International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women: MFWA calls for stronger protection of women journalists and an end to impunity

As the world marks the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the Media Foundation for West Africa (MFWA) calls for urgent action to ensure justice for women journalists who face violence, protect survivors, and end the impunity that allows attacks against them to continue.

A global report published in April 2026 by UN Women, in partnership with UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ), found that only 14% of women journalists surveyed had pursued legal action against perpetrators, facilitators, or employers following online violence. This comes even as online violence against women journalists rises, fuelled by AI-driven abuse such as deepfakes.

Across West Africa, women journalists face threats, physical attacks, sexual harassment and online abuse, both in the newsroom and in the field. An August 2026 MFWA study of Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger and Guinea found that women journalists there face compounding risks, including cyberstalking and body shaming.

The day also marks the beginning of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence, which run until December 10 under the theme: "UNiTE to End Violence against Women and Girls: Ensure Justice, Protect Survivors and End Impunity."

The MFWA has also documented physical attacks on women journalists. In Ghana, on July 11, 2025, Sally Martey, a journalist with JoyNews, was slapped and shoved by a masked man while covering a parliamentary election rerun in Accra. In Nigeria, on August 6, 2026, Ibukunoluwa Daramola, a journalist with News Central Television, was slapped while conducting a live street interview in Lagos.

Online violence is an equally serious threat to women journalists and other women in public life. In Ghana, an eight-month MFWA monitoring exercise, from August 2024 to March 2025, documented 583 instances of online gender-based violence across five platforms, mostly targeting female politicians.

In Sierra Leone, in October and November 2026, two journalists with Liberty Online TV, Mabel Kabba and Kadija Bangura, faced a wave of online attacks and harassment after interviewing Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) publicity secretary Moses Sellu Mambu. In Burkina Faso, Sky News journalist Yousra Elbagir faced an online harassment campaign after her documentary on the country's political situation aired on April 10, 2026. The campaign used manipulated images and false information to discredit her.

The UN Women report also found that 45% of the women journalists and media professionals surveyed said they self-censored on social media because of online violence, narrowing women's participation in public debate and the diversity of voices in the media.

Yet 2026 also brought progress. In Ghana, on May 14, the Accra High Court ordered the police to compensate journalists Bridget Otoo and Vanessa Edotom Boateng, finding that officers had assaulted Otoo, reportedly tearing her blouse, and unlawfully detained Boateng during the September 2023 #OccupyJulorbiHouse protests. In Nigeria, on July 29, the Federal Capital Territory High Court in Abuja ordered the police to pay 12 million naira to journalist Kasarahchi Aniagolu over her unlawful arrest, assault and detention while covering a police operation in February 2024.

In Sierra Leone, on February 25, the Independent Media Commission ordered the Sierra Leone Broadcasting Corporation (SLBC) to compensate former journalist Umu Thoronka for her unlawful dismissal. A related case alleging sexual harassment and discrimination is before the ECOWAS Court of Justice.

These rulings show that redress is possible when institutions comply, yet for many women journalists it remains out of reach. Of the 77 violations against journalists the MFWA recorded across West Africa in the first half of 2026, only about five led to any form of redress. Although the share pursuing legal action has risen from 8% in 2020 to 14%, fear of reprisals, stigma and distrust of institutions still keep many survivors from reporting abuse and seeking justice.

The MFWA has worked to make the media and online spaces safer for women. With support from the Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands in Ghana, its digital safety trainings have equipped 430 women in Ghana, Liberia and Sierra Leone, and 200 female politicians in Ghana ahead of the 2024 elections. Through the Equal Voices project (2023–2025) with Canal France International (CFI), it trained 40 journalists in Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire in gender-sensitive reporting and developed a five-year strategy for gender equality in the Ghanaian media. Its research found that most private media organisations lack policies on gender-based violence and harassment.

But training and advocacy alone cannot end impunity. Under the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, CEDAW and the Maputo Protocol, West African states have a duty to protect women from violence and ensure that survivors obtain justice. The MFWA therefore calls on:

1. West African governments to enforce laws on violence against women and girls, extend them to AI-generated abuse, and give particular attention to the safety of women journalists.
2. Police and judicial authorities to investigate reported cases promptly and impartially, prosecute perpetrators where the evidence allows, and ensure that court decisions are enforced.
3. Media organisations and journalists' associations to adopt and enforce policies against sexual harassment and gender-based violence, with confidential reporting and legal, medical and psychosocial support for survivors.
4. Technology companies to act swiftly against online violence, including deepfakes, manipulated images and coordinated harassment campaigns, and to give women journalists access to effective remedies.
5. ECOWAS, the African Union and the African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights to integrate the safety of women journalists into their press freedom, digital rights and gender equality frameworks.

For its part, the MFWA will continue to monitor and document attacks on women journalists across West Africa and to advocate for accountability in every case. It will also continue to provide legal assistance and digital safety training to journalists, including through its new Legal Support Fund in Ghana. Ensuring justice, protecting survivors and ending impunity are essential if women journalists are to work freely and safely, without fear of violence or reprisals.