



Woman journalists cite challenges of reporting in Africa

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Three African woman journalists, speaking in a virtual discussion sponsored by the National Press Club's International Correspondents Committee Dec. 6, a week before the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in Washington, emphasized the importance of women in the media in Africa and the special challenges they face.

Two of the journalists, Culton Scovia Nakamya, an award-winning Ugandan journalist based in Kampala, and Pearl Matibe a Zimbabwe-born and Washington-based State Department and White House correspondent for the *Swaziland News*, described how they have been the targets of violence, harassment, and bullying while reporting in Africa.

The third journalist, Angela Quintal, South African-born Africa program coordinator at the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), observed that her organization receives two or three reports every day of such incidents.

Nakamya, founder of HerStory Foundation, which advocates on women's issues, described how she was targeted and interrogated by the police in Uganda during the country's presidential campaign in 2020. She was surrounded by heavily armed, masked policemen with their hands on the trigger.

"It was like a war zone, not a presidential campaign," she said.

The effect on her and other journalists was chilling, but she was not cowed, she said, noting, "When you have a voice as a journalist, you have the power to negotiate."

Matibe told how she has been the target of incessant cyber bullying, a form of violence that impacts her friends and family as well as herself. She has learned to document every incident, she said.

She bemoaned the fact that no journalists were invited to the table of the U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit, despite their key role as a pillar of democracy. In her view, trade and investment, and international peace and security -- two focal points of the Summit -- can't happen without a free press because "journalists are the fourth arm of government."

Quintal cited examples of press harassment in Senegal, the Cameroons, Somalia, Mali and South Africa. She noted that election years are especially dangerous for the media. (Next year, elections will be held in Nigeria, Zimbabwe, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo).

However, not everything is gloom and doom, she said. There is some positive progress in Malawi, she reported, and UNESCO issued a 10-year update on the UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity in November. Quintal urged her fellow panelists not to let the online trolls silence them, emphasizing that the CPJ is on call to offer social, emotional and institutional support to journalists.

The panel ended on a positive note when Nakamya described her most meaningful story -- reporting on a regional hospital in Uganda that didn't supply water to its patients. The journalist managed to conduct covert interviews inside the hospital. The day after her story broke, the government ensured the availability of water.

A fourth scheduled participant in the discussion, Blessed Mhlanga, senior political reporter at NewsDay Zimbabwe, was unable to attend because of an electrical blackout in Harare, underscoring additional challenges journalists face in Africa.

The panel was moderated by International Correspondents Committee member **Claude Porsella**, Medi 1's Washington correspondent. In introducing the speakers, he noted that press freedom is regressing in many parts of the world, including the African continent.

