

Safety of Journalists in Liberia

A Survey of the State of Safety Policies and Practices in
Media Houses in Liberia



October, 2020

Supported by:



Embassy of the Kingdom
of the Netherlands in Ghana

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This study presents an overview of the state of safety journalists' conditions in Liberia. Specifically, this study focused on the existence or lack of safety policies in media houses, the perceptions of journalists about the role of regulatory bodies, media managers/owners, and colleagues, in safeguarding journalists in the discharge of their duties.

Key issues the study looked at included the number of media outlets that have a safety policy or manual, trends of safety of journalists' issues in Liberia (including types of violations, perpetrators, gender of victims; Number of media outlets with a specific policy for female journalists, what the practices are etc. It discusses the quality of the policies that exists in the media houses and how they are being used – Do the safety policies meet international standards? What is missing in the policies? What are the practices by these media houses? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

As part of the study, open and closed ended questions were administered among different layers of media stakeholders across Liberia. Also, there were direct interviews of key informers.

The study revealed that:

- The safety of journalists is not prioritised by many media outlets, as none of the forty media outlets selected for the study had a codified general safety policy, or a specific safety policy for female journalists.
- State security agents are the principal perpetrators of violations against the media.
- Journalists covering issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic have come under attacks and threats.
- Elections and protest represent period of increased attacks and abuse of media rights.

From the core findings whose detailed analyses are presented below, it is established that safety policy documents are non-existent in the majority of the media houses.

The study recommended that to address the non-existence of safety policies in media houses in Liberia, a national safety of journalists' mechanism could be adopted that will be binding on all parties. Such an effort must be subsumed under ongoing regulatory media reforms such as the establishment of a National Media Regulatory Commission as a work in progress with support from the British Embassy in Liberia and even the Community Radio Sustainability Bill submitted to the legislature.

Such reform processes must be assumed under the multi-stakeholder approach as it was employed in the enactment of FOI Act. This is morally imperative, given that the media has trickledown effect on good governance that covers all facets of the Liberian society.

INTRODUCTION

As a country that is trying to rebuild after years of civil conflict, Liberia has very fragile democratic institutions including the media. The safety and security of journalists in such a fledgling democracy has therefore have been of concern to the media fraternity and other stakeholders.

Since the signing of the Accra Comprehensive Peace Agreement in 2003 and the transition to multiparty democratic governance, Liberia has witnessed a proliferation of media outlets. According to membership records of the Press Union of Liberia and axillary Female Journalists Association of Liberia, there are over 100 radio stations across the country. In the capital, Monrovia, over 50 newspapers are in circulation although fewer than 15 appear regularly on newsstands. Social media, especially Facebook, has also heightened the practice of citizen journalism.

Notwithstanding these impressive nominal figures, there is a concern that the consequent rise in quantity of news outlets and platforms is not matched by a parallel rise in the quality of professional practice. This deficit in professional output has provided the pretext for clamping down on media in the country.

Since 2008, a couple of media reform processes have been initiated as part of the architecture for peacebuilding and democratic renewal. Three media bills were drafted and submitted for enactment; namely: Independent Media Regulator Bill; Community Radio Sustainability bill and a Public Service Broadcaster Act. These bills have not been enacted and are still stalling at the legislature.

This is in spite of huge donor resources that have been invested into the process. For instance, USAID, through the media development organisation, Internews, initiated a five years Liberia Media Development Project.

Following the assumption of power in 2018, the government of President George Weah passed the “Kamara Abdullah Kamara (KAK) Act of Press Freedom”ⁱ. The Act amends and repeals relevant sections of the Penal Law of 1978, on criminal libel and criminal malevolence. While this development was widely lauded, the prevailing state of heightened media repression has reinforced conviction among sections of the media and rights advocates that the mere enactment of the laws does not guarantee the enjoyment of media freedom and freedom of expression generally.

The attacks on journalists during the COVID-19 lockdown and the violent repression of protests before the outbreak of the pandemic demonstrate a lack of political will to protect press freedom and promote safety of journalists, despite the monumental reforms to the country’s media undertaken by the government.

Since 2015, the Centre for Media Studies and Peacebuilding (CEMESP) has collaborated to monitor, document and report press freedom violations and carry out advocacy of safety of journalists issues. Intimidations, assaults, police interrogation, arbitrary arrests and detentions, prosecution of journalists and seizure and/or destruction of journalists’ equipment have been among the violations frequently recorded.

This study, therefore, examined the ‘Safety of Journalists Policies and Practices among media houses in Liberia’ in 40 media outlets (radio stations, television stations, newspapers and online media) across the country. The focus of the study is the trends of safety of journalists’ issues in Liberia (including types of violations, perpetrators, gender of victims), number of media outlets that have a safety policy or manual, and number with a specific policy for female journalists, and what the specific safety practices are.

The study shows a general lack of formalised safety and security policy framework in the various media houses. It establishes that the existing safety policies and practices in the few media houses that have such policies do not meet the UNESCO safety of journalists’ indicators and general safety of journalists’ standards. The report concludes with recommendations on how the safety and security of journalists can be improved by media organisations in Liberia.

METHODOLOGY

Mixed research method has been used to collect and interpret data. Primarily, qualitative more than quantitative data was captured. This was a decision based on the fact that the sample size was low, forty media houses, print, electronics and online platforms. But the low sample size notwithstanding, is representative of the overall media feedback on safety policy and practices. In all 100 questionnaires were administered. The data set were inputted in frequency table matrix. Some these have been converted into graphs and charts. We also integrated data sourced from social media opinion poll on the subject of journalists’ safety as process of cross-fertilizing data from other documents and reports on the issue of safety. For instance, where there is hardly a baseline on the issue, the UNESCO indicators that had been used to assess journalists’ safety in 2015 has been factored in capturing trends and patterns. Cumulatively the materials have summed up holistic picture informing findings.

FINDINGS

The survey results indicate a low level of commitment to journalists’ safety on the part of media managers and owners. It underlines the fact that the safety of journalists’ policies of the few media organisations that have adopted such policies do not totally meet international standards.

The survey also points to overwhelming male dominance in the media - 75% male as opposed to 25% female responses in the survey conducted. This is a reflection of the disproportionate gender role whereby more male journalists are holding senior editorial and management positions. Below are core survey findings:

- All journalists sampled say their institutions have no codified safety policy which is in line pattern established during a previous survey done by CEMESP in 2015 using UNESCO indicators as reflected in the responses.

- There is high rating for the relevance of safety policy and practice from the responses of journalists at 85% who say to a large extent as opposed to those who say to some extent 25%
- 67.5% of journalists claimed to have learnt about media safety from workshop trainings followed by 25% who have learnt about it in colleges
- There is no special safety policy for female journalists based on result of the survey findings
- 52% of respondents indicated that protests and demonstrations represent the riskiest moments for journalists' safety. 25% respondents said elections related activities were the second
- Respondents agreed that 50% of violations on journalists were perpetrated by state security agents followed by politicians (38%) and civilians (10%)
- There is an increase in safety training workshops a reflection of the growing consciousness among media development partners to bridge the gap with 70% of journalists claiming to have benefited from such training followed by 25% that say no and 5% that cannot remember
- Some journalists have not taken precaution in some situations to elude harm

Beyond the data emanating from the survey there have insights from anecdotes and media reports that depicts trends and patterns of safety issues that the media is contending with in Liberia:

- No journalist has been prosecuted and jailed since the passage of the Kamara Abdullai Kamara Press Freedom Act 2018.
- One journalist was murdered in 2018 and the accused has been sentenced to life imprisonment.¹
- One journalist has been killed in controversial circumstances in Bong County with allegation that he stole a goat but there are counter views that it is a frame up.²
- One journalist's death has been linked to injuries sustained from physical assault from Presidential guards but the family declined to pursue autopsy to ascertain claim.³
- One female journalist has faced threat, forcing her to go into hiding after covering protests.⁴

¹ Journalist's Murderer Sentenced to Life Imprisonment Laudable – CEMESP
<https://www.mfwa.org/partner-highlights/journalists-murderer-sentenced-to-life-imprisonment-laudable-cemesp/> Accessed 2020

² Liberia: Journalist Found Dead With Gunshot Wounds in Gbarnga, Bong County
<https://frontpageafricaonline.com/front-slider/liberia-journalist-found-dead-with-gunshot-wounds-in-gbarnga-bong-county/>. Accessed October 2020

³ Liberian journalist dies weeks after alleged assault by presidential bodyguards
<https://cpj.org/2020/02/liberian-journalist-dies-weeks-after-alleged-assau/> Accessed October 2020

⁴ Liberian journalist Gloria Tamba in hiding amid threats
<https://cpj.org/2020/12/liberian-journalist-gloria-tamba-in-hiding-amid-threats/> Accessed October 2020

- Two female journalists have died of health-related condition where there exists no medical insurance in their respective institutions.⁵

Here, we are presenting the output of responses from the field survey using the questionnaire administered to forty respondents.

Table 1: *Gender of Participants*

| Gender | Frequency | Percent |
|---------------|------------------|----------------|
| Male | 30 | 75% |
| Female | 10 | 25% |
| Total | 40 | 100% |

Source: Field Data, 2020

This reflects the numerical predominance of male journalists compared to female journalists in media houses in Liberia.

Table 2: *Participants' Years of Work Experience*

| Number of years in service | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Two to five years | 23 | 57.5% |
| Five to ten years | 10 | 25% |
| Over ten years | 7 | 17.5% |
| Total | 40 | 100% |

Source: Field Data, 2020

Table 2 reveals that the respondents of the survey had averagely 5 years of work experience as journalists.

Table 3: *Media Responses*

| Type of Media | Frequency | Percent |
|--------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Radio | 17 | 42.5% |
| Television | 6 | 15.0% |
| Newspaper | 5 | 12.5% |
| Online | 7 | 17.5% |
| News agency | 1 | 2.5% |
| Media Development | 4 | 10.0% |
| Total | 40 | 100% |

Source: Field Data, 2020

⁵ Liberia: Journalist Sally Gaye to Be Laid to Rest On Saturday
<https://allafrica.com/stories/202005270533.html> Accessed October 2020

There was no deliberate decision to have more radio respondents, although there are more radio stations than newspapers in the country. The newspapers follow in numerical ranking. Online portals are increasing and match the number of television stations that have always been few in the country.

Media Houses Sampled

| Name | Type | County | Persons Interviewed |
|------------------|-----------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Spoon FM | Radio | Montserrado | Gloria Tamba, Reporter |
| Kool FM | Radio | Montserrado | Victor Whelm, Reporter |
| LBS | Radio | Montserrado | Estelle Liberty, Director |
| Truth FM | Radio | Montserrado | Henson Dehgar, Reporter |
| Voice of Gbapolu | Community Radio | Gbapolu | Benatta Bloh, Annoucer |
| Radio Live | Radio | Grand Gedeh | Grace Dweh, Reporter |
| ABC | Radio | Montserrado | Joe Wander, Producer |
| Hot FM | Radio | Nimba | Daniel Rogers, producer |
| Sky FM | Radio | Montserrado | Josephine Wreh, Reporter |
| Prime FM | Radio | Montserrado | Jutunu Kollie, Dir of News |
| Okay FM | Radio | Montserrado | Varney Dukuly, Reporter |
| FAWUL | Radio | Margibi | Dorris Deah, reporter |
| Methodist FM | Radio | Montserrado | Barbeson Harris, Manager |
| Power FM | Radio | Montserrado | Aaron Kollie, Manager |
| Bana FM | Radio | Montserrado | Winston Blyee, Reporter |
| ELWA | Radio | Paynesville City Montserrado | Samuel McGill, Reporter |
| Strong FM | Radio | Rural Montserrado | Steve Moore, Sr. Reporter |
| New Republic | Newspaper | Montserrado | Joyce Whea, Reporter |
| Inquirer | Newspaper | Montserrado | Alex Yonmah, Reporter |

| | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|---------------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Heritage | Newspaper | Montserrado | Emmanuel Weedee, Reporter |
| Frontpage Africa | Newspaper | Montserrado | Lennart Dodoo, Editor |
| New Dawn | Newspaper | Montserrado | Lewis Teh, Reporter |
| Women TV | Online | Montserrado | Lisa Diasy, Presenter |
| Fortune TV | Online | Montserrado | Emmanuel Davies |
| Independent Probe | Online | Montserrado | Chester Smith, Editor |
| ABLEEJAY | Online | Grand Bassa | Elton Teiah |
| Local voices | Online | Montserrado | Alpha Sekpeni, manager |
| Public Trust Media | Online | Montserrado | William Selmah, Editor |
| KMTV | Online | Montserrado | Lovetee Wornaweh, Presenter |
| LINA | News Agency | Montserrado | Peter Khaler, Deputy Director |
| REAL | Television | Paynesville city Montserrado | Christopher Serlee, Presenter |
| Liberia National | Television | Paynesville city Montserrado | Fabine Quiah, Presenter |
| HOT | Television | Montserrado | Bernard Benson, Manager |
| Sky | Television | Montserrado | Aaron |
| Power | Television | Montserrado | Samukia Dukuly, Editor |
| Light | Television | Montserrado | |
| New Narratives | Media Development Institution | Montserrado | Mai Azango, Country Rep. |
| Youth Media Action | Media Development Institution | Montserrado | Varmah Kamara, Executive Director |
| Press Union of Liberia | Media Development Institution | Montserrado | Daniel Nyankona, Vice President |
| Female Journalists Association of Liberia | Media Development Institution | Montserrado | Siatta Scott Johnson, President |

Table 4: Journalists understanding of safety

| Ever heard about professional safety | Frequency | Percent |
|---|------------------|----------------|
| Yes | 29 | 72.5% |
| No | 11 | 27.5% |
| Total | 40 | 100% |

Source: Field Data, 2020

Table 5: Where did you learn about Journalists' safety issues

| Source of safety knowledge | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Workshops | 27 | 67.5% |
| Colleagues | 3 | 7.5% |
| College | 10 | 25% |
| Total | 40 | 100% |

Source: Field Data, 2020

Tables 4 and 5 illustrate that more safety knowledge is taught at workshops as opposed to formal academic media training institutions. It is also of interest to know that peer education of safety among those who know its importance is very low or non-existent.

Table 6: Existence of safety policy at media houses

| Available Policy | Frequency | Percent |
|-------------------------|------------------|----------------|
| Yes | 0 | 0% |
| No | 40 | 100% |
| Total | 40 | 100% |

Source: Field Data, 2020

This indicates that none of media outlets had a formal safety policy in place. This is a startling revelation and confirms a previous UNESCO safety study conducted by CEMESP in 2015 which also revealed that no media outlet which was part of the survey had a safety policy in place. There is no progress recorded in this regard as confirmed by the data.

Table 7: Are there special safety standard for female journalists

| Available Policy | Frequency | Percent |
|------------------|-----------|-------------|
| Yes | 0 | 0% |
| No | 40 | 100% |
| Total | 40 | 100% |

Source: Field Data, 2020

The above findings indicate that none of the media outlets had a safety policy for female journalists. This finding, which follows the finding that none of media outlets sampled do not have safety policies. What this means is that safety issues of journalists in these media houses are not prioritised and in effect the peculiar safety needs of female journalists are not acknowledged and addressed.

Perpetrators of attacks and threats on media in Liberia

Figure 1 below indicates that the security agents are the biggest culprits of attacks and victimization of journalists in Liberia. This is followed by politicians and their affiliates. This finding maintains the same perception as contained in the 2015 journalist safety study conducted by CEMESP using UNESCO safety of journalists indicators.

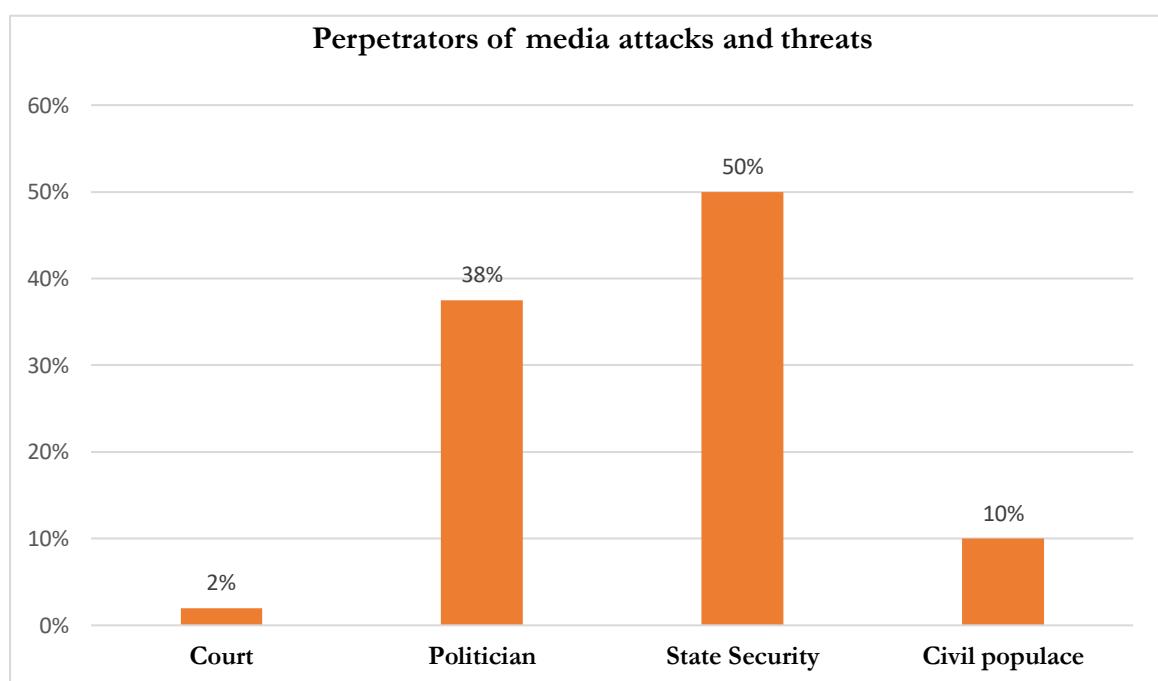


Figure 1: Perpetrators of violations against journalists

It is crucial to note that the journalists perceived the judicial system as unsupportive when they are abused and, by their conduct, are also responsible for abuses against journalists. Some of the journalists also noted that courts were consistently imposing excessive fines in defamation suits against journalists and media outlets. The respondents noted that this greatly affects the practice of journalism in the country.

Priority Given to Safety of Journalists Issues in Liberia

Figure 2 below shows that out of the 40 journalists interviewed, 28 (representing 70%) had benefitted from a safety training while 10 had not. Two of the respondents indicated they do not remember having received any safety training.



Figure 2: Measuring Safety Training Scope

It is worthy to note that all journalists who indicated that they had benefitted from a safety training, said the trainings were offered by media development entities and civil society actors and donors and not the management of their media outlets. These trainings according to them filled the curriculum gaps on safety training courses at mass media and journalism training institutions.

Level of Awareness of Safety Issues

Findings from the survey indicated that more than 80 percent of respondents indicated they see safety issues as very important as opposed to the very low number of responses that stated “to some extent.”

Table 8: Relevance of safety to journalists

| To what extent | Frequency | Percent |
|-----------------|-----------|-------------|
| To Great Extent | 34 | 85% |
| To some extent | 6 | 15% |
| Total | 40 | 100% |

Source: Field Data, 2020

Table 9: Measuring levels of journalists instigated risks

| To what extent | Frequency | Percent |
|---|-----------|-------------|
| To a large extent | 4 | 10% |
| To some extent | 16 | 40% |
| Journalists are not responsible at all | 20 | 50% |
| Total | 40 | 100% |

Source: Field Data, 2020

This question made an assumption that some of the attacks and threats that journalists face in Liberia are self-inflicted or based on negligence on the part of some journalists who fail to protect themselves professionally. However, the data suggest otherwise, with half (50%) of the journalists disagreeing that they are responsible for the attacks and victimizations. On the other hand, 40% of the respondents agree that, to some extent, journalists must take responsibility for the varied forms of safety issues they contend with. This point is actually suggesting that sometimes journalists have not taken precaution to protect themselves in certain situations but rather made foolhardy moves to incur the wrath of their aggressors.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The composite data analysis of the survey results shows that the problem of safety is a major concern and that safety protocols and practices among media organisations in Liberia are almost non-existent. This has the potential to inhibit the work of journalists and undermine the aspirations for good governance in Liberia. It is therefore important that the issue is considered seriously and factored into ongoing media reforms.

When journalists' safety issues are compromised, it affects the wider public. This point is supported by the wave of fake news and disinformation that suddenly filled the vacuum created when Liberian journalists decided to stop covering the COVID 19 in protest at access restrictions. Donors such as OSIWA, IFEX and even the British Embassy were compelled to provide grants in tackling fake news around the epidemic reportage.

Threat and safety issues are real and palpable and the causes are both internal and external. Journalists and media organisations have to own up to their level of involvement in creating the conditions that expose them to attacks. The state also has an obligation provide the enabling space based on legal frameworks that accord protection of journalists as a right. The state has an additional obligation to investigate and prosecute attacks on journalists.

The COVID-19 outbreak triggered a lot of press freedom violations, particularly assault on journalists during the curfew and lockdown hours, all of which went unpunished.

This state of impunity sends a bad signal and emboldens other actors to attack and victimise journalists. The Press Union of Liberia has to be assertive in pursuing the unresolved complaints from journalists.

It has been established that safety issues rank low on the priorities of media owners and managers. The lack of safety of journalists' protocols and practices tie in with a general lack of concern for journalists' welfare. Meanwhile, welfare issues are journalists' safety issues. Welfare packages including medical insurance may provide a lifeline to journalists attacked or injured or infected with a contagious disease in the course of work. Being equipped with the right tools or gadgets and being appropriately clothed provides a boost to journalists' confidence and enhances their safety on the job. It is a genuine media safety issue that was contained in the collective bargaining agreement initiated in the past but yet to be enforced in Liberia.

In view of the foregoing, we make the following recommendations towards improving safety of journalists' practices among media organisations in Liberia;

- Media stakeholders working on the reforms to respond the issue of non-existent safety policies in media outlets by factoring that element in the draft bill for media regulation;
- Press Union of Liberia to pick up from the process of adapting the draft Collective Bargaining Agreement and ensure that all parties abide by the terms that speak remuneration of journalists;
- Media Stakeholders advocacy process for harmonization of state security-media relationship to be crafted and implemented based on international standard of dealing with impunity towards journalists;
- PUL to lead engagement with political parties to secure their buy in in promoting the ideals of eliminating impunity towards journalists as an obligation of the state;
- Media stakeholders to engage universities and schools offering courses in mass media to integrate safety issues based on international standards in curriculum for journalists;
- Female journalists Association to drive the advocacy campaign in promoting gender safety policy in media houses;

REFERENCES

Assessing Journalist Safety in Liberia from the Prism of UNESCO Safety Indicators
(Joseph, Ansu 2015)

ⁱ **President Weah Signs Two Acts into Law, Including KAK Act ...**

https://www.emansion.gov.lr/2press.php?news_id=4807&pg=sp

Some of the changes included titling the **Press Freedom Act** after the deceased former President of the **Press Union of Liberia** and veteran journalist **Kamara Abdullah Kamara**. It amends Chapter 11 of the Penal Law of 1978, repealing Sections 11.11 on criminal libel against the President; 11.12 on Sedition and 11.14 on criminal malevolence.



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