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BACKGROUND PAPER: AUGUST 2017

Right to a voice?

Freedom of expression in the media in Nepal

SUMMARY

This background paper draws on research conducted to collect baseline data for a project by International Alert and the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), entitled 'Right to Voice: Promoting media freedom of expression in Nepal'. The baseline research highlighted three predominant themes concerning journalists in Nepal: they face a range of threats to their safety, thereby curtailing their freedom of expression; they censor their own work in response to external pressures and their own motivations; and their inclusion and influence in the media sector depends on their gender and social background (the sector is dominated by men from the high caste Brahmin/Chhetri groups and controlled by powerful political and business figures).

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Introduction

The 'Right to Voice' project was launched in January 2016 and will run until mid-2018. Its objective is to contribute to increased freedom of expression and pluralism in the media through a reduction in threats to journalists, less self-censorship and the promotion of marginalised voices to increase the diversity of perspectives in the news. It targets both journalists and those directly or indirectly complicit in curtailing freedom of expression, including political parties, security forces and local officials.

The research to collect baseline data for the project was conducted in the six districts it targets: Sunsari, Parsa, Kathmandu, Rupandehi, Banke and Kailali. The study, conducted from March to August 2016, gathered information relating to media security, self-censorship and the representation of marginalised voices in the media from journalists, members of civil society, government officials and members of marginalised communities. Various information-gathering methods were used, including interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and a sample survey. In addition, a content analysis of print media focusing on political/governance-related articles was conducted. For this analysis, six major newspapers from Kathmandu were collected over seven days, of which three were Nepali-language (*Nagarik*, *Kantipur* and *Gorkhapatra*) and three were English-language (*Republica*, *The Kathmandu Post* and *The Himalayan Times*). Three major local newspapers were collected from each of the other five districts during the same period. In total 1,883 articles were analysed.

Analysis of all the information collected sought to understand the issues and challenges faced by media professionals in these six districts and then feed this insight into the activities of the project. The data collected will serve as a benchmark against which to monitor the project's progress towards its objectives. The issues identified in the baseline research will be monitored throughout the implementation of project activities and will be investigated again during a final evaluation before project completion.

Findings

Safety and security of journalists and other media workers

The right to freedom of speech, expression and media freedom, including that of broadcast and online media, is guaranteed in the 2015 constitution.¹ However, despite legal guarantees, Nepali journalists are not able to safely

practise their right to freedom of expression. Over half (55%) of the 100 journalists who responded to the survey (three quarters of whom were men) reported feeling unsafe while doing their job. A significant proportion of respondents (60%) had been threatened while working and almost all those surveyed (84%) knew of another journalist who had received threats. Almost a third of these were death threats (28%), while more than half (56%) of the respondents said they had been threatened with physical violence of various kinds. Differences in responses between male and female journalists were not significant, although the nature of the roles often played by women journalists (see below) may mean they are less exposed to threats.

Political protests, such as those in the Terai region following the promulgation of the new constitution in September 2015,² were argued to be particularly dangerous occasions for journalists. During this period, journalists in the Banke, Kailali and Parsa districts in particular experienced threats, intimidation and violence on a daily basis, according to respondents. In such situations, many felt that their press pass had stopped being a guarantor of safe passage and instead had made them a target.

Attacks on and threats to media workers were explained in different ways. Some respondents blamed political leaders for creating an anti-media narrative that justifies the use of intimidation and violence against media workers. This narrative was argued to stem from politicians' displeasure with how their actions and policies are covered by the press. Others felt that local media workers bore the brunt of violent reactions to the news media in Kathmandu publishing inaccurate or misleading information. It was also argued that in certain instances the media was itself to blame, as malpractice in the sector (such as falsely maligning people in print) undermines public trust and creates the conditions in which journalists would be targeted during street protests. A similar argument was made about poor quality journalism and the misrepresentation of issues that often results from it; this was felt to lead to negative public opinion of the media as a whole. Another source of threats and violence was argued to be criminal gangs, which retaliate against individual media workers and media companies that investigate their illegal activities. Finally, the security forces tasked with maintaining law and order were also identified as a threat to media workers and accused of colluding with criminal gangs to target the media.

More than a third (36%) of those who said they had received threats did not report the threat (whether to their employer or the police). The common explanation for threats going

unreported was that the security services were not trusted to respond adequately, either because of their incompetency or a disinclination to act. Some respondents gave examples of police officers being present at the scene of a threat being made against a journalist and declining to take any action. The police and local government officials refuted this during the FGDs, however, arguing that threats against journalists received a swift response.

Self-censorship

Research conducted by Alert, FNJ and Equal Access Nepal in 2013,³ which is supported by other studies,⁴ found that journalists in Nepal censor their own work in response to external pressures and their own motivations. External pressures include threats to journalists' safety from individuals or groups unhappy with how an issue has been reported and requests (or orders) to change copy to reflect the business or political interests of media organisations. Journalists also self-censor for their own reasons, such as having an ideological position on an issue.

The survey responses supported this earlier research: almost all the respondents (87%) stated that they practised self-censorship. In around a quarter of cases (24%), this was either 'most of the time' or the 'majority of the time'. More than a third (37%) said that they 'sometimes' practised self-censorship.

The reasons given for self-censorship were varied, but responses to 'physical insecurity' and 'to maintain good relations with source' were the primary explanations given, with 'publisher and editors' pressure' the third most cited reason. During FGDs, journalists explained that the small size of their reporting areas means that the risk of an article offending someone the reporter knows is often high and self-censorship avoids creating personal animosities. Another reason given was that many journalists, whether based in Kathmandu or not, do not understand the political or cultural movements of minority groups in Nepal, and censor themselves to avoid misrepresentation and the backlash it could provoke. Two-thirds (67%) of survey respondents declared themselves not to be confident in reporting on sensitive issues.

Inclusivity in the media

Journalism is a predominantly male profession in Nepal and one dominated by Brahmin/Chhetri caste groups. Estimates of the number of women working in the media sector differ, but all put women in a small minority, especially in decision-making roles, meaning they are significantly underrepresented (no data exist on the number of journalists



Radio journalists and a technician at Dinesh FM, Dhangadhi, Kailali, 2016.

from gender minorities). Female participants in FGDs argued that this low participation by women was mainly the result of Nepal's patriarchal culture, with a professional career in the media (as in other sectors) regarded as being best suited to men. They also explained that those who overcome the barriers to entering the profession face sexual harassment and discrimination. Gendering of roles was argued to be common, with women journalists given behind-the-scenes jobs or asked to cover 'soft' subjects such as entertainment and women's issues, while their male colleagues cover the 'hard' subjects of crime, politics and the economy. To some extent, these perceptions are supported by the print media content analysis, which found that in the newspapers assessed, the overwhelming majority of both byline and op-ed authors were men.

FGD participants also argued that their male colleagues receive higher wages for the same work, are promoted more and receive more professional development opportunities. On top of these discriminatory practices, women journalists must contend with the patriarchal social norms followed by their families and wider society, which create other barriers. As one participant explained: "My male colleague can stay until late hours ... and socialise easily over drink, but I cannot because of the society and my family and since he can, [the] editor is more likely to give him more opportunities than me."⁵ Women journalists can struggle to be taken seriously by sources and be trusted with timely information. Unsurprisingly given these findings, the print media content analysis shows that men are the most quoted sources for news articles across the districts surveyed.

The men who dominate the media sector are largely from Brahmin/Chhetri groups that have historically controlled economic resources and political power in Nepal, and

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continue to do so at the expense of social and religious minorities such as Dalits, Madeshis, Janajatis and Muslims. The dominance of these groups is clear from the media content analysis, which shows that they outnumbered other identities in the authorship of news (72% of 584 bylines) and op-ed articles (59% of 547 articles). This was largely the case even in those districts with large Madeshi and Janajati populations; only in Kailali were there more non-Brahmin/Chhetri bylines, and only in Kailali and Banke were there similar numbers of op-ed articles written by non-Brahmin/Chhetri journalists as there were by Brahmin/Chhetri ones. Moreover, just as the content analysis shows that most of the sources quoted in the news reports were men, it also shows that most of these male sources were from Brahmin/Chhetri communities. This means that the content of the newspapers reviewed during the period in question was largely informed only by the views of Brahmin/Chhetri men.

Conclusion

In Nepal's post-conflict period, expectations of a flowering of freedom of expression among the media have not been realised. The findings of Alert's baseline research support the argument that violence against media actors is a constraint on freedom of expression, as journalists self-censor to stay safe. Journalists face a range of threats to their safety, including verbal abuse, intimidation, physical attacks and even death threats.

However, it is not only the threat of violence that has shrunk the space for freedom of expression; this has also been the result of in-house issues at media organisations (e.g. journalistic malpractice, editorial pressures, etc.).

The research findings also highlight a lack of gender and social inclusion in the media sector, which is dominated by Brahmin/Chhetri elites and controlled by powerful political and business figures. The exclusive nature of the industry makes fair, balanced and accurate reporting on the voices and perspectives of women, Dalits, Madeshis, indigenous groups, and sexual and gender minorities unlikely.

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Endnotes

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