ACTION ALERT

World Press Freedom Day: Creating Change and Giving Voices to the Invisible

The freedom of the press, and women’s participation in it, are often a measure of the freedom of a nation’s people.

Journalists hold a key power and vital responsibility in our society. A free press becomes a driving force in creating and upholding the rights of citizens. However, media around the world face multiple threats, ranging from oppressive government legislation obstructing journalists’ ability to report freely and objectively to more physical threats such as violence, incarceration and even murder.

On May 3, the United Nations recognizes these threats to press freedom that in turn threaten the independence and rights of the people by celebrating World Press Freedom Day.

Denying people the right to press freedom is denying them the freedom of information and expression. These freedoms, according to the U.N., are integral in the promotion of peace, inclusivity, justice for all and accountability.

The U.N. Conference on Women in Beijing also recognized that the media plays an important role in empowering women and advancing women’s rights. This conference was held to come up with a plan of action to obliterare obstacles to women’s participation in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making. Out of this goal came the recognition that increasing women’s participation in the media would help increase women’s participation and equality in other arenas. The Beijing conference was the foundation to the work U.N. Women does now, which involves partnering with media organizations to disrupt negative representations of women in the media and to increase women’s participation in creating news.

By having women participating in the press, women’s voices, opinions and issues are more likely to be heard. According to Women’s Media Center President Julie Burton, people aren’t getting the whole story and democracy suffers as a result. Women’s stories aren’t being told since women aren’t there to tell it.

Not only would promoting gender equity within the journalism profession empower women, but so would having access to credible information.

“Women should be empowered by enhancing their skills, knowledge and access to information technology,” The United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women wrote. “This will strengthen their ability to combat negative portrayals of women internationally and to challenge
instances of abuse of the power of an increasingly important industry.”

**Threats to Press Freedom**

A lack of women in the media and the treatment of women journalists are threats to press freedom. According to the International Women Media Foundation (IWMF), the media will never be truly free without the equal voice of women.

As journalist and co-editor of The Network of Women in Media India Ammu Joseph once said, “Gender equality in the media is important not only to secure women’s right to freedom of expression but also to promote diversity and plurality in the media, which are essential if the media are to play their appointed role in democracy.”

Globally, the decision-makers in the media—that is, those who choose what news to cover and have the final say on news content—are still disproportionately men, as are the reporters given bylines in most hard news stories.

“The lack of women in decision-making and prominent positions in the media is the breeding ground for defamatory and sexist coverage and comments, and it lowers the standard of excellence by cutting in half the pool from which talent is chosen,” President Julie Burton said in Women’s Media Center’s 2015 report. “It also results in media missing major stories—and missing viewership.”

Perhaps from a lack of female voices, women are often portrayed in limiting and negative ways in the media. In the United States, there’s an intense emphasis on looks, according to Forbes journalist Kathy Caprino, and a focus on the balance between family and work. Globally, women are often sexualized and not taken seriously when they appear in the media. This is true of the women covered in the media, as well as those who report it. More women tend to cover what the industry labels as ‘soft’ news, such as lifestyle news, while far fewer women get to cover politics, sports, tech, economics and other hard news topics.

In the United States, for example, women produced nearly 55 percent of education news in 2014, but only 38 percent of business and economy-related news.

Because of this skew, some have called pieces on entertainment, lifestyle, fashion and culture “pink journalism.” Such labeling demeans the work that women journalists do, as well as places less value on such topics because they are seen as “feminine” and not serious ventures. Women are often driven into pink journalism due to these assumptions and thus become unable to steer their professional growth toward more respected beats in the industry.

In addition to workplace discrimination, women can also face other gender-based threats as
woman journalists. According to Reporters Without Borders, these threats against women journalists can take the form of sexual smears, sexual harassment and violence, and threats against their families.

In a global study of 977 women journalists by International Women's Media Foundation, nearly two-thirds reported some form of intimidation, threats and abuse. The most common perpetrator was a boss, but abuse from co-workers, government officials, interviewees, members of the public and police was also reported.

“Many of these women face not only the implicit dangers of hostile environments,” IWMF stated, “but cultural and social prejudices that would keep them silent.”

The threats to press freedom vary from nation to nation, but there are some that are used universally to stifle the dissemination of news and women journalists’ participation.

In their 2015 World Press Freedom Index, Reporters Without Borders identified the following as today’s major threats: blasphemy charges to censor political criticism in the media; increased violence against journalists covering protests and violence from non-state groups; national security and counterterrorism reasoning to stifle coverage on governments’ actions; media coverage as a weapon of war; and improved methods of censorship and repression in closed states.

These threats are not limited to paid reporters; citizen journalists too face censorship and physical threats. With the spread of phones with video and social media capabilities, the rise of ordinary citizens documenting the world around them has led to an explosion of eyewitness reporting on multiple subjects, ranging from protests like the Arab Spring to police brutality in the United States.

**In the Name of Religion**

Journalists face accusations of blasphemy and sacrilege as a punishment for unflattering coverage in about half the world’s countries, according to Reporters Without Borders. The political use of religious censorship also criminalizes certain opinions, infringing upon free speech as well as the free flow of information.

Yemeni journalist Samia Al-Aghbari has been accused of blasphemy by both government officials and religious extremists. She has been the target of harassment, death threats and smear campaigns since 2012 when she criticized the government and the use of religion to achieve political aims.

“Whoever stands against them, they will accuse him or her of blasphemy and spoil their careers and reputations, in order to make society react negatively to what journalists and activists write or say,” Al-Aghbari said. “There is a systematic campaign against every woman who doesn’t wish to idly subject to others’ thoughts.”

**Violence Against Journalists**

Beatings, torture, sexual violence, violence against family members and murder are all types of violence journalists face simply for doing their jobs.
About 1,187 journalists have been killed due to their work since 1992. Nearly half of these journalists were covering politics at the time. Women covering cultural and social issues have also been known to be targeted.

Women such as Liberian journalist Mae Azango become targets by covering local issues. Azango, who wrote about female genital mutilation (FGM) in Liberia, was forced into hiding when she began receiving death threats.

“Because I am a woman, and I went deeper and talked to a victim, so the other women are angry with me. If a white lady picked this story up, nobody would have time for her,” Azango said. “Because it was a Liberian woman writing it, I betrayed a secret.”

However, she continued to report, and as a result of her efforts, Liberian President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf condemned the practice of FGM publicly. By continuing to expose groups who practice FGM and making this information available, women gain the education and power they need to denounce such violence and make change in their communities.

Violence against women journalists can also take the form of sexual violence. About 15 percent of the women surveyed in IWMF’s global study reported they had experienced sexual violence in relation to their jobs. According to the Committee to Protect Journalists’ 2011 report, sexual violence against journalists often goes undocumented due to cultural stigmas and fear of professional ramifications such as being denied future assignments. Sexual violence against journalists usually falls into three categories, the report states: sexual violence of specific journalists in retaliation for their work, mob-related sexual violence while covering public events such as protests, and sexual violence of imprisoned or detained journalists.

Colombian journalist Jineth Bedoya was one of the journalists targeted specifically for her work. She had been reporting on paramilitaries when she was abducted, beaten and sexually assaulted.

Not only is the violence a crime and a violation of these women’s human rights, but it also has a silencing effect on the media. Bedoya has since spoken out against sexual violence against journalists to encourage others to do the same, but it took her nine years to break that silence.

“Sexual attacks against journalists have the effect of silencing the messenger and blocking the dissemination of news and information,” journalist Lauren Wolfe wrote in her report on sexual violence against journalists. “In the same manner as other types of attacks, sexual aggression is a direct assault on the internationally guaranteed rights to freedom of expression and access to information.”

**Arrest and Imprisonment**

Protests and other public gatherings particularly are becoming stages for the arrests of journalists. Police will sometimes target journalists and others recording a protest, stopping news of a protest from spreading.

In the United States, journalists have been arrested increasingly during protests. About 24 journalists were arrested while covering the 2014 protests in Ferguson, Missouri. In one case, two journalists were charging their equipment in a McDonald’s when they were arrested. One reporter, who had not resisted, was slammed against a soda machine before being handcuffed;
they were eventually released with no charges and no explanation. The police would not give out names or badge numbers of those who arrested him.

While the Ferguson reporters’ cases did not lead to any charges, many journalists—and citizens who report the news—around the world are charged and imprisoned for doing their jobs.

According to the Committee to Protect Journalists, about 199 journalists were jailed in 2015, 49 of whom were in China, 23 in Egypt and 19 in Iran.

One rising cause for journalists’ arrests is on the grounds of national security.

In Turkey, the government has enacted new legislation to expand the intelligence service’s surveillance capabilities. Using national security and counterterrorism reasoning, Turkey arrested three journalists in December 2015 for covering local news on pro-Kurdish activities. Journalist Beritan Canözer, for example, was arrested while covering a Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) protest in December 2015 and charged with aiding a terrorist organization. First taken into custody for being “feverish,” Canözer has since been accused for propagandizing for the PKK simply by reporting on the protest for the women’s news agency JİNHA. She was recently released from prison, but remains on trial.

The United States has also been criticized for increasingly using the Espionage Act against journalists and their sources, in what is being called a war on whistleblowers. According to Reporters Without Borders, the Obama administration has prosecuted eight whistleblowers under the Espionage Act, more than any previous administration combined. Chelsea Manning was among this list of whistleblowers; she received a 35-year sentence for sharing information with a journalist about Guantanamo Bay detainees and other military documents. According to Manning, she was willing to pay the heavy price if it meant living in a free country. “I will gladly pay that price if it means we could have a country that is truly conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all women and men are created equal,” Manning said to a Washington Post reporter.

Reporters Without Borders has cited the overuse of the Espionage Act as the main reason the United States has dropped to 49th out of 180 countries in the organization’s rankings of countries’ performance in press freedom.

**Propaganda and State-Controlled Media**

Freedom of the press truly suffers in countries where governments have tight control over the media.

The 10 most censored countries, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, are Eritrea, North Korea, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, Azerbaijan, Vietnam, Iran, China, Myanmar and Cuba.

Governments can go about controlling the news media by limiting access to news and the Internet, monitoring content, feeding propaganda to the media, and becoming the owners of media outlets.

In Myanmar, state controlled media was used to villainize female political dissenters. Propagating gender stereotypes, state controlled media labeled women who dissented as
duplicitous and untrustworthy, and used certain language to sexualize them in an attempt to discredit their opinions. Aung San Suu Kyi, a political leader and pro-democracy activist, became a target of state propaganda and media attacks. Suu Kyi has been placed under house arrest several times for her work in promoting democracy for Myanmar. Myanmar also censored any news that could be interpreted as opposing military rule; with the vilification of women dissenters and the lack of reports on Suu Kyi’s and other women’s protests, the government could discredit women’s political activism and keep the public from hearing women’s views on political issues. Suu Kyi now holds the position of State Counselor in Myanmar. She has since called for more women in leadership roles. Without the equality of women in politics, Suu Kyi has said, democracy will not be possible in her country.

Despite some successes in overcoming state propaganda such as Suu Kyi’s new political role, the use of propaganda has become more active and aggressive, according to Freedom House’s Freedom of the Press 2015 report.

Like Myanmar, Iran uses its state owned media to discredit dissenters, but takes it a step further by inciting public violence against its opposition. Its media implicitly justify violence against women to silence female dissenters, according to the International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran. The executive director of this campaign, Hadi Ghaemi, has spoken out on this gendered attack.

“Blatantly encouraging attacks on women, for any reason, is criminal behavior,” Ghaemi stated in a campaign article. “This only confirms the flagrant lawlessness of hardliners who desperately fear any challenge to their repressive grip on society.”

In Russia, propaganda and over-coverage of the tensions with Ukraine were used to prepare the public for war. The Russian government has slowly been planting new pro-government editors and directors at state owned outlets and dismantling any remaining independent media organizations. With control over the media, the government has been able to spread misinformation and rumors to incite anger and fear in both Russia and Ukraine. “By spreading talk of fascists, of gangs of unknown armed men, of coups and self-determination and persecution – while sending armed men into Ukraine, egging on real and staged protests, bribing politicians and blocking the media – the Kremlin is enacting and realizing its propaganda on the ground,” Guardian journalist Alan Yuhas reported.

Head of the Kremlin’s international news enterprise, Dmitriy Kiselyov, acknowledged using the media as a type of warfare. “Information wars have already become standard practice and the main type of warfare,” Kiselyov said in a statement. “The bombers are now sent in after the information campaign.”

Censorship Remains an Issue in 2016

As is evident from the current threats to press freedom across the world, censorship can take many forms. Some governments control the content of the news directly, while others pass restrictive legislation to limit journalists’ ability to report. Journalists face harassment, economic pressure, imprisonment and even death when covering news stories. Propaganda drowns out independent journalists’ reports and spreads misinformation to the public. Religion, national
security and counterterrorism increasingly become reasons to deter political criticism. While the media face many issues that curtail press freedom, censorship—whether it’s done by government, corporations, organizations or the media themselves—remains one of the largest threats to press freedom and in turn, to the freedoms of expression, information and speech.

Censorship is especially potent for women and women journalists, who not only face gendered attacks from governments and the public, but also face censorship within the industry. Men dominate most coverage and are even more quoted in stories covering women’s rights. New tools, such as Twitter and other social media platforms, are helping women find new ways to practice free speech outside the media’s male-dominated industry. In Bahrain, for example, women were able to fight gender stereotypes within the media and change how women are portrayed. According to Bahraini journalist Nada Alwadi, social media put Arab female activists on the map and allowed them to be viewed as proactive leaders in their communities. Social media offers women a new platform where they can express their views and report stories from the ground.

Women outside the industry also use these tools, gaining the media’s attention and engaging their local communities to promote gender equality. Girls and women are training themselves on how to report on their local issues, since these women’s stories are not being told elsewhere. Even inmates are finding ways to share their stories, like the women in Ecuador who produce their own radio shows from inside prison—giving voice to another group of women kept silent.

Such activism is helping raise awareness on women’s issues in local communities and helps further the United Nation’s goal to promote gender equality through the media’s influence. United Nations Women has recognized the power of the media and wants to use it to empower women globally.

“Media have great influence over how we perceive and understand the world around us,” UN Women Executive Director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka said. “Even when reporting is entirely factually accurate, if it is reported predominantly by men, about men, it is actually misrepresenting the real state of the world. At UN Women, we want to address this through partnership to change the media landscape and make media work for gender equality.”

**Take Action:**

- Meet your Congressional representatives in your district or contact them through the Congressional switchboard: 202-224-3121. Urge them to support the **World Press Freedom Protection Act of 2015 (H.R.2242)**, which allows the presidents to impose sanctions on entities that restrict the freedoms of expression and the press, including those who have assisted, sponsored, or supported these restrictions.
- Tell your representatives to introduce a **federal shield law**, which would protect journalists against the government requiring them to reveal confidential sources or other information without good reason. Forty-nine states and the District of Columbia have shield laws, but federal protection does not exist for journalists.
- Monitor the media. United Methodist Women **collaborates with the World Association of Christian Communicators** (WAAC) for Global Media monitoring.
Find out other ways to monitor the media by checking out the organizations [Who Makes the News](https://whomakesthenews.org), [Women’s Media Center](https://womensmediacenter.org), [International Women’s Media Foundation](https://ifaw.org) and [Gender Report](https://www.genderreport.net).

**Subscribe** to response magazine for first-hand accounts of women in action for justice. “Today the magazine is called response, and United Methodist Women continues to publish the stories of women in mission 11 times a year,” says Tara Barnes, editor of response magazine. “Our foremothers knew the power of publication, the importance of women’s voices and the freedom to share their voices. We work to make sure this becomes and remains the case for all women.”

**Learn More:**

- **Read** Council on Foreign Relations’ “[Media Censorship in China.](https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/media-censorship-china)”
- **Read** the Committee to Protect Journalists’ “[Going It Alone: More Freelancers Means Less Support, Greater Danger.](https://cpj.org/index.cfm?fa=news.story&arti=51303)”
- **Read** the Committee to Protect Journalists’ “[Journalists Overcome Obstacles Through Crowdfunding And Determination.](https://cpj.org/index.cfm?fa=news.story&arti=51302)”

**Join** the United Methodist Women’s Action Network.  
**Contact** the Washington Office of Public Policy at: [csadc@unitedmethodistwomen.org](mailto:csadc@unitedmethodistwomen.org)