

MEDIA TOOLKIT

**VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN IN & THROUGH
THE MEDIA:**

**BENIN, BURKINA FASO,
TOGO 2025**

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Reporting
Violence
Against
Women and
Girls

Benin. Burkina Faso. Togo



African Women in the Media

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Acronyms & Abbreviations	3
Acknowledgements	4
About This Study	5
Introduction	8
Conceptual Framework	10
Methodology	17
Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR)	18
Ethical Considerations	21
Desk Review	22
Background	28
Political Context and Media Landscapes	29
VAWG and Related Legal Frameworks	34
Key Findings	40
Violence against women and girls through media	41
Violence against women journalists	61
VAWJ within newsrooms	62
Sexual Harrasment in the media industry	65
Lack of Institutional Support	77
Recommendations	84
References	88

ACRONYMS & ABBREVIATIONS

AWiM:	African Women in Media
CSO(s):	Civil Society Organisation(s)
FGD(s):	Focus Group Discussion(s)
FGM:	Female Genital Mutilation
HAAC:	High Authority of Audiovisual and Communication
LBTIQA+:	Lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, asexual
MFWA:	Media Foundation for West Africa
NGO(s):	Non-governmental Organisation(s)
OTM:	Observatoire Togolais des Médias
PTSD:	Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder
UN:	United Nations
VAWG:	Violence against Women And Girls
WJ(s):	African Women in Media
WHRD(s):	Women Human Rights Defender(s)
WRO(s):	Women & Rights Organisation(s)

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

WiM extends its heartfelt gratitude to the research participants, particularly the women journalists, who generously gave their time, shared their knowledge, and entrusted us with their stories.

We are profoundly grateful to the various contributors—including **interview** and **focus group participants**, and **online survey respondents**—whose collaboration was essential in co-creating this research report.

This report was written by **Kenza Ben Azouz**, a **Gender Expert Consultant**. The author wishes to express deep appreciation to **Dr. Yemisi Akinbobola**, AWiM **Co-founder & CEO**, for her significant contributions in refining the research process and reviewing this report; and to **Mame Yacine**, AWiM **Project Coordinator**, for her unwavering support and contributions throughout the research process.



ABOUT THIS STUDY

This report presents an in-depth analysis of both the media's coverage of **violence against women and girls (VAWG)** and the **violence faced by women journalists (VAWJ)** in **Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo**.

Through **rigorous examination and critical analysis**, this study provides **evidence-based recommendations** aimed at improving reporting practices concerning VAWG and addressing the challenges faced by women journalists.

Research Questions

This study is structured around two key research questions:

- * **How is VAWG investigated and represented in media coverage across Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo?**
- * **What forms of violence and discrimination do women journalists (WJs) experience in these countries, and how do these impact their careers?**

Scoping Limitations



Note

This report does not directly include the voices and perspectives of survivors—whether women or girls—interviewed by journalists, nor does it provide a meta-analysis of media content. Although several online articles and videos of national media outlets were reviewed, the main objective is to amplify the concerns and insights shared by the women journalists who partook in the research project.

Additionally, the research did not derive sufficient data specifically addressing the media's coverage of violence against girls, as this issue did not emerge prominently within research interviews. Limited information regarding media coverage of child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and incest is, however, included in this report. This underscores the necessity for focused research on the media's coverage of violence against girls.

Furthermore, concerning violence against women journalists (VAWJ), the report primarily addresses the forms of violence encountered in professional settings, omitting other forms of violence they may simultaneously experience outside of work. Moreover, the report does not differentiate between types of media outlets (TV, print, radio, or online), instead treating them collectively.



These gaps highlight areas for further investigation in future research efforts.

PROJECT AND PARTNER INFORMATION

Donor name / project information

This study was funded by **African Women Development Fund** under the **Reporting Violence against Women and Girls Project**. The project takes an innovative approach to addressing violence against women and girls by advocating for a **comprehensive multi-sectoral strategy**. While many existing organizations focus primarily on women in communities, this project recognizes the importance of **prioritizing the safety and well-being of women in the media sector**. By viewing women journalists as both victims and influential advocates for accountability, this program highlights their unique challenges and suggests measures to protect their safety while on duty. Additionally, the project provides support through capacity-building programs, giving these journalists the confidence and resilience to report on VAWG.

Beneficiaries of this research include policy-makers and media managers/leaders who can effect positive change in media organisations and the journalism.

profession based on the recommendations of the report. It will also benefit grant-making bodies and other projects that support women in journalism in Africa, in identifying gaps in existing programs, and contribute to addressing the gaps and challenges identified by the report.

Another output of this project is the development and launch of Media Toolkits on VAWG reporting in Burkina Faso, Benin, and Togo, based on this research report. The toolkits include actionable strategies and best practices for ethical and sensitive reporting on VAWG, echoing the report's findings and recommendations.

The toolkits are intended to serve as a comprehensive resource for media professionals seeking to enhance their reporting skills.

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INTRODUCTION

Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo, all have legal frameworks aimed at preventing and addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG). However, these laws are often inadequately implemented, and VAWG persists due to entrenched patriarchal norms and violence, and to institutional insufficiencies.

The media plays a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions and addressing VAWG by bringing the issue to light and advocating for policy reforms. Yet, media coverage often fails to go beyond the following:

- ✘ **sensationalised reporting**
- ✘ **reinforcing harmful stereotypes,**
- ✘ **victim-blaming**
- ✘ **perpetuating discriminatory narratives.**

This lack of nuance in reporting undermines a comprehensive understanding of the issue. It is therefore critical to assess how media outlets in these countries address these vulnerabilities and whether they acknowledge the risks faced by women journalists (WJs) themselves.

Moreover, WJs around the world have unique risks as their profession inherently challenges traditional gender roles.

In fact, VAWJ has reached endemic proportions globally, with over 75% of WJs facing online violence, which frequently escalates into offline attacks.¹

The femicides of journalists are also increasing at an unprecedented rate². As VAWG is often motivated by the desire to punish those perceived as defying gender norms, WJs who report such violence are at heightened risk³

Indeed, their work directly questions the impunity of perpetrators and challenges the normalization of VAWG, which exposes them to hostility from society, authorities, and even their own families and communities.

This research aims to analyze the portrayal of VAWG in the media alongside the systemic challenges WJs face within the industry in **Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo**.

By exploring both the representation of violence and the risks faced by WJs, the project seeks to foster a **more informed and sensitive media landscape** that promotes **women's rights, safety, and well-being**.



CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

KEY Definitions

Femicides

Femicides, the intentional killing of women, represent the most **extreme and deadly form** of violence against women and girls (VAWG – defined below).

Their gravity is amplified by their widespread occurrence, underscoring a global failure to protect women from systemic VAWG.

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Often, **these killings** are perpetrated by **intimate partners or family members**, driven by motives of power, control, or perceived violations of societal norms surrounding women's behavior.⁴

Gender Bias

Prejudiced actions or thoughts based on the gender-based perception that women are not equal to men in rights and dignity.⁵

Such biases may be implicit, involving automatic and unconscious prejudiced judgments and behaviors toward women.



Gender bias often manifests through:



Stereotyped thinking about the roles of women and men



Devaluing "women's work"



Lack of awareness of the social and economic realities of different genders

Studies show that implicit sexism affects various domains. Women are interviewed more critically, interrupted more often, and face difficulties in leadership roles due to perceived incongruence between femininity and leadership. Hiring practices frequently display bias, with male candidates often favored and job advertisements using male-associated words being less appealing to women.

Gender Norms

Standards and expectations to which women and men generally conform, within a range that defines a particular society, culture and community at that point in time.⁷

Misogyny

Feelings of hating women, or the belief that men are superior to women.⁸

Patriarchy

Social system in which men hold the greatest power, leadership roles, privilege, moral authority and access to resources and land, including in the family. Most modern societies are patriarchies.⁹

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

PTSD is a mental health condition that can arise after experiencing or witnessing traumatic events. Survivors of violence against women may suffer from PTSD due to enduring physical, sexual, or emotional abuse. Symptoms may include flashbacks, nightmares, severe anxiety, and uncontrollable thoughts about the traumatic event.

For women, PTSD is often compounded by feelings of shame, guilt, and fear, which can deeply affect their personal and professional lives.



Symptoms of PTSD



Feelings of Shame



Guilt



Fear

Women who experience gender-based violence, particularly domestic violence or sexual assault, are at an increased risk of developing PTSD.¹⁰

The disorder can have long-lasting effects, leading to emotional numbness, difficulty forming relationships, and a constant sense of danger, known as hypervigilance

Understanding PTSD in the context of violence against women requires recognising how trauma affects not only the mind but also the body and social relationships, impacting the survivor's sense of safety and autonomy.¹¹

Safety and Wellbeing

Violence, whether physical, psychological, or economic, can significantly impact women's health, both in their personal and professional lives. These experiences often lead to mental and physical health issues, such as low self-esteem, guilt, anxiety, depression, PTSD, and in some cases, self-destructive behaviour.¹²

The latter may induce further financial and psychosomatic damage. However, survivors' safety and well-being shouldn't be solely measured by the absence of abuse or mental disorders.

AWiM considers mental health a fundamental right for women, including journalists, emphasizing the need for safe, confidential, and non-discriminatory access to mental health services in workplaces.

Mental health is defined as a state that enables individuals to manage life's challenges, reach their potential, and contribute to their communities.¹³

From an intersectional feminist perspective (explained in the following section), the safety of WJs encompasses physical, psychological, and professional security.

It requires protection from violence, harassment, and discrimination, which can arise from intersecting identities such as gender, race, age, and socio-economic status.

Ensuring their safety involves addressing violence and broader power dynamics that perpetuate structural inequalities.¹⁴

Sexual Coercion

The exertion of undue pressure, influence, or power by someone in a position of authority—such as an employer, editor, senior colleague, or information source—through harassment, subtle manipulation techniques, intimidation, or threats, to compel someone (typically a woman) to engage in sexual activity.

In the context of journalism, this often involves leveraging professional opportunities or career advancement to manipulate women into believing they owe sexual favours in return. This abuse of power is a severe form of sexual harassment and exploitation.¹⁵



Sexual Harassment

Sexual harassment is any unwelcome sexual advance, request for sexual favour, verbal or physical conduct or gesture of a sexual nature, or any other behaviour of a sexual nature that might reasonably be expected or be perceived to cause offence or humiliation to another when such conduct interferes with work, is made a condition of employment, or creates an intimidating, hostile, or offensive work environment.

While typically involving a pattern of behaviour, it can take the form of a single incident. Sexual harassment may occur between persons of the opposite or same sex. Both males and females can be either the victims or the offenders. (*United Nations, 2008*).¹⁶

Survivors

The term "survivor" refers to any woman or girl having experienced violence. While synonymous with the term "victim," "survivor" is preferred because it invokes a notion of resilience, whereas the term "victim" can be stigmatising, suggesting passivity and weakness.

VAWG

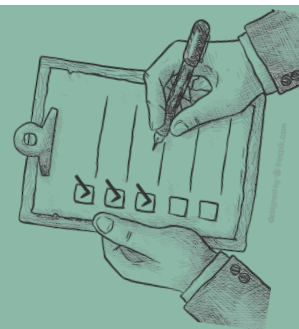
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

VAWG refers to acts of physical, sexual, psychological, financial, or political harm specifically targeted at females.¹⁷ The United Nations defines it as any act "that results in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering to women, including **threats, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty**, in both public and private life."¹⁸

VAWG is widespread and often starts in childhood, with up to 36% of girls around the world experiencing sexual abuse – mostly from male individuals known to them.

Forms of VAWG range from sexual exploitation and trafficking to harmful traditional practices like female genital mutilation (**FGM**), child marriage, and so-called "honour killings" (**femicides by family members for perceived violations of honour, such as engaging in relationships deemed inappropriate**). More recently, online harassment and cyberstalking have expanded the reach of such violence into the digital sphere, further threatening women's safety.

While legislations tend to passively refer to "violence against women," the latter is a male issue. It is deeply rooted in the patriarchal order that perpetuates men's social, economic, and political domination over women.¹⁹



Although women also commit acts of violence against other women or men, the overwhelming majority of VAWG are inflicted by men.²⁰

Indeed, this violence is sustained by historically unequal power dynamics between men and women, as highlighted by the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women. These power imbalances often lead to cycles of abuse that intertwine physical, sexual, emotional, and economic harm, trapping women in oppressive situations with lasting psychological and financial consequences.²¹

Violence Against Women Journalists (VAWJ)

The violence experienced by women journalists (WJs) -whether freelancers or staff reporters, working across print, online platforms, or radio stations- is compounded by their gender and profession.

WJs confront the same threats, violence, and discrimination that affect all women in their personal, public, and professional lives. These include domestic violence, unequal pay, workplace harassment, and other forms of mistreatment.²²

Online, they receive significantly higher rates of threats and abuse, personal insults, the circulation of private information or demeaning images²³ than their male counterparts.

As VAWG is often motivated by the desire to punish those perceived as challenging gender norms,²⁴ WJs, due to their public role which inherently challenges the patriarchal order that confines women to primary caregiving roles, face heightened risks of hostility and VAWG.

This dynamic can result in hostility or a lack of support from the broader population, as well as from authorities, and even from their own families and communities.²⁵ As such, WJs who report on VAWG are at even greater risk as they act against the normalization of VAWG.²⁶

Around the globe, the media's "stereotypical portrayals and insults used against women defenders working on issues such as rape, domestic violence and female genital mutilation" have played a negative role, often legitimising attacks against them.²⁷ A common accusation directed in particular at those working on women's rights and gender issues is the assertion that these defenders are somehow advocating or attempting to import "foreign" or "Western" values which contradict national or regional culture.

Approach

Inclusive Writing

This report deploys a reflexive and inclusive language that strives to shed light on and undo unconscious biases.

It adopts a gender-neutral language, choosing words that do not specify gender unless necessary, and uses respectful terminologies that were preferred by the concerned research participants (**e.g. “survivor” instead of “victim”²⁸**)

Intersectionality

Intersectionality highlights the impact of violence experienced by different female journalists according to the intersection of their various profiles, situations, and experiences.

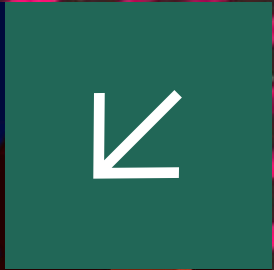
In this study, we focused on the different experiences of female journalists working in Burkina Faso, Togo, and Benin, of different ages, with or without children.

We also ensured that interviews and questionnaires took into account the cases of female journalists with disabilities and those who identify as LGBTQ+. Due to the low presence of Black women and migrant women in the journalism sector within these countries, these intersections (among many others) were not considered within the limited scope of this research.

Transformative gender approach

An intersectional and transformative gender approach recognises that VAWG is rooted in unequal power structures and aims to challenge these structures by promoting gender equality and encouraging social change.

In the context of this research on VAWG in and through the media, this approach examines how gender norms influence experiences of violence and the responses of institutions to such violence, and how better interventions can contribute to the transformation of gender norms and relations through targeted recommendations and actions.



METHODOLOGY

This research was developed through a comprehensive qualitative and participatory approach and feminist principles. The methodology encompasses three core components: focus group discussions, interviews, and an online questionnaire.

These methods were designed to capture the multifaceted perspectives and lived experiences of various WJs.



Core Components of the Methodology



Focus Group Discussions



Interview



Online Questionnaire

FPAR

FEMINIST PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH (FPAR)

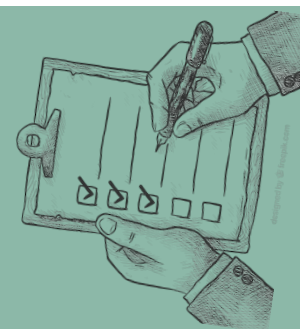
This research is based on a participatory research action approach that integrates feminist perspectives and methods.

FPAR is a conceptual and methodological framework that actively involves the women and girls affected by the issue being studied as co-producers of the research.

It aims to bring about critical change to power structures while placing the most affected women and girls as the expert policy influencers. In practice, it requires researchers' sharing of power and redistribution of research roles through establishing non-hierarchical collaborative processes that give female participants a central role in knowledge generation, data collection, and analysis.

In participatory feminist research, participants are knowledgeable and active subjects during every stage of the research process. FPAR aims to foster collective action by strengthening solidarity and empowering women to build social movements, advocate for just policies, and influence decision-makers. It notably emphasises practical solutions from which research participants can directly benefit.

Complemented by a literature review of regional and country-specific secondary sources, the research will involve the following FPAR methods for data collection and analysis:



Focus Group Discussions

This research's framework and content were defined and refined through the participatory engagement of WJs from each country. The latter consisted of participatory focus group discussions (FGDs) held online in French.

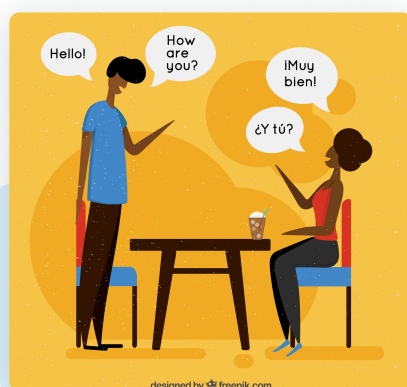
The first three FGDs, one per country, were held at the early stages of research design on 1-3 July 2024 with a small group of participants (2-5 per FGD). These sessions helped assess the validity of research hypotheses, draw country-specific preliminary findings, identify key stakeholders, and inform the production of data-collection tools.

The fourth FGD, on 23 August 2024, gathered 39 research participants, exclusively women as opposed to the first three FGDs which included a minority of men, from all three countries. The session aimed to present, collectively review, and validate research findings for the present report's finalisation.



Participatory Interviews

Building on the preliminary findings of the listening sessions, 23 qualitative interviews were conducted with 19 WJs from print, radio, TV, and online media outlets, two Women Human Rights Defenders working toward the elimination of VAWG, and two human rights policy advocates. Seven were from Benin, eight from Burkina Faso, and eight from Togo. Participants were identified using a snowball sampling method.



The semi-structured interviews, conducted online and lasting between 50 and 180 minutes with an approximate average of 70 minutes, consisted of open-ended questions provoking in-depth conversations that explored the professional and personal experiences and perspectives of WJs. Interviews were transcribed verbatim, and notes were coded manually. A data validation exercise and thematic analysis were applied to interview notes to identify commonalities and draw key findings.

To provide a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by WJs, this report includes direct quotes from WJs and survivors of violence from Burkina Faso, Benin, and Togo. These first-person narratives offer a glimpse into their unique perspectives and personal experiences.

Online Questionnaire

An online questionnaire (launched on 22 July 2024 and closed on 5 August 2024) was conducted to complement FGDs and interview findings. The survey's mix of 12 multiple-choice and open-ended questions was informed by insights gathered from the FGDs (Annexe 1 – Survey Questionnaire).

The questionnaire's objectives were to gather quantitative and qualitative data from a broader audience of journalists, notably women. It was circulated with the help of FGD and interview participants, as well as through social media and AWiM's contacts. The questionnaire's objectives were to gather quantitative and qualitative data from a broader audience of journalists, notably women. It was circulated with the help of FGD and interview participants, as well as through social media and AWiM's contacts.

In total, **39 participants responded to the questionnaire**, with the following breakdown:

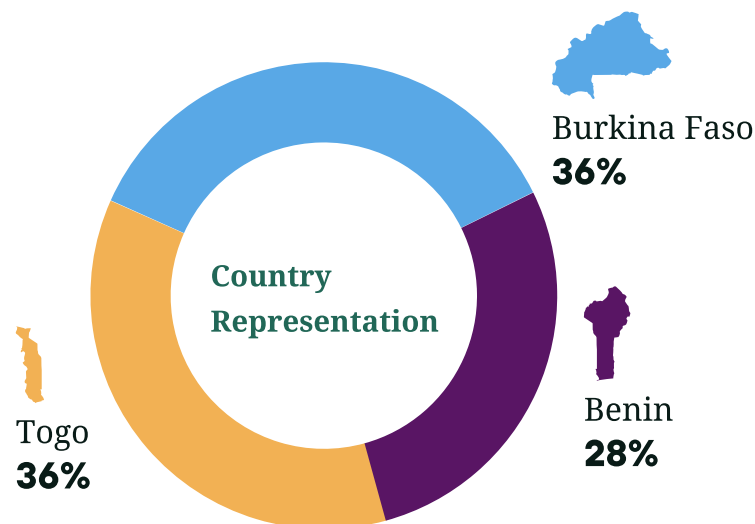


Diagram 1. Country Representation of the online survey

Gender Representation

Total Participants: 39



Diagram 2. Gender Representation of the online survey

Sector Representation

Total Participants: 34



Diagram 3. Sector Representation of the online survey

Action-planning

In line with the Feminist Participatory Action Research directive to integrate research, gender justice, and activism to empower feminist movements with practical solutions from which research participants can directly benefit³⁴, the report's findings will support the production of three Media Toolkits on reporting VAWG for female journalists in Burkina Faso, Benin, and Togo.

These toolkits will include actionable strategies and best practices for ethical and sensitive reporting on VAWG, tailored to each country. They will serve as comprehensive resources for media professionals seeking to enhance their reporting skills. This ensures the study not only documents issues but also contributes to tangible improvements in the safety and working conditions of WJs.

Moreover, this report concludes with a list of specific and actionable recommendations reflecting WJs' perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the study, topics, and experiences shared, all participants have been anonymised. **Focus group discussions and interviews were not recorded.**

To meet ethical guidelines and global data management laws, namely GDPR, the interview notes' viewing permissions were limited-access and private. Similarly, transcripts were anonymised.

Quotes used in this study only include the country and career level of the interview participant. Where the content of the quote holds a greater risk of identification, the location and certain details have been omitted or modified.



DESK REVIEW

This section sheds light on existent literature concerning the media's coverage of VAWG or VAWJ in Sub-Saharan Africa, with a focus on Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo (non-exhaustive list, as of the time of publication).

While numerous studies examine these topics globally³⁵, and increasingly so in Anglophone Africa, such research remains scarce in Francophone West Africa—particularly in the studied countries, with Benin and Togo receiving the least attention.

Sub-Saharan Africa

In the past two to three decades, in-depth research and a wide range of capacity-building initiatives addressing WJs in sub-Saharan Africa have emerged. AWiM's key contributions to these efforts are summarised below.



2021

AWiM researched the barriers and obstacles faced by WJs across sub-Saharan Africa, identifying various challenges that hinder them from entering, progressing, and/or staying in journalism.³⁶



2022

AWiM conducted significant research on the media's coverage of VAWG in Nigeria.³⁸



2023

AWiM examined the perspectives and experiences of 10 African female photojournalists and documentary photographers working across sub-Saharan Africa, covering mediation/ conflict and peacebuilding on the continent.³⁷

AWiM published a report, *Review of the Media Policy Guidelines*, exploring the existing regulatory framework for media coverage of violence against women and girls in Nigeria. This analysis identified strategies for enhancing both local and national policies for media outlets reporting on such violence.³⁹

Francophone West Africa

Despite the growing body of research on the challenges faced by WJs and the media's coverage of VAWG across the continent, there remains a significant gap in studies specifically focusing on Francophone West Africa. While countries like Burkina Faso have seen an increase in research in recent years, Benin and Togo remain relatively under-examined.



2022

Canal France International revealed the research findings of its gendered analysis 40 of the media in four West and Central African countries: Ivory Coast, Ghana, Niger, and the Democratic Republic of Congo.⁴¹

The analysis found that across all four countries, the primary concern for WJs was combating sexual harassment by both their employers and sources.



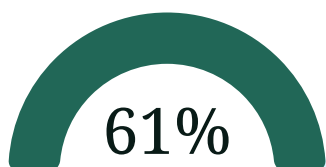
2023

the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) published a similar study focused on WJs' safety in Burkina Faso, Guinea, Guinea Bissau, Niger, and Nigeria (discussed below).⁴³

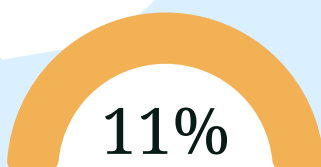
Benin

In a rare initiative on the subject matter in Benin, in May 2021, journalist Sinatou Saka and the Centre for Assistance and Fight against Violence against Women (CALVIF) conducted an anonymous survey of **20 women**, mostly from the television sector, to assess violence in the media and communication industries in Benin.

The findings revealed that:



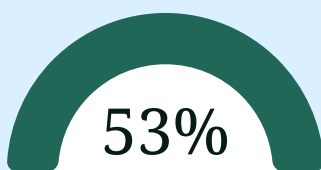
of respondents believed at least one of their colleagues had suffered psychological violence, such as sexist comments.



Reported cases of physical or sexual violence, including unwanted touching.



Indicated that these incidents happened repeatedly



Attributed the harassment to a single colleague, while 46% reported harassment from multiple colleagues



Note

Despite the small sample size, the results highlighted a hostile work environment for WJs in Benin.⁴⁴

Burkina Faso

In 2017, DW Akademie and the Burkinabe Norbert Zongo National Press Centre shared the findings of the first of three press freedom studies focused on WJs. The study examined legal frameworks, journalism quality, and media management practices in Burkina Faso.

Data from **140** out of **237** media organizations



The 2023 MFWA study on WJs' safety in five West African countries also produced a focused report on Burkina Faso.⁴⁶ Based on interviews with 22 WJs and 10 media leaders, the study highlighted the significant challenges WJs face both within their workplaces and in public, including:

- * Sexual harassment
- * Gender discrimination⁴⁷

To complement this multi-country research, MFWA conducted a series of webinars on the safety of female journalists.⁴⁸

Togo

There is limited research on WJs in Togo. However, existing studies indicate that while women are increasingly present in the media industry, they remain underrepresented in decision-making roles.

Women only Manage **2 of 9** Television channels in Togo

Women only lead **3 of 30** Community Radio Stations in Togo

WJs in Togo face specific challenges, including:

- * Gender-based harassment
- * Exclusion from covering critical areas like politics and economics, further limiting their professional opportunities and influence within the sector.⁵⁰

These gaps underscore the critical need for targeted research to:

- * Draw attention to the challenges faced by WJs.
- * Develop policies and protective measures for their safety and well-being.
- * Improve the media's coverage of VAWG.



Note

To address the lack of research on gender-related challenges faced by WJs in Francophone Africa, in May 2024, the African Women in Journalism Project (AWJP)⁵¹ launched a research survey on the status of WJs and gender reporting in Burkina Faso, Senegal, and Togo.⁵² However, at the time of writing this report, AWJP's survey had yet to be published.

Burkina Faso

11.3 million are women ~
(50% of the population)

Benin

7.04 million are women ~
(50% of the population)

Togo

4.62 million are women ~
(49.68% of the population)

Background

This section sheds light on the national contexts in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo, covering:

- * Political contexts
- * Freedom of the press
- * Media landscape
- * VAWG-related data and legislations

The information provided here is based on findings derived from secondary sources, which were confirmed and enriched by AWiM's primary research (questionnaire, interviews, and FGDs).



POLITICAL CONTEXT AND MEDIA LANDSCAPES

Benin

Benin has witnessed a troubling deterioration in media freedom and freedom of expression in recent years. Once recognized for its robust protection of civil liberties, including press freedom and digital rights, the country is now experiencing a significant backslide due to a changing political context, increased authoritarianism, and restrictive laws aimed at controlling the media.⁵³

A key turning point in this decline was the **adoption of the 2018 Digital Code**.⁵⁴

Article 550 of the code criminalizes harassment via electronic communications, stating that:

Any person who initiates an online communication with the intent to coerce, intimidate, harass, or cause emotional distress using an information technology system... is punishable by imprisonment of one to two years or a fine ranging from 500,000 to 10 million CFA Francs, or both.⁵⁵

While the article ostensibly seeks to address online harassment, it has been applied in ways that restrict press freedom, particularly through its second and third paragraphs, which address the dissemination of "fake news." These clauses have provided legal grounds for the arrest and prosecution of at least 17 journalists, bloggers, and digital activists within a two-year span.

Media outlets and independent journalists have increasingly found themselves targeted, and self-censorship has become more prevalent, as President Patrice Talon's government employs legal, financial, and political pressures to silence dissent.⁵⁶

Burkina Faso

Burkina Faso was long considered a beacon of press freedom in Africa, ranking 41st out of 180 countries in Reporters Without Borders' 2022 World Press Freedom Index.⁵⁷ Although the fall of Compaoré in 2014 initially led to significant media freedoms, this progress was short-lived.

Since the 2014 popular uprising that ended President Blaise Compaoré's 27-year rule, Burkina Faso has been plagued by political instability, marked by multiple coups and escalating violence from Islamist armed groups.⁵⁸

The most recent coup, in September 2022, led by Captain Ibrahim Traoré, further intensified repression and shrunk civic space.

Prominent publications such as *Jeune Afrique* and *Le Monde* have been suspended for allegedly undermining the military.⁵⁹ Local and foreign journalists have been targeted through harassment, interrogations, and even expulsion. Three Burkinabe journalists faced defamation campaigns on pirate websites.⁶⁰

The hostile environment for independent journalism is exacerbated by legal obstacles, including the 2019 law n°044-2019/AN, which reintroduced harsh penalties for press offenses, such as up to 10 years in prison for publications seen as threatening national security. The media is now required to obtain prior authorization before publishing any images or audios related to terrorist incidents. The junta continued to tighten its control over the media through a 2023 legislation that further suppressed critical reporting and fostered widespread self-censorship.

Amidst this restrictive context, the resilience of Burkina Faso's historically diverse and dynamic media landscape remains remarkable. Investigative journalism has gained significant traction, leading to the launch of the country's first online investigative newspaper in 2023.

Togo

Since 1963, Togolese politics have been shaped by the long-standing dominance of the Gnassingbé family. Efforts by opposition groups to bring about political reforms have been met with harsh repression, further entrenching the power of the Gnassingbé administration.⁶⁶

Amidst this context, the media landscape is characterized by both vibrancy and constraint. Despite the existence of over 200 newspapers, numerous radio stations, and a growing number of online platforms, few outlets remain independent from political influence.⁶⁷ Major publications, such as *Liberté* and *L'Alternative*, have faced temporary suspensions and continued government scrutiny, reflecting the ongoing pressures faced by the media.⁶⁸

Journalists in Togo often resort to self-censorship, especially during politically sensitive periods, such as elections. Government authorities, alongside opposition forces, exert considerable influence over editorial content.

The ruling party controls key appointments in state-owned media and the media regulatory body, Haute Autorité de l'Audiovisuel et de la Communication (HAAC).

This political influence has led to:

- * Legal actions against journalists
- * Cyberattacks on independent media
- * Suspensions of critical outlets

The Observatoire Togolais des Médias (OTM), established in 1999, serves as the internal self-regulatory body for the media, but it often struggles to ensure true media independence.

While Togo's legal framework officially upholds freedom of expression, various laws on public order, secrecy, and anti-terrorism severely limit journalistic freedoms.

The December 2023 cybersecurity law has further restricted press freedom by imposing harsh penalties, including:

- * Up to three years' imprisonment for spreading false information
- * Up to 20 years' imprisonment for terrorism-related charges

These broad and vaguely defined laws can be easily weaponized against whistleblowers and journalists reporting on human rights abuses.⁶⁹

The quality of journalism in Togo has also deteriorated due to:

- * Corruption
- * Lack of training
- * Limited investigative journalism

This environment of fear, intimidation, and harassment has led to a pervasive culture of self-censorship among journalists.⁷⁰

Financial Instability & Precarious Working Conditions

Across Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo, journalists are severely underpaid and face precarious working conditions, significantly impacting their professional independence.

- * In Benin, despite a legal minimum wage increase to 52,000 CFA francs in December 2022, many media organizations, especially in the private sector, do not adhere to this standard. Journalists often earn between 20,000 and 30,000 CFA francs per month, leaving them financially vulnerable. A human rights specialist in Benin noted that this deliberate underpayment by media leaders and politicians acts as a political tactic to limit journalists' influence.
- * In Togo, the government raised its minimum wage to 52,500 CFA francs in January 2023. However, most private media outlets still underpay journalists, treating them as freelance contributors with an average monthly income of around 35,000 CFA francs, as reported by research participants.
- * A collective agreement was signed between Togo's private media unions and press organizations under the supervision of the Minister of Communication and Media in October 2023.

The agreement introduced key Provisions on:

- * Standardized salaries based on experience
- * Recruitment criteria
- * Additional benefits (transport, performance bonuses)
- * Career progression opportunities and training

However, its implementation has been largely ineffective, leaving the financial situation of journalists unchanged.⁷³

- * In Burkina Faso, although the minimum wage increased from 30,684 CFA francs to 45,000 CFA francs (a 46% rise), journalists in private media rarely receive the full amount in practice.⁷⁴

This widespread financial instability undermines not only journalists' livelihoods but also the overall quality of media. Underpaid journalists are more susceptible to external pressures and self-censorship.

Lack of Data on Women Journalists (WJs)

According to research participants from the three countries studied, there is currently no comprehensive or up-to-date data on the exact number of WJs in these countries.

This lack of information is attributed to:

- * The dynamic and volatile nature of the profession
- * The absence of centralized national databases tracking female participation in the media sector

Based on interviews, only a handful of women lead media organizations in these countries.

The scarcity of women in decision-making roles means that media institutions often fail to address gender-specific concerns, including:

- * Societal issues affecting women
- * Professional challenges faced by WJs

WJs face a range of issues and violence, which this report explores in detail.

As a result, a growing number of women journalists are choosing to join, establish, and lead their own digital news platforms—many of which are dedicated to women's issues.

This marks a shift towards greater female leadership and autonomy in the media landscape.

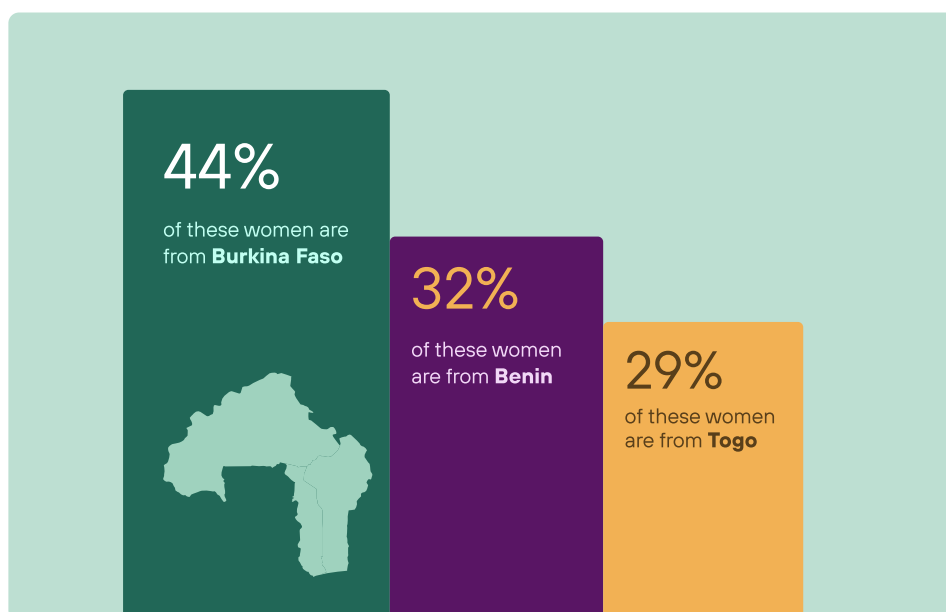
An illustration of a woman with brown hair, wearing a yellow top, with her hand over her mouth in a gesture of silence or distress. She is surrounded by several hands pointing towards her from various directions. The background is a light pink color with a pattern of colorful, radiating lines in shades of pink, blue, and yellow.

VAWG AND RELATED LEGAL FRAMEWORKS

Although this report does not focus on the prevalence of VAWG in the three study countries, it is important to note that a 2018 study revealed that over 40% of West African women have experienced some form of violence, with domestic violence being the most common.⁷⁵

World Bank data (2012–2019) shows that:

Some women in Burkina Faso, Benin and Togo believe that a man has the right to physically discipline his wife



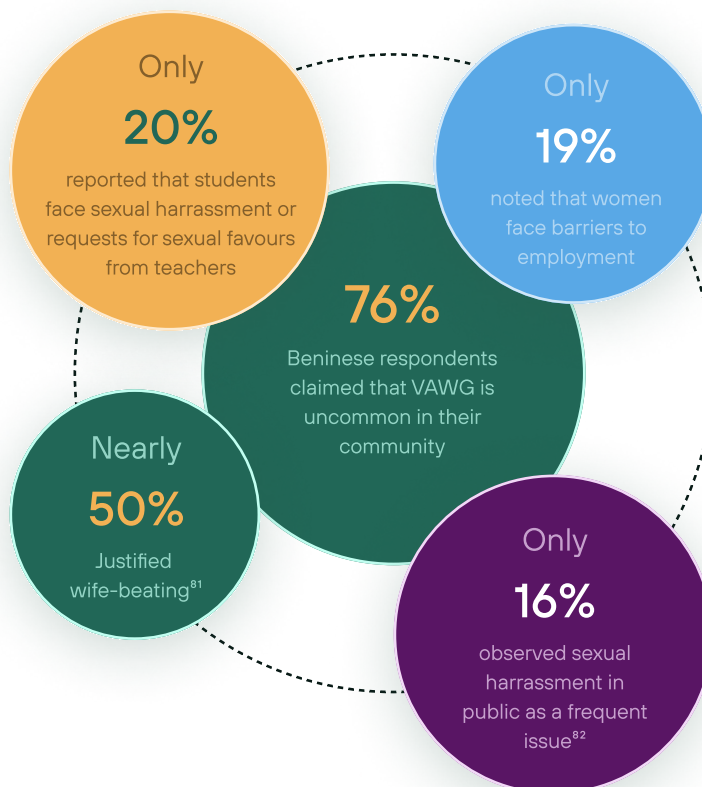
All research participants emphasized that cultural tolerance for VAWG is consistently pervasive across all three countries. This shared cultural reality suggests that, despite differences in statistical figures, the underlying acceptance of VAWG remains uniform across the sub-region.

To assess the likelihood of state and media interventions (both public and private) in improving VAWG coverage and enhancing the safety of women journalists (VAWJ), it is essential to consider the existing legal frameworks for preventing and punishing VAWG, including VAWJ, within these countries.

Benin

According to data from the Public Listening Center, which manages the only free helpline for survivors of workplace violence in Benin⁷⁸, corroborated by World Bank findings⁷⁹, approximately 70% of women in Benin experience some form of violence (physical, verbal, psychological, sexual, or harmful traditional practices) during their lifetime.⁸⁰

However, the 2024 Afrobarometer survey showed that VAWG is not taken seriously by a significant portion of the population:



These figures suggest widespread cultural tolerance of violence and discrimination against women.

Despite having a legal framework aimed at preventing and punishing VAWG, as outlined in Law 2011-26 of January 9, revised in 2013, 2017, and 2021, these laws often remain unenforced.

The 2021 revisions introduced by Law 2021-1183:

- * Expanded the definition of VAWG to cover female genital mutilation, incest, and child marriage.
- * Strengthened penalties for sexual harassment, rape, and teacher-student abuse.
- * Led to a modest rise in VAWG prosecutions, from 12.1% in 2020 to 13.7% in 2022.⁸⁴

Additionally, multiple ministries and public institutions have conducted research and awareness-raising activities following the adoption of Law 2021-11.⁸⁵

Burkina Faso

Reports from international human rights institutions highlight the widespread prevalence of VAWG in Burkina Faso.⁸⁶ Similarly to Benin, the country has made strides in addressing VAWG over the last decade.



2018 Penal Code Revision⁸⁷ → Criminalises various forms of VAWG, including sexual harassment, domestic violence, and FGM, with penalties ranging from fines to imprisonment.



2015 Law on the Protection of Women Against Violence⁸⁸ → Specifically designed to protect women from violence in both public and private spheres.



2009 National Gender Policy⁸⁹ → Preceded the 2015 law and promotes the establishment of additional mechanisms for the prevention of violence and protection of victims.

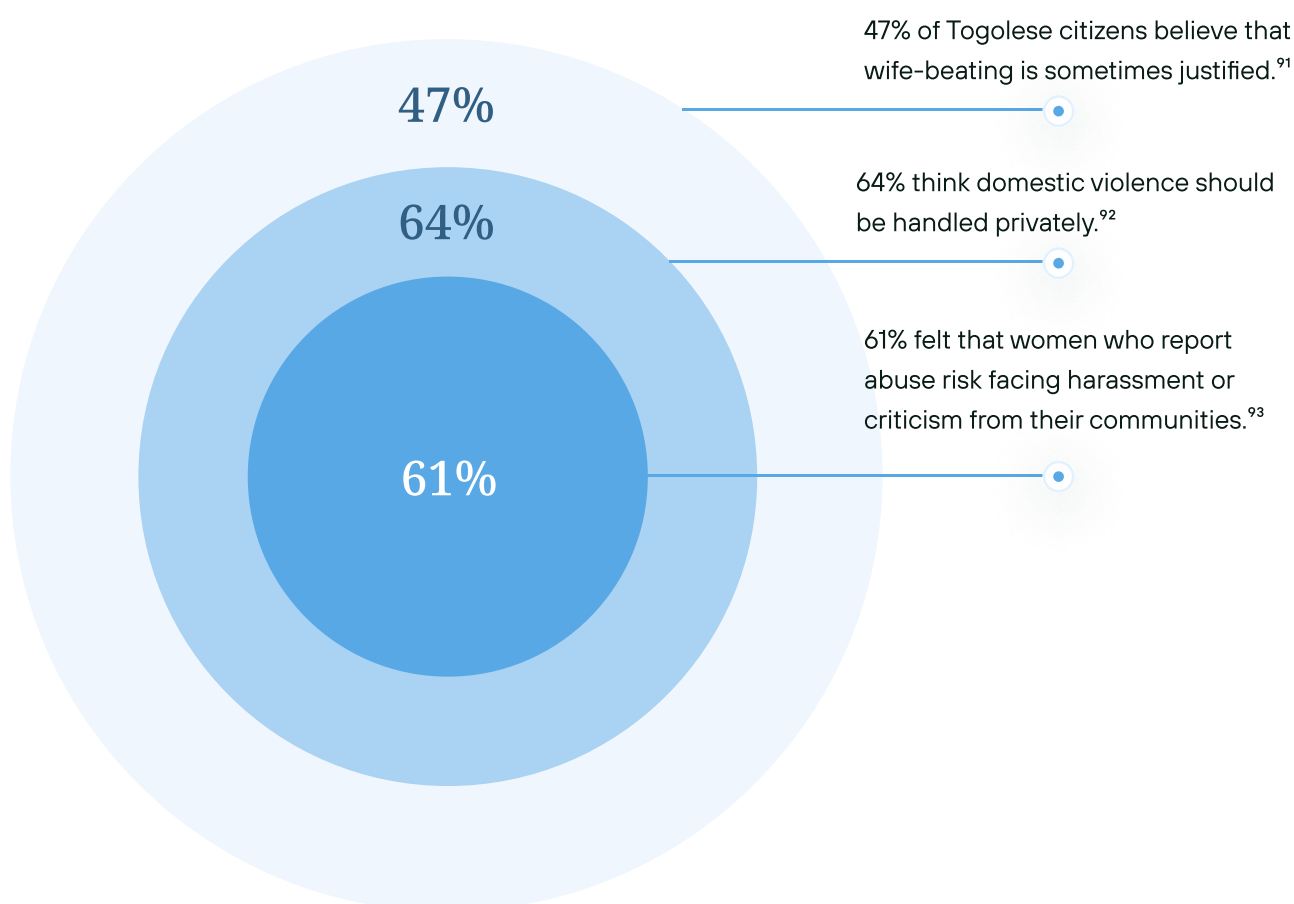
However, despite these legal advancements, enforcement remains a challenge due to:

- * Social stigmas surrounding VAWG
- * Limited resources for law enforcement and support services
- * Low levels of awareness among the public and affected communities

Togo

According to a 2024 analysis of data from Togo's 2013 Demographic and Health Survey, 35.5% of women aged 15–49 had experienced some form of intimate partner violence (IPV).⁹⁰

A 2022 Afrobarometer survey showed that:



More positive and recent data shows signs of progress:

- * A 2022 World Bank poverty and gender assessment found that acceptance of VAWG among women aged 15–49 was lower in Togo (**28.7%**) compared to Benin (**31.8%**) and Burkina Faso (**43.5%**).⁹⁴
- * Teenage pregnancies in Togo are also lower than in neighbouring countries.⁹⁵

Togo's 2015 Penal Code⁹⁶ criminalises sexual harassment, domestic violence, and female genital mutilation, with penalties designed to deter such acts. Additionally, the Personal and Family Code provides legal protections for women, particularly in cases of domestic violence.

However, Togo does not have a single, comprehensive law specifically dedicated to VAWG, an issue that raised significant concerns among WJs. The absence of a specific domestic law addressing VAWG means that tribunals handling such cases often fall back on the Maputo Protocol for legal recourse.

Although the government has established gender units within each ministry to address gender-related issues, research participants noted that the roles, responsibilities, and impact of these units remain unclear.

Feminist groups working to raise awareness and advocate for stricter action against VAWG, such as "Négresses Féministes," face criticism, harassment, and intimidation. Despite this, they continue to push for greater protections for women and girls in Togo.⁹⁷

Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo have all signed the Kigali Declaration on the Elimination of Gender Violence in and through Media in Africa by 2034 (2022),⁹⁸ which advocates for:

- * Stronger legal protections
- * Enhanced reporting mechanisms
- * Promotion of gender equality
- * Prevention of sexual harassment
- * A safer, more supportive environment for female journalists to carry out their work without fear of violence or discrimination.



KEY FINDINGS

The research revealed significant similarities across the three countries, largely due to shared cultural norms, political challenges, and structural insufficiencies, as noted by participants.

While the following sections address trends and issues common to **Benin**, **Burkina Faso**, and **Togo**, country-specific nuances and distinctions are highlighted where relevant.

Violence Against Women and Girls Through the Media

Over the past decade, media coverage of VAWG in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo has gained prominence.

This progress is partly due to:

- * The critical role of women journalists in raising awareness and shedding light on these pressing issues.
- * The critical role of women journalists in raising awareness and shedding light on these pressing issues.
- * Their reporting, which has encouraged more survivors to come forward and share their experiences of abuse.
- * The expansion of online media platforms, creating additional spaces for WJs to address sensitive topics affecting women's lives, notably VAWG.

However, interviews with women journalists from the three countries revealed that:

- * Media coverage of VAWG remains inconsistent and narrow.
- * Coverage primarily focuses on physical violence, while largely neglecting:
 - * Moral, psychological, and economic abuse
 - * Violence in conflict zones
- * There is a grave absence of dedicated editorial protocols or mechanisms to:
 - * Ensure the safety and well-being of VAWG survivors participating in interviews.
 - * Protect journalists conducting these interviews
- * Overall, the lack of specialisation among journalists in VAWG reporting and insufficient capacity-building initiatives affect the quality and effectiveness of coverage in addressing the full scope of VAWG.

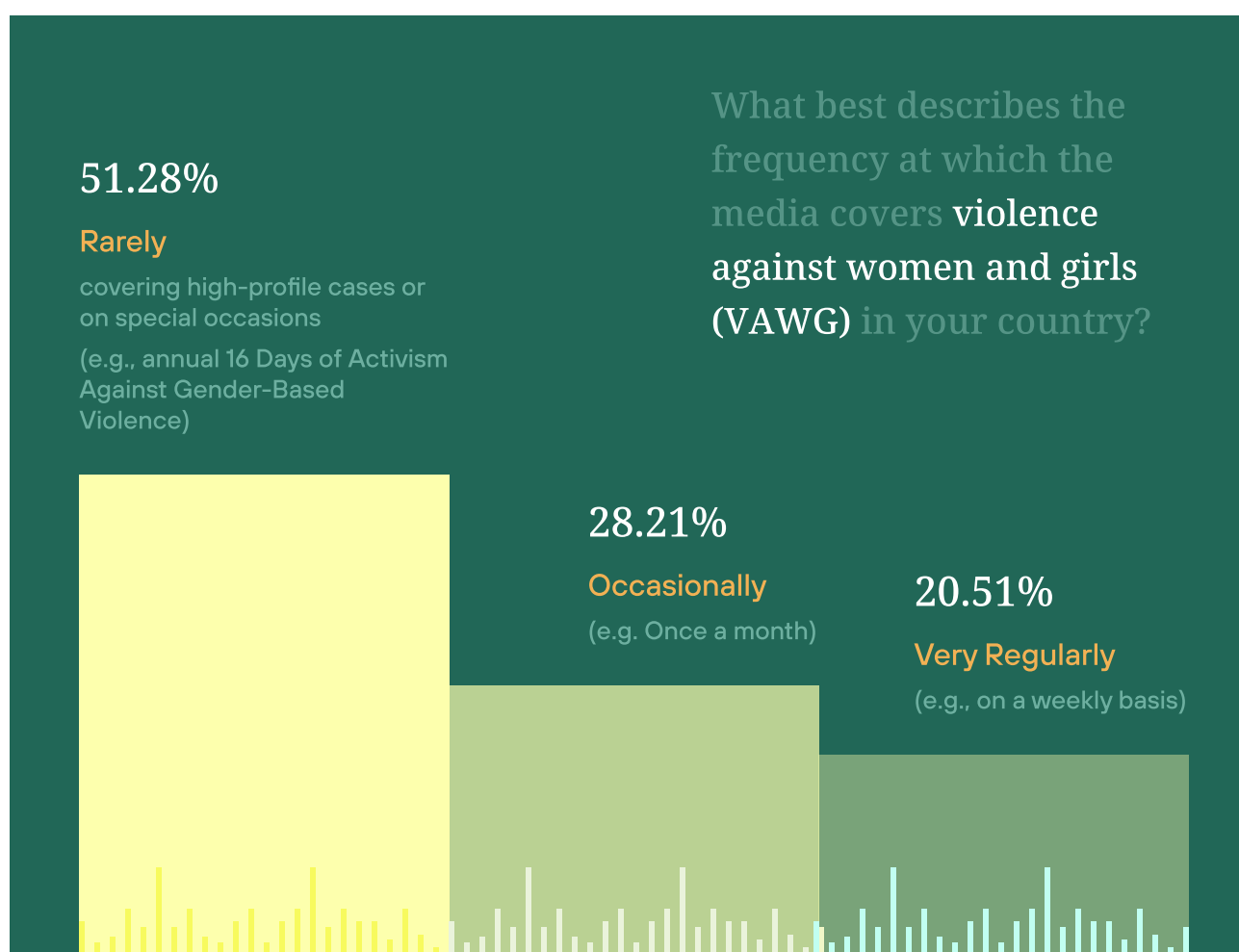
Sporadic Coverage

In each of the studied countries, media coverage of VAWG is inconsistent and often marginalised. Rather than being framed as a pressing public health and criminal issue affecting half the population, VAWG is frequently relegated to the "faits divers" section—incidental or minor news items.

Coverage tends to be sporadic, occurring infrequently, often only:

- * Once a month
- * In connection with high-profile cases or events, such as:
 - * 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence
 - * National and International Women's Days

Nearly 80% of online questionnaire participants highlighted this pattern (see Box 1).



WJs noted that VAWG reporting often consists of merely relaying basic information, such as:

- * Brief articles summarising content reported by other media outlets or social media platforms.
- * Lack of deeper investigation or journalistic inquiry

We [journalists] are willing to address VAWG topics in public media, but our ability to do so depends on our bosses. If they are not interested, they may discourage us.

And if we do cover such topics, we need to make sure not to criticise the government.

—— Senior WJ from Burkina Faso

This perspective reflects the broader challenges facing investigative and critical reporting on VAWG, which is further constrained by editorial and political pressures in the three countries.

Interview participants further highlighted that when journalists report on VAWG, they may not always do so out of a commitment to the issue, but rather because government mandates require them to showcase the state's purported efforts in addressing it, rather than conducting critical or in-depth investigations.

These findings were echoed by the majority of WJs who participated in this research. They primarily attributed the limited VAWG coverage to the persistent societal taboos surrounding the issue (**see 'Background' section**)

VAWG in media coverage reflects the way society is silencing women: the press does not cover it substantially because our society still refuses to talk about it openly. Women are scared of being blamed for the violence they endure if they speak out.

—— Senior Journalist, Burkina Faso

Similarly, a journalist from Togo emphasised the significant challenges in addressing such attacks, noting that they are seldom reported because survivors often face accusations rather than the perpetrators.

This situation is particularly evident in cases of rape, where many families choose silence over speaking out, preferring instead to settle matters privately—sometimes even accepting money from the abuser, as explained by a woman directing a press company in Togo.

Numerous WJs across the three countries attributed coverage gaps to the lack of female leadership—estimated at 2-5% in each of the project countries—and limited involvement in defining editorial lines.

They specifically blamed the reluctance of male-dominated media leadership to allocate adequate resources to the topic, instead prioritising more lucrative issues such as the economy or politics.

As one WJ from Burkina Faso explained, adequately covering VAWG—which requires:

- * Numerous visits to survivors to gain their trust
- * In-depth survivor interviews
- * Incorporating community perspectives
- * Following up on case progress

—is time and resource-intensive. Notably, transportation costs are rarely provided or reimbursed for such coverage, as confirmed by interview participants.

A handful of WJs explained that they had often covered their own transportation fees in order to report on VAWG cases.

In this context of chronic, and partly planned, underfunding, financial incentives provided by NGOs—such as daily stipends and transportation costs—often become key motivators for journalists to cover VAWG-related initiatives.

This financial neglect can result in coverage that is more instrumental, driven by the need for compensation, rather than by a genuine commitment to addressing VAWG.

Another Burkinabé woman, who leads an association advocating for women's rights, expressed concern that without sufficient funds for media coverage, journalists are unlikely to engage—posing a significant challenge to raising awareness about VAWG.

She noted that the costs associated with media coverage are often prohibitive for local associations, typically ranging between 150,000 and 177,000 CFA for a single journalist and cameraperson to record approximately 30 minutes of footage, which is then condensed to only 2-3 minutes of airtime on television.

This issue is exacerbated in regions outside the capital (Ouagadougou), where expenses are even higher.

She also highlighted the frequent occurrence of last-minute cancellations by television journalists, often requiring advance payments to secure coverage as a guarantee of their participation.

In contrast, she observed that online media and press outlets are generally more dynamic, dependable, and cost-effective.

List of governmental and non-governmental structures supporting VAWG survivors in Burkina Faso:

Benin

1 ABPF (Association Béninoise pour la Promotion de la Famille)

2 Association des Avocats du Bénin

3 Réseau des Féministes du Bénin

4 WiLDAF Bénin

5 Famille Nutrition Développement (FND)

Burkina Faso

1 N'aies Pas Peur

2 AFJB (Association des Femmes Juristes du Burkina Faso)

3 WANEF Burkina Faso

4 IPBF (Initiative Pananetugri pour le Bien-être de la Femme)

5 Voix de Femmes

6 ONIDS (Organisation pour de Nouvelles Initiatives en Développement et Santé)

7 ADEP (Association d'Appui et d'Éveil Pugsada)

8 Marche Mondiale des Femmes / Action Nationale du Burkina Faso (MMF / ANBF)

9 CBDF (Coalition Burkinabé pour les Droits de la Femme)

Togo

1 Les Négresses Féministes

2 GF2D (Groupe de Réflexion et d'Action Femme, Démocratie et Développement)

3 WILDAFTOGO

4 ATBEFTOGO

5 IYAWO

6 Centre Hanoukopé – Lomé

7 YAHO

Participants from the three countries noted the general unavailability or reluctance of representatives from key state institutions, such as the judiciary and security services, to engage with the media on VAWG. While these institutions are not primarily responsible for combating VAWG, they play fundamental roles in addressing it, and their lack of engagement hampers media coverage.

The National Institutes of Women in Benin and Burkina Faso were described as more responsive, with representatives—particularly in Benin—actively participating in interviews.

In Togo, however, there is no comparable public institution dedicated to women's rights. Instead, the Ministry of Social Action, Promotion of Women, and Literacy serves this function. Despite this, one Togolese research participant mentioned successfully securing an interview on gender politics with the Secretary of the Presidency.

Narrow Definition of VAWG

Beyond quantitative shortcomings, media coverage in the three countries reflects a limited understanding of VAWG's multiple dimensions.

This limitations

- * Reflects journalists' narrow perspective on the violence endured by women and girls
- * Influences public perception of what does—or does not—constitute VAWG

Focus on Physical Violence

- * Research findings consistently indicated a predominant focus on physical violence, particularly:
 - * Rape and other sexual offences.
 - * Sexual harassment within universities, which has gained increased coverage in recent years.
- * Some research participants suggested that heightened media scrutiny of university professors may have contributed to a perceived or actual decline in sexual VAWG rates in academic settings.
- * However, sexual violence within households remains largely ignored:
 - * Marital rape is rarely acknowledged in legislation or media
 - * Incest remains unreported
 - * Some WJs noted that marital rape is dismissed as a white people's issue.

Digital and Psychological VAWG

- * Some research participants suggested that heightened media scrutiny of university professors may have contributed to a perceived or actual decline in sexual VAWG rates in academic settings.
- * The media almost systematically overlooks:
 - * Moral and psychological forms of VAWG
 - * Psychological VAWG is often disregarded due to the lack of tangible evidence, which casts doubt on women's experiences.
 - * This contradicts feminist principles, which emphasize believing and supporting victims.

Economic and Traditional VAWG

- * Economic violence against women is sometimes covered but framed as financial injustice rather than a specific form of VAWG.
- * The media's portrayal of "traditional" forms of VAWG (FGM, forced child marriage) is complex:
 - * Communities that practice these customs often conceal them
 - * Some women speak out, and NGO/government efforts occasionally receive media attention

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Conflict-Related VAWG & Security Risks

- * Severe limitations hinder coverage of VAWG in conflict zones in:
- * Severe limitations hinder coverage of VAWG in conflict zones in:
 - * Northern Benin
 - * Togo
 - * Northeastern Burkina Faso
- * Apart from Mariam Ouédraogo, a Burkinabè journalist known for her reporting on VAWG in conflict zones, journalistic coverage remains scarce due to:
 - * Restricted state-authorized access for journalists
 - * Security risks in terrorist-threatened regions (e.g., northwest Benin)
 - * Priority access given to humanitarian organisations over journalists

 We don't have our own Mariam Ouédraogo in Benin.

—— Senior Beninese journalist

She emphasized the lack of reporting on alarming developments in northern Benin, including:

- * Closure of many schools
- * Suspected cases of forced marriages and VAWG by armed men.
- * Unaddressed mental health issues in affected populations.

Broader Implications

- * Despite strong interest from journalists in covering these regions, the risks are too high without state protection.
- * The lack of support, training, and resources results in:
 - * Limited capacity for conflict journalism.
 - * Invisibility of the violence experienced by women and girls in these contexts.

Other forms of violence affecting women's lives are:

Spiritual and Obstetric Violence

Other forms of violence affecting women's lives, such as spiritual violence (including occult practices and voodoo threats against women) and obstetric violence, are virtually absent from media discussions, despite being reportedly prevalent in the region.

Intersectional Factors & Marginalised Groups

Additionally, forms of VAWG intensified by intersectional factors like sexual identity, gender identity, and social class have received minimal attention. For example, the widespread violence against domestic workers and migrant women often goes unreported.

Moreover, the violence faced by lesbian, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, and asexual women (LBTIQ+) appears largely absent in media coverage of VAWG. A senior WJ who partook in the research shared her experience of facing internal resistance when she attempted to include stories about lesbian women's lives in her programming. While she noted that she had generally been free to cover topics considered locally as taboo, she found it significantly more challenging when she decided to address issues affecting LBTIQ+ women.

Lack of Structural & Patriarchal Analysis

As summarised by a senior journalist in Burkina Faso:

The media's reporting often fails to highlight the patriarchal structures at the root of VAWG, ultimately stigmatising the women who have suffered it.

— Senior journalist in Burkina Faso

Similarly, journalistic analyses of structural forms of VAWG appeared to be nearly inexistent across the three study countries. This absence may be linked to a lack of critical engagement with these forms of violence, and the political environment, where government criticism is often discouraged.

Journalists may discuss VAWG but are compelled to "watch their tone" when calling on the government to take action, as phrased by a participant:

Or else, they will get into trouble,

— She Warned

Systemic Exclusion & Need for Inclusive Media Narratives

The serious gaps in the three countries' media's coverage of the full spectrum of VAWG not only limit public understanding but also perpetuate the invisibility of many forms of violence that women and girls experience.

This omission, in turn, constitutes systemic and epistemological violence against women by the male-dominated media sector. The lack of representation of diverse experiences of VAWG, particularly those of marginalised groups, highlights the urgent need for broader and more inclusive media narratives and policy discourses that recognise and address the full spectrum of VAWG, with stringent operational and legislative support from state authorities.

Insensitive Reporting

Over half of the questionnaire respondents (**see Box 2**) affirmed that journalists in all three countries generally adhered to basic reporting standards when covering VAWG, such as:

- * Protecting survivors' identities by blurring faces in images and videos.
- * Using initials and pseudonyms instead of full names.

She also highlighted the frequent occurrence of last-minute cancellations by television journalists, often requiring advance payments to secure coverage as a guarantee of their participation.

In contrast, she observed that online media and press outlets are generally more dynamic, dependable, and cost-effective.

Which statement best describes media coverage of VAWG in your country?

Reports VAWG with sensitivity & respect, no bias, references advocacy

19 (6 men, 13 women)

Sensationalizes cases, focuses on shocking details

12

Victim-blaming language, suggests women are responsible

6

Uses derogatory terms for feminists

2

However, significant ethical and deontological concerns were apparent in the online survey and in-depth interviews. WJs and CSO participants providing support to VAWG survivors across the three countries indicated a concerning lack of ethical conduct – namely, insensitive framing of questions and a failure to guarantee anonymity.

The divulgence of survivors' and alleged perpetrators' identities by the media can compromise the psychological well-being and physical safety of survivors interviewed and compromise potential legal proceedings, WJs stressed.

Media Coverage Concerns

In terms of media coverage, WJs particularly condemned the tendency of certain journalists to use derogatory and victim-blaming language when describing survivors' experiences.

For example, the phrase “se faire violer” (“*getting raped*”) is reportedly frequently used in cases of sexual assault, implicitly placing responsibility on the victim. Similarly, numerous WJs condemned certain journalists' references to survivors' clothing in harassment and rape cases, suggesting it bore any relevance.

Such discourses perpetuate harmful stereotypes by implying that a woman's attire or behavior may justify or provoke an assault, detracting from the accountability of the perpetrator.

A senior journalist in Burkina Faso emphasised the additional trauma that survivors could endure through digital platforms and social media, where they may face further scrutiny and blame in often unmediated comment sections.

Gender Disparities in VAWG Reporting

Several WJs participants attributed the poor ethical standards in VAWG reporting to the fact that men often handle these stories.

60%

of questionnaire participants indicated that both men and women cover VAWG cases.

35%

said that VAWG coverage was almost exclusively the domain of WJs.

Personal Experience vs. Professional Training

While many WJs explained that their personal experiences with some forms of VAWG had helped them empathize with survivors' accounts and trauma—with some even describing writing about VAWG as a form of "exutoire" or emotional release—they also acknowledged that simply being a woman is not sufficient for responsible VAWG reporting and stressed the need for greater training of journalists reporting on VAWG.

The observation that lived experiences can create deeper understanding but are insufficient for responsible reporting is one that feminist literature has thoroughly emphasised.⁹⁹

Lack of Specialization

The limitations in the scope, depth, and quality of VAWG coverage reflect mainstream media's broader disinterest in representing women's lived experiences and the significant lack of specialisation in this area. While sectoral specialisation among journalists in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo has begun to develop in fields like sports, politics, and economics, it remains in its infancy due to various structural constraints, including economic dependencies and political pressures, which limit the development of specialised media content.¹⁰⁰ This is particularly true of VAWG and feminist issues.

Although several media organisations across these countries have established "units" or "desks" dedicated to women's affairs, these are often confined to topics like health, culinary arts, and education—areas traditionally assigned to women due to entrenched gender norms and stereotypes.

Opportunities Through Online Media

On a positive note, the emergence of more affordable online media platforms over the past decade has created greater opportunities for WJs to ascend to leadership positions and tackle more sensitive or taboo forms of VAWG. Several WJs who participated in this research expressed their frustration with the limitations in covering issues relevant to women and their safety, which drove them to establish their own media platforms.

As of the time of writing:

- * Only a limited number of women-focused magazines and radio channels operate in Burkina Faso and Togo.
- * In Benin, there are no major media organisations exclusively dedicated to women's issues. However, certain radio stations and publications in Benin (as well as in the other two countries) occasionally focus on women's topics as part of their overall programming.
 - * For instance, Radio Cap FM airs a show titled "La Tribune du Genre", which frequently explores these issues.
 - * Community radio stations, which play a significant role in Benin, also air programs that address gender-related issues, notably VAWG.

Despite the growing number of media outlets in the country, women's perspectives and issues remain significantly underrepresented.

Feminist Media & Resistance to Feminism

Media organisations with an explicitly feminist mandate, such as Ekinamag in Togo, are particularly scarce (see Table 3). Certain women-focused media outlets and WJs even deliberately distance themselves from feminist labels.

One Burkinabè women-focused magazine explicitly stated, in a media interview¹⁰¹, not wanting to be perceived as advocating for feminist ideals or seeking to turn women into "Gandaodo" (*Iron Women in Fulfulde*).

The reluctance of media outlets and of certain WJs who contributed to this research to fully embrace feminist principles might be a reflection of the patriarchal pressures on women or misconceptions surrounding feminism.

This issue reflects long-standing debates in African feminist scholarship, wherein academics have:

- * Analysed the perception of feminism as a foreign, Western concept.¹⁰³
- * Explored alternative terms and epistemologies rooted in African socio-political realities and worldviews.¹⁰⁴

Country	Radio Channels	Online Magazines
Benin	—	—
Burkina Faso	Femina FM	Moussonews, Queen Mafa
Togo	DAGAN, Radio Djena	AkrikElles, Equinamag, ISIS Media

The few media outlets dedicated to women’s issues often struggle with chronic underfunding. Project grants, sponsorships, and efforts to secure media coverage are generally insufficient to sustain these outlets.

As a result, many leaders of these women-focused media organisations are compelled to operate communication agencies alongside their journalistic work to ensure their media’s viability.

For instance, Queenmafa.net’s founder, Sophie Fatoumata Ouattara, had to establish Actu-Elles Média, a communications agency.¹⁰⁵

Insufficient Training and Preparation

The lack of recognition among the media for the need to specialise in women’s rights issues is reflected in the virtually systematic absence of dedicated protocols for reporting on VAWG.






Across the three countries studied, media outlets typically had no established guidelines for VAWG coverage.

Among the WJs who partook in this research, with a collective and cumulative experience with over 30 different media platforms, only one media outlet – in Togo – had put in place a protocol dedicated to VAWG reporting.




This protocol included several stages designed to ensure thorough consideration of ethical and professional standards (see Box 3).

Good Practices – Sample Protocol for VAWG Coverage

Pre-production Phase

-  Evaluate the added value of the subject
-  Review experiences from previous coverage
-  Determine the best approach for the subject
-  Identify and avoid gender stereotypes.
-  Prepare journalists to handle sensitive topics thoughtfully and effectively.

Production Phase

-  Ensure the use of inclusive language
-  Avoid vocabulary that might reinforce harmful stereotypes.
-  Maintain content integrity to prevent biases or survivor stigmatization

Post-publication Phase



Analyze audience engagement and responses



Assess reactions of men and women in the comments section.



Determine the best approach for the subject



Identify and avoid gender stereotypes.



Prepare journalists to handle sensitive topics thoughtfully and effectively.

Survival Protection & Ethical Considerations



Prioritize survivors' needs and minimize secondary trauma.



Build trust through ethical reporting practices.



Maintain strict confidentiality agreements to protect survivors' identities.



Ensure no video content or information is shared without consent.



Note

This comprehensive approach, as described by the media outlet's founder, highlights the crucial role of ethical considerations in reporting on VAWG.

However, such formalised practices are infrequently adopted by media outlets that produce content related to VAWG in the studied countries.

The vast majority of media organisations and journalists covering VAWG adhere only to general ethical guidelines and safety protocols of national press codes and deontological practices, including:

- * Avoiding the exposure of minors (under 18 years old)
- * Exercising sensitivity in the selection of images
- * Protecting the identity of survivors when necessary

Superficial & Harmful Approaches to Reporting

The absence of formalised protocols often leads to a superficial and, at times, harmful approach to reporting on VAWG, emphasising the urgent need for more rigorous journalistic practices in this critical area.

Numerous WJs who participated in this research highlighted that, in most cases, they had to rely on their own judgment when reporting on VAWG.

A senior WJ from Benin explained that, in the absence of formal protocols, she made a point to personally review her articles to ensure that the content was not problematic.

Limited Training Opportunities for Journalists

This necessity is further underscored by the limited training opportunities available for journalists covering VAWG.

Across the three countries, WJs consistently reported that university curricula for journalism do not include courses specifically dedicated to VAWG coverage.

- * Some programs may include modules on gender equality and development, where VAWG is addressed, but the coverage is not comprehensive.

Moreover, none of the media organisations involved in this research—whether private or public, women-centered or not—offer:

- * Specialised training for their journalists on VAWG coverage.
- * Mandatory training requirements for journalists covering VAWG.

Journalists as First Responders

This lack of preparedness is particularly concerning given the scarcity of support services for survivors.

When survivors speak to journalists, they often confide in them and rely on them as if they were counselors, according to WJs interviewed for this research.

Consequently, errors such as victim-blaming or causing secondary trauma can have serious repercussions.

One representative from an organisation supporting survivors in Burkina Faso reported that she always ensures a staff member is present during interviews with survivors to prevent journalists from revealing identities or making inappropriate comments.

In the last decade, according to WJs participants, NGOs dedicated to women's rights and some international or regional media institutes have begun offering training in the region.

For example, in 2023, CARE Benin and Togo trained 20 journalists and bloggers on improved VAWG coverage through its "March4Women" program.¹⁰⁶

However, these specialised VAWG training initiatives remain rare, with most VAWG-related training focused on NGO personnel and first responders (such as health/case workers, police officers, lawyers, etc.), as noted by the WJs.

I have often heard of professionals attending trainings and wondered why they did and not me? I feel like there is an issue in the choice of participants, because those who write about it are never trained.

—— Senior journalist from Benin

I don't feel prepared enough to cover a case of violence against women, so I am holding back. I wish there were more of such trainings.

—— Junior WJ from Togo

An interviewee from Burkina Faso with experience in TV, press, and radio pointed out inconsistencies in the distribution of training opportunities, with more slots seemingly allocated to press and radio journalists.

While it is difficult to verify this information, all WJs participants agreed on the significant need to ensure the long-term continuity of successful training programs by:

- * Establishing a network of trained journalists.
- * Providing regular refresher courses

A Togolese WJ who partook in the research highlighted the importance of ensuring that VAWG training programs for journalists do not rely solely on international funding and external partners, as this would jeopardize their long-term viability.

Expanding & Strengthening VAWG Coverage

This section's findings highlight the urgent need for media outlets in **Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo** to:

- ✓ **Expand their coverage to fully address the various forms of VAWG, including:**
 - * All forms of sexual violence (notably marital rape, digital harassment, incest, etc.).
 - * Economic violence.
 - * Psychological abuse.
 - * Other marginalised forms of abuse.
- ✓ **Formally adopt and strictly adhere to feminist ethical guidelines.**
- ✓ **Ensure comprehensive and ongoing training for staff to report on VAWG topics effectively and safely.**
- ✓ **Establish dedicated units to improve VAWG coverage, as the media significantly influences public perceptions of this issue.**
- ✓ **Incorporate specific guidance and standards for reporting on VAWG into national press codes to:**
 - * Prevent the normalization of violence.
 - * Avoid victim-blaming.
 - * Protect survivors.
- ✓ **Mandate explicit weekly minimums for reporting on VAWG, treating gender-based violence with the same seriousness as:**
 - * Economic issues.
 - * Political matters.
 - * Security challenges.

By implementing these measures, media outlets can foster social change and policy reform. Without such actions, press codes and legislations punishing VAWG risk being tokenistic, failing to provide the sustained focus necessary to combat the violence that devastates the lives of women and girls.

The research revealed significant similarities across the three countries, largely due to shared cultural norms, political challenges, and structural insufficiencies, as noted by participants.

While the following sections address trends and issues common to **Benin**, **Burkina Faso**, and **Togo**, country-specific nuances and distinctions are highlighted where relevant.

Violence Against Women Journalists

While the media in the three examined countries have made important improvements in reflecting VAWG, the multifaceted forms of violence experienced by women working within the media industry itself remain largely unexposed.

In addition to the general forms of violence they face as:

- * Women (domestic and family violence, institutional violence, sexual harassment, etc.).
- * Journalists (financial insecurity, political risks—including censorship, crackdowns on journalists during protests).

WJs face aggravated safety risks, resulting from the intersection of their gender and profession.

While the most predominant form of violence men exert on WJs was unequivocally sexual harassment, participants in the research described a whole range (panoply) of:

- * Psychological violence.
- * Economic violence.
- * Physical violence.

These forms of violence impact WJs at all stages of their careers.

Impact of Patriarchal Violence on WJs

The following section summarises the different forms of violence patriarchy directly and indirectly exerts on WJs, as well as their cumulative and systemic ramifications on generations of WJs across the three countries.



VAWJ within Newsrooms

Systemic Discrimination and Gender Bias

The experiences shared by WJs in this research revealed a deeply entrenched culture of discrimination and gender bias within the media industry across Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo. Despite the growing number of women entering the profession, the media landscape remains predominantly male-dominated and resistant to gender equality.

The first form of discrimination reported by participants concerned recruitment. Across the three countries, media companies reportedly exclude women journalists from certain roles, citing concerns about potential pregnancy and the belief that married women will prioritise domestic responsibilities over their careers.

This discrimination extends beyond hiring practices to the daily operations of the newsroom, where women are frequently perceived as "weak" or "inadequate" for covering complex and traditionally male-dominated topics such as politics and economics. This stereotype is deeply rooted in systemic gender bias, which fails to recognise that women's perceived silence or lack of assertiveness is not a result of incapacity but rather a consequence of socialisation and structural discrimination. The media industry's reluctance to assign women to serious and important roles reflects a broader societal issue where women's contributions are undervalued and their professional development is stunted by preconceived notions about gender.¹⁰⁷

In a positive move, Togo has recently initiated several efforts to improve WJs' position in the media. For instance, in 2023, the Observatoire Togolais des Medias (OTM) highlighted the need to include a policy to promote women's representation in the media.¹⁰⁸ In 2024, the OTM, in partnership with the Réseau Inter-Africain des Femmes, Médias, Genre et Développement (FAMEDEV)¹⁰⁹, organised a conference where it committed to promoting greater gender equality in the media. Despite this commitment, meaningful interventions remain limited at the time of writing. Similarly, in May 2024, a panel discussion titled "Promoting policies and a culture of equal opportunities for women in journalism institutes and newsrooms," was held as part of a Conference titled "Women's place in the media in Togo" and organized by the OTM, bringing together media professionals, press organisation leaders, researchers, students, and journalists from various media outlets.¹¹⁰ However, these efforts are nascent and their impact is undetermined.

Disparities in Treatment and Professional Worth

The discriminatory attitudes that pervade the media industry also manifest in the day-to-day differential treatment of WJs. Many participants reported experiences of humiliation and intimidation, where they were not afforded the same respect and consideration as their male counterparts.

For example, a journalist from Benin described being "yelled at like a child," while another from Burkina Faso recounted being "mocked like a little girl." These experiences highlight the pervasive culture of condescension and disrespect that WJs endure, further marginalising them within their professional environments.

A Togolese WJ who partook in the research expressed frustration over the lack of female leadership in the industry. She notes that as of December 2023, only two media outlets were led by women in her country. She lamented,

We feel crushed; they don't want to see women rise. They try to undermine us with comments like, 'What are you doing here among men? This is the jungle—you won't survive.' If women don't conform to the system, they face deliberate efforts to strip them of opportunities.

—— A Togolese WJ

Discrimination also permeates WJs' career growth. Pregnancy, maternity leave, and other domestic responsibilities are frequently cited as reasons to disqualify married women from leadership roles or promotions.

Despite their experience and qualifications, many women encounter a **"glass ceiling,"** as put by one senior Burkinabè WJ who partook in the research, where they are systematically overlooked for advancement in favor of less experienced male colleagues.

The lack of transparent promotion procedures within media organisations facilitates favoritism, often to the detriment of women, who are then left to contend with the repercussions of gendered biases in the workplace.

Two WJs from Burkina Faso who partook in the research recounted experiences where employers, including one public television channel, inserted contractual clauses requiring that female journalists refrain from becoming pregnant for at least two years. One journalist, who was terminated for violating this clause after having her first child, described it as "a form of violence." Such practices not only perpetuate harmful stereotypes and undermine women's professional capabilities but also violate their most fundamental rights and freedoms.

Moreover, several WJs who partook in the research reported being targeted and insulted by male colleagues when they sought to advance their careers through specialisation or participation in international training programs and conferences, particularly those dedicated to women's professional development.

For instance, a journalist from Benin who had just returned from a conference in Dakar was derogatorily accused by a male colleague of "dressing like a prostitute" in front of others in the office. On another occasion, she was nominated for further training abroad but was denied authorisation to travel by her director, who claimed she risked becoming "too full of herself" if she continued to partake in these events.

These incidents underscore the persistent hostility WJs face when they attempt to break free from traditional gender roles and assert their professional ambitions.

Economic Inequities and Barriers to Leadership

Financial insecurity among WJs, particularly those in private media, emerged as a recurring theme in this research. A senior journalist from Benin's public media noted:

I'm not sure if working for public media makes me feel safer, but the working conditions are certainly more adequate—both contractually and financially. Many women in private media work without pay at times.

—— A senior journalist from Benin's public media

Interviews revealed that the gender pay gap and financial instability are even more pronounced in private outlets.

One senior journalist in Togo highlighted that in some private media organisations, women's salaries are reduced when they become pregnant, a practice that constitutes economic violence. This concern was echoed by another journalist from Togo, who had held a leadership position in a major media company and recounted instances where women who had recently given birth were barred from returning to work.

Such practices not only violate labour rights but also perpetuate the systemic marginalisation of women in the media industry.

Furthermore, even in media organisations that provide equal pay for men and women, women journalists face significant barriers to accessing higher-paying leadership roles.

Key Points

- * The cumulative impact of these various forms of VAWJ creates an environment that is hostile to women's professional growth and well-being. The internalization of negative stereotypes and the constant struggle against VAWJ may lead many WJs to avoid pursuing complex topics, such as politics and economics, out of fear of further marginalization or backlash, as revealed by interview participants. This self-censorship not only limits their career opportunities but also deprives the public of diverse perspectives on critical issues.
- * VAWJ has far-reaching implications, beyond the individual WJs affected. By perpetuating a culture of exclusion and inequality, the media industry continues to hinder the emergence of a more diverse and representative press. The generational impact of this violence is profound, as it discourages future generations of women from entering the field, thereby perpetuating the cycle of discrimination and underrepresentation.
- * WJs in the three countries require robust institutional frameworks to protect them from psychological and economic violence and promote their professional growth. Without such measures, the industry will continue to struggle with gender-based violence and discrimination, hindering the overall advancement of WJs in the region.

Sexual Harassment in the Media Industry

Sexual harassment emerged as the most frequently reported violence by WJs who participated in the research, cutting across all stages of their careers and various media formats.

Sexual Violence Against Women Journalists is pervasive, beginning in their educational years and persisting into their senior roles within the industry, regardless of the type of media—whether television, radio, online, or print press.

This violence manifests in diverse settings, including workplaces, interviews, and public spaces, illustrating the pervasive nature of the threat.

Prevalence and Forms of Sexual Violence

The forms of sexual VAWJ are multifaceted, encompassing:

- * Physical violence: Includes unwanted touching and rape.
- * Economic violence: Often involves sexual coercion, where women are pressured to engage in sexual activities to secure employment, career advancement, or access to information.
- * Psychological violence: Manifests as harassment, bullying, and sexist or sexualised comments, which undermine women's professional dignity and mental well-being.
- * Digital violence: WJs face online harassment, including the circulation of falsified nude images, which exacerbates the impact of such violence by extending its reach into the public domain.

Systemic Harassment Across Media Formats

The forms of sexual VAWJ are multifaceted, encompassing:

Sometimes I fell apart, sometimes I was able to face it. But I could never escape. No woman in this professional field here is ever free from sexual harassment.

—— Senior Woman Journalist, Burkina Faso

A significant majority of the WJs interviewed reported widespread and systemic sexual harassment by colleagues, employers, and information sources across both public and private media outlets. While two of the interviewed WJs had never personally experienced sexual harassment, they said they considered themselves exceptions. This harassment disproportionately affects those with less economic power or social standing, such as unmarried women, childless women, and particularly interns. However, professional seniority or financial stability does not fully protect women from such abuse. Even those in senior roles or with financial security are not immune, underscoring the entrenched and pervasive nature of sexual violence within the media industry.

The harassment faced by WJs is not limited to the physical workplace; it extends into public spaces, whether during commutes, fieldwork, or even online. Whether in person or through social media, these women endure moral, physical, and digital violence.

A personal account from a journalist in Benin encapsulates the damaging effects of sexual harassment. She lost her job early in her career at a well-known private newspaper after refusing her boss's sexual advances. Her refusal led to tensions and her eventual dismissal

I was just an intern at the time, so I had to leave

—— A personal account from a journalist in Benin

This forced her to give up on her dream of working in print journalism, despite her passion for writing and her university training. Though she has since worked in TV and radio, where she hasn't faced similar harassment, her experience highlights the devastating personal and professional consequences of sexual violence in the media industry.

Some WJs working in public media noted that while sexual harassment is not less common, the contractual protections in public organisations offer some degree of security. As a Beninese journalist shared:

Systemic Harassment Across Media Formats

The forms of sexual VAWJ are multifaceted, encompassing:

It's not that harassment is less frequent in public media, but at least we have more contractual protection. If you refuse advances, they can't just fire you.

—— A Beninese journalist

However, this protection is limited. Women who reject unwanted advances may not lose their jobs, but their careers often suffer, with promotions denied, interesting assignments withheld, or professional growth stagnating.

WJs also face harassment from information sources. As one Togolese journalist observed:

When we interact with men in positions of power—ministers, politicians, university professors—we're rarely seen as journalists. Instead, we're viewed as young and attractive, or as if we have something to offer.

—— A Beninese journalist

This objectification presents additional hurdles for women, who must navigate both the challenges of their profession and the prejudices of those they interact with.

A senior woman journalist in Togo who partook in this research shared that while her position as an entrepreneur shields her from sexual harassment within her organisation, she now faces more subtle forms of violence that compromise her professional integrity.

I've been told, 'You're a woman; you know what you need to do for this deal.' When a man says that, I leave as soon as I can. If you don't comply, you'll be defamed,

—— A senior woman journalist in Togo

This illustrates the ongoing battle faced by women in leadership positions, who are subjected to more insidious but equally harmful forms of violence.

One senior journalist from Burkina Faso recounted how a source asked her on a date after an interview. When she did not respond, the source refused to provide further information when she later reached out, effectively punishing her for not complying.

Lack of Frameworks to Counter Sexual Harassment

- * Despite the widespread prevalence of sexual harassment in the media industry, internal reporting mechanisms within both public and private media organisations in the three countries are virtually nonexistent.
- * While the labor and press codes of Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo cover workers' basic rights and penalize harassment, none have specific policies for WJs, and the three countries are yet to ratify the International Labor Convention 190 112, which addresses violence and harassment in the workplace, including sexual harassment.

As readily established by research laid out in the background, the issue of sexual harassment against WJ in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo is deeply exacerbated by a pervasive culture of silence and shame which cuts across social and professional boundaries.

Indeed, a significant barrier to reporting sexual harassment is the lack of awareness about what constitutes harassment. As one senior Burkinabè journalist explained, many WJs are unsure if their experiences qualify as sexual harassment, pointing to the need for clearer definitions and awareness campaigns within the media sector.

The fear of losing career opportunities or promotions also discourages WJs from coming forward, as demonstrated by accounts of supervisors who not only failed to protect their staff but blamed them for the abuse. In some cases, female colleagues themselves perpetuate this victim-blaming, reinforcing harmful gender norms within the industry.

The silence surrounding harassment is further compounded by victim-blaming attitudes. Women who do report abuse often face accusations of having "invited" the harassment, as noted by numerous WJ who partook in this research, highlighting survivors who speak up are often blamed rather than supported.

To underscore the pervasive issue of victim-blaming, one Beninese journalist criticised the fact that even educational institutions like the University of Abomey-Calavi have imposed bans on tank tops and are regulating women's clothing in an attempt to reduce harassment by male professors and students, shifting responsibility onto women rather than addressing the root cause of abuse.¹¹³

The case of Beninese journalist Angela Kpeidja exemplifies the potential impact and the high-cost WJs face when speaking out against harassment. In May 2020, Kpeidja publicly denounced the moral and sexual harassment, as well as the rapes, she and her colleagues endured in the Beninese media industry.¹¹⁴ Her testimony, shared on Facebook, sparked a rare public conversation on the issue and led to limited governmental responses. However, Kpeidja continues to face significant social and professional backlash, with critics targeting her, in part, due to her status as a divorced woman. She remarked:

Since I chose to fight gender inequality, I've become the madwoman of Benin.¹¹⁵

— Beninese journalist Angela Kpeidja

Other journalists, such as Priscile Kpogbemabou, also came forward, sharing similar experiences of abuse by media executives.¹¹⁶

Following these events, on May 5, 2020, the President of Benin held a meeting with the leadership of the national broadcasting service to emphasise the government's commitment to supporting survivors of sexual harassment within the media industry and ensuring that their claims are properly investigated.¹¹⁷ However, Kpeidja's case remains an outlier in an industry where fear and retaliation often deter others from speaking publicly, and unfortunately, the government's expressed support did little to support WJs in the longer-run.

Civil society organisations, including the Union of Media Professionals of Benin, also responded by establishing a support and legal assistance unit for victims of abuse in the media.¹¹⁸ However, interviews suggested it is unfortunately barely active and functional to date.

Key Points

- * The experiences of sexual harassment shared by WJs in this research illustrate the pervasive and systemic nature of VAWG in the media industry. This harassment is not confined to any single stage of a woman's career or type of media but is a constant presence that shapes their professional lives in profound ways. The impact of such violence is far-reaching, affecting not only the immediate safety and well-being of WJs but also their long-term career prospects and professional development.
- * The media industry must take urgent and comprehensive action to address this issue, ensuring that WJs can work in environments free from the threat of sexual violence.

VAWJ in Public Spheres

In Transports

WJs often face significant risks related to transportation, particularly due to their work hours, which frequently require them to use public transport—often motorbikes—during very early or late hours when it is still dark, and where abusers are likelier to target unaccompanied women. Interviews with WJs, especially for those working for TV or press, revealed that they may begin their commute as early as 5:00 a.m. and return home as late as midnight or even 2:00 a.m.



When I was working for a news channel, I would often leave work very late. Usually, colleagues would drop me off by motorbike, but when no one was available, I had to use motorbike drivers, which can be risky. Once, the police stopped the motorbike I was on and arrested the driver because the motorbike didn't have the proper license. I felt very nervous being on the road alone late at night with these policemen

—— A senior journalist from Benin

On the Field

Based on WJs who partook in the research, street interviews can also be sites of verbal or physical violence for WJs.

When interacting with men during interviews, some might refuse to speak or treat them with disrespect. Once, a man told a colleague of mine, 'How dare you even talk to me,' while she attempted to conduct an interview.

—— A senior WJ from Burkina Faso

Furthermore, WJs sometimes face attacks from interviewees

About three years ago, I was physically assaulted by an interviewee while working on a story about the dangers of adulterated alcohol [ethanol tablets mixed with water]. We were on the street, I was asking him questions, and he suddenly hit me. A female journalist who was with me at the time encouraged me to file a complaint, which I did. However, despite my efforts, the case was dismissed as a 'non-lieu' without any clear explanation.

—— A senior journalist from Benin

Moreover, the few WJs covering political issues in these three countries may face specific forms of gendered harassment from authorities.

While covering a story in the risky north of the country, my male colleague and I were arbitrarily arrested and taken to multiple police stations. One officer made inappropriate comments and gestures, implying a sexual threat. I was then temporarily isolated in a cell, separated from my male colleague, for what appeared to be an attempt at sexual intimidation.

— A Beninese journalist recounted an incident where she was sexually harassed by police officers

These various risks, threats, and actual forms of violence have tremendous ramifications not only on WJs' safety and well-being but also on their professional performance.

It is harder for women to focus on their work when they need to focus on their safety.

— A WJ from Burkina Faso

Instead of providing necessary protections, media organisations often impose patronising and discriminatory restrictions on WJs, further entrenching gender inequality.

- * WJs are frequently confined to “**soft news**” roles, while more prestigious “**hard news**” assignments are reserved for their male counterparts.
- * WJs may be prohibited from working in the field at night, under the guise of protecting them
- * These restrictions are justified as safety measures or moral concerns (particularly for married women) but are typically implemented without consulting the women themselves.
- * Such measures severely hinder their professional growth and limit their career opportunities.

Digital Violence

In the past decade, VAWJ has reached endemic proportions globally, with over 75% of WJs experiencing online violence—which often escalates into offline attacks¹¹⁹

Additionally, femicides of journalists are increasing at an unprecedented rate¹²⁰

As discussed in the context section, WJs are often subjected to damaging stereotypes, including:

- * Perceptions of being morally lax or promiscuous.
- * Accusations of using sexual favours to advance their careers.

The rise of social media has exacerbated these issues by amplifying and normalising extreme misogyny

- * WhatsApp, Facebook, and other platforms have become breeding grounds for sexist hate speech targeting WJs.
- * The digital environment is increasingly saturated with misogynistic content, leading to both online and offline attacks.
- * WJs appearing on television are often targeted for their physical appearance in comment sections.

This digital violence further endangers WJs and adds psychological pressure to an already hostile work environment.

Moreover, false or misleading information about WJs is often disseminated on social networks, occasionally involving the unauthorized sharing of private photos by former partners. According to several interviewed WJs, this misinformation is sometimes even reported by the media without proper verification, further intensifying the impact of digital violence and undermining their trust in the media as a safe professional environment.

This relentless scrutiny and harassment discourage WJs from engaging with politically and economically sensitive topics due to fears of judgment and backlash. Digital violence, therefore, contributes significantly to a pervasive sense of vulnerability and lack of support.

On a regional level, the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights passed a resolution in 2022 specifically calling on African states to adopt laws that protect women against digital violence, which includes harassment, cyberbullying, and other forms of abuse online. While this resolution encourages countries to review their legal frameworks to ensure women have adequate protection in the digital space, Burkina Faso, Togo, and Benin have varying degrees of legislative frameworks to address digital violence, particularly in the context of protecting women.¹²¹

The legislative frameworks of Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo address various forms of violence, including harassment, intimidation, and defamation, and are sufficiently broad to encompass emerging issues like digital abuse. However, they do not explicitly define digital violence as a distinct category. While survivors of online abuse can utilize existing provisions within criminal codes or gender-based violence laws to seek justice, these legal frameworks fail to recognize the specific vulnerabilities of women to digital violence. Furthermore, they lack clear mechanisms for both the prevention of and accountability for such offences, leaving significant gaps in protection.

List of Structures Offering Tools and Free Online Trainings to Address Online Harassment

Access Now

Access Now offers 24/7 free-of-charge help services available in nine languages, including French, to civil society groups & activists, media organisations, journalists & bloggers, and human rights defenders to improve their digital security.¹²²

Chayn's DIY Online Safety Guide

Chayn offers a personalised digital security toolkit aimed at women, with practical steps for protecting against online harassment. The guide is adaptable to the specific needs of African women journalists.¹²³

International Women's Media Foundation (IWMF) Safety Training

IWMF offers free online and in-person training focused on the physical and digital safety of women journalists, including African reporters who face online threats and harassment in their work.¹²⁴

Take Back the Tech (Tactical Tech)

IWMF offers free online and in-person training focused on the physical and digital safety of women journalists, including African reporters who face online threats and harassment in their work. This platform offers resources and guides specifically focused on the online safety of women, including African women, particularly those working in media. Their "Feminist Guide to Digital Security" helps women journalists protect their online presence from harassment and hacking.¹²⁵

Œil pour Œil CREATIONS

This structure offers a catalog of digital learnings that are aimed at all employees of a company without any particular prerequisites. Training topics include: GDPR - RGPD, Cybersecurity, Professional Equality of Women and Men, Diversity and Non-Discrimination, Duty of Vigilance, Fight against Sexual Harassment at Work.¹²⁶

Right To Be

This organisation offers bystander intervention and digital safety training designed for women, including journalists facing harassment.¹²⁷

Safer Internet for Women Journalists (IPI Africa)

In 2024, the IPI launched online training to equip African female journalists with knowledge, tools, and strategies to address online harassment.¹²⁸

Women's Media Center (WMC) Speech Project

WMC offers free resources for women journalists facing online abuse, particularly through its "Speech Project," which advocates for the protection of women's voices in media.¹²⁹

Forms of Violence

Type of Perpetrators

Economic / Employment-Related

Discrimination in recruitment and/or compensation

Employers

Contractual clauses requiring that WJs refrain from becoming pregnant for a two-year period

Employers

Refusal to assign WJs to 'complex' topics (politics, economics, etc.)

Employers, Supervisors, Peers

Digital

Derogatory comments on social media (Facebook)

Public (strangers)

Circulation of rumours and falsified nude images (Facebook and WhatsApp)

Public (both strangers and relatives of WJs)

Physical

Physical aggressions

Public (street interviews, night-time transports)

Violence during protests (pushing, obstruction, intimidation, etc.)

Police

Sexual

Stares, inappropriate or intimidating comments, unsolicited attention

Colleagues, employers, authorities (police)

Sexual coercion (*see Glossary*)

Employers, interviewees / Information sources

Verbal

Derogatory comments; defamation; sexist and demeaning speech

Fellow journalists, supervisors, and media owners; Public (in public spheres and on social media)



LACK OF INSTITUTIONAL SUPPORT

Lack of protective mechanisms

Despite the prevalence of VAWJ, across the three countries, there is a marked absence of internal policies or practices to address this issue, as revealed by testimonies from WJs and their broader knowledge of the industry.

In **Togo**, the **Observatoire Togolais des Médias (OTM)**, the self-regulatory body for journalists, has the authority to receive feedback on cases of violence against women, including WJs. However, interviews revealed that journalists have rarely, if ever, turned to the OTM for such cases.

In **Benin**, in 2021, the **National Institute for Women (INF)** was empowered to act as a civil party and assist survivors in filing complaints¹³⁰. However, several Beninese WJs expressed concerns to AWiM regarding the INF's lack of independence and confidentiality. This has made the institute a less trusted resource for research participants seeking justice, particularly when the perpetrators are influential media figures or politicians with close ties to the government.

Media organisations, public or private, in **Benin, Burkina Faso**, and **Togo** have largely failed to implement mechanisms to combat VAWJ, perpetuating a culture of silence that exacerbates the problem. As a senior journalist from Burkina Faso noted, the pervasive silence surrounding sexual harassment serves as a convenient pretext for media companies to avoid taking meaningful action. According to her, there is a "total blackout" on the issue, leading to a dismissive attitude:

Why put in place a mechanism for something that does not exist?

— A senior journalist from Burkina Faso

This inaction not only fails to address the problem but also contributes to its persistence by limiting women's awareness of their rights and the protections available to them.

Based on interviews and FGDs, media organisations across the three countries make no structured efforts to inform women of their legal protections and workplace rights. Women who are aware of their rights have typically acquired this knowledge through personal initiatives, such as independent research or participation in NGO-led training and awareness programs. This lack of formal education and institutional support further obscures men's abuse of power in the media industry, leaving WJs and their colleagues ill-equipped to hold abusers accountable or navigate the professional challenges they face.

Several WJs noted that being part of associations, federations, or networks has played a crucial role in keeping them informed of their rights and providing them with opportunities for training on VAWG. These networks have become essential for many women journalists in an industry that otherwise fails to support them effectively. The absence of institutional mechanisms to protect WJs underscores the need for more robust policies and systems within media organisations to address sexual harassment and promote gender equality.

Category	Structures dedicated to journalists	Structures Dedicated to Women Journalists
International / Régional	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Union Africaine Consortium Institut Panos Afrique de l'Ouest MFWA Réseau Inter-Africain des Femmes, Médias, Genre et Développement (FAMEDEV) Amnesty International (Emergency funds for journalists) Fondation Hirondelle (Suisse) CFI (France) Norwegian Union of Journalists International Press Institute 	African Women in Media (AWiM)
Bénin	L'Union des professionnels des médias du Bénin (UPMB)	CFU (La Cellule des Femmes de l'UPMB)
Togo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HAAC Observatoire Togolais des Médias 	Observatoire Togolais pour l'Image des Femmes dans les Médias

Burkina Faso

UNALFA

Centre National Norbert Zongo

APAC (Association des
Professionnelles Africaines de la
Communication)

RECIF de la Presse (Réseau
de Communication,
d'Information et de
Formation des Femmes -
Focus on access to
technology and
communication for women)

AF2JC (L'Association des
Femmes Journalistes et
Communicatrices pour la
Citoyenneté)

Psychological Assistance

The multiple and overlapping forms of VAWJ, exacerbated by a lack of societal and institutional support, often lead WJs to internalise negative beliefs about themselves. This fosters self-doubt, discouraging them from pursuing complex stories or speaking out about their experiences. Younger, less experienced journalists are especially vulnerable, as they often lack mentors to guide them through these challenges.

Many of the WJs in this research coped by taking personal responsibility for men's inappropriate behaviour and adopting a "tough" or "strong" persona. A mid-senior journalist from Burkina Faso described how she developed resilience to navigate her patriarchal family and workplace. Raised in a male-dominated environment, she explained how embodying traits typically associated with men helped her survive in the media industry:

I grew up in a patriarchal family, where men were valued more than women. Being surrounded by my father and brothers made me stronger, though it took time.

— A senior journalist from Burkina Faso

There is no PTSD training or psychological support available to help WJs process survivors' trauma. Media company HR departments offer no aid for WJs facing violence, and there are no NGOs specifically focused on counselling women in journalism. One Beninese journalist shared her struggle:

Having suffered abuse myself, I often want to help women who come to me with their stories, but it's always triggering—a psychological battle. It makes me face my own demons. But if I don't help, I don't feel like myself.

— A senior journalist from Burkina Faso

Many WJs internalize self-blame narratives, attributing the violence they face to African cultural and societal norms while overlooking the global structural roots of patriarchy and VAWJ.

Although two WJs in this study sought help through personal initiatives, organisations in Benin and Burkina Faso offering general psychological counselling for women noted that WJs rarely seek assistance, likely due to the stigma surrounding mental health issues. Further research is needed to understand why WJs are reluctant to access available services and how to effectively address these barriers.

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The absence of dedicated mental health services highlights the need for specialized support systems and broader institutional reforms to protect and assist WJs in navigating the professional and psychological impacts of VAWJ.

- * To address VAWJ, in all its forms, media organisations must implement clear internal protocols that outline procedures for handling instances of violence and harassment. Establishing safe and confidential reporting mechanisms is essential to ensure that women can report abuses without fear of exposure or retribution. Accountability measures must also be enforced to hold perpetrators responsible and to foster a culture of respect and equality within the workplace.
- * Moreover, significant support and services in terms of rights-awareness, trainings and psychological counselling are necessary to enhance WJ's safety and wellbeing.



CONCLUSION

This study, based on interviews with women journalists and an online survey, revealed that coverage of VAWG, especially non-physical forms like emotional, financial, or digital abuse, and violence in conflict zones, is lacking in the media across Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo. This study, based on interviews with women journalists and an online survey, revealed that coverage of VAWG, especially non-physical forms like emotional, financial, or digital abuse, and violence in conflict zones, is lacking in the media across Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo.

Moreover, insensitive reporting often perpetuates harmful stereotypes, victim-blaming, and the normalization of violence, hindering efforts to address the issue comprehensively. Establishing specific guidelines and standards should be incorporated into national press codes to prevent normalization of violence, avoid victim-blaming, and protect survivors.

Women journalists in these countries face significant challenges, including job stagnation, pay gaps, harassment, bullying, and sexism. Societal expectations around family and gender roles also hinder their career progression. The violence WJ experience, stemming from both their gender and profession, creates a particularly hostile media environment for women.

Many WJs have shifted to freelancing or online platforms for more flexibility, but this often results in job insecurity and fails to address the systemic factors behind VAWJ.



Final Thoughts

In conclusion, while strides have been made, a more robust, ethical approach to covering VAWG is needed. Improving the working conditions and protections for women journalists is essential, as their safety and empowerment are critical to advancing the fight against all forms of violence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations aim to improve media coverage of VAWG and to enhance the safety and well-being of WJs in Benin, Burkina Faso, and Togo, reflecting interview and FGD participants' insights and analysis.

Promote Gender Equity in Media Leadership

- * **Advance Women to Leadership Positions:** Actively promote women to leadership roles with appropriate measures to achieve genuine equity and impactful participation within media organisations.
- * **Ensure Transparent Decision-Making:** Encourage transparency and diversity in decision-making roles to enable meaningful contributions from women.
- * **Challenge Gender Biases:** Implement policies that confront limiting generalizations and biases hindering women's advancement in media.

Address Disparities in Job Role Distribution

- * **Equal Opportunities Across Roles:** Address disparities between men and women in job roles, ensuring women have equal opportunities in all media sectors, including traditionally male-dominated areas like politics and economics.
- * **Promote Parity in Recruitment:** Encourage parity and increased female presence during recruitment, adopting new approaches to include more women in media teams.
- * **Development of Gender and Maternity Policies:** Development and monitored implementation of gender and maternity policies within media organisations.

Ensure Safety and Protection of WJs

- * **Combat Sexual Harassment:** Develop and enforce measures to eliminate sexual harassment in newsrooms, ensuring the physical and psychological safety of WJs.
 - * **Integrate Kigali Declaration (KD) Principles:** The KD advocates for key measures to prevent sexual harassment and create a safer, more supportive environment for WJs.
 - * **Implement PSEA Trainings:** Conduct Prevention of Sexual Exploitation and Abuse trainings.
 - * **Establish Reporting Mechanisms:** Create anonymous and safe channels for reporting harassment.
 - * **Foster Allyship:** Build support networks within organisations.
 - * **Conduct Regular Audits:** Monitor workplace environments to ensure compliance.

- * **Confidential Reporting Units:** Establish units within press organisations where women can safely report cases of violence or harassment, ensuring appropriate action is taken.
- * **Governmental Support:** Ministries overseeing communications should include protections for WJs in their policies and ensure their implementation.

Strengthen Legal Frameworks and Policies

- * **Adopt Specific VAWG Laws:** Adoption (Togo) and effective enforcement of laws addressing all forms of VAWG – including in its digital forms.
- * **Ratify C190:** Ratify the International Labor Organisation’s Convention No. 190 which addresses violence and harassment in the workplace, including sexual harassment.
- * **Enhance Rights Awareness:** Develop institutional mechanisms to increase awareness and realization of WJs' rights across media organisations (notably through coordination between journalist unions, NGOs, and ministries in charge of communications).
- * **Educational Curriculum Integration:** Include VAWG topics in journalism education, consulting WJs and gender specialists for curricula development.

Enhance Training and Capacity-Building

- * **Mandatory Training on VAWG:** Ensure mandatory and regular training on VAWG and ethical reporting for all journalists, media leaders, and editorial staff (coordinated by unions and relevant ministries and NGOs).
- * **Include Journalists in NGO Trainings:** Encourage NGOs to include journalists in their VAWG training programs to build capacity.
- * **Develop Specialized Modules:** Create educational modules addressing discrimination and VAWG, with specialized training for women working in the field.
- * **Writing and Ethics Training:** Improve sensitive and ethical reporting on VAWG through writing and ethics training programs.

Support Mental Health and Well-Being

- * **Access to Mental Health Services:** Establish support systems within media organisations and unions, including access to psychologists and mental health professionals for PTSD and stress management, and profound healing.
- * **Promote Self-Care Practices:** Encourage self-care practices by media outlets (e.g. additional days off, more flexibility in working hours and remote work) among WJs to prevent burnout, and amplify WJ's self-confidence notably for those covering VAWG and conflict-related violence.

- * **Emergency Support Funds:** Set up funds to provide financial assistance to survivors of violence, including legal aid and other necessary support.

Increase Ethical and Comprehensive Media Coverage of VAWG

- * **Broaden Coverage Scope:** Increase reporting on all forms of VAWG, including under-reported issues like psychological forms of violence, child marriage, digital violence, and those occurring in conflict areas.
- * **Adopt Ethical Guidelines:** Establish and oversee the implementation of strict media guidelines on ethical reporting of VAWG at national and organisational levels as per the guidelines of the United Nations and International Federation of Journalists.
- * **Monitor Compliance:** Develop clear processes for policy implementation and compliance monitoring across media outlets.
- * **Allocate Resources for VAWG Reporting:** Dedicate more time and space to VAWG issues, ensuring regular and in-depth coverage.

Strengthen Alliances, Unions, and Federations for WJs

- * **Encourage Union Participation:** Motivate WJs to join and actively participate in unions, alliances, and federations dedicated to supporting women in media.
- * **Establish Dedicated Units:** Create thematic units within existing media organisations focused on addressing issues specific to WJs.
- * **Provide Mentorship Programs:** Offer mentorship opportunities connecting junior and senior WJs, fostering personal development and leadership skills.
- * **Foster Feminist Solidarity:** Connect WJs with national, regional, and global feminist networks to build solidarity and shared advocacy.
- * **Include Mental Health and Legal Support:** Unions should provide access to mental health services and legal assistance for WJs facing violence or harassment.

Raise Family and Community Awareness

- * **Community Engagement:** Conduct awareness campaigns targeting families and communities to garner support for WJs.
- * **Address Cultural Barriers:** Tackle cultural and social obstacles that hinder women's careers in media by involving families in understanding the importance of women's roles.

Encourage Women's Participation in Diverse Media Topics

- * **Diversify Coverage Areas:** Support WJs in covering a wider range of topics, including politics and economics.
- * **Training and Mentorship:** Provide training and mentorship to build confidence and expertise in traditionally male-dominated subjects.
- * **Challenge Stereotypes:** Actively work to dismantle stereotypes that limit the roles of women in media.

Further Research

- * **Voices of Survivors:** Future research should incorporate the perspectives of survivors—women and girls—who have been interviewed by journalists.
- * **Meta-analysis of media content:** Conduct an in-depth meta-analysis of how violence against women and girls is portrayed in the study countries.
- * **Media Coverage of Violence Against Girls:** There is a need for more focused research on media coverage of violence against girls, particularly on issues like child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and incest, which were not adequately addressed in this report.
- * **Differentiation Among Media Outlets:** Future studies should differentiate between types of media outlets (TV, print, radio, and online) to allow for more specific and nuanced analysis of the challenges faced by women journalists across different platforms.

Implementing these recommendations requires a holistic and feminist approach, involving collaboration between media organisations, government agencies, NGOs, unions, and the wider community. Beyond promoting tokenistic gender equity and ensuring safety, efforts must address broader improvements in working conditions to create a more inclusive and empowering environment for all journalists. With more comprehensive, ethical, and feminist-informed coverage, the media can play a pivotal role in shaping public discourse around ending violence against women and girls. By pursuing an ambitious, feminist, and collaborative path, the media can center the stories and lived experiences of women and girls, advancing journalism that is just, compassionate, and transformative for society.

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