



THE TAHRIR INSTITUTE
FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

The Realities and Recourse for Women Journalists in and from North Africa



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Executive Summary

Around the world, journalists are at-risk for the work that they do. This is particularly the case for women journalists, who often experience compounded harm as a result of the violations targeting members of the press, as well as gender-specific violations. In North Africa, women journalists are increasingly coming under attack by state and non-state actors. Yet even in the face of serious violations, they face serious obstacles in being able to document and report on these violations and to seek recourse for them in-country and extraterritorially.

In a new report, the Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) highlights and categorizes the violations experienced by women in North Africa as a result of their work, and explores the legal pathways available to them domestically and via the international system and regional courts.

The report finds that women journalists in North Africa are at risk of arrest, lengthy detention periods, and prosecution, particularly for reporting that is perceived to be critical of the state. They are commonly charged with anti-terrorism, national security, and false news provisions. In countries like Tunisia, strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP suits) that capitalize on patriarchal norms are commonly brought against women. Even when jail time is not in question, women journalists are at-risk of other violative practices, including travel bans, asset freezes, and license revocations. Defamation campaigns initiated against women journalists similarly seek to weaponize their reputations against them and create family and societal pressure for women to withdraw from the field; smear campaigns and doxing, often carried out by non-state actors, often amplify defamation by state and/or state-affiliated actors or pave the way for it. In the workplace, women journalists are subject to pervasive levels of sexual harassment and discrimination, particularly when it comes to issues of equal pay and eligibility for promotions. In conflict settings like Libya and Sudan, the risk of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women journalists has increased.

The report identifies a number of legal pathways that are available to women journalists who experience these violations. Domestically, an ability to file an internal complaint depends on the rigor of the workplace's policies and many fall short in this regard. For those seeking to bring civil or criminal suit, success is dependent on many factors, including whether or not laws on sexual harassment and discrimination are on the books; whether police officers, prosecutors, and judges have been trained in gender-sensitivity; and the strength of rule of law in the country at-large, among others. Extraterritorially, submissions before the African and UN systems are possible; though the principle of universal jurisdiction in foreign courts has not yet been tested in cases involving violations experienced by women journalists, there is a movement toward gender-sensitive litigation and the exploration of SGBV-related crimes that may make this a viable pathway in the future.

Ultimately, the report concludes with a series of recommendations on the importance of more comprehensively documenting the specific violations experienced by women, creating mechanisms through which to understand and address the unique impact of these violations on these women, and investing in partnerships and collaborations between women journalists and lawyers that can yield greater access to the justice system. ■

Introduction

Across North Africa¹, the situation for press freedom continues to deteriorate in an alarming manner. Journalists are at growing risk of targeting by state and non-state actors alike. In recent years, they have faced prosecution and arrest; administrative sanction; defamation and harassment; surveillance; and sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) for their work. Particularly in conflict settings, journalists have been at additional risk of injury, kidnapping, and killing. The World Press Freedom Index (2023) [categorizes](#) the situation of press freedom in every single country in North Africa, with the exception of Mauritania, as “difficult” or “very serious.”

Since 2014, the situation for respect of human rights and fundamental freedoms has steadily deteriorated in *Egypt*. At least 21 journalists [are currently](#) behind bars per December 2022 data from the Committee to Protect Journalists, making the country one of the world’s top jailers of journalists. A series of restrictive laws, including a [cybercrime law](#) and [counterterrorism law](#), have been leveraged to restrict independent media reporting and posts on social media; and a [2018 media law](#) has made it more difficult for independent outlets to seek licensing. In the lead-up to presidential elections set to take place in December of this year, a number of incidents targeting journalists, including the [arrest of an investigative journalist](#) associated with an independent fact-checking platform, have been documented, raising serious concerns about the space for press freedom going forward and on the sidelines of the political contest. Well over 500 websites, including the sites of various news outlets, [have been blocked](#) by authorities.

Since April 2023 when conflict broke out in *Sudan* between the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF) and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), the situation for journalists has become increasingly life-threatening. As recently as October of this year, journalist Halima Idris Salem of the Sudan Bukra Channel [was killed](#) after being trampled over by RSF soldiers. Journalists have been assaulted and have received threats of violence, including online, from the RSF and the SAF for their coverage. They are at risk of being targeted for assault, kidnapping, and killing their critical reporting. The deteriorating conditions in Sudan have contributed to an environment of fear and distrust. As a result of these threats, many journalists [have had](#) to flee the country or have been displaced from their homes. Further, Omar al-Bashir era laws that criminalize the publishing of “false information” and materials that “threaten public peace” or “weaken state prestige”--charges frequently levied against journalists--[are still](#) in effect.

In *Libya*, another country that has been torn apart by conflict, warring parties [have threatened](#) the safety of journalists, forcing some to depart and others to work under the protection of one side, compromising independence of the media space as a result. Amid violence, journalists have been assaulted, injured, kidnapped, and lost their lives. The passage of an October 2021 cybercrime law [has led](#) to a further chilling effect and greater levels of self-censorship. During the most recent floods in Derna, authorities [restricted](#) media access for local and foreign journalists, further contributing to the information blackhole. Though the country had been on a democratic trajectory, President Kais Saied’s July 2021 power grab in *Tunisia* [has severely impacted](#) the space for press freedom. Security forces have [targeted](#) journalists for their professional activities [when covering](#) public demonstrations

¹This report covers the following countries in North Africa: Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco, Mauritania, and Sudan.

and election periods. Of the frequently documented [violations](#) against journalists include the bringing of trumped-up terrorism and sex-related charges. Though the 2011 [press code](#) introduced a number of significant improvements to the 1975 code that it replaced; a more recent [cybercrime law](#) passed in 2022 has already been used to prosecute individuals, including journalists, for publishing information and opinion online. An active and engaged [National Syndicate of Tunisian Journalists](#) has played an essential role in addressing the crackdown and has been equipped with a unit to document and report on violations experienced by members of the press.

In neighboring *Algeria*, and following popular protests in 2019 which took to the streets after the announced candidacy of then-President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the state of press freedom has worsened. The definition of terrorism, which was widened in June 2021, [has been weaponized](#) to target among others, journalists. Government control over the hiring and firing of media executives [has compromised](#) the independence of the media space. In a recent representative example, the seven year sentence of prominent journalist Ihsane El Kadi [was upheld](#) and two outlets that he owns, news website Maghreb Emergent and radio station Radio M, were shuttered.

In the wake of the Hirak Rif protests and the February 20 movement in *Morocco*, authorities [have leveraged](#) a number of different tactics to target journalists critical of the state. Though a July 2016 press law abolished prison sentences for press-related offenses, authorities have [brought](#) other non-press charges to prosecute independent reporters and subject them to jail time. Reporting by Amnesty International confirms that Morocco also [purchased](#) surveillance spyware and that it had used it against a number of targets, including journalist Omar Radi.

Of all the countries featured in this report, *Mauritania* scores the highest when it comes to press freedom assessments. A law amended in 2011 protects press freedom and [introduces](#) important concepts like freedom of information. A diversity of media outlets [are present](#) in-country and there is room for some form of debate on a number of topics. That being said, for those covering sensitive topics or critiquing the political elite, there have been instances in which journalists [have been subject](#) to wiretapping, harassment, or arrest.

Amid this alarming phenomena of a deteriorating state for press freedom across North Africa, an unanswered question arises: What of the situation of women journalists? And more specifically: What challenges, risks, and violations do women journalists working in North Africa face as a result of their work? When they experience these violations, what legal pathways do they have available to them to document the violations they have experienced and see remedy or justice for them?

The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP) addresses these questions in this report. It does so based on extensive desk research and a focus group convening that brought together more than 20 women journalists from and in North Africa to reflect on their lived experiences and those of their fellow colleagues. Due to security issues, the report anonymizes convening participants and uses the phrase “convening participant(s)” to protect them in light of significant risk of reprisal. Where relevant and appropriate, it indicates country of origin but no other identifying information.

In this report, TIMEP will present an accounting of the key categories of violations committed against women journalists in North Africa by state and non-state actors; it highlights paradigmatic examples, rather than a comprehensive accounting, and focuses on the period of time between 2019 and 2023. It will then explore the remedies available when these violations take place, focusing first on those available in-country on the domestic level and then on those available extraterritorially. While this report does not purport to present a comprehensive accounting of every legal pathway accountable to every woman journalist from or in North Africa, it seeks to present a menu of key, accessible options to a community that has been systematically denied sufficient legal protection amid a number of very serious violations. ■

State-Driven Violative Practices →

This section of the report presents a thematic, non-comprehensive accounting of some of the key types of violations committed by state and/or state-affiliated actors against women journalists in North Africa: (1) arbitrary arrest and detention; (2) prosecution; (3) strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPP suits); (4) cybersurveillance; (5) defamation campaigns; and (6) other forms of violations, including travel bans, asset freezes, license revocations, and transnational repression, among others.

As an overarching note of reference, convening participants explain that there are violations committed by state and/or state-affiliated actors targeting all journalists, including women, and that there are violations that affect and target women much more specifically. On the former, these violations have a disproportionate impact on women due to the fact that the targets are women; these violations leave women vulnerable to additional gendered experiences and violations.

Other factors also exacerbate the harms experienced by women journalists. Convening participants agreed that across the board, journalism that is critical of the state places journalists at greater risk of harm initiated or facilitated by the state. One convening participant states: “The fact that you are a woman doing this upsets them even more and thus, women experience higher levels of danger.” One convening participant from Sudan stated that authorities tend to focus most of their targeting against women journalists who produce journalism in Arabic, due to its larger reach among the population, over journalists who produce coverage in English. A debate ensued on whether being associated with an outlet or being a freelancer subjects women journalists to a greater risk of harm; ultimately, participants agreed that each environment brings its own challenges.

Arbitrary Arrest and Detention

Amid the deteriorating state of press freedom and independent media reporting across countries in North Africa, women journalists have experienced arbitrary arrest and detention for carrying out their journalistic work. Of the cases surveyed and data gathered from consultations informing this report, women journalists are often targeted by state authorities for reporting on topics that expose government abuses, challenge the official state narrative on “sensitive issues,” or for being perceived as a threat to national peace and security. In addition to violations to the right to be free from arbitrary arrest or detention, these journalists experience compounding violations to fundamental rights including rights to a fair trial, privacy, liberty and security, and freedom of expression.

Women journalists in Egypt face politically-motivated prosecutions, arrests, and targeting by the state which have, in some cases, involved imprisonment and torture for their journalistic activities. A common tactic adopted by the Egyptian government is to order individuals into pretrial detention, which repeatedly gets renewed initially in 15-day increments for the first 150 days and then in 45-day increments thereafter. This is a practice that has affected a number of women journalists in the country.

[Esraa Abdelfattah](#), a journalist for Tahrir News, was physically assaulted by plainclothes armed officers on October 12, 2019. Between her arrest and her appearance before the Supreme State Security Prosecution the next day, officers held her incommunicado; she was subjected to physical beatings, torture, violently threatened, and forced to remain seated in

the same position while handcuffed for eight hours. Abdelfattah was eventually charged with false news and anti-state crimes. Similarly, freelance journalist [Solafa Magdy](#) was arrested on November 26, 2019 as part of a larger wave of arrests. Along with a group of journalists, she was charged with membership of a banned group and spreading of false news. Her pretrial detention continued to be renewed and on August 30, 2020, additional charges of membership in a terrorist group, spreading false news, and missing social media were levied against her, creating multiple bases upon which to keep her in extended custody. Magdy was subjected to physical and sexual violence while detained in Al-Qanatir Prison in Cairo. Prior to being officially charged and prosecuted, Egyptian journalist [Shimaa Samy](#) reported being arrested and held in incommunicado pretrial detention for criticizing the government's practice of pretrial detention of political prisoners. After spending ten days in detention without charge, the prosecution finally charged Samy with joining a terrorist organization, spreading false news, and misusing social media. Her pretrial detention was repeatedly renewed until she was finally released in August 2021. Other examples of women journalists who have been arrested and who have faced prosecution for their work have included: [Safaa al-Korbagy and Hala Fahmy](#), both of whom worked for state-affiliated media.

The arrest and detention of women journalists without charge is a tactic used by Algerian authorities to deter journalists from carrying out their professional duties. The arrest and detention of Algerian journalists [Lynda Abbou and Kenza Khatto](#) in May 2021 exemplify such violative practices. Both journalists were arrested with a group of at least 16 other journalists while covering the Hirak protests in downtown Algiers. While Abbou was released after being detained for three hours, Khatto was held in pretrial detention for at least four days without charge. On June 1, 2021, Khatto received a three month suspended sentence.

Prior to the October 2021 coup in Sudan, the arrest and interrogation of women journalists without charge was a frequently-documented occurrence. In January 2019, multiple women journalists [were arrested](#) and held without charge for participating and reporting on protests. Since the October 2021 coup, the arbitrary detention and violent assault of women journalists has increased. Journalists like [Maha Al-Talb and Noha-al Hakim](#), were physically assaulted and detained by state security officers for reporting on the anti-coup demonstrations.

Prosecutions

Governments across North Africa have weaponized vague legal provisions to limit access and the free flow of information, criticism of government policies, and systematically crackdown and prosecute journalists.

In Algeria, journalists, including women, who covered the Hirak protests or reported on government mismanagement were frequently prosecuted under the following charges: activity considered to destroy or change the regime; conspiracy to incite an armed insurrection against the State; spreading misinformation or propaganda likely to harm the national interests; spreading "false news" that threatens national unity or offends public officials; and undermining the integrity of the national territory. On August 6, 2021, [Nadjet Ben Messaoud](#) a radio producer in the eastern city of El Taref was prosecuted under criminal defamation

charges after publishing a report about an oxygen shortage in the region's state-run hospitals. Amid the crackdown on Hirak protestors, [Jamila Loukil](#), a well-known photojournalist for *Liberté*, was charged with terrorism-related offenses--“conspiring against state security in order to incite citizens to take up arms against the authority of the state or to endanger the integrity of the nation's territory” and “publishing information that could endanger the national interest”--along with 12 other human rights defenders for their participation and coverage of the Hirak protests.

Moroccan authorities have prosecuted women journalists for portraying the royal family in an unfavorable light, perceived criticism of the government that is harmful to national interests, as well as activities related to their private life. [Hajar Raissouni](#), a journalist with *Akhbar al-Yaoum* was arrested with her fiancé on suspicion of having an abortion. On September 30, 2019, they were both convicted of having nonmarital sex and an illegal abortion and sentenced to one year in prison. The police interrogated Raissouni about two of her uncles who are renowned dissidents, and her political writings. Blogger and founder of *Femmes Marocaines Contre la Detention Politique*, [Saida Al-Alami](#), was interrogated and held in police custody for 48 hours in March 2022, in connection to two Facebook posts that criticized Morocco's National Security and Surveillance Directorates. She was held in pretrial detention until September 21, 2022, when the Court of Appeal in Casablanca upheld her conviction under charges of «insulting the king» and «insulting a magistrate or public servant» and [increased](#) her prison sentence. Three journalists, [Hanan Bakour](#), [Afaf Bernani](#), and [Amal Houari](#), were forced to testify in favor of the prosecution during the trial of a journalist, Taoufik Bouachrine, who reported on the multiple allegations of sexual assault against a police officer. When the three journalists refused to comply with the judicial order compelling testimony, they were arrested. Houari and Bernani were convicted for refusing to cooperate with the court and “defaming the police.”

Strategic Lawsuits Against Public Participation (SLAPP Suits)

In Tunisia, government authorities have used SLAPP suits to silence journalists and stifle criticism. Their use against women journalists is a symptom of a widespread socially accepted culture of patriarchal attacks on women. As compared to their male counterparts, Tunisian women journalists [have been subjected](#) to severe violations and systematic attacks on their reputation resulting from defamation, threats, patriarchal social norms and stigma, job insecurity, and the arbitrary application of military and anti-terrorism laws.

On April 12, 2020, Tunisian blogger [Hajer Aouadi](#) published a video on Facebook exposing public corruption in the distribution of semolina during the pandemic. She also described the assault and threats she experienced when seeking to file a police complaint. The next day she was charged with “insulting a civil servant” and “causing noises and disturbances to the public” and convicted to one year in prison. In October 2020, [Myriam Bribri](#) posted a video on Facebook documenting police brutality in Sfax. In turn, the prosecutor charged her with “knowingly harming or disturbing others via public telecommunications networks,” under article 86 of Tunisia's 2001 Code of Telecommunications. She was provisionally released pending trial; on December 20, 2021, she was sentenced to four months in prison.

Cybersurveillance

Journalists across North Africa, among them women, have been targeted by governments for surveillance, [including](#) through the use of spyware, deep packet inspection (DPI), and social media monitoring. The use of surveillance technology in this context is intended to intimidate targets through access to their private communications, behaviors, and devices, contributing to greater self-censorship and violating the right to freedom of expression and the right to privacy. Furthermore, by leveraging technologies to restrict access to information and content produced by journalists, governments advance violations of the rights to freedom of expression and freedom of information.

In July 2021, *Forbidden Stories* and *Amnesty International* [found](#) that 180 journalists around the world had been selected for targeting in 20 countries by ten clients of the NSO Group, an Israeli cyber-intelligence firm known for Pegasus spyware software which enables zero-click surveillance of a smartphone. Of the 20 countries, three were in North Africa: Morocco, Algeria, and Egypt. Though the names of all 180 journalists were not disclosed to the public, at least two women journalists from North Africa were included in public reporting as having been selected for targeting: Moroccan journalists [Maria Moukrim](#) and [Hajar Raissouni](#). Morocco is [believed](#) to be one of NSO Group's largest clients.

Journalists, including women, [have been impacted](#) by government use of deep-packet inspection (DPI) technology to monitor and redirect internet flow at a large scale; DPI has been used to block websites and in some cases, to force users to access certain websites infected with spyware. Reporting from 2018 [found](#) that Egyptian authorities were able to block 34,000 websites in a single shot using DPI told by a Canadian company called Sandvine. This [is consistent](#) with later reporting from the country that highlighted how DPI had been used to block access to a number of media outlets, including two independent, women-led outlets, al-Manassa and Mada Masr.

Governments in North Africa also conduct social media monitoring and mass surveillance to oversee, intercept, and/or scan communications and/or social media posts, including that of journalists. In some cases, this monitoring [is conducted](#) manually by individuals and in other cases, it is automated and leverages artificial intelligence (AI) technology. In Tunisia, for example, the Technical Agency for Telecommunications [conducts](#) communications surveillance operations on behalf of the prosecution to collect electronic data that can later serve as evidence before the courts." In Egypt, the Public Prosecution created the Communication, Guidance and Social Media Department in 2019; its Monitoring and Analysis Unit [has been responsible](#) for monitoring social media content and referring relevant users to prosecution. This has resulted in a spike of prosecutions on charges of spreading false news and misusing social media, both of which have been levied against women journalists in recent years as described earlier in this report.

Defamation Campaigns

Across North Africa, women journalists are subject to defamation campaigns led by state and/or state-aligned actors that are meant to impugn their reputation and in turn, justify other repressive measures being brought against them, including prosecution and arrest.

One of the most prominent sets of examples from the sub-region come from the case of Tunisia. Convening participants explain that defamation campaigns targeting women journalists led by authorities and security officials often precede or occur shortly after arrest of these journalists; they are leveraged to justify the detention, create public support for it, and distill the reach of critique of the arrest. Women journalists who are targeted for arrest by the state [have experienced](#) “abusive language” directed at them via authorities’ social media platforms; this has particularly been the case for women journalists presenting an alternate political narrative since President Kais Saied’s power grab in July 2021. Convening participants also add that defamation campaigns have targeted women journalists who cover women’s rights and LGBTQI+ rights issues; in the words of one participant, these campaigns “use society’s rules [on morality] to restrict women.”

This practice does predate the power grab in Tunisia however. For example, on August 13, 2020, a group of security forces [launched](#) a defamation campaign against radio journalist Wasal Al-Kasrawi--using profane and degrading sex-based comments across social media pages--for her criticism of them during Tunisia’s celebration of National Women’s Day. The Ministry of Interior threatened to retaliate with criminal charges against Al-Kasrawi, enabling impunity for state-sanctioned violations.

In other countries in the region, authorities have leveraged state-aligned media outlets to defame women journalists. In Morocco, for example, journalist Hajar Raissouni [reports](#) that following her own arrest and later, the arrest of her uncle: “Our private lives were published by the defamation press, with lots of exaggerations, fabrications, and lies in order to portray us as a morally corrupt family that does the exact opposite of what it claims to be doing.” Ultimately, that harassment forced her to have to leave the country. Even following her departure from the country, the defamation initiated by the state did not come to a halt. She [tells](#) Daraj: “Unfortunately, despite my departure, the defamation campaigns targeting me and my family continued whenever I published an article or wrote a blog about human rights violations in Morocco. While the authorities were trying to portray themselves as a state defending women’s rights, numerous websites and newspapers tried to tarnish my reputation as a woman. And, because we live in such a conservative society, the easiest way to symbolically kill a woman is by killing her reputation.”

Though not explicitly a form of defamation, authorities have also weaponized the concept of harm to the reputation of women to create pressure on them or their families to stop their work. One convening participant from Egypt described how State Security reached out to her uncle and indirectly her father to pressure her to stop her critical media coverage. “They use the patriarchal systems put in place by society to get [journalists like me] to stop,” she said. Later, when she was arrested, she described: “Whenever my dad would visit me in prison, he was always accompanied by an officer whose purpose was to talk with my father so that he could talk sense into me and force me to stop journalism.” In Tunisia, officials placed pressure on El Zeitouna radio station to investigate two female journalists for their coverage; “the female journalists received more pressure by threatening to ruin their reputation as a way to ward them off of journalism,” reported one convening participant from the country. In Sudan, one convening participant who was arrested for her reporting on prisons was subject to pressure from her family and household to stop her critical coverage.

The impact of these defamation campaigns, whether they result in or justify arrest or not, is significant. Reporting explains that these defamation campaigns [place](#) “psychological and social pressures on female journalists... This negatively impacts their work and prompts fear of being labeled as biased, unprofessional, or working for foreign agendas.” Additionally: “These measures may cause a significant decrease in the professional activity of female journalists due to their fear of being exposed to situations that are inconsistent with ethics relevant to dealing with the press. Moreover, they may push the families of female journalists to put pressure on the journalists to stop or suspend their work until the country’s political crisis is resolved.”

Other Forms

In addition to the violations laid out above, women journalists in North Africa have also experienced other forms of harassment at the hands of state and/or state-affiliated actors, including travel bans, asset freezes, license revocation, threats and harassment, and transnational repression.

Women journalists across North Africa have faced restrictions on their movement through individual travel bans and as a matter of systemic practice. In Morocco, for example, when journalist Hajar Raissouni [first tried](#) to leave the country following arrest and a widespread defamation campaign, described above, authorities refused to grant her “an exceptional permission to leave Morocco.” It was only thanks to the intervention of “one official at the very last minute,” that she was ultimately able to leave the country with her husband. In Libya, an April 2023 policy [was issued](#) by the Government of National Unity [that restricts](#) the rights of women and girls to travel abroad without a mahram; this has naturally impacted women journalists working from the country as well. In Egypt, the National Press Authority requires reporters, editors-in-chief, and board chairpersons who are working for state media to get permission before traveling to Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, Turkey, Sudan, Yemen and Libya; though the policy does not single out women and applies to all journalists alike, women have necessarily been impacted. Also in Egypt, more targeted travel bans have also been levied against individual women journalists amid a larger trend involving the abuse of travel bans as a tool by authorities; reporting [describes](#) at least one woman journalist who did not know she was on travel ban, was stopped and interrogated for five hours at the airport, and questioned about her political expression and that of her father’s. She had no prior criminal record.

At other times, women journalists have seen their assets frozen. In all of the cases documented for this report, asset freezes have been levied in accompaniment with other actions taken by the state. For example, in Mauritania, at least one woman journalist who was being accused of allegedly taking bribes from a vocal critic of the state [was also subject](#) to judicial supervision, which also entailed a regular check-in with prosecutors, a travel ban, and confiscation of passports. In Egypt, the terrorism designation process, to which many journalists have been subject--among them women, [also entails](#) a travel ban and passport confiscation, in addition to the asset freeze.

Women journalists or women-run media outlets have also seen their licenses revoked in recent years across North Africa. This includes the example of Tunisian war reporter Kareema Nagy whose accreditation [was revoked](#) by the Libyan Foreign Media Department in June

2019 due to alleged “security concerns,” following an interview that she had conducted with one of General Khalifa Haftar’s aides. As a result of this incident, she “lost her employment as a reporter with Medi1 News Channel due to her inability to work without an accreditation.” In Egypt, The Guardian’s correspondent Ruth Michaelson [had her press accreditation](#) revoked after she covered a story on the number of COVID-19 cases in the country; she was asked and advised to promptly leave the country thereafter. In 2023, following a nearly-four year wait on the licensing and registration of women-led, Egyptian independent media outlet Mada Masr, the state media regulator [denied](#) the license; this administrative action resulted in legal action against the editor-in-chief of the outlet as well as a number of its women journalists.

Officials have also made threats and harassed women journalists for their coverage. One convening participant in Libya described a threat that her female colleague received from a state-aligned militia for having done a report on the businesses of undocumented migrants in Libya and their connections to militias. Another from Morocco who covered an incident in which women working in a sponge factory died under suspicious circumstances was called in by state security; though no legal case was ultimately brought, the intention of authorities was to harass and scare her from continuing her coverage of the story. In Sudan, one woman journalist was [orally threatened](#) by the state police chief with legal action in a public press conference for the story she worked on involving police officers and allegations of looting.

The violations experienced by women journalists have not been contained to the borders of North African countries. A number of incidents of [transnational repression](#) carried out by North African governments and directed at women journalists living abroad or in exile have been documented. Spyware, addressed earlier in this report, [has been used](#) against journalists, particularly by Morocco. Governments across North Africa [have also leveraged](#) the following tactics to silence journalists or take retributive actions against them: delays in passport processing and renewal, the arrest of family members back home, and harassment conducted by embassy and other officials. Human Rights Watch reports that Egypt [has systematically refused](#) to provide or renew the identity documents of dozens of Egyptians living abroad, among them journalists. Women journalists working from a foreign country are fearful of the extensive reach of their governments, but also the new environment in which they are working; this is particularly the case for women journalists relocating within the same North African sub-region. For example, convening participants from Sudan raised concern about the ability of newly-displaced, Sudanese women journalists in Egypt to conduct their work in an environment already rife with press freedom violations. One convening participant from Libya reported being subject to hacking attempts and defamation campaigns once she continued her reporting work from Egypt, where she had relocated. ■

Non-State Actors →

This section of the report presents a thematic, non-comprehensive accounting of some of the key types of violations committed by non-state actors against women journalists in North Africa: (1) sexual and gender-based violence; (2) workplace harassment and discrimination; and (3) smear campaigns and doxing.

This includes violations committed by militias not aligned with the state, employers, colleagues in workplace and educational settings, and fellow civilians.

Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)

Women journalists who seek to conduct their professional duties during times of armed conflict are particularly vulnerable to SGBV by actors, including armed non-state groups.

In Sudan, and particularly as the conflict between the SAF and the RSF has continued, reports of SGBV continue to increase against women in the country; numerous reports [involving rape](#) have made headlines. Women journalists have also been subject to assault, or even killing. Most recently, in October 2023, journalist Halima Idris Salim [was run over](#) by an RSF vehicle and killed.

Since the start of the 2011 revolution in Libya, the sociocultural and security climate in Libya has been extremely difficult for women journalists. Documentation of attacks against women journalists in Libya since 2019 is sparse. Prior to 2018, reports from civil society organizations [documented](#) widespread incidents of gender-based violence including attacks against women journalists, activists, and human rights defenders in Libya. [Since 2014](#) after the collapse of central government institutions in Libya, militias and warlords including armed groups affiliated with the UN-backed government based in Tripoli have been [accused](#) of kidnapping, detaining, and torturing several journalists, and destroying media outlets like the headquarters of Al-Nabaa TV on a level of unprecedented impunity. [Howeyda El-Serawi](#), a Libyan TV presenter noted the frequent attacks against women media workers across social media platforms. [Social media activists](#) in Libya are monitored by de facto security authorities, and harassed by other activists who are allied with opposing armed factions in the country--[often](#) resulting in extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, arbitrary detention, and forced exile.

According to Libyan journalist, [Fatima Al-Majbari](#), the targeting of women journalists by powerful tribes have had a chilling effect on the number of Libyan media workers. Mabrouka al-Mismari, a journalist and camerawoman, was [attacked](#) by an armed group of eight people while working on February 12, 2023 in the city of Benghazi. The armed group verbally and physically assaulted her. Despite calls for an investigation, there have been no judicial proceedings against the perpetrators.

Workplace Sexual Harassment and Discrimination

Across North Africa, women journalists report facing extensive levels of workplace sexual harassment and/or discrimination targeting them because they are women.

Sexual harassment in the workplace or while work is being done is a common experience for women journalists across North Africa. Most media outlets do not have formal sexual

harassment policies in place; this includes [even progressive outlets](#). In a number of countries, the male heads of media outlets or media departments are complicit in sexual harassment against women journalists; the power dynamic at-play makes it difficult if not impossible for women journalists to seek remedy, an issue that will be discussed later in the report. Convening participants explained that women journalists who are not responsive to the sexual passes of their supervisors or editors-in-chief may not be promoted or may experience pressure to leave the role and/or the field entirely.

In Morocco, four in ten women journalists [have reported](#) experiencing harassment in the workplace. While 82.8 percent of those experiencing the harassment [stated](#) that it was verbal, 17.2 percent said it was physical. In Tunisia, women journalists reported being subject to sexual harassment while covering protests following the power grab of Kais Saied in July 2021. In Egypt, a 2013-2014 survey by the Cairo Foundation for Development and the Law [found](#) that 48 percent of women journalists had experienced some form of sexual harassment at work--64 percent of which was verbal and 24 percent of which was physical; more recent data from the country was not available. Convening participants from Egypt pointed to the case of an independent, male journalist who used to train other journalists across the region and who [was accused](#) of sexual harassment and sexual assault by ten to fifteen women journalists from Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia amid the global #MeToo movement. When women mobilized using a variety of different tactics, he responded by attacking the reputation of the women and threatening to seek legal action against them. In a different case from Egypt, a colleague [was fired](#) from her job at a state-aligned media outlet and could not find a job following the incident after it became known that she had filed a complaint of sexual assault in the workplace; she was seen as having “disrespected the media outlet,” reported one convening participant and was then subject to “a slew of comments on social media against this woman from her former colleagues who were often forced to write these insults.” A woman journalist from Sudan who works in broadcasting reports that one day she went into work only to be handed a letter of termination without notice or explanation; she [states](#): “I am totally convinced the real reason behind this dismissal was my refusal to respond to after-midnight-calls I was receiving from the institution’s manager.”

Discrimination in the workplace is widespread. This is the case even when there are laws on the books, for example in Tunisia, that prohibit such discrimination. Convening participants said that across the board, women journalists receive lower salaries than their male counterparts. In Egypt’s state-run institutions and despite strong labor laws that are meant to guarantee equal pay among men and women, there [is](#) a loophole that has been leveraged; bonuses are not protected by the law and thus, a discrepancy in amounts and quantity between women and male journalists has been documented. In Morocco, 41 out of 66 female journalists [state](#) that there is a major gender pay gap. In Tunisia, convening participants describe how workplaces have discriminated against pregnant women journalists, denying them promotions, career-advancement opportunities, and certain roles. This in turn has also discouraged women from becoming pregnant or disclosing their pregnancies to their employer. During the pandemic and across the sub-region, women journalists were fired at a higher rate than male counterparts. Additionally, convening participants noted across the board that women journalists are more likely to be passed up for travel opportunities as opposed to their male counterparts.

Underrepresentation of women in the leadership of press syndicates across North Africa is a form of discrimination documented across the sub-region, but also an exacerbating factor in what remedies are available when discrimination or sexual harassment in the workplace does take place. Convening participants agreed that women journalists perceived to be “troublemakers,” for submitting complaints involving incidents of sexual harassment and discrimination face pressure or even lose their jobs as a result. The difference is clear in two examples examined by the convening participants during one discussion: in Tunisia, a syndicate with strong female representation has been better able to support women, whereas in Egypt, a syndicate that is male-led and has only one female on the governing council of the syndicate, has been unable to provide the necessary support, contributing to compounded harm as a result.

Smear Campaigns and Doxing

In addition to defamation campaigns led by state and/or state-aligned entities described earlier in the report, women journalists have also been subject to smear campaigns by non-state entities and individuals. At times, these campaigns have been standalone ones, and at other times, they have built on state-initiated campaigns and extended their impact and harm.

In Tunisia, one convening participant anecdotally reflects that hate speech and slander directed against women journalists has gotten progressively worse over the past three years. Numerous social media incitement campaigns targeting women journalists have been documented, including one wave of posts calling on followers to rape a group of female journalists. [According to public reporting](#), Tunisian journalist Fadoia Chtourou was bullied online when she did not wear makeup while reporting on a terrorist attack, and in another incident, Tunisian journalist Malak Al-Bakari was abused online for reporting while wearing a short dress. One convening participant from the country described how she was cyberbullied when she took off her hijab; before and after pictures were shared in a widespread campaign in order to “shame” her for her decision and impugn her reputation. Another was subject to doxing, the sharing of her personal information online, and then physically attacked by assailants when her address was disclosed. One convening participant from Sudan described how bots sent her threats and messages on her personal social media profile for her coverage on sensitive issues involving the conflict in the country and the role of foreign actors; she additionally experienced doxing. Women journalists from Sudan have been accused of working for foreign governments in smear campaigns intended to take away from their credibility. ■

Legal Pathways for Women Journalists →

In light of the above described violations experienced by women journalists in and from North Africa at the hands of state and non-state actors, a number of legal pathways may be available to those seeking to document these violations and their harms and to seek recourse and remedy for them. This section of the report will first explore domestic remedies and will then present extraterritorial remedies.

Domestic Remedies

The availability and nature of domestic remedies varies for each country. Judicial systems across North Africa are influenced by socio-political factors which can impact the impartiality and independence of the institution.

Journalists who work at a licensed media outlet or an accredited media institution may be able to address workplace grievances through professional or administrative complaints filed with the appropriate agency--such as a human resources department or commission. Although such written complaints are not judicial in nature, they may provide the first route of recourse. Journalists who are part of a press syndicate may also be able to seek recourse for any violations to workplace policies including discrimination and harassment. In countries in which women are underrepresented in press syndicate leadership however, like in Egypt, the needs of women journalists have not been sufficiently met or recognized. On the flip side, in a country like Tunisia where the press syndicate is independent and well-resourced, a unit to document violations against journalists, including standalone documentation involving women journalists specifically, serves a critical role; syndicate programming has also included convenings bringing together judges and journalists, provision of legal support, and submissions to the UN and regional systems.

Women journalists can lodge civil lawsuits against employers under applicable domestic labor laws that criminalize workplace sexual harassment, unfair and discriminatory treatment, and wrongful termination, among other violations to personal security. They may also pursue civil remedies under offenses defined in the criminal penal code including assault and battery. Conversely, in many civil law jurisdictions, victims can lodge a criminal complaint or request the public prosecutor to investigate their grievance under the criminal justice system. In some cases, laws on the books can help advance women journalist's access to the justice system; for example in Tunisia, Law 58 on Violence against Women has been used to protect women journalists targeted with sexual violence.

Gender-based risks and challenges are experienced by women worldwide and across multiple industries. In North Africa, women journalists are faced with inadequate access to legal resources due to weak regulatory and legal frameworks protecting women's rights, and societal understanding and conceptualization of specific harms as violations that could amount to actionable offenses. Advocacy campaigns led by women's rights organizations across the region have sought to raise awareness on violence against women and gender-inequality including workplace sexual harassment and discrimination, to challenge harmful social norms, and to demand legal reforms that properly protect women's rights.

There are many challenges across the region that have precluded women journalists from access to domestic legal and judicial redress. According to women journalists from North Africa consulted for this study, access to legal resources and the justice system is limited

due to the lack of public knowledge and awareness of various legal accountability pathways. In-country human rights lawyers rely on journalists to provide data and crucial information in support of ongoing cases against advocates, human rights defenders, and other members of civil society. Lawyers also play a crucial role as defense counsel for journalists arbitrarily arrested and detained including those who are prosecuted under vague, politically fueled trumped-up charges. However, legal remedies are seldomly pursued proactively by women journalists for violations experienced due to their journalistic work or gender-specific harms experienced in the workplace. In the words of one convening participant: “There’s an issue of lawyers not listening to journalists as they are journalists, but rather, only treating them as defendants.”

Access to legal and judicial remedies for women journalists in North Africa is also partly due to national legislative frameworks that fail to criminalize sexual harassment and gender-based discrimination. While countries like Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia have enacted laws prohibiting violence against women including sexual harassment, their effectiveness in protecting women journalists are sometimes stifled by lack of enforcement and sociocultural patriarchal norms that force women into self-censorship or selective reporting. At times, even when laws on the books exist, women journalists who have experienced violations do not feel that they can go public or that the system will protect them if they do; social considerations, societal norms, and fear for one’s reputation also play into this. Many convening participants from Egypt, for example, pointed to the lack of gender-sensitive training for police officers, prosecutors, and judges, and explained that when victims of sexual harassment have gone into police stations to report an incident, they have often been harassed once again. One participant said: “No woman wants to go to a police station in Egypt. If you are a woman, you might be harassed in the police station even when you yourself have been harassed, and this is all before even beginning the interrogation.”

Sociocultural gender scripts across North Africa are deeply engrained and institutionalized within the country’s fabric. Accordingly, women in the region have led public awareness campaigns to shift societal framing and normalization of violence against women. Civil society organizations across the region have facilitated trainings, workshops, and resources for victims and survivors to share advocacy tools and provide a safe space for women to share lived experiences. Though advocacy has been additionally impactful in raising the profile of women journalists who have experienced violation, some convening participants noted that larger organizations that do advocacy often focus on high-profile or big-name journalists and their resources are often inaccessible to women journalists who are newer in the space, face language barriers, or may otherwise not be connected to such international organizations.

Community organizing has empowered women journalists to collectively address gender inequality, build partnerships and alliances, and foster public support to address systemic violence and gender inequality. Such efforts can also be leveraged to create an intersectional and inclusive approach to tackle gender-specific harms that women journalists experience. Many grassroots and informal efforts do experience resource and personnel challenges; as a result, they have been able to provide some responsive emergency support, but not necessarily advance the conversation or establish strategic interventions for the long-term.

Extraterritorial Remedies

In the face of challenges in seeking domestic recourse for violations experienced by women journalists, extraterritorial remedies may be possible as complementary or standalone actions and may merit further exploration. Across the board, women journalists noted the need for more programming that makes these mechanisms more accessible and available to them, and that connects them with lawyers able to bring complaints before these mechanisms.

Noting that some extraterritorial remedies require the exhaustion of domestic remedies however, some convening participants expressed concern on whether that would be possible in contexts in which the judiciary has been politicized. Others noted that extraterritorial remedies may not always be binding or may take lengthy amounts of time; one convening participant reflected on an African Commission complaint involving women journalists in Egypt and stated that the process took so long that one of the victims represented in the case passed away before she could see justice.

The African Commission and Court System

All of the North African countries covered by this report have [ratified](#) the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights ([African Charter](#)). Article 30 of the African Charter established the [African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights](#) (ACHPR)--a quasi-judicial body tasked with promoting and protecting human rights [by interpreting](#) the African Charter and considering individual complaints. In 2004, the [Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Establishment of an African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights](#), went into force and created the African Court. The African Court is responsible for protecting human rights and interpreting the African Charter.

Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Western Sahara have ratified the Protocol establishing the African Court. However, only Tunisia has deposited the Special Declaration under Article 34(6) allowing individuals and NGOs to bring cases to the Court. Other interested parties from Algeria, Libya, and Western Sahara can only access the African Court via a [petition](#) to the African Commission, which then decides whether to refer their case to the Court. Articles 55 and 56 of the African Charter grants individuals the right to send communications directly to the ACHPR. Both the African Court and Commission have authority to refer cases to each other. However, the African Court only has jurisdiction to deal with cases submitted by individuals or NGOs *against* countries that have ratified the Protocol and deposited the Special Declaration under Article 34(6). The case must involve allegations of human rights and those alleged violations must have taken place in the State concerned after it ratified the Protocol, unless the alleged violations are on-going. It has jurisdiction to hear all cases and disputes submitted to it regarding the interpretation and application of the Charter, the Protocol, and any other relevant human rights instrument ratified by the *concerned* States. Article 4 of the Protocol [provides advisory jurisdiction](#) of the Court.

The Commission [has jurisdiction](#) over the rights enshrined in the African Charter. Among the Commission's duties includes adjudicating complaints submitted by Member States, individuals, and NGOs. Complaints should not be filed before parties exhaust domestic remedies within a reasonable timeframe and should include specific provisions to the

African Charter that are alleged to have been violated. The Commission has also developed a system of “[Special Mechanisms](#),” consisting of: Special Rapporteurs to whom specific allegations of human rights violations in specific areas may be brought, and Working Groups that monitor and investigate specific questions linked to the Commission’s work.

Article 9 of the African Charter guarantees the right to freedom of expression which encompasses the right to seek and receive impartial information, investigate, and report on matters of public interest--all of which are part and parcel to journalistic activities and relevant to the situation of women journalists. Governments are only able to restrict access to information based on limitations that are reasonable, necessary, and proportionate. The African Charter protects against arbitrary arrest and detention per Article 6. It guarantees a journalist’s right to liberty and security and requires governments to ensure that any deprivation of liberty is in accordance with established legal procedures and not used to suppress the legitimate work of journalists. Article 7 also protects the right to a fair trial which can be invoked if a journalist is charged with a criminal offense related to their professional activities. Although the African Charter establishes a robust legal framework that can be used to protect the rights of women journalists, the implementation and enforcement of said rights are dependent on the legal and political context of each country.

UN Treaty-Based Bodies

The UN has established [treaty-based bodies](#), which are committees that monitor state parties’ compliance with their obligations under [human rights treaties](#). Committees that may be relevant to the situation facing women journalists include:

1. The Human Rights Committee
2. The Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights
3. The Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women
4. The Committee against Torture

These committees produce reports and make recommendations to state parties, which can bring increased awareness and international pressure to comply with international human rights law. Women journalists [are able](#) to submit reporting and information for consideration when these reports are being drafted.

All of the North African countries featured in this report are state parties to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention Against Torture (CAT). All of the North African countries featured in this report except Sudan, are state parties to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

In addition, if states have ratified the Optional Protocol for these treaties or made a relevant declaration, as well as met other case-specific requirements, women journalists [may be able to submit](#) individual complaints or communications. Algeria, Morocco, Libya, and Tunisia have signed the Optional Protocol to the ICCPR, allowing for individual complaints before the Human Rights Committee. None of the countries featured in this report have signed the Optional Protocol to the ICESCR that would then allow individual complaints before the

Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights. Morocco, Tunisia, and have signed the Optional Protocol to CEDAW, allowing for individual complaints before the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women. Libya Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia have made the relevant declaration to the CAT, allowing for individual complaints before the Committee against Torture.

In addition to the above, the [Subcommittee on Prevention of Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment \(SPT\)](#) is a different type of treaty body that undertakes country visits and can visit places of detention and that provides advice and assistance to state parties on their national prevention mechanisms. Of the countries featured in this report, Morocco, Mauritania, and Tunisia have ratified the Optional Protocol to CAT, which creates a mandate for the SPT to engage in said-countries. Women journalists may be able to engage with the SPT in providing information to inform their outputs and activities.

UN Special Procedures

The special procedures of the Human Rights Council are independent human rights experts, designated as “Special Rapporteurs,” “Independent Experts” or “Working Groups,” who hold thematic or country-specific mandates. The special procedures can play a vital role in prevention by raising awareness and accountability for human rights violations. Special procedures receive input and communications from government stakeholders and members of civil society including victims of human right violations to make recommendations to improve the concerned matter, which could include advocating for measures of redress.

Women journalists can leverage the special procedures to highlight their grievances and lack of in-country accountability by [filing](#) a communication to a UN Special Rapporteur, or providing information to supplement their reporting and country visits. There are several Special Rapporteurs and Working Groups whose mandates may be relevant to the type of violations experienced by women journalists across North Africa; they include are not limited to:

1. The Special Rapporteur on the promotion and protection of the right to freedom of opinion and expression;
2. Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights defenders;
3. Special Rapporteur on violence against women and girls, its causes and consequences;
4. Special Rapporteur on the right to privacy;
5. Working Group on discrimination against women and girls;
6. Working Group on arbitrary detention;
7. Working Group on enforced or involuntary disappearances.

Unlike the African Court or the UN treaty-based bodies, states do not need to be parties to a particular treaty for the UN Special Rapporteurs to investigate allegations of human rights violations. However, in order to conduct country visits, the Special Rapporteur must obtain an invitation or receive consent from the hosting state. Any individual, group, civil-society organization, inter-governmental entity or national human rights body can submit information to the special procedures using an [online form](#).

Universal Jurisdiction in Foreign Courts

In recent years, foreign courts have increasingly been the forum of accountability for core international crimes when national judicial mechanisms are ineffective or inaccessible. Under the principle of [universal jurisdiction](#), national authorities may prosecute individuals for grave international crimes, notwithstanding where the crimes took place, and irrespective of the victim and perpetrator's nationality. Core international crimes including genocide, crimes against humanity, war crimes, and torture, are of such a heinous nature that it would be unconscionable to condition jurisdiction for accountability. While the accountability of universal jurisdiction has not been applied in a case relating to violations experienced by women journalists in North Africa, it can be a potential avenue to address widespread and systematic violations against women journalists. ■

Conclusion

In sum, the violations experienced by women journalists in and from North Africa are extensive and in need of further documentation; their impact takes on a gendered nature on the personal lives, professional careers, and enjoyment of the rights and fundamental freedoms of these women; and access to recourse and remedy via the law for these violations is possible, yet not without significant challenges.

Informed by conversations with convening participants and other women journalists from and in North Africa, TIMEP makes a series of practical recommendations. It recommends that additional resources be set aside:

- To comprehensively document the violations experienced by women journalists because of their work;
- To map, understand, and analyze the impact of these violations on the enjoyment of the rights and fundamental freedoms of women journalists, including but not solely the impact on their personal lives and professional careers;
- To create a network that brings together women journalists from and in North Africa and creates a space for exchange of lessons learned, collaboration, relationship-building, and mutual support;
- To support the capacity of press syndicates in North Africa to create documentation units that track violations experienced by journalists, including women, and to offer mental health and legal support for journalists, including women;
- To invest in the creation of rapid support units, either in press syndicates or outside of them in independent institutions, that can respond to emergency requests by women journalists experiencing violations in moments of elections, armed conflict, or other crisis points;
- To host trainings for women journalists on the ways in which they can seek protection domestically and extraterritorially when they experience violation for the work that they do;
- To provide digital security support and best practices training for women journalists, and facilitate security checks of their phones to account for the growing risk of surveillance;
- To build connective tissue between the legal community, advocates and advocacy organizations, and women journalists, making available legal know-how, access to legal counsel across different jurisdictions, and resources;
- To support the bringing of individual litigation in cases involving a single perpetrator, as well as strategic litigation that can establish a larger trend or be leveraged to support and protect a greater community of women;
- To invest in the creation and adoption of model sexual harassment and anti-discrimination policies for the workplace; and
- To invest in the drafting and submission of laws that would prohibit and/or criminalize sexual harassment and other violations experienced by women in the course of their work.



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