



In the series: World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development



Press and Planet in danger

Safety of environmental journalists – trends, challenges and recommendations

KEY TRENDS

- → At least 749 journalists, groups of journalists, and news media outlets reporting on environmental issues have been attacked in 89 countries between 2009 and 2023, in all regions of the world.
- Over 300 attacks occurred in the past five years, marking a 42% increase from the preceding five-year period. This surge is attributed to a rise in physical attacks like assaults, arrests and harassment, and legal actions including defamation lawsuits and criminal prosecutions.
- → State actors have committed at least half of the 749 attacks. Private actors are responsible for at least a quarter.
- → A total of 44 journalists reporting on environmental issues have been killed in 15 different countries between 2009 and 2023, with only five cases resulting in convictions. At least 24 journalists survived murder attempts.
- → Between 2009 to 2023, at least 204 journalists and news outlets covering environmental issues have faced legal attacks. State actors filed criminal charges against 93 of them. 39 journalists have been imprisoned, primarily in Asia and the Pacific. Defamation lawsuits are common with at least 63 cases, predominantly in Europe and North America.
- → There have been at least 194 journalists attacked at environmental protests in the past 15 years, mainly in Europe, North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Police and military forces are the main perpetrators with 89 attacks, while protesters account for 32 attacks.
- → UNESCO and the International Federation of Journalists conducted a survey with 905 respondents from 129 countries. Over 70% reported being subject to attacks, threats or pressure while covering environmental issues. Men reporters experience all types of attacks more frequently than women, except for digital aggressions.
- → 407 respondents (45%) said they have practiced self-censorship driven by fears of potential attacks, having their sources exposed to harm, and being aware that their environmental coverage might conflict with the interests of their employers or advertisers.

INTRODUCTION

The global environmental crises of climate change, loss of biodiversity and pollution, impact the lives of billions worldwide and environmental journalism plays a key role in how the world understands this. Reporters and the media who cover environmental issues and its impact not only raise awareness among disengaged audiences who inattentively believe the climate crisis does not affect them, but also document and tell the stories of the marginalized communities who carry the heavy burden of a changing climate. In this sense, reporters covering environmental issues are the chroniclers of humanity's major challenge and play a role in holding policy-makers accountable to this crisis.

However, environmental journalism is a perilous field.

Reporters chronicling the climate crisis often find themselves in remote and isolated locations, far from the reach of immediate help or legal protection. Whether they are investigating deforestation in the Amazon, pollution in industrial regions, or illegal mining in Africa, the remote nature of these assignments adds a significant layer of risk. The challenges of travel, communication, and personal safety in these secluded areas can turn a reporting task into a dangerous mission, highlighting the unique vulnerabilities associated with environmental journalism.

And the work of these journalists frequently intersects with highly profitable economic activities, adding complexity and danger to their roles. Covering issues like illegal logging, poaching, or clandestine waste dumping, involves exposing actions that are interwoven with local and sometimes international economies. This overlap can provoke hostility from a wide array of actors, including corporations, local small-scale operators, and criminal organizations, all of whom have vested interests in continuing their activities away from public scrutiny. These stakeholders often viewing environmental journalists as direct threats to their operations.

Moreover, the readiness of some of these actors to resort to violence poses a serious threat to journalists. State and private actors, as well as criminal groups, have been known to intimidate, harass, or even physically harm journalists in an effort to silence their reporting. The global scale of these threats underscores the widespread and serious nature of the challenges faced by environmental journalists.

In addition, environmental journalism is often a precarized occupation often left to small and underfunded news outlets and independent reporters who lack the resources to mitigate the risks they face and to respond to the attacks they suffer. To grasp the extent, nature, and geographies of such issues, UNESCO collected data from multiple sources and analysed information on a diverse set of attacks against this population¹.

In all, this review found that at least 749 journalists, groups of journalists and news media outlets have been attacked while covering environmental issues in 89 countries between 2009 and 2023 – an average of fifty attacks per year, and in all regions of the world.

Collectively, these journalists and news outlets covered a wide range of topics: from climate change causes—like mining, deforestation, and the fossil fuel industry—to environmental issues directly impacting their communities—corporations encroaching on their resources, land grabs, mega-projects, and the aftermath of extreme weather events. In doing so, they not only shed light on the issues happening in their backyards but also produced knowledge on how the global climate crisis looks at the most local level.

Recognizing that many attacks go unreported and aiming to comprehend the full spectrum of safety challenges journalists and media outlets face while covering environmental stories, UNESCO, in partnership with the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), conducted a survey among reporters from 129 countries. Of the 905 journalists who took the survey, **over 70% reported being subject to attacks**. The survey revealed that women journalists report digital aggressions more frequently than men, while freelancers report higher levels of attacks compared to reporters employed full-time by media outlets.

About one third of the respondents said they have been censored by editors while covering environmental issues and 45% indicated they have practiced self-censorship driven by fears of potential attacks, having their sources exposed to harm, and being aware that their environmental coverage might conflict with the interests of their employers or advertisers.

The combination of both sources (data on attacks and the survey) provides an unprecedented view of the threats. Through this comprehensive report, UNESCO underscores the critical need for greater protection and support for journalists and media outlets as they continue to cover environmental issues and thus advocate for a sustainable future.

¹ Sources published online by international and regional advocacy groups defending journalists.

ATTACKS AGAINST JOURNALISTS COVERING THE ENVIRONMENT (2009 - 2023)

Over the past 15 years, attacks on journalists, groups of journalists and news media outlets covering environmental stories remained constant – with a spike in 2012 driven by protests against mining projects in the Latin American and the Caribbean region, which led to numerous threats against journalists.

Data grouped in five-year periods reveal a clearer trend over time:

With numbers peaking at 305 in the most recent five-year period (2019-2023) and a 42% increase from the preceding five-year period (2014-2018), attacks against journalists covering environmental stories are higher than ever before.



This rise is primarily due to the increase in physical attacks, more than doubling in the most recent five-year period: from 85 incidents in 2014-2018 to 183 incidents in 2019-2023. Geographically, the surge in physical attacks occurs across all regions, with significant increases in Europe and North America, Africa, and Asia and the Pacific.



Who attacks the press?

State actors—police, military forces, government officials and employees, local authorities—are responsible for most of the attacks for which there is perpetrator information available. For every ten attacks in the data, state actors committed at least five. Private actors – extractive industry companies, criminal groups, protesters and local communities – committed almost three. There is not sufficient information to identify the remaining two. Out of all the reported attacks, 13 cases have shown the involvement of private actors in attacks perpetrated by state actors. This however does not exclude the possibility of the involvement of private actors in other attacks perpetrated by state actors when attacks have been perpetrated by private actors.

Attacks by state actors have seen a constant increase in the 15-year period analysed, having a significant spike in the past 5 years. These incidents went up from 111 in the period in 2014-2018 to 174 in 2019-2023. Attacks by private actors seem to be relatively constant throughout the entire period analysed.

The incidents involving state actors are mainly physical, such as arbitrary detentions, assault, harassment, obstruction; and legal, including criminal charges brought against reporters, imprisonment, defamation cases, and other legal attacks. A similar physical/legal split happens in the attacks perpetrated by private actors.



Analysed by region, two trends become apparent: State actors are the main perpetrators in Arab States (all 14 attacks), in Africa (63 or two-thirds of the attacks), and in Europe and North America (102 or more than half of total attacks). While in Latin America and Caribbean, the attacks are more evenly split between state, private actors and unidentified individuals.

What topics were the journalists covering?

Journalists faced attacks while covering a range of topics, with environmental protests (196), mining (142), and land conflicts (115) showing the highest numbers. Other issues were logging and deforestation (83), extreme weather events (56), pollution and environmental damage (54), and the fossil fuel industry (32).

Regional affinities for certain topics are evident: covering logging and deforestation, for instance, is an activity specific to forests, and therefore there are significant cases in regions like Asia and the Pacific, but not in the Arab States. A similar connection appears with regard to mining in Africa.



Overall, while there are minor fluctuations in the topics covered over the years, the data does not show a strong correlation between the subject of reporting and the type of perpetrator involved, with the exception of land conflicts predominantly involving private actors.

Killings

Over the past 15 years, 44 environmental journalists covering environmental issues have been killed, according to <u>UNESCO's Observatory of Killed Journalists</u>. These killings occurred in 15 countries, predominantly in Asia and the Pacific (30), and in Latin America and the Caribbean (11).

The journalists killed in Asia and the Pacific were primarily covering mining, deforestation, and land conflicts. In contrast, no specific coverage pattern emerges in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Of the 44 killings, perpetrators remain unidentified in 19 cases. Private actors were responsible for 16 of the killings, while state actors were involved in nine.

In Asia and the Pacific, killings are evenly distributed among unidentified, state and private actors. However, in Latin America and the Caribbean, most killings lack identified perpetrators, suggesting possible higher levels of impunity or specific patterns in how journalists are targeted.

A review of the judicial status of the killings, based on the information that Member States have reported to <u>UNESCO's Observatory of Killed Journalists</u>, reveals that impunity prevails: 19 cases remain unresolved, only five have led to convictions, and investigations continue in five more. The status of the remaining 15 cases is still unknown and Member States have yet to provide information to UNESCO.

Governments often dismiss these killings as unrelated to the journalists work. In at least seven unresolved cases from Asia and the Pacific, authorities have claimed motives such as land disputes or personal revenge, sometimes denying the professional status of the victims. Allegations include accusations that the journalists' work did not meet "journalistic standards and ethics," or that the victims were not affiliated with recognized media organisations or journalist associations. UNESCO Member States have the "duty of preventing, investigating and punishing" the killings of journalists (General Conference resolution 29 C/Resolution 29, 1997) and their investigations should exhaust "...lines of enquiry that determine whether violence, threats and attacks result from the journalistic activities of the victim..." (Human Rights Council resolution 51/9).

Physical attacks

Physical attacks are the most prevalent form of violence in the data, totaling 353 incidents. As stated before, there was a significant increase to 183 in the latest five-year period. This happened across Europe and North America, Africa, and Asia and the Pacific.

Of the 353 physical attacks, 136 happened in the context of environmental protests. As they respond to specific dynamics, they will be studied in detail further down. Outside the context of protest, the data shows a total of 217 journalists, groups of journalists and media houses who were physically attacked. There is a notable rise in the last five-year period: physical attacks went up to 111 incidents in 2019-2023, from 61 in 2014-2018, and 45 in 2009-2013.

Breaking down the types of physical attacks, 83 instances consist of assaults, the most frequent type of attack, followed by 42 arbitrary arrests (detentions without any charges), 28 instances of physical harassment, 24 attempted murders, 13 abductions, and eight attacks on news organisation facilities or property damage.



Physical violence occurs across all environmental reporting issues hence it is not predominantly associated with any one type. Out of every ten physical attacks on journalists and media outlets, two involve land conflicts, two relate to mining, two to deforestation, and the remaining four cover extreme weather, pollution, fossil fuels, and other topics. Finally, the data does not indicate a high frequency of physical attacks tied to any specific type of perpetrator, although state actors are seemingly more involved in attacks on journalists covering extreme weather, and private actors are more involved in attacks related to land conflicts.

Threats

Over the past 15 years, 77 journalists and media outlets covering environmental issues have been threatened, with an additional 49 journalists receiving death threats, according to collected data. Unidentified attackers issued six out of ten of these threats, while state and private actors were responsible for the remainder.

The mining industry emerges as the one with the most threats associated, with 40% of all threats and a substantial number of death threats directed at journalists covering this sector. Coverage of logging and deforestation also proves perilous, accounting for 18% of the threats.

Legal attacks

Journalists and media houses covering environmental issues who were subject to legal attacks constitute the second largest group registered in the data, with a total of 210 cases registered since 2009.

Criminal charges lead the legal attacks with 94 incidents: 74 involving charges like public order disruption, terrorism, hate speech, and dissemination of fake news, plus 20 cases of criminal defamation. Additionally, 39 journalists have been convicted and jailed for their environmental reporting, with at least four remaining imprisoned as of 1 December 2023.

Civil defamation cases comprise 63 incidents, often used to intimidate and silence journalists critical of powerful entities, a trend already identified in the UNESCO study <u>The "misuse" of the judicial system to attack freedom of expression (2022)</u>. The remaining cases were threats to pursue legal actions made against journalists and media houses, and administrative sanctions imposed by regulators as means to silence critical reporting.

Regionally, journalists in Europe and North America have experienced the most legal attacks (77), predominantly civil defamation suits (36) and criminal prosecutions related to protests coverage (31).

Conversely, in Asia and the Pacific (59 cases), imprisonment is the most common form of legal attack with 24 cases. This region accounts for 60% of all the journalists imprisoned due to their environmental reporting.



Violence against journalists during environmental protests

The research identified a total of 194 journalists, groups of journalists and media houses attacked within the context of environmental protests and climate change demonstrations.

Physical attacks were the most prevalent form of attack, totaling 135 cases. Additionally, 38 journalists faced legal repercussions such as misdemeanor charges for trespassing or obstruction.

In some situations, authorities blocked journalists from accessing protest sites, deported foreign reporters, or denied entry into the country to journalists coming to cover these events. More severe incidents included killings, death threats, and abductions.

State actors were identified as the primary aggressors in 144 incidents (74%), often due to criminal charges arising from protest coverage, confirming a trend identified in UNESCO's previous study <u>Safety of journalists covering protest: preserving freedom</u> <u>of the press during times of turmoil (2020)</u>. Excluding legal attacks associated with protests, state actors still accounted for 110 physical attacks during protests.

At a granular level, police and military forces were notably responsible for the bulk of physical attacks on journalists at climate or environmental demonstrations, implicated in 89 incidents. This trend was especially identified in Europe, North America, and Latin America and the Caribbean. Protesters themselves were responsible for 32 incidents.

Censorship, digital attacks and surveillance

Over the past fifteen years, 24 journalists and media outlets covering environmental issues were censored or chose self-censorship. In 16 of these cases, governments mandated the removal or restriction of environmental content. The remaining eight instances involved content removal by journalists or outlets under pressure from advertisers and commercial partners.

Regionally, the majority of these cases occurred in Latin America and the Caribbean (12), followed by Asia and the Pacific (6) and Africa (5), with only one case reported in Europe and North America. Mining was the most censored topic, implicated in 11 cases, followed by extreme weather events coverage in seven instances. Pollution and environmental damage, along with fossil fuel coverage, each accounted for three cases.

In addition to the 22 cases previously mentioned, the review also identified at least ten instances of government interference in the past 15 years, such as bans on reporting certain environmental topics or restricting information flow to official channels and state media, aimed to ensure "positive coverage" of environmental issues.

While none of these measures targeted individual journalists (and thus were not included in the total number of attacks), they significantly impacted press freedom and the right to access information.

Regionally, five of these interference cases occurred in Asia and the Pacific, affecting coverage of floods, oil leaks, and water pollution. Three were in Africa, one in Latin America, and another in the Arab States, addressing floods, droughts, and mining.

Additionally, the research identified 11 digital attacks against environmental journalists, showing a clear increase over the last five-year period—from one case in 2009-2013 to seven in 2019-2023. Latin America and the Caribbean had the most cases (5), followed by Europe and North America (3), Asia and the Pacific (2), and Africa (1).

UNESCO-IFJ JOINT SURVEY TO ASSESS THE SAFETY OF ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISTS

In March 2024, UNESCO and the International Federation of Journalists conducted a survey among journalists and media outlets to map the risks, pressures, and safety challenges that reporters covering environmental issues face in their work. In total, the survey gathered insights from 905 reporters, representing a diverse group of individuals across journalism.

A total of 518 men and 371 women responded to the survey, and 10 preferred to selfdescribe. There were respondents from 129 countries, including 383 respondents in Africa, 169 in Asia and the Pacific, 146 in Latin America and the Caribbean, 124 in Europe and North America, and 73 in Arab States.

A third of the respondents (305) indicated they work for radio/TV outlets, while 240 work for digital outlets, 160 for newspaper, magazine, print press; 102 for hybrid outlets, and 68 for news agencies. The roles in newsrooms also were diverse: 740 respondents said they were journalist/reporter, 23 editors, 120 senior editor/leadership, and 13 who had other roles. Finally, 304 respondents described their outlets as non-profit/ community/independent, 267 as public service/national media, 196 as commercial media, and 122 said they worked as freelancers for multiple outlets.

Over 70% of the total number of respondents indicated they had been subject to attacks, threats or pressure while covering environmental issues. Of those:

- 562 reported experiencing psychological threats or pressure (85%).
- 397 indicated having been victims of online harassment (60%).
- 271 said having experienced physical attacks (41%).
- 163 indicated being legally attacked (24.5%).

Based on their responses to the types of attacks they had suffered (online, physical, psychological, legal) and other qualitative variables surveyed (such as gender, journalism role, outlet type, and media type), the data shows that the percentage of men respondents who reported being attacked is constantly higher than women respondents for all types of attacks except for digital harassment, in which women respondents indicated a higher level of attacks This echoes the trend identified in UNESCO's previous report <u>The Chilling: global trends in online violence against</u> women journalists; research discussion paper (2021).

Freelancers covering environmental issues report higher levels of attacks compared to reporters employed full-time by media outlets.

The survey also asked reporters whether they or someone within their newsrooms were dedicated exclusively to covering environmental and climate stories, with 84% of respondents answering positively (766).

A comparison between those who said they cover environmental reporting exclusively and the overall group of general assignment journalists who experienced attacks while covering environmental issues, reveals that the frequency of all types of attacks is lower for journalists with dedicated coverage. This suggests that covering environmental issues exclusively doesn't imply a higher frequency of attacks.

The survey also inquired about conflicts of interest in newsrooms and 299 (33%) of all the respondents indicated they have been internally censored by their editors due to conflict of interests while reporting on environmental issues while 407 respondents (45%) said they have practiced self-censorship. Of these, at least 108 respondents indicated that covering environmental issues exposes them to potential retaliation, 59 mentioned fear of legal repercussions, and 68 respondents noted that covering environmental issues might run against the interests of their advertisers or business partners.

In the follow-up interviews, some journalists from Latin America and Africa reflected on the challenges of covering environmental issues in a highly controlled media ecosystem. It was underlined that with only government-approved sources allowed to speak on certain topics, the scope and depth of what media can report and publish becomes limited. Additionally, working for the state-run outlets impacts their editorial freedom especially vis-à-vis reporting challenging the government. And finally, in certain circumstances, the advertisers have been limiting the editorial independence due to conflicts of interest and financial pressures.

The survey queried journalists about measures that could be implemented to increase the safety of journalists covering climate and environmental issues.

At least 169 respondents mentioned training for high-risk reporting, situational awareness, pre-reporting risk assessment, self-defense, and stress management. Within this group, some respondents mentioned the need to localise existing safety manuals and protocols to match specific risks in the regions.

In addition to training, 21 respondents mentioned the need of promoting access to some equipment and tools (trackers and satellite communicators, GIS, drones and other observation tools) that reduce on-site risks and the necessity of training and workshops on equipment and tools.

Over 80 respondents indicated their need for support when facing legal challenges or threats as a result of their reporting. Within this group, respondents indicated the need to end impunity in cases of attacks against journalists, including better regulating/punishing baseless legal action or legal threats brought against reporters.

Lastly, at least 24 surveyed journalists mentioned the need to facilitate access to government information on environmental issues, including information related to disaster and climate risk.

RECOMMENDATIONS

GOVERNMENTS

- Governments must end impunity for cases of attacks against journalists covering environmental issues. Under their international obligations, governments must thoroughly investigate and sanction all cases of violence against journalists covering environmental issues. This requires pursuing and exhausting lines of inquiry connected to the victim's journalistic work. Additionally, governments should improve existing prevention mechanisms and strengthen protective measures to effectively counter the threats faced by journalists covering the environment
- Environmental protests are events of clear public interest and, in accordance with the UNESCO guidelines on <u>The role of law enforcement agents: ensuring safety of journalists during public demonstrations and elections (2023)</u>, no authorisation can be required of journalists wanting to report on such events, and reporters do not require special accreditation to cover them. Law enforcement agencies must also allow physical access to the press to demonstrations and not confine them to a specific area, even when they happen within special delimited areas like reservoirs or indigenous lands. Police and military must respect the safety and integrity of reporters covering environmental protests who are identifiable as press by their clothing, equipment or IDs, and restrain from using force or any way of obstruction against them
- In accordance with UNESCO's issue brief <u>The "misuse" of the judicial system</u> to attack freedom of expression: governments should implement safeguards against civil litigation used to intimidate and silence journalists and media workers. Criminal defamation laws should be repealed, and other laws that criminalise legitimate environmental journalistic activities, including the coverage of climate-related protests, should be abolished, or reviewed in accordance with international standards.
- Even when media outlets are supported by State funding, editorial freedom and public interest reporting should be guaranteed, including when covering environmental issues involving government interests. Additionally, governments should restrain from imposing blanket bans, ordering internet shutdowns, restricting media access, or otherwise curtailing the coverage of extreme weather events and their aftermath, even if such reports critique the way authorities respond to such events.

MEDIA ORGANISATIONS, JOURNALISM NETWORKS, DONORS AND MULTILATERAL ORGANISATIONS

- Journalists should be trained in hostile environments and emergency first aid training. Reporters covering environmental issues often report from locations marked by social unrest, conflict or even war. News organisations, journalism networks, donors, multilateral organisations and other concerned stakeholders should provide training to ensure journalists are equipped to respond to attacks and threats.
- Media outlets and employers must prioritise journalists' safety, dedicating adequate resources to develop appropriate risk assessments and safety protocols, including for protests and extreme weather events. Risk assessment and safety protocols should be specifically crafted to local contexts, taking into account that each environmental reporting project carries unique safety challenges.
- Journalists need to access safety equipment, including trackers, satellite communicators, drones, and other devices that can significantly reduce risks and act as a lifeline in particularly volatile situations. However, the cost of such equipment often makes it inaccessible to smaller, underfunded news organisations, community journalists and freelancers. Journalism networks, donors, multilateral organisations and other concerned stakeholders could facilitate access to these tools and provide necessary training on how to use them effectively.
- Journalists reporting on environmental issues often face criminal and civil actions aimed at curbing their work or as punishment for it. They must receive legal support, which should be an obligation for news organisations and employers. When direct support is not available, journalism networks, donors, advocacy groups and pro-bono lawyers should intervene and offer assistance where possible. UN organisations, including UNESCO, under the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, should further seek to enhance legal support and defence to journalists, including through the Global Media Defence Fund, specifically focusing on this issue.

ADVOCACY AND AWARENESS

- In the face of the global environmental crisis, the importance of environmental reporting cannot be overstated, and thus advocacy groups, journalism networks, donors, multilateral organisations, and other stakeholders must emphasise the need for a free press and the safety of journalists. They should campaign for country-specific measures, including legislative reforms and policy changes. UN organisations, especially UNESCO as coordinator for the implementation of the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity, should upscale the focus on addressing particular aspects of violence against journalists and media outlets reporting on environmental issues, including by specifically integrating these issues within UNESCO's Judges initiative and law enforcement trainings.
- Providing funding and resources to train and better equip journalists, particularly those underfunded at the local level, is crucial for covering environmental issues safely. UN organisations should accelerate their engagement with the private sector, particularly under the framework of the UN Global Compact, to stimulate companies to support and promote the work of journalists reporting on the environment, as part of their commitment under the Compact to support and respect the protection of internationally proclaimed human rights.
- Advancing research is relevant to tackling the challenges faced. Collecting better data
 on attacks against journalists covering environmental issues improves the collective
 understanding of the phenomenon and helps pinpoint risks and challenges. Better
 data could mean isolating environmental issues as a separate variable (which can and
 will overlap with other topics, such as politics or corruption, as environmental issues
 are multidimensional by definition), or capturing more detailed accounts of the precise
 circumstances of the attack and the targeted journalist.



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About this brief

This brief comes as part of the UNESCO series World Trends in Freedom of Expression and Media Development. It examines attacks against journalists covering environmental issues over the past fifteen years. The brief is designed to serve as a reference for UNESCO Member States, media organizations, NGOs, and academia. David Mora was in charge of gathering and analysing the data. He is an investigative reporter, news documentary producer and adjunct faculty at Columbia Journalism School.

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