

# Stand up, speak, put a stop to gender based violence



## Gender-based Violence Against Women Journalists in East and West Africa

### Research to Support Strategic Litigation to Protect Women Journalists

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HUMAN RIGHTS

#### Inside track

...sometimes as women on we make wrong assumptions about what constitutes love and how it should be expressed. I automatically assume that when a man buys me chocolate or flowers, it is his way of saying to me that he loves me. I think men do that because they realise that it is the easiest way to be liked. I think men simply want to come to care for them

...yourself in a relationship. Some young women fall for abusive men who beat them up at the drop of a hat. I have met women who are emotionally and physically abused and some of them knew the men were abusive before they even married them. "We dated for two years

...beat me up if he didn't like the way I was dressed or I spoke back to him but I just assumed this was because he loved me too much and just wanted me to himself," said one young woman. Gender-Based Violence (GBV) is the reason why every year we mark 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence. We have reminded the world about the evils of gender-based violence since 1981 but we do not seem to be making a difference. In 1999 the United

...gnated November 25 as the international day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. We have themes that should make us go beyond simple reflection over a few days but somehow at the end of the 16 days, we seem to just roll back to our old way of life. Even more worrying is the fact that the prominent publicity the period receives does not seem to deter those determined to perpetuate gender-based violence. Throughout the 16

...to untold violence. This year the theme is "Peace in the Home to build peace in the World". This is encouraging because most violence starts from the home. Abusive men were raised in families where fathers treated the mothers as pushovers. A man raised by an abusive father sometimes becomes the best way to solve a conflict is to emotionally abuse his wife. Such situations are helped by the fact that

...across. Being an activist does not require one to have money in order to make a difference. Women need to be empowered and also taught life skills so that life continues for them as they are able to break the chain of abuse. For me, being an activist is not about being asked to be involved in handling cases related to gender-based violence. Based Action Teams (COMBAT) have been set up by the Ghana Health Service, the National Commission for Civic Education, the Commission for Gender and the Victims of Violence, the Ghana Welfare Association, the Ghana Department of Social Welfare and the Commission on Human Rights and Administration. They are to work in close cooperation with the Community-Based Action Teams (COMBAT) in the project communities for sensitisation and management of violence against women. Some of the topics treated include the definition of violence, the causes of violence, types of violence, and social and cultural influences supporting violence.

...job. To me, the true act of providing psychological support to survivors is to empower them to enable them to get out of the relationship and their survival. I wish I would follow the lead of the parcel of oil.

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# Gender-based Violence Against Women Journalists in East and West Africa: Research to Support Strategic Litigation to Protect Women Journalists

## I. Glossary

**Gender-Based Violence (GBV)** is “violence directed against a woman because she is a woman or which affects a woman disproportionately. It includes physical, mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty.”<sup>1</sup> The Committee on the Elimination of Violence Against Women “considers that gender-based violence against women is one of the fundamental social, political and economic means by which the subordinate position of women with respect to men and their stereotyped roles are perpetuated. Throughout its work, the Committee has made clear that such violence is a critical obstacle to the achievement of substantive equality between women and men and to the enjoyment by women of their human rights and fundamental freedoms.”<sup>2</sup>

**Sexual and Gender-Based violence (SGBV)** “is a particularly disturbing phenomenon which exists in all regions of the world. The term refers to any harmful act that is perpetrated against one person’s will and that is based on socially ascribed (gender) differences between males and females. It includes acts that inflict physical, mental, or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life. SGBV entails widespread human rights violations, and is often linked to unequal gender relations within communities and abuses of power. It can take the form of sexual violence or persecution by the authorities, or can be the result of discrimination embedded in legislation or prevailing societal norms and practices. It can be both a cause of forced displacement and an intolerable part of the displacement experience.”<sup>3</sup>

**Gender Discrimination** is the “unfair or unequal treatment of an individual based on their...gender. It can take various forms, such as biased decision-making, unequal opportunities, or prejudiced actions that harm an individual because of their [gender].”<sup>4</sup>

**Patriarchy** refers to the “social system in which men hold the greatest power, leadership roles, privilege, moral authority and access to resources and land, including in the family. Most modern societies are patriarchies.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, [General recommendation No. 19: Violence against women](#), 1992 at 1.

<sup>2</sup> UN High Commissioner for Refugees Division of International Protection, [Action against Sexual and Gender-Based Violence: An Updated Strategy](#), June 2011 at 6.

<sup>3</sup> The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, [General recommendation No. 35 on gender-based violence against women, updating general recommendation No. 19](#), 2017 at 4.

<sup>4</sup> Tanzania Media Women’s Association and International Media Support, [Sexual Harassment, Corruption, and Gender Mainstreaming in the Media – Tanzania](#), November 2023 at vii.

<sup>5</sup> UNICEF Regional Office for South Asia, [Gender Equality: Glossary of Terms and Concepts](#), November 2017 at 7.

**Harassment** is “any improper and unwelcome conduct that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another person. Harassment may take the form of words, gestures or actions which tend to annoy, alarm, abuse, demean, intimidate, belittle, humiliate or embarrass another or which create an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment. Harassment normally implies a series of incidents.”<sup>6</sup>

**Sexual Harassment** is “any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another, when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive work environment.”<sup>7</sup> “It can be verbal, non-verbal, physical, visual, or cyber.”<sup>8</sup>

**Sexual Exploitation** is “the use of an individual for sexual purposes, often for personal or financial gain. It can include the production, distribution, or consumption of sexually explicit material without the clear and informed consent of all parties involved.”<sup>9</sup>

**Targeted surveillance** is “surveillance that targets a specific person or an organization, such as using spyware, to access and monitor their activities and private data.”<sup>10</sup> Women “often pay a higher price when their privacy is breached because of, for example, the different ways their private data could be weaponised against them.”<sup>11</sup> While surveillance is traditionally thought of as being carried out by the state and its institutions, there can also be “social surveillance,” which refers to monitoring “by the audience and various non-state actors.”<sup>12</sup>

**Discriminatory speech** refers to “speech reflecting cultural models that assign women and gender non-conforming bodies a secondary, sexualized, or strictly reproductive role. Such speech may or may not incite violence.”<sup>13</sup>

**Threats against women journalists** are specific and gendered with “historical, structural and underlying causes, including unequal power relations, and risk factors of violence against women and girls.”<sup>14</sup> According to UN Special Rapporteur Irene Khan, women journalists “are particularly targeted for physical and psychological violence and threats,

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<sup>6</sup> UN Secretariat, [Prohibition of discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority](#), February 11, 2008 at 1.

<sup>7</sup> UN Women, [Prohibition of discrimination, harassment, including sexual harassment, and abuse of authority](#), 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Tanzania Media Women’s Association and International Media Support, [Sexual Harassment, Corruption, and Gender Mainstreaming in the Media – Tanzania](#), November 2023 at vii.

<sup>9</sup> Tanzania Media Women’s Association and International Media Support, [Sexual Harassment, Corruption, and Gender Mainstreaming in the Media – Tanzania](#), November 2023 at viii.

<sup>10</sup> Amnesty International, [Online Violence](#), 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Amnesty International, [Online Violence](#), 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Digital Rights Foundation, [Surveillance of Female Journalists in Pakistan](#), 2017 at 1.

<sup>13</sup> GenderIT.org, [13 Manifestations of Gender-Based Violence Using Technology](#), November 12, 2018.

<sup>14</sup> UN Human Rights Council, [Accelerating efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls: preventing and responding to violence against women and girls in digital contexts](#), A/HRC/RES/38/5, July 17, 2018 at 4.



including death and rape threats, for speaking out or simply for being a woman in a leadership role.”<sup>15</sup>

**Non-consensual sharing of private information** is “the unauthorized sharing or publication of any kind of information, data, or private details regarding a person.”<sup>16</sup> A prominent example of this manifestation is **doxxing**, which is “the process of retrieving, hacking and publishing other people’s personally identifiable information such as names, addresses, phone numbers and credit card details in an environment that implies or encourages intimidation or threat.”<sup>17</sup>

**Mob Mentality** happens when “online groups post destructive offensive content online, often competing with other groups to shame someone.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Irene Khan, [Report of the Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#), A/76/259, July 30, 2021 at 5-6

<sup>16</sup> GenderIT.org, [13 Manifestations of Gender-Based Violence Using Technology](#), November 12, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> UNESCO, Julie Posetti et al., [The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists](#), April 2021 at 21 (citing Techopedia, [Dictionary: Cybersecurity: Doxing](#), 2021; J. McCully, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), and the International Press Institute (IPI), [Legal Responses to Online Harassment and Abuse of Journalists: Perspectives from Finland, France and Ireland](#), 2019).

<sup>18</sup> Organization of American States, [Combating Online Violence Against Women: A Call for Protection](#), 2019 at 8.

## II. Introduction

Journalism is crucial for the functioning of democracies and the protection and enjoyment of human rights. Without access to information and open debates, the democratic process is hindered, and the ability of citizens to make informed decisions about their communities and society is compromised.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, it is imperative for journalism to contain a diverse set of voices, in order to eliminate bias, strengthen trust between media and the public, and uplift often neglected stories from marginalized communities. Women journalists are crucial in achieving these objectives.

Journalists<sup>20</sup> across the globe are faced with violence, harassment, criminalization, and even death for reporting on the issues facing their communities.<sup>21</sup> The killings of journalists rose sharply in 2022, and in 2023, attacks raised to near-record levels highlighting the urgent and expansive nature of the problem.<sup>22</sup> In 2024, the Committee for the Protection of Journalists reported the deadliest year in its history with at least 124 journalists being killed; 70% of these are Palestinian journalists.<sup>23</sup> This signals a systemic attack on the foundations of free expression given that "violence against journalists is the most extreme form of censorship."<sup>24</sup> The participation of women in the media field is being particularly undermined. All over the world, women journalists are confronted with increasing attacks both in the digital and physical sphere that are targeted, specific, and disproportionate.<sup>25</sup> Compared to their male colleagues, women journalists are "particularly targeted for physical and psychological violence"<sup>26</sup>, and are "subject to disproportionate and specific threats."<sup>27</sup> The environment of patriarchy and gender-based violence perpetuates distinct threats both in the newsroom and in the field, including gender discrimination, sexist hate speech, disinformation sexual harassment, verbal assault, and even lethal violence.<sup>28</sup> These

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<sup>19</sup> American Press Institute, [Improve diversity and inclusion in journalism](#), 2022.

<sup>20</sup> We understand journalists from a broad and comprehensive perspective that encompasses a wide range of actors. In this sense, we agree with the definition provided by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, who defines journalists as "individuals who document events, analyze issues, gather facts, and process data in order to inform society on matters of public interest. The term 'journalist' refers to a wide range of actors, including professional full-time reporters and analysts, media workers and support staff, as well as citizen journalists, bloggers and others who engage in forms of self-publication in print, on the internet or elsewhere. The professional designation of an individual as a journalist is less relevant than the acts of journalism or the nature of the content and its public interest function." OHCHR, [Human Rights in the Context of Protests for Journalists](#), 2023.

<sup>21</sup> UNESCO, [Threats that silence: Trends in the safety of journalists](#), 2021.

<sup>22</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, [Attacks on the Press in 2023](#), 2024.

<sup>23</sup> Committee to Protect Journalists, [2024 is deadliest year for journalists in CPI history; almost 70% killed by Israel](#), 2025.

<sup>24</sup> Global Freedom of Expression, Columbia University, [Global Case-law on Violence Against Journalists](#), 2022 at 6 (citing Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, [Violence Against Journalists and Media Workers: Inter-American Standards and National Practices on Prevention, Protection and Prosecution of Perpetrators](#), December 31, 2013 at para. 1).

<sup>25</sup> UNESCO, [Safety of Women Journalists](#), 2022.

<sup>26</sup> UN General Assembly, [Promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#), A/76/258, July 30, 2021 at para. 17.

<sup>27</sup> UNESCO, [Safety of Women Journalists](#), 2022.

<sup>28</sup> UNESCO, [Safety of Women Journalists](#), 2022; UN General Assembly, [Promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression](#), A/76/258, July 30, 2021 at para. 17.

harmful practices often chill women's expression causing them to self-censor or ceasing to participate in the public sphere altogether.<sup>29</sup>

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, attacks on women journalists have increased and transformed given the shift to or overreliance on digital platforms. According to a study conducted by African Women in Media (AWiM) on East African women journalists, 69.4 percent of participants moved their work online due to the pandemic.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, online attacks against women journalists increased, with 63.9 percent of the study's respondents reporting a rise in online harassment because of the pandemic.<sup>31</sup> Despite the change in conditions since the COVID-19 outbreak forced journalists to move online in 2020, online violence persists. In Tanzania, for example, sexual abuse in the media industry has seen little change since 2020.<sup>32</sup> Across East and West Africa, digital harassment is pervasive and increasingly used as a tool to intimidate, silence, and discredit women journalists.

Online attacks against women journalists take many forms, including targeted incidents involving threats of violence, breaches to digital privacy that intensify offline safety threats, and coordinated disinformation campaigns.<sup>33</sup> Although gender-based violence is not new, the technological dimension adds elements of search, persistence, replicability, and scalability that facilitate the aggressors' access to the women they target and can increase and exacerbate the harm.<sup>34</sup> ARTICLE 19 Eastern Africa has found that female journalists are not just being targeted about their professional work, but also about elements of their private lives.<sup>35</sup> These acts discourage women in general, and journalists in particular, from fully accessing the vast amount of information on the Internet and taking advantage of the global platform that the Internet creates to communicate ideas, develop opinions, and generally participate in public discourse.

Beyond the digital sphere, women journalists are increasingly facing disproportionate and specific threats in sub-Saharan Africa. A 2021 Reporters Without Borders report found that women journalists in Africa face twice the level of danger as their male colleagues.<sup>36</sup> This phenomenon is particularly evident in East and West Africa. Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) has observed a growing trend in physical attacks, arrests, threats, and harassment of female journalists in West Africa. According to research conducted by the Africa Freedom of Information Centre on gender-based violence against journalists in

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<sup>29</sup> UN Office of the High Commissioner, [Statement by Irene Khan, Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of freedom of opinion and expression](#), October 18, 2021.

<sup>30</sup> African Women in Media, [The Impact of COVID-19 on East African Women Journalists](#), December 2020 at 8.

<sup>31</sup> African Women in Media, [The Impact of COVID-19 on East African Women Journalists](#), December 2020 at 8.

<sup>32</sup> Tanzania Media Women's Association and International Media Support, [Sexual Harassment, Corruption, and Gender Mainstreaming in the Media – Tanzania](#), November 2023 at 1.

<sup>33</sup> UNESCO, Julie Posetti et al., [The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists](#), April 2021 at 5-7.

<sup>34</sup> Association for Progressive Communications, [Online gender-based violence: A submission from the Association for Progressive Communications to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on violence against women, its causes and consequences](#), November 2017.

<sup>35</sup> Media Foundation for West Africa, [Safety of female journalists in West Africa: Reflections of media practitioners](#), March 14, 2023; Article 19, [Kenya: Journalists attacked and silenced during COVID-19 pandemic](#), September 30, 2020.

<sup>36</sup> Reporters Without Borders, [Sexism's Toll on Journalism](#), 2021 at 3.

Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, women journalists in these countries “face more sexism and misogyny, sexual harassment and cyberbullying in newsrooms at all levels, which frequently leads to self-censorship.”<sup>37</sup> Additionally, while more men journalists experienced physical harm than women journalists, women journalists in these countries also feel deep uncertainty outside the newsroom, constantly worrying about being tracked or surveilled.<sup>38</sup> Understanding the prevalence of violence against women journalists in Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, The Gambia, and Sierra Leone, this report focuses on these countries.

To understand the increasing violence against women journalists in Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, The Gambia, and Sierra Leone it is crucial to put it into the context of the patriarchal societies in which women are working and living. This is especially true as “women journalists are further confronted by the gender stereotypes entrenched in most of the African community.”<sup>39</sup> Mirroring trends seen across the globe, many sub-Saharan African societies are governed by patriarchal laws, policies, and norms upheld by organizations and communities.<sup>40</sup>

In different countries, systemic barriers manifest in distinct ways ultimately creating contexts that hinder the opportunities women have access to. In Kenya, women are underrepresented in decision making at all levels in different aspects of society. This situation is more severe for women in rural areas who “spend long hours collecting water and firewood.”<sup>41</sup> These types of tasks prevent women from attending school, holding land tenure, and eventually pursuing career opportunities.<sup>42</sup> The situation is similar in Tanzania where women also face similar barriers including inadequate education, reproductive health pressures, lack of assets, lack of access to labor, and lack of access to land.<sup>43</sup> Throughout different sectors of Tanzanian society, gender roles and patriarchal social norms cement expectations for women to be operating in the home sphere.<sup>44</sup> As follows, this limits women’s “voices, decision-making power and agency.”<sup>45</sup> Once again following this pattern, Uganda’s societal organization provides very limited opportunity from taking ownership of their lives and communities. Economic, political, social, and cultural power is held by men thus relegating women to parts of society that strip them of decision-making powers.<sup>46</sup> Beyond these cultural norms that take deep root communities, many customs tangibly deprive women of opportunity. For example, in The Gambia, customs dictate that

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<sup>37</sup> Freedom of Information Centre, [Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists’ safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda](#), 2023 at 5.

<sup>38</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists’ safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda](#), 2023, at 5.

<sup>39</sup> Nyamwire Bonnita, Metial Kupfer and Siba Yahaya Mardiya, Internews, [A Dark Place for Women Journalists and Women Human Rights Defenders: Documenting the Experiences of Online Violence in Anglo and Francophone Countries](#), 2022 at 8.

<sup>40</sup> Verena Tandrayen-Ragoobur, [Building the Patriarchy Index for sub-Saharan Africa: Perceptions and Acceptance of Violence Matter Most](#), 2021 at 1.

<sup>41</sup> Verena Tandrayen-Ragoobur, [Building the Patriarchy Index for sub-Saharan Africa: Perceptions and Acceptance of Violence Matter Most](#), 2021 at 1.

<sup>42</sup> United States Agency for International Development, [Kenya: Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment](#), May 22, 2023.

<sup>43</sup> Cartier Philanthropy, [Shifting Gender Attitudes in Tanzania](#), July 10, 2023.

<sup>44</sup> Cartier Philanthropy, [Shifting Gender Attitudes in Tanzania](#), July 10, 2023.

<sup>45</sup> Cartier Philanthropy, [Shifting Gender Attitudes in Tanzania](#), July 10, 2023.

<sup>46</sup> PLAN International, [Girls Get Equal in Uganda Q&A](#), 2022.



men inherit land unconditionally, completely limiting women's economic mobility.<sup>47</sup> In Nigeria, a number of customary laws restrict the rights of women to possess land.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, “Nigeria as a country is made up of several communities with various cultures and traditional practices” which translates to varied practices in regards to the treatment of women in different parts of the country.<sup>49</sup> Ghanaian society also operates under distinct gender roles that give women little choice but to marry, have children, take care of the home, and be sexually available for their husband.<sup>50</sup> Moreover, these norms give way to a culture of violence where women become victims of assault and have little opportunity for recourse. A nationwide study in Ghana found that 1 in 3 women experienced physical violence at the hands of a partner and 29% had their first experience with sexual intercourse by force.<sup>51</sup> Finally, a similar story can be told in Sierra Leone. Aside from the gender norms that forcefully exist, the situation of women in the country is dire. Sierra Leone has one of the highest female mortality rates in the world with 1,165 of every 100,000 women dying.<sup>52</sup> 59% of those killed by Ebola in the country were women due to their roles as caregivers.<sup>53</sup> Adding to this, women face a severe lack of independence and high illiteracy rates.<sup>54</sup>

These patriarchal norms are reflected in the journalism field; across the African continent, women’s participation in journalism is low, and the sector is male-dominated.<sup>55</sup> Within East Africa, for example, the percentage of media reporters that were women in 2022 was 29% in Kenya, 35% in Tanzania, and 20% in Uganda.<sup>56</sup> In Sierra Leone, only 20% of the members of the Sierra Leone Association of Journalists are women.<sup>57</sup> The gap keeps widening as evidenced by Tanzania where despite more female graduates in journalism, there are fewer female journalists. The disparities exist not just in numbers but in content with women holding lower positions, covering soft news, receiving lower pay, and being subject to unequal job security benefits.<sup>58</sup> In considering the different experiences of men and women journalists, it is important to acknowledge that men suffer higher risk of physical attack or murder. However, female journalists “endure unequal pay and higher

<sup>47</sup> International Center for Transitional Justice, [Women’s Experiences of Dictatorship in the Gambia](#), December 2019 at 15.

<sup>48</sup> Ekwutosi Essien Offiong et al., [Patriarchy, Culture and the Social Development of Women in Nigeria](#), *Pinisi Journal of Art, Humanity & Social Studies*, Vol. 1 No. 4, 2021 at 85.

<sup>49</sup> Ekwutosi Essien Offiong et al., [Patriarchy, Culture and the Social Development of Women in Nigeria](#), *Pinisi Journal of Art, Humanity & Social Studies*, Vol. 1 No. 4, 2021 at 85.

<sup>50</sup> Yandisa Sikweyiya et al., [Patriarchy and gender-inequitable attitudes as drivers of intimate partner violence against women in the central region of Ghana](#), *BMC Public Health*, 2020.

<sup>51</sup> Coker-Appiah & Cusack, [Breaking the Silence and Challenging the Myths of Violence against Women and Children in Ghana: Report of a National Study on Violence](#), 1999.

<sup>52</sup> Kim Dickson, [Sierra Leone’s latest Maternal Death and Surveillance Report \(MDSR\), released today at a launch in Freetown](#), United Nations Population Fund, May 2017.

<sup>53</sup> UN Women, [Ebola Outbreak Takes its toll on Women](#), September 2014.

<sup>54</sup> World Bank Group Gender Data Portal, [Sierra Leone](#), 2024.

<sup>55</sup> Nyamwire Bonnita, Metial Kupfer and Siba Yahaya Mardiya, Internews, [A Dark Place for Women Journalists and Women Human Rights Defenders: Documenting the Experiences of Online Violence in Anglo and Francophone Countries](#), 2022 at 7.

<sup>56</sup> Nyamwire Bonnita, Metial Kupfer and Siba Yahaya Mardiya, Internews, [A Dark Place for Women Journalists and Women Human Rights Defenders: Documenting the Experiences of Online Violence in Anglo and Francophone Countries](#), 2022 at 7.

<sup>57</sup> Sierra Leone Association of Journalists, [Media Gender Equality Policy](#), September 2023 at 10.

<sup>58</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists’ Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists’ Safety Indicators: Tanzania Country Report](#), July 2023 at 10.

sexual harassment.”<sup>59</sup> For example, a study by FOJO Media Institute and AWiM found that there are great disparities in pay between men and women in the field throughout Sub-Saharan Africa. A majority of the participants interviewed for this study indicated that they made less than \$500 per year from journalism, attributing this to the gender pay gap.<sup>60</sup>

According to a study conducted on the gendered dimensions of journalists’ safety in Kenya, both male and female journalists had witnessed breaches in workplace safety which “manifested through surveillance, cyberbullying, sexual harassment, and physical attacks.”<sup>61</sup> The women interviewed in this study felt that these breaches are “explicitly sexist and misogynistic.”<sup>62</sup> In comparison to the male journalists, female journalists in Kenya reported significantly more harassment by “male editors, fellow reporters, news sources, politicians, and their supporters.”<sup>63</sup> Kenyan female journalists are also more vulnerable when reporting for the crime and political desks leading editors to assign male journalists to these more coveted stories.<sup>64</sup> Resulting from these barriers, more female journalists reported self-censorship and even a complete abandonment of journalism.<sup>65</sup> These trends reveal a reality in which male journalists are more likely to advance, while women journalists continue to face systemic and cultural barriers to success. Overall, Africa’s journalism sector “remains male-dominated and women remain a marginalized group, making up only one-third of the total media workforce.”<sup>66</sup>

Within this context, women media workers are particularly targeted by discrimination, sexist hate speech, sexual harassment, and verbal assault—both online and offline—because of “the belief that women can easily be intimidated and hence silenced.”<sup>67</sup>

This report seeks to summarize the trends in violence against women journalists that have emerged in Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, The Gambia and Sierra Leone since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020. The primary trends this piece will address concern the types of attacks women journalists face, the type of attackers who commit this violence, the factors heightening women journalists’ risk of attack, the impact of violence on women journalists and the sector at large, as well as institutional responses to violence and barriers to reporting. Finally, we will discuss opportunities in the

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<sup>59</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Tanzania Country Report](#), July 2023 at 10.

<sup>60</sup> FOJO Media Institute and Africa Women in Media, [Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2020 at 16, 29.

<sup>61</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Kenya Country Report](#), July 2023 at 5.

<sup>62</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Kenya Country Report](#), July 2023 at 5.

<sup>63</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Kenya Country Report](#), July 2023 at 6.

<sup>64</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Kenya Country Report](#), July 2023 at 7.

<sup>65</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Kenya Country Report](#), July 2023 at 5.

<sup>66</sup> Nyamwire Bonnita, Metial Kupfer and Siba Yahaya Mardiya, Internews, [A Dark Place for Women Journalists and Women Human Rights Defenders: Documenting the Experiences of Online Violence in Anglo and Francophone Countries](#), 2022 at 7.

<sup>67</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists' Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

realm of strategic litigation that can begin addressing the gaps in protection for women journalists across East and West Africa.

### **III. Understanding gender-based violence against women journalists and its consequences in East and West Africa**

#### **I. Types of Attacks**

Women journalists in Africa face a triple threat of violence because of their gender identity and gender expression, the general safety risks all journalists face, and the specific risks these women experience due to their professional work.<sup>68</sup> Violence against journalists is “a moving target: it constantly changes in terms of strategies, modalities and state’s responses.”<sup>69</sup> However, some of the most common attacks women journalists in East and West Africa currently face include verbal and sexual harassment, physical violence, judicial harassment, and surveillance. Importantly, these forms of violence do not exist in silos from one another. Often one form of violence will converge with another: physical violence against women journalists can be sexual in nature, online violence often becomes physical, and surveillance can be used as a tool to locate journalists ultimately resulting in either arrest or physical violence. While distilling these categories aids general understanding, violence functions as an interconnected ecosystem, with different forms reinforcing one another to suppress the influence and agency of women journalists.

#### **a. Online Harassment**

Throughout East and West Africa, online harassment is one of the most common and potent forms of violence leading women to question their worth, safety, and capacity as journalists. Gendered online harassment can be defined as “sexualized expressions or comments directed at women on the Internet.”<sup>70</sup> Given journalism’s increasing reliance on online platforms, the risk of online harassment is pervasive. For example, in Kenya 53.7% of women journalists rely on Facebook for their day-to-day responsibilities.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, women journalists tend to use the internet differently than men. Women more commonly use their online presences, whether that be blogging or their social media profiles, to connect with their audiences.<sup>72</sup> While online gender-based violence can take many forms, some of these manifestations are more common and documented than others. Civil society organizations have surveyed hundreds of women across the African continent to better understand, document, and illustrate how women journalists are being attacked online.<sup>73</sup> Some of the most significant forms of online gender-based violence against women

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<sup>68</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>69</sup> Global Freedom of Expression, Columbia University, [Global Case-law on Violence Against Journalists](#), 2022 at 24.

<sup>70</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>71</sup> African Women in Media Kenya, & Article 19, [Women Journalist’s Digital Security](#), May 2016 at 3.

<sup>72</sup> African Women in Media Kenya, & Article 19, [Women Journalist’s Digital Security](#), May 2016 at 18.

<sup>73</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

journalists include doxing, threats, non-consensual distribution of intimate and sexual images, hacking, and identity theft.<sup>74</sup> In addition to this, threats of sexual and physical violence as well as bullying women for their physical appearance remain widespread.

A 2023 study conducted in Uganda found that women journalists in the country experience various forms of gendered online harassment, including bullying, trolling, cyberstalking, threats, hate messages, character assassination, sexist comments, sexualized messages, and body and age-shaming comments.<sup>75</sup> The study also found that these women experience online harassment on two levels: the first level targets journalists' professional work, while the second is directed at their individual opinions as social media users, particularly when the opinions relate to political or controversial social issues.<sup>76</sup> A different report on violence against journalists in Uganda found that women journalists faced additional online threats compared to their male counterparts, including blackmail, body-shaming, and false accusations of relationships with married individuals.<sup>77</sup>

These patterns extend across the region. In Sierra Leone, a 2021 survey found that 50% of female journalists reported being targets of online harassment or experiencing behaviors similar to online harassment.<sup>78</sup> For example, in 2021 Radio Democracy reported on a famous rapper, Alhaji Amadu Bah. In retaliation, he posted a video on Facebook where he called the director- a woman- of the station a "bastard child," and warned "the next time I see you I will piss on your face."<sup>79</sup> As many women in Sierra Leone caution, these comments are not just single occurrences with no further impact. As a female radio reporter from Port Loko recounts, "You will not be spared any privacy."<sup>80</sup> She explained that her attackers sought to expose her and her family's private information and distribute fabricated stories.<sup>81</sup> In some cases, online harassment can take the form of coordinated smear campaigns that transcend haphazard comments by one or two social media users. The Association of Media Women of Kenya (AMWIK) found that several Kenyan women in media had become victims to social media campaigns that spread through hashtags, malicious blog posts, photos, and video edits that showed them in nude.<sup>82</sup>

In Ghana, iWatch Africa monitored 57 journalists and human rights activists during part of 2020 to assess the prevalence of online violence. Their findings showed that, on average, male journalists would face 28 instances of online abuse, while each female journalist was

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<sup>74</sup> Gideon Sarpong, [Keeping journalists safe online: a guide for newsrooms in West Africa & beyond](#), April 2022 at 5.

<sup>75</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, ["I thought You Are Beautiful": Uganda Women Journalists' Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>76</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, ["I thought You Are Beautiful": Uganda Women Journalists' Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>77</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report](#), July 2023 at 14.

<sup>78</sup> Intranews in Sierra Leone, [Digital Security in Sierra Leone](#), 2021.

<sup>79</sup> Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism & Intranews, [Threats Against Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone](#), 2022 at 4.

<sup>80</sup> Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism & Intranews, [Threats Against Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone](#), 2022 at 22.

<sup>81</sup> Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism & Intranews, [Threats Against Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone](#), 2022 at 22.

<sup>82</sup> African Women in Media Kenya & Article 19, [Women Journalist's Digital Security](#), May 2016 at 20.

subjected to an even higher number — 61 incidents during the same period.<sup>83</sup> It is not only the number of abuses that differ between male and female journalists, but it is also the nature of attacks. Testimonies illustrate that Ghanaian women journalists are faced with the dissemination of photoshopped pictures and threats of intimate images being published online.<sup>84</sup> Similarly, in Uganda and Tanzania, women journalists faced unique online threats compared to their male counterparts, including blackmail, body-shaming, sexist comments, and false accusations of relationships with married individuals.<sup>85, 86</sup> These types of threats can cost many women their reputations while also causing them severe psychological trauma ultimately leading many to leave the field.<sup>87</sup>

Demonstrating this trend, one journalist from Zimbabwe discussed how social media harassment impacted her psyche: they would “say nasty things about the clothes, make-up, the way I smiled, the way I spoke, my accent, my weight, everything and it hurt.”<sup>88</sup> She continued “I had to keep my head high and take the hurt but it took so much of my confidence away, I could have done more with my career.”<sup>89</sup> As expressed here, cyberbullying and online harassment intimately affect self-esteem and push women journalists off of online platforms creating less representation and visibility for African women journalists in the digital realm.

Alarmingly, the incidence of these threats is rapidly increasing. As a general trend, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, online violence against women in African media has been on the rise. Tanzanian women report “escalating online harassment, especially on social media platforms.”<sup>90</sup> They endure sexist comments, body-shaming, and malicious content. These threats can be career-damaging, causing many women journalists to “leave the field or endure psychological trauma due to severe online attacks.”<sup>91</sup>

Despite the prevalence of online gender-based violence against journalists, many women journalists do not recognize it as a problem.

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<sup>83</sup> Gideon Sarapong, [\*Q2 Report: Manasseh Azure, Nana Aba Anamoah & Justice Annan among most abused journalists online: Tracking digital rights in Ghana\*](#), July 27, 2020.

<sup>84</sup> Side event: Addressing Online Safety of Female Journalists in Africa: Gaps and Opportunities, October 19, 2023, 10:30 am - 12:30 pm, Arusha, Tanzania.

<sup>85</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [\*The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report\*](#), July 2023 at 14; Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [\*The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Tanzania Country Report\*](#), July 2023 at 11.

<sup>86</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [\*The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report\*](#), July 2023 at 13.

<sup>87</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [\*The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Tanzania Country Report\*](#), July 2023 at 11.

<sup>88</sup> African Women in Media & FOJO Media Institute, [\*Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa\*](#), 2020 at 41.

<sup>89</sup> African Women in Media & FOJO Media Institute, [\*Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa\*](#), 2020 at 41.

<sup>90</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [\*The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report\*](#), July 2023 at 14; Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [\*The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Tanzania Country Report\*](#), July 2023 at 11.

<sup>91</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [\*The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Tanzania Country Report\*](#), July 2023 at 11.



Members of a Nigerian union of women journalists shared that many of them have never considered online harassment as violence or a systemic gender-based violence issue.<sup>92</sup> As will be expanded upon in later sections, this lack of awareness leads to unfamiliarity about potential remedies.

While online violence is in itself extremely harmful, it also often leads to offline violence. As Irūngũ Houghton, a human rights advocate and the director of Amnesty International Kenya stated, “the greatest danger is not that there is discriminatory language flying around on social media, [but that it] ends up in hate crimes and produces the social consent for gender-based violence and rape.”<sup>93</sup> In fact, the Committee to Protect Journalists reported that at least 40% of murdered journalists received death threats, including online threats, prior to the attacks against them.<sup>94</sup>

## **b. Sexual Harassment**

While the gendered harassment African women journalists face takes many forms, many of these threats and attacks are sexual in nature. Sexual harassment compounds other forms of harassment and is often used to control the actions of women journalists. For example, some perpetrators are supervisors who use sexual solicitations to threaten job security while other perpetrators are faceless and make sexual threats via social media in response to a sensitive piece of journalism and in some other occasions it involves physical assault including aggravated assault at gunpoint.<sup>95</sup>

Sexual violence is a common experience for women journalists throughout East and West Africa. According to a survey, 77.5% of women journalists in Kenya reported experiencing sexual harassment more than once, with 40% having experienced it five or more times. In the same study, 38.1% of women journalists in Nigeria reported experiencing sexual harassment.<sup>96</sup> Another report found that the African countries with the highest prevalence of verbal and physical sexual harassment were Kenya, Botswana, Zambia, Uganda, and Tanzania.<sup>97</sup> In a 2023 study by the Tanzania Media Women Association (TAMWA) and the International Media Support (IMS), 77% of the interviewed women media workers reported experiencing sexual harassment within their respective media outlets.<sup>98</sup>

One of the most common and insidious forms of sexual harassment is when perpetrators make sexual solicitations in exchange for job opportunities. This is a common

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<sup>92</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, Consultation with African Civil Society Regarding Violence Against Women Journalists, June 5, 2024.

<sup>93</sup> Caroline Kimeu, [As social media grows in Kenya, so does the disturbing and toxic ‘manosphere’](#), October 2, 2023.

<sup>94</sup> Elisabeth Witchel, [Getting Away with Murder](#), Committee to Protect Journalists, October 31st, 2017.

<sup>95</sup> FOJO Media Institute and Africa Women in Media, [Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2020 at 37.

<sup>96</sup> Lindsey E. Blumell and Dinfin Mulupi, [Newsrooms and the metoo Movement. Sexism and the press in Kenya, South Africa, and Nigeria](#), Feminist Media Studies, 2020.

<sup>97</sup> Women in News, [Sexual Harassment in the Media: Africa Report](#), 2022 at 9.

<sup>98</sup> Tanzania Media Women’s Association and International Media Support, [Sexual Harassment, Corruption, and Gender Mainstreaming in the Media – Tanzania](#), November 2023 at ix.

trend throughout the continent with women from across Africa discussing it as a normalized aspect of the field. One anonymous journalist discussed her repeated experience with this type of extortion:

“I have experienced sexual abuse from almost all of my supervisors. I have had to fight one boss off and another almost raped me and my refusal to date any of them caused me so much harm. I was given terrible beats, treated badly by my bosses and when I complained to my fellow female colleagues, I was told it was normal.”<sup>99</sup>

This journalist’s story is representative of how sexual violence has become so common that many women journalists accept it as inevitable. As she discussed, refusing sexual advances affects career prospects, workplace treatment, wellbeing, and more. Sometimes, this harassment comes at the hands of interviewees, news sources, or financial sponsors. Journalists in Sierra Leone explain that it is not uncommon for their bosses to use them as a pawn to attract financial contributions from sponsors. If the woman journalist refuses sexual advances from the sponsor, the same sponsor will complain to the media house suggesting termination.<sup>100</sup> One media manager who attended a focus group conducted by the Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism discussed how he had once received a request from a sponsor to assign a specific female journalist to a work-related trip. Even though he suspected a sexual trap, he obliged given that refusal to would have been financially detrimental to the organization.<sup>101</sup> The manager decided to assign another male journalist to go on the trip alongside the woman in an attempt to protect her, but as he described, turning down the sponsor was not feasible.<sup>102</sup>

This type of sexual violence is addedly precarious for young female journalists who depend on already limited salaries. To support themselves or their families, many women are subject to “to the demands of male superiors” and feel that they have no choice but to accept advances.<sup>103</sup> Similarly, women who are trying to be placed on certain reporting beats or be hired at more prestigious jobs encounter similar threats. As a journalist in Zimbabwe emphasizes, “If you will not give yourself to the boss, then you cannot get the job you wanted even if you qualify for that job.”<sup>104</sup>

In some cases, sexual violence can be fatal for women journalists. An anonymous journalist from <sup>Sub</sup>-Saharan Africa explained her experience: “I was lucky to get a chance at one of the mainstream media houses... then my immediate boss... kept me as a hostage in the office in the evening when everyone was away. He made advances with the promise of giving me a job, he threatened me at gunpoint.”<sup>105</sup> This example demonstrates the

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<sup>99</sup>African Women in Media & FOJO Media Institute, [Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2020 at 41.

<sup>100</sup> Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism & Intranews, [Threats Against Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone](#), 2022 at 30.

<sup>101</sup> Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism & Intranews, [Threats Against Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone](#), 2022 at 30.

<sup>102</sup> Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism & Intranews, [Threats Against Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone](#), 2022 at 30.

<sup>103</sup>African Women in Media & FOJO Media Institute, [Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2020 at 38.

<sup>104</sup> African Women in Media & FOJO Media Institute, [Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2020 at 38.

<sup>105</sup>African Women in Media & FOJO Media Institute, [Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2020 at 37.

interconnected nature of gendered violence; sexual violence can transcend sexual acts and lend itself to a physical violence that puts the lives of women journalists at risk if they challenge or resist.

Sexual harassment is not always physical. Verbal sexual harassment is used as another tool to degrade and silence women journalists through demeaning remarks. In a study conducted by Women Win, researchers found that almost 60% of women journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa had experienced some form of verbal sexual harassment.<sup>106</sup> A journalist from Kenya who newly joined a newspaper said that “the men are fond of sexually harassing women verbally in a way that keeps us so uncomfortable, yet they laugh about it and make it seem like it is normal.”<sup>107</sup> Another journalist in Zimbabwe echoed these sentiments in saying “The line between casual chatter and uncomfortable dialogue is easily crossed.” She continued “A fellow female told me I should ignore certain comments if I want to survive in the industry.”<sup>108</sup> These reflections underline the pervasive nature of verbal sexual harassment and make clear that women journalists see it as unescapable. As represented here, instead of suggesting reporting mechanisms, many women will tell their peers to find ways to cope and accept with violence and harassment. This exposes systemic failures in holding perpetrators accountable for violence against women journalists.

The incidence of different forms of sexual harassment fluctuated with the emergence of the pandemic. According to African Women in Media’s study on the impacts of COVID-19 on women journalists, 61.4% respondents said in-person sexual harassment was not as severe of an issue between March 2020 and September 2020 given less physical proximity. On the other hand, online harassment went up by 63.9% within this same period.<sup>109</sup> As many of the testimonials cited in this report suggest, in-person sexual harassment has continued as women have gone back to physical work.

Whether it be verbal harassment, exploitation, or rape, sexual abuse has become heavily ingrained in everyday life in newsrooms across the continent. A 23-year-old Nigerian journalist put it succinctly when she dictated that “harassment has become a culture” regarding her workplace.<sup>110</sup> Beginning to address abuse will require action in newsrooms, in legal systems, and in the cultural sphere.

### **c. Physical Violence**

Civil society has observed a growing trend in physical attacks against women journalists in West Africa.<sup>111</sup> According to a study conducted in Uganda, physical threats against

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<sup>106</sup> Women in News, [Sexual Harassment in Media](#), June 2021 at 24.

<sup>107</sup> Philip Obaji Jr., [Sexual Harassment in African Newsrooms in a Scourge on Journalism](#), Al Jazeera Journalism Review, December 2022.

<sup>108</sup> African Women in Media & FOJO Media Institute, [Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2020 at 38.

<sup>109</sup> African Women in Media, [The Impact of COVID-19 on East African Women Journalists](#), December 2020 at 8.

<sup>110</sup> Philip Obaji Jr., [Sexual Harassment in African Newsrooms in a Scourge on Journalism](#), Al Jazeera Journalism Review, December 2022.

<sup>111</sup> Media Foundation for West Africa, [Safety of female journalists in West Africa: Reflections of media practitioners](#), March 14, 2023.

journalists at large include “beatings, arrests, imprisonment, and kidnappings, particularly during public demonstrations.”<sup>112</sup> Researchers report that male journalists face more physical threats than their female counterparts. However, women journalists still encounter significant risks. Additionally, though women journalists face less physical violence than their counterparts, many still cited these physical threats as a reason for considerations to leave journalism.<sup>113</sup>

In a study evaluating the situation of women journalists in Nigeria, respondents cited physically being pushed out of events by security guards, being harassed by security officers, and arbitrary arrest as experiences they have faced.<sup>114</sup> One spoke of how she was arrested by joint security forces for covering a political engagement.<sup>115</sup> In a different instance, a journalist told the story of when she interviewed a government official and “his aides literally pushed [her] so much that even the governor had to look back in shock.”<sup>116</sup> In reflecting on the various situations, one journalist reflected that police officers and others “believe that my body should be substituted for information.”<sup>117</sup> This is another area physical and sexual violence merge together as many perpetrators use physical force to then make an unwanted sexual advance.

Of note, when it comes to understanding the landscape of physical violence incidents, there remains a lack of data and reporting. As Victoria Ibanga, editor-in-chief of the Nigerian online newspaper Next-Edition discusses, there are many instances of abuse that women journalists never mention for fear of being stigmatized. When considering physical violence, most research looks at journalists as a whole. For example, in Kenya, civil society organizations documented 94 violent incidents against journalists during the 2017 elections but did not include disaggregated data that could provide a gendered understanding as noted by International Media Support.<sup>118</sup>

Women journalists in Uganda also reported instances of their equipment being forcibly broken or stolen.<sup>119</sup> This hampered their tangible ability to complete their work, but moreover, threatened their personal safety given that they had private data and information

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<sup>112</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report](#), July 2023 at 6.

<sup>113</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists' safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda](#), 2023 at 5.

<sup>114</sup> Media Foundation for West Africa & International Press Centre, [State of Safety of Female Journalists in Nigeria](#), 2023 at 12.

<sup>115</sup> Media Foundation for West Africa & International Press Centre, [State of Safety of Female Journalists in Nigeria](#), 2023 at 12.

<sup>116</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung & Center for Journalism Innovation & Development, [Hidden Battles: Patterns and Nuances of Violence against Journalists in Nigeria](#), 2024 at 10.

<sup>117</sup> Media Foundation for West Africa & International Press Centre, [State of Safety of Female Journalists in Nigeria](#), 2023 at 13.

<sup>118</sup> International Media Support, [The Safety of Women Journalists: Breaking the Cycle of Silence and Violence](#), September 2019 at 29.

<sup>119</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report](#), July 2023 at 14.

stored on their devices.<sup>120</sup> Further, various cases of confiscation of mobile devices that compromise digital communication and distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks have been reported in Africa.<sup>121</sup>

While high numbers of murders of women journalists are not reported, threats of murder, killing, and rape continue. For many women journalists, these threats create intense intimidation that lead them to self-censor and remove themselves from certain stories “emphasizing that no story is worth more than one's life.”<sup>122</sup>

#### **d. Judicial Harassment**

A commonly used strategy to silence and intimidate journalists is judicial harassment which occurs when actors abuse the judicial system and bring unsubstantiated civil lawsuits or administrative proceedings, and manipulate criminal charges and more.<sup>123</sup> Journalists often face a wide range of legal charges including defamation, breaches of protest or NGO laws, as well as violations public order. Sometimes, they are charged of even more serious crimes like terrorism, crimes against state security, and subversion.<sup>124</sup> This tactic is used to intimidate journalists from reporting on certain topics and simultaneously diminishes a journalist's capacity to continue their reporting work by diverting time, energy and resources from their work, and puts on a heavy financial burden on them.<sup>125</sup>

Judicial harassment tactics can include arrest and imprisonment. According to Reporters Without Borders many countries imprison journalists in order to suppress the right access information. As of December 2024, 550 journalists are currently imprisoned across the globe.<sup>126</sup> In Kenya, more than 30 journalists—both men and women—were arrested in 2021 while carrying out their duties.<sup>127</sup>

A form of judicial harassment is filing Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation (SLAPPs). SLAPPs “are vexatious and meritless legal action, often taken against journalists and human rights activists who have expressed a critical opinion.”<sup>128</sup> Legal actions like these are designed to deflect attention from critical reporting, instill fear in journalists, deter them from expressing their views, and force them to shift resources away from public-interest journalism toward unavoidable legal defense.<sup>129</sup> SLAPPs manipulate judicial

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<sup>120</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report](#), July 2023 at 14.

<sup>121</sup> Side event: Addressing Online Safety of Female Journalists in Africa: Gaps and Opportunities, October 19, 2023, 10:30 am - 12:30 pm, Arusha, Tanzania.

<sup>122</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report](#), July 2023 at 13.

<sup>123</sup> Front Line Defenders, [#Judicial Harassment](#), 2024.

<sup>124</sup> Front Line Defenders, [#Judicial Harassment](#), 2024.

<sup>125</sup> Front Line Defenders, [#Judicial Harassment](#), 2024.

<sup>126</sup> Reporters Without Borders, [2024 Round-Up](#), December 2024 at 5.

<sup>127</sup> Article 19, [Eastern Africa: Governments must do more to protect journalists](#), November 2, 2022.

<sup>128</sup> Media Defence, [Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation \(SLAPPs\) in sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2023 at 1.

<sup>129</sup> Global Freedom of Expression Initiative at Columbia University, [How are courts responding to SLAPPs? Analysis of selected court decisions](#), 2023 at 12.



systems to chill action and criticism on public interest issues. Journalists targeted by SLAPPs often feel isolated as they are faced with insurmountable legal fees, reputational harm, overall emotional distress. Stemming from this, the suits are generally successful in silencing journalists who do not have the resources to respond to impending legal threats.<sup>130</sup> While the use of SLAPPs is more widespread in the Americas and Europe, it is a growing challenge in Sub-Saharan Africa, resulting in increased action in the region.<sup>131</sup>

According to a study conducted in Kenya, SLAPPs against media affect not only journalists, but also sources who fear retaliation against them. Court actions (sentencing and compensation) have perpetuated self-censorship by journalists and reduced stories that rely on anonymized sources given that they are more vulnerable to SLAPPs.<sup>132</sup> There is also a pattern “of arrest and prosecution of journalists on frivolous charges in Nigeria.”<sup>133</sup> There is a lack of extensive research on judicial harassment against women in Africa, but a study looking at Turkey found that anti-terrorism laws and criminal charges for “insulting the nation” are the most used to target women journalists.<sup>134</sup>

While judicial harassment in East and West Africa does not appear to have a specifically gendered component, it contributes to the overall hostile environment for journalists in the regions, heightening the chilling effect on women journalists.

#### **e. Surveillance**

Digital surveillance of journalists is globally on the rise.<sup>135</sup> Both public and private actors are using software like spyware and cyberweapons to infiltrate encrypted and confidential information.<sup>136</sup> This puts reporters, their sources, and their families in immediate risk. Investigative journalists who focus on cases with large societal impact spanning from corruption, human rights violations, and general abuse of power, are at higher risk of particularly extensive surveillance which can lead to the arrest and even murder of journalists.<sup>137</sup>

A 2019 study conducted by the Association of Media Women in Kenya and Article 19 Eastern Africa, reveals that surveillance is a common tactic used to attack women journalists.<sup>138</sup> Additionally, women journalists in Uganda reported cases of being

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<sup>130</sup> Tanja Kerševan and Melita Poler, [Silencing journalists in matters of public interest: Journalists and Editors Assessments of the Impact of SLAPPs on Journalism](#), Sage Journals, December 2024.

<sup>131</sup> Southern Africa Resource Watch, [Coalition Against Slaps in Africa](#), 2025.

<sup>132</sup> Mzalendo and International Center for Not-For-Profit Law, [The Use of Strategic Litigation Against Public Participation \(SLAPP\) as a Concept in Kenya and Its Impact on the Freedom of Expression](#), 2023 at 23.

<sup>133</sup> IFEX and Media Foundation for West Africa, [The growing SLAPP in the face of Nigeria's press freedom](#), June 8, 2022.

<sup>134</sup> Women Press Freedom, [Weaponizing the Courts: Erdoğan's Escalating Legal Repression of Women Journalists](#), February 2025.

<sup>135</sup> OHCHR, [Digital surveillance treats “journalists as criminals.”](#) May 3, 2022.

<sup>136</sup> Media Defence, [Spying in the digital age: The use of spyware against journalists](#), August 2, 2022.

<sup>137</sup> OHCHR, [Digital surveillance treats “journalists as criminals.”](#) May 3, 2022.

<sup>138</sup> Mora Obiria, International Journalists' Network, [Report finds Kenyan women journalists face online harassment, makes recommendations](#), January 31, 2019.

phone-tracked and physically trailed by unknown individuals.<sup>139</sup> These threats were often attributed to state agents and influential figures.

Further, a recent study found that Nigeria and Ghana are among a plethora of countries in Africa that use surveillance technology contracts to spy on journalists.<sup>140</sup> Nigeria is the largest market for of surveillance technology in Africa, and it lacks strong and effective safeguards for citizens' rights to privacy, freedom of expression, and association. Various state agencies collectively invest billions of dollars in a wide range of surveillance tools sourced from multiple countries.<sup>141</sup> In particular, Nigeria receives internet interception, mobile interception, social media monitoring, safe city, and biometric ID technologies from the US, the UK, France, Germany, Italy, Israel, and China.<sup>142</sup> Similarly, Ghana has purchased internet surveillance, mobile interception, safe city, and biometric ID technology.<sup>143</sup> Other African States are also investing in this technology; notable surveillance company NSO Group and its affiliate Circles are active in or have supplied technology to various countries in the region, including Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, and Uganda.<sup>144</sup>

## II. Types of attackers

Women journalists' attackers "range from misogynistic mobs seeking to silence women journalists, to state-linked networks aiming to undercut press freedom and chill critical journalism via orchestrated attacks."<sup>145</sup> Some of the most common categories of perpetrators include sources and contacts, colleagues within the newsroom, political actors, and anonymous perpetrators.

### a. Sources and Contacts

Sources and contacts often commit violations against women journalists in Africa. According to a study on sexual harassment in the media in Africa, 17% of perpetrators of sexual harassment were sources.<sup>146</sup> Additionally, women journalists in Kenya reported more harassment from news sources than their male counterparts.<sup>147</sup> In the TAMWA and IMS study on the safety of women journalists in Tanzania, 27% of the respondents indicated

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<sup>139</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report](#), July 2023 at 12.

<sup>140</sup> Tony Roberts et al., [Mapping the Supply of Surveillance Technologies to Africa: Case Studies from Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, Malawi, and Zambia](#), Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2023.

<sup>141</sup> Tony Roberts et al., [Mapping the Supply of Surveillance Technologies to Africa: Case Studies from Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, Malawi, and Zambia](#), Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2023 at 20.

<sup>142</sup> Tony Roberts et al., [Mapping the Supply of Surveillance Technologies to Africa: Case Studies from Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, Malawi, and Zambia](#), Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2023 at 20.

<sup>143</sup> Tony Roberts et al., [Mapping the Supply of Surveillance Technologies to Africa: Case Studies from Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, Malawi, and Zambia](#), Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2023 at 21-22.

<sup>144</sup> Tony Roberts et al., [Mapping the Supply of Surveillance Technologies to Africa: Case Studies from Nigeria, Ghana, Morocco, Malawi, and Zambia](#), Brighton: Institute of Development Studies, 2023 at 149.

<sup>145</sup> Nyamwire Bonnita, Metial Kupfer and Siba Yahaya Mardiya, Internews, [A Dark Place for Women Journalists and Women Human Rights Defenders: Documenting the Experiences of Online Violence in Anglo and Francophone Countries](#), 2022 at 8.

<sup>146</sup> Women in News, [Sexual Harassment in the Media: Africa Report](#), 2022 at 5.

<sup>147</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Kenya Country Report](#), July 2023 at 6.

that they were sexually harassed by sources or in the field.<sup>148</sup> Journalists surveyed in Tanzania and Kenya reported that some sources “want to be interviewed in exclusive hotels for their own purposes.”<sup>149</sup> This issue was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic “as without public places to meet, sources want to suggest meeting in private places which may not be safe.”<sup>150</sup>

In one particularly pointed interview shared as part of a study conducted by the Centre for Journalism Innovation and Development and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung in 2024, a Nigerian journalist talked about her first assignment when she was covering a murder at a police station. Originally, she was welcomed in by an officer who “then suddenly locked the door and attacked” her; she cautioned, “When they want to rape you, they’re incredibly strong.”<sup>151</sup> Many women journalists have stories like this one. In a similar way to how supervisors threaten job security if women withhold sex, sources often do the same thing indicating they will only share information in exchange for sexual actions.<sup>152</sup>

As a result of these types of experiences, many women feel an overwhelming and omnipresent sense of fear that harassment could be at any corner as they are pursuing important stories.

## **b. Colleagues within the Newsroom**

Colleagues are also common offenders of violence against women journalists in Africa. According to a survey conducted by WAN-IFRA, 41% of perpetrators of sexual harassment were supervisors or executives, and 38% were colleagues.<sup>153</sup> In the TAMWA and IMS study in Tanzania, 59.4% of the 37 key informants confirmed the occurrence of sexual harassment within the media sector.<sup>154</sup> Sexual advancements by superiors and male colleagues are especially prevalent in the region.<sup>155</sup> According to a study conducted in Kenya, women journalists significantly reported more harassment by editors and fellow reporters than their male peers.<sup>156</sup> This study showed that women journalists “often experience harassment at the entry level, with some powerful male editors making

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<sup>148</sup> Tanzania Media Women’s Association and International Media Support, [Sexual Harassment, Corruption, and Gender Mainstreaming in the Media – Tanzania](#), November 2023 at ix.

<sup>149</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists’ safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda](#), 2023, at 9.

<sup>150</sup> African Women in Media, [The Impact of COVID-19 on East African Women Journalists](#), December 2020 at 36.

<sup>151</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung & Center for Journalism Innovation & Development, [Hidden Battles: Patterns and Nuances of Violence against Journalists in Nigeria](#), 2024 at 11.

<sup>152</sup> African Women in Media & FOJO Media Institute, [Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2020 at 39.

<sup>153</sup> Women in News, [Sexual Harassment in the Media: Africa Report](#), 2022 at 5.

<sup>154</sup> Tanzania Media Women’s Association and International Media Support, [Sexual Harassment, Corruption, and Gender Mainstreaming in the Media – Tanzania](#), November 2023 at x.

<sup>155</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists’ safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda](#), 2023 at 8.

<sup>156</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists’ Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists’ Safety Indicators: Kenya Country Report](#), July 2023 at 6.

advances that affect their careers.”<sup>157</sup> Women journalists in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda “are less secure in newsrooms and media houses than their male counterparts.”<sup>158</sup>

During a workshop sharing the findings of a study launched by the African Freedom of Information Centre and UNESCO, one journalist from Uganda told an anecdote of how when she was in college, a lecturer said “As a lady when you walk into a newsroom, you are seen as a piece of fresh flesh that everybody wants to feast on.”<sup>159</sup> This was affirmed by a journalist in Nigeria who discussed how she was stalked by a male colleague: “A senior male staff member throwing advances at me was capturing my pictures in every move I made at the office without my knowledge. He also set up a watchman on me.”<sup>160</sup> When colleagues are the perpetrators, women have no means of escape given that their home-base is now a place associated with risk, fear, and distress. Added to this, threats from supervisors and colleagues directly impacts career progression as threatened women either must accept sexual solicitations to receive promotions or instead risk being terminated and unemployed. Overall, in these situations, many women feel that if they want to continue in their careers, they have no choice but to accept their fates.

### c. Political Actors

A report on digital rights in Ghana showed that in the country, abuse against women journalists is often part of organized campaigns led by political or other interest groups to silence critical discussion.<sup>161</sup> In some cases, the suppression of dissent is systemic and embedded within political institutions. For example, in Eastern Africa, government mandated authorization regimes spur self-censorship thus changing the types of stories journalists cover. One example of this is how Tanzanian journalists are obligated to have their stories confirmed by the government prior to releasing them.<sup>162</sup> Further, instances of journalists being phone-tracked and physically followed in Uganda were often attributed to state agents and influential figures.<sup>163</sup> Additionally, while men journalists in Kenya “experience more threats, arrests, and abductions by state agents,” women journalists in the country reported more harassment from politicians and their supporters than male journalists, particularly during elections.<sup>164</sup> In Kenya, women journalists face incessant

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<sup>157</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Kenya Country Report](#), July 2023 at 15.

<sup>158</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists' safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda](#), 2023, at 5.

<sup>159</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists' safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda](#), 2023, at 9.

<sup>160</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung & Center for Journalism Innovation & Development, [Hidden Battles: Patterns and Nuances of Violence against Journalists in Nigeria](#), 2024 at 11.

<sup>161</sup> Gideon Sarapong, [Q2 Report: Manasseh Azure, Nana Aba Anamoah & Justice Annan among most abused journalists online: Tracking digital rights in Ghana](#), July 27, 2020.

<sup>162</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists' safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda](#), 2023, at 9.

<sup>163</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report](#), July 2023 at 12.

<sup>164</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Tanzania Country Report](#), July 2023 at 6, 11, 16.

threats of rape and abuse from politicians, especially during elections, and supporters who see them as easy targets to discredit and silence.<sup>165</sup> Politicians in Kenya and Tanzania reportedly “engage in unhealthy ‘locker room’ competitions on ‘who will bed the female journalist first.’”<sup>166</sup>

Some politicians will specifically villainize certain women journalists who have criticized them, their parties, or their actions. The Director of Information and Publicity for the Zimbabwe National Union Patriotic Front cyberbullied a woman journalist. The Director threatened to release a “bombshell” if she was not stopped.<sup>167</sup> He went on accusing her of poor journalistic practices and undermining her work. In some cases, political actors engage in what is called Coordinated Inauthentic Behavior (CIB) which can be defined as adversarial actors using fake social media accounts to influence public debate. One journalist detailed her time covering the 2021 Ugandan campaigns when she did a story on Museveni’s presidency. Following its publication, she had 20 accounts attacking her on Facebook. She received multiple threats: “If you do not change your negativity about this government, we shall finish you,” “We know you are paid to tarnish this government, but we shall finish you,” “Do you think you can remove Museveni from power?.”<sup>168</sup> In 2021, Facebook deleted over 20 pro-ruling party supporters’ accounts it believed to be engaged in CIB; there is a possibility that some of these accounts engaged in the above attacks.<sup>169</sup>

In contrast to these more public forms of harassment, some political actors operate via more discreet threats. As part of a study, one journalist from Nigeria shared that when she was working on a story investigating the forceful abduction of an underaged girl, a senior police officer warned her to stay off the story.<sup>170</sup> In this case, the police were on the side of the suspect. The journalist remarked “I immediately stopped because I was a single parent and wouldn’t endanger my life because that would affect my kids.”<sup>171</sup> Additionally, when political actors are also sources, these more direct threats of harassment can also occur. One Ugandan journalist expressed that “powerful politicians invite journalists to inappropriate venues for interviews leading to harassment” and even said that two journalists had told her they had “narrowly escaped being raped while conducting interviews with male sources.”<sup>172</sup> This is a concrete example of how threats by political actors can translate into women journalists having less access to the types of stories they might want to cover.

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<sup>165</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists’ Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists’ Safety Indicators: Kenya Country Report](#), July 2023 at 16.

<sup>166</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists’ safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda](#), 2023 at 9.

<sup>167</sup> Women Press Freedom, [Zimbabwe: CFWIJ Denounces The Online Bullying Of Journalist Sophie Mokoena](#), January 2021.

<sup>168</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>169</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>170</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung & Center for Journalism Innovation & Development, [Hidden Battles: Patterns and Nuances of Violence against Journalists in Nigeria](#), 2024 at 10.

<sup>171</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung & Center for Journalism Innovation & Development, [Hidden Battles: Patterns and Nuances of Violence against Journalists in Nigeria](#), 2024 at 10.

<sup>172</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, Survey with African Women Journalists, 2025.



#### d. Anonymous Perpetrators

Many perpetrators attack African women journalists anonymously, especially in online fora. According to a report on online violence against women journalists in Francophone countries, anonymous or unknown attackers are the most frequently cited source of attacks according to the women respondents.<sup>173</sup> Online harassment in particular thrives “because of the inability to control every aspect of the Internet, which is exacerbated by the anonymity social media afford their users.”<sup>174</sup>

Many online attacks are not only anonymous, but are also “decentralized,” making it easier for users to evade accountability for violating content.<sup>175</sup> “Decentralized” online attacks are orchestrated by multiple people or groups, leading women journalists to be inundated by hundreds of abusive messages, forcing them out of participating in the online space.<sup>176</sup> This phenomenon is a form of mob censorship. Traditionally, mob violence is understood as extrajudicial punishment wherein a crowd decides that someone has done wrong, and then proceeds to enact punishment.<sup>177</sup> Mob censorship is a type of mob violence where the aim of the perpetrators is to censor their victims.<sup>178</sup> When this concept is translated to online harassment, mob censorship refers to “a tendency when social media users or vigilantes attack, troll, abuse, and harass women journalists” with an overall mission to silence the woman. Mob censorship is often perpetrated by attackers who use pseudo identities making them numerous, powerful, and yet still hidden from public view. Mob censorship thrives given this anonymity as perpetrators become a faceless mass, making their attacks appear organic rather than orchestrated. As a result, no single individual can be blamed, creating a cycle of impunity.

### III. Factors heightening risk of attacks

While women journalists are attacked more than their male counterparts across the board there are other factors that heighten women journalists’ risk of facing violence. Circumstances that increase women journalists’ risk of attack include their coverage of specific issues, reporting via visual media, being a part of a media house, and reporting in conflict zones.<sup>179</sup>

#### a. Coverage of Specific Issues

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<sup>173</sup> Nyamwire Bonnitia, Metial Kupfer and Siba Yahaya Mardiya, Internews, [A Dark Place for Women Journalists and Women Human Rights Defenders: Documenting the Experiences of Online Violence in Anglo and Francophone Countries](#), 2022 at 3.

<sup>174</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>175</sup> Caroline Kimeu, [As social media grows in Kenya, so does the disturbing and toxic ‘manosphere’](#), October 2, 2023.

<sup>176</sup> Caroline Kimeu, [As social media grows in Kenya, so does the disturbing and toxic ‘manosphere’](#), October 2, 2023.

<sup>177</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>178</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>179</sup> Julie Posetti et al., [The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists](#), UNESCO, April 2021.

Women journalists are at a higher risk of facing violence when they cover specific issues, particularly when they are reporting on stories revolving around gender, human rights and social policy, political issues, elections, conflict, and/or violence.<sup>180</sup> AFIC's study in Uganda found that "threats were directed at stories related to politics, business, land transactions, and sensitive community issues."<sup>181</sup> Similarly, in Nigeria, politics, security, and crime beats were the areas labeled as highest risk.<sup>182</sup>

One Ugandan woman journalist was pushed out of the profession after being harassed for covering LGBTQ+ issues.<sup>183</sup> In the article she wrote on her experience stated:

"Covering gay rights was simply an extension of the good work. I never really expected the hate emails, the vile Facebook messages, or the face-to-face insults. No one warned me that there would be suspicious looks from colleagues, lost friendships, and stern warnings not to write too many gay stories because they might affect the paper's circulation."<sup>184</sup>

The journalist eventually quit journalism.<sup>185</sup> Stories surrounding politics seem to especially expose women journalists to vitriol. In Uganda, studies show that "online mob violence tends to escalate during heightened political situations and elections than other periods."<sup>186</sup> Further, the report found that political stories particularly instigated more attacks with perpetrators assigning political bias to journalists reporting stories that reflect negatively on a given party.<sup>187</sup> Along with this, politics is generally a highly charged area meaning reporters become vulnerable to the "extremism of loyalists and entitlement mentality of politicians."<sup>188</sup> Additionally, women journalists expressing their own political opinions triggers abuse.<sup>189</sup>

This pattern is troubling, as the retreat of women journalists from reporting on politics aggravates gender inequality in journalism and removes women's voices from political

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<sup>180</sup> Media Foundation for West Africa, [Safety of female journalists in West Africa: Reflections of media practitioners](#), March 14, 2023.

<sup>181</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report](#), July 2023 at 14.

<sup>182</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung & Center for Journalism Innovation & Development, [Hidden Battles: Patterns and Nuances of Violence against Journalists in Nigeria](#), 2024 at 13.

<sup>183</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, ["I thought You Are Beautiful": Uganda Women Journalists' Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>184</sup> Patience Akumu, [I've had hate mail and lost friends – but I will not stop writing about gay rights in Uganda](#), August 24, 2013.

<sup>185</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, ["I thought You Are Beautiful": Uganda Women Journalists' Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>186</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, ["I thought You Are Beautiful": Uganda Women Journalists' Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>187</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, ["I thought You Are Beautiful": Uganda Women Journalists' Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>188</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung & Center for Journalism Innovation & Development, [Hidden Battles: Patterns and Nuances of Violence against Journalists in Nigeria](#), 2024 at 13.

<sup>189</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, ["I thought You Are Beautiful": Uganda Women Journalists' Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

discussions.<sup>190</sup> Removing women from these topics negatively impacts the entire media industry due to a marked lack of women's perspectives on story angles.<sup>191</sup> This leads to decreased accessibility of leadership roles to women later in their careers. Further, women are prevented from covering the types of topics that have the highest potential to create social impact whether those are stories about human rights, exposing corruption, or discussing political abuse.

## **b. Institutional Affiliation**

Whether a journalist is a part of a media house or is a freelance journalist may also impact their risk of attack. In Uganda, some journalists are attacked not because of their own actions, but because of the media houses with which they are affiliated.<sup>192</sup> Journalists affiliated with media houses that are considered politically biased are especially vulnerable to attacks.<sup>193</sup>

## **c. Reporting in Conflict Zones**

Women journalists reporting on or living in conflict zones are at increased risk of encountering violence given “widespread availability of weapons, the presence of militias and the absence of legal structures.”<sup>194</sup> As they report on violence and in some cases, expose problematic actions by relevant parties, they risk being caught in the violence itself. The threats they face include “intimidation, kidnappings, threats of rape, harming family members, causing disabilities, stealing or destroying equipment and, in extreme cases, even assassinating.”<sup>195</sup>

# **IV. Impact of Violence on Women Journalists and Other Consequences of Violence**

## **I. Mental Health Implications**

Globally, mental health effects are the most common consequence of online violence against women journalists, followed by feelings of physical danger.<sup>196</sup> The African region follows a similar pattern. As one expert said, “most of the attacks female journalists face go beyond mere physical attacks, as they can seriously affect their mental well-being.”<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>190</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>191</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists’ safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda](#), 2023, at 5.

<sup>192</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>193</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>194</sup> International Media Support, [Safety of women journalists: Learning Brief No. 1](#), 2024 at 3.

<sup>195</sup> International Media Support, [Safety of women journalists: Learning Brief No. 1](#), 2024 at 3.

<sup>196</sup> Julie Posetti et al., [The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists](#), UNESCO, April 2021 at 6.

<sup>197</sup> Media Foundation for West Africa, [Safety of female journalists in West Africa: Reflections of media practitioners](#), March 14, 2023.

A report on the mental health crisis among journalists in East Africa discusses how stressors journalists face put their “well-being at risk.”<sup>198</sup> One such stressor mentioned by the report was working through the pandemic: According to a 2020 study conducted by the International Center for Journalists, 70% of journalist survey participants responded that the psychological and emotional impacts of dealing with COVID-19 was the hardest part of their work.<sup>199</sup> Despite the various challenges journalists face, mental health is not often talked about due to stigmas surrounding it as well a generally held understanding that journalists should be able to manage their work. As a result, many journalists do not seek help perceiving it as weakness, leading problems to worsen over time.<sup>200</sup>

The mental health implications of gendered violence perpetrated against journalists are severe. In a global study done on online violence against women journalists, mental health impacts were the most cited and significant consequence of online violence.<sup>201</sup> Some women even said they struggle with PTSD due to the threats they received online as a result of their work.<sup>202</sup> Researchers have tracked how experiencing higher rates of sexual harassment at work is associated with increased depressive symptoms.<sup>203</sup> Along with this, when sexual harassment is experienced early in one’s career, there are long-term effects on depressive symptoms experienced into adulthood.<sup>204</sup>

This trend holds up for women across East and West Africa. A representative from Sierra Leone’s Independent Media Commission, stated that online attacks intimately damage many women journalists’ self-esteem causing fear, depression, self-blame, and more.<sup>205</sup> The problem is not only that these mental health complications occur, but that there is barely any psychological support in place. In Sierra Leone, 98% of people who have a severe mental illnesses are not getting the treatment they need<sup>206</sup>

## II. Impact on Family Members

Attackers often extend their harassment of women journalists to the journalists’ families.<sup>207</sup> This “presents a worrying trajectory that may further pressure women

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<sup>198</sup> Lydia Ouma Radoli, [Courting Trauma: An Unspoken Mental Health Crisis Among Journalists in East Africa](#), August 2023 at 2.

<sup>199</sup> Julie Posetti et al., [Journalism & the Pandemic: A Global Snapshot of Impacts](#), International Center for Journalists and Tow Center for Digital Journalism, 2020 at 5.

<sup>200</sup> Lydia Ouma Radoli, [Courting Trauma: An Unspoken Mental Health Crisis Among Journalists in East Africa](#), August 2023 at 3.

<sup>201</sup> Julie Posetti et al., [The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists](#), UNESCO, April 2021 at 3.

<sup>202</sup> Julie Posetti et al., [The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists](#), UNESCO, April 2021 at 3.

<sup>203</sup> Jason Houle et al., [The Impact of Sexual Harassment on Depressive Symptoms during the Early Occupational Career](#), Sage Journals, August 31, 2011.

<sup>204</sup> Jason Houle et al., [The Impact of Sexual Harassment on Depressive Symptoms during the Early Occupational Career](#), Sage Journals, August 31, 2011.

<sup>205</sup> Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism & Intranews, [Threats Against Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone](#), 2022 at 29.

<sup>206</sup> Sierra Leone Association of Women in Journalism & Intranews, [Threats Against Public-Facing Women in Sierra Leone](#), 2022 at 29.

<sup>207</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

journalists into quitting journalism. Any suggestions that attackers may target the journalists' children, spouse or parents are bound to break the journalist's resilience."<sup>208</sup>

### III. The Chilling Effect

While attacks on women journalists have detrimental impacts on them, they also have dire consequences for the media profession generally. Violence against women journalists has what researchers call a "chilling effect" and "is designed to: belittle, humiliate, and shame; induce fear, silence, and retreat; discredit [journalists] professionally, undermining accountability journalism and trust in facts."<sup>209</sup> All of these tactics are used to "chill their active participation (along with that of their sources, colleagues and audiences) in public debate."<sup>210</sup> This chilling effect is an "attack on democratic deliberation and media freedom, encompassing the public's right to access information, and it cannot afford to be normalised or tolerated as an inevitable aspect of online discourse, nor contemporary audience-engaged journalism"<sup>211</sup> and requires urgent attention.

A 28-year-old Tanzanian journalist's experience in the newsroom exemplifies this "chilling effect." As she told The Chanzo, she quit her dream job as a radio journalist because "the work environment became so toxic that it left [her] with no other option."<sup>212</sup> This toxicity mainly came from her editor who constantly sexually harassed and abused her making the work untenable.<sup>213</sup>

In East and West Africa, this is especially apparent when it comes to online violence. Digital harassment causes many women to change their behavior on the internet. Whether they completely stop working or police the types of opinions they share on their social media accounts, many women have incessant fears of being targeted.<sup>214</sup> In processing her experience, one woman said that she would constantly revisit short paragraphs of just 3-4 lines. She explained that "by the time you are putting out the information, it's not genuine information you want to give out but rather, overly-censored."<sup>215</sup> In this anecdote, there is a direct link between online violence and women journalists preventing themselves from communicating in the ways they want. Here, it is also important to emphasize that decisions to avoid certain stories or self-censor alter many women's professional trajectories, slowly diminishing the available opportunities for career advancement.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>208</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [\*"I thought You Are Beautiful": Uganda Women Journalists' Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media\*](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>209</sup> UNESCO, Julie Posetti et al., [\*The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists\*](#), April 2021 at 6.

<sup>210</sup> UNESCO, Julie Posetti et al., [\*The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists\*](#), April 2021 at 6.

<sup>211</sup> UNESCO, Julie Posetti et al., [\*The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists\*](#), April 2021 at 12.

<sup>212</sup> Jackline Kuwanda, The Chanzo, [\*Tanzania's Newsrooms Are Increasingly Becoming Dangerous for Women Journalists\*](#), January 17, 2024.

<sup>213</sup> Jackline Kuwanda, The Chanzo, [\*Tanzania's Newsrooms Are Increasingly Becoming Dangerous for Women Journalists\*](#), January 17, 2024.

<sup>214</sup> Moraa Obiria, International Journalists' Network, [\*Report finds Kenyan women journalists face online harassment, makes recommendations\*](#), January 31, 2019.

<sup>215</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [\*"I thought You Are Beautiful": Uganda Women Journalists' Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media\*](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>216</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung & Center for Journalism Innovation & Development, [\*Hidden Battles: Patterns and Nuances of Violence against Journalists in Nigeria\*](#), 2024 at 12.



Even when certain women journalists are not directly affected, by violence, the generalized culture of violence can be enough to chill participation. One Nigerian woman put this succinctly: “As a journalist, you read about what is happening to others... and it forces you to ask yourself: could I be next?”<sup>217</sup> The “chilling effect” can be expansive to the point where it begins influencing women who are still in the process of considering journalism as a profession. Bearing witness to this treatment in online fora, many young women are forced to weigh the dangers of the occupation and chose other professions as a result.<sup>218</sup>

As violence leads to women leaving journalism or avoiding covering “risky” topics, this causes the participation of women in media to decrease even further. This leads to “a gender-stratified public sphere...reducing diversity of authorship, perspective and stories covered.”<sup>219</sup> In other words, not only are women pushed out of journalism, but their voices and perspectives are lost, decreasing African media’s diversity and credibility.

## **V. Barriers to Women Reporting Attacks and Institutional Responses to Violence**

Women journalists face various barriers to reporting the violence they face. According to survey results from Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, most journalists stated that they did not report sexual harassment out of fear; some participants were afraid of losing their jobs, while others were afraid of retaliation or gaining a negative reputation.<sup>220</sup> Other reasons for not reporting included organizational barriers such as no reporting mechanisms, no sexual harassment policies in newsrooms, and no evidence.<sup>221</sup>

### **I. Cultural Barriers**

In other studies, women do not report violations out of fear of stigma due to patriarchal norms—“socio-cultural constraints are the real obstacle to female journalists seeking justice against their abusers in their respective countries...the relatives of an assaulted journalist often manage to dissuade her from filing a complaint, reasoning that this could give her a bad reputation as a shrew, a difficult woman, which goes against the established image of women.”<sup>222</sup> Women are also discouraged from reporting because they are often blamed for the violence they face. In African newsrooms “slut shaming and victim blaming” have been normalized, thus “perpetuating an environment where harassment and abuse can go unchecked.”<sup>223</sup> Further, patriarchal society conditions people into believing that physical

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<sup>217</sup> Friedrich Ebert Stiftung & Center for Journalism Innovation & Development, [Hidden Battles: Patterns and Nuances of Violence against Journalists in Nigeria](#), 2024 at 12.

<sup>218</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, [“I thought You Are Beautiful”: Uganda Women Journalists’ Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>219</sup> Lea Stahel and Constantin Schoen, [Female journalists under attack? Explaining gender differences in reactions to audiences’ attacks](#), November 2019 at 22.

<sup>220</sup> Women in News, [Sexual Harassment in the Media: Africa Report](#), 2022 at 29.

<sup>221</sup> Women in News, [Sexual Harassment in the Media: Africa Report](#), 2022 at 30.

<sup>222</sup> Media Foundation for West Africa, [Safety of female journalists in West Africa: Reflections of media practitioners](#), March 14, 2023.

<sup>223</sup> FOJO Media Institute and Africa Women in Media, [Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2020 at 11.

violence is the only “real” form of violence, invalidating women’s experience with online violence.<sup>224</sup> Even when women do report harassment, investigations into these cases are rarely completed, contributing to impunity.<sup>225</sup>

## II. Weak Media Outlets Protection Mechanisms

Media outlets offer varying levels of support to women journalists who experience harassment. In a survey focused on Kenya, 70.2% of respondents said that there were no adequate measures in place to protect women journalists from online violence and 70% voiced their view that employers have not done enough to protect them.<sup>226</sup> Less than 10% of those who had experienced online harassment reported it to their employers. Even when media outlets or news organizations have relevant rules and regulations, these will often not be enforced.<sup>227</sup> Adding to this danger, many women have low levels of awareness as to how and to whom they should report harassment.<sup>228</sup>

It is not enough for newsrooms to have policies on sexual harassment, but they must be substantial and offer impactful remedies for abuse. However, existing sexual harassment reporting policies in newsrooms often offer weak protections. In an analysis of 17 newsroom policies throughout Sub-Saharan Africa, researchers found numerous concerning patterns.<sup>229</sup> Very few news outlets and media houses acknowledged the risks victims might face after reporting harassment, most policies did not outline any type of support offered to victims, and many policies used vague language to explain potential disciplinary action against perpetrators.<sup>230</sup> These trends amount to a climate where newsroom policies do not “center on victims of sexual harassment” and “overlooked safeguarding provisions, clear reporting channels, and necessary communication to combat current problematic cultural norms.”<sup>231</sup> Adding to this, a study conducted by African Women in the Media noted that many of their respondents from Rwanda, Tanzania, and Uganda felt that even though some gender policies existed in their countries, effective implementation is lacking in the media.<sup>232</sup> These symbolic commitments and implementation failures allow harassment to continue with very limited checks.

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<sup>224</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, Consultation with African Civil Society Regarding Violence Against Women Journalists, June 5, 2024.

<sup>225</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, *The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda (2016-2021) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Kenya Country Report*, July 2023 at 18.

<sup>226</sup> <http://amwik.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/Women-Journalists-Digital-Security.pdf>

<sup>227</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, *Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists' safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda*, 2023, at 5.

<sup>228</sup> UNESCO, Julie Posetti et al., *The Chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists*, April 2021 at 135.

<sup>229</sup> Lindsey Blumell & Dinfin Mulupi, *The Impact of Anti-Sexual Harassment Policies on Sexual Harassment Prevention in the Workplace*, Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal, December 2023 at 99.

<sup>230</sup> Lindsey Blumell & Dinfin Mulupi, *The Impact of Anti-Sexual Harassment Policies on Sexual Harassment Prevention in the Workplace*, Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal, December 2023 at 99.

<sup>231</sup> Lindsey Blumell & Dinfin Mulupi, *The Impact of Anti-Sexual Harassment Policies on Sexual Harassment Prevention in the Workplace*, Employee Responsibilities and Rights Journal, December 2023 at 103.

<sup>232</sup> African Women in Media & FOJO Media Institute, *Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa*, 2020 at 57.

Women who work freelance or at media houses without a contract are especially wary of reporting, as they are afraid of losing their jobs merely for reporting something.<sup>233</sup> Further, reporting to a media house can carry risk throughout one's career; because media houses have relationships with each other, if a journalist gets fired from one, she could also be blacklisted from others.<sup>234</sup>

Additionally, when news institutions do respond to the rise in violence against women journalists, they often do so to the detriment of these women. For example, many news outlets resort to not assigning women journalists to 'high risk' roles such as covering elections or conflict. In a study on sub-Saharan Africa, "[s]everal respondents described being passed over, or not being given opportunities to report stories that would have led to promotion; health and safety being used as a reason by editors for example for not being assigned to cover conflict. The 'soft news' versus 'hard news' spectrum emerged as a typology for determining what women journalists can do, and what should be reserved for men."<sup>235</sup>

### III. Weak Legal Protection Mechanisms

The protections offered by different countries' legal systems differ in both the breadth of existing frameworks and the enforcement of them.

In Kenya, the Media Council of Kenya, an independent institution created by legislation in 2013, provides potential recourse as a body that is meant to support journalists facing challenges. While the Council has made some progress in its efforts to protect members of the media, it lacks a distinct gender focus. When it comes to enforcement, in 2018, advocates highlighted that Kenyan police investigators do not have the tools, technologies, or capacity to uncover identities of digital perpetrators of sexual harassment.<sup>236</sup> There has been some limited progress made on this front. As the African Freedom of Information Center and UNESCO underlined in 2023, Kenya has begun training law enforcement officers in gender units but these programs are limited in their discussions of the risks women journalists face.<sup>237</sup> There have even been attempts made at establishing units with the specific focus of dealing with violence against female journalists; however, cemented protection mechanisms still do not exist.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>233</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, Consultation with African Civil Society Regarding Violence Against Women Journalists, June 5, 2024.

<sup>234</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, Consultation with African Civil Society Regarding Violence Against Women Journalists, June 5, 2024.

<sup>235</sup> FOJO Media Institute and Africa Women in Media, [Barriers to Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2020 at 33.

<sup>236</sup> Juliet Akoth, [Technology Facilitated Gender-Based Violence, A Deepening Crisis in Kenya](#), Talk Africa, November 15, 2024.

<sup>237</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Kenya Country Report](#), July 2023 at 18.

<sup>238</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Kenya Country Report](#), July 2023 at 18.

Tanzania also suffers from a severe lack of mechanisms for monitoring, reporting, and acting on reported threats against journalists.<sup>239</sup> Tanzania's constitution enshrines rights for media actors; however, no specific laws exist that specifically speak to journalists' safety at large, let alone women journalists. Some recourse comes from media stakeholders like the Media Council of Tanzania (MCT), which is an independent non-regulatory body that works to promote journalists' safety and wellbeing. In 2019, it released a "Gender in Media Policy" which was written to complement the MCT Code of Ethics.<sup>240</sup> It outlines practices for media houses to follow in relation to sexual harassment prevention, perpetrator accountability, and mitigation of professional barriers.<sup>241</sup> However, this is not enforceable and still, options for women to report harassment and abuse are scarce.

Uganda has a number of mechanisms in place to protect media freedom. Specifically, the Press and Journalists Act is notable as it created the Media Council, the National Institute of Journalists of Uganda, and the Disciplinary Committee. These oversight bodies offer potential forums for accountability but are not specifically focused on the distinct violence faced by women journalists. Along with these, the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC) is a government body that regulates the communications sector; however, advocates have said the body has been ineffective in limiting the threat to journalists' safety.<sup>242</sup> Another existing mechanism is the Computer Misuse Act, which is meant to regulate internet action<sup>243</sup>. It is forcefully implemented but when women journalists make complaints, they are not taken seriously.<sup>244</sup> Even given this, the Act "holds relevance for combating hate speech against female journalists," making it a promising framework even if its current enforcement is weak.<sup>245</sup> It is also relevant to note that this Act, despite its protective potential, has also been known to limit expression of journalists online.<sup>246</sup>

As these analyses suggest, throughout the continent, there is a lack of willingness among law enforcement to uphold protections for women journalists. Tangibly, this means women journalists fear reporting due to both concerns of inaction and also of retaliation. The story of one journalist from Ghana makes this concrete — she was threatened by members of a church when she reported on protests against one of its leaders. The police were called and instead of protecting her, they arrested her.<sup>247</sup> Stories like this erode faith in government and law enforcement among women journalists who feel that it is pointless to turn to these bodies for support.

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<sup>239</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Tanzania Country Report](#), July 2023 at 13.

<sup>240</sup> Media Council of Tanzania, [Gender in Media Policy](#), 2019.

<sup>241</sup> Media Council of Tanzania, [Gender in Media Policy](#), 2019.

<sup>242</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report](#), July 2023 at 15.

<sup>243</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report](#), July 2023 at 10.

<sup>244</sup> Gerald Walulya and Florence Namasinga, ["I thought You Are Beautiful": Uganda Women Journalists' Tales of Mob Violence on Social Media](#), June 9, 2023.

<sup>245</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report](#), July 2023 at 10.

<sup>246</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [The Gendered Dimensions of Journalists' Safety in Kenya, Tanzania And Uganda \(2016-2021\) Based on UNESCO Journalists' Safety Indicators: Uganda Country Report](#), July 2023 at 14.

<sup>247</sup> Prime News Ghana, [Badu Kobi's church: GJA condemns attack on Daily Graphic Reporter](#), August 2019.

#### IV. Online Reporting Challenges

As discussed extensively in this report, online violence against women journalists is increasingly common but simultaneously, presents unique challenges in holding perpetrators accountable. For one, given the anonymous nature of many attacks, perpetrators are more easily able to escape responsibility given that in many cases, the worst outcome is simply an account getting deleted. Mob censorship also creates the added difficulty of women journalists not being able to block every single account that spews abusive rhetoric. Also, private digital platforms have very little physical presence in Africa and have their own content moderation standards. These can fail to understand the languages and contexts behind certain attacks.<sup>248</sup> Additionally, states tend to be non-supportive of accountability steps given that in some cases, government officials are complicit in attacks against journalists.<sup>249</sup>

Even when women do attempt reporting digital harassment to social media companies, many feel that it falls on deaf ears. All of this combines to foster deep frustration among women who feel as if there is no avenue for relief:

“It’s not just attacks from individuals, troll armies are often weaponised to cause insurmountable levels of abuse, which are impossible to stem through deleting and blocking alone. Along with many other journalists, I have tried to use the social media platforms’ reporting mechanisms and even contacted the companies directly, but it is to no avail. They knowingly turn a blind eye while playing host to assaults on women’s rights and media freedom.”<sup>250</sup>

This reflection was shared by an Associate Editor at the Daily Maverick in South Africa. Her concern is shared by journalists across the continent who find these digital accountability gaps troubling.

#### VI. Combating Violence Against Women Journalists and the Need for Strategic Litigation

Various efforts to seek justice for women journalists who have been attacked have already been put in motion by civil society. For example, the Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK) has enabled women journalists to counter online harassment through digital security trainings.<sup>251</sup> Additionally, tools have been created to curb online threats, including Ripoti, a platform that enables members of the public to report digital rights violations in Africa, and Ayeta, a toolkit that aims to address the growing need to safeguard digital rights defenders, journalists, whistle-blowers, and others working with sensitive

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<sup>248</sup> Media Defence, [Violence Against Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2024 at 16.

<sup>249</sup> Media Defence, [Violence Against Women Journalists in Sub-Saharan Africa](#), 2024 at 17.

<sup>250</sup> Global Witness, [“Female stupidity at its best. They all need to die.”: Violent and sexualised hate speech targeting women approved for publication by social media platforms](#), December 7, 2023.

<sup>251</sup> Moraa Obiria, International Journalists’ Network, [Report finds Kenyan women journalists face online harassment, makes recommendations](#), January 31, 2019.



information in the global South by providing digital security support.<sup>252</sup> While initiatives like these are helpful to minimize attacks against women journalists, they do not address the issues with legal remedies that arise when attacks do occur.

Additionally, while “the governments of Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania have put in place legal frameworks to protect journalists...none of [these] countries [have] specific policies for the protection of female journalists.”<sup>253</sup> There needs to be stronger legal protections for women journalists in Africa—the violence they experience cannot solely be captured by laws combating violence against women and violence against journalists. Because the violence women journalists face is so particular, there needs to be specific provisions and remedies for violence against women journalists. As AFIC recommends in their report: “gender-responsive laws and policies [must be] enacted and effectively implemented to improve the safety of journalists, especially female journalists who are most at risk. Gender responsiveness should be mainstreamed in state institutions that work to promote media freedoms and safety in [Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya].”<sup>254</sup> Further, the laws that are in place to combat online violence are often structured and applied in a way that does not help victims of online violence, but rather restricts speech.<sup>255</sup> For example, because the Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act<sup>256</sup> in Kenya is very vague and does not define what cyberharassment is, its application can infringe upon freedom of expression.<sup>257</sup>

One potential way to strengthen legal protections for women journalists in East and West Africa is to bring cases of impacted women journalists to sub-regional courts, including the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice and the East African Court of Justice (EACJ). This strategy will not only seek legal recourse benefiting the individual journalists involved, but also has the potential to be a catalyst for greater change, hopefully impacting legislation affecting women journalists across Africa. In the long term, strategic litigation in this arena has the potential to strengthen the avenues for women journalists throughout Africa to seek legal protections, be able to pursue justice for human rights abuses, and have the capacity to continue their critical work.

RFKHR’s approach to strategic litigation in this area focuses on addressing the jurisprudential gaps on violence against journalists generally, and women journalists in particular. Research and consultations revealed that women journalists face the most significant threats within the media organization and from sources. Research also revealed that there is a paucity of jurisprudence that highlights this aspect of attacks against women journalists. The goal of our strategic litigation is then to understand the extent to which

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<sup>252</sup> Side event: Addressing Online Safety of Female Journalists in Africa: Gaps and Opportunities, October 19, 2023, 10:30 am - 12:30 pm, Arusha, Tanzania; Paradigm Initiative, [Ripoti](#), 2024; Paradigm Initiative, [Ayeta: A proactive toolkit for African digital rights actors](#), 2024.

<sup>253</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists’ safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda](#), 2023, at 4.

<sup>254</sup> Africa Freedom of Information Centre, [Examining the gendered dimensions of journalists’ safety: Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda](#), 2023, at 6.

<sup>255</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, Consultation with African Civil Society Regarding Violence Against Women Journalists, June 5, 2024.

<sup>256</sup> The Computer Misuse and Cybercrimes Act, 2018.

<sup>257</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, Consultation with African Civil Society Regarding Violence Against Women Journalists, June 5, 2024.

States' responsibility for the protection of women and journalists can be raised in a case to establish clear judicial standards on specific protection for women journalists. RFKHR's case before the ECOWAS court is a test case to determine the efficacy of this approach, and lessons will be shared with partners.

However, there are various barriers to successfully litigating these cases. Strategic litigation can be expensive, time-consuming, and risky.<sup>258</sup> These drawbacks are not only issues in their own right, but they also tend to drive away potential litigants. For example, "Media Defence and ARTICLE 19 have also been exploring options for strategic litigation against perpetrators and facilitators of online violence against women journalists as of the time of writing in mid-2021. However, Joanna Connolly, former Legal Officer for Media Legal Defence Initiative, noted that they were having difficulty surfacing cases involving women journalists who were prepared to put themselves through onerous litigation processes."<sup>259</sup> Further, some victims fear that denouncing or exposing the violence they experienced may increase their vulnerability to attacks.<sup>260</sup> It is especially difficult to find women journalists to volunteer to be litigants because of the mental toll of litigation.<sup>261</sup> In order to build evidence, victims need to share personal experiences and be available to engage both inside and outside of the courtroom, which can be extremely retraumatizing for some.<sup>262</sup> Many journalists would rather try to move on than relive these experiences in order to take part in litigation.<sup>263</sup>

Another challenge to strategic litigation stems from the attacks by the government against judicial and quasi-judicial mechanisms at domestic, sub-regional, and regional levels. Across the board, States are encroaching on the independence of the judiciary, blatantly defying the orders of the court and, in some cases, detaining judges who take on cases critical of the government. At the regional level, States and intergovernmental bodies have reduced funding for human rights mechanisms, reduced their personnel, and implemented reforms that propose to eliminate the jurisdiction of the mechanisms to consider human rights complaints. In addition, some states have begun to question the bindingness of the decisions of regional human rights mechanisms. A move that could worsen the already low rate of compliance and implementation with decisions of these mechanisms.

Despite the pitfalls and challenges of litigation, it is a crucial tool with the potential to achieve justice for women journalists who are survivors of gender-based violence. Therefore, RFKHR and partner organizations will initiate strategic litigation in the region. This litigation will use jurisprudence from other regions to contribute to the development of progressive jurisprudence and pursue legal protections for women journalists.

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<sup>258</sup> Open Society Justice Initiative, [Strategic Litigation Impacts: Insights from Global Experience](#), 2018 at 13.

<sup>259</sup> UNESCO, Angélique Lu et al., [Legal and Normative Frameworks for Combatting Online Violence Against Women Journalists](#), November 2, 2022 at 27.

<sup>260</sup> Women in News, Sexual Harassment in the Media: Africa Report, 2022 at 29.

<sup>261</sup> Robert F. Kennedy Human Rights, Consultation with African Civil Society Regarding Violence Against Women Journalists, June 5, 2024.

<sup>262</sup> *Id.*

<sup>263</sup> *Id.*