



COMPREHENSIVE NATIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR THE SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS IN LIBERIA



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The Framework was developed through a joint process involving media actors and state actors in the country as part of efforts to reduce incidents of media rights violations, increase responsiveness by authorities to addressing media rights violations and to reduce acts of impunity for crimes against journalists in Liberia.

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Introduction

The need for a Comprehensive National Framework for the Safety of Journalists in Liberia cannot be over-emphasized given the wide-ranging incidents of violations, attacks and abuses meted out to journalists over the years. In 2015 a baseline study was done by Center for Media Studies and Peacebuilding (CEMESP) under the rubric: **Assessing the Safety of Liberia Journalists from the Prism of UNESCO Safety Indicators**. The study catalogued the forms of attacks and those behind them, and came out with recommendations for national action to end the culture of impunity against journalists. Since then, not much has changed for the better with the culture of impunity actually worsening.

In recent times, there have been more efforts towards improving media-security relations and resolving safety concerns that tend to heighten during elections. But there has never been a formal mechanism or blueprint to serve as safeguard in responding to these threats, attacks, violations and abuses that journalists face in the process of doing their work.

This document is intended to fill that void created by the lack of national commitment to protect journalists from acts of impunity; creating pathways for redress and even establishing a mechanism for monitoring and evaluating the level of compliance with the UN standards to end impunity against journalists.

This Framework has scanned the media landscape. It points out who the perpetrators of attacks and violations against journalists are, and highlights the nature and forms of these attacks, violations and abuses. It looks at the evolving efforts to build national consensus to end the vicious cycle of impunity against journalists in Liberia with the view to also protecting other democratic tenets and human rights values.

Justification of Comprehensive National Framework for the Safety of Journalists in Liberia

There are objective indices that prove that Liberia's journalists are exposed to varied forms of harm. In recent years, Freedom House's country reports on Liberia have consistently designated the country as 'partly free.' For example, in 2021 and 2022 the Freedom House report ranked Liberia 60 out of 100 with designation, 'partly free'.¹

¹ "Freedom in the World 2022: Liberia" (Freedom House, February 2022), <https://freedomhouse.org/country/liberia/freedom-world/2022>

In its [2022 country report](#), Freedom House notes that freedom of speech and the press are sometimes restricted in Liberia, even though the country's Constitution provides for their protection. The Freedom House report also notes that, "Investigative reporters frequently receive threats, including by members of the government who vowed to sue in response to journalistic inquiries."

During Liberia's Universal Periodic Review in 2020 the UN Human Rights Council made 218 recommendations. Out of this, 166 were supported during the adoption of the country's UPR outcome at the Human Rights Council's meeting in March 2021. The recommendations fielded under the freedom of opinion and expression and access to information theme included repealing relevant portions of the Penal Law to decriminalize speech, and upholding international human rights standards to protect journalists online and offline.² The passage of the Kamara Abdullai Act of Press Freedom in February 2019 meant that the government met the recommendation on decriminalizing press offenses.

Despite the decriminalization of speech offenses and the government's stated intention to uphold international best practices in regards to freedom of expression however, attacks on journalists continue. In its third quarter report on freedom of expression in West Africa, the Media Foundation for West Africa reported that a Liberian journalist was arrested and detained by the police while covering a protest at the home of a politician.³

The 13th Quarterly Media Alert Report released by the Press Union of Liberia in 2020 painted a bleaker picture of the state of Press Freedom in the country. The Alert outlined several cases of assault and threats against journalists.⁴

A statement released by the Center for Media Studies and Peacebuilding to commemorate World Press Freedom Day 2022 noted that the organisation's "tracking of violent and other extrajudicial actions against journalists through the year 2021 found that physical assault accounted for 47% of violations of journalists.

² "UPR36 Liberia: Thematic List of Recommendations" (UN Human Rights Council, November 2022), https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/lib-docs/HRBodies/UPR/Documents/Session36/LR/UPR36_Liberia_Thematic_List_of_Recommendations.docx. p11

³ "West Africa Freedom of Expression Monitor" (Media Foundation for West Africa, July - September 2021), <https://www.mfwa.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/FoE-Monitor-Q3-July-Sept-2021-1.pdf>. p6

⁴ "Thirteenth Quarterly Report" (Press Union of Liberia, April - June 2020), <http://www.pul.org.lr/doc/Final%20Thirteenth%20Media%20Alert%20Report.pdf>

The organisation noted that the statistic represented a 14% increase in physical assault on journalist over the 2020 tracking.⁵

While there has been progress in improving the legal environment for freedom of expression in Liberia, the examples cited above show that there is still a lot to be done to protect journalists in performing their duties in the country. On paper, Liberia has met some of its stated obligations under the international human rights construct. However, in practice, it has failed to apply the tenets espoused in many respects.

Media Landscape in Liberia

Since the end of the Liberian civil war in 2004, the country's media has grown. There is not a provincial capital city in the country that does not have at least one community radio station. In the country's capital, Monrovia, dozens of radio stations fill the airwaves. There are several newspapers that put out publications while social media has also been active in the country. This situation is a far cry from the oppressive and restrictive media landscape that existed prior to the civil war.

Media ownership in Liberia is controversial. Most media houses are apparently owned by male politicians who often have others fronting for them. The political interest of the owners of media outlets is usually evident in the content that they publish. To many, there is hardly an independent media house in the country and this perception is affecting public trust.

Over the years, there have been reforms and policies aimed to improve press freedom in the country. Perhaps the most monumental of these reforms was the passage of the Freedom of Information Act in September 2010 which may have been the main reason Liberia made the leap from 'not free' to 'partly free' in the Freedom House annual ranking. It is to be noted, however, that even with the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act, there are other media reform Bills that have not been passed. These include; the Bill that seeks to convert the national broadcaster to a Public Service Broadcaster, the Bill that seeks to create an Independent Media Commission, and the Bill that seeks to provide for community radio sustainability.

⁵ As Journalists Observe World Press Freedom Day: CEMESP Speaks on Media Freedom in Liberia, Global News Network Liberia, <https://gnnliberia.com/2022/05/03/as-journalists-observe-world-press-freedom-day-cesesp-speaks-on-media-freedom-in-liberia/>, May 3, 2022

In 2012, during the presidency of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia acceded to the Declaration of Table Mountain. On assuming power in 2018, President George Weah repealed sections of the Penal Code that hitherto criminalized speech. This was subsumed under the Kamara Abdullai Kamara Press Freedom Act. Libel and slander have since been treated as civil offences.

Liberia also acceded to the African Charter on Democracy and Good Governance and ECOWAS' Supplementary Protocol on Elections. There are provisions in both of these documents that seek to uphold freedom of expression and independent media.

There have been contentions over issues of self-regulation using the complaints mechanism of the Press Union of Liberia (now elevated to the National Media Council), and the need for an established state structure under the framework of a National Media Commission that is in the offing.

Safety concerns for journalists heightened during the COVID-19 outbreak. The country's Solicitor General, Sayma Syrenius Cephus, who oversees prosecutions at the Ministry of Justice, threatened that the government would shut down new outlets and seize equipment of journalists peddling fake news. Before then there was a standoff between the PUL and the government over the increased spate of attacks on journalists. These were incidents that were recorded by IFEX, Reporters without Borders and the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Safety of Journalists Situation in Liberia

Over the past five years, the pattern and trends of attacks on the media have ranged from assaults, arbitrary detentions, impoundment of assets, intimidation, murder, arson, and unmeritorious litigations. Majority of these attacks, abuses and violations have been perpetrated by actors in the security sector, according to a study conducted by CEMESP: **Assessing the Safety of Journalists from the Prism of UNESCO Safety Indicator.**

There is no specially instituted redress mechanism for attacks on journalists. The Liberia National Police and other security agencies have professional standards that serve as mechanism for adjudicating complaints against their officers. There is hardly

any instance when action has been taken against a police officer who brutalized or assaulted a journalist.

In the past, CEMESP has benefited from projects in partnership with the Media Foundation for West Africa and the World Association of Journalists, enabling it, among others, to host media-security sector roundtable in effort to foster understanding and build mutual respect between the media and security agencies. These programs have however not guaranteed an end to hostility between the police and journalists during certain events.

The UN Plan of Action to end impunity against journalists is not popular in government circles. It is only during Press Freedom Day, when media stakeholders converge with very little government support that reference is made to the UN Plan of Action to end impunity crime against journalists. From the side of the government, there is clearly no political will to implement what the UN Plan of Action entails. There is no record of the government leading efforts to build partnerships to protect journalists from harm; most of the legal reforms for the safety of journalists have been driven by civil society and donors.

National Coordination Committee for Safety of Journalists in Liberia

On July 22, 2022, a national forum on safety of journalists was convened by Media Foundation for West Africa and the Center for Media Studies and peacebuilding in Monrovia. At the meeting the stakeholders, made up of both state and non-state actors, including journalists, reached a consensus to constitute a committee on the safety of journalists. This came on the heels of the initiative to have a National Media Council as a self-regulatory body constituted by the Press Union of Liberia with both state and non-state actors as stakeholders. The composition of the council includes media stakeholders, civil society, and academia. This is certainly the closest Liberia has come to fulfilling its obligation to have a coordinating committee on the safety of journalists. Stakeholders of the Framework have committed to constituting a coordinating committee on the safety of journalists with an exclusive obligation, but with different pathways to achieving the overarching goal of curtailing impunity against journalists in the line of duty.

The membership of the council is as follows:

From the Government

1. Maj. Gen. Prince C Johnson III, Chief of Defense Staff, Armed Forces of Liberia
2. Jefferson Karmoh, National Security Advisor to the President of Liberia
3. Daniel Gayedu, Deputy Minister, Ministry of Information, Culture and Tourism
4. Vincent Willie, Representative, Grand Bassa County
5. Smith Toby, Deputy Presidential Press Secretary
6. Philip Moore, Director of Communication, Executive Protection Service
7. Moses Carter, Spokesperson, Liberia National Police

Non-state Actors

1. Lien Bach, Chief of Party, Internews Liberia
2. Charles Coffey, President, Press Union of Liberia
3. Daniel Nyakonah, Vice President, Press Union of Liberia
4. Othello Garbla, Head of Publishers Association of Liberia
5. Winnie Saywah Jimmy, Vice President, Female Journalists Association of Liberia
6. Mae Azango, Head of New Narratives-Liberia

Activities of the National Coordination Committee for Safety of Journalists in Liberia

The UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity aims to create a free and safe environment for journalists and media workers, both in conflict and non-conflict situations, with a view to strengthening peace, democracy, and development worldwide. Its recommended measures include, the establishment of a coordinated inter-agency mechanism to handle issues related to the safety of journalists as well as assisting countries to develop legislation and mechanisms favorable to freedom of expression and information and supporting their efforts to implement existing international rules and principles.

To further reinforce prevention, the UN Plan of Action recommends working in cooperation with governments, media houses, professional associations, and NGOs

to conduct awareness raising campaigns on a wide range of issues including existing international instruments and conventions, the growing dangers posed by emerging threats to media professionals, including non-state actors, as well as various existing practical guides on the safety of journalists.

Liberia cannot reinvent the wheel in this regard as it is based on universal standards. However, the National Coordinating Committee is bound to a contextual adaptation of this framework given the peculiarity of Liberia. The core elements of close collaboration, capacity building, mutual respect, information sharing, monitoring and evaluation and openness, however, remain cardinal to driving the process forward.

Stakeholders’ Roles and Interventions

The role and interventions of various stakeholders such as the executive, legislature, judiciary, and state security agents, media owners, media associations, journalists, and civil society, that will be mandated to ensure the safety of journalists, are spelt out below.

Government	Role in the Comprehensive National Framework for the Safety of Journalists in Liberia	Role of Representative(s)
Executive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Work with the media to ensure proper understanding of the operations of the military and other security forces ii. Ensure the safety and security of media practitioners at all times; Promote the proper implementation of the laws on media freedoms in the country; iii. Ensure the implementation of international and national obligations to foster media freedoms; iv. Support and take part in regular interactive dialogue forums on safety and security of journalists; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The focal point for the executive branch will be the Ministry of Information Culture, Affairs, and Tourism.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> v. Strengthen disciplinary self-regulatory mechanisms within security agencies to make them more responsive to dealing with complaints from journalists and other media practitioners; vi. Ensure that laws that foster media freedom and access to information are adhered to by security and other government agencies; vii. Ensure reforms to foster laws that provide for individual privacy and the safety of technology; viii. Ensure that the public and political climate is conducive for the functioning of independent and pluralistic media. 	
Judiciary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Demonstrate interest in hearing appeals in cases emanating from the Freedom of Information Law. Since the passage of the law, no Liberian court has heard any appeal that has been taken; ii. Improve the efficiency of Liberian courts when it comes to their case completion rates with attention given to cases bordering on media freedom; iii. Conduct capacity-building to help judges understand the Freedom of Information Act and help them develop an appreciation of their responsibility under the Act; iv. Convene regular dialogue/interaction between the judiciary and the media to consider concerns relative to dispensation of justice in Liberia. 	The focal person shall participate in all National Comprehensive Framework meetings on the safety of journalists in Liberia. The focal person will provide information on cases on Freedom of Information, and media freedom issues that are in court.
Legislature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Hold dialogue sessions for media practitioners and parliamentarians on law reform initiatives to foster media freedom and privacy; ii. Review legal, policy and institutional regulatory frameworks that have the 	The focal person shall participate in all Comprehensive National Framework

	<p>potential of hampering freedoms of expression, privacy, and media rights;</p> <p>iii. Make budgetary allocation to the operation of community media. The mechanism for administering such funding should be set up to be independent.</p> <p>iv. Make budgetary allocation for public interest journalism.</p>	<p>meetings on the safety of journalists in Liberia.</p> <p>Coordinate all dialogue sessions.</p>
Security sector institutions	<p>i. At all times create a safe and secure environment for the media to perform their duties;</p> <p>ii. The security sector will create and maintain a conducive environment to foster media freedom;</p> <p>iii. The security agencies to work with the media to carry out routine awareness creation about the roles of individual agencies;</p> <p>iv. The security sector to contribute to the promotion of freedom of expression, access to information, and other fundamental freedoms;</p> <p>As the lead internal security agency in the country, the Liberia National Police, (LNP) should do the following:</p> <p>i. Make awareness of national obligation on freedom of expression and media required training for all police officers both as initial recruits and in-service personnel.</p> <p>ii. Maintain a cordial relationship with journalists and media outlets while recognizing and respecting their rights, responsibilities, and independence.</p> <p>iii. Welcome journalistic and other forms of public scrutiny.</p>	<p>The representative(s) shall participate in all Comprehensive National Framework meetings on the Safety of Journalists in Liberia;</p> <p>Coordinate all dialogue sessions;</p> <p>Produce reports of meetings and forums.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> iv. Not hinder public access to information held by the police especially if there is no reason for such information to be classified as exempt as defined under the Freedom of Information law; v. Police must respond to media enquiries promptly as much as possible. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a) 	
<p>Media</p>	<p>PUL</p> <p>PUL shall:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. advance the advocacy for media owners to institute safety policies; ii. take prompt actions to support journalists with safety issues; iii. Take stock of all threats to, or attacks on journalists; iv. conduct training programs to educate journalists about processes and procedures of security forces in certain instances where cooperation is required; v. provide conflict sensitive training to journalists to help guide their reporting; vi. Provide journalists training to help them understand how to protect individual privacy; vii. Furnish all journalists with the PUL Code of Conduct. <p>The Journalists</p> <p>Journalists shall:</p>	<p>The representative(s) shall participate in all Comprehensive National Framework coordinating meetings on the safety of journalists in Liberia;</p> <p>Coordinate all discussion sessions;</p> <p>Produce reports of meetings and forums.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Abide by the Code of Conduct for journalists and all or self-regulatory tools available to the Liberian media; ii. Look after their physical and mental wellbeing; iii. Make sure to have all identification and accreditation documents on their person even when they are not on active duty; iv. Always clearly identify themselves and their equipment during coverage of events especially where a security operation is ongoing; v. All journalists must be mindful of sensibilities while carrying out their duties. They must thus be conflict sensitive in all their actions; vi. When working in risk prone zones involving protests, or any form of violence, journalists must listen to warnings from the security forces and take the requisite precaution; <p>Employers of journalists/Media Houses</p> <p>Employers of journalists or media houses shall:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. provide for the safety and security of all journalists working for them; ii. Make available all relevant equipment to journalists working for them; iii. Routinely support safety training for journalists working for them; iv. Employers or media houses should not send inexperienced journalists on dangerous assignments; v. Insurance coverage for journalists where it is required to do so; vi. Educate journalists about the political, social and cultural conditions of a particular place 	
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	<p>before sending them there to cover events;</p> <p>Media Development and Press Freedom Advocacy Organizations</p> <p>These are required to:</p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Support capacity building in respect of issues such as: the treatment of journalists especially by security forces, investigation of crimes against journalists, and prosecution and protection measures; ii. Incentivize capacity-building efforts and safety training for journalists; iii. Train journalists on legal rights, self-protection techniques, first aid, etc. and assist with provision of safety equipment; 	
<p>Other Stakeholders</p>	<p>Other stakeholders are required to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> i. Continue supporting media development initiatives in Liberia ii. Support law and other reforms that foster media freedom and safety in Liberia iii. Support security operational mechanisms that foster openness in the country. 	<p>The representative(s) shall participate in all Comprehensive National Framework meetings on the safety of journalists in Liberia</p> <p>Produce reports of meetings and forums.</p>



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