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# Co-ordinated, vitriolic online attacks against female journalists prompt police reports, calls for action from media organizations

Several police reports have been filed in Ottawa and Toronto by journalists and columnists for *The Toronto Star*, *The Hill Times*, and Global News over incidents of online abuse that directly name a contributor associated with each of the organizations.



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*The Hill Times* columnist Erica Ifill, left, Global News reporter Rachel Gilmore, and *Toronto Star* podcast co-host and producer Saba Eitizaz were named in ugly messages that have been reported to law enforcement. Global News editor-in-chief Sonia Verma says 'this type of abuse is of increasing concern.' *The Hill Times*

An uptick in hateful, racist, and sexist vitriol directed at female journalists in recent weeks has prompted a trio of news organizations to co-sign a letter addressed to police and federal ministers calling for greater co-ordination, regular updates, and a formal role for media to file complaints on behalf of or with journalists who have become targets of hate and harassment.

In the past two weeks, several police reports have been filed in Ottawa and Toronto by journalists and columnists for *The Toronto Star*, *The Hill Times*, and Global News over incidents of online abuse that directly name a contributor associated with each of the organizations.

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“For the most part, these reports have been filed by racialized journalists or writers who are experiencing an increasing number of targeted, vile threats of violence,” according to the [letter](https://caj.ca/blog/letter_to_ottawa_and_toronto_police_chiefs) ([https://caj.ca/blog/letter\\_to\\_ottawa\\_and\\_toronto\\_police\\_chiefs](https://caj.ca/blog/letter_to_ottawa_and_toronto_police_chiefs)). “The volume and nature of the rhetoric has caused many of these journalists, as well as their respective organizations, to fear for their safety.”

The letter also notes that the emails are threatening “even in instances where police may determine they do not constitute a legal threat.”

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Representatives from the three media organizations, alongside the Canadian Association of Journalists (CAJ), delivered the letter on Aug. 11. It was addressed directly to Ottawa Police interim chief Steve Bell and Toronto Police Chief James Ramer.

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The letter was also addressed to Justice Minister David Lametti (LaSalle-Émard-Verdun, Que.), Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino (Eglinton-Lawrence, Ont.), Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez (Honoré-Mercier, Que.), Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth Marci Ien (Toronto Centre, Ont.), RCMP Commissioner Brenda Lucki, and Ontario Attorney General Doug Downey.

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In a letter addressed to RCMP Commissioner Brenda Lucki, left, interim Ottawa Police Service Chief Steve Bell, and Toronto Police Chief James Ramer, a number of media organizations say the 'volume and nature' of racist and misogynistic rhetoric 'has caused many of these journalists, as well as their respective organizations, to fear for their safety.' *The Hill Times* photograph by Andrew Meade, screenshot courtesy of Twitter, photograph courtesy of the Toronto Police Service

Saba Eitizaz is a podcast co-host and producer with *The Toronto Star*. She said she's been on the receiving end of harassing, misogynistic, and racist messaging before.

But the events of the last two weeks have been an escalation of what she's been experiencing for the last year, in terms of "constant abuse, hatred, racism, and Islamophobia that we're facing through what seems like an organized and systemic campaign against journalists like me."

"It's come to getting two emails a day ... where there has been cross-referencing among emails where other colleagues receive them, but my name is mentioned in graphic terms, and I just feel like the rage has increased for these parties who want to shrink these spaces for us," said Eitizaz.

Eitizaz also said there is a "believability problem," with a lack of will to do anything to help address the situation.

Originally from Pakistan, she is a former BBC correspondent who has reported extensively from the country and from Afghanistan covering human rights abuses.

“There is no understating the importance and the crucial juncture that we are at now,” she said. “I come from a country where I’ve seen this take place—I’ve seen organized militias and movements targeting journalists with the intent to silence take over the narrative, and I don’t see much different happening here,” said Eitizaz.

Anne Marie Owens, editor of *The Toronto Star*, was a signatory to the letter addressed to the government and to police. Donovan Vincent, public editor at *The Toronto Star*, told *The Hill Times* that the tone and rhetoric of some of the messages received by journalists in recent weeks has seemed to ramp up.

“Whether it’s reporters coming forward and talking about the emotional trauma that these letters are causing, I think there’s more conversation happening and more conversations between journalists about it,” said Vincent, alluding to what has been reported on social media by those who have been targeted.

“But that has accelerated some of the vitriol,” said Vincent. “It’s one of those moments, like the #MeToo movement, where something really crystallizes and where everyone drops what they’re doing and says ‘wait a second, this is really not acceptable, this is infuriating.’ We’ve got to figure out a way, through the police, through technology, through government and politics—we just need to figure out a way to combat this problem.”

In his most [recent article](#)

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(<https://www.hilltimes.com>) **“Various online attacks won’t silence voices in Canadian**

media,” Vincent wrote that as the news industry began to shrink, and “diversity was suddenly on the back burner,” it meant “hateful, extremist voices also had a new platform.”

“That brings us to the present, where a rise in hate—fuelled in part by political polarization, divisions over mask mandates and vaccines, economic and employment shifts and other factors—has resulted in a torrent of racist, homophobic, misogynistic and violent messages being directed at journalists, often women and women of colour,” wrote Vincent.

## **‘What we’re seeing recently is extremely alarming,’ says Global News top editor**

Editor-in-chief of Global News, Sonia Verna, told *The Hill Times* that “we recognize that these attacks are taking place in a co-ordinated and organized way, and it was important for us to calibrate our response in the same manner,” which included sharing information and responding to the abuse against journalists and against the profession.

Verna noted that this wasn’t the first incident that her organization has had to deal with, and that since she began her time at the network, “this is something that’s unfortunately become a constant concern and a feature of the landscape out there.”

“But what we’ve been seeing recently is extremely alarming, and it’s something that also shows signs of gaining strength,” she said. “This type of abuse is of increasing concern.”

Rachel Gilmore, a reporter who covers federal politics for Global News, has long been the recipient of ongoing attacks online and has been [documenting](https://twitter.com/atRachelGilmore?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor) ([https://twitter.com/atRachelGilmore?ref\\_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor](https://twitter.com/atRachelGilmore?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor)) her experience in receiving “misogynistic and racist garbage” and reporting incidents to police. “We have to keep calling it out,” she said.

(https://www.hilltimes.com) The attacks are coming from people who are “clearly racist and sexist,” said Verna. “I don’t think that there’s anything complicated about that, and it’s very much part of the pattern that we’ve been seeing. A number of our journalists unfortunately have had experiences like this, but they seem to be disproportionately directed towards female journalists and racialized journalists as well.”

Erica Ifill, who writes a column for *The Hill Times* and is co-host of the *Bad + Bitchy Podcast*, said that she, Eitizaz and Gilmore “put our heads together, moved it up the line, and said we have to do something about this.” She raised the question as to what happens following a report made to local law enforcement.

“This is co-ordinated, this is systemic,” said Ifill, who submitted a police report to the Ottawa Police Service on Aug. 9. According to the incident description within the report, Ifill received an email from a Proton Mail account filled with expletives, sexual and physical threats, and a line stating that “we made a fun old-school wall with printout pics of all the Canadian media cunts that need to be boogaloo’ed the fuck out of Canada.”

“Why is it that the police aren’t co-ordinating this data? Why is it being kept in different local precincts?” asked Ifill.

Kate Malloy, editor-in-chief of *The Hill Times* and a member of the Parliamentary Press Gallery since 1989, said she signed the letter to show support for Ifill, Gilmore, Eitizaz, and the media as a whole.



(https://www.hilltimes.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/mashup-ministers.jpg)

(<https://www.hilltimes.com>) A letter from a number of media organizations, as well as the Canadian Association of Journalists, highlights a recent uptick in threats made to female journalists. It was addressed, in part, to, clockwise from top left, Minister for Women and Gender Equality and Youth Marci Ien, Public Safety Minister Marco Mendicino, Heritage Minister Pablo Rodriguez, and Justice Minister David Lametti. *The Hill Times photographs by Andrew Meade*

“I signed the letter because reporters and columnists shouldn’t be getting rape threats, death threats, or any threats to their personal safety for doing their jobs. It’s time to speak up publicly about this and to show support for the media,” said Malloy.

Charelle Evelyn, managing editor at *The Hill Times*, said it’s frustrating and infuriating to see women being abused and threatened in such graphic ways just for doing their jobs and doing them well.

“And it’s even more maddening to see it get shrugged off as simply the cost of doing business,” said Evelyn. “People like Erica and Rachel and Saba and all of the other women who are subject to this harassment and hate have the courage to put themselves out there publicly with their name and face for all to see with their work. And they get attacked by people too cowardly to come out from behind an anonymous email or social media account.”

Evelyn said no one should have to take on the burden and emotional labour of trying to protect themselves and their families for doing their job.

“But since they are, it’s the least we can do to support them in any way we can—especially women of colour who face an exponential risk for simply having the temerity to exist,” she said.

Brent Jolly, president of the CAJ and another signatory to the letter, said he thinks “a lot of this call to action is grounded in the antipathy that people felt by law enforcement when they approached them the first time,” referring to instances such as former Conservative cabinet minister and now leader of the People’s Party of Canada [Maxime Bernier’s](https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/twitter-takes-down-maxime-bernier-tweet-that-called-reporters-idiots) (<https://nationalpost.com/news/politics/twitter-takes-down-maxime-bernier-tweet-that-called-reporters-idiots>) tweet calling journalists “idiots” and listing their emails for asking him questions, as well as during the “Freedom Convoy” that descended upon Ottawa in January and February earlier this year.

“I think at the end, you ultimately believe that it’s worth trusting the process, and I think a lot of the people who I’ve talked to about those earlier experiences were really disappointed with how things turned out,” said Jolly.

“Whether it’s the Toronto Police Service, the Ottawa Police



(<https://www.hilltimes.com>) Service, the RCMP, whomever, they continue to sort of see

these as isolated incidents, and I think we need to stop thinking about it that way and I think we're seeing this as part of something a lot bigger."

Jolly said he thinks about what ultimately needs to happen in order for law enforcement bodies to take the issue seriously and do something about it.

"If you continually see it as some person in their parents' basement who's hard done by and angry at the world and letting of some steam, I think if you dilute yourself into that theoretical cocoon, you're missing a heck of a lot and you really need to put this in perspective," said Jolly. "Whoever is behind this are allowed to act with impunity because there is no enforcement mechanism to stopping them."

According to a spokesperson from the Ottawa Police Service, authorities have been working with partners from the onset and in close collaboration with the Toronto Police Service (TPS).

"We continue to share any leads that may arise within our jurisdiction with TPS," according to the spokesperson. "We do not comment on ongoing investigations; and as such we will not provide further details at this time."

According to Stephanie Sayer, spokesperson for the Toronto Police Service, the letter to the chief has been received and is being reviewed. She did not provide further comment about the contents of the letter itself.

But Sayer did point out that Toronto has experienced a spike in reported hate crimes over the last several years, noting there was a 22 per cent increase in hate-motivated occurrences in 2021 compared to the year prior.

The RCMP was unable to provide a response before press deadline. The federal government also did not respond.

However, on Aug. 12, ministers Ien and Rodriguez made social media comments in response to the threats.

"Women in journalism, specifically Black and racialized women, are relentlessly targeted for simply doing their jobs. I know this firsthand," Ien posted on Aug. 12

(<https://twitter.com/MarciIen/status/1558184490547167233>).

"I see you. I stand with you. It's time for allies to step up & call out this insidious behaviour. Enough is enough."

(<https://www.hilltimes.com/>) "Nobody should be harassed for doing their job, but too many journalists are attacked online for exactly that. This needs to stop," Rodriguez [tweeted](https://twitter.com/pablorodriguez/status/1558207554047676417) (<https://twitter.com/pablorodriguez/status/1558207554047676417>) the same day. "As politicians—as leaders—we must respect journalists, answer their tough questions, and call out this hateful behaviour."

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