

#InternetFreedomAfrica

Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists in Africa



JAMIFORUMS

Background

The media in Africa continues to face serious challenges in the execution of its work. The minimal progress in the advancement of press freedom and freedom of expression on the continent has been whitewashed by legislation and actions by some states that continue to hinder the development of a professional and independent media.

Many areas of journalistic practice have been criminalised, with the adoption of cybercrime laws that prohibit the publication of false news or news deemed to threaten national security or public health, in countries such as Ethiopia, Kenya, Nigeria and Tanzania. In Egypt, cybercrime laws grant investigating authorities power to block or suspend locally-based or foreign websites featuring content that is deemed harmful to national security or the national economy.

In 2021, 75 African journalists had been imprisoned or detained by their governments in 12 countries. These violations are aggravated by attacks on individual journalists, including extra-judicial killings, forced disappearances and imprisonment, with incidents recorded in Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo), Egypt, Ethiopia, Libya, Morocco, Rwanda and Somalia.

Increasingly, digital media and independent content creators are also coming under attack from state and non-state actors through legal and extra-legal measures. Indeed, given the growing importance of digital technologies to press freedom and freedom of expression, various African governments are keen on monitoring and regulating online spaces. Moreover, state surveillance, which often targets journalists and undermines their privacy and safety, is a growing concern.



Together with our key partners, we are committed to support the African media stakeholders, by looking back, drawing lessons and planning for the future, in view of improving the status of press freedom and the safety of journalists on the continent.

Dr. Rita Bissoonauth Director UNESCO Liaison Office to the AU, UNECA and Representative to Ethiopia

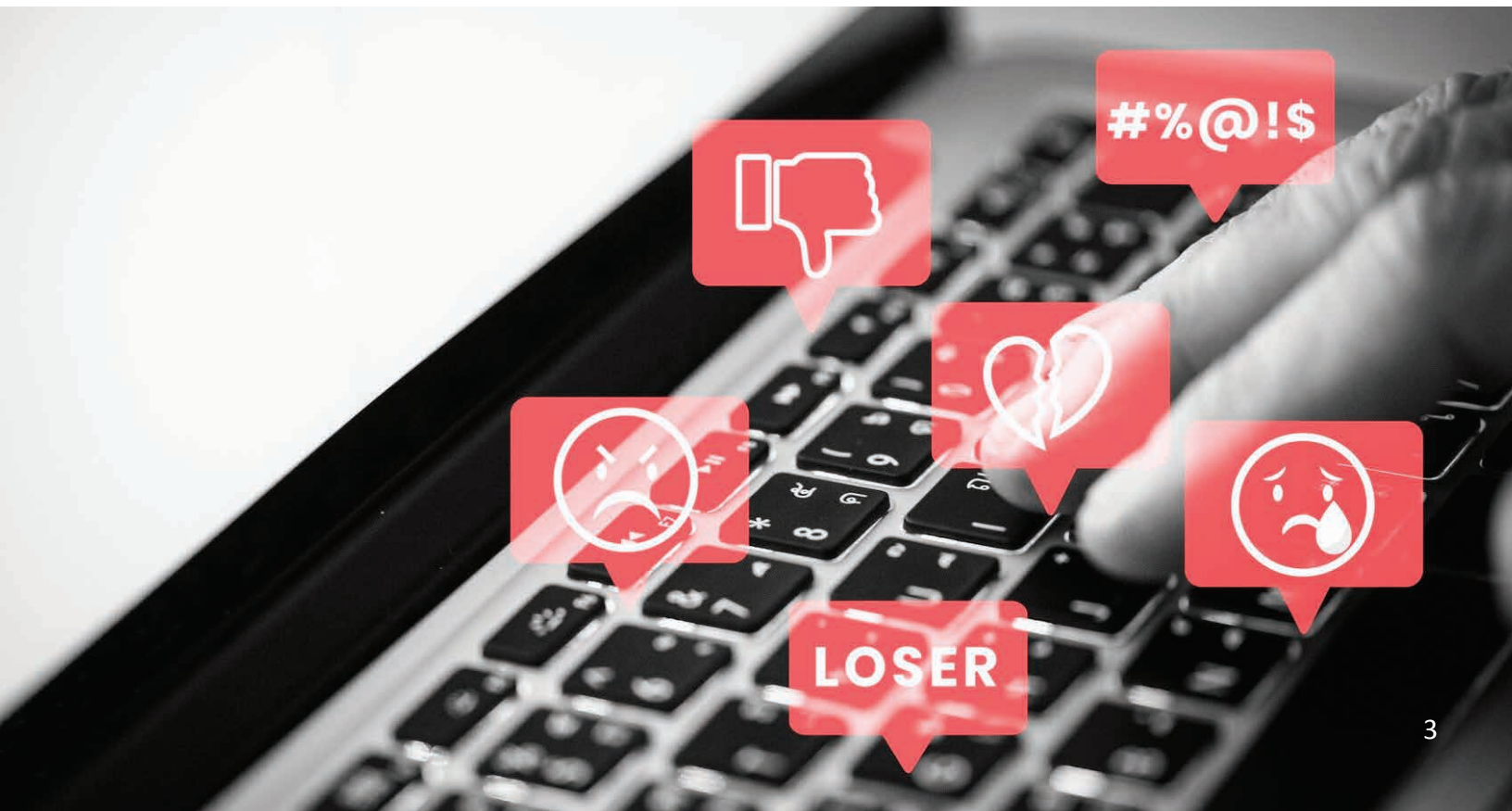
Online Harassment of Female Journalists

Online trolling of women journalists often takes the form of gendered and sexualised attacks and, often involves body shaming. Worryingly, a global survey by UNESCO found in December 2020 that online attacks on women journalists appear to be increasing exponentially. Moreover, the UNESCO report demonstrated that online violence was also moving offline - with potentially deadly consequences. Yet women journalists who experience abuse online rarely seek justice and often struggle to have their complaints taken seriously and properly investigated.

This is partly because those who suffer online abuse do not report to authorities, thus, the full extent of online violence against female journalists remains unknown. However, there are also illustrative cases that indicate that this is a growing problem.

In 2019, Julius Malema, the leader of the EFF political party in South Africa, posted a journalist's phone number on Twitter. The journalist was then subjected to "an avalanche of racialised and sexist abuse, including rape and death threats". The EFF was sued and the court found that the party had violated the electoral code by failing to "instruct and take reasonable steps to ensure that their supporters do not harass, intimidate, threaten or abuse journalists and especially women".

Similar incidents of online trolling and cyber harassment of female journalists have also been experienced in many countries across the continent. A 2021 UN Women report about online and ICT-facilitated violence against women established that women in politics and the media are at higher risk of suffering online violence due to their public personas and nature of work.



Meanwhile, studies by the Association of Media Women of Kenya (AMWIK) found that several Kenyan women in the media had fallen victim to smear campaigns usually spread through social media platforms, through hashtags, photos and video edited graphics used to show nude characters. Moreover, female television journalists were particularly prone to attracting online abuse and trolls, with the attacks “triggered by the women’s way of dressing, their makeup, or something they did in line of duty.”⁸⁸ Ugandan female journalists have also reported that online sexual harassment against them is rampant as is age shaming, character assassination and body shaming.

The abuse had driven some female journalists off social media while it left others depressed. In Somalia much of the online harassment, online threats, stalking and broadcasting private or personally identifiable information of journalists is directed at female journalists. Research in southern Africa shows that abusive comments and hate speech are consistently being used to silence female journalists.

The UNESCO research notes that, in the long run, online harassment against female journalists hampers the achievement of a diversity of voices in the public sphere while also impacting negatively on the enjoyment of freedom of expression.

Enhancing the Safety of Women Journalists in Tanzania

In response to the report on the State of Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists in Africa, UNESCO, in partnership with the Collaboration on International ICT Policy for East and Southern Africa (CIPESA) and Jamii Forums are hosting a Safety of Women Journalists and Digital Security Café in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.

This assembly of individuals will not only serve to raise awareness about the first State of Media Freedom and Safety of Journalists in Africa Report but also offer participants an opportunity to engage with experts on the current digital landscape that women journalists are working in and also enhance their digital security practices amongst the participants.



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