

# Sexual harassment is rife in many African media workplaces

July 20 2021, by Lindsey Blumell, Dinfin Mulupi

---



1 IN 2

women have faced verbal or physical sexual harassment at work.

Credit: WAN-IFRA

Survivors of sexual violence around the world have begun to speak out more in recent years. This has happened partly due to the [#MeToo movement](#), which began in 2006 in the US and gained momentum through high-profile cases like Hollywood executive [Harvey Weinstein](#) and actor [Bill Cosby](#).

On the African continent, several countries have seen the movement gain ground. In Kenya, there was the [#mydressmychoice campaign](#) while in Nigeria the [#ArewaMeToo campaign](#) mobilized survivors and activists. In South Africa, women have used several campaigns including [#EndRapeCulture](#), [#AmINext campaign](#) and [#TheTotalShutdown](#) to demand change. And in Malawi, journalists took to the streets in November 2020, in [a march against rape and sexual abuse](#).

The un-silencing of survivors may have accelerated in the past few years, but the response from organizations remains haphazard at best. Consequently, across many sectors there is little incentive for survivors to come forward. The policies that are meant to protect people from sexual harassment are often opaque or nonexistent. Moreover, punishment of perpetrators is rare and retribution for survivors who report it is common.

Included on the long list of problematic industries is [news](#) media. When the #MeToo movement took off globally in 2017, it triggered new research into the prevalence of sexual harassment in media. But much of the inquiry focused on the west, with almost no attention on the global south.

We conducted [research](#) on sexual harassment in newsrooms, working with [WAN-IFRA Women in News](#), a global organization focused on gender equality. Our large scale survey of news personnel looked at the rate of sexual harassment, how often people report it, the sources of harassment, and how organizations react.

Women in News defines sexual harassment as unwanted and offensive behavior of a sexual nature that violates a person's dignity and makes them feel degraded, humiliated, intimidated or threatened.

The results show little helpful action is taken when survivors report this

behavior. Organizations still cultivate unsafe work environments in which their staff seldom report it. If they do, their claims are likely dismissed. Or the accused is merely warned. The negative cycle silences survivors and empowers perpetrators.

## **Women are prime targets**

This project employed two methods for [data collection](#): a survey of media personnel, distributed online, and in-depth interviews with media executives conducted online through video calls. The approach was designed to understand patterns of sexual harassment in newsrooms, and monitor perceptions of officers with positions of power within media organizations.

The survey responses were anonymous and interview participants were assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. Data collection began in July 2020 in Botswana, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Tanzania, Uganda, Zambia, and Zimbabwe. It ended in November 2020.

## SEXUAL HARASSMENT IN AFRICAN MEDIA ORGANISATIONS



**1 IN 2**

women have faced verbal or physical sexual harassment at work.

**30%**

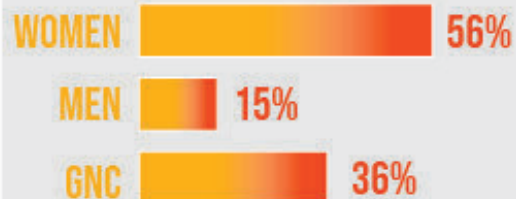
Under a third of cases of sexual harassment are ever reported to management

### VERBAL SEXUAL HARASSMENT



Some 56% of women faced verbal sexual harassment at work, against 24% of men and 50% of gender-nonconforming individuals.

### PHYSICAL SEXUAL HARASSMENT



56% of women had faced sexual harassment at work, against 15% of men and 36% of gender-nonconforming individuals.

### THE PERPETRATORS

SUPERVISOR/EXECUTIVE **41%**

### ACTION

**42%**

Credit: WAN-IFRA

The survey was completed by 584 participants and 32 in-depth interviews were conducted with managers and executives.

The findings show that women are the prime targets of sexual harassment. An average of 56% experienced verbal harassment and 38% experienced physical harassment. But 24% of men reported experiencing

verbal harassment and 15% reported experiencing physical harassment. Those who identified as [gender non-conforming](#) were a small sample in the study, but 50% reported experiencing some form of sexual harassment. Nearly half of participants reported witnessing sexual harassment—17% stated they had seen five or more incidents. And this was quite consistent across all types of media.

When people imagine sexual harassment in the workplace, they may assume it's a powerful man in a senior position targeting junior employees. And certainly, that happens. But higher management accounted for only about 20% of perpetrators in our survey. Participants also reported the perpetrators as fellow employees at 38%, direct supervisors at 22%, and outside news sources at 17% (participants could also choose "other"). In sum, sexual harassment is so ubiquitous that it could happen to anyone and come from anyone.

With the serious emotional and psychological [effects of sexual harassment](#) on survivors and the unsafe work environments it cultivates in newsrooms, it would seem logical for news organizations to make eliminating it a top priority. Sadly, this isn't the case.

## **Why sexual harassment thrives**

The first problem is that there aren't robust policies in place aimed at preventing sexual harassment. Only 53% of participants said they were aware of any anti-sexual harassment policy at their organization. And even fewer—17%—were aware of what was contained in the policy. In interviews, 68% of news executives were aware of a policy at their organization. The results indicate policies are weak and not enough staff have training on them.

A secondary problem is that only a third of survivors ever report their experiences to their organization. The most common reason given was

worry that it would have a negative impact on their job or reputation. The second most common reason was a lack of a reporting mechanism. This would imply that organizations lack the infrastructure for survivors to report and that a negative atmosphere around reporting instills fear.

When we looked at cases where survivors did report, we found that organizations responded to only 42% of them. The most likely response was to warn the perpetrator. Only four participants said the perpetrator was fired, and eight stated the perpetrator was suspended. Survivors risk their reputations, status, retribution and further trauma to come forward. Those who do are likely to be failed by their organization's lack of response.

## **What news organizations must do**

Without proper accountability and due process in place, sexual harassment will continue in the [news media](#) and workplaces around the world. A lack of reporting and consequences will also continue. News personnel will fear the backlash. Many survivors choose to leave their jobs and even the media industry to get away from harmful newsrooms. Those who stay risk future sexual harassment, anxiety, feeling disempowered, and many other negative consequences.

News organizations need to adopt policies with zero tolerance for sexual [harassment](#). These must clearly outline what [sexual harassment](#) is, how survivors can safely report it, procedures on how complaints will be given due process, and consequences for perpetrators. Staff need regular training and survivors need support.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Sexual harassment is rife in many African media workplaces (2021, July 20) retrieved 21 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2021-07-sexual-rife-african-media-workplaces.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.