



THE IMPACT

COVID-19 ON EAST AFRICAN
WOMEN JOURNALISTS



December 2020



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This study investigates the impact of the COVID19 pandemic on East African women journalists. In capturing these experiences, the study provides useful insight for industry, civil society, policymakers and academia.

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COVID-19	Coronavirus disease 2019
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GMMP	Global Media Monitoring Project
IFJ	International Federation of Journalist

FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

A study of this nature is important because even in normal times, decades of research has shown that women journalists face challenging work environments in the journalism industry. The COVID19 Pandemic changed many lives, impacted many industries and will undoubtedly have lasting ramifications.

With the support of UNESCO, within the IPDC Framework, this study has captured the lived experiences of East African women journalists during this period. We hope the data presented in this report will form the basis for many more industry and academic research that digs deeper into the various themes that our study discovered.

Themes ranged from gendered role assignment, changes in employment that saw a disproportionate number of women, including pregnant women, placed on unpaid leave or losing their jobs. There were expectedly impacts on mental health, from the feeling of loneliness to anxiety about job security, how they will care for themselves and their families. I suspect that remote working will become more readily accepted going forward, for the respondents of this study, this has not always been a positive experience. The increased and somewhat borderless virtual connectedness with colleagues saw cases of sexual harassment through digital platforms like WhatsApp. How do we police these digital boundaries when we already grapple with policing sexual harassment of women journalists? Cyberbullying and cyber misogyny has been on the increase for women journalists in the last decade or so, and when asked how this has changed since the pandemic, 67per cent of our respondents said incidents of online abuse has increased for them.

While the COVID19 Pandemic took the world by surprise, we hope the journalism industry, policy makers, civil society and academia find this study useful in preparing and adapting to change.

Dr. Yemisi Akinbobola
Cofounder & CEO, African Women in Media

Multiple crises arising from COVID-19 are urgently underlining UNESCO's goal of "gender equality in and through media".

As is shown by this study, the pandemic is a setback to the media, and especially to women journalists' role in media. In turn, this is a setback for achieving gender equality in society and sustainable development for all.

Around Africa, no media house and no journalists have been unscathed by what is happening. In the pages that follow, we can see the distressing impacts on women journalists in particular. But this research itself is a symbol of resistance, not despair. Its findings cry out for strong interventions. Targeted rescue packages for media are urgent. Medium-term subsidy funds have to be set up to sustain jobs in journalism - if society is to have a supply of independent public information. And all this must be gender-transformative in its impact.

Combating the pandemic and its 'long tail' effects also means discrimination in the newsrooms has to cease. For the safety of women journalists, there can no longer be impunity for those who threaten and attack them. Monitoring is vital to track all crimes against women journalists and whether the perpetrators face justice. States have to strengthen their duty to protect. In this way, a strong media infrastructure, with equality and safety for women journalists, will help us to build back better.

Identifying and implementing solutions to problems is at the heart of UNESCO's dedicated intergovernmental committee known as "the IPDC", the International Programme for the Development of Communication. This committee mobilises funds - and then awards grants- for media development, always with a gender-sensitive lens.

The limit on the funds available to IPDC means that many projects do not secure support. Of those that do win assistance, not all succeed with something to show for the investment. This is why sincere congratulations are due to this project for winning an IPDC grant, and for having a tangible output.

All readers can help to make the knowledge in these pages into change in reality. The pandemic and its damage requires nothing less of us.

Guy Berger
Secretary, IPDC

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The threat posed by coronavirus has propelled journalists to the frontline as information purveyors to a world struggling to come to terms with the pandemic and its effects. Despite their central role in this period, reporters, editors and other media workers are also grappling with the impacts of the pandemic on their lives and work. This study sought to explore how women journalists in East Africa are experiencing the changes occasioned by the pandemic.

This was mixed study design incorporating an online survey and online focus group discussions from women in Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya working in a variety of media outlets. Findings indicate women journalists were hard hit economically with 52per cent reporting they had been put on unpaid leave. Work has moved online with 69.4per cent working online but this adds to the financial strain since 62per cent of those surveyed said they have to pay for the data costs out of their own pockets. In addition, working from home was unsettling in the home environment as they had to juggle with work and home demands at the same time and securing a space for working posed a challenge for many.

Sexual harassment was not a problem during this period for 61.4per cent of the respondents due to less physical proximity as a result of COVID-19. Conversely, online harassment had gone up as reported by 63.9per cent. Some women journalists did not have employer supplied protective gear (43.5per cent). A large per cent, 69.7per cent, reported elevated levels of stress and worry over their welfare, and almost half, 46.3per cent reported not having employer provided psychosocial support.

In sum, women felt that severity of the impact of the pandemic on them was also because they had junior positions or worked freelance and therefore experienced precarious working conditions in Journalism. Remote working was for them was a challenge because of lack of equipment and cost of data. In terms of technology use, WhatsApp is the most popular app at 91.7per cent followed by Facebook at 56.5per cent and Twitter at 45.4per cent as well as a number of videoconferencing apps.

This study makes several recommendations, key of which is for media organizations to put in place policies that safeguard and protect women from harm. Gender policies that recognize the need for a work-life balance for women need to be enacted and women journalists' associations need to be strengthened to provide psychosocial and legal support for members experiencing mental health challenges and sexual harassment on and offline. It is increasingly important to provide women journalists with the digital skills needed to help them produce content without depending on equipment from media organizations. Careers in journalism, even before the pandemic, were unstable for women journalists as many worked as freelancers. Given the precarity of journalistic work, training in entrepreneurial skills in journalism is solely needed.

East African women journalists need to be networked to leverage their skills, work collaboratively and strengthen the sisterhood within a community of professionals. Finally, a virtual resource centre would go a long way in helping women journalists learn new skills and knowledge in their craft.

01

CHAPTER

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of COVID19 as a serious respiratory illness with global spread is thrusting health journalism to the forefront as populations grapple with its impact on their communities and families. Wall-to-wall coverage of the pandemic is becoming the norm in global and local news. While in East Africa, the first cases of the disease were reported in March, the rapidly increasing new cases have given impetus to increased health coverage.

Women, in general, are disproportionately affected by COVID-19 because they make up the bulk of health care workers, especially as nurses and community health workers and caregivers. Women journalists are on the frontlines, along with their male counterparts, witnessing how this disease is ravaging communities and telling these stories in online, broadcast media and print media. At the same time, they are grappling with what these changes mean to them professionally and personally as organizations take measures to mitigate against the financial impact of the pandemic on their fortunes.

A global study carried out by International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) in April 2020, shows COVID-19 has led to pay cuts, job losses, lost revenue, lost commissions and poor working conditions for two-thirds of journalists surveyed. The study further showed that women journalists had higher levels of stress-related to COVID-19 despite the fact that their working conditions have changed less than those of men (IFJ, 2020). Of those surveyed, 7.4 per cent of women had lost their jobs as opposed to 6.5 per cent of male journalists. Women also reported higher degrees of stress and anxiety (IFJ, 2020). While the insights of such a global study are valuable, there is still a need for regional studies due to the wide array of differences in conditions in various parts of the world.

This therefore makes this study on East African women journalists important in understanding the impact of the pandemic on them. The study is guided by the following research questions:



- How has the pandemic impacted the status of women journalists in East Africa?
- How has the pandemic changed the working conditions and practices for these women?
- What challenges are East African women journalists facing during the pandemic?

BACKGROUND

Journalism has long been viewed as a male-dominated profession but women have steadily infiltrated the field in many parts of the world. Globally, women started making inroads into professional journalism in the early 20th century in Europe and North America. In Sweden for example, only 11 per cent of newspaper jobs in Stockholm was held by 1914 but this continued to grow so that “the share of women among journalists grew from a few per cent at the start of the century to half 100 years later” (Djerf-Pierre 2007, p. 96). In the US, by 2019 a “record high of 44.4 per cent of local TV news staffers were female” while “34.3 per cent of news directors were female” (Women’s Media Center 2019, p. 53). Print was slightly lower with women making up 41 per cent (Women’s Media Center 2019, p. 18).

However, from a global perspective, the picture is not as upward-looking elsewhere. In Asia Pacific, only 28.6 per cent of journalists are female (IFJ, Asia Pacific, 2015, p.10). Current statistics on Africa are hard to come by, however according to the WACC’s Global Media Monitoring Project (GMMP), in Africa, across newspapers, radio and television news, female reporters comprise of 35 per cent of all journalists (GMMP, 2015). Within East Africa, the subject of this report, newspaper, television, and radio female reporters were 29 per cent in Kenya, 37 per cent in South Sudan, 35 per cent in Tanzania and 20 per cent in Uganda (GMMP, 2015, p. 121).

The global variations notwithstanding, women’s share of space within the media industry has grown. Yet whether it has made a difference in news content and in dispelling gender bias remains an open question. Despite significant gains, women remain overrepresented in the lower cadres and underrepresented in senior editorial and management positions. The newsroom remains largely a gendered space where the presence of women does not seem welcome. As Steiner observes, “in journalism and mass media, women have been regarded as the intruder, the exception, the problem” (2012, p. 201).

This translates differently in various parts of the world and calls for context-based inquiry into the experiences of women journalists working under different institutional and regulatory regimes. This is in line with feminist research, which is typically undergirded by specific theoretical perspectives and questions that foreground the lived experiences of women (Hesse-Biber 2008, p.336). As such, standpoint theorist Dorothy Smith stresses the necessity of starting research from women’s lives; taking into account women’s everyday experiences, she pays particular attention to finding and analyzing the gaps that occur when women try to fit their lives into mainstream methods of conceptualizing women’s situation (in Hesse-Biber 2008, p. 336-7).

These feminists claim that knowledge is achieved by paying attention to the specificity and uniqueness of women's lives and experiences rather than by correcting studies by simply adding women. (Hesse-Biber, 2008, p.336).

Further, the study will contribute to African feminist media studies. As Opoku-Mensah notes, feminist media research is scarcely undertaken in Africa (2001, p.26). Ten years later, Bosch echoing Opoku-Mensah decried the "dearth of feminist media scholarship" in Africa (2011, p.27). This is particularly pertinent to East Africa. African feminist studies would serve to diversify women's experience from a mostly white perspective (Bosch,2011, p.28).

METHODOLOGY

This was a mixed-methods study that incorporated a questionnaire and a focus group discussion. The questionnaire was sent to various media women associations across East Africa. These included Association of Media Women in Kenya (AMWIK), Uganda Media Women Association (UMWA), Association of Media Women in Southern Sudan (AMWISS), Tanzania Media Women's Association (TAMWA), UNESCO Regional Office Ethiopia,), South Sudan's Female Journalists Network (FJN), Union of Journalists of South Sudan (UJOSS), and Association of Rwandese Female Journalists (ARFEM).

The questionnaire had six sections arranged in the following order:



- Section A: General Questions
- Section B: Job Security & Working Conditions
- Section C: Reporting Practices/Storytelling
- Section D: Safety & Security during COVID-19
- Section E: Impact of Working Life on Home Life
- Section F: Adoption of Technology during COVID-19

Qualitative research

A qualitative study was carried out to follow up on issues identified in the analysis of the questionnaire. Focus group discussions were carried out via Zoom with women journalists from Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya on 24th, 25th, 27th and 28th July and 7th August 2020. All the respondents accepted to participate by completing a consent form.

Questionnaire development

Google Forms was used to design the questionnaire, which was distributed via email and WhatsApp receiving 108 responses. Majority of the responses (94 per cent) were received from Rwanda, Uganda, Tanzania, Kenya and South Sudan. Burundi, Zanzibar, Sudan and Somalia made up 6 per cent of the response due to a number of factors including poor internet connectivity. Overall, nine East African countries were represented in the study, thereby providing a broad overview of what is happening among women journalists in the region in the wake of COVID-19.

Data Collection and analysis

Respondents were compensated for their data costs. Each focus group was an average of an hour and a half and were recorded. All the recordings from the focus group discussions were transcribed and uploaded to NVIVO 12 software where the coding was done. This was followed by thematic analysis and interpretation.

02

CHAPTER

QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS

Demographic data

A majority of the respondents fell in the 25-34 age group (54.6 per cent), with 53 per cent being based in Kenya. 55 per cent of the women enrolled in this study worked full time and mostly in broadcast journalism (Table 1).

Demographic Data	Total n=108	
	No.	%
AGE GROUP		
18-24	10	9.3
25-34	59	54.6
35-49	36	33.3
50-64	3	2.8
WORKING COUNTRY		
Kenya	57	53
Tanzania	11	10
Uganda	20	19
Rwanda	10	9
Burundi	2	2
Somalia	1	1
South Sudan	5	5
Zanzibar	1	1
Sudan	1	1

EMPLOYMENT STATUS		
Full time	59	55
Part time	9	8
Affiliated correspondent	21	19
Freelance	16	15
Unemployed	3	3
WORK ROLES		
Online editor	6	5.6
Radio program manager	3	2.8
Photographer	4	3.7
News editor	3	2.8
News anchor	11	10.2
Radio producer	12	11.1
Freelance	15	13.9
Multimedia journalist	25	23.1
Broadcast journalist	44	40.7

Table 1: Summary of demographic data

The findings focus on changes in job status and work patterns as well safety of journalists, challenges of working remotely and technology adoption during the pandemic.

Change of job status during COVID-19

A staggering 63 per cent of respondents said their jobs had been affected during the COVID19 pandemic. Most respondents reported being placed on unpaid leave at 52 per cent, whilst a further 11 per cent lost their jobs. Only 27 per cent said their jobs were unaffected. The Other category is made up of several individual responses that reported an increase in workload, increase in work hours, production put on hold, working on a volunteer basis among others (See Figure 1).

Many changes in the workplace were reported. This included reduced use of correspondents at 37 per cent, reduction of salaries at 40.7 per cent, putting staff members on unpaid leave at 22.2 per cent, closing of some operations at 44.4 per cent, termination notice given at 18.5 per cent, reduction of executive pay 16.7 per cent reducing non-essential staff at 25 per cent, cutting down equipment and supplies at 26 per cent among other measures such as cancelled leave, reducing

the work output received by freelancers, working from home, change of programming which all received smaller per centages totaling 9 per cent (Figure 2).

In addition, a sizeable number of journalists (37per cent) reported that they are now required to work from home. At least 32.4 per cent say their work hours have reduced, while 37 per cent report their assignments decreased. On the other hand, 18per cent report their working hours have gone up. The other category is made of responses all of which came from individual respondents reporting issues such they now have to be multiskilled, have less time to rest, their engagement has been stopped indefinitely and so forth.

On the one hand, a majority of the participants, 59.3 per cent, did not know whether men or women had been affected more by the changes taking place in the media industry. On the other hand, 36 per cent believed women were affected more by the changes and 4.6 per cent believed men were more, four key reasons were provided:



- Practical considerations – “in some organizations women are the mostly affected cause (sic) they were the majority.”
- Negative perception about the capacity of women journalists. As one respondent said, “the women were reduced for reasons that they would not be as active as the men in the work!” Another wrote, “women have been paid off with the belief that they don’t deliver much.” In some media houses, there seemed to be a belief that women are generally less effective at work.
- Reproductive and care roles. As a respondent reported, “some of our staff especially women are pregnant and they are forced to stay home.” This was understandable given the risks, but the downside is that journalists working at home lost earnings. Another indicated, “A number of women, who are mostly mothers have been directed to stay at home, and as such, they’re not receiving pay. This is a polite way of sending them home/retrenchment.”
- Women are seen as having more demands “we’re the most affected since the bosses couldn’t stand the female demands in this period.” For example, the Ugandan government had banned public transportation but for personal security reasons, employers would need to provide women employees with transportation.
- Gendered role assignment and assumption such as male journalists being better suited for field work. Comments reflecting this view included, “Because of insecurity in our area,” and “men are now preferred to women, they can take the risk during the time of curfew.”

Hierarchy and the limited number of women in leadership positions also emerged as a theme here. Comments included “most of them are not in top management positions at workplaces and therefore become an easy target to retrench” and “Women make the greatest number of inferior (sic) journalists”

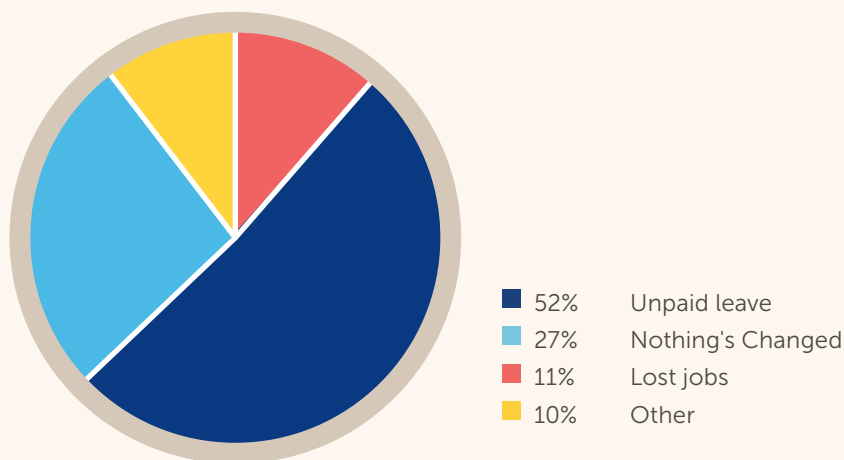


Figure 1: Impact on Job Status

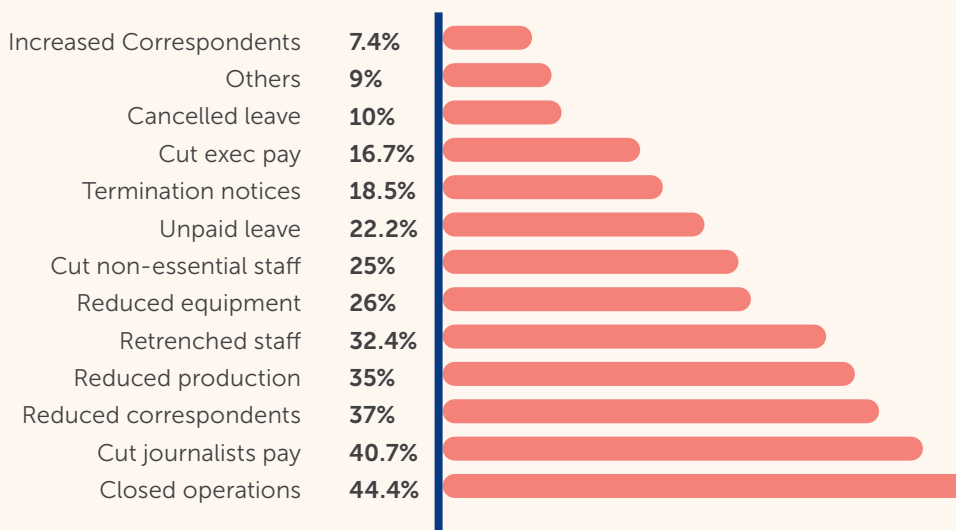


Figure 2: Organizational measure taken during COVID-19

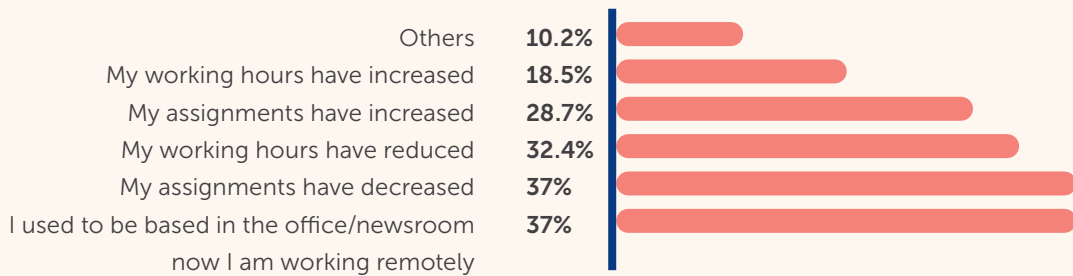


Figure 3:

Change of job status during COVID-19

- Job Security**

A majority of respondents feel insecure in their jobs at 49.1 per cent, with 32.4 per cent feeling somewhat less secure. Combined, it adds up to a whopping 81.5 per cent. Only 10.2 per cent opted for no change in their level of job security, while 4.6 per cent feel more secure and only 3.7 per cent feel very secure.

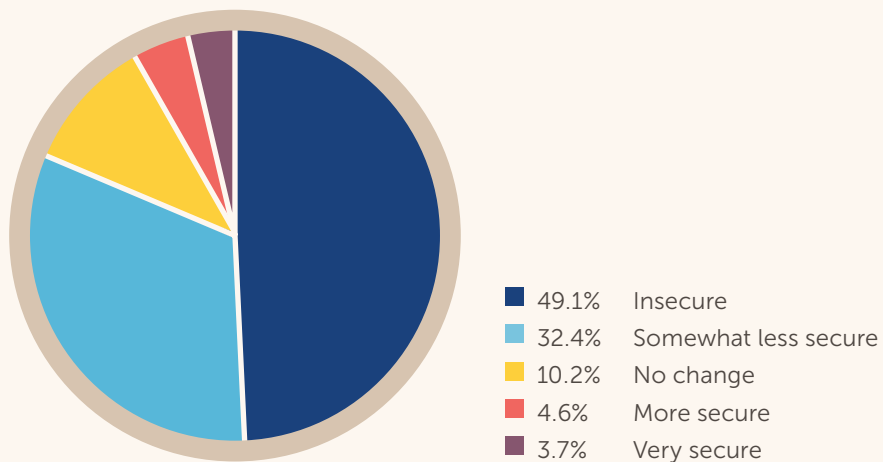


Figure 4: Sentiments on job security

- **Dispensability**

At least 37 per cent of women did not feel like they were any different from anyone in terms of dispensability. Only 12.1 per cent felt very dispensable, 23.1 per cent felt somewhat dispensable and 16 per cent very indispensable with 11.1 per cent feeling somewhat indispensable.

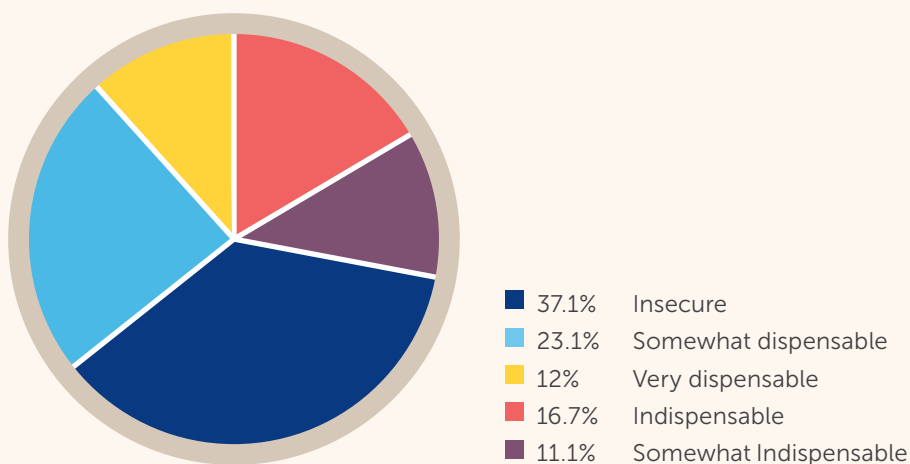


Figure 5: Sentiments on dispensability

- **Changes in work assignments**

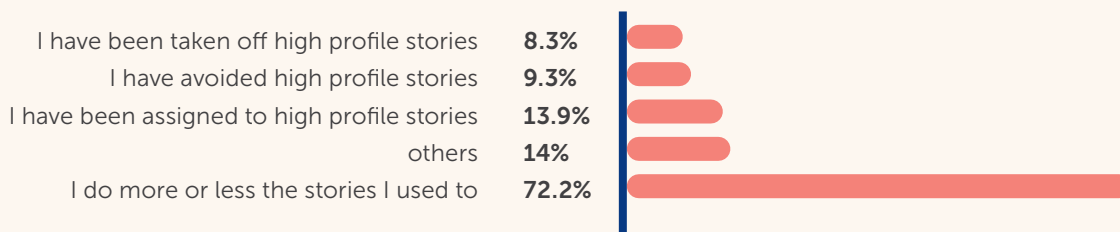


Figure 6: Changes in work assignments since COVID-19

- **Changes in work patterns**

As expected, a majority of journalists (69.4 per cent) have migrated online to do their research and use digital tools to do interviews. They are also doing less fieldwork, 47.2 per cent saying their fieldwork has reduced and depended more on government briefings. Only 9.3 per cent have not experienced disruption in their work routines.

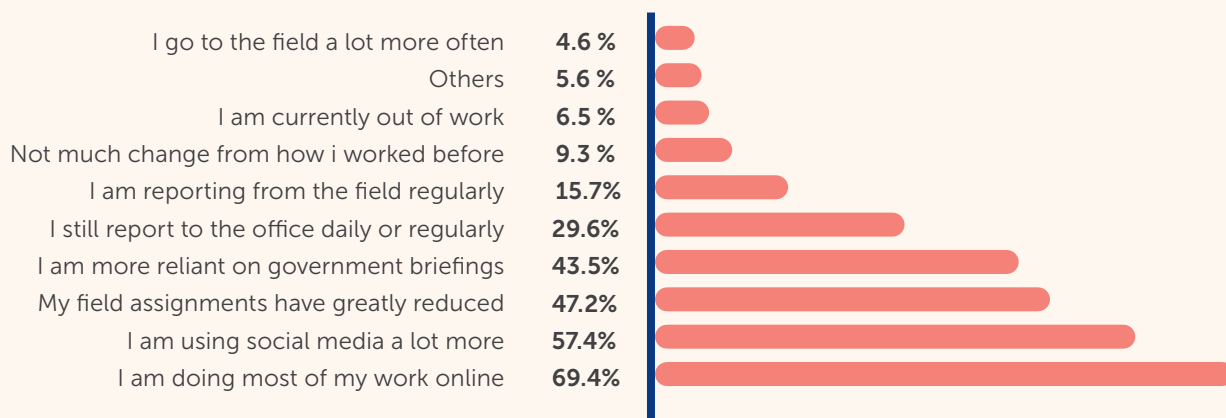


Figure 7: Change in work patterns

- **Sentiments about field work**

Slightly more than half (50.9 per cent) of respondents expressed fear over their well-being. A few, 11.3 per cent, have tried to negotiate to reduce their field assignments, 12.3 per cent have declined field assignments on account of concerns over their well-being and 19.8 per cent do not harbor concerns about fieldwork.

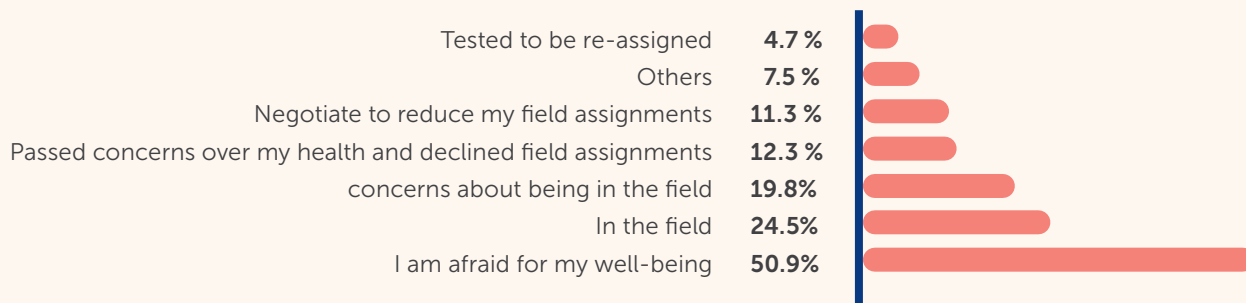


Figure 8: Sentiments about fieldwork

- **Financial implications of working remotely**

Working from home, also called 'remote working', is proving to be expensive for journalists with 62 per cent paying for their data costs. Just over a third, 32.4 per cent, have had to pay for equipment costs, 58.3 per cent work-related calling costs, as well as 32.4 per cent paying for video-conferencing services.

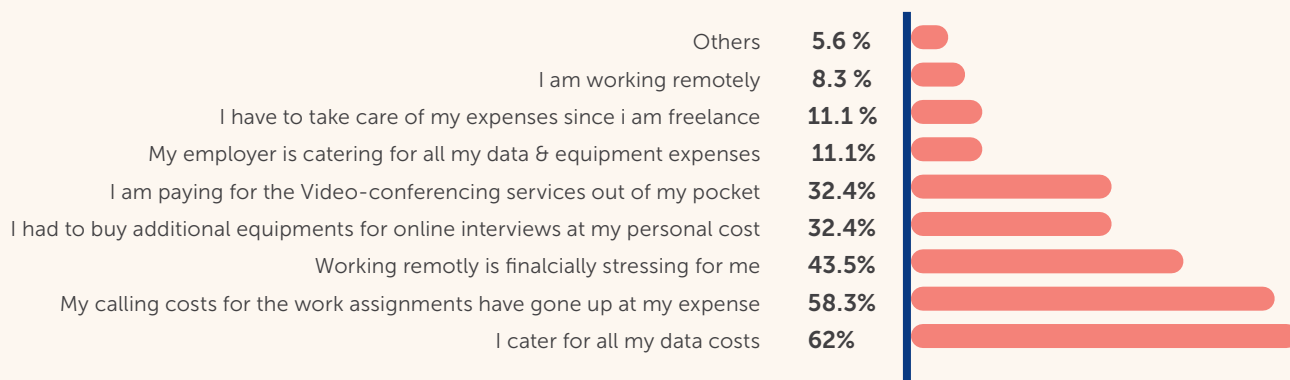


Figure 9: Financial implications of working remotely

- **Impact of Working Life on Home-Life**

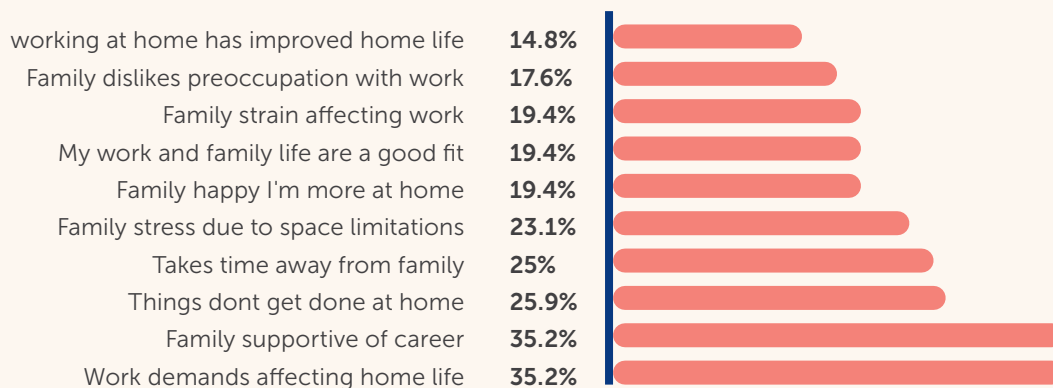


Figure 10: Impact of working life on home-life

- **Work-life balance**

To balance home and work life, respondents did more collaborative work (43.7 per cent), worked after children went to sleep, for 22.3 per cent nothing had changed, for another 22.3 per cent opted for less demanding assignments, 15.5 per cent relied on spousal assistance while 10.7 per cent relied on domestic workers.

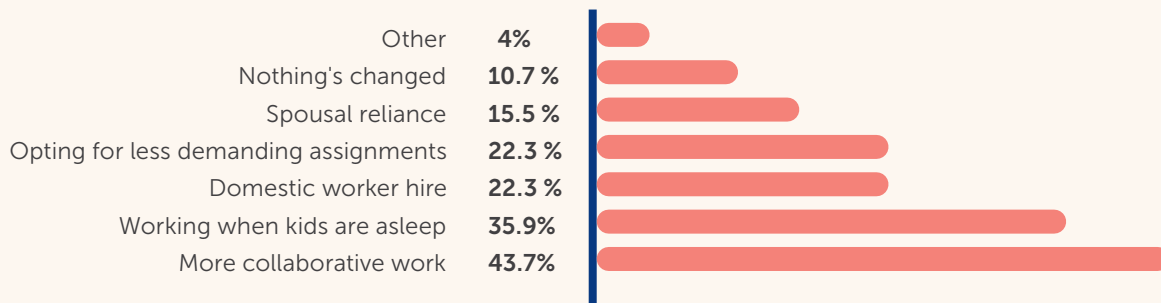


Figure 11: Work-life balance

- **Living alone**

Almost a third (30.6%) of people living by themselves found it too expensive to keep in touch with others using technological means and were thus 24.5% said they felt lonely. Another 24.5% had minimal human contact, and while 14.3% of them were happy to recharge and reflect, 6.1% felt they had too much time on their hands.

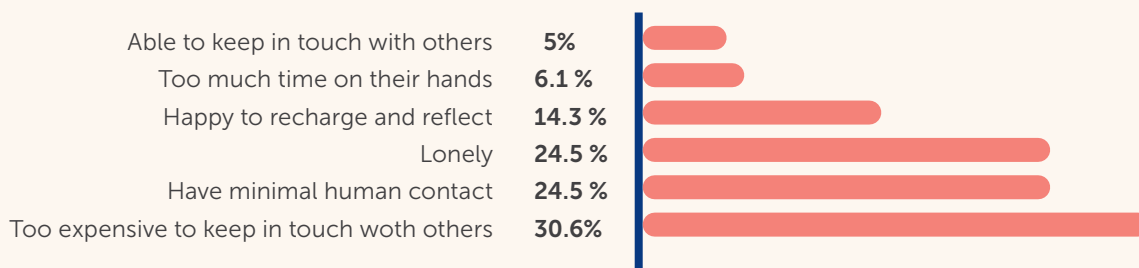


Figure 12: Living alone

- **Safety gear**

Less than half of employers mostly provide masks (40.7 per cent) with a sizeable per centage (43.5 per cent) providing nothing to journalists. Just over a third provide sanitizers (36.1 per cent) and gloves are provided by 13per cent. This means that employees cater for their protective gear. Threats come from authorities mainly the police at 28.4per cent and other government representatives as well as the public.

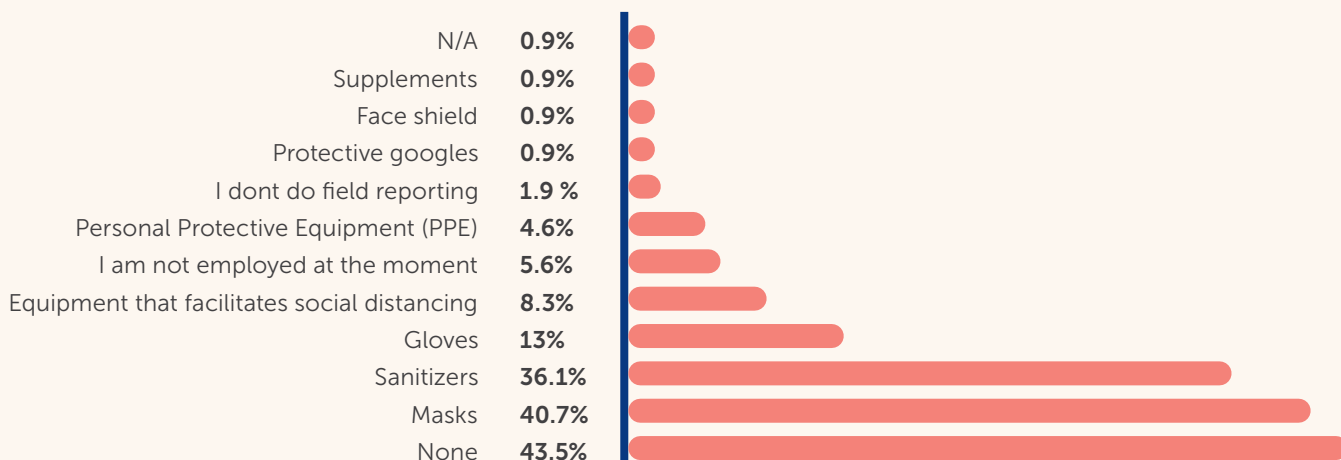


Figure 13: Employer-provided safety gear

- **Sexual harassment online**

These are fairly low as most respondents (61.1per cent) reported not to have experienced any form of sexual violence. For those who have, these have been in the form of sexually suggested messages (22.2per cent) and unwanted compliments (16.7per cent).

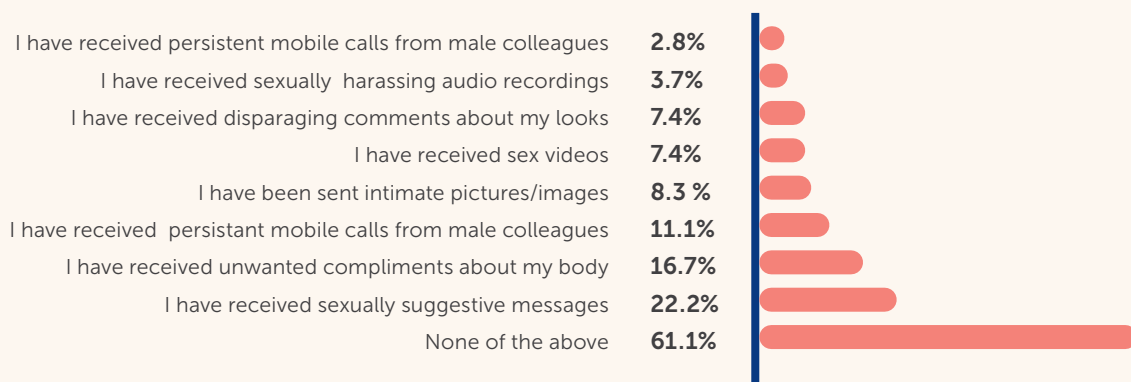


Figure 14: Workplace sexual harassment experienced since outbreak of COVID-19

- **Emotions During COVID-19**

Majority of women are worried about their well-being and that of their families (69.4per cent) with 39.9per cent feeling optimistic about the future. Over a third (36.1per cent) reported experiencing feelings of despair as well as burnout (36.1per cent).

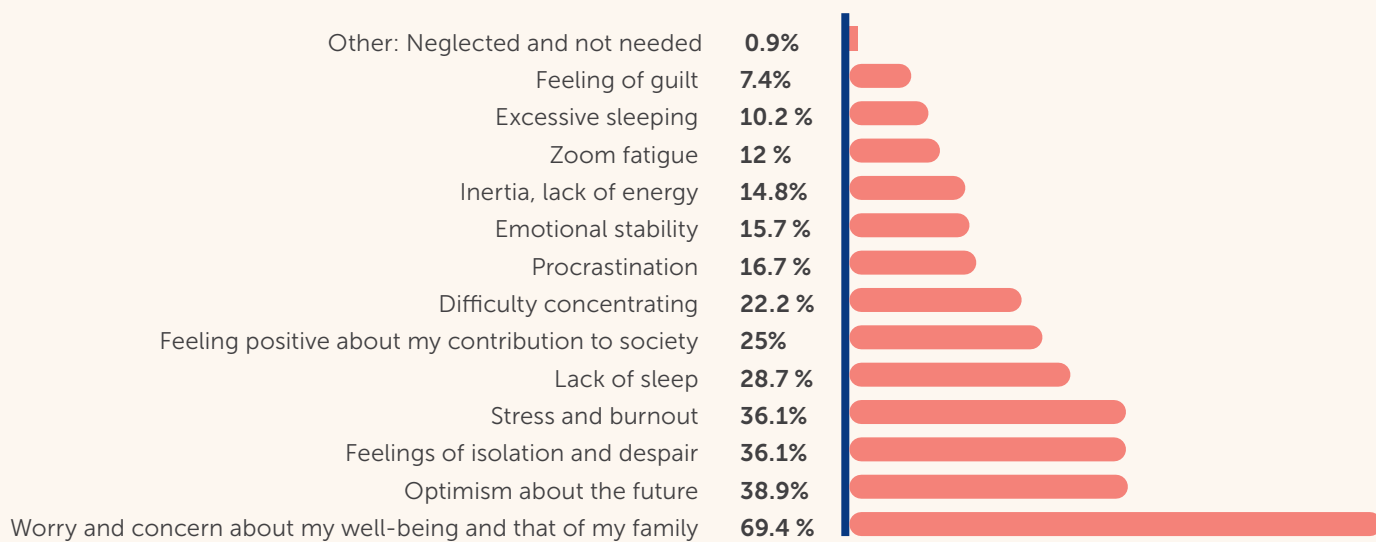


Figure 15: Emotions experienced during COVID-19

- **Lack of employer-provided Psycho-social Support**

Most women (46.3per cent) reported receiving no support from the employer but forms of employer-provided psycho-social support included counselling support (24.1per cent), time off (20.4per cent) and a little bit of training on mental health (13per cent).

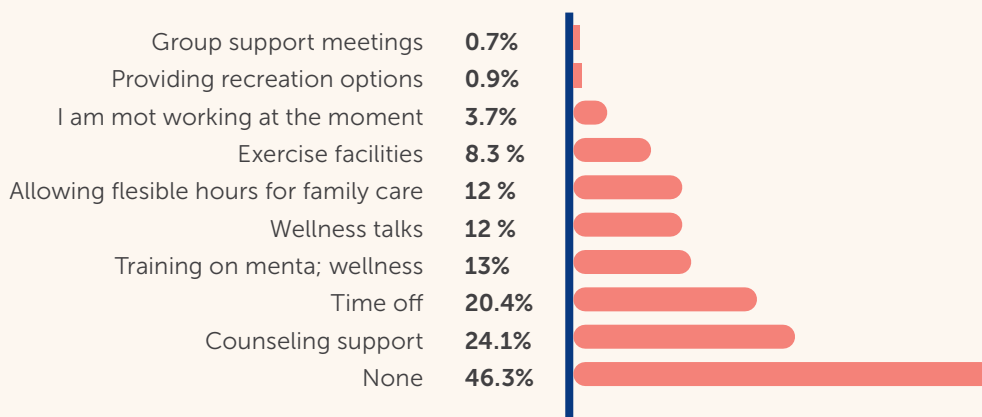


Figure 16: Employer-provided psychosocial support

- **Lack of digital skills for remote working**

Just over a third (35.2%) agreed they have the requisite digital skills for remote working. Neutral accounted for 37% which was curious because one should be able to gauge their capacities one way or the other. Over 18% were strongly confident about their digital skills, with 8.3% not confident about their online skills.

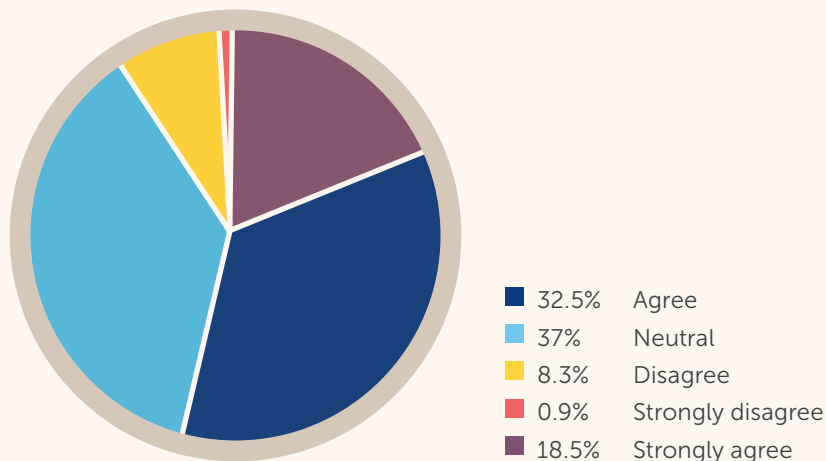


Figure 17: Confidence in using digital skills for remote working

QUALITATIVE RESEARCH FINDINGS

In order to further probe the outcomes of the questionnaire, focus groups discussions were carried out with women journalists from Rwanda, South Sudan, Tanzania, Uganda and Kenya. A total of 29 women journalists participated in the focus groups. The breakdown in terms of country representation and numbers was as follows Kenya (7); Rwanda (9); South Sudan (3); Tanzania (5); and Uganda (5).

Demographic Data	Total n=29	
	No.	%
AGE GROUP		
18-24	3	10
25-34	17	59
35-49	8	28
50-64	1	3
WORKING COUNTRY		
Kenya	7	24
Tanzania	5	17
Uganda	5	17
Rwanda	9	31
South Sudan	3	10
EMPLOYEE STATUS		
Full Time	12	41
Part Time	4	14
Affiliated Crrespondent	8	28
Freelance	5	17
WORK ROLES		
Online Editor	2	5
Print Journalist	6	15
Photographer	1	2
News Editor	1	2
News Anchor	2	5
Radio Presenter	6	15
Freelance Journalist	6	15
Multimedia Journalist	7	17
Broadcast Journalist	10	24

Table 2: Focus group discussions participant demographic data

Four major themes emerged from the analysis of the focus groups. These are:



- Precarity of work
- The effects of COVID-19 on reporting processes
- Ambivalence about working at home
- Navigating sexual harassment at the workplace.

• **THEME 1- PRECARIETY OF WORK**

For many reporters, male and female, work in many cases reduced, and lay-offs and salary deductions affected people across the board. For many reporters, male and female, work in many cases reduced, and lay-offs and salary deductions affected people across the board. This was characterised by a state where women's material well-being was not assured and their psychological well-being was compromised. Women journalists' already precarious working arrangements have been exacerbated by COVID-19. While most journalists have been affected by layoffs and salary cuts occasioned by the pandemic, the findings of this study suggest gendered elements to these impacts, thus, not all journalists are affected equally.

Women journalists in East Africa were particularly vulnerable because even before the pandemic, many did not have permanent or contracted working positions, making them vulnerable. Many were already being paid per story.

Employers in some countries such as Uganda, South Sudan and Rwanda were asked by their governments to select some workers to stay at the office and some to work from home to mitigate against the impact of coronavirus. Still, there was no clear basis for the selection. The criteria by which this decision was made was considered sexist by the respondents. This was a consequential decision, as a participant explained,

“Those selected to work at the office were given risk allowance from the government and they were given all other basics like food, they could have like teas and things of the sort.”

One might also get additional money or benefits here and there from participating in work-related activities but at home, people were cut off and mostly not paid because most of the female media workers were freelance. The selection of those remaining at work was haphazard and was based on one's family situation so if you were married or had kids, then you were asked to work from home with no assured income. No distinction was made if the woman was the breadwinner in the married households or in single parent families.

These changes in working conditions were sudden and journalists were ill-prepared to either stay or go home. According to one Ugandan journalist, for example, there no level of preparation to stay or work remotely. Further, not only were the workers not prepared, but some were also treated callously. In one case, the police were called in to carry out the exercise of reading out the names of those who were to stay and those who were to go home. They went home unclear about how to work and under what terms.

There were some exceptions to this experience where consultation were done but on the whole, these changes were sudden and far-reaching.

Further, not only were the workers not prepared, but some were also treated callously. In one case, the police were called in to carry out the exercise of reading out the names of those who were to stay and those who were to go home. They went home unclear about how to work and under what terms.

There were some exceptions to this experience where consultation were done but on the whole, these changes were sudden and far-reaching.

This situation had psychological impact on the respondents as they were left feeling less than. Being sent home engendered feelings of unworthiness in some of the women and affected their morale and self-esteem. The being “put on the shelf,” leads to affected journalists feeling dispensable and questioning their worth to the organizations they work for. Those sent home were left wondering why they were not considered “essential” to the organization. Being sent home had women questioning their worth –

“Your work is of less importance to the company...so it is you to struggle to make sure that you’re...your value is felt so that you are not completely cut off but of course the finances get low.”

It meant that they continued working from home even without pay to shore up their value to their employers.

- **Other quotes related to perceived precarity of work:**

“Because a lot of journalists here in Tanzania are in private media, this situation common in the media that you are working. Maybe you are 20 journalists but people who have a contract, maybe five.”

"Our boss didn't ask us will you manage?... she was just like women stop work ... because you can't manage coming from home to work because public transport was banned. But some ...I think some would manage but we were not given a chance and those ones who were stopped from work facilitation [pay] was also stopped....so you have to keep your job sending stories, getting them on the internet at your cost but you don't expect anything from your boss. Until now they have not called us, you just send stories because you want to keep that relationship."

"so it is challenging and sometimes you feel like you are frustrated and as if you want to quit.... because as if you are one of those who are stopped from coming to the office daily...as if you feel that you are not valued (laughs)..."

- **THEME 2 – EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON REPORTING PROCESSES**

Travel restrictions, reliance on technology and limited resources all impacted on journalistic routines and patterns of work. Journalists were forced to find new ways of working and to be creative to ensure they delivered on their work. This section outlines the complications that arose in journalistic endeavours and how they handled them.

Once COVID-19 hit, reporters had to pivot to reporting stories about the pandemic and little else. Since all other stories were put on the back burner, the journalists not on the health or science desk had to play catch up. According to a South Sudan radio journalist:

"Somehow it has overshadowed other stories because there are certain stories you can do but now it seems like it's not very strong. So, you find like maybe certain stories are chopped off because they are not as strong, and then I used to do health stories, so for me, it's not such a big challenge for me, but when I try to pitch other stories, they are not as strong as corona stories, like every story has to have corona in it."

Hence, journalists not in the health field had to quickly adapt which some of them did by signing up for various training programs offered online. They are doing what they can to learn more about health reporting as one Kenyan journalist explained,

"For instance, now, with COVID, it has come with the responsibility of writing more health stories I find, so I am constantly looking for either links to you know, health reporting, or fellowships or things like those."

And it was not just going to the field that was a problem, but it made things harder for presenters in studios. As a South Sudan radio presenter shared,

“For me, I am working as a presenter in X and during the Covid-19 it’s hard to get a guest in the studio and the program is not going like before.”

This meant they had to do interviews they had to get people on the phone which did not always work out well and limited the range of communication possible. This was compounded by getting poor quality sound as people would be in traffic or doing their normal work as opposed when interviews would be taped in the sources’ offices without disruptions.

While using technology for work had become the new norm, it presented some drawbacks in their work. For instance, they now had to rely more on the sources in the absence of events and work

at their convenience. Essentially was there no spontaneity – everything had to be planned ever so carefully “which means stories take longer to do, stories take longer to execute” noted a Kenyan journalist.

Trying to verify news was another challenge they faced. A Tanzanian journalist described the difficulty of having to depend on PR people from various organizations to give them news about what is going on and the difficulty of verifying such information. They depended on press releases and lacked the opportunity to visit various organizations and investigate the story for themselves instead of going with the one skewed towards the interests of the organization. Despite the business-as-usual stance taken by the Tanzanian government, journalists were not comfortable in carrying out their reporting duties as normal. As they said,

“We are affected because we want to go to the people but we can’t. We are afraid because of Corona. So we have to use internet, phones.”

Some of the respondents felt that the quality of journalism had been affected as well. While there is a lot of demand for news because of COVID-19, writing them using journalistic standards was a challenge. Journalist found it hard to be fair and balanced since finding multiple sources was difficult and they could not go in person to verify what was going on.

Accuracy has also been compromised. This was elaborated on by a Kenyan journalist who said,

“And then you realize that “...the age they have given you is not the same or not the real age, the names or even the cause of death.”

Some countries were affected more than others. In Rwanda for example, journalists were not considered essential workers. This resulted in urban stories getting prominence at the expense of rural parts of the country.

Another complication that arose from the inability to go to the field was being unable to take pictures for their stories. This made them use third parties, a situation they were not comfortable with. As one Rwandese journalist explained,

“I can add one thing which is that we are using photos, those photos are not our own photos. Because if you can’t go to the field and you need a photo to do you story, you ask your friend, ‘please give me photos’ but I don’t think that is not good, but we are doing it.”

Going digital, not just in news-gathering but reporting, was a steep learning curve for some of the journalists. While they knew that was the direction journalism was headed to, as one Kenyan journalist reported, the pandemic, “has pushed it faster, which means they want you to do everything that can be put out there digitally.” The journalists had to brush up on their digital reporting skills quickly as they had to build their online profile and find ways of pushing their content on digital platforms. This continues to be a challenge and many of them reported attending several online courses to learn the skills they needed including the one offered by AWiM.

• **THEME 3 – THE JOYS AND THE PAINS OF WORKING FROM HOME**

The women journalists in this study seemed to have mixed feelings about working at home. Despite complications, some journalists, especially those with small children, appreciated the opportunity to interact more closely with their family members. But they also worried about the distractions of working at home and their ability to deliver like their other colleagues with some recommending that women’s output should not be judged the same as men due to women’s added responsibilities.

On the one hand, they appreciated the opportunity to see their children grow and to bond with the family. As a Rwandan journalist stated,

“As for one side, it’s fantastic because you find the time to be with my babies and husband, the other side is difficult because to concentrate on work with home activities is not easy for me in this period of COVID-19.”

As another journalist put it,

“Working at home gives you some space.... gives you a room,”

Conversely, they talked about the many distractions of working at home which were apparent even during the focus group discussions. A Kenyan respondent said laughingly, “You can hear the voices of the kids. It’s a challenge of working from home. They are jumping up and down, that’s why my video tends to be a bit like off.” Trying to multi-task between giving attention to the kids, finding stories and looking for data to send that story among domestic activities was considered a key challenge for most women.

Lack of equipment was also cited as a problem. The journalists either did not have it or had to share equipment available with other family members. For example, a journalist from Kenya explained that once schools closed due to COVID-19, home learning was introduced and children needed the computer to do their assignments yet there was only one computer in the family. As she put it, “and now that machine is the same one that you are trying to work with - it was just very hectic.” A South Sudanese radio producer said they were forced to risk going to the office since they did not have certain equipment at home.

For reporters working from home, data was a challenge. They needed it to research, edit stories sent from other sources, have meetings with their editors yet they did not get any support for data from their employers. They also needed airtime to call their sources. This was a constant struggle balancing the data needs of the family and those of work. When they worked at the office, they depended on Wi-Fi from the office but now it had become an extra burden. As a Sudanese journalist put it, the money you have is for food, it becomes a challenge if you have to cater for data as well.

The other downside of working from home was lack of discipline. As a Rwandese reporter put it, **“Sometimes you tend to be lazy you know because no one is there to watch over you.”**

Some of the women tended to procrastinate and therefore get caught up with unfinished work. But there was an upside to this for some women, especially those living alone, as it became a time to become better organized.

In terms of strategies for managing the situation, some women made arrangements to go to a neighbor’s house to work. It didn’t always work as the kids knew where to find mum. Others talked to their children about their work and involve them so they could understand why mummy should not be disturbed. A common strategy was to work once the kids were in bed.

Generally speaking, it appeared like women would not mind working at home.

One respondent said,

“If we had equipment and data..... it would too be interesting..... you get enough time to see your people around you.”

- **THEME 4 – NAVIGATING SEXUAL HARASSMENT AT THE WORKPLACE**

Nature of Sexual Harassment

As borne out by several studies, sexual harassment in the media is systemic, endemic and therefore a common feature in most media houses. The only exception found in this study was a women's radio station in Uganda since most employees were female. In most cases, sexual harassment is presented as quid pro quo to gain employment or promotion. As a Tanzanian respondent explained,

"You are coming just from school. You wanted job. If you find their boss is a man, he will tell you, if you want a job, you have to do one, one, two, this and this. So I would give you a job. So, if we will get in sexual matters, we'll be happy."

Perpetrators

A Southern Sudanese journalist reported the same problem of pressure from sources in order to give information. Another form of this type of harassment is presented in keeping women on probation for very long and when they ask when they will be confirmed,

"This is what happens in these organizations ...you complain that so and so am performing well and you told me this and this... I know my stories are being used but why are you keeping me so long on probation...yeah, and the condition comes out...you know what if you do this and this."

According to a freelance journalist in Uganda,

"But you feel exhausted...one year (claps), two years (claps)...three years (claps) then you are like eeh... I have to find my way out... but remember he told you if you submitted...but I have seen people saying they did submit to the condition... but after some time still, they were not considered..."

These women said that if you say no and keep performing well, things are not likely to change. In fact, even those who submit still do not get those positions sometimes. These demands for sexual favours though couched as quid-pro-quo are just exploitation. As one respondent said,

"If you don't submit you will leave, that is how those people exploit women."

Women journalists are also used as bait for news. Male colleagues will sometimes ask them to accompany them to interview a source because the chances of getting an interview are enhanced if a woman is part of the team. Sources also make sexual demands on women. As a Kenyan journalist shared,

“Working as a journalist for women is very challenging, because the sources you meet, most men there make passes at you.”

COVID-19 is posing new challenges as without public places to meet, sources want to suggest meeting in private places which may not be safe.

Harassment is seasonal by nature in many East African contexts and happens most often when many young women join the organization for their internships from universities and colleges. They are still new young and naïve and have not figured out how things work in organizations so they are normally vulnerable. It is almost like a sport that begins in a particular season. As a journalist from Uganda shared,

“I am telling you... these men are like always maybe waiting for each season....a big season for many interns from colleges and from Universities coming for internship...”

Nevertheless, a female senior reporter called her and advised about the dangers of succumbing and she was able to stand her ground.

The culture of harassment is common and entrenched within newsrooms. As a Rwandese journalist said,

“Sexual harassment is still a taboo, you might even be harassed and people take it as if it's normal.” Another shared her personal experience”

A Kenyan journalist stated,

“As for my colleagues have said, women, us journalists', we do go through such things so, it's something normal so it's like it's an accepted culture, you know.”

According to the respondents, this culture has been normalized in the newsroom.

What is more, women who report and talk about it suffer some form of backlash. They are seen as the problem for bringing it out rather than the perpetrator is seen as the problem. Some of them end up being stigmatized. Sharing her experience, a Kenyan respondent explained,

"Because we are very few women in that space, we try to avoid making... being labelled trouble makers because that will affect how your colleagues will treat you, you will find yourself ostracized. The few ladies who've come to me on the issue where they're like so and so is harassing me, I confront the male colleague and I also ask...which has branded me a trouble maker."

Then there is the issue of believability. When women report harassment, they are not necessarily believed which causes them to hesitate reporting incidents of harassment.

Copying Strategies

Some of the strategies women use to counter harassment is avoiding going by themselves to meet sources and operating in teams. Then it becomes difficult for them to be isolated. Another strategy is to endure until the pressure eased. As a Ugandan freelancer explained,

"Because some of us who have stayed here we said no and some of us already came when we were already attached to the father of your child."

Being strong was another strategy adopted. One respondent said,
"Some women who are strong cannot just accept any howly like that."

Some of the older women mentor the younger ones and advise them as such,

"When you reach the station this and this will happen, don't do this and this. Soon after she had men flocking to her with different propositions but she was able to stand her ground."

03

CHAPTER

DISCUSSION

While just over a tenth of the respondents had lost jobs, the bad news is that those still in unemployment (52 per cent) are on unpaid leave. This means that women's employment status is precarious in this season and into the foreseeable future. The pandemic has thrust a sizeable number of women into some sort of pseudo-employment without any form of stability. Pajnik and Hrženjak (2020) state that precarity of work affects women more.

They point out the future of media work is pointing to an economic model of media that operates by "enthroning a disembodied, genderless and highly fragmented class that functions as a coincidental sum of individuals fighting for improvement of one's own work position" (Pajnik & Hrženjak, 2020, p.14). A genderless world will disadvantage women and other minority groups since the unique situation of workers will not be taken into consideration. This is already apparent in the East African situation where women's unique needs were constructed as problems to be avoided instead of accommodations that needed to be made enable them work comfortably.

In probing this further in the focus group, it became apparent that women journalists' already precarious working arrangements have been exacerbated by COVID-19. While all journalists have been affected by layoffs and salary cuts occasioned by the pandemic, not all journalists are affected equally. Women in this region were particularly vulnerable because even before the pandemic, they did not have permanent or contracted working positions, making them susceptible to job losses. Even before COVID-19, many of them worked without contracts for many years or benefits and were paid per story. Only a small percentage of the respondents 11.3 per cent sought to be exempted from field work but the bosses' paternalistic stance was that they were not suitable. Hence, the work changes brought on by the pandemic may have consigned women journalists to low-wage workers despite their training and experience. This also reflects a global trend where because of the digital economy, there is "the drift from staff to freelance positions by many women in journalism, where freelancers tend to be paid less" (Harris, Mosdell and Griffiths 2016, 903). Bakker (2012) described this as the rise of "low-pay, no-pay" journalism.

This raises questions about the future of women in Journalism. This study shows that media remains a space where there is a gendered division of labour where women, because of their perceived physical weaknesses, are first to be cut off from the workplace whenever restructuring and lay-offs take place. In addition, women's reproductive and childrearing responsibilities continue to disadvantage them in the newsroom.

As the findings show, many women were forced to stay home due to the domestic and reproductive roles without pay which seemed to signify being retrenched in a quiet way. Findings also show women were easier to dismiss as they were perceived to have more demands. This corresponds with other findings, for example, researchers have found systemic gender bias with regard to reproductive roles and childcare and discovered self-prejudice as women believed their family roles stood in their way of career success (Van Zoonen, 1988; Pajnik & Hrženjak, 2020).

In essence, the media industry militates against work-life balance for women. This study shows the because of the struggle of fulfilling domestic and work roles, women make deliberate choices to ask for less demanding work or act in self-limiting ways. As North asserts, the media “industry is inflexible and incompatible with motherhood” (2014 p. 10). It has not made the necessary changes to cater for the needs of women who have entered the profession forcing them to make the difficult choice to delay to opt out of motherhood altogether. It is part of the neoliberal discourse that where the ideal worker is free of family obligations that would interfere with the performance of duties which in most cases is a male worker which then “works to undermine the journalistic abilities of women who care for children or at the very least ensures that women see the work culture as anathema to motherhood” (North 2014, 7).

Women adopted coping strategies to enable them some work at home. These included working when children had gone to sleep at night, getting a family member or a nanny to help with kids, using a separate room to work and including kids in the work from time to time. These types of arrangements continue to entrench the double bind that women face in having to handle their domestic roles and work roles with women now forced to work double shifts. This has implications for their productivity at work and the quality of family care. Self-care remains a mirage for many. It is nearly impossible to successfully combine the journalism career and a family and that after the gains women have made over time, “family and career still seems an insurmountable problem” in Journalism (Ross 2001, 533). Newsrooms need to be family-friendly to accommodate women’s family needs but the masculinized culture makes that a difficult proposition.

Women in this study though passionate about journalism did not see a future for them in the profession. This is borne out by other studies that examine the gendered newsroom. For example, Elmore (2007) in her interview of 15 journalists who left the profession found that these women worked in a patriarchal newsroom culture where decisions were taken based on sex, exclusionary tactics kept women out of various spaces and the culture of dominance encouraged there led women editors to adopt masculine attitudes thereby militating against any sense of community togetherness among women across the ranks. North (2009) in her study of Australian journalism refers to this as the “blokey” newsroom culture that still pervades the newsroom. This was apparent in this study where decisions about who was to go home were made on a sexist basis as women were considered to have attachments to their children and husbands and therefore would be comfortable at home. What was different though was that there was some form of limited rapport and mentorship among women across the ranks.

These tenets of journalism are at risk. The pandemic has limited field reporting opportunities. As the survey indicated, majority of journalists, 69.4 per cent were operating online in data gathering and reporting and 47.2 per cent reported a reduction in field. The focus group discussion element brought to the fore this particular issue. Given COVID-19 is the only story happening and journalists have to make this pivot to covering it, and given the predominant use of technology for newsgathering, some things have fallen to the wayside or have been compromised. Because of these factors, journalists have made certain adjustment such as high dependence on sources in lieu of fieldwork, lapses in accuracy because they depend on third parties on the scene of the story who may not be trained journalists so details are not carefully collected and stories are not always balanced as getting multiple viewpoints from sources is hard to and also expensive as one has to make several calls. This coupled with the fact that journalists who are new to health reporting are also training on the job and brushing up their digital skills. This has serious implications for the quality of journalism in times of risk and crisis. It compromises "its ability to serve as a watchdog on concentrations of power, its engagement with and relationship to its audience, and its future prospects" (Wahl-Jorgensen et al 2016, 903). This is a worrying trend with 43.5 per cent of journalists reporting being dependent on government briefings for news.

Mental health is an issue of concern not just among journalists but the general public. Women seem to be more emotionally stressed by the pandemic as reported in the International Federation of Journalists April 2020 study in which two-thirds of women reported feelings of stress and anxiety. This survey has comparable figures with just under two-thirds reporting concern and anxiety over their well-being and that of their family. The situation is compounded by the fact that among those employed, majority receive no psycho-social support from the employer although a third have sought their own means of psychological support.

Further probing in the focus group discussions showed that some women were also undergoing feelings of inadequacy and worthlessness as a result of being furloughed from the jobs or let go. They battled with feelings of feeling less valuable to their organizations which may have led to the decision to send them home on unpaid leave.

In her study, (Lobo et al 2017) women regularly expressed dissatisfaction about the difficulties of successfully combining their journalistic careers and family care with some admitting they held themselves back from progressing so as not to let down their families. As this study shows even working from home is not a panacea for restoring work-life balance.

Since COVID-19 began, at least two-thirds of women journalists have experienced intimidation and threats. Since these come from police and other government authorities' women are left vulnerable as those who should be protecting them are the source of intimidation. No wonder then that majority of women experiencing online violence do not bother to report to anyone but endure in silence. As research has shown, "both online and offline abuse tends to be underestimated by media management and minimized by authorities and others who are best positioned to provide support" (International Media Support, 2019, p.13).

Sexual harassment has always been touted as a big problem for women in media. In this survey majority of women, over 60 per cent reported no incidences of sexual violence. This is in stark contrast to Blumell and Mulupi's 2020 study that found a high prevalence of 77 per cent in Kenya. Reasons for this difference could be that working from home has reduced the opportunity for interaction between males and females in the newsroom. But online violence has continued unabated with over 60 per cent reporting it has increased. It would seem violence has migrated online where women journalists are now operating from.

From the focus group discussion, sexual harassment was common in the newsroom, it was normalized and part of the newsroom culture. Sometimes it was presented as a joke but it was always present in one form or the other. What was interesting in this study is the fact that it was referred to as seasonal, almost like a sport that happens when several new interns from colleges came for internship. Getting employment or a contract are typically dangled to women employees when sexual favours are sought. Nevertheless, typically this is not a quid pro quo situation but an exploitative relationship which probably explains why incoming and naïve students are key targets for such behaviour. Sources and media managers are mostly the perpetrators but peers may also play a role. One scenario is where male peers seek to be accompanied by attractive females to interview situations in order to get an audience with a source, using the women as bait.

Women adopted various strategies to cope with these behaviours. These in being strong and toughing it out, group support and mentorship. Studies have shown that the first two approaches and fit within the masculinized newsroom. Ross (2001) points out ways in which women choose to deal with newsroom culture. These include incorporation (becoming one of them by adopting masculine styles); feminist where a deliberate choice is made to give voice to women issues and retreat where women opt to leave the newsroom and work independently. Specific actions by targets facing incidents of sexual harassment are doing nothing, talk to a senior staff member, leaving and submitting to the overtures. The survey also that 61 per cent of women choose to keep quiet.

Women in this study expressed ambivalence about their digital skills with the highest percentage 37 per cent indicating as neutral on the question of digital skills. Under 20 per cent were confident of their skills which speaks to the digital skills gap between men and women. As Gadzekpo (2009) noted, while African women have increased their online participation, they still lag behind, many are still left out and not able to participate fully. From the focus group, it was apparent that women are working very hard to make up this deficit with many of them taking advantage of the online courses and webinars to hone their digital and health reporting skills.

So, what have learned from this study? This pandemic is poised to roll back some of the gains women journalists had made in their professional advancement journey as media organizations become hampered and unable to provide women with the support they need to succeed as journalists.

Many women journalists will continue to be consigned to the informal digital media ecosystem with no safeguards. The fact that many worked as freelance even before the pandemic might be an indication that they may survive better in the media gig economy but it is still too early to tell.

Further, in many ways, the more things change, the more they remain the same and the challenges women journalists are facing world over, whether it is negative perceptions, online violence, juggling family and career, job insecurity will continue to hold back women from having it all as the promise of gender equality suggests.

04

CHAPTER

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Drastic measures have been taken at the workplace in the wake of the pandemic including issuing termination notices, reducing salaries, increased or decreased use of correspondents and freelancers, reduction of equipment and supplies, unpaid leave, changes in programming, fewer interview guests and so on.

The practice of journalism is being reshaped by the pandemic with fewer resources, including staff, equipment and even sources being utilized. What does this mean for the long-term future of the industry especially in the world of fake news and disinformation? Who will provide a standard for truth and objectivity and stand out when the industry has been decimated by the pandemic?

The pandemic has taken the lid off the journalism professional and it is not pretty. The masculinized newsroom culture continues to hold women back and deny society diverse perspectives. The economic headwinds buffeting industry notwithstanding, its gender exclusionary practices has made it appear anachronistic and less innovative.

Recommendations

Media organizations need safeguarding policies to protect women from harm and these need to be made the industry gold standard rather than individual initiatives by individual media establishments. Regulatory agencies must require this as part of the licensing procedures.

Gender policies, recognizing the need for work-life balance for women and men in the media need to be enacted. The whole human person as a functioning being needs to be recognized not just their work output ensuring dignified work.

Women journalists' associations need to be strengthened to provide psychosocial and legal support for members experiencing mental health challenges and sexual harassment. Clearly with declining staff jobs, women will need to be organized and to have institutional support as they operate from as free agents in the open market negotiating agreements and contracts with various media houses and other agencies.

Women journalists in the region need training in digital skills, especially the utilization of apps, that will enable them to produce content without depending on equipment from media organizations. They need to learn how to build their personal brands online and how to disseminate content on different platforms so they can expand their visibility beyond their working stations and reach broader audiences.

Basic equipment still a need such as computers and good quality smartphones are require to give these women professional tools and independence in doing their work. Given the precarity of work for these women, entrepreneurial skills in journalism are solely so they do not feel they have to work for free for their employers in the hope of being recalled but have a chance to market their work regionally and internationally.

Digital security training to avert online violence and to keep the women secure in their interactions with sources. This would help women to be more inclined to operate from the digital spaces. East African women need to be networked to leverage their skills, work collaboratively and strengthen sisterhood within a community of professionals. A virtual resource center linking these women with information on improving their craft and opportunities for paid work would be useful for providing additional income streams

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: Focus Group Discussion Consent Form

