

# THE UNTOLD TALES OF DEEP MISERY

**Somali Journalists and  
their Precarious Work**



**2010 Survey of Somali Journalists**

**NUSOJ**

## INTRODUCTION

In Somalia, working journalists and other media workers have borne dangerous working conditions for years. Unfortunately, in the past four years poor conditions have deteriorated even more. Violence, targeting journalists has made investigative journalism a hazardous undertaking and the reporting of events, issues, and trends to the wider Somali audience is, as a result, erratic.

The atmosphere of insecurity in which journalists have to work has already resulted in the deaths of both experienced and young upcoming journalists. The precarious conditions in an otherwise booming media industry further contribute to this unfortunate situation.

Generally, journalists are among the most disadvantaged lot in media houses where they often earn less than the technicians and other support staff. They earn very low wages, work long and unpredictable hours and enjoy no fringe benefits. Agitation for better terms and working conditions by journalists is often met with threats of dismissal.

Part of the problem is the seeming abundance of cheap journalistic labour willing to accept any terms while other media workers, such as technicians who are also not working in appropriate conditions, earn slightly better. The perceived scarcity of technical employee skills forces employers to be more receptive to their grievances.

Employment for most journalists is typically short-lived and there is no definite duration of employment contracts. There are no standard working hours, weeks or months for media workers. Social security is completely lacking in the sector which is a pervasive challenge shared by all workers in the country because there is no functional government fund.

While the more successful media houses have seen an increase in the number of women journalists, women are the most vulnerable and suffer the most abusive working conditions. They earn less than their male counterparts and suffer unequal treatment in many other respects. Isolation and sexual abuse of female journalists is prevalent in the media. Women journalists are sidelined from hard reporting work and forced into soft work such as advertising and public relations instead of getting exposure to the same career advancing opportunities. Both male and female working journalists lack the legal protection mechanisms for employees in dangerous occupations.

Due to these appalling issues, the National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) conducted a survey on precarious working conditions in 2010 for journalists and the results showed sweeping job insecurity, poorer remuneration, unwaged work and discrimination. NUSOJ decided to carry out this survey to present the extent, consequences and factors that drive the precarious conditions of work for journalists in order to find ways to improve working conditions.

## THE NATIONAL SITUATION

Somalia remains in the midst of an ongoing violent crisis that has seen the nation without an effective government for nearly twenty years.

This prolonged and profoundly difficult political and security situation has created extreme challenges for workers in Somalia. In the country many journalists, especially those covering the armed conflicts for both local and international news media organizations, find themselves in a situation of precarious and dangerous employment.

In the country there are three administrations that operate with varying degrees of sovereignty, the Transitional Federal Government (TFG), generally recognized by the international community,

and the semi-autonomous regional state of Puntland in the north-east and the secessionist region of Somaliland in the north-west. Somaliland unilaterally declared independence from greater Somalia in 1991.

In the southern and central regions, which are nominally, but not in practice under the control of the TFG, there is a major vacuum in the rule of law. This vacuum is largely filled by clan based militias operating either as allies of or opponents of several fundamentalist Islamic insurgent groups, the dominant of which is Al-Shabaab.

The security of these regions deteriorated and has been getting more complicated day-by-day due to the lack of a viable political solution. The Djibouti peace agreement brought together the Alliance for the Re-liberation of Somalia (ARS) and TFG, but TFG is still to restore law and order and be above the internal leadership wrangles that incapacitated it.

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Puntland and Somaliland are relatively stable and have functioning governmental systems. The political parts and the people of Somaliland made milestone achievements that cemented the peace, stability and democratic rule through presidential elections that resulted in peaceful transfer of power. The Transitional Federal Charter of the TFG and the constitutions of Puntland and Somaliland all guarantee the rights of freedom of association, and the right of workers to join or form trade unions.

However, Puntland and the TFG adhere to Somalia’s aged labour code, which was adopted on 18 October 1972 and has significant weaknesses in regards to protecting basic worker rights. In Somaliland, a new labour code has been adopted. The Somaliland Labour Law deals with the minimum rights of employees, recruitment, contracts of employment, health & safety at work, settlement of employment disputes, employment registration, trade unions, the rights and duties of employees and employers, the role of the Labour Office, skills training and remuneration, work permits for foreign employees, and other important aspects of labour law. Enforcement, and the capacity to enforce, continues to be a challenge for the Somaliland authorities.

None of the three administrations have adequate laws protecting decent work, or laws describing minimum wages/salaries of the areas they control. The 1972 Somali labour code does cover a wide spectrum of workers, including women, part time workers, domestic workers, agriculture workers, contractual workers., and temporary workers, but protections are antiquated and inadequate, aside from a near absence of enforcement for much of the country.

#### 2010 Somali Journalist survey results:

Working Situation	Total Workforce	Union Members	Young	Old	Male	Female
Permanent Working Journalists	134	91	28%	72.00%	79.85%	20.15%
Precarious Working Journalists	605	387	84%	28%	72.56%	27.44%
<b>Total</b>	<b>739</b>	<b>478</b>				

In both Somalia and Somaliland labour codes, the law sets out certain preconditions for the formation of trade unions. However, there are no systems in place to implement acceptable work conditions, decent work, child labour regulations, work standards and minimum wages. There are significant gender inequalities written into the laws of all three administrations.

The TFG, which is the recognized government of Somalia, has not worked on labour laws since its formation, except for the presentation to cabinet of ministers in 2006 of a draft law governing civil servants.

Additionally, Somalia has only ratified ten ILO conventions, including only three of the core conventions (C029, C105, and C111). Again, it needs to be clarified that the government has little or no power to enforce these conventions and other international obligations that the TFG has inherited as the recognized government.

## PRECARIOUS WORK IN THE JOURNALISM AND MEDIA SECTOR

Most of the working journalists in Somalia work under verbal agreements and they are not employed through written contracts. Written documents that clearly spell out their rights, duties/responsibilities and deliverables are very rare. Most journalists in Somalia are young adults, overwhelmingly male. Many are either excited to join the journalism profession, in part because it can be entered without a particular educational requirement. Media owners are often eager to employ young journalists over more well-trained and experienced staff because of a desire to pay less.

As the disastrous conflict in south-central Somalia has intensified in recent years, the area has become one of the most dangerous in the world for working journalists. The work is often poorly paid, insecure, unprotected, and cannot support the families of the journalists. International employers, such as major media aggregators, wire-services, and other news outlets often employ local stringers to cover events in Somalia that would be unsafe for their own nationals.

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Respondents to this survey overwhelmingly described their work as what could be summarized as freelance employment. Most of the journalists working in Somalia do not charge by the day, hour, or page or on a per-assignment basis. However, they are often paid a flat rate, generally between \$20 and 80\$ USD per month. The bulk of the journalists surveyed are paid at the lowest end of this spectrum, approximately \$20 USD for a single month.

It is also common for Somali journalists to work under a “name-for-work” system that essentially compensates the journalist only with a by-line recognition of their work. Since there are young workers eager to make a name for themselves, there are journalists who will accept this system and work for no monetary compensation.

In general, the survey showed a 68% increase in the number of journalists working under informal and precarious conditions from the 2007 figures that NUSOJ compiled.

Across Somalia, local and international news media organizations employ journalists without going through employment agencies or brokers. Often, the employment is of a local to the region where the media house is located. For example a Radio Station based in Mogadishu rarely recruits a journalist in Bossasso because the cost of hiring and maintaining a network of professionals in multiple regions is higher.

The majority of the precariously working journalists are untrained and unqualified young journalists. Over 70% across Somalia are male. Journalists working under these conditions are particularly vulnerable. In general media houses in Somali cite low advertising revenue and inadequate income as primary reasons for failing to provide better remuneration.

Journalists also reported a significant pattern of bias in favour of young workers. Veteran journalists reported a deteriorating employment situation. Much of this shift is attributed to a desire by employers to pay less, which they can do for inexperienced young workers.

Additionally, there is a perception that new technologies and techniques used by media houses in recent years push more of the work towards younger workers who are thought to be more technologically savvy. The increased focus by employers on digital radio, and web-based services has contributed to this trend.

In general working journalists in Somalia are employed and managed by the owner or director of the media house. In most cases the journalist needs to know this person, or be recommended by a fellow journalist already working for the media house. There are seldom employment contracts, and work is generally gained through these personal connections. There is little in the way of standardized working hours, or a consistent approach to leave or sick leaves. This is compounded by the absence of any social benefits, due to the effective absence of a central government. Because the employment relationship is so tenuous, journalists accepting to work under this situation are unprotected from many other dangerous and abusive conditions.

It is common that verbal employment agreements include a probationary period, sometimes called a “make yourself famous” period, of up to a year. However, there is rarely any formal transition, or clarification of when a worker has ended their probation. The surveyor found multiple cases where workers had worked at numerous radio stations in a period of a few years, never reaching formal employment at any. It is also common for journalists to work on a will-call basis, adding their names to lists with each media house for as-need freelance work.

Despite the challenges, there has been some forward progress in the sector. The National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) has had 7 recognition agreements with 7 Media Houses since 2005 when the union was transformed from an association to a trade union. The employers came back to the union to change the agreement due to ongoing wars and conflicts impacting the income generating of the media houses. While, the union does not have a policy to deal with precarious workers, the heads of the six branches of the union have been working to publicize the degraded and dangerous working conditions in their respective constituencies.

NUSOJ leaders have reported that the situation in Puntland, and in the north-eastern regions is different from the rest of the country. In the rest of Somalia, the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources Development of the Transitional Federal Government has yet to engage in consultations with the trade union movement concerning legal reform and labour law enforcement mechanisms.

## **GENDER AND PRECARIOUS WORKING CONDITIONS**

In Somalia, women working as journalists face an especially dangerous and challenging environment. Female journalists confront deeply held biases and traditions. The local media houses often perceive women as persons only recruited for advertisements, as presenters, and as assistants to their male colleagues.

Across the board, precarious media workers receive low wages, and hold only part-time or temporary work without benefits. However, female journalists are even more likely to hold part-time positions, receive less payment than men do for the same work, and face additional barriers to advancement in their careers. A large number of the women journalists responding to this survey reported that the majority of media owners believe that women journalists would only work temporarily until they got married and become mothers, at which time they would leave from the work.

Though women journalists are in more complicated and precarious conditions of work than their male colleagues, salaries and other work conditions are usually worse for freelance women journalists, and they do not occupy positions of power in the media houses. Women journalists reported violence such as pervasive sexual harassment and violence in the workplace. Female journalists said that media owners treat women journalists as sexual objects and engage in a pattern of sexually harassing behaviour. There were reported cases whereby women journalists

were forced to have sexual relations with their employers in exchange for career advancement opportunities. There are at least three cases of women journalists who are also mothers and are currently divorced because of their work in the media. This is a very serious and challenging situation for female workers in Somalia.

## DEFENSE OF WORK RIGHTS OF JOURNALISTS

With the resurgence of violence in Mogadishu and in the south and central regions of Somalia in 2007 a renewed focus on the danger of journalists' work has emerged.

In the last three years, due in part to the renewed violence, the shift to freelance work has been accelerated. Since 2007, NUSOJ has focused on advocating for secure and stable working conditions for journalists. NUSOJ has reached out to employers to find amicable solutions. During this campaign, the union has confronted problems in professionalism and quality reporting, poor morale of journalists, and extensive politicization of many news media houses.

Across Somalia media houses have been pushing against long-term contracts, and continue to push against formal written employment contracts. Many less experienced journalists have been pushed into these informal employment relationships, or have been unable to shift to more permanent work as they gained skills. To a certain extent, the political uncertainty and instability created pressure on media houses to resist longer-term contracts. All seven of the major media houses that NUSOJ has recognition agreements with have expressed similar concerns to the union, given the political situation across the country.

In many cases, precariously employed journalists have been performing the same work as they did when they were permanent employees, except for lower or no pay in the past year or more. Likewise, these casualized journalists have no health support, or other benefits. In general, media houses that have experienced a decline in profit during the continued political violence have had to cut pay and change working conditions rather than cut jobs. The 2010 journalist survey found that there was a 36% increase since 2007 in the number practicing journalists in Somalia.

In addition to the push to informal, short-term contracts, media houses have also used artificial promotions to move senior journalists out of their positions as long-term employees. In these cases, the senior journalists are either made "managers" with no actual authority, or are made co-owners with extremely small shareholder stakes. In both situations the senior journalists' employment relationship is altered to remove them from union protection. The media houses that NUSOJ has dealt with are often afraid to be publicly accused of rights violations, but have no fear of legal action, given the effective absence of any judicial system.

Since 2005, NUSOJ has used public pressure to resist these employer efforts. In one case, NUSOJ appealed to international backers and funders of a local media house, by NUSOJ publishing a report on the behaviour of the employer and appealed to its international backers to cut their funding. This type of pressure campaign has yielded some successes.

## NUSOJ AND PRECARIOUS WORK

NUSOJ convened its first leadership meeting to specifically address precarious working conditions in Mogadishu in March 2007. The meeting focused on the changing nature of employment relationships in the sector and the correspondingly harmful impact this had on the quality and professionalism of the media. The union initially decided to deal more directly with precarious work because of the impact on the wellbeing of journalists, especially given the personal safety concerns common in Somalia. However, the union also felt that the issue of

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precarious work in the sector was having a broadly negative impact on the profession.

At the March 2007 meeting NUSOJ discussed the ways in which casualization of the journalist work force created pressure against substantive local investigative reporting, and in favour of “soft” stories and international reporting.

Since 2007, the increase in tactical dismissals by media houses, as well as the push to casualize media labour has exacerbated the need for a union-led response to precarious work in the journalist field.

There is no doubt that bitter and bloody fighting between the Transitional Federal Government, Islamic insurgents, Ethiopian troops and African Union troops is a main cause of the decline of the standard employment relationship in southern and central regions where a good number of Somali media are stationed.

In addition to the problems caused by the increasingly precarious working relationship with their employers there continue to be extreme safety and welfare issues for journalists in Somalia. Killings of journalists continue both as targeted acts of political violence, and as collateral deaths in the course of dangerous work. The increasing use of younger journalists has also worsened the safety situation as inexperienced workers are less professional and skilled at war-time reporting.

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Journalists who are working for the foreign media outlets also often work as freelancers. Some freelancers for major foreign employers get a retainer of between \$500-1500 USD, plus additional fees for stories they file. Apart from the retainer fees paid to some journalists, there is also a payment on each story filed or wordage. Photographers often sell their pictures for approximately \$50 each. Although, compared to local employers, the rates are better; stringers for international media houses are paid far less than citizens of the home countries of these houses. Additionally, there are no benefits, including importantly issues such as death benefits for the families of stringers covering the armed conflicts in Somalia.

NUSOJ has also continued to push for overall freedom of the media, free speech, and freedom of association as general human rights. NUSOJ, coordinating with international partners, has worked to publicize the targeted killings of journalists, and the repression of media rights in particular.

Corruption in the media field is also an ongoing problem. In Somalia the 2010 survey continued to find instances of “Sharuur, Duub, Children’s Milk, or Transportation” all local slang terms for payoffs to journalists or media houses for positive news coverage. In some case media house owners encouraged newsmakers, business owners, or politicians, to pay to keep a friendly reporter on staff at the media house.

Even though many working journalists in Somalia are employed as freelancers, they are often not allowed to seek employment with competing media. This is another indication that the informal employment is a fiction of convenience to the employer. Essentially, the survey found that precariously employed journalists earned an average of 20% less than full-time formally contracted workers.

Given the number of new journalists who are relatively young, NUSOJ has adopted a strategy of youth outreach to these incoming workers. NUSOJ has also worked with employers to form a kind of “Associate Membership” in the union for media house managers and owners, to work on broader issues confronting professional journalism. This strategy was also formulated to help reassure young journalists that it would be safe for their career to join the union.

NUSOJ has also organized workshops for these young journalists on their working conditions, basics of journalism, and safety of journalists. Union organizing issues were covered in

workshops held in Djibouti by Eastern Africa Journalists Associations and Solidarity Center. Additionally, NUSOJ in cooperation with Reporters without Borders and Doha Centre provided protective equipment to journalists in dangerous environments.

NUSOJ also dedicated space in its annual report on press freedom to specifically talk about the working conditions of journalists in Somalia since 2007.

When NUSOJ engages with media owners about these concerns, they have often responded that many of the issues are temporary and created by the unstable political environment of Somalia. NUSOJ is carefully following the financial situation of major media houses in Somalia to determine when and how to approach additional collective bargaining campaigns.

On a positive note, the union density amongst freelancers remains quite high. NUSOJ has continued to have success in membership recruitment and retention. NUSOJ is however emphasizing a campaign for full trade union rights to freedom of association, collective bargaining and other core labour conventions to protect precarious media workers. A particular focus for the campaign is to incorporate the perspectives and leadership of women journalists. The union used and will be using reports, statements, face-to-face negotiations, workshops, meetings, international advocacy and partnerships with trade unions and broader civil society.

Despite some forward progress, the situation for working journalists in Somalia remains extremely dire. Not only the profession of journalism but the reliability of information is at risk. NUSOJ plans to continue to build its efforts to face these challenges.

## CONCLUSIONS

The 2010 survey depicts that working journalists in southern regions as well as in Puntland and Somaliland regions share abusive working conditions. These media workers are among the most over-worked, most exploited and most abused. Most of them are on call or work twenty-four hours in seven days, meaning lack of rest days because of the evolving situation of the country and the enormous threats inside media houses and outside. They are often either not paid at all or are underpaid, work long hours and are susceptible to a variety of mistreatment.

The precarious working conditions spelt out in the survey report demonstrates that media workers work in situations that are very far from meeting the international labour standards. However, the problems continue to be extremely urgent. Journalists working for international media organizations as stringers are discriminated compared to foreign journalists of the same international media house. A Somali journalist and a journalist from another country performing the same work for the same employer does not enjoy equal wages or equal benefits.

Women and young journalists are particularly at a heightened risk of exploitation and sexual harassment. They are not often regarded as important to the work and the survival of the media companies. These workers do not enjoy broad legal protections.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Transitional Federal Government of Somalia, Puntland Regional State and Somaliland Authorities must develop, immediately, legal protections for workers under their territories in line with international standards of the ILO and should provide special protections for media workers in precarious conditions.
2. Media employers should cease and desist forcing working journalists and associated media workers to work in poor and unsafe working conditions.



3. Media employers must present unambiguous employment agreements to working journalists and must stop employing journalists for name sake purposes and must stop employment on an on-call and stringer basis which translates to fulltime employment.
4. Journalists must not accept oral contracts, working for their names and entering into employment contracts without specific conditions of work, remuneration, hours of work and duties. Women journalists should be bold to report to the union cases of sexual abuses and physical attacks.
5. The International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Trade Union Movement are urged to take strong measures to monitor and protect the rights and dignity of Somali workers, particularly media workers regarding violations of legal obligations by employers and the authorities' lack of respect, protection and promotion of workers' rights according to the international labour standards.
6. The World Community should step in to help preserve and promote Somali workers' rights and conditions and offer their support and cooperation with local authorities on how to promote workers' human rights.
7. The International Labour Organization should develop and implement an integrated Decent Work Country Programme for Somalia to help achieve rights and dignity of workers, reduce poverty, secure social justice and achieve equitable, inclusive, and sustainable stability and development.



The National Union of Somali Journalists (NUSOJ) is a fervent champion for media freedom, the rights of journalists, workers' rights and for social justice in Somalia. Member journalists work across the whole industry as reporters, editors and sub-editors and photographers. Members work in broadcasting, newspapers, magazines, and in the new media. NUSOJ systematically monitors and conducts investigations into violations of press freedom and human rights of journalists. The union provides accurate, prompt and impartial information concerning attacks on journalists such as killings, arrests, death threats and harassments, as well as acts of aggression against media organizations. NUSOJ is a member of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), Federation of African Journalists (FAJ), and Eastern Africa Journalists Association (EAJA). It is also a member of International Freedom of Expression eXchange (IFEX) and partner with Reporters without Borders.

For more information, visit [www.nusoj.org](http://www.nusoj.org)

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