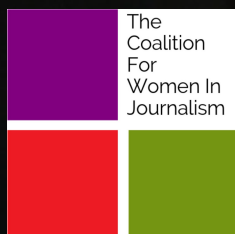


**Canada**

# **RIGHT-WING POPULIST LEADERS WEAPONIZE SOCIAL MEDIA TO SILENCE JOURNALISTS**



**2021  
REPORT**

# ABOUT US

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The Coalition For Women In Journalism (CFWIJ) is a global organization of support for women journalists. The CFWIJ pioneered mentorship for mid-career women journalists across several countries around the world and is the first organization to focus on the status of free press for women journalists. Our network of individuals and organizations brings together the experience and mentorship necessary to help female career journalists navigate the industry. Our goal is to help develop a strong mechanism where women journalists can work safely and thrive.

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## **Canada: Right-wing Populist Leaders Weaponize Social Media to Silence Journalists**

Right-wing populist politics has found a sizable audience on social media globally. The digital landscape – designed around small bites of information as opposed to extensive research – has made way for political conversations devoid of nuance. Communication via 280 characters or short videos, has inevitably led to provocative and sensationalized rhetoric which does not necessarily reflect reality. This, combined with the recent rise of right-wing governments globally and negligible accountability by multi-billionaire tech platforms, journalists find themselves increasingly vulnerable to attacks from right-wing political personalities as well as their following.

Over the past few weeks, a stark reminder of digital vulnerabilities for those holding power accountable unfolded in Canada. According to our findings, the country proved to be the most hostile virtual space for women journalists in September. At least 18 women journalists received vile and threatening emails after right-wing politician Maxime Bernier tweeted a provocative message to his followers. Displeased by their coverage of his work, and their line of inquiry, Bernier encouraged his supporters to “play dirty”, sparking a violent and targeted harassment campaign. He even went so far as to publish the email addresses of some of the journalists online, exposing them to online abuse. Although Twitter later suspended Bernier’s account for violating its information privacy policy and reactivated it only after Bernier deleted the incendiary tweets, the damage was done. His tweets paved the way for hostile attacks against journalists.



Over the past week, the Coalition For Women In Journalism reported extensively on the issue. We were alerted to this issue after Christy Somos, who was specifically mentioned in Bernier's tweet, came forward. Shortly afterwards, Saba Eitizaz approached our organization to report the multiple vile messages she received as well. From thereon, it appeared a floodgate had opened on Twitter, with several Canadian journalists coming forward with screenshots of the extremely vile, gendered and racist hate mail they were sent. The targeted journalists included Ashleigh-Rae Thomas, Shireen Ahmed and Angela Sterritt, among others.

Find below the twitter accounts of women journalists who received these hateful emails according to CFWIJ data:

1. Evy Kwong
2. Omayra Issa
3. Sarah Petz
4. Elisha Davey
5. Jen St. Denis
6. [Wishes to remain anonymous]
7. Bethany Lindsay
8. Abby Neufield
9. Saba Eitizaaz
10. Jaela Bernstein
11. Rumneek Johal
12. Sarah Reiger
13. Anandi Sen
14. Olivia Rania Bowden
15. Christy Somos
16. Angela Sterett
17. Ashleigh-Rae Thomas
18. Shireen Ahmed



Several journalism support groups have condemned the recent wave of attacks that followed Bernier's provocative tweets. The Canadian Association of Journalists has since issued a comprehensive statement and demanded investigations into the matter. The Canadian Association of Black Journalists issued a statement as well. It does not escape anyone's notice that those targeted were largely women journalists and/or journalists of color. The widespread bullying and abuse of journalists is not only unethical but also criminal. Especially when those messages are based on hateful rhetoric targeting the race, gender and sexual orientation of the journalists. Not only is it an attack on democratic principles and the free press but also puts at risk the multiculturalism that the country boasts of.

CFWIJ spoke to journalist Elisha Dacey about what occurred. "This is a symptom of a larger issue and that is misogyny and toxic masculinity on the internet," she said.

When asked what kind of response she would like to see, Elisha said, "This is the result of 'fake news' mentality. We need the RCMP to take it seriously, we need the police to understand how inherently threatening it is. And I don't think they do."

On the impact of instances like these, she added, "Media groups are finally paying attention to the mental health of their journalists. And now it is time for the police and politicians to stand up."

"All Canadians who value what journalists do need to stand up and say it. I am so grateful for the support we have gotten as a response to this hate campaign," she added.



We also reached out to Saba Eitizaz. This is not the first time Saba has been threatened and harassed. “I am in exile because of threats from [my home country] Pakistan. And now to receive the same kind of highly sexualised abuse and threats in Canada as well where I came to be safe is obviously very disturbing,” she told CFWIJ.

Saba believes that journalists of colour are being targeted more frequently in connection with the racially charged atmosphere of Canada’s election season. It is getting more toxic on social media, she said. “Over the past few weeks far-right and anti-vaxxer groups have been growing in Canada in an echo of what we saw in the United States on January 6. They all have common threads.”

Saba said that similar sort of threatening emails, containing sexualised and racist vitriol, were sent to multiple women journalists in recent days. The timing and the dangerous labelling of women of colour as “traitors” indicates an organized smear campaign against certain journalists, she added.



CFWIJ extends its complete support to the journalists being targeted and joins the calls for a thorough investigation into the issue. The attacks appear to be coordinated and planned and the law enforcement authorities need to hold accountable those behind it. We condemn the actions of Maxime Bernier, whose reckless and insensitive tweets led to the entire press community feeling vulnerable to hate and threats. But we also understand that the issue runs deeper. The news media industry needs to find a way to protect journalists digitally, and tech giants need to take responsibility for the kind of political vitriol their platforms are enabling. A much larger conversation needs to take place on why journalists become the first scapegoats of right-wing populist leaders, and what real-world measures can be put in place to protect them. Especially if they belong to groups that are already sociopolitically vulnerable.



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