



Journalist Fellowship Paper

The future is feminist: lessons from journalists in Mexico and Argentina

By **Monica Cole**

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Journalists in Mexico and Argentina are working hard to revolutionise the way women are represented in the news media but the media industry itself needs to look at how it treats women in the newsroom. *Monica Cole* interviewed 15 journalists to chronicle the ways representation is changing, and the challenges faced by those leading the charge.

Journalist Irene Benito recently [covered the femicide](#) of 32-year-old teacher Paola Tacacho. Tacacho was killed just 200 metres from Benito's home in downtown Tucumán, Argentina: Benito heard the screams while she was working.

Tacacho was murdered by a former student who had stalked her for five years. She had gone to local authorities to file [13 complaints against him](#) in that time, obtained a restraining order that he ignored, and finally took him to court. Criminal judge Francisco Pisa rejected the case, citing a lack of evidence of harassment.

“It was a chilling case,” Benito told me. “It made me think, ‘It could have been me’. Any woman can be attacked by a man. I thought about my nieces and sisters and the more I learned about the story, the more I felt the injustice of the case, and the more I needed to tell it. Maybe it’s because I’m a woman, or maybe it’s just about having empathy for another person.”

Women’s perspectives on gendered violence and women-centred stories have historically been lacking in newsrooms, especially in Latin America.

Benito covers judicial power, government transparency and corruption and, while she doesn't view herself as a feminist journalist, she said her work could accurately be described as being in service of equity. Ultimately she believes that distance, neutrality and objectivity are key to good reporting.



Journalist Irene Benito arrives at court on Dec. 21, 2021 Photograph: Soledad Dato/Supplied

With so few women in the industry, their voices and impact in newsrooms continue to be marginalised. Only [24% of news subjects](#) globally are women, meaning coverage also slants toward male-centred stories. When women are news subjects in Mexico, they are often depicted solely as victims of gendered violence, usually post-mortem, not as human beings with full lives and agency that contribute to society in multifaceted ways.

As growing movements for gender equity in Argentina and Mexico flourish against a backdrop of sexualized violence, many journalists are implementing feminist or non-sexist approaches to their work through a variety of methods.

Many want to portray women for their diverse experiences, to make normalised violence and inequities visible, and to give voice to those who've long been portrayed insensitively.

They are achieving this by developing their own content, connecting with like-minded reporters, and pushing for improvements in newsrooms and news coverage through journalism and activism. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified violence against women globally, highlighting a need for improvement in equitable representation in newsrooms for more accurate news coverage.

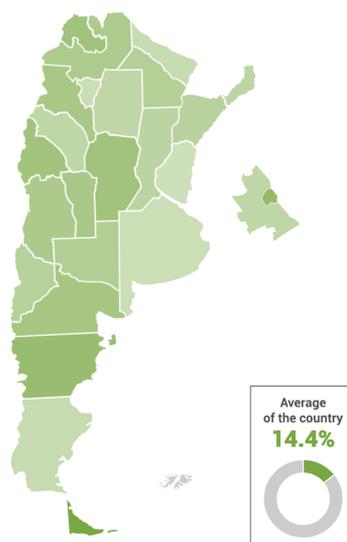
Female journalists in Argentina made up only 30% of the industry in 2018 – and far fewer are in decision-making leadership positions.¹ Fewer still are owners of media companies. Most lack job security and benefits: they account for most part-time and freelance workers in the sector. Because responsibilities of housework, cooking and child rearing are still considered women's work, there are added personal obligations, which make it difficult for women to break into a sector that is notorious for its demanding work schedule and low pay.

The problem is as old as the industry itself and people have been actively organising for inclusion of women since the feminist movements of the 1970s, from within newsrooms and through international collaboration like the United Nations' World Conferences on Women.

¹ <https://www.iwmf.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/IWMF-Global-Report.pdf>

In 1995, the UN Women's [global conference](#) in Beijing, China laid out a set of goals for women and the media. The strategic objectives were to increase women's access to expression and decision-making, and to promote balanced, non-stereotyped portrayals of women. Actions to be taken by government and media organisations were identified to facilitate and encourage women's full participation. Though there have been advances, progress has been slow, and many countries have seen setbacks. Most countries that agreed to the convention are not implementing the objectives identified.

In 2021 the [Forum of Argentinian Journalists](#) (FOPEA), an organisation that advocates for journalists and press freedom, conducted the first country-wide [study of local news deserts](#) with funding from the Google News Initiative. With that data they analysed [gender in leadership](#) of local news outlets nationwide, creating the first directory of the 354 women who lead local newsrooms in the country. They found that 14% of local outlets are led by women and only 13% of all journalists surveyed work in a female-led organisation.



FOPEA's survey of 2,464 news organisations in Argentina found female directors lead 354 (14.4%) of the news outlets

“The media are channels for disseminating women’s grievances, but we don’t look within. It’s as if we were far away from the demand for equality, equity and diversity,” said Benito, who was on the research team. She sees the research as a huge step forward in recognising the magnitude of the problem.

Benito found that there are women who are thought leaders with influence in society, but they are generally not in decision-making positions to lead teams within the newsroom. They take on different, informal leadership roles that are important – like moral leadership – but are not recognised as those who steer the ship. More progress can be seen in the digital part of the industry: of all the local organisations led by women in Argentina, 62% are digital outlets.

The current social climate obligates conversations around gender inclusion. During my time as a journalist fellow at the Reuters Institute, I wanted to continue the important work that Benito described as “looking within” at the state of gender inclusion in the news industry. I interviewed 15 journalists, activists and academics in Mexico and Argentina to compile this report.

As I was finishing my work, on December 21, 2021, Benito was sued by a public official that she’d previously investigated. Many of her fellow journalists, including those within FOPEA, view the case as completely without merit and a clear attack on press freedom and independent accountability journalism.

“Ultimately and paradoxically, I feel like I’m a victim of the abuses I investigated and exposed,” she said. Benito was fingerprinted and arraigned on criminal charges. Regardless of the outcome, she feels like the damage has been done. She can no longer report on government transparency with criminal charges pending.

Femicide covered in a sexist tone

The male-dominated nature of the industry and lack of female leadership in newsrooms means women are often portrayed in stereotypical and hypersexualized ways in the news, which normalises and perpetuates gendered violence.² A scourge of femicides documented in Latin America over the past decade, likely due to increased reporting, has set the stage for activists to demand more sensitive coverage of extreme violence against women and LGBTQ people in the media.

Much of the coverage of femicide exploits gory details that harm ongoing criminal investigations, the victim's family or their dignity post-mortem – including publishing naked photos of mutilated bodies, as was the case with [Ingrid Escamilla](#) in Mexico.

Escamilla's 46-year-old partner stabbed and dismembered the 25-year-old in their home. Crime tabloid *Pásala* and Mexico's *La Prensa* published disturbing graphic images of Escamilla's naked, mutilated body on the front page with the headline *It Was Cupid's Fault*, days before Valentine's Day 2020.

Ten women are killed every day in [Mexico](#). In [Argentina](#), a woman is killed on average every 30 hours. The vast majority of femicides (killing of women because of their gender) are perpetrated with impunity by intimate partners, usually accompanied by sexual violence and often the result of ongoing abusive relationships. Sensationalised and exploitative coverage of these killings often normalises the brutality, portraying it as if it were a regular part of loving relationships, and not an extreme form of violence.

² Patricia Easteal, Kate Holland, Keziah Judd, *Enduring themes and silences in media portrayals of violence against women*, Women's Studies International Forum, Vol. 48, 2015, pp 103-113.

Many feminist journalists in Mexico and Argentina describe mainstream news coverage of femicides as problematic, justifying perpetrators and blaming victims with headlines like, *Blind with Jealousy, He Killed Her*. Many news organisations print photographs of the underwear or miniskirt the victim was wearing when killed, implying that her choice of clothing played a role in her murder. Use of the passive voice is also common, deflecting guilt from the perpetrator and normalising violence as something that occurs rather than a criminal act that is perpetrated, by saying “she was killed” rather than “he killed her”.



A woman places flowers on an altar in memory of femicide victims before the Day of the Dead in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, October 31, 2021. The letters read "Not one less" REUTERS/Jose Luis Gonzalez

Publishing graphic photos of Escamilla post-mortem earned the tabloids viral levels of traffic and sparked anger among hundreds of women who [demonstrated](#) following the controversial coverage, marching to the *La Prensa* newsroom and destroying several vehicles belonging to them. Digital activists used Escamilla’s name as a hashtag, [posting](#) photos of natural landscapes to drown out the violent imagery of her death going viral.

The case represented a flashpoint in the intersection between extreme violence against women and sexist news coverage that exploits trauma as clickbait.

[Ingrid's Law](#) was approved in Mexico in February of 2021. It is [a set of legal reforms](#) that seek to protect the victims of femicide from having their photos distributed. The reforms introduce criminal charges of three to six years of prison or fines for anyone who distributes photos, videos or documented evidence of murder victims.

Femicides in Mexico increased 137% between 2015 and 2020 according to the Attorney General. President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador's slashing of the budget for women's advocacy by 75% and accusing journalists of manipulating data on gendered violence during his daily press conferences has angered and disappointed many women who see activism as the only way to make visible the gravity of this immense problem.



Activist from "Marea Verde" take part in a performance to film a message to spread awareness during the International Safe Abortion Day in Mexico City, Mexico September 28, 2019. REUTERS/Carlos Jasso

On [March 8, 2020](#) more women than ever before participated in activism for the first time across the country with the first nationwide women's strike. Feminist movements in Mexico and Argentina like *Ni Una Menos* (Not One Woman Less) and *Marea Verde* (Green Wave, a movement for safe and legal abortion) have gained

traction over the past several years, becoming more active, visible, and controversial due to negative media coverage and minor destruction of property by some activists.

Leading up to International Women's Day 2021, President Lopez Obrador ordered barricades set up surrounding the presidential palace in Mexico City, which feminist activists covered with the names of femicide victims.

Covering criminalised abortion as gendered violence

With feminist activism confronting the mainstream cultural climate, the journalism industries in Mexico and Argentina are grappling with what accurate non-sexist coverage means and how to achieve it. When most newsrooms are run by men and a culture of violence against women is dominant in society and in the workplace, the problem of skewed coverage is difficult for many to see because sexism is normalised and internalised.

Debates around abortion are a perfect example. Unlike cases of femicide, which are perpetrated with close to absolute impunity, criminal charges are brought against women who have abortions and even against those who suffer obstetric emergencies like miscarriages in Mexico. Increased visibility of women's movements and more critical audiences has created a demand for news content on abortion. Feminist journalists and activists are framing the lack of legal abortion as a form of gendered violence.

In the investigation series [*Cuando Parir es un Delito*](#) (*When Giving Birth is a Crime*) Katia Rejón and Lilia Balam reported on the experiences of young women and teenagers who miscarried and were later charged with homicide. The investigation explored how a lack of training in gender sensitivity (and a lack of knowledge of female biology) results in legal decisions being made based on faulty evidence. Often the methods by which prosecutors prove the accused to be guilty do not have a

legitimate scientific basis and are attempts to prove that the miscarried foetuses were deliberately terminated, or born alive and then killed.

In Mexico over 3,600 criminal complaints were filed for the crime of illegal abortion between 2010 and 2020 according to [GIRE](#), a Mexican reproductive rights group. Within that same timeframe, 380 people were criminally tried and 142 were sentenced.

Due to lack of sexual education, many don't know that they are pregnant until miscarrying and they are then accused by medical staff and prosecutors of committing a crime. [Every day in Latin America](#), girls between the age of 10 and 14 give birth – the vast majority having been raped.

Feminist journalists, especially young women in Argentina, have publicly advocated for free, safe and legal abortion. Many have shown support for the fight by wearing a green bandana around their neck or wrist in their profile pictures, a symbol of the *Marea Verde* movement. Others put green hearts in their Twitter profiles. The reframing of gendered issues is pushing the boundaries of conventional journalistic norms of objectivity and replacing them with human rights advocacy frameworks and the contextualization of complex issues in news coverage.

Activism and journalists reporting on the issue has led to recent policy changes in both countries. Argentina legalised abortion in the first 14 weeks of pregnancy in December 2020. In Mexico abortion has been [decriminalized](#), after the country's Supreme Court declared that abortion is not a crime in September 2021.

The cost of covering feminist issues

Reporting on abortion does not come without cost, and reporters who cover it are often harassed. [Katia Rejón](#), a young journalist in Mérida, Mexico was the target of

so-called pro-life groups after reporting on abortion and verifying that group members had lied about facts.

“There is a hostility for touching those kinds of topics, but not only topics of gender, also human rights and the indigenous community,” Rejón told me. On a separate occasion, she was the subject of a public attack when Jorge Álvarez Rendón (the Chronicler of the city of Mérida, a man whose books she’d read as a student), wrote a public letter to her on his Facebook page, insulting her credibility as a journalist and her looks. The attack came while she was up for a journalistic award. She removed herself from the running after his letter was picked up by [local media](#).

Rejón was also sued, along with 39 other journalists and activists, by a high-profile male journalist [accused of abuse](#). The lawsuit hasn’t made much progress over the past three years but these kinds of cases cast a shadow over female journalists as they do their job.

Raised in the school of journalism that values objectivity as a core principle, Rejón began reporting stories involving obstetric violence, menstruation, the #MeToo movement and street harassment.

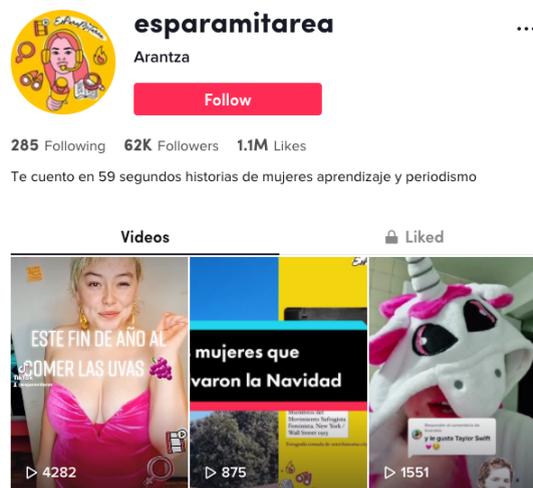
“At some point I understood that feminism wasn’t just something that served me as a person, as a woman, but also my work. Because these were subjects of social interest. Gendered violence in Mexico is outrageous. We can’t cover that news without considering that there is a whole system underneath it,” said Rejón.

Rejón represents a new generation of feminist journalists creating their own content through independent nonprofit digital publications. Her magazine [Memorias de Nómada](#), started as a blog when she was 19 and now has a reach of about 20,000

views per month focusing on cultural content, including the indigenous Maya population in the Yucatan region.

Like many feminists her age, she said her organisation practices intersectional feminism: viewing gender as intertwined with other social identities, like race and sexuality. “When we decided to call ourselves feminist, it wasn’t just to talk about themes related to gender but with everything that encompasses systems of oppression including language, skin color, sexual diversity, people with disabilities,” said Rejón.

Arantza Garcia Gonzalez is another young intersectional feminist journalist who has been offered freelance jobs after the wild success of her TikTok account [EsParaMiTarea](#) (It’s for my Homework), where she posts engaging short videos explaining the latest developments in legal reforms around abortion, women’s history in Mexico, and human rights issues to an audience of 62,000 followers.



A screenshot of Arantza Garcia Gonzalez’s TikTok profile

“I saw a need from younger people who were seeing the activism in the streets and asking, what is this all about?” said Gonzalez. “During quarantine it seemed like the best way to use my voice.”

Though she hasn't received "real" threats of violence, she said a group of men reported her original TikTok page for content violation and had it removed by the company. Garcia Gonzalez said it is likely that her case was not properly investigated, since her page did not break community guidelines. But it talked about abortion, which is unpopular with many in Mexico, and this was likely why it was targeted – a suspicion confirmed by the hateful messages she'd received from the group of men.

Mexican journalist and coordinator of the [International Network of Journalists with Gendered Perspectives](#) (RIPVG) Rosa Maria Rodriguez Quintanilla had to relocate out of her home state of Tamaulipas to Nuevo León because of threats against her and her family. Her home state has seen growing violence and several local journalists have been murdered.

"Now I'm conscious about what I experienced, but when I lived in my state I wasn't aware of the violence I was experiencing every day. There were various threats. Despite that, we stayed and we didn't report it because there was no way to," Rodriguez Quintanilla told me. "In Tamaulipas no one reports violence because there's no trust in institutions."

At least seven in every 10 journalists in the country have received some type of threat or attack, Rodriguez Quintanilla said, adding that it's never just one incident; the constant repetition is a key aspect of how the violence works. She described a local context where mass murders, executions, and disappearances add to a climate of frightening violence.

"This time we left because the threats were against my children."

She and her husband are both journalists and so is her husband's adult son. Their three children together were all minors when the family started receiving threats of murder against them.

“One of my sons had neurological damage, another was receiving treatment for serious depression. The other showed symptoms of depression. He was very thin and spent all day sleeping, avoiding reality. Fortunately he's recovered. The others are still recovering. The youngest was 14 years old at the time, and is still receiving treatment,” said Rodriguez Quintanilla.

They left the state before reporting to the special prosecutor for attention to crimes against freedom of expression. Every time there was a threat, they made a report. Five years later they still haven't heard any results.

Mexico has a 99% impunity rate for crimes against freedom of expression³ and is one of the deadliest places in the world to be a journalist.⁴

To make matters worse, authorities often minimise threats received via social media, or say that they're unable to investigate. Social platforms like Facebook and Twitter do little to intervene. Even when threats of murder are shared on Facebook groups with thousands of followers, where people's identities are exposed, like in Rodriguez Quintanilla's case, results are nil. At the same time, she said, the platform blocks journalists' accounts regularly for violations of community guidelines.

Rodriguez Quintanilla credits [CIMAC](#) with supporting her during the abuse. CIMAC is the most widely recognised feminist digital publication in Mexico, which many see as the pioneers of feminist journalism in the country.

³ <https://www.article19.org/regional-office/mexico-and-central-america/>

⁴ <https://cpj.org/americas/mexico/>

It was one of the first organisations to document violence against journalists who were writing about issues related to gender.

During her work with the International Network of Journalists with Gendered Perspectives ([RIPVG](#)), of which CIMAC was a founding member, Rodriguez Quintanilla documented cases in which media outlets would distribute news about an attack or killing of a female journalist but would refer to her as, “the wife of”, without noting her work as a journalist.

When gendered violence is normalised, women journalists are targeted by a culture seeking to silence their voices and perspectives. While Mexico is one of the deadliest countries for all journalists, women journalists face a layered threat of gendered violence and press freedom attacks that are often more personal, intimate and sexualized. Many female journalists work in climates of escalated fear. Because most threats are received online, the police often say they can’t investigate.

New digital voices

It’s not all bad news online: feminist journalists in Mexico and Argentina are using the internet to network, launch new initiatives, and reach new audiences. In Mexico, platforms like [Memorias de Nómada](#) and [EsParaMiTarea](#) are thriving. In Argentina, [LATFEM](#) is a digital publication with highly successful reach and engagement that has published a variety of investigations.

The organisation uses innovative methods to show the results of their investigations: [Cuarantentials](#) (see image on next page) used illustrations to provide a feminist perspective on stories about young people in Latin America coming of age during the pandemic.



Screenshot from LATFEM's Cuarentenials series, which illustrated the experiences of young people in lockdown. Illustrations by Kiti & Seelvana

The stories include first-hand experiences from teenage girls, nonbinary youth and young women about isolation, finding community online, experiencing discrimination, microaggressions on the job as healthcare workers, violence and self-care.

The founders and journalists of LATFEM are journalists who come from activist backgrounds involved in feminist organising in Argentina. Founder [Flor Alcaraz](#) describes 2015 and the [Ni Una Menos](#) movement as a before-and-after moment which marks the era that took feminist activism mainstream in Argentina, and when she personally became comfortable calling herself a feminist journalist.

Though both LATFEM and [Memorias de Nómada](#) in Mexico are successful in terms of audience engagement, innovation and originality, both have struggled with funding to sustain their efforts.

While they do generate revenue through their workshops on gender, through collaborations with other nonprofit organisations, or by educating young journalists, neither receives any funding to do journalistic work. This means all their writers and

staff work on a voluntary basis and have day-jobs to support themselves. Because they are both mission-driven organisations, unwilling to compromise their values for funding, their work for these outlets remains a passion project.

Building international networks

Despite the hostile ecosystem of digital spaces, online media is the medium in which women's participation and leadership are growing. And feminist journalists and activists are using tech platforms to connect with each other, build networks and develop new strategies for combating violence.

Both Rejón and Alcaraz are members of international networks of journalists which have helped support their work by connecting them with like-minded journalists throughout Latin America. The LATFEM outlet created the [Red de Periodistas Feministas de Latinoamérica y el Caribe](#) (Feminist Journalist Network of Latin America and the Caribbean). Rejón is a part of the [Latin American Network of Young Journalists](#) and [Coalición LATAM](#), a group which provides mentorship to organisations like Memorias de Nómada, assisting them in the process of becoming a legally registered nonprofit organisation so that they can accept donations and register readers.

“I think that it's really helped us a lot to have alliances in other states [and] in other countries to help us legitimise our work. We are investigating topics that weren't being touched before,” said Rejón.

These networks have brought journalists together for transnational investigative projects like [Violentadas en Cuarentena](#) (Abused in Lockdown). The project was a collaboration of over 66 people including reporters, fact-checkers, illustrators and translators in 19 countries, and won a Google News Award. It was made possible

through the collaboration of various international networks like Young Journalists and [Chicas Poderosas](#), and is one-of-a-kind in depth, breadth and style.

International Network of Journalists with a Gendered Vision (RIPVG) is a network that connects journalists with online events, publishes research around gender in the media, and hosts educational workshops to teach journalists new methods to incorporate gendered perspectives into their work.

Feminist leadership, education and work

Feminist journalists like Miriam Bobadilla and Alejandra Benaglia of Argentina see their work as making the industry more female, not only in terms of equitable representation, but also in the styles of leadership and how the industry is organised.

Traditionally, the industry has been competitive and hierarchical, but feminist journalists are developing collaborative and communal methods of working to get results driven by higher quality standards rather than ego and individual advancement.

Both Bobadilla and Benaglia are part of the International Network of Journalists with a Gendered Vision.

Educating journalists in gendered perspectives is another main goal of the networks. “To make visible that which is invisible,” Bobadilla explained.

Journalism schools in Mexico and Argentina teach objectivity as standard practice and anything else as opinion – something many feminist journalists push back against, arguing that all journalism takes a stance and is a form of activism. The

difference between mainstream and feminist journalism, they argue, is whether it's an activism that maintains or critiques the status quo.

Still, many journalists who consider gender issues in their work don't want to be called feminist, even when they agree that their work could accurately be described as such. Due to the politicisation of the term and the connection to activism it remains somewhat stigmatised. The reason a major international network doesn't bare the name feminist, but rather journalists with gendered perspectives, is precisely so they don't alienate journalists who might not feel connected to the term feminist but are interested in gender issues.

The future is feminist

Legacy media around the world is beginning to view gender coverage as profitable and starting to take notice, according to Aimée Vega Montiel, a researcher at the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Major publications like *The Guardian*, *El País*, and Mexican publications like *La Silla Rota* and *Reforma* are starting to incorporate human rights coverage of women in some of their reporting.

Spanish editions of the [Washington Post](#) and [New York Times](#) have also published content focused on gender and human rights in their Opinion sections. Flor Alcaraz, LATFEM founder, was recruited by the [Washington Post](#) for her expertise in feminist content in Argentina. Other news outlets in Latin America like [La Silla Rota](#) in Mexico and [Página 12](#) in Argentina are creating gender verticals to speak to the growing demand for content. *Página 12* and *Tiempo Argentina* also use inclusive or gender neutral language, which is an editorial decision that Bobadilla and Benaglia said other mainstream publications don't incorporate in their coverage.

Even with the rise in demand, much of this work is still unpaid or underpaid, and most women in these countries are not staff reporters but freelancers or part-time

workers with little to no job security. The precarity of the industry means that they often have unpredictable pay scales and schedules.

Pay inequity is often perpetuated by sexist ideals that permeate newsroom management. Fifteen years ago Rosa Maria Rodriguez Quintanilla was paid 40% of the salary earned by her male colleagues for the same work. When she asked her boss why, he said that the man had a family to support, but she had a husband to support her.

Some are starting to use labour unions to advocate for women's advancement in the field. FATPREN, the Federation of Press Workers of Argentina, is a union that has an agenda which includes a committee on gender. The group fought for and secured sexual harassment and gendered violence protocol in 2016.

The female leadership sees their work as combating the hypermasculine culture of both unionism and the news industry so that women are included in meaningful ways.

There are improvements. New legislative reforms are securing gender equity in the law, with major reforms in Argentina demanding that at least 1% of public media workers are transgender. Argentina also has a law that allows audiences to make complaints about offensive media or publications, and receive detailed feedback regarding the complaint, sometimes resulting in a warning or penalty for the publications.

Women, LGBTQ people and their allies within the industry are organising and building power through traditional methods like labour unions, as well as entrepreneurial and investigative projects. They are pushing to improve newsrooms slowly and in the face of resistance. But the changes being implemented are not

moving in pace with the cultural moment that activists have forced into existence. Much like the groundswell of feminist activism that inspired major policy changes for gender equity, few can predict the fervor or force with which the situation will progress.

The only certainty is that the male gaze has dominated the journalism industry for as long as it has existed. Anyone interested in accurate news coverage and newsroom equity can see a long overdue change on the horizon. The future of journalism is feminist.

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