



World Press Freedom Day

JOINT MEDIA SECTOR STATEMENT

Monday, 4th May, 2020.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

KENYA MEDIA SECTOR STATEMENT ON THE OCCASION OF WORLD PRESS FREEDOM DAY 2020

AS we mark the 2020 World Press Freedom Day with the theme “Journalism Without Fear or Favour”, Kenya media sector players note with concern that the rising trend in press freedom violations witnessed in 2019 continues in 2020.

That Kenya’s press freedom situation is doing badly was reflected in the country’s global ranking according to the Reporters Without Borders (RSF) index in which the country dropped from position 96 to 103.

Sector players are concerned about the increasing hostile working environment that is increasingly making the work of professional and independent journalism a challenge in Kenya. While we take note of the honest concerns by citizens about gaps in the adherence to the professional ethics for the practice of journalism in Kenya by some media practitioners, we want to remind Kenyans that there are enough self-regulatory mechanisms in the industry and profession to deal with such cases.

While for a long time the issues of malpractices in the profession, interference from owners and advertisers and restrictions in terms of the legal regime relating to media practice in Kenya have affected professional conduct by journalists, we are happy to note that enough is being done by industry players to create an environment that allows the practice of journalism without fear or favor. Additionally, targeted attacks against journalists and media houses have instilled fear among journalists affecting their work. However, we note that a great number of journalists remain professional and bold in their work, and an improved working environment and conducive legal regime will be ideal for journalists to remain focused on public interest issues.

The COVID-19 pandemic has only made a bad situation worse for journalists in Kenya. While applauding the sacrifices that journalists are making in covering the pandemic, we note that the already bad working conditions and safety situation of journalists in Kenya has been made worse by the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as seen in mass sackings, non-payment of salaries and wages and harassment of journalists.

Since January 2020, the Media Council of Kenya has documented 34 cases of harassment of journalists. Of the 34 incidents documented in Kenya, ten involved journalists whose rights were violated while on duty during the COVID 19 period. Police harassment, intimidation, assault, and denial of access (physical access and provision of information) occupy the largest percentage of violations against media workers in Kenya. Targeted sexual online campaigns against female journalists are also becoming the norm.

As the world wades through the uncharted waters of COVID-19, the media in Kenya has not been spared adverse effects of the pandemic. In addition to harassment and intimidation from within and outside the industry, hundreds of journalists are staring at uncertain futures due to reduced income as most employers implement cost-cutting measures to cushion themselves from the negative economic effects of the pandemic.

We note that while some of the measures the industry is taking are necessary given the situation, some media executives are taking advantage of the situation to mishandle journalists and violate their rights. The processes must be implemented in a fair, transparent and humane manner, within all the laws protecting employees. Journalism is facing the test of fake news and misinformation, which poses serious threats to the profession. This has worsened during the COVID-19 period due to the circulation of large amounts of unverified information. We however, note that the industry and media support groups have invested heavily in fact checking with considerable success.



World Press Freedom Day

We are also aware that as frontline workers, journalists and media practitioners are exposed to the daily risks of infection as they seek and report on events and facts about the COVID-19. The industry moved in and released editorial and safety guidelines to reinforce the in-house policies of media houses to cushion employees from risk of infection. Most of the media houses are implementing the work from home policy and other interventions.

We take note that while the sector is concerned and makes interventions on reported violations and continues to champion the course for justice from journalists affected by attacks, there is a major challenge; a notable and worrying trend where journalists who have been victims of violations resort to withdrawal or abandon the cases without professional guidance on issue of conflict resolution.

Recent response to the Media Council of Kenya from the Inspector General of Police showed that of the 19 cases reported, only one is currently active in court; ten other cases collapsed because 6 complainants withdrew and 4 others were closed because of disinterest from the complainants. While alternative forms of conflict resolution are encouraged, it is important that withdrawal of such cases is done in a structured manner to avoid jeopardizing the course for justice.

INTERVENTIONS

1. Media Sector Response Team (MESERT) — Media stakeholders established the MESERT on 13th March to coordinate safety responses for journalists during the COVID-19 period. Under the same framework the Media Council of Kenya with support from UNESCO developed and disseminated safety guidelines for media houses and journalists on COVID-19 and continues to sensitize stakeholders on the same.
2. Psychosocial and compassionate support — the sector has extended support to journalist affected by COVID-19. The Council, GIZ and IREX provided trauma/psychological support through virtual counseling sessions. The first beneficiaries are 14 journalists who were observing self-isolation in Kilifi County when the first cases of infection were reported in the region. The Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK) also conducted virtual support for its members, since they face an additional demand on their schedule as women. The Council has extended financial support to a number of journalists across the country
3. Journalism Grants — the Council has rolled out the first and second phase of health journalism grants targeting health reporters and media associations. It is hoped that the move in addition to developing professional health reporting, will help beneficiaries to alleviate financial challenges when seeking and reporting stories of the pandemic.
4. The Sector continues to engage the offices of the Inspector General (IG) of Police, Independent Police Oversight Authority and that of Director of Public Prosecutions in search of answers on apparent inaction on press freedom violation cases reported to the police. Media Stakeholders have so far written numerous letters to the relevant offices on lack of progress on investigations.

WAY FORWARD

- The Sector requests the government and development partners to consider a stimulus package for media houses in a bid to secure jobs for employees who are frontline workers and key partners in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.
- We request that government institutions owing media houses to urgently clear the debts/pending bills to alleviate the financial burden on media houses and media workers.
- We urge media houses to prioritize the safety and welfare of their employees. We commend the media houses that have embraced the concept of virtual newsrooms and provided Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) for their staff in the field.



World Press Freedom Day

- Newsrooms are urged to strengthen their fact checking desks in a bid to strengthen verification efforts towards fighting misinformation/disinformation.
- We urge the Police IG to issue a public directive to officers to provide security to journalists and media house staff while in the course of duty and desist from harassing and intimidating them.
- We urge media executives to implement current cost cutting measures humanely and respect the rights of employees even as they struggle to achieve sustainability.
- The Industry players must continue to collectively and individually look for opportunities to include media reforms and capacity building for journalists amidst the challenges. The latter notwithstanding, the media should remain steadfast in demanding for accountability while reporting on the pandemic. Journalism is more critical now than ever before.
- We call upon all stakeholders to join hands in evolving policy and legal reforms to protect independent journalism in the country. There is need to strengthen the media self-regulatory mechanism to ensure professional journalism to flourish

ISSUED BY:



Association of Freelance Journalists (AFJ)



Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK)



Digital Broadcaster Association (DBA)



IREX Kenya



Kenya Correspondents Association (KCA)



Kenya Editors Guild (KEG)



The Kenya Union of Journalists (KUJ)



The Media Council of Kenya (MCK)