

An Intersectional Analysis of the Experiences of Women Journalists in Selected African Newsrooms

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Abstract

This study is reminiscent of the online and offline experiences of women journalists in selected African countries, within the context of press freedom. Based on elements of the intersectionality theoretical framework, we highlight how women of colour find themselves at the intersection of many sources of domination, resulting in specific threats. Secondary data were purposively selected and qualitatively analysed. The findings of the study indicate that even though all journalists are affected, women are disproportionately affected differently due to their gender and sometimes their race too. The peculiarity of their gender has resulted in untold suffering, stigmatisation, under-representation and gender-based violence. Furthermore, it emerged that since patriarchy and intersectional factors continue to impact negatively on the working lives of women journalists across the continent, they disproportionately experience threats such as cyber trolling, racism, sexual harassment and gender-related threats in their online and offline activities, which all have a direct impact on their safety. Based on these findings, we recommended change for the status quo and called for concerted actions from various stakeholders, aimed at influencing social change in a corrective way to the perpetrators of such threats.

Key words: African women journalists, intersectionality, gender-based violence, press freedom

Afrika Haber Odaları Örneğinde Kadın Gazetecilerin Deneyimlerine İlişkin Kesişimsel Bir Analiz

Özet

Bu çalışma, basın özgürlüğü bağlamında ele alınan bir örneklem dahilinde seçilen Afrika ülkelerindeki kadın gazetecilerin çevrimiçi ve çevrimdışı deneyimlerini yansıtmaktadır. Kesişimsellik teorisine dayanarak, siyahi kadınların kendilerini çeşitli tahakküm kaynaklarının kesişim noktasında buldukları varsayılarak, çalışmada siyahi kadınların belirli tehditlerle karşı karşıya kaldıkları vurgulanacaktır. İkincil veriler amaca yönelik olarak seçilmiş ve nitel yöntem kullanılarak analiz edilmiştir. Araştırmanın bulgularına göre, incelenen bağlamda tüm gazeteciler etkilenmiş olsa da, kadınların cinsiyetleri ve bazen de kökenleri nedeniyle orantısız biçimde farklı boyutlarda etkilendiği ortaya çıkmıştır. Cinsiyetlerinin özelliğinden dolayı tarafsız acılara, etiketlenmelere, eksik temsillere ve toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı şiddete maruz kalmaktadırlar. Ayrıca, ataerkillik ve kesişimsel faktörler kıta genelinde kadın gazetecilerin çalışma hayatlarını olumsuz etkilemeye devam ederken, çevrimiçi ve çevrimdışı faaliyetlerinde siber saldırı, ırkçılık, cinsel taciz ve toplumsal cinsiyete yönelik bazı tehditlere orantısız bir şekilde maruz kaldıkları ve bunların hepsinin güvenlikleri üzerinde doğrudan bir etkiye sahip olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır. Çalışmada elde edilen bulgulara dayanarak, mevcut durumun değiştirilmesi yönünde öneriler geliştirilerek, bu tür tehditlerin faillerine yönelik düzeltici bir toplumsal değişimi etkilemeyi amaçlayan çeşitli aktörlere ortak eylem çağrısında bulunulmuştur.

Anahtar kelimeler: Afrikalı kadın gazeteciler, basın özgürlüğü, kesişimsellik, toplumsal cinsiyete dayalı şiddet

Introduction

As the fourth estate, the media's mandate is that of the watchdog role against wrongdoings in power dynamics within societies. While playing this critical role, men and women are increasingly becoming victims of their reporting in different ways. In the same way, the women journalists are disproportionately disadvantaged as they are faced with an array of intersectional discrimination, highly sexualised gender-specific threats, as well as various forms of violence, all of which affect their ability to work and progress in their profession. This culture is marginalising and discouraging women in their journalistic practice. The 2020 global survey by UNESCO and the International Centre of Journalists (conducted in 125 countries around the world) reveals that 73% of women journalists experienced online threats, while 25% were physically threatened while on duty. In a postcolonial context associated with the 'triple jeopardy' (intersectional, cultural and gender-based violence) against women, the experiences of female journalists matter. It is these and other issues that prompted this study, which sought to make a theoretical intervention to the existing mainstream literature on the safety of women of colour journalists. Drawing from the intersectionality theoretical framework, the study proceeds as follows: drawing examples from selected African countries, we firstly unpack the intersectionality concept and how it relates to the discussion in this paper, we discuss the offline

attacks confronting women journalists for the past decade, as well as the online threats, particularly amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

In the context of the above, the following objectives were addressed.

- To investigate the online and offline attacks on women journalists, and how these attacks affect their person and profession
- To suggest measures to address the identified issues

Women Navigating the Mediascape

In their efforts to fight the culture of stereotypes and gain their status in areas that are traditionally dominated by men, and as they strive for recognition, credibility, respect and equal opportunities, women find themselves fighting for their space in the journalistic terrain. Traditionally, a woman is expected to be in the home and not the public domain, hence, those who refute the custom are often discriminated against (Sanusi and Adelabu, 2015). What is evident here is the concept of gender which somehow prescribes specific roles for men and women. When a woman chooses to be in the corporate space, she is often regarded as violating traditional gender norms and is therefore perceived as too ambitious and irresponsible. In some instances, suspicions of infidelity surface, especially for women journalists whose work involves working beyond normal working hours, or sometimes they have to travel and spend days away from home while covering stories. Because of the demand of the media industry, many women journalists find it difficult to abide by these cultural prescriptions and expectations and in this view, they are perceived as contravening their societal obligations.

However, the fact of the matter is that women experience sexism in many aspects: leadership roles, decision-making, remuneration and for those in the media, they may not be allowed to preside over certain programmes or report on certain stories like politics (Oyinade et al., 2013). When women are involved in decision making, they often face resistance from men, the reason being that traditionally, women are subordinates of men (Anyawu, 2017). In many instances, women are not trusted to take up senior positions and if they happen to be there, suspicions are that they might have gained entry through unscrupulous means such as transactional sex or flirting (Franks, 2013). Some media organisations hesitate to employ female journalists, the fear being that they are likely to sacrifice their marriages. Franks (2013) notes that the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) had discriminatory policies which discourage women from becoming journalists, for instance, suppressing their wages and recruiting a limited number of women for journalism training. It is thus evident that in the media fraternity, women tend to be

sexualised: their voices are suppressed, while at the same time they are being excluded from participating in decision-making and leadership roles. In addition to these experiences, they also experience another kind of violation in the digital space. These and other issues form part of the discussion of this paper. Having said this, the section that follows describes the intersectionality approach, which lays the basis for the discussion in this paper.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality

The intersectionality approach was propounded by the legal activist-scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989. It has its roots from the feminist thinking, thereby a critique of tokenism, solipsism and exclusion in both White-dominated feminist socio-political discourses and male-dominated antiracist ones such as the Black Nationalism (Overstreet, Rosenthal & Case, 2020). Crenshaw (1989; 1991) describes intersectionality as comprising structural, political and representational intersectionality. Structural intersectionality describes how different structures work together and craft multifaceted ways in which the location of women of colour are found at the intersection of race and gender to make sense of real experiences of domestic violence and sexual harassment (Carastathis, 2014). It entails the ways in which racism, sexism and classism interconnect and dominate women of colour while shaping their experiences in different fields. Political intersectionality focuses on two incompatible structures within the political circles, which separates women of colour and White women into two minor groups (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). The experiences of the former differ from those of the latter and men of colour due to their race and gender. Thus, White women encounter gender bias, while men of colour experience racial bias. Ironically, women of colour experience both racial and gender bias, which make them multiple-dominated over the former. Representational intersectionality advocates for the creation of imagery that is supportive of women of colour, as it criticises their sexist and racist marginalisation in media representation (Crenshaw, 1989; 1991). It posits the significance of women of colour having representation in media and contemporary settings.

Leaning on the lens of the intersectionality perspective, women of colour find themselves at the intersection of many sources of domination, resulting in multi-dimensional attacks. Based on their race, civil status, ethnicity and sexual orientation, they experience domination differently. They disproportionately encounter online and offline threats when a perpetrator overtly or covertly threatens them in their day-to-day journalistic routines. As professionals whose mandate is to act as a watchdog against wrongdoings in power dynamics within societies, the attacks they encounter are not only acts of violence, but also violation of press freedom. In turn, this sternly deters their professional

engagements and ability to work. In view of this, we therefore unpack some of the common forms of threats and abuses experienced by women journalists of colour, with specific examples from the African region.

Methodology

The study employed qualitative approach to research. Literature about and by women from different African countries which include South Africa, Malawi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Afghanistan, Kenya, Somalia, Senegal and Uganda was purposively sampled. This type of sampling method requires that the researcher rely on her/his own judgement when choosing a sample as it is rationally assumed to be representative of the target population (Sharma, 2017). Furthermore, the sampling strategy paved room for the generalization of findings. Qualitative content analysis of literature was done to organise and classify codes, thereby giving a collective meaning to themes with similar meanings which are discussed below.

Findings and Discussion

Physical Attacks and Killing of Journalists: South Africa and Afghanistan

Many women journalists are targeted physically and some of the threats they experience include harassment, physical assault, rape, murder and sexist hate speech. These forms of violence often result in detrimental effects such as physical and psychological harm. Some journalists, because of this, tend to avoid reporting on certain issues or they totally withdraw from the journalism profession. Statistics from The Southern Africa region clearly indicate that the voices of female journalists are generally lower on critical issues, as compared to their male counterparts.

Women journalists who cover politics, sports and are in disagreement with dominant ideologies and ruling political dispensations, are often at high risks of physical threats, irrespective of their race or ethnicity. In April 2021, South African eNews Channel Africa (*eNCA*) women journalists: Monique Mortlock, Asanda Javu (photojournalist) and Elma Smit (sports journalist) were physically attacked by armed robbers. Mortlock and Javu's attack occurred in Khayelitsha suburb of Cape Town while reporting on the impact of poor service delivery by the municipality in that community (News24, 2021a). Their cell phones and camera kit were confiscated. This was not Mortlock's first time to encounter gendered physical threat. In the beginning of 2021, she was assaulted by a male protester, while covering resistance to the lockdown beach ban in South Africa. Smit was also attacked in the same area of Khayelitsha during a profile compilation of one prominent Springbok Women's team member. The *eNCA*'s filming equipment, a cell phone and wallet belonging to one of Smit's crew member were

confiscated by three alleged perpetrators who were not arrested (News24, 2021a). It is disturbing to note that such physical attacks on women journalists disrupt them from being public communicators, hence the notion of press freedom gets obscured in the long haul.

As the rate of violence against women journalists continue to rise, we are witnessing a shift from mere physical attacks to their killing across the globe, in order to silence them. Journalists who advocate for women's rights can be in jeopardy, especially in some countries where it means undermining traditions and raising awareness in minds that have been subjected to a patriarchal society. In Afghanistan, journalism is known to be one of the most dangerous and immoral profession for women, to an extent that she can be despised by the whole family for following that profession:

“Traditional families, particularly men, including fathers, brothers and husbands, are often ardently opposed to the women of their families working in the media” A job that places a woman in any traditionally public, male-dominated space can be controversial. The case of women working in media, where their images or voices are broadcast to the general public, can elicit intervention by relatives (Afghan Journalists' Safety Committee, 2016: 3).

In some instances, women journalists encounter deaths for reporting on certain issues. In 2020, a 30 years old Afghan women's rights journalist and civil society advocate, Malalai Maiwand (at Enikas Radio and TV) was killed by two gunmen while on duty, together with her driver (The Guardian, 2020). It is alleged that her demise was masterminded by the Taliban (Islamist movement and military organisation), a well-known critic of women's rights in Afghanistan. She was one of two women journalists killed in Afghanistan in 2020, out of 50 journalists killed worldwide (CPJ, 2020). Her death created a climate of fear, leaving many women journalists around the world sceptical about their safety in the field. Clearly, the killing of journalists is not only an abuse of human rights, but a mockery of the freedom of the press.

Stereotypes in the Newsrooms: Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo

Female journalists are not only attacked from the audience perspective, but rather from the authorities as well. Their leadership roles and visibility in the mainstream newsroom is a major concern, as they are under-represented. Commenting on this, LaFlamme (cited by Pulfer) argues that:

“This under-representation has a damning domino effect on democracy overall...and filters through to the people actually quoted in the stories we cover. So, despite the

mini-revolutions fought to get to where we are today, there is still a long road ahead for full and fair representation, especially in key-decision making positions.”

In Somalia, women journalists account for just 23% of employees in media houses. In addition to this under-representation, they occupy limited roles involved in decision-making (IMS-Fojo, 2017). One of the reasons for this disparity, it is argued, is the fact that:

“...most Somali media houses lack clear, written recruitment policies and procedures...recruitment is conducted informally. In the absence of proper procedures, appointments are open to the discretion of management, who are primarily male. The absence of recruitment panels indicates that the process may be intimidating to female journalists, as men constitute the majority of senior management. Experience from other settings has proven that the lack of clear policies and procedures may result in corruption and abuse of power by management, which can leave women vulnerable to sexual harassment” (IMS-Fojo Media, 2017: 15)

Writing about their experiences in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Sandra Bashengezi (2020) notes that training and leadership roles are spared from women since the culture stipulates that men cannot take orders from women. In the DRC, gender inequality is culturally entrenched to such an extent that the public has normalised the notion that women do not belong in the public domain, hence, should not become journalists. As a result, the female journalists in this country are seen as rebellious and not traditionally feminine, hence, they are despised and often regarded as promiscuous because of their participation in the public domain. This kind of gender bias result in many males in the media fraternity not to trust women with leadership roles. Supporting this view, Kiriza (Bashengezi, 2020: 22) argues that:

“There is a perception that women are careless and less rigorous in management. This is why it is men who are promoted at the expense of women in the media”.

Moreso, women journalists in the DRC are not allowed to work on assignments which are “masculine”, for instance, politics, as well as investigative journalism (Bashengezi, 2020). One of her fellow journalists noted that:

“Some male journalists think that women cannot host political programs or shows. For example, that they can’t cover stories that require a little more effort, like sports, or investigate serious issues like corruption. That their competence is limited to light subjects such as health, cooking, beauty,” (Panda, cited by Bashengezi, 2020: 21).

What is clear from the DRC case is that women working in the media battle with stereotypes, as individuals, as well as in relation to their male counterparts. In this view, a journalist from a feminist radio station that advocates for women's rights and empowerment notes that:

“It is difficult then for many men, especially in rural areas, to recognize the value of women, without prejudice, when they are leaders or when they do a good job as journalists,” (Adidja, cited by Bashengezi, 2020: 23).

To add to the series of the challenges, women are often overlooked when it comes to promotions. Highlighting the DRC experiences, Namwezi, points that:

“There are social and cultural aspects that are reflected even in the newsrooms. The result is a gendered distribution of roles among journalists...There are several customs that place women at a lower rank than men...the perception is that women cannot lead men. According to some customs, speaking in public when you are a woman is a crime...The traditional role of women is to keep quiet. But when you're a woman journalist and you speak, you lead the debate, you question people, and then you cross that traditional line and people judge you as they see fit,” (Bashengezi, 2020: 21).

In response to this, Armstrong (Bashengezi, 2020: 9) highlights the need for the males in the newsrooms to:

“...step up and support women, particularly women in leadership roles...Nothing is really going to change unless men are involved...Women journalists need to convince men that they're not taking their jobs, they're expanding and redefining them.”

In response to some of the stereotypes cited above, Adidja (Bashengezi, 2020) argues that:

“Women also need to specialize in certain areas that men take for granted, such as politics, sports and investigations. This will give them the same opportunities” (Bashengezi, 2020: 24).

Overall, the Congolese case is one that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. Training in gender equality becomes imperative, particularly for the males in the journalistic profession. Essentially, there is need for raising awareness, especially about the stereotypes, as well as the old-fashioned habits described above, which discriminate women in journalism. Such perceptions of discrimination against female journalists can only be dealt away with when all

relevant stakeholders mobilise against them, in order to protect women and promote their rights in the society.

Sexual Violence: Uganda and Malawi

MISA Zimbabwe's Southern Africa Press Freedom Report (2019/2020) highlights that women journalists are violated in many ways which include sexual abuse, as well as harassment in the workplace. The UNESCO's Global Survey on Online Violence against Women Journalists highlights that 18% of women indicated that they have been threatened with sexual violence (Posetti, Aboulez, Bontcheva, Harrison & Waisbord, 2020). While covering stories in the communities, women journalists in the DRC are sexually harassed by their colleagues and informants as well. In worst scenarios, female journalists find themselves enduring sexual harassment by their male counterparts in the newsrooms. This resonates with Franks (2013) who notes that in many instances, women journalists are sexually abused by their male superiors and other colleagues in the workplace. An instance is that of a Ugandan journalist who described how her supervisor called her to his office and forced her to watch sexual material on his computer. She reported that he:

“Said he wanted to put [me] in the mood just the way he was feeling. He immediately grabbed me by the hand and started forcing me to touch his penis and to kiss his lips.”
(Barton & Storm, 2018: 20).

Williams (2015) argues that these acts of sexual harassment begin at the point where one applies for a position of the journalist. It is further noted that some women are sexually harassed by their interviewees, the police or government officials. In 2020, the Malawian female journalists marched against rape and abuse, noting that:

“As journalists we are saying we've been reporting on issues of rape and defilement for long, long time, but we are seeing little impact on the ground...We are acknowledging effort the police are putting in place, the courts, and we also know that there are laws in place, but we believe that if these issues are continuing, then probably they [laws] are not stringent enough.” (Kambalame, quoted by Masina, in the *Voice of Africa News*, 2020).

The forms of sexual harassment described above have detrimental effects on the journalists as individuals, their profession, their families, as well as on press freedom.

Online Harassment: South Africa, Senegal and Kenya

The uptake of digitisation act as a double-edged sword in that it has created new opportunities for women journalists (through social media platforms) to conveniently engage with their audience and also provided a platform for new forms of online gendered-specific attacks. Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about the ‘new normal’ which saw an incremental shift from mainstream journalism to digital journalism in a bid to observe physical distancing. Women journalists experience online threats such as cyberbullying and trolling which occurs when the offender incite annoyance or any other adverse emotions, often by posting provocative messages (Phillips, 2016). Deviants find social media platforms such as Twitter to encourage ecosystems for trolling and profanity (Rego, 2018). In the same vein, such online behaviours which lead to the harassment of women journalists connotes a misogynistic variant called ‘gender trolling’ (Mantilla, 2013). It is about “patrolling gender boundaries and using insults, hate, and threats, of violence and/or rape to ensure that women and girls are either kept out of or play subservient roles in male-dominated arenas” (Mantilla, 2013, p. 568). Golf-Papez and Veer (2017); Sankhwar and Chaturvedi (2018) corroborate that the majority of trolls are males who indulge in anti-social behaviour for earnings. They are characterised by aggressive attitudes that seek to trigger violence, shame and humiliate their targets (Rego, 2018).

The South African Economic Freedom Fighters once attacked eNCA’s late journalist Karima Brown on social media, an instance which Gumede (in the Mail & Guardian, 2019) describes as:

“... not only painful for her, they are an attack on the news media and our democracy. These attacks are also a chilling example of the threats that female journalists face ...yet another example of the ingrained patriarchal and sexist attitudes that women in South Africa face”.

In the same way, South African newspaper Editor Ferial Haffajee has also been a victim of trolling, stalking and received death threats (Gumede, 2019). Gumede further argues that whether the abuser is known or is anonymous, their political agenda is often perceived and usually accompanied by patriarchal and sexist ideas. In this view, she argues that women journalists are enduring “double attacks”, firstly being targeted simply because of their gender and secondly, for being journalists. This kind of cyberbullying and cyber-misogyny, according

to Gumede (2019), “*are the ugliest forms of sexism used to try to intimidate and silence women journalists*”.

South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) Foreign Editor Sophie Mokoena is among women journalists who experienced cyber-trolling from some Zimbabwe's ruling ZANU-PF information and publicity officials when she reported on the protestors' plight soon after the Zimbabwean elections of 2018 (News24, 2021)b. Mokoena, who has been on the forefront questioning the whereabouts of Zimbabwean President, Emmerson Mnangagwa amid COVID-19 crisis in the country, is also known for covering controversial political affairs within the entire African region. It is alleged that the ZANU-PF officials tweeted sexist and misogynistic vitriol to Mokoena in a bid to harass, intimidate and muzzle her from conducting her professional duties (News24, 2021b). Following this incident, Mokoena did not react but the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF) cautioned the alleged officials to cease online attacks on female journalists. Based on Mokoena's nationality, ethnicity, race and gender, the intersectionality perspective sheds light on how women of colour journalists experience multiple layers of domination compared to White journalists.

Senegalese female journalists, Maimouna Ndour Faye and Mame Maty Fall received death threats from unidentified persons through their social media accounts. This was after they reported an alleged rape case involving a senior political figure in February 2021 (International Federation of Journalists, 2021). Ndour Faye and Maty Fall felt muzzled and did nothing about their case as they feared it could take a new twist. The Syndicate Professionals Information Communication Senegal (SYNPICS) reacted to the attack by denouncing such attempts of obstructing freedom of the press. It further called on its members (journalists) not to underestimate such threats and to report them publicly and file formal complaints to relevant authorities. Despite its respectable 47th place ranking on media freedom out of 180 countries around the globe (by *Reporters without Borders*), Senegalese political leaders continue to undermine the fundamental right to freedom of expression, which is guaranteed in the country's Constitution. This scenario is not unique to Senegal, but in many African countries, the importance of press freedom only exists in black and white but in practice it is non-existent.

In Kenya, online attacks on women journalists are well documented. The Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK, 2016) highlights increased numbers of online attacks instigated on female journalists and these include surveillance, sexual harassment and stalking, as well as unauthorised use of the journalists' personal information. In the main, women journalists are

experiencing ‘dual-faceted attacks’, firstly because of the content that they report on, and secondly, for being women, their gender and sometimes ethnic background. One common form of abuse experienced by female journalists in Kenya is smear campaign. The campaigns, which include Twitter hashtags, Facebook hate pages, memes with insulting messages, as well as blog comments, are often a retaliation to perhaps some stories which the journalists would have covered. Caroline Mutoko is a prominent journalist known for her ‘no-holds barred’ approach in journalism. In giving her personal opinion about events taking place within the Kenyan community, she has been attacked for this, with the perpetrators diverting from the issues under discussion to getting personal, calling her names like “bitch”, asking her about the number of men that she has “bedded” and asking for those men’s telephone numbers (AMWIK, 2016). Julie Gichuru is a freelance journalist who was once insulted for posting an article on her company website. The insults she received targeted her appearance, sexuality and ethnic background. Among other things, she received harassing private messages and bullying comments in which she was labelled as:

“Old ugly yellow pig...How many kikuyus including you who sell their bodies for survival? Get a life you old moronic harlot!”

These are some examples of how women journalists in Kenya are enduring online violence and threats. Another common experience for these journalists is account hacking, this is done to silence some of them from reporting news of the day. Sadly, as communicators of public information, women journalists are enduring such misogynistic comments that stereotype, criticise and marginalise them, based on their sexuality, gender and race (Adams, 2018). Thus, journalism as a profession is considered hazardous for women who operate in hostile environments.

In What Ways Do the Attacks Affect the Journalists?

Having said the above, one can argue that the experiences described in this paper are often underestimated, especially by those who are meant to protect the journalists. The issues discussed in this article highlight the long history of violence perpetrated against women. The gendered threats often result in emotional stress, as well as long-term psychological trauma. Moreover, the attacks have a double effect on the journalists: their private lives and professional mobility are implicated. As a response to this, some of the journalists rather turn off their social media accounts in an effort to disguise their identity when publishing, reducing the amount of media content they create as to cope with such threats while others resort to

quitting the profession (Adams, 2018; Ferrier and Garud-Patkar, 2018). Some journalists decide not to report the matters for fear of retribution or other profession-related reasons. A study by Ogundoyin (2020) on the challenges faced by women journalists in Nigeria reveals that some women journalists who encountered online sexual harassment opted to remain silent because of traditional beliefs and stigma attached to it. However, in some cases women journalists refuse to be silenced and retaliate against online attacks.

It has also been noted that the violence that they experience has forced some of them to self-censor (ICFJ, 2020). This on its own is a violation of freedom of speech, while at the same time it hugely affects diversity in the newsroom. In the same way, the nature of the violence experienced by some women make them lose confidence in what they do, and they start battling imposter syndrome- they feel that they are not qualified enough to discharge their journalistic roles, despite sometimes being more qualified than their male counterparts. This assertion resonates with the feminist muted group theory (Ardner, 2006) which highlights that certain groups of people are silenced due to their lack of power to stand up for themselves, in this instance, the women. This results from the mentality that men are more powerful and hence, the dominant group that should lead as prescribed by society. Often, women tend to give up when competing with men. Nonetheless, the fact remains that women journalists are struggling for visibility in the media landscape, albeit, with the challenges described in this article.

Covid-19 Aggravated the Situation?

We have noted in the discussion above, how women journalists are experiencing a series of physical and digital threats, in a way compromising the freedom of expression. A global survey by ICFJ and the Tow Centre for Digital Journalism revealed that 16% of women indicated that online abuse and harassment became “much worse than normal” during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is noted that these forms of violence are necessitated by “populist and authoritarian politicians” who are also becoming disinformation peddlers (Poseti, Harisson & Waisbord, 2020, in UNESCO). With the outbreak of the pandemic, these forms of violence have also increased- the online platform has become a weapon in this regard. With its speed and connected networks, the online environment accelerates sophisticated attacks on women journalists. While platforms like Facebook Live present the opportunity for broadcasting directly to the public, the digital tools expose women journalists to real-time harassment, thus increasing the risks. It is no doubt that social media have become an integral part of journalistic work, as the journalists use these platforms, as well as other digital tools to source, create, distribute news (including live broadcasts) and engage the public. With the implementation of

COVID-19 lockdown measures to curb the spread of the virus, journalists are forced to engage with their sources and the general public online, as social distancing measures are being reinforced. While using the digital platforms to blend their professional and personal identities, journalists are risking being exposed to threats of any sort, day in day out. For the women journalists, the threats and gender-based sexist attacks are real and meant to shame or intimidate them: insults targeting their bodies, their families, personal features and relationships, as well as impersonation and sometimes they receive distasteful videos. Commenting on online violence against women journalists, Silvia Chocarro (cited by van Leuven, 2020), the Head of Protection Journalists and Human Rights Defenders stresses that:

“Online harassment and abuse against women journalists is not only about silencing journalism, it is about silencing women...This is why addressing the issue in the long term requires to put in place and implement strong gender equality and non-discrimination policies.”

With the increase in the online violence, most journalists begin to self-censor, thus, fulfilling the agenda of the abusers. This alone is an attack on press freedom, as well as the fundamental right to freedom, as women tend to be forced to silence their voices and not participating as active digital citizens. Online violence is also a public health issue whose repercussions are detrimental not only to the attacked journalists, but their families as well.

Where to, from Here?

This paper has brought to the fore, the gruesome experiences of women in the journalistic practice, as well as how they impact on the individual journalists and the field of journalism as a whole. Despite efforts towards advocacy for women journalists' rights, it seems there is still a long way to go in this regard. Even though there are some steps taken towards the safety of women journalists, there remains some gaps- the need for the relevant stakeholders to integrate gender specific measures in this regard. Our observation is that the freedom of expression, the media fraternity, as well as policy makers, ought to further research and distribute information on good practices, while at the same time advocating for a gender-sensitive approach to promote the safety of women journalists. Indeed, the UN General Assembly Resolution 72/175 of 2017 emphasised the urgent imperative to adopt and implement measures aimed at effectively tackling:

“gender-based discrimination, including intimidation, harassment and violence offline and online, incitement to hatred, inequality and gender-based stereotypes; to enable

women to enter and remain in journalism on equal terms with men while ensuring their greatest possible safety; and to ensure that the experiences and concerns of women journalists are effectively addressed and gender stereotypes in the media are adequately tackled” (ICFJ, 2020).

What this implies is the need to educate and thoroughly address the forms of harassment instigated upon women journalists. In the same way, the journalists themselves should also be equipped to handle such threats and forms of violence, particularly in the area of practical resources. Gender digital safety (the protection of their identity) is imperative. This implies the need to train the journalists on how to protect themselves as a vulnerable group online. It should be emphasised that they are part of the social media community and should not be deterred by anyone, it is their fundamental right to do so. What is needed are the necessary tips and tools to help them to remain safe while online.

Conclusion

The findings of this study indicated that the voices of women of colour journalists have been lost in patriarchal and intersectional perspectives. Therefore, the significance and thesis of this study lies in its theoretical intervention that incorporates the intersectionality approach into the experience of women of colour journalists. It offers in-depth perspectives regarding the intersectional experiences of women journalists in the African context, than other approaches such as feminist, which often gaze at domination as a theoretical toolkit to generalise all women journalists, not paying close attention to women of colour as multiply- dominated. We have noted that even though all journalists are affected, women are affected differently due to their gender and sometimes their race too. The peculiarity of their gender has resulted in untold suffering and stigmatisation-under-representation and all sorts of violence. However, it should be noted that half the story is never enough- the media cannot be regarded as totally free if women’s voices and participation in the public sphere are stifled. Holistically, if women are still marginalised due to their gender, the message being sent out there is that men are what define cultural standard, while women have no place in society. The media are the building blocks of democracy, hence, women equally have the right to provide information, as well as to create public opinion. It is therefore the mandate of the same media to play a critical role in combatting gender-based violence. This implies the need to look beyond the embedded stereotypes and help women journalists to cope with the series of challenges aimed at hindering them from participating in the public domain.

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