used by the previous government to silence independent media outlets was repealed. A commission was established to investigate unresolved deaths and disappearances, including those of journalist Ahmed Rilwan and blogger Yameen Rasheed. International covenants and domestic laws were ratified with the intention of promoting and protecting fundamental rights, checking police and state-led violence, and ending the culture of impunity.

However, undoing decades of political patronage that has protected and emboldened criminal gangs and extremist groups is an ongoing challenge for the Solih administration. Despite evidence that a local extremist group affiliated with al-Qaeda is responsible for Ahmed Rilwan’s disappearance and Yameen Rasheed’s murder, the delivery of justice has been slow with no closure in sight for the families of the murdered.

Meanwhile, journalists continue to write, scrutinize, and inform the country while being intimidated and harassed by various sources. Although there has not been a single murder, abduction or physical assault against journalists since Solih assumed office, what has increased is online violence against journalists delivered through anonymous social media accounts. According to the findings of the survey and focus group discussions presented in this study, some anonymous accounts are believed to be linked to government officials and extremist groups.

In addition to online violence, journalists also report being pressured and intimidated by government officials and political appointees through indirect behind-the-curtain threats for being critical of the government and reporting on political corruption.

As for offline violence, although threats from criminal gangs





Left: Citizens protest in Malé following former president Abdulla Yameen declaring a state of emergency in February 2018. CREDIT: RAAJJE TV

Above: Families of slain blogger Yameen Rasheed and journalist Ahmed Rilwan march in 2018, one year on from Yameen's death. CREDIT: MALDIVES INDEPENDENT

are less frequent than they used to be, gangs continue to be a big threat for journalists.

Gender-specific threats against women journalists were also identified as a concerning problem. The perpetrators range from online threats and harassment from anonymous sources to sexual harassment from sources, contacts, and colleagues. In fact, given that sexual harassment and gender discrimination is normalized in the workplace, women journalists feel their bosses and editors do not take gender-specific threats seriously.

The survey also shows few journalists report online and offline violence, including gender-specific threats, to law enforcement authorities. Journalists believe the police will not investigate these crimes, in particular those occurring online. Even if such cases are investigated, journalists do not believe perpetrators will be held accountable and brought to justice. In fact, journalists have little to no trust that the police will not tip off the perpetrator by leaking information that will put a journalist at further risk.

Overall, the findings of the survey and the discussions of the focus groups demonstrate that the government must stand up to condemn, investigate, and prosecute perpetrators of all forms of violence against journalists and human rights defenders. Otherwise, any attempt to restore freedom of expression, increase civic space, and ensure the safety of journalists and human rights defenders is stillborn. •

## ABOUT THE REPORT

This report, presented in three chapters, provides a broad picture of the dangers faced by many journalists in the Maldives. It describes the types of violence and threats journalists encounter along with the nature and frequency of these types of violations.

For the purpose of this report, a journalist is defined as “a wide range of actors, including professional full-time reporters and analysts, as well as bloggers and others who engage in forms of self-publication in print, on the internet or elsewhere.”<sup>2</sup>

The first chapter of the report looks at the political history of the Maldives and the impact of autocratic governments on freedom of expression and press freedom. The chapter also provides snapshots of documented cases of violence against journalists and media outlets, from 2012 to 2018.

The second chapter looks at the progress of the incumbent government's fight against impunity and how Islamist ideologies that encourage religion-based violence is undermining the rule of law and delivery of justice in the Maldives.

The third chapter presents the findings of a perception survey that captures what journalists think about press freedom, safety of journalists, and the issue of impunity. The chapter also includes insights captured from focus group discussions with journalists and editors of various media outlets. •

## THE SURVEY Conducted online from 17 - 28 March 2021

70 journalists surveyed • 28 women journalists took part • 2 focus groups held

### KEY FINDINGS

<p><b>1 Lack of safety is a big problem</b> Nearly four in five journalists think that lack of safety is a big problem in the Maldives.</p>	<p><b>2 Impunity is a big problem</b> Eighty-three per cent of journalists think impunity for crimes against journalists is a big problem in the Maldives.</p>	<p><b>3 Media regulatory bodies are toothless</b> Majority of journalists think Maldives Media Council (70 per cent) and Maldives Broadcasting Commission (79) are doing a bad job tackling issues that affect media freedom in the Maldives.</p>
<p><b>4 Criminal gangs are seen as a threat</b> More than three in five journalists think gangs and criminal groups are involved in acts that restrict press freedom and affect the safety of journalists.</p>	<p><b>5 Online violence is increasing</b> Three in five journalists have experienced online violence in the past two years. Thirty-nine per cent have experienced online violence more than twice.</p>	<p><b>6 Reporting on political corruption results in threats</b> Fifty-four per cent of journalists reported receiving threats, including undue interference, when reporting stories on political corruption.</p>
<p><b>7 Women journalists experience gender-specific threats</b> Twenty-nine per cent of women journalists have experienced gender-specific threats online in the past two years, and 21 per cent have experienced the same offline.</p>	<p><b>8 Reported cases are not investigated</b> Only one case of online violence, two cases of offline violence, and one case of online gender-specific threats were investigated in the past two years.</p>	<p><b>9 Perpetrators are not brought to justice</b> No perpetrators, except in one case involving offline gender-specific threats, were brought to justice in the past two years.</p>

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government of Maldives needs to make an immediate and concerted effort to address violence against journalists and combat pervasive impunity.

<p><b>1 Publicly, unequivocally, and systematically condemn violence and attacks</b> Government, political parties, and media regulatory bodies must respond to any violence against journalists, including sexual and gender-based discrimination and violence, by making unambiguous public statements that such violations will not be tolerated and perpetrators will be held accountable.</p>	<p><b>2 Impartial, prompt, thorough, independent and effective investigations</b> Government and law enforcement authorities must ensure accountability for all violence, threats and attacks against journalists through impartial, prompt, thorough, independent, and effective investigations. Such investigations should recognize and take seriously gender-specific attacks on women journalists.</p>
<p><b>3 Prosecute perpetrators</b> Government, law enforcement authorities, and the justice system must work together to bring perpetrators of crimes against journalists to justice. This includes those who command, conspire to commit, aid and abet, or cover up such crimes.</p>	<p><b>4 Access to appropriate remedies</b> Government must ensure that appropriate remedies are available to victims of crimes against journalists and their families. This can include non-judicial remedies such as compensation, socio-economic support, and long-term psychosocial healthcare.</p>
<p><b>5 Protect rights online</b> Government must ensure that laws and rights that provide protection to journalists offline are applied equally online.</p>	<p><b>6 Advance safety of journalists</b> Media organizations and media regulatory bodies must advance the safety of journalists by providing trainings on safety, risk awareness, digital security, and self-protection. Media organizations must also provide protection against workplace harassment and discrimination for women journalists.</p>



Former Maldives president Maumoon Abdul Gayoom leaves the custodial island of Dhoonidhoo to attend a hearing at the High Court of Maldives in Male on September 30, 2018. CREDIT: AHMED SHURAU / AFP

## CHAPTER 1: A HISTORY OF VIOLENCE AND IMPUNITY

### REPRESSION BY DESIGN

For three decades, power was firm in the iron fists of President Maumoon Abdul Gayoom. He was the head of state, head of government, the commander-in-chief of the army and the police, and held the supreme authority to propagate the tenets of Islam.<sup>3</sup> He appointed the cabinet, members of the judiciary, and one-sixth of the parliament.<sup>4</sup> Political parties were discouraged and candidates could not run independently for elections.<sup>5</sup> Fundamental rights were not guaranteed in the 1997 Constitution he ratified and were subject to subordinate laws including practices of the government.<sup>6</sup>

The repression of opposition politicians, journalists, and other dissenting voices that marked the legacy of Gayoom was, therefore, by design. He had politically vocal magazines such as *Sangu* banned and many writers arbitrarily arrested and convicted in grossly unfair trials.<sup>7</sup> The only broadcast media allowed were the state-owned TV Maldives and *Voices of Maldives* run by the Information Ministry.<sup>8</sup> Privately-owned newspapers and publications critical of the government had their licence to print or publish requests stalled indefinitely.<sup>9</sup>

In 2005, Gayoom was forced to open up the space for freedom of expression and assembly due to mounting domestic and international pressure.<sup>10</sup> As part of his reform agenda, in May 2005 the President's Office issued a statement outlining 'Proposed Constitutional Amendments.'<sup>11</sup> The proposed

amendments would address freedom of expression, freedom of information, the right to seek compensation for loss or injury, and the right to form political parties.<sup>12</sup> In June 2005, multi-party politics were allowed for the first time by a unanimous vote of the parliament,<sup>13</sup> which resulted in the registration of the four main political parties that have continued to dominate the political landscape of the Maldives.<sup>14</sup> All pending licence requests were granted to privately-owned publications and the previously cumbersome registration process was relaxed.<sup>15</sup> Newly formed publications such as *Jazeera*, *Hamma*, and *Minivan*, and existing ones such as *Adduvas*, became known for their investigative journalism and reporting on previously taboo subjects such as police violence and political corruption.<sup>16</sup>

These newfound freedoms, however, did not result in a safe and enabling environment for journalists. The editor of *Adduvas* received death threats while many *Minivan* journalists were beaten up by the police and charged with treason, drug trafficking, theft, and sedition.<sup>17</sup> *Minivan* — founded by Mohamed Nasheed, the leader of the main opposition political party Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) — was especially targeted due to their anti-government views.<sup>18</sup>

Despite Gayoom's alleged commitment towards democratic reform, his government continued to attack and intimidate journalists with impunity. In fact, in 2006 — the very year the Maldives ratified the International Covenant on Civil and





Political Rights — the government drafted a Defamation Bill that sought to criminalize any content or speech that could be interpreted as an “act against the State”.<sup>19</sup> But the Maldivian desire for democracy was stronger, and the bill was never passed.

### FLEETING DEMOCRACY

The Maldives’ transition to democracy began with the ratification of a new Constitution on August 7, 2008, which heralded an entirely open and liberal constitutional democracy with clear separation of the three powers and an extensive Bill of Rights. On October 8, 2008, the country held its first multi-party presidential elections, with Mohamed Nasheed elected the president.<sup>20</sup> In May 2009, the first multi-party parliamentary elections took place for the 77 elected seats in the new People’s Majlis.<sup>21</sup>

Although the initial transition was peaceful, the first few years of the new democracy was characterized by a succession of political confrontations and crises, often involving a judiciary still loyal to the old regime.<sup>22</sup> The Supreme Court’s constant interference beyond its constitutionally demarcated area of authority resulted in a deadlock between the judiciary and the executive, made worse when the Chief Judge of the Criminal Court was arrested on the orders of President Nasheed.<sup>23</sup> The judge’s arrest was widely condemned as executive overreach and anti-government protests led by Gayoom’s Progressive Party of Maldives (PPM) broke out in Malé.<sup>24</sup> Political unrest escalated until President Nasheed resigned — allegedly under duress — on February 7, 2012.<sup>25</sup>

Journalists document the rally next to police in 2018 following former president Abdulla Yameen declaring a state of emergency in February 2018. CREDIT: RAAJJE TV

### CRUSHING DISSENT

In November 2013, Abdulla Yameen — leader of PPM and Gayoom’s half-brother — was elected the president following a controverted election dominated by the Supreme Court.<sup>26</sup> When fragile democracies fall to autocratic control, it is often dissenters who are the first dominoes to be pushed. For the next five years the new regime led a ruthless campaign to crush dissent.

Opposition politicians were arbitrarily arrested and convicted on politically-motivated charges that ranged from “terrorism”<sup>27</sup> to “possession of illegal weapons”.<sup>28</sup> Members of the Human Rights Commission were accused of “undermining the Constitution” and “high treason” for criticizing the Supreme Court in the 2015 Universal Periodic Review submitted to the UN Human Rights Council.<sup>29</sup> The Auditor General who released an audit report incriminating Vice President Ahmed Adeb in corruption schemes was arbitrarily removed from office.<sup>30</sup> Lawyers were muzzled, civil society organizations were threatened with dissolution, and peaceful protesters were met with police brutality.<sup>31</sup> Attacks and threats against journalists and bloggers increased to levels never before seen in the country,<sup>32</sup> with criminal gangs and



## Lawyers were muzzled, civil society organizations were threatened with dissolution, and peaceful protesters were met with police brutality.

religious extremists protected by the Yameen government enjoying total impunity.<sup>33</sup>

Between 2013 and 2018, the Maldives fell steadily in the Word Press Freedom Index.<sup>34</sup> For three consecutive years since 2016, the Maldives scored low in the Corruption Perception Index and was among the two-third of countries falling behind in combatting corruption.<sup>35</sup>

### JOURNALISTS PAY A HEAVY PRICE

Between 2012 and 2018, as illustrated in the cases below, journalists and bloggers paid a heavy price, usually with their freedom and lives.

#### ◆ Attempted murder

On June 4, 2012, journalists and blogger **Ismail Hilath Rasheed** was about to enter his apartment building in Malé when three men attacked him.<sup>36</sup> One of the attackers took a box cutter to his throat and slashed it clean through the trachea.<sup>37</sup> The men then walked out, going separate ways, leaving Hilath to bleed to death.

Hilath, who narrowly survived the attack, was a former editor of the newspaper *Haveeru* and also ran a personal blog where he often wrote about religious freedom and gay rights.<sup>38</sup> His blog — which the Ministry of Islamic Affairs declared “anti-Islamic” and had it shut down a few months before his attack — also covered politically and religiously sensitive stories that usually did not appear in mainstream media.<sup>39</sup> One such story was written in 2009 about an underage girl who was allegedly kept as a concubine by a radicalized man. The story was the beginning of threats to his life.<sup>40</sup>

Despite the escalation of threats over the years, he received no protection from the police. In fact, in December 2011 when he suffered a fractured skull after an attack during a peaceful protest<sup>41</sup> in support of religious tolerance, the assailants were not arrested even though their photographs were shared with the police by other protestors.<sup>42</sup> This pattern of impunity continued when the government attributed Hilath’s near fatal attack in 2012 to gang rivalry, rejecting his claims that he was targeted by gang members radicalized into religious extremism due to his blog and journalism.<sup>43</sup> Despite having CCTV footage of the area where the attack took place, the assailants were not identified and arrested.

Hilath’s story is not an isolated one. On February 23, 2013, **Ibrahim ‘Aswad’ Waheed**, a journalist from the pro-opposition television channel, *Raajje TV*, was beaten on the head with an iron bar while riding on a motorcycle and left for dead.<sup>44</sup> In a press conference held on March 13, 2013, the police said while two suspects with existing criminal records and gang affiliations have been arrested, the attack on Aswad cannot be viewed as an attack on journalism.<sup>45</sup>

A little over a year since his near fatal attack, Aswad along with 14 journalists from six media outlets received an

anonymous text message threatening them with murder if they kept reporting on gang violence.<sup>46</sup> The text message read “[We] will kill if you keep writing inappropriate articles about gangs in the media.”<sup>47</sup>

#### ◆ Arson

In the early hours of October 7, 2013, reporters of **Raajje TV** went home after providing live coverage of MDP’s ongoing protests against the hijacking of presidential elections by the Supreme Court. A short while later, six masked men armed with machetes and crowbars stabbed the security guard outside the station.<sup>48</sup> They then broke through the reinforced steel door of the station on the second floor, doused it with petrol and set it alight, destroying everything from cameras to broadcasting equipment.<sup>49</sup>

The attack occurred a few hours after *Raajje TV* was threatened with arson and requested for police protection. According to the head of the TV station, the police never responded.<sup>50</sup> A witness said that the injured guard repeatedly asked police stationed nearby for help but received none.<sup>51</sup> Other witnesses said they called the police, who did not respond until after the whole building was ablaze.<sup>52</sup>

Since the fall of Nasheed’s administration on February 7, 2012, heightened friction between the police and *Raajje TV* was observed. In July 2012, Maldives Police Service (MPS) refused to provide *Raajje TV* police protection at protests, alleging that the station was broadcasting false and slanderous content that undermined credibility and public confidence in the police.<sup>53</sup> The Civil Court, calling the police decision to ostracize *Raajje TV* unconstitutional, ordered MPS to provide protection for *Raajje TV*’s journalists and premises.<sup>54</sup>

In December 2013, the Police Integrity Commission released a report stating that MPS was negligent in protecting *Raajje TV* despite having credible information of an impending arson attack.<sup>55</sup> In October 2017, *Raajje TV* sued the state for negligence, asking for damages valued at MVR 11.6 million (USD 743,000).<sup>56</sup> However, the civil court refused to accept the case, claiming the court did not have the jurisdiction to hear the negligence suit.<sup>57</sup>

To date only one individual has been arrested over the arson attack.<sup>58</sup>

#### ◆ Enforced disappearance

In the early hours of August 8, 2014, *Minivan News*<sup>59</sup> journalist **Ahmed Rilwan** got on a ferry to Hulhumale and was never seen again. Rilwan was known for his views on political corruption and its links to religiously motivated violent extremism. Before he went missing, he published two stories — one on death threats received by journalists for reporting on criminal gangs<sup>60</sup> and the other on Maldivian militants fighting for the Daesh (Islamic State) and the al-Qaeda affiliated *Jabhat al-Nusra* in Syria.<sup>61</sup>



**The findings of a private investigation  
commissioned by local human rights NGO  
Maldives Democracy Network (MDN)  
implicated radicalized criminal gangs in  
the disappearance of Rilwan.**

Four days later his family reported him to the police as missing.<sup>62</sup> The police took 29 hours to arrive at his apartment in Hulhumale to conduct their investigation.<sup>63</sup> His office would not be searched until eleven days later.<sup>64</sup> On August 15, his family and friends began an islandwide search of Hulhumale, without success.<sup>65</sup>

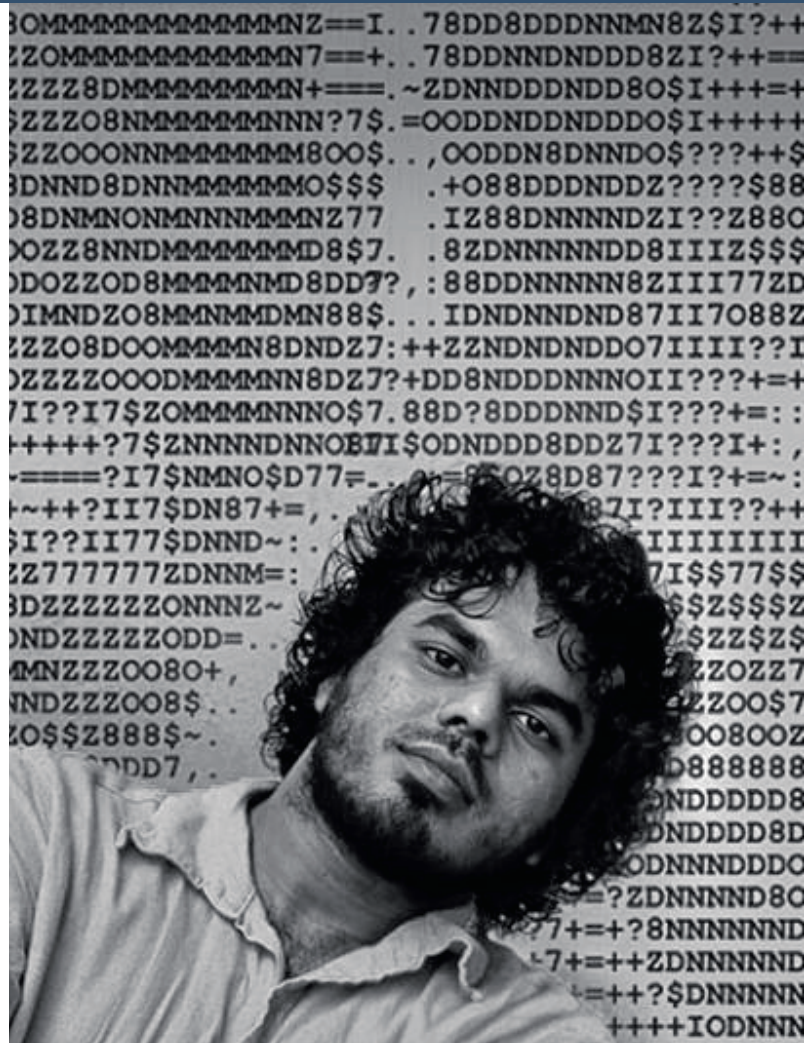
Investigations by Minivan News revealed that on the night Rilwan went missing, his neighbours heard screaming and saw a man being forced into a red car at knife point.<sup>66</sup> This happened outside Rilwan's apartment around the time he would have reached home. They alerted the police, who recovered a knife at the scene. The police did not share this crucial information with Rilwan's family when he was reported missing.<sup>67</sup>

Following President Yameen's non-committal response towards Rilwan's disappearance,<sup>68</sup> journalists of private media outlets issued a solidarity statement calling for an end to intimidation of the press.<sup>69</sup> Yameen's family also submitted a letter<sup>70</sup> and a petition<sup>71</sup> — which the parliament would eventually reject<sup>72</sup> — to the parliament, requesting for their intervention over police negligence.

The police, on September 6, issued a statement saying that there was no concrete evidence to connect Rilwan's disappearance and the reported abduction outside his apartment on the same night.<sup>73</sup>

The findings of a private investigation commissioned by local human rights NGO Maldives Democracy Network (MDN) implicated radicalized criminal gangs in the disappearance of Rilwan. According to the report, two months prior to Rilwan's disappearance, the three main gangs in Malé — often used by the government to silence and intimidate dissenters — had participated in a series of attacks against individuals deemed “unIslamic.”<sup>74</sup> The report also noted that the online forum Bilad al-Sham Media, run by Maldivian militants in Syria, had “made a clear and unambiguous threat to [Rilwan's] life shortly before his disappearance.”<sup>75</sup>

Although six suspects were arrested, only two proceeded to trial on terrorism charges. One of the suspects travelled to Syria for jihad, along with six members of a criminal gang.<sup>76</sup> One of the gang members was Azlif Rauf — a suspect in the brutal murder of parliamentarian and reformist Muslim scholar Dr Afrasheem Ali.<sup>77</sup> MDN's report identified Azlif's brother Aalif Rauf as the owner of the red car Rilwan's neighbours saw on the night of his disappearance. Aalif was eventually arrested on April 22, 2016,<sup>78</sup> after the police revealed that DNA samples from hairs lifted from the boot of the red car matched the DNA of Rilwan's mother.<sup>79</sup>



Above: Ahmed Rilwan. CREDIT: MALDIVES INDEPENDENT / FACEBOOK

Right: Raajje TV journalist Hussain Hassan is arrested in February 2018 at a rally in Malé following former president Abdulla Yameen declaring a state of emergency. Hussain arrived at the police station ‘near unconscious’.

CREDIT: MOHAMED SHARUHAAN / RAAJJE TV

The first preliminary hearing of two suspects, Aalif Rauf and Mohamed Nooradeen, were held on September 20, 2017.<sup>80</sup> Neither were detained while the trial was ongoing. On July 24, 2018, the Criminal Court acquitted the duo due to prosecutorial failures.<sup>81</sup>

Four years to the day Rilwan went missing, former Vice President Ahmed Adeeb serving a 15-year jail term for allegedly plotting to assassinate President Yameen, issued a statement stating that his efforts within the cabinet to find Rilwan was “overruled” by President Yameen.<sup>82</sup> Speaking at a campaign event in August 2018, President Yameen denied the allegation and offhandedly declared, “There is no doubt that Rilwan [...] is now dead.”<sup>83</sup>

### ◆ Arbitrary detention and arbitrary arrest

On November 2, 2015, the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists, Raajje TV journalists **Mohamed Wisam, Leevan Ali Nasir, and Hussain Fiyaz Moosa** were arrested for “obstructing police duties” while covering police attempts to defuse a bomb found near the presidential palace.<sup>84</sup> All three were released the next day, but accused police of





beating them while in custody.<sup>85</sup> Over a year later, on January 24, 2017,<sup>86</sup> Wisam and Leevan were found guilty of obstructing police officers and fined MVR 28,800 each.<sup>87</sup> The duo, according to the prosecution, tried to prevent Fiyaz's arrest. Although Fiyaz was initially charged with assault, the charges were later dropped.

In April 2016, Wisam was also charged with a second count of "obstructing police duty", along with Raajje TV cameraman **Adam Zareer**, in a separate trial.<sup>88</sup> The duo was arrested on March 25, 2015 while covering an anti-government protest, and released after five days in police custody.<sup>89</sup> On February 24, 2017, Zareer was found guilty and fined MVR 3,000.<sup>90</sup> On March 28, 2017, Wisam was found not guilty.<sup>91</sup>

On July 26, 2017, **four Sangu TV journalists and three Raajje TV journalists** were arrested while covering an anti-government protest in Malé.<sup>92</sup> All seven journalists were accused of "obstructing police duty", and was released a few hours later.<sup>93</sup> According to both television stations, the police used excessive force against the journalists, damaging their video equipment in the process.<sup>94</sup>

On March 16, 2018, three Raajje TV journalists — **Mohamed Wisam, Mohamed Fazeen, and Amir Saleem** — were detained while covering an anti-government protest in Malé.<sup>95</sup> Their arrests came shortly after a ruling party parliamentarian accused Raajje TV of making a video showing masked men in police uniforms expressing their opposition to the government.<sup>96</sup> Raajje TV condemned the accusations as "false and baseless."<sup>97</sup> Fazeen, arrested for "defying police

orders", was released the next day. After extending Wisam and Saleem's detention for ten days, the Criminal Court ordered their release, as the prosecution failed to produce any concrete evidence.<sup>98</sup>

#### ◆ Draconian laws

On August 11, 2016, President Yameen ratified the widely-condemned **Anti-Defamation and Freedom of Expression Act**.<sup>99</sup> The law set heavy fines for content or speech that disrupted "religious unity", endangered "national security" or violated "social order".<sup>100</sup> The law imposed jail terms of up to six months for failure to pay fines, and required journalists to reveal the sources of alleged defamatory statements.<sup>101</sup>

The chilling effects of the Anti-Defamation Act was immediate. The day after the law was enacted, the country's first privately-owned television channel **DhiTV**, which also ran a radio station and an online news website, abruptly ceased all operations. A memo was sent to the staff saying that the media outlet can no longer be "run in a sustainable manner under the current circumstances".<sup>102</sup>

Between March 2017 and August 2018, the opposition-aligned **Raajje TV** was slapped with defamation charges four times by the broadcasting regulator Maldives Broadcasting Commission (MBC):

◆ On March 7, 2017, the MBC fined the news channel and its journalist Aala Ibrahim,<sup>103</sup> with MVR 200,000 and MVR 50,000 respectively, for allegedly damaging the reputation of a social worker.<sup>104</sup>





- ◆ On April 6, 2017, the same day Raajje TV paid the fine, the MBC fined Raajje TV again, this time for MVR 1 million, for airing an opposition rally speech deemed defamatory towards President Yameen.<sup>105</sup>
  - ◆ On October 8, 2017, on the four-year anniversary of the arson attack on Raajje TV, the MBC fined the news channel for MVR 500,000, this time for a parliamentarian's comments aired live on July 28. The parliamentarian was not charged with defamation even though his comments were considered a threat to national security.<sup>106</sup>
  - ◆ On August 8, 2018, a month before presidential elections, Raajje TV was fined MVR 2 million for airing a live interview at an opposition rally in March 2018.<sup>107</sup> According to the MBC, the comments were defamatory against President Yameen and threatened national security. The MBC also brought defamation charges against the news channel Sangu TV and the country's main cable television provider Medianet. On March 29, 2018, **Sangu TV** was fined MVR 100,000 for airing comments allegedly defamatory towards President Yameen made by a parliamentarian in December 2017.<sup>108</sup> Sangu TV paid the fine on April 30, 2018.<sup>109</sup>
- In June 2017, **Medianet** was fined MVR 500,000 for not blocking Al Jazeera during the broadcast of the documentary *Stealing Paradise*.<sup>110</sup> The documentary, deemed a threat to national security, exposed systemic corruption and criminal activity implicating President Yameen and Vice President Ahmed Adeb. Medianet launched a lawsuit against MBC,

Ahmed Rilwan's mother pleads with police at a rally in 2015 next to Yameen Rasheed, a Maldivian blogger who was murdered in 2017.  
CREDIT: FIND MOYAMEEHAA CAMPAIGN

but the Civil Court ruled that the broadcasting regulator's decision to fine Medianet was not unlawful.<sup>111</sup>

#### ◆ Attacks on and forced closure of media outlets

In the first six months of 2016, amidst growing concerns over press freedom, three critical media outlets — Haveeru, Channel News Maldives, and Addu Live — were forced to shut down.

**Haveeru**, the country's longest serving newspaper, and **Haveeru Online**, the first online news site, were forced to shut down in March by the civil court over a bitter lawsuit that split the publication's ownership four ways.<sup>112</sup> The court also barred<sup>113</sup> the publication's more than 70 journalists from resigning en masse and working for any other media organization for the next two years.<sup>114</sup> A month later the offices of Haveeru was destroyed in an arson attack.<sup>115</sup>

In April, the online news site **AdduLive** was blocked by the Communications Authority of Maldives, on the order of the Home Minister, because it was unregistered.<sup>116</sup> According to AdduLive staff, the news site was blocked for reporting on corruption linked to the First Lady Fathimath Ibrahim.<sup>117</sup>



**In the early hours of April 23, 2017, blogger and human rights activist Yameen Rasheed was stabbed to death in the stairway of his apartment building in Malé. He had received numerous death threats for over a year, which the police completely ignored.**

Similarly, the online news site **Channel News Maldives** (CNM) was forced to close down in June, citing political pressure for publishing a series of reports linking the First Lady to corruption.<sup>118</sup>

### ◆ Intimidation & harassment

In August 2012, intruders broke into **Raajje TV** and cut the cables in the control room, temporarily terminating the station's broadcast.<sup>119</sup>

On September 25, 2014, a month after **Maldives Independent** (formerly known as Minivan News) journalist Ahmed Rilwan was forcibly disappeared, a machete was lodged through the door of Maldives Independent's office.<sup>120</sup> Hours after the incident one of their journalists received a threatening text message saying, "You will be killed or disappeared next."<sup>121</sup> The attacker was caught on CCTV,<sup>122</sup> and was identified as one of the men who formed a vigilante group that targeted individuals accused of atheism and homosexuality.<sup>123</sup>

On March 19, 2017, the Criminal Court issued a statement accusing some journalists of trying to "disrupt peace and stability", "sow strife and discord among the public", "create misgivings in the hearts of the people towards institutions and the heads of the Maldivian state", "bring the three branches of the state into disrepute", and "create divisions among the Maldivian people".<sup>124</sup> Threatening to take **legal action against journalists**, the court went to say that "some of these writings are of the sort that encourages terrorism".<sup>125</sup> The statement was made amidst media reports critical of the government and the judiciary over two different issues: prolonged incarceration without trial<sup>126</sup> and possible sale of an entire atoll to Saudi royals.<sup>127</sup>

On September 7, 2017, hours after the Al Jazeera documentary *Stealing Paradise*<sup>128</sup> was released, the police raided the office of **Maldives Independent**.<sup>129</sup> The documentary, which features an interview with Maldives Independent editor Zaheena Rasheed, exposed corruption and abuse of power implicating President Yameen and Vice President Ahmed Adeb. The search warrant alleged a conspiracy to overthrow the government with foreign backing and trying to create hatred between the public and state institutions.<sup>130</sup>

On January 31, 2018, online news sites **Mihaaru**<sup>131</sup> and **Avas**<sup>132</sup> were questioned by the police for publishing statements made by the jailed former Vice President Ahmed Adeb. Two days prior, the Maldives Correctional Services, following media coverage of statements made by Adeb through his lawyers, threatened legal action against any media outlet that covered statements by political detainees.<sup>133</sup>

### ◆ Murder

In the early hours of April 23, 2017, blogger and human rights activist **Yameen Rasheed** was stabbed to death in the stairway of his apartment building in Malé. He had received numerous death threats for over a year, which the police completely ignored.<sup>134</sup>

On April 25, 2017, the police released grainy photos of two suspects captured from CCTV cameras inside and outside Yameen's apartment building, asking the public's help in apprehending the men.<sup>135</sup> In the meantime, clerics and religious figures known for their extremist views justified the murder, claiming Yameen was an apostate.<sup>136</sup> A Facebook page called *Qafila* popped up threatening more killings against those they accused of apostasy.<sup>137</sup> The page's first post was a bloody image of Yameen, his best friend and journalist Ahmed Rilwan, and a blank space with the words "loading next".<sup>138</sup> A hit list was also released, which included the names of bloggers, academics, and human rights activists.<sup>139</sup>

On May 1, 2017, Yameen's family submitted to the police over 800 letters calling for a credible and independent investigation.<sup>140</sup> The police refused to accept the letters, stating that each letter must be submitted by the individual who signed it.<sup>141</sup> The next day, Yameen's family filed a case at the Civil Court, suing the police for failing to provide Yameen protection and investigate the reported death threats.<sup>142</sup>

Between May 3 and 9, 2017, the police announced the arrest of eight suspects.<sup>143</sup> On June 18, the police identified three main suspects out of the seven in custody.<sup>144</sup> One of the prime suspects had a record for gang violence and the other for robbery. On July 20, the police forwarded the case for prosecution, seeking charges against all eight suspects.<sup>145</sup>

The trial of six out of the eight suspects, charged with felony murder, began on September 10, 2017 with a closed preliminary hearing.<sup>146</sup> The seventh suspect was charged with aiding and abetting murder and was transferred to house arrest while the Prosecutor General's Office decided not to press charges against the eighth suspect.<sup>147</sup>

On September 17, the Civil Court dismissed the lawsuit filed against the police by Yameen's family, stating that the court did not have jurisdiction to look into complaints of police misconduct.<sup>148</sup>

In addition to the first preliminary hearing, five more closed preliminary hearings were held between October 4, 2017 and April 18, 2018, with a series of last-minute cancellations.<sup>149</sup> Hearings in the murder trial of Yameen Rasheed would not resume again until after President Ibrahim Mohamed Solih assumed office on November 17, 2018. •



## CHAPTER 2: NEW GOVERNMENT, NEW PROMISES



### A REMARKABLE TURNAROUND

In November 2018, the Maldivian people, to the surprise of many domestic and international observers,<sup>150</sup> not only managed to conduct the presidential elections freely and fairly, but also elected the liberal democrat, Ibrahim Mohamed Solih of MDP, and peacefully transferred power to a coalition government<sup>151</sup> committed to wide-reaching reforms. The following year, in April 2019, Solih's party won a landslide victory in parliamentary elections, completing the country's political transition.<sup>152</sup>

Nearly three months after Solih assumed office, former President Yameen was charged with corruption and money-laundering for illegal financial transactions of money embezzled from the state.<sup>153</sup> On November 8, 2019, he was fined US\$ 5 million and sentenced to five years in prison.<sup>154</sup>

### BREAKING AWAY FROM A REPRESSIVE PAST

Solih's MDP-led multi-party government rose to power promising to protect fundamental rights, strengthen judicial independence, and investigate abuses that had taken place under the Yameen administration.<sup>155</sup> To this end, an ambitious 100-day agenda aimed at promoting good governance and enhancing socio-economic development was introduced,<sup>156</sup> with 56 of the 67 pledges achieved by the first 30 days.<sup>157</sup> Within three months the Anti-Defamation Act was repealed,<sup>158</sup> a commission to investigate unresolved deaths and disappearances — including those of journalist Ahmed

People on the streets in Malé, Maldives on September 24, 2018, celebrate the win of Maldives Democratic Party candidate Ibrahim Mohamed Solih.

CREDIT: MOHAMED SHARUHAAN / RAAJJE TV

Rilwan and blogger Yameen Rasheed — was established,<sup>159</sup> and politically-motivated terrorism charges against opposition leaders and dissenters were overturned.<sup>160</sup>

On December 12, 2018, speaking at an event to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Maldivian journalism, President Solih emphasized that his administration “would never go after journalists for expressing a certain thought” and vowed to “create a free, independent environment for journalists where freedom of expression will always be encouraged”.<sup>161</sup> This commitment was reiterated once again on April 23, 2019 when President Solih and the First Lady joined a solidarity march in Malé with the parents and supporters of Ahmed Rilwan and Yameen Rasheed.<sup>162</sup>

Recognizing the Solih administration's commitment to press freedom and journalists' safety,<sup>163</sup> on May 3, 2019, the UNESCO held the first ever South Asian celebration of World Press Freedom Day in Malé, in collaboration with local NGOs Addu Women's Association (AWA) and Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN), the Maldives government, United Nations, International Federation of Journalists, and Facebook.<sup>164</sup>

Other significant steps taken to fortify the government's commitment to promote and protect fundamental rights

...speaking at an event to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Maldivian journalism, President Solih emphasized that his administration “would never go after journalists for expressing a certain thought” and vowed to “create a free, independent environment for journalists where freedom of expression will always be encouraged”

include the ratification of two core international human rights treaties: the Optional Protocol to the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Convention for the Protection of all Persons from Enforced Disappearance.<sup>165</sup> Domestic laws such as the Transitional Justice Act and Police Service Act were also ratified, with the goal of checking police and state-led violence, ending the culture of impunity, and providing redress and reparations for victims of past rights violations.<sup>166</sup>

Under the Solih administration, the Maldives’ ranking rose in the World Press Freedom Index, from 120th in 2018 to 72nd in 2021.<sup>167</sup>

## IMPUNITY MARCHES ON

Despite the positive steps taken to put the country back on the democratic path, undoing decades of political patronage that has protected and emboldened criminal gangs and extremist groups — especially during Yameen’s presidency — is proving to be difficult for the Solih administration. While there are no organized armed jihadi groups in the Maldives, the violence that has taken place — including threats and attacks against journalists and bloggers — seems to be linked to criminal gangs radicalized into Islamist ideologies that encourage religion-based violence.<sup>168</sup> Their ties to politicians have created a culture of impunity that seriously undermines the rule of law and delivery of justice.

In September 2019, the presidential commission mandated to independently investigate unresolved murders and disappearances revealed that a local extremist group affiliated with al-Qaeda had organized and funded Ahmed Rilwan’s abduction and murder.<sup>169</sup> According to the commission, weeks before his abduction in August 2014, Bilad al-Sham Media — a social media forum run by Maldivians fighting in Syria with the al-Qaeda affiliated Al-Nusra Front — accused Rilwan of providing information to the police about Maldivian militants in Syria and their affiliates in the Maldives.<sup>170</sup> They also accused Rilwan of apostasy for writing articles for Minivan News about Maldivian jihadis in Syria.<sup>171</sup>

The commission’s nine-month investigation also found that the same extremist group<sup>172</sup> — a radicalized gang motivated by Islamist ideologies and active since 2011 — was responsible for the Sultan Park bombing in Malé in 2007, the attempted murder of blogger Ismail Hilath Rasheed in June 2012, the murder of parliamentarian and reformist Islamic scholar Dr Afrasheem Ali in October 2012, and the murder of blogger Yameen Rasheed in 2017.<sup>173</sup>

The commission also revealed that the extremist group enjoyed complete state protection, confirming longstanding

suspicions that the police buried evidence linking Rilwan’s abduction to known gangs with ties to powerful politicians. According to Husnu Al Suood, the former chair of the commission, former president Abdulla Yameen and his former deputy Ahmed Adeeb had tried to derail and obstruct earlier investigations into the case.<sup>174</sup>

Despite these findings, the delivery of justice has been slow with no closure in sight for the families of the murdered. In Rilwan’s case, no one has been charged for his abduction and murder.<sup>175</sup> While Yameen’s murder trial is ongoing, his family and rights organizations have repeatedly expressed concerns over long periods between hearings, hearings being scheduled without informing Yameen’s family until the eleventh hour,<sup>176</sup> and multiple delay tactics by defence lawyers.<sup>177</sup>

While impunity marches on, extremist ideologies and narratives continue to exploit religious beliefs to incite violence and hatred, particularly online, against human rights defenders and rights organizations. In June 2020, the women’s right NGO Uthema was targeted for publicizing its shadow report to the state submission on UN Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).<sup>178</sup> The main controversy was around Uthema’s endorsement of a report by Maldivian Democracy Network (MDN) on radicalization and call on the government to implement its recommendations.

The social media campaign to ban Uthema followed a similar campaign to ban MDN over its radicalization report in 2019, which was considered anti-Islamic.<sup>179</sup> The government, instead of introducing effective policies and mechanisms to address growing polarization and hateful extremism, de-registered and banned MDN on December 19, 2019.<sup>180</sup> In Uthema’s case, the government remained silent even as local councils and Islamist-oriented Adhalath Party — a member of Solih’s coalition government — joined the calls to ban Uthema.<sup>181</sup>

While there has not been a single murder, abduction or physical assault against journalists and human rights defenders since Solih assumed office in 2018, social media campaigns against MDN and Uthema demonstrate the prevalence of online violence being delivered through anonymous social media accounts and digital news outlets aligned with politicians with vested interests. If the government’s response continues to be failure to condemn, investigate, and prosecute perpetrators of violence, then any attempt to restore freedom of expression and to ensure the safety of journalists and human rights defenders is stillborn. •

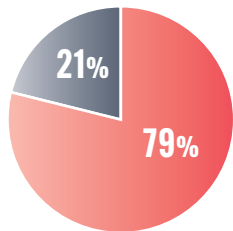


## CHAPTER 3: SURVEY FINDINGS

We asked journalists what they thought about press freedom, safety of journalists, and the issue of impunity. We also asked about their personal experience with violence and gender-specific threats, both online and offline, to better understand the many and wide-ranging threats they face. Here is what we found.

### LACK OF SAFETY

When asked whether safety for journalists is a problem in the Maldives, an overwhelming majority of journalists (79 per cent) said they think the lack of safety is a big problem. Only 21 per cent think the lack of safety is no problem or a small problem.

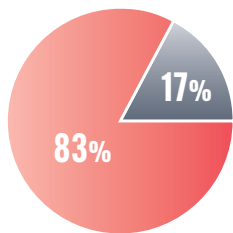


**79%** Think the lack of safety for journalists is a **big problem**

**21%** Think the lack of safety for journalists is **no problem** or a **small problem**

### IMPUNITY

An overwhelming majority of journalists (83 per cent) think impunity for crimes against journalists is a big problem in the country. Only 17 per cent think impunity is no problem or a small problem.

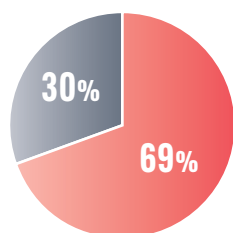


**83%** Think impunity for crimes against journalists is a **big problem**

**17%** Think impunity for crimes against journalists is **no problem** or a **small problem**

### GOVERNMENT FAILURES

We asked journalists how they rate the government's efforts to ensure safety of journalists. The results show most journalists (69 per cent) are dissatisfied with the government's efforts. Only 30 per cent think the government is doing a good job protecting them.

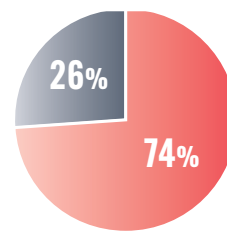


**69%** Think the government is doing a **bad job** protecting journalists

**30%** Think the government is **doing well**

### GOVERNMENT NOT TACKLING IMPUNITY

Most journalists (74 per cent) are dissatisfied with the government's efforts to ensure justice for crimes against journalists. Only 26 per cent believe the government is doing a good job combating pervasive impunity.



**74%** Think the government is doing a **bad job** ending impunity for crimes against journalists

**26%** Think the government is **doing well**

#### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION:

#### SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS AND THE ISSUE OF IMPUNITY

*Journalists said even though they feel somewhat safer under the incumbent administration, they continue to receive threats from public officials, especially political appointees, in government offices and state-owned enterprises. A journalist said: "Prior to 2018, there was always fear journalists might receive direct threats to their life or place of work for writing something. That has changed now but journalists still receive a lot of indirect pressure from political people."*

*Another journalist said: "Before journalists got direct and overt threats and intimidation. Now, it's mostly behind-the-curtain threats. More underground pressure. They call mutual third parties, someone I have a rapport with, and tell them to tell us not to write this, don't report that, if you do this we will cut your funding. These indirect pressures come from within the government. People in government offices, state-owned companies, and people appointed through political connections."*

*A journalist, giving an example of how state-owned enterprises influence journalists' autonomy and safety, said: "Many media outlets receive sponsorships from SOEs. So, if a media outlet wants to write about political corruption in an SOE or how badly employees are being treated in an SOE, we get indirect threats whether it's from someone within that particular SOE or someone within the government. They will never say directly if you write this, this will happen. They will say you can avoid writing about this."*

*Another journalist shared a similar experience: "Recently a colleague of mine was looking into accusations made towards a top-level official in an SOE. A political appointee in a government ministry contacted my colleague and said it's not a good idea to write about this. If you do, this and this might happen. There are some stories like this we can't pursue and publish because we may face some sort of consequence."*

*Speaking about impunity, journalists said no action has been taken to date to end impunity for crimes against journalists and bring perpetrators to justice. A journalist said: "I had high hopes the current government will look into Yameen's murder and Rilwan's disappearance. I thought there will finally be justice. But no action has been taken. That sends the message that attacking us, threatening us, even killing us for being journalists, for the things we write, is okay."*

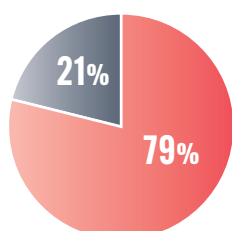
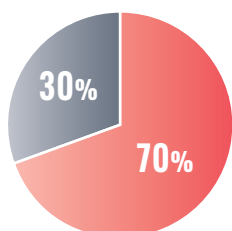


## MEDIA REGULATORS NOT PERFORMING

Majority of journalists think the media regulatory bodies, Maldives Media Council (70 per cent) and Maldives Broadcasting Commission (79 per cent), are doing a bad job tackling issues that affect media freedom in the country. Few journalists (30 per cent and 21 per cent respectively) are satisfied with the performance of these institutions.

Maldives Media Council

Maldives Broadcasting Commission



■ Badly ■ Well

The Maldives Media Council (MMC) is an independent institution established under the Maldives Media Council Act. The MMC is mandated to protect and promote press freedom, prescribe ethical and professional standards for journalists and media organizations, and investigate complaints from the public against both print and broadcast outlets. The MMC consists of eight media workers elected by a vote among media organizations registered at the Home Ministry, and seven members of the public selected among fourteen candidates shortlisted by the ministry. Members serve a two-year term.

The Maldives Broadcasting Commission (BroadCom) is an independent institution formed under the Broadcasting Act. BroadCom is mandated to formulate broadcasting policies, licence broadcasters, and regulate the broadcasting media in the country. BroadCom has seven members appointed by the president, with parliamentary approval, for a five-year term.

In October 2020, the government announced its decision to

Maldives police forcibly enter the main opposition Maldivian Democratic Party (MDP) camp to break up celebrations of opposition supporters gathered to celebrate the Supreme Court's decision to order the release of all jailed political leaders near the capital Male on February 2, 2018. CREDIT: AFP

merge the Media Council and Broadcasting Commission to form a single regulatory body accountable to the parliament and granted powers to licence media and take action against media outlets.<sup>182</sup> The new commission will include members from MMC, BroadCom, and the Information Commissioner's Office. The Attorney General's Office is currently working on drafting a bill to make this happen.<sup>183</sup>

### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: "TOOTHLESS LIONS"

Journalists were critical of the Media Council and Broadcasting Commission and the deeply polarized media landscape. A journalist said: "Media Council is not independent at all. There is politics within media. Some media outlets are seen as aligning with the government and others are considered anti-government. It becomes a competition between media outlets serving two interest groups to get majority seats at the Media Council. When media is politicized, you question how much of an independent body can Media Council be? Will they even work to protect the rights of journalists? And BroadCom is a commission convened by the president with approval from the parliament. You wonder about its independence for this reason. Because even if it's an independent institution, it's independent in name only as its members are political appointees."

A journalist, speaking about the failure of both regulatory bodies to provide necessary protection for journalists, said: "Even if you look at the past two years, neither Media Council nor BroadCom has taken any constructive action. For example, when a journalist is attacked by a police officer, all they do is issue statements. Maybe their mandate doesn't allow them to do something more impactful, but I don't think a press statement is what journalists are looking for at the end of the day."

Another journalist described both regulatory bodies as "toothless lions": "I say lion because they are statutory bodies, and they receive salary from the state. I say toothless because they are powerless or even if they have power, they don't use it. So, who knows what will happen when these two toothless bodies are merged to form one commission."





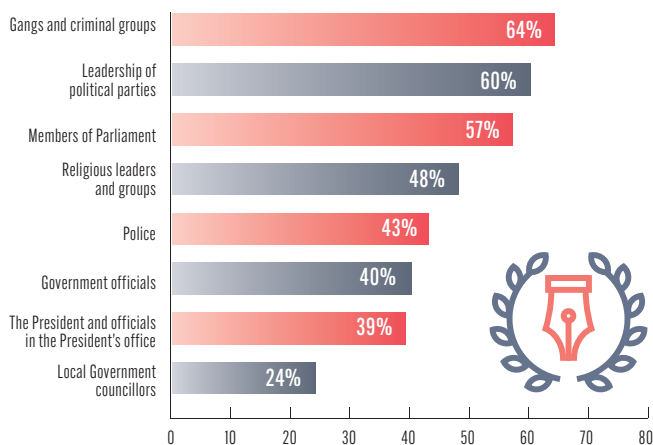
Journalist and activist Yameen Rasheed was stabbed to death in the stairway of his apartment building in Malé in 2016. He had received numerous death threats for over a year, which the police completely ignored. After his death, journalists and supporters marched to demand justice. CREDIT: ASHWA FAHEEM.

## CRIMINAL GANGS RESTRICT PRESS FREEDOM

We asked journalists which institutions and groups they think are involved in acts that restrict press freedom and affect the safety of journalists. A majority of journalists (64 per cent) believe most or all gangs and criminal groups are involved in acts that restrict press freedom.

### Press freedom by institution

Percentage of journalists who think that most or all people in these groups or institutions are involved in acts that restrict press freedom and affect the safety of journalists.



## FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: SOURCES OF THREATS

Journalists shared their thoughts on the top four sources of threats to press freedom and safety of journalists identified in the survey.

### Criminal gangs

Journalists think criminal gangs continue to be a big threat to journalists. A journalist said: "Recently some people were arrested for drug related offences and the police made their photos public. We received threatening phone calls for publishing these photos on the news. And last year, I don't know how, but someone broke into our office and destroyed our TVs and vandalized our desks. I don't know if the police investigated, but we certainly filed the case."

The journalist also noted that the break in was not an isolated incident. The same media outlet was broken into by gang members about five or six years ago, for publishing a photo of a gang violence in Malé. The only staff on duty in the newsroom managed to talk to the group and convince them to leave peacefully.

### Political parties and state officials

A journalist spoke about threats from political parties and politicians: "It's very common for activists and leadership of political parties to attack journalists for writing certain news. These days such attacks take place on social media. I remember an incident that happened in 2017. In a press conference a journalist was told to get ready to go to court for asking a question about accusations of corruption against MPs. This was regarding the MMPRC corruption case."

Sharing a recent experience, another journalist noted that he receives more threats and pressure from government officials than from leadership of political parties: "For criticizing a government official, we were targeted on social media by other political

appointees in his office and their close circles in other offices. His family also came after us simply because we criticized this government official.”

### Extremist groups

Journalists also spoke about how they are targeted for ‘threatening’ Islam. A journalist said: “Religious groups and people who take short-term advantage of things religious groups say are also a big threat. The number of times I have been labelled ‘laadheenee’ [irreligious] for something I have written is not few. We all know the implications of this. These things spread far and faster than a virus. Everyone in the community knows when a journalist is labelled. So, who knows... an attack, a physical attack, could actually happen to any one of us.”

Another journalist said journalists have to be careful when writing about extremism or counterterrorism: “You should know when to draw the line if you don’t want to end up in their bad books.”

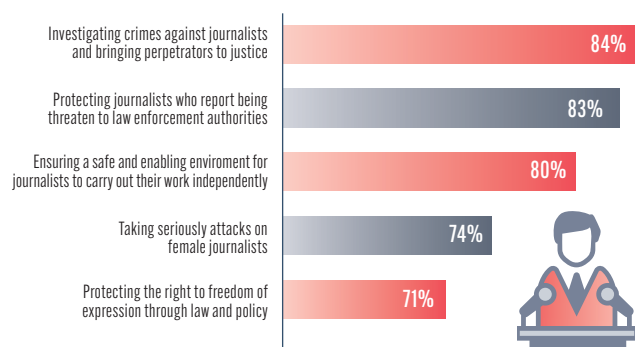
Journalists also think some criminal gangs have links to extremist groups. “Some gangs have some kind of rapport with religious groups. We see this from these people’s social media handles,” said a journalist. “It is difficult to establish a direct linkage, but there have been studies done on this. There are two or three government commissioned reports that show some connection between religious groups and gangs.”

## LOW TRUST IN GOVERNMENT

The results show that journalists have little or no trust in the government to do a good job and act fairly when protecting the right to freedom of expression through law and policy (71 per cent), ensuring a safe and enabling environment for journalists to carry out their work independently (80 per cent), protecting journalists who are threatened (83 per cent), investigating crimes against journalists and bringing perpetrators to justice (84 per cent), and taking seriously attacks on women journalists (74 per cent).

### Trust in the government

Percentage of journalists who have little or no trust in the government to do a good job when carrying out certain responsibilities.



## FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: REASONS FOR LACK OF TRUST IN THE GOVERNMENT

Journalists highlighted various reasons for low levels of trust in the government. According to one journalist, mistrust is high because journalists do not feel ensuring press freedom is a priority for the government: “The people now in the government used to talk about the importance of media transparency and increasing journalists’ access to information. But I don’t think they remember saying these things. For example, the current president, in an interview given to me before he came into power, said he will proactively provide information to journalists. But I don’t see him or his government doing this. Tweeting from official accounts of government offices or updating their websites is not proactively providing information to journalists.”

Another journalist thinks the reason for mistrust is that sometimes the government is the perpetrator: “I think it’s difficult to trust the government because sometimes direct and indirect attacks against journalists come from inside the government or people aligned with the government. So, if someone threatens or intimidates me, if I go to the police, there is no guarantee the police won’t tell the perpetrator about it.”

Lack of accountability for crimes against journalist was also highlighted as a reason journalists have little to no trust in the government: “We emailed Media Council regarding some issues we faced from the government. To date, we have not received a response or even an acknowledgment of receiving the email. Often times these regulatory bodies don’t do anything until we take it to social media and make them pay attention. Even then the most they do is issue a statement. Nothing more is done. Which means perpetrators are emboldened and feel like they are above the law.”

## MORE VIOLENCE ONLINE THAN OFFLINE

We asked journalists about their personal experiences with online and offline violence during the course of their work in the past two years.<sup>184</sup> Violence includes, but is not limited to, physical attacks including killing and other forms of violence, arbitrary arrest and arbitrary detention, intimidation and harassment, and digital attacks including hacking and phishing.

We found that three in five journalists (60 per cent) have experienced online violence and nearly two in five journalists (38 per cent) have experienced offline violence in the past two years.

**60%** Experienced online violence | **38%** Experienced offline violence

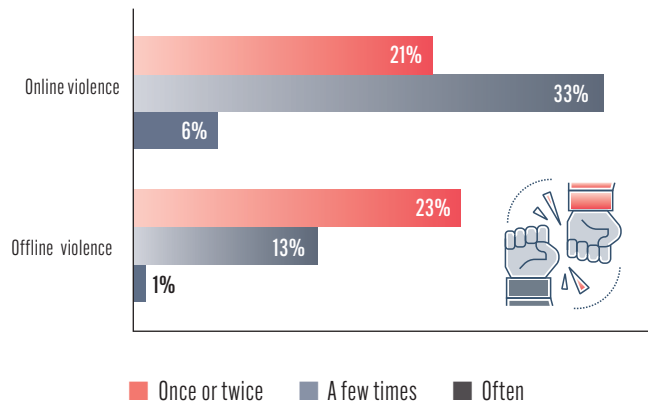
Among those who experienced violence in the past two years, 21 per cent of journalists have experienced online violence once or twice while 39 per cent have experienced online violence more than twice.

Similarly, 23 per cent of journalists have experienced offline violence once or twice. Fourteen per cent, on the other hand, have experienced online violence more than twice.



## Rate of violence

Percentage of journalists who have experienced online and offline violence in the past two years.



## FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: PERSONAL EXPERIENCES OF ONLINE AND OFFLINE VIOLENCE

Journalists said they used to experience offline violence, usually as a result of covering anti-government protests and political unrest that often spilled into the streets during Yameen's presidency. However, journalists now experience more online violence than offline: "I think what has increased is online threats and harassment. Physical conflicts that took place in the streets before 2019, the kind where police had to come and break up protests, that doesn't happen anymore. I think before 2019 what was filed as offline violence against journalists would have been physical attacks when covering protests. That doesn't happen now. But what is ongoing is online violence by government officials and religious groups."

Another journalist also shared similar views: "I would say online violence is more rampant compared to before 2018. If online harassment can be considered online violence, then I personally have experienced it. Last year I was tagged [on Twitter] and insulted with obscenities for a news I didn't even write in the first place. I found the whole situation a little funny. This has been my experience. I usually get harassed online."

Speaking about the sources of online violence, a journalist said: "For me, it has always been anonymous accounts. Anonymous accounts which have been followed by the official Twitter handles of government officials. When you see high-level government officials following these fake accounts, you know online attacks are coming from within the government." Another journalist also noted how government officials sometimes retweet or like posts made from such anonymous accounts: "That's the indication... how we know the government is behind the attacks."

For some journalists the source of online violence is religious groups: "In 2019, during this fiasco of banning Maldivian Democracy Network, we had to remove the byline of a report we published because we knew the journalist who wrote it would receive threats otherwise. But they noticed the missing byline and started speculating as to who wrote the report. They started tagging us on Twitter saying this person or that person wrote it and labelled us 'laadheene'."

## THREATS REPORTING ON POLITICAL CORRUPTION

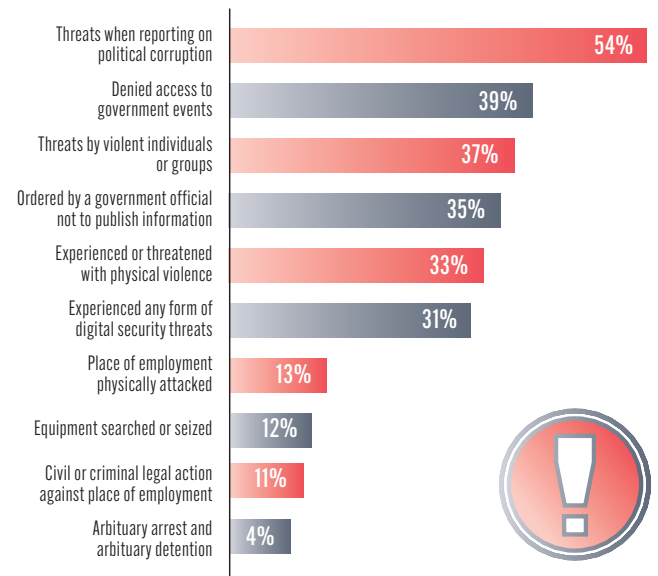
We asked journalists about the types of threats they have faced during the course of their work in the past two years. More than half of journalists (54 per cent) said they have received threats, including undue influence, when reporting stories on political corruption.

Other prevalent types of threats journalists have experienced are:

- ◆ Denied access to government events that are traditionally open to the press (39 per cent).
- ◆ Labelled as 'laadheene' (irreligious) and threatened by radicalized or violent extremist individuals or groups (37 per cent).
- ◆ Ordered by a government official not to publish information under threat of punishment (35 per cent).
- ◆ Experienced or threatened with physical violence, either as a result of a targeted attack or while doing their job (33 per cent).
- ◆ Experienced any form of digital threats including hacking, phishing, doxing and more (31 per cent).

## Violence, by type

Percentage of journalists who have experienced various types of violence in the past two years.



## FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: TYPES OF THREATS

### Intimidated for reporting on political corruption

Journalists said they are threatened and intimidated for reporting on political corruption. "It's common for the person who is being accused of corruption to call and intimidate and insult the journalist who wrote the report," a journalist said.

Another journalist said: "You don't get direct threats for reporting on political corruption. Instead, they threaten you indirectly. For example, they will say if you write this, it wouldn't be really good for you. So, we sometimes publish such reports without bylines. If we don't do that, as



## Journalists noted that government officials actively try to stop or discourage them from writing certain reports critical of the government or a government official.

Journalists hold a peaceful demonstration outside the President Office's in Malé, Maldives on April 3, 2016, after attacks on media freedom. Police arrested 19 journalists during the demonstration using pepper spray and excessive force. CREDIT: MALDIVES JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION

*Maldives is such a small community, it's very easy to identify reporters and call them with threats and such."*

*Another journalist also said: "I have received, not always threats, but if I write something they will call my superior and say what is this, why was this written. On Twitter they will tag me and accuse me of being politically aligned a certain way and harass me."*

### **Discouraged from publishing stories**

Journalists noted that government officials actively try to stop or discourage them from writing certain reports critical of the government or a government official. Interestingly, a journalist also spoke about being silenced by some diplomatic missions in the Maldives: "Recently, some diplomatic missions in the Maldives have pressured some media outlets to not report certain stories or forced to remove controversial news about what's happening in their own countries that's widely criticized and condemned globally."

### **Legal or physical attacks against place of employment**

Journalists said physical attacks and civil or criminal legal actions against media outlets were no longer as frequent as they once were. In fact, they highlighted only one recent incident of physical attack, which involved a gang member breaking into a media outlet and destroying equipment including TVs.

*As to legal action, a journalist said while empty threats are very common, there has not been any direct legal action taken against a media outlet in the past two years: "In early 2019, someone threatened to take our organization and one of our reporters to court. We said go ahead, take us to court, because we had enough evidence to back the report we published."*

*Another journalist shared a similar experience: "Last year we wrote that a Singaporean billionaire who owns resorts in the Maldives has donated ventilators. And towards the end of the article, it was mentioned that he is also accused of allegedly being involved in the MPRC corruption scandal. For this he threatened to take legal action against us. And obviously he did this via politicians in his pockets."*

## FEW JOURNALISTS REPORT ATTACKS OR THREATS

In the past two years, only five cases of online violence and seven cases of offline violence against journalists were reported to the police.

**5** Cases of online violence reported

**7** Cases of offline violence reported





Rae Munavwar pictured at the Edition newspaper launch in 2018. CREDIT: NISHAAN ALI / MIHAARU NEWS

## REASONS FOR NOT REPORTING VIOLENCE

The main reason journalists do not report violence is the lack of trust in law enforcement authorities.

Forty-one per cent of journalists believe the police will not take crimes against journalists seriously and investigate them. Thirty-nine per cent think even if cases are investigated, perpetrators will not be brought to justice.

**41%** Think police will not investigate crimes against journalists

**39%** Think even if crimes against journalists were investigated the perpetrators will not be brought to justice

### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: REASONS FOR NOT REPORTING

When asked why journalists think the police will not investigate crimes against journalists, a journalist said: "Sometimes the perpetrator is either someone from the government or someone affiliated with the government. If the government doesn't hold their own officials accountable, do you think the police will?"

Another journalist said when online attacks and harassment journalists face are not taken seriously by the authorities including the police, it makes journalists doubt themselves and question whether the threat should even be taken seriously: "When Twitter threats are not taken seriously by the police, I fall into a place of doubt where I wonder if threats people make on Twitter, even if they sound life-threatening, are genuinely serious threats worth reporting."

## CASES NOT INVESTIGATED

Out of reported cases in the past two years, only a single case of online violence and two cases of offline violence against journalists were investigated.

**1** Case of **online** violence investigated

**2** Cases of **offline** violence investigated

## PERPETRATORS ENJOY IMPUNITY

Even in instances where the police conducted investigations, no perpetrators were brought to justice in the past two years for online and offline violence committed against journalists.

**0** Cases where perpetrators were brought to justice for online and offline violence



## GENDER-SPECIFIC THREATS

Worldwide, women journalists experience some threats to their safety differently from their male colleagues. The types of threats or attacks women journalists experience can be:

- ◆ **Bias-motivated:** The perpetrator is motivated, wholly or in part, because the journalist is a woman.
- ◆ **Sexual & gender-based threats:** This includes rape and sexual assault, the risks of which increase when reporting on political corruption involving influential people, large-scale public events such as protests, or when arrested and detained. This also includes, whether online or offline, abuse, threats, harassment, and intimidation that are gender-based.

In the Maldives, 29 per cent of women journalists have experienced gender specific-threats online and 21 per cent offline in the past two years.

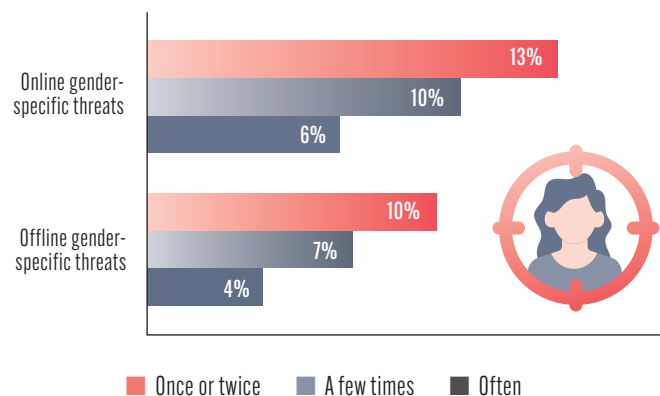
**29%** Women journalists experienced gender-specific threats online | **21%** Women journalists experienced gender-specific threats offline

Among those who experienced gender-specific threats in the past two years, 13 per cent experienced online gender-specific threats once or twice. Sixteen per cent experienced such threats online more than twice.

Similarly, 10 per cent experienced offline gender-specific threats once or twice, and 11 per cent experienced such threats offline more than twice.

### Rate of gender-specific threats

Percentage of women journalists who have experienced gender-specific threats in the past two years.



### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN JOURNALISTS

Several women journalists shared that they receive online threats and harassment primarily through anonymous social media accounts. According to one journalist, the online harassment she experienced were often personal in nature: “They sometimes accuse me of lying or acting

in bad faith for reporting a certain story.” She also received indirect threats warning her “to be careful” or that she was “going too far”.

Speaking about how she sometimes struggles to assess the risk of anonymous threats, she said: “Sometimes I think it’s not serious because these are anonymous threats on social media, but in the back of my mind I’m always thinking even anonymous threats could be dangerous. Physical violence against journalists have happened before. Yameen was murdered. Rilwan was disappeared. And they all started with online threats.”

Another journalist shared her experience with online harassment and intimidation: “Just as the pandemic started last year, I was harassed online. It’s a big secret that everyone knows that the people behind these accounts were working directly with the government and the President’s Office. This harassment that came from the highest level of government continued for weeks and I still get random attacks online from time to time. The tactic they used was to target my gender through character assassination just because I am a woman.”

Journalists also shared their experiences of sexual harassment, which they noted was not something their male colleagues would face. One journalist pointed out that the worst a male journalist will be called is “thief” while women journalists are called “various insulting names using filthy, sexualized language”. She also highlighted the gender-based retaliation women journalists face for covering certain stories: “They post your photos to different places online and comment on your body and appearance.”

Several journalists also spoke about the sexual harassment received from their contacts and sources. A journalist shared that one of her colleagues — a woman journalist who covered business-related stories — quit in 2019 due to continuous sexual harassment from men in businesses and the private sector she contacted for her stories. Another journalist said that a state minister-level official she contacted for a story created a secret chat on a messaging platform and sent her inappropriate messages such as “how are you?” and “I miss you”.

A journalist also reported receiving death threats from a criminal gang after covering a police drug operation in 2020 near Lorenzo Park in Malé, which is named after the local gang ‘Lorenzo’. She was driving near the park when her motorbike was stopped, and she was threatened: “They said they will get me and I better not be seen in this area again.” Although she lived in the same vicinity, she avoided the park area for over a month: “Because I continue to cover stories on drugs and gangs, I still live in fear. Each time I park my motorbike outside my home, I’m scared they will torch it.”

## FEW WOMEN JOURNALISTS REPORT ATTACKS/THREATS

In the past two years, only four cases of online gender-specific threats and four cases of offline gender-specific threats against women journalists were reported to the police.

**4** Cases of online gender-specific threats reported | **4** Cases of offline gender-specific threats reported

### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: REPORTING GENDER-SPECIFIC THREATS

#### Reporting to the police

Women journalists think reporting to the police will not yield any positive results. Although one journalist reported online threats she had received from a social media account, and the police knew who was



behind the account, they were still not able to take action against the perpetrator. “If the police can’t do anything even when they know the perpetrator, how are they going to do anything when threats are from anonymous sources?” she said.

Another journalist who received death threats from a criminal gang reported the incident to the police, but her concerns were brushed aside by the police: “They said they also get such threats. But it’s different when police get threats. They are the police. I’m a journalist.”

Women journalists also spoke about not trusting the police to protect them. They hesitate to report threats to the police, especially threats made by criminal gangs, because “there is fear that police will leak it to the perpetrator”. A journalist who reported online threats to the police said she was more worried about the potential consequences of reporting: “I was hesitant to report, but I did it anyway. After reporting, I was more scared the police will tell the perpetrator and the situation will worsen. During that time, I was afraid to walk alone. I was afraid each time I went out of my home or entered my home.”

### Reporting to employers

The consensus among women journalists is that their bosses and editors — who are predominantly men — do not take gender-specific threats seriously. Several journalists said when they report being sexually harassed by contacts and sources to their bosses, they are usually told to “ignore” or “forget it”, that it is “not a big deal” or they are not believed. “I think they don’t understand what we go through because these things never happen to them. It’s not easy to ignore or forget about it when you are the one being harassed,” a journalist said.

Women journalists also feel their bosses and editors do not take gender-specific threats seriously because sexual harassment is prevalent in newsrooms and male colleagues are often perpetrators. A journalist said: “Sexual harassment is the culture in all offices whether government or private. I’d like to believe it’s different in newsrooms because we are the people reporting such stories and advocating on behalf of victims. But even newsrooms have the same culture.”

Another journalist said inexperienced journalists starting their career are especially vulnerable to harassment in the workplace: “I was new and this used to happen to me. They said things that made me uncomfortable, but I was afraid to say anything. But then I thought if I don’t do anything, if I keep tolerating, they will think I don’t mind. So, I started saying I’m uncomfortable. When I started saying that many times, they finally stopped.”

Some journalists also spoke about the discrimination they face within media organizations. A journalist said: “My male editorial colleagues don’t like a woman being among them and make me feel like I don’t belong there.” She also shared when top editors across media organizations came together in 2020 to start a public awareness campaign related to Covid-19, women editors were not invited until an uproar on social media: “It’s always the second option to invite women. Always women have to fight for the right to be there.”

Several journalists also noted that media organizations had insufficient or no internal mechanisms for handling sexual harassment reporting: “There are no harassment committees, no in-built mechanisms or procedures.”

## REPORTED CASES NOT INVESTIGATED

Out of reported cases in the past two years, only one case of online gender-specific threats was investigated. Not a single case of offline gender-specific threats was investigated.

**1** Case of online gender-specific threats investigated

**0** Cases of offline gender-specific threats investigated

## PERPETRATORS ENJOY IMPUNITY

No perpetrator was brought to justice for online gender-specific threats in the past two years. Perpetrators were held accountable only in one case of offline gender-specific threats.

**0** Cases where perpetrators were brought to justice for online gender-specific threats

**1** Cases where perpetrators were brought to justice for offline gender-specific threats

## A CULTURE OF IMPUNITY FOR SEXUAL HARASSERS

Men in positions of power, whose abuses have been “open secrets” for years, continue to prey on women journalists without rebuke:

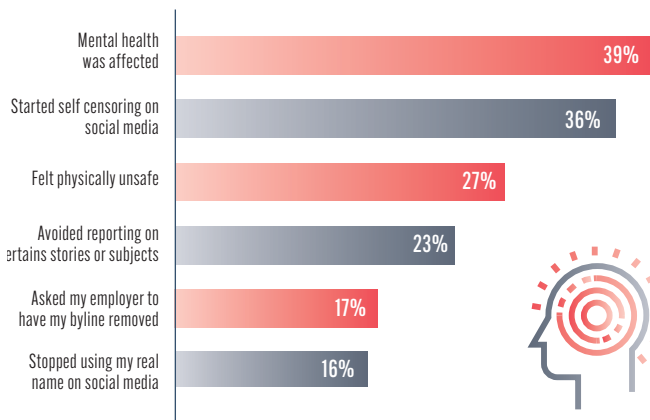
- ◆ In July 2013, Sinaan Ali, the CEO of the Sun Media Group who began his career in journalism at Miadhu News, was accused of sextortion for offering women job opportunities in exchange for sexual favours.<sup>185</sup> Despite these allegations, he was awarded the Maldives’ most prestigious award in journalism in 2019.<sup>186</sup>
- ◆ In 2014, the former VNews editor, Adam ‘Mundoo’ Haleem, was arrested for physically assaulting a woman journalist.<sup>187</sup> CCTV footage showed him shoving his colleague onto a staircase. He was terminated from his post.<sup>188</sup> But he went on to become the chief editor of Avas Online, where he continued to sexually harass and assault more women journalists.<sup>189</sup> In 2018, he won one of the most prestigious national awards in journalism.<sup>190</sup> The following year he won a special award for writing articles on Maldivian history.<sup>191</sup> After a surge in allegations of sexual harassment against him in 2020, 73 journalists from 19 different media outlets signed a petition calling the authorities to investigate the allegations against Mundoo and revoke his awards.<sup>192</sup>
- ◆ In 2019, Rae Munavvar, journalist and former editor of The Edition, was sexually harassed by Hassan Ismail, the former secretary of communications at the President’s Office. “He proportioned me, offering special treatment [...] in exchange for “time spent with him” at either a resort or an apartment in Sri Lanka,” Rae wrote in a detailed account of the incident published on *The Wire*.<sup>193</sup> She reported the incident to the police, the Anti-Corruption Commission, and the President’s Office.<sup>194</sup> But no action was taken. Ismail continued to serve at the President’s Office until his resignation in January 2021.<sup>195</sup>



The Maldivian media community gathered en masse for its first impunity protest after the murder of activist Yameen Rasheed in 2016. CREDIT: AVAS

## SELF-CENSORSHIP

Violence, including gender-specific threats, has adverse effects on journalists. Experiencing mental health issues was reported by 39 per cent of journalists while 36 per cent admitted self-censoring on social media and 23 per cent avoided reporting on certain stories or subjects.



### FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION: TRAINING AND SUPPORT WITHIN MEDIA ORGANIZATIONS

Journalists noted that while they get support from their colleagues and senior staff when their safety is affected while doing their work, there are no established internal mechanisms within media organizations to provide adequate support for journalists.

A journalist said: “We are talking about serious issues that affect our mental health and physical well-being. And our mental health and physical well-being are linked to our work capacity. The collective performance of media is linked to the performance of individual journalists and individual media organizations. So, I feel it’s very important for Maldives Media Council, Maldives Broadcasting Commission and other institutions that have legal status and power to make sure these protocols and mechanisms are established within media organizations. For example, the law mandates offices and

companies to have internal sexual harassment committees. But only a few media organizations have such committees set up.”

Another journalist spoke about how journalists risked their personal safety and worked long hours during the lockdown in Malé in 2020 to report on the Covid-19 pandemic. Some TV stations had their journalists and media workers isolate inside the broadcasting stations during the lockdown so that reporting on the pandemic can continue uninterrupted. Despite the toll taken on their mental health and physical well-being, most journalists and media professionals did not have access to adequate support systems and networks.

None of the journalists that participated in the focus groups have ever received physical security and digital security training.

## METHODOLOGY

For this report, a perception survey was conducted online from March 17 – 28, 2021. Two focus groups were also held to discuss the findings of the survey and capture personal stories of violence experienced by journalists during the course of their work.

Purposive sampling approach with snowballing techniques was used for the survey to generate responses from journalists across the country. The response percentages have been rounded off to the nearest percent in the survey findings presented in this report. To ensure data integrity and avoid responses from those outside the field of journalism, the survey was shared only via the closed networks of Maldives Journalist Association. A total of 70 journalists took part in the survey, of which 24 respondents were women. This sample is not sufficient to be statistically representative, but it does give legitimate insights into the views of journalists, editors, photojournalists and other media professionals from various media outlets who participated in the survey and focus groups.

This report also draws on a great many news articles, press statements, and reports published over the past two decades by media organizations and rights groups in the Maldives and elsewhere. •




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