

# Chapter 3

## Dealing With Sexual Harassment: Are Women Journalists Silenced at Work?

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### **ABSTRACT**

*In the Philippines, sexual harassment is among the threats and attacks women in media face. While Filipino women journalists experience being sexually harassed by colleagues and sources, several have opted not to report such incidents for fear of being blamed and fear of retaliation from the accused. This case study research documents six Filipino women journalists' experiences. Findings were analyzed using thematic analysis, guided by the framework of the spiral of silence theory by Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann. The findings show that interviewees did not report sexual harassment and related issues because they perceived these cases as part of the reality of working in the news industry. Other factors for staying silent were uncertainties about how their employer will respond, the fear of losing sources, and the fear of being isolated from colleagues. The interviewees proposed strategies, however, on how cases of sexual harassment against women journalists should be addressed in the future. Suggested practices and policy recommendations are presented.*

## INTRODUCTION

Filipino journalists are exposed to a range of threats in the form of physical, verbal, legal, and digital attacks (Tuazon & Torres, 2019). Specifically, low wages and poor working conditions, as well as cyber-attacks and online harassment/trolling, were the worst threats they faced in 2018 (International Federation of Journalists, 2018). These are the attacks that have been discussed openly in studies on journalist safety in the Philippines, but there is a gap in the research literature on threats and attacks against Filipino women journalists in particular. The studies available indicate that physical and verbal threats against Filipino women journalists, that appear to be underreported, constitute sexual harassment.

A 1989 study described various cases of sexual harassment against Filipino women journalists, ranging from “conversations with sexual overtones, touching to outright asking for sexual favors by a superior in exchange for a promotion” (Tan, 1989, p. 3). Recent studies and news reports reveal more forms of sexual harassment and violence against women journalists globally: from harassment through email, text messages or SMS, and phone calls (Jamil, 2020; Høiby, 2016) and threats of sexual violence (Wolfe, 2011), to groping, violent sexual touching, and penetration by hands (Wolfe, 2011). Perpetrators included people in crowds while journalists cover public events, public officials, and colleagues (Wolfe, 2011). Steiner (2017) similarly reports that perpetrators include both sources and colleagues. According to the 1989 study in the Philippines, many cases of sexual harassment were reported but these were met with indifference, dismissal, or settlement through an apology (Tan, 1989). There was no mention of any penalties for perpetrators to prevent such cases from happening again.

More recent studies show that for women journalists around the world, there are different reasons for underreporting sexual harassment and other sexual attacks. These include embarrassment, fear of being removed from an assignment, and “compulsion to remain part of the macho club” (Steiner, 2017, p. 11). The Committee to Protect Journalists likewise reported that women journalists have chosen not to report sexual harassment or violence because they fear not being taken seriously, or fear appearing weak and harming their reputation, thus creating a “culture of silence” (Wolfe, 2011, para. 30). An INSI study found that those who opted to speak up experienced being disregarded, losing assignments, or in some cases, losing their job (International News Safety Institute, as cited in Høiby, 2016).

When President Rodrigo Duterte was elected in 2016, Filipinos started hearing “sexist jokes and demeaning remarks about women” from the highest leader of the land (Abao, 2017, p. 311), and women, including journalists, experienced being wolf-whistled and called sexually offensive names (Go, 2019, p. 33). Feminist supporters of the president have given testimonies about Duterte’s policies and programs benefiting women when he was mayor of Davao City, including legal support for rape victims, suggesting that “he is sexist in words but not in action” (Evangalista, 2017, 259). In 2018, however, the president admitted to molesting a maid when he was a teenager (BBC, 2018), and during a press conference in South Korea, kissed a married female overseas Filipino worker onstage (Associated Press, 2018; Alingasa & Ofreneo, 2020). Human rights groups condemned these actions.

Senator Risa Hontiveros noted that though the kiss was “consensual,” a person in a position of power initiated it (Associated Press, 2018, para. 6), while women’s rights organization Gabriela said the act “alarmingly makes sexual advances against women look right” (para. 7). Condemning the sexual abuse of the maid, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women-Asia Pacific said, “Flaunting abusive practices encourages the rape culture and in this case, sexual abuse of domestic workers” (BBC, 2018, para. 15).

Women journalists who were sexually harassed experience psychological effects (INSI, as cited in Høiby, 2016) including trauma (Wolfe, 2011). According to a report by the International Labour Orga-

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