

Credibility, Safety and Equity: An Agenda for Change in South Asia's Media

Kathmandu Declaration September 10, 2017

Journalists, leaders and representatives of journalist unions and media rights organizations under the umbrella of the South Asia Media Solidarity Network (SAMSN) and the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), convened in Kathmandu from September 8 to 10, 2017 under the theme 'Credibility, Safety and Equity: An Agenda for Change in South Asia's Media'. The meeting was supported by the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung (FES).

Participants deliberated on national and regional issues affecting freedom of expression, press freedom, journalist's rights and media development including impunity for crimes against journalists; labor issues such as decent wages, wage board and mass layoffs; gender equity in media; internet shutdowns and freedom of expression online; fake news; journalism in conflict and repressive states; safety of journalists and digital security. Strategies to tackle these issues through strong campaigns and advocacy by unions were discussed.

Considering that South Asia continues to be a risky region for journalism despite all eight nations being in democracy, the meeting called upon governments for an urgent roadmap to ensure a safe environment for journalists and media; ensuring robust police investigations in threats; urgent action on the incidents of press freedom violations, and ending the culture of impunity. The meeting also called for Journalist Protection Acts in every country to ensure speedy judicial procedures in cases of crimes against journalists. The meeting also urged the journalists and media to adopt safety practices to ensure physical, psychosocial and digital security.

The meeting decided to work further to devise national and regional strategies towards journalism protection mechanisms, preferably in the form of special legislation, and psychosocial safety for journalists.

Taking note of the non-implementation of the wage boards and/or delays in forming wage board, the meeting called upon the governments to ensure timely constitution and implementation of wage boards. The meeting also expressed concerns over mass layoffs by media, and called upon media houses to ensure transparent procedures in accordance with national labour laws and international best practices.

Expressing concerns over the increasing trend of arbitrary internet shutdowns and censorship attempts on online communication and content which affects media the most, the meeting called upon all stakeholders to unite for advocacy against internet shutdowns terming it a violation of the fundamental human right of the freedom of expression and opinion; and called upon all governments to refrain from arbitrary internet shutdowns.

The meeting also discussed increased use of information technology and defamation laws to punish journalists; and expressed serious concerns over the existing repressive legislation in Bangladesh,

Pakistan, Maldives and Nepal. The meeting called on the governments to ensure that the legitimate expression are not punished or censored or threatened; and called on them to remain committed fundamental human rights and international standards when introducing new legislations.

Considering fake news and unverified content as a threat to media and democracy, the meeting called up all media and journalists to develop skills and resources for proper verification of content. The meeting also felt the need for the greater initiatives on fact-checking to stop spreading of rumours and fake news by vested interests.

The meeting called upon unions to take decisive action to ensure gender equity to strengthen the numbers and voices of women in unions, especially in decision-making positions. Active mentoring; capacity building; leadership training; family-friendly union practices; implementation of policies against sexual harassment; and active engagement of men can remove barriers to women's growth in professional as well as union settings.

The journalist unions and media rights organizations affiliated to the IFJ and the SAMSN in South Asia resolve to:

1. Build strong, united, democratic, independent, representative and self-sustaining unions ensuring meaningful representation of female journalists and youth in decision-making and leadership positions;
2. Encourage journalists and media staff, especially female journalists, youth, online and rural journalists, to join unions through viable and beneficial membership systems; and build robust leadership to further the interests of members especially in collective bargaining for decent working conditions.
3. Build solidarity with all stakeholders in the struggle for press freedom, journalist's rights and freedom of expression.
4. Lead and join campaigns to promote freedom of expression on online platforms; struggle against arbitrary Internet shutdowns, and control of service providers over the content.
5. Call upon governments to refrain from shutdowns, censorship and similar arbitrary silencing of critical voices and independent journalism.
6. Share knowledge, campaign and provide support at the regional level to improve working conditions of journalists, safety of journalists, and fight against impunity in crimes against journalists.