



# CHALLENGES FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA IN CAMBODIA 2021



**CAMBODIAN CENTER FOR INDEPENDENT MEDIA**  
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**SURVEY REPORT 2021**

**CHALLENGES FOR  
INDEPENDENT MEDIA  
IN CAMBODIA**

**January 31, 2022**

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## List of Abbreviation

CAMBOJA	Cambodian Journalists Alliance
CCIM	Cambodian Centre for Independent Media
CSO	Civil Society Organization
NIG	National Internet Gateway
RSF	Reporters Without Borders
VOD	Voice of Democracy

## CCIM Vision, Mission and Core Values

### Vision

CCIM envisions a Cambodian society where everybody is well-informed and empowered to strengthen democratic governance and respect for human rights.

### Mission

CCIM works with stakeholders in resolutely providing fair and impartial information of protecting social benefits.

### Core Values

*Equal Voice* - With an extensive and growing on-air and online media presence, CCIM is in a unique position to promote issues of concern to sections of Cambodian society without a voice, including the oppressed, the marginalized, the weak and minority groups. CCIM is highly committed to advocate for gender equality at all levels of Cambodian society and institutions. CCIM seeks to promote an inclusive society without discrimination on race, gender, disability, sexual preference or religion.

*Active Non-violence* - CCIM openly supports the right of the Cambodian people to freely and peacefully express their opinion on issues affecting their lives, including the right to active non-violent protest and action. CCIM opposes and will expose impunity, particularly the use of violence and lethal force by government agents against those peacefully demanding rights and justice.

*Accountability* - CCIM strives to hold Cambodian public officials and decision makers accountable for all policies, actions and financial control. Consistent with these principles, CCIM as an organization also endeavors to be fully accountable and transparent to both its supporters and the wider community.

*Non-partisan* - CCIM is an organization without any political party affiliation. We firmly believe in the right of the people to make a democratic choice in selecting their political leaders and the policies that will be pursued.

*Trust & Integrity* - CCIM will provide news and in-depth information from reliable and multiple sources, which is accurate and fact-checked. Reporting by CCIM journalists will meet best-practice professional ethical standards.

## Executive Summary

Independent media plays an important role to promote good governance, democracy and development in Cambodia. Based on the World Press Freedom Index by the Reporters Without Borders, prior to 2016 Cambodia outperformed its neighbouring countries with some degrees of freedom of press and expression. However, freedom of press and expression have fallen short and deteriorated since 2017 after the government crackdown on civil society, political opposition, and some critical media outlets. Cambodia's press was deemed "Not Free" by Freedom House in its latest report, while Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked Cambodia 132 out of 180 countries in 2017, 142 in 2018, 143 in 2019, 144 in 2020. As usual, Cambodia was also ranked 144 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index 2021.

The press freedom in 2021 is worse than the one in 2020. The data from the study presents that the freedom of press and expression is still in limbo due to the ongoing political tension and government oppression. The study shows that the press freedom in Cambodia is still not on the right path. Based on the literature review and data analysis of the survey, among the many challenges facing Cambodian journalists in 2021, the fear of legal harassment and physical assault were the most serious challenges for journalists. Journalists often feel intimidated or threatened by government actions, whether it be police stopping journalists from filming or taking legal actions against them for simply doing their job. The survey also shows that 58% of the total respondents are not optimistic that the press freedom in 2022 will be better off compared to the one in 2021.

Overcoming the challenges to independent media in Cambodia requires a genuine commitment and political accountability from the government to support and protect media freedom in Cambodia, a strong self-determination and professionalism from the journalists, and a strengthened solidarity and cooperation between CSOs working in media sector, media organizations and journalists' associations in the constructive and holistic approach to support journalists and enhance rights to information and independent media.

## **I. Introduction**

The Cambodian Centre for Independent Media (CCIM) works to promote press freedom, access to information and freedom of expression through production and dissemination of independent media and media development activities. CCIM operates the VOD, a multimedia platform producing news, in-depth reports, and radio programs published on websites and Facebook pages in Khmer and English, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, and more.

The 'Challenges for Independent Media' is one of CCIM's activities aiming to promote press freedoms and strengthening the independent media in Cambodia. The study explores the key findings, examining challenges and notable developments in the media sector in 2021 and making recommendations for improvement.

## **II. Objective of the Study**

The main objectives of the study are to identify the situation of the independent media in 2021 and the greatest obstacles to producing and disseminating independent journalism as well as highlight significant changes to the country's media industry during the year. The study also explores the experience and challenges of journalists who report during and cover the novel Covid-19. Building on the findings, recommendations are produced for journalists, media organizations, CSOs, donor community, government and other relevant stakeholders in order to strengthen independent media in Cambodia.

## **III. Methodology**

This study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods which consist of desk review and online survey. A number of existing reports, policies, laws, regulations and media scholarships related to media in Cambodia were reviewed and consulted as part of the study in order to build the foundation of media landscape in Cambodia from 2020 to 2021. The findings from this review were incorporated and used for the design for questionnaires for an online survey.

The online survey designed to target 100 respondents from 25 news outlets and institutions in media disciplines across Cambodia. The survey recorded a total of 125 respondents who are journalists, citizen journalists, public officials, academics, government officials, and staff members of CSOs who work in the field of and familiar with media and journalism in Cambodia.

## **IV. Limitation of the study**

This study only focuses on the challenges of journalists and those who work in the media discipline prior to and in 2021. Although there is array of engagement with targeted respondents in the forms of online survey, there are research dimensions which are not able to explore by the research team such as the public understanding and opinion on media and journalism in Cambodia especially the institutional arrangement and leadership of media and journalist management body, training curriculum and resources available to journalists and media practitioners. Despite significant effort to reach out to female journalists, their participation in this online survey remains relatively low compare to their male counterparts.



## V. Findings

### 5.1 An Overview of Media Landscape in Cambodia 2021

In 2021, the Ministry of Information has updated the number of media institutions that there were 2,017 registered media outlets, including 706 websites and 81 video news outlets and 23 of those are under foreign-owned.<sup>1</sup> According to the report, Cambodia has a total of 50 media associations, 193 magazines, 22 bulletin newsletters, 114 printing houses, 22 book publishers and 26 foreign news agencies with local representative offices. However, the ministry also revoked the licenses of 15 media entities for violating the law or non-renewal by the owners.

Independent media plays an important role to promote good governance, democracy and development in Cambodia. Based on the World Press Freedom Index by the Reporters Without Borders, prior to 2016 Cambodia outperformed its neighbouring countries with some degrees of freedom of press and expression. However, freedom of press and expression have fallen short and deteriorated since 2017 after the government crackdown on civil society, political opposition, and some critical media outlets.

Cambodia's press was deemed "Not Free" by Freedom House in its latest report, while Reporters Without Borders (RSF) ranked Cambodia 132 out of 180 countries in 2017, 142 in 2018, 143 in 2019, 144 in 2020. As usual, Cambodia was also ranked 144 out of 180 countries in the World Press Freedom Index 2021<sup>2</sup>.

Cambodia continued to score low on international rankings of press freedom, and outlets that report critically on the government and others in positions of power faced increased threats or intimidation compared to recent years. Based on the existing reports, among the many challenges facing Cambodian journalists, the fear of legal harassment and physical assault were the most serious challenges for journalists in 2021. Journalists often feel intimidated or threatened by government actions, whether it be police stopping journalists from filming or taking legal actions against them for simply doing their job. From January to December 2021, CCIM and CAMBOJA recorded 51 recorded cases of harassment against 93 journalists (5 females) in which 32 journalists were arrested, 10 journalists face other legal actions and 18 experienced violence and harassment.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.phnompenhpost.com/national/kingdom-boasts-over-2000-print-online-and-tv-outlets>

<sup>2</sup> <https://rsf.org/en/cambodia>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.camboja.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Quarterly-Report-Oct-Dec-2021-Final.pdf>

For example, in July 2021, Piseth Kouv, a reporter for the Siem Reap Breaking News, was arrested in Battambang over alleged incitement related to his Facebook activity. He was accused of incitement to disturb social security based on a Facebook post. Piseth's Facebook page has four items: a new profile picture of vegetables and barbecued meat, a photo of himself with a police officer, a picture of architecture, and an inflammatory video shared from another user. The video includes images of Prime Minister Hun Sen with commentary: "You are a cheap person and you betray the nation... please, Jesus, break the betrayal of the nation." The Military police also posted an image of Piseth with printouts of several other earlier Facebook posts. They included an image of Prime Minister Hun Sen that says "Acquired through the real betrayal of the nation." The image shows mansions and arrows pointing to forests, a gold mine, an island and other resources. The Military Police also confiscated Piseth's three mobile phones, one car and one press card.

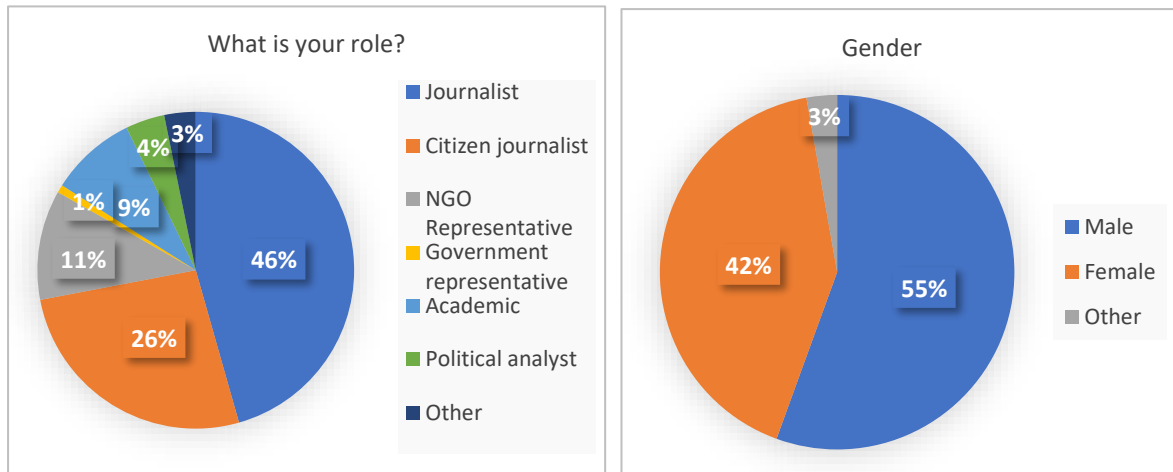
There was also another legal harassment in Koh Kong on the 30<sup>th</sup> of September 2021 in which Youn Chhiv, a journalist for the Koh Kong Hot News, was sentenced to a year in prison for incitement. His trial was conducted without a lawyer and just two days after being questioned by police — over a report that the deputy governor was "cruel and abuses citizens." Chhiv reported on authorities clearing villagers' huts from state land in Kiri Sakor district where he is said to also have cashew trees. The provincial administration of Koh Kong singled out a video entitled "Koh Kong Provincial Deputy Governor Sok Sothy Is Cruel and Abuses Citizens," produced by Chhiv as tarnishing the reputation of the official and the province.

Even though, social media rises as an alternative source of information for Cambodians which provide greater access to a plurality of voices for internet users, there was little consensus on whether it would ultimately help or hurt independent media outlets. However, there are some concerns about fake news and contents produced by some online media reporters who are lack of professionalism and code of ethics that could undermine the value of established brands and traditional platforms.

Since 2012 the government of Cambodia has been drafting internet related-law. In February 2021 Cambodia has approved the establishment of a "National Internet Gateway (NIG)" in which all of the country's online traffic will be routed. In addition, the Ministry of Post and Telecommunication recently involves in drafting of Cyber Security law, since 2012, the Ministry of Interior has been drafting a Cybercrime law which intended to regulate Cambodia's cyberspace and related crimes, giving judicial police and courts access to investigate these infractions. Some digital rights defenders and freedom of press and expression advocates raised concerns over the NIG and other draft laws because these laws will give government unchecked power to control internet which undermines the

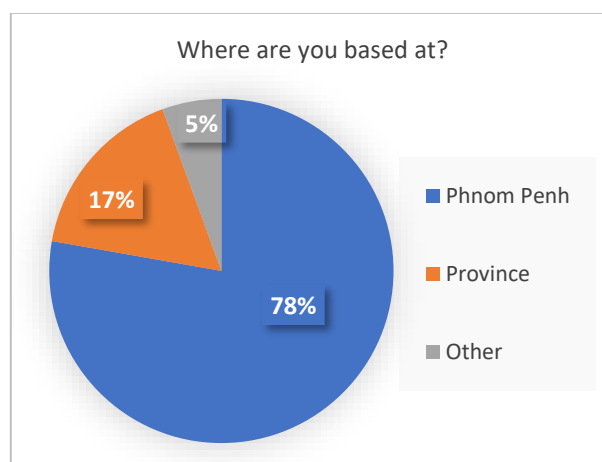
citizen internet access, restrict flow of information and create new challenges to independent media in Cambodia.

## 5.2 Respondents' Demographic



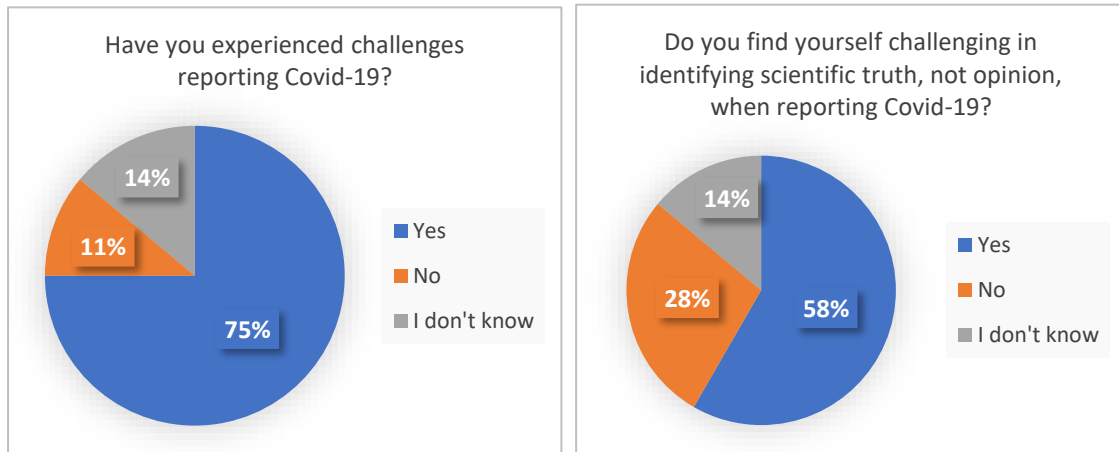
The study records 46% of respondents who identify themselves as journalists, followed by 26% of citizen journalists, 11% as CSO staff members, 9% as researchers, 4% as political analysts, 1% as public officials, and 3% as others. The 'others' here mostly refer to those who do not fall into the defined profession, but they can be a human rights defenders or lawyers who have been working to promote press freedom and independent media in Cambodia.

The percentage of male respondents drops to just 55% compares to 68.22% of male respondents in the survey 2020. On the other hand, the female respondents, increases to 42% compares to just 30.84% in 2020. The remaining 3% respondents have identified themselves from other genders.

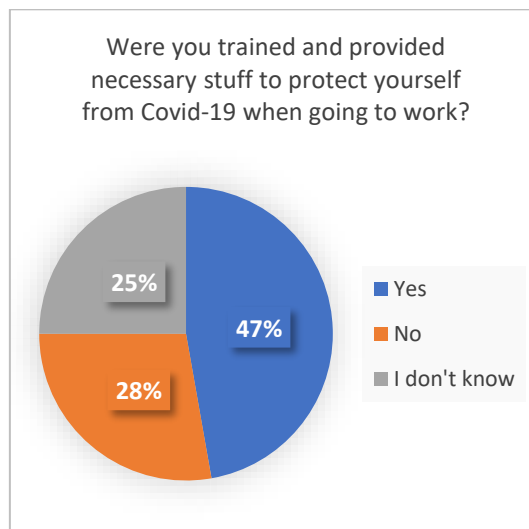


Among the total respondents, 78% of them are based in Phnom Penh, 17% of them are province-based respondents and 5% of respondents identified themselves from other areas.

### 5.3 Challenges Reporting Covid-19



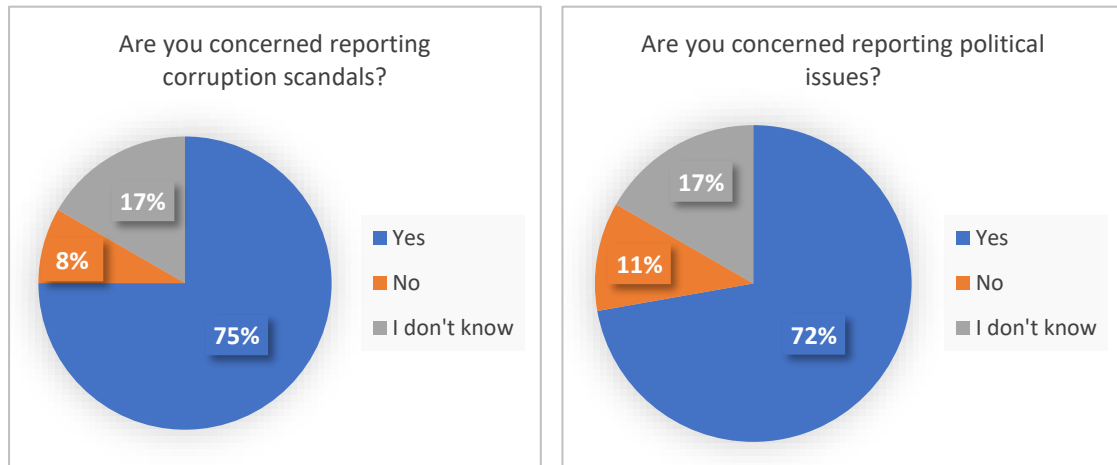
The novel Covid-19 pandemic has brought journalists into a new height of challenge such as the lack of scientific knowledge and the difficulty of identifying scientific truth concerning the Covid-19 and so on. Seventy-five percent (75%) of the respondents say they had experienced challenges in reporting Covid-19. The data from a survey records 58% of respondents found themselves challenging in identifying scientific truth when reporting Covid-19.



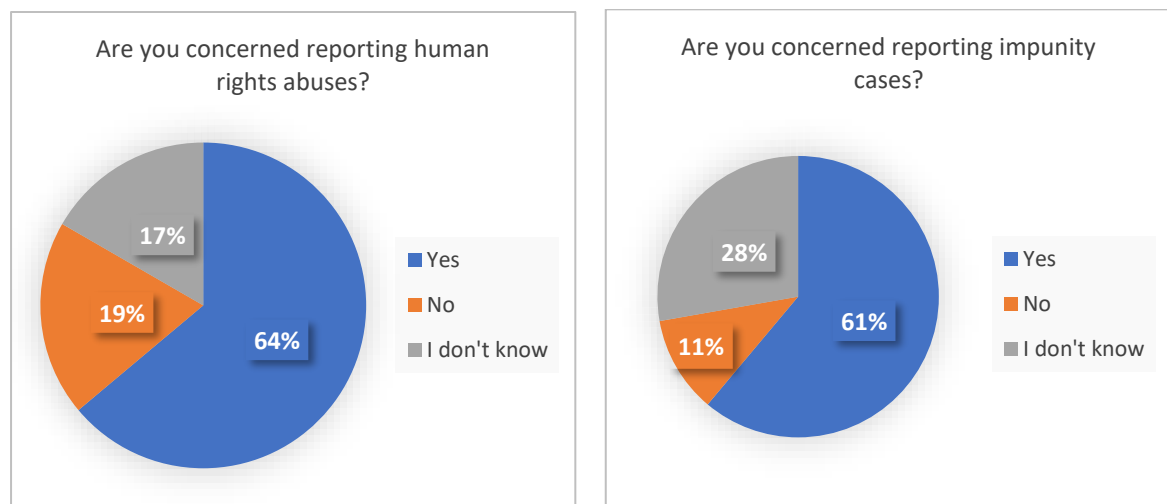
Among the total respondents, 47% of them say they were trained and provided necessary stuff to protect themselves when going to cover Covid-19 related incidents. Building on these, it can be concluded that journalists are still challenging by the lack of scientific knowledge in identifying

scientific facts to the lack of training and necessary stuff to protect themselves when performing their work.

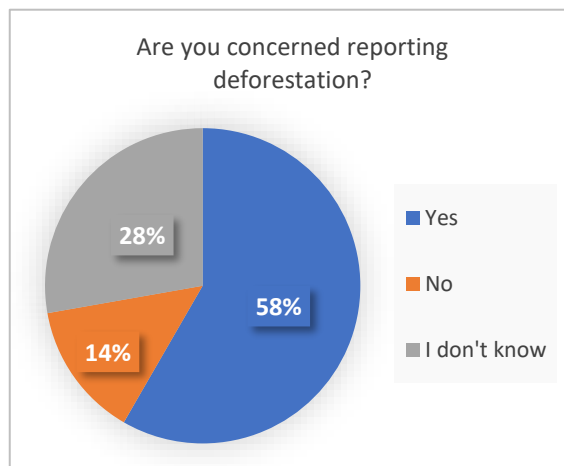
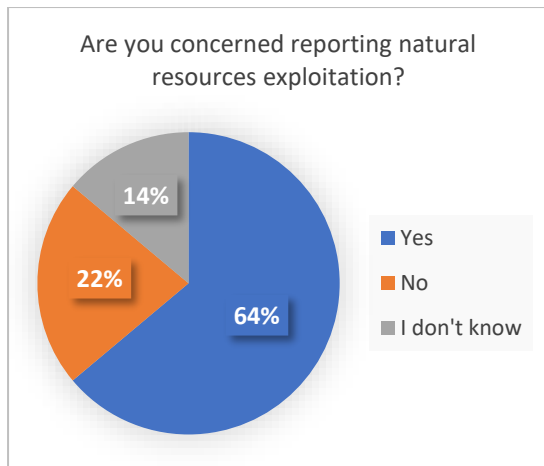
#### 5.4 Concerns in Reporting Sensitive Issues



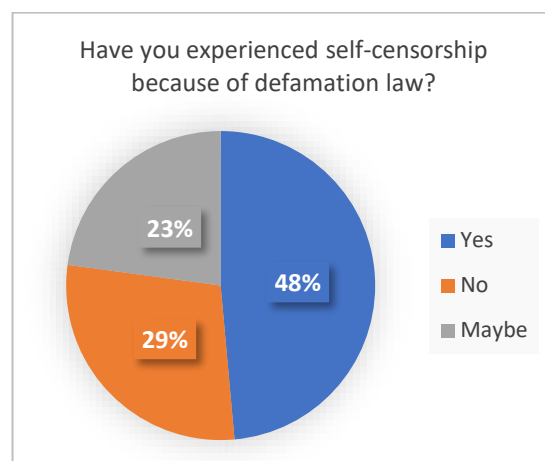
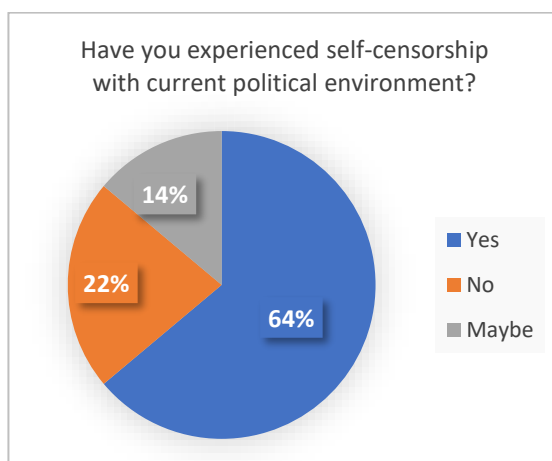
Reporting on sensitive issues is still a grave concern for journalists in Cambodia. The self-censorship among the journalists resulting from laws, regulations and political environment in Cambodia is also a threat for independent media in 2021. The data from the survey records that 75% of respondents say they are concerned with reporting corruption scandals. The figure remains high when it comes to reporting political issues which accounts for 72% of total respondents.



Reporting human rights abuses and impunity cases are still issues for journalists in Cambodia. The result of the study shows that 64% of respondents are still concerned with reporting human rights abuses, followed by 61% of respondents who are concerned with writing about reporting impunity cases.

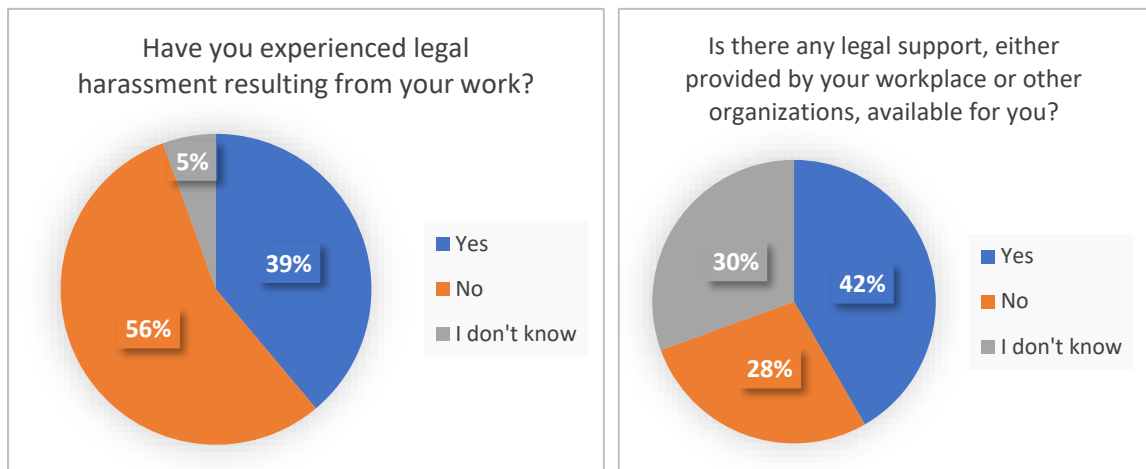


Reporting natural resources exploitation and deforestation are also challenging, 64% of respondents say they are concerned with reporting natural resources exploitation, followed by 58% of respondents who are concerned with writing about deforestation cases.

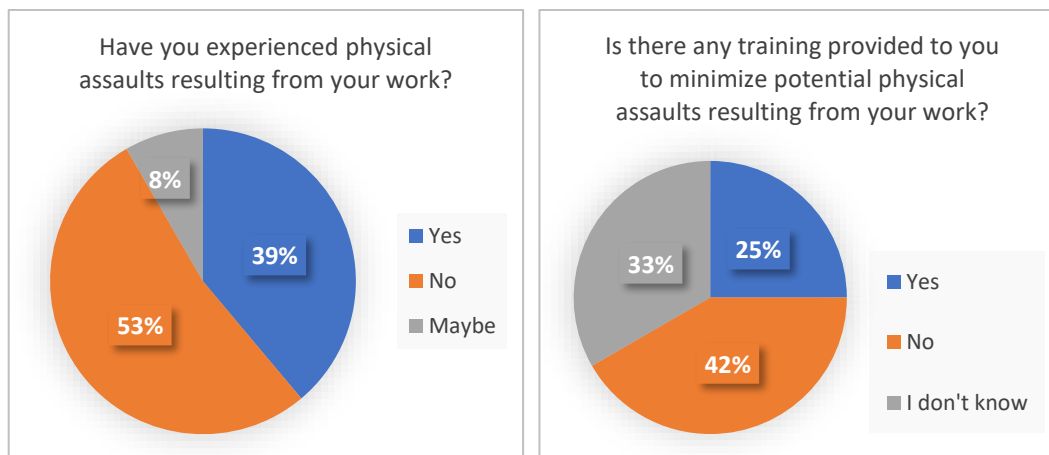


Political environment and the defamation law puts a lot of pressure on journalists. The survey reports 64% of respondents say they have experienced self-censorship because of the current political environment, followed by 48% of respondents who have experienced self-censorship because of defamation law.

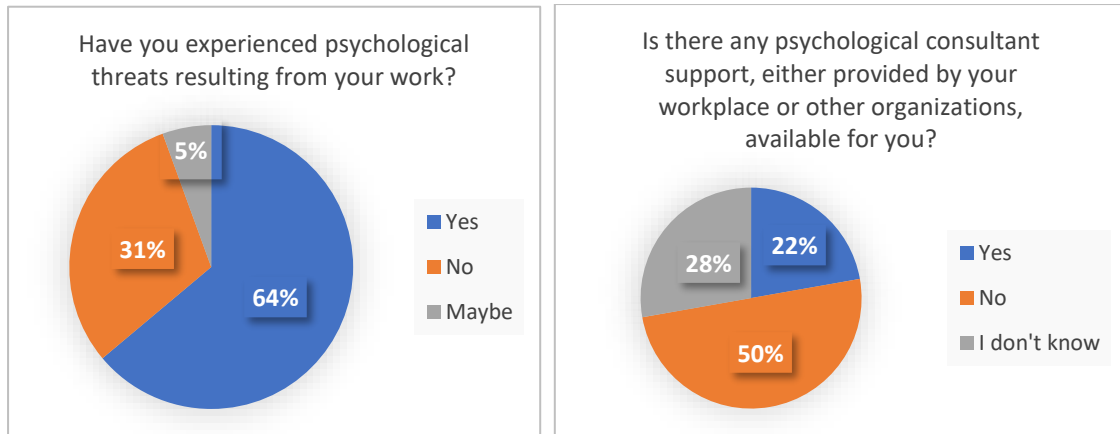
## 5.5 Threats and the lack of support



Legal support, psychological counselling service and training available to journalists remain relatively limited. The percentage of respondents who experienced legal harassment from their work increases to 39% compares to just 27.10% in 2020. However, only 42% of respondents say there are legal supports provided by their workplace or other organizations available for them.

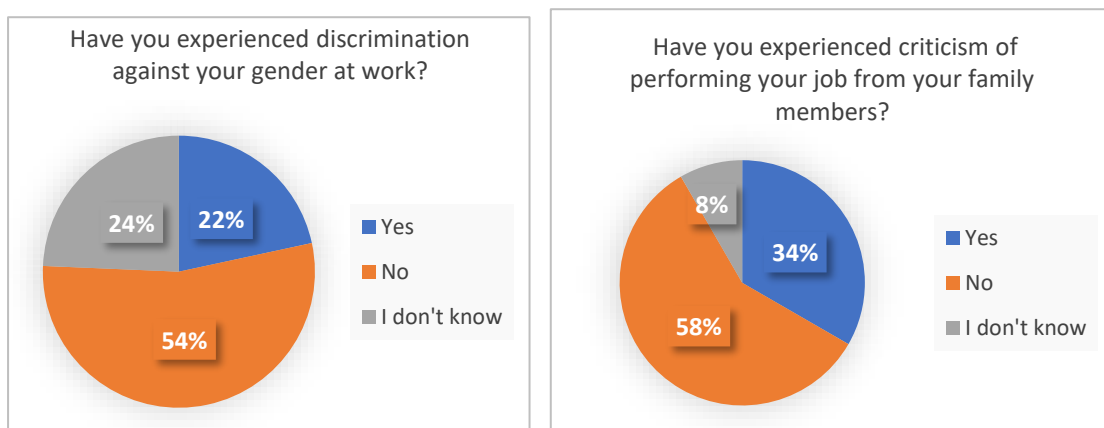


The percentage of respondents who experienced physical assaults increases to 39% compares to just 8.41% in 2020. The study records 25% of respondents say there is training provided to them to minimize potential physical assaults resulting from their work.



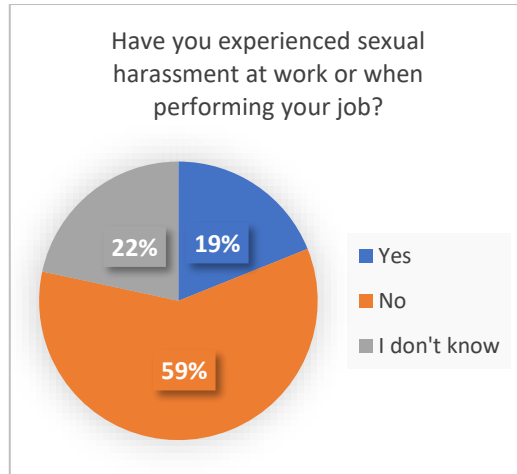
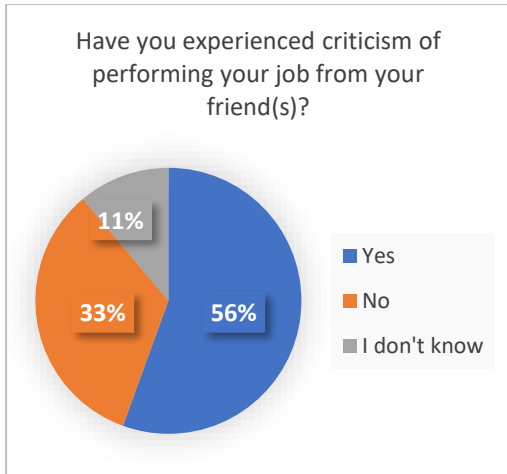
There is an increase of psychological threats for journalists in 2021. The survey reports that 64% of respondents say they have experienced psychological threats resulting from their work, which increases from 57.94% in 2020. Only 22% of them say there is any psychological support/counsellor either provided by their workplace or other organizations available for them.

### 5.6 Criticism and Discrimination Against Journalists



Amongst the challenges, journalists faced criticism and discrimination, both at work and at home. There is a slight increase of discrimination against gender at work. The figure from the survey reports 22% of respondents have experienced discrimination against their gender at work, which increases from 20.56% in 2020. However, there is a decrease of criticism for journalists from their family members. The percentage of respondents who experienced criticism of performing their job from family members drops to 34% compares to 49.53% in 2020.

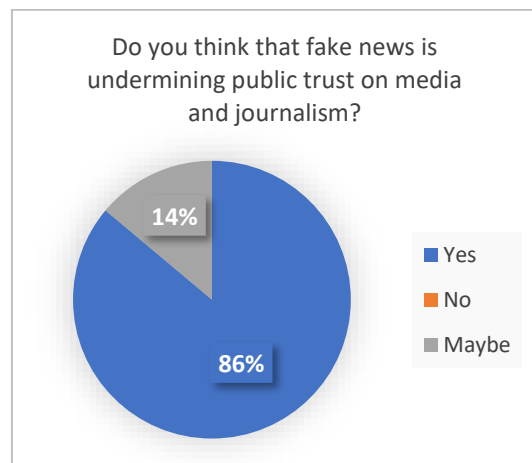
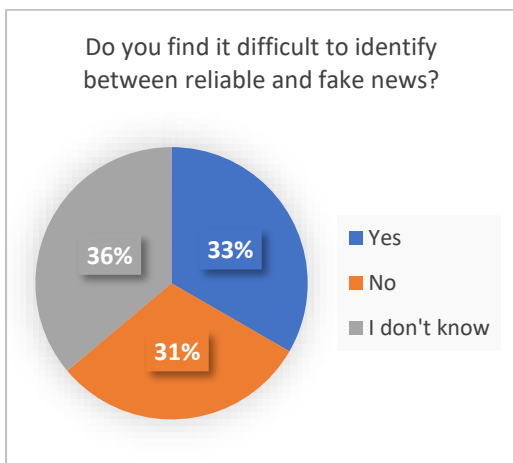




The survey reports that 56% of respondents have also experienced criticism of performing their job from friends. The percentage of respondents who have experienced sexual harassment at work or when performing their job increases to 19% compares to 12.15% in 2020.

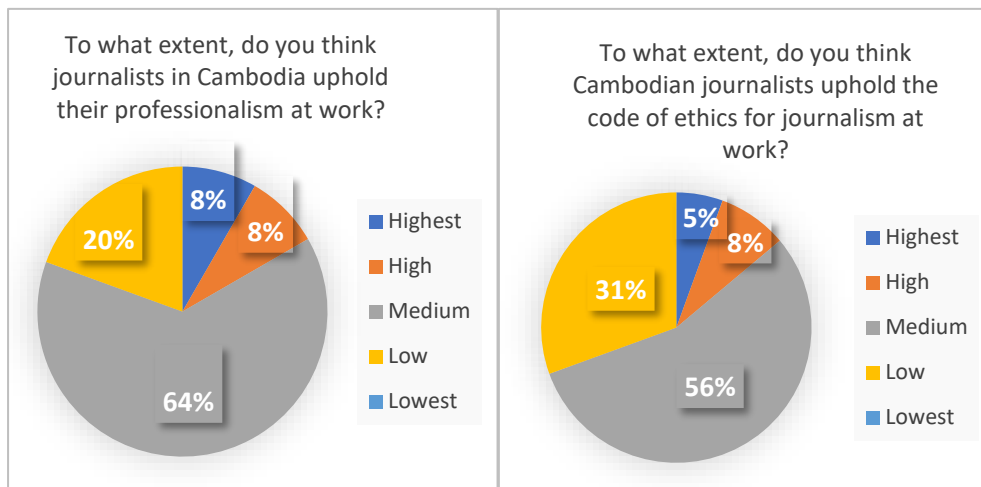
### 5.7 Fake News and Public Discourse

With the growing of internet coverage and accessibility to smartphones, many Cambodians are online where they have an opportunity to access news from various sources other than the state-run and media channels that are owned by and affiliated with the ruling party. However, internet is also a window to fake news which is also a challenge for independent media.

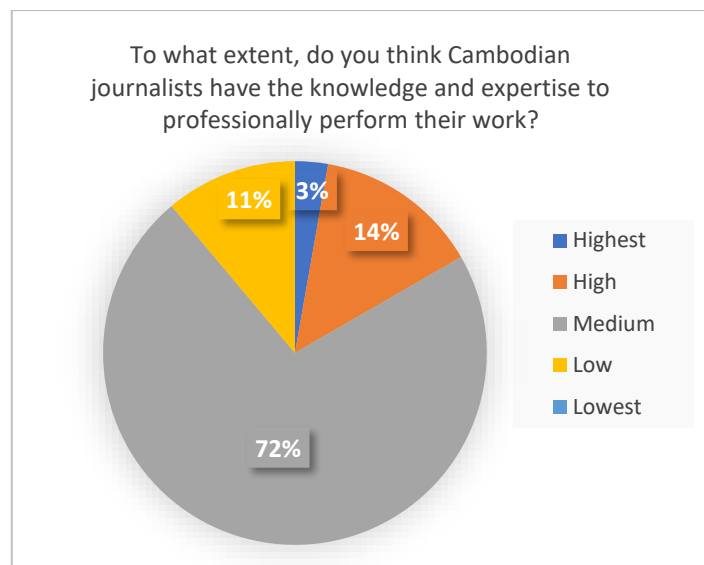


Amongst the total respondents, more than 60% of them are still struggling to identify between reliable and fake news in which 86% of the respondents think that fake news is undermining public trust on media and journalism.

## 5.8 Journalist's Professionalism and Ethics

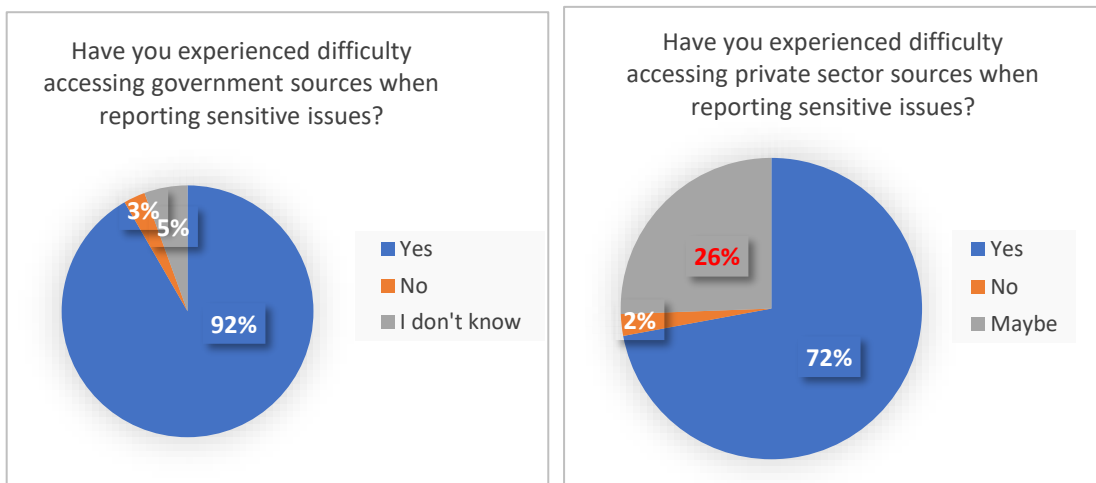


Professionalism and the code of ethics for journalists also need more improvement. The study presents 64% of respondents say the journalists uphold their professionalism at work about average, followed by 56% of respondents say journalists uphold the code of ethics at work about average too.

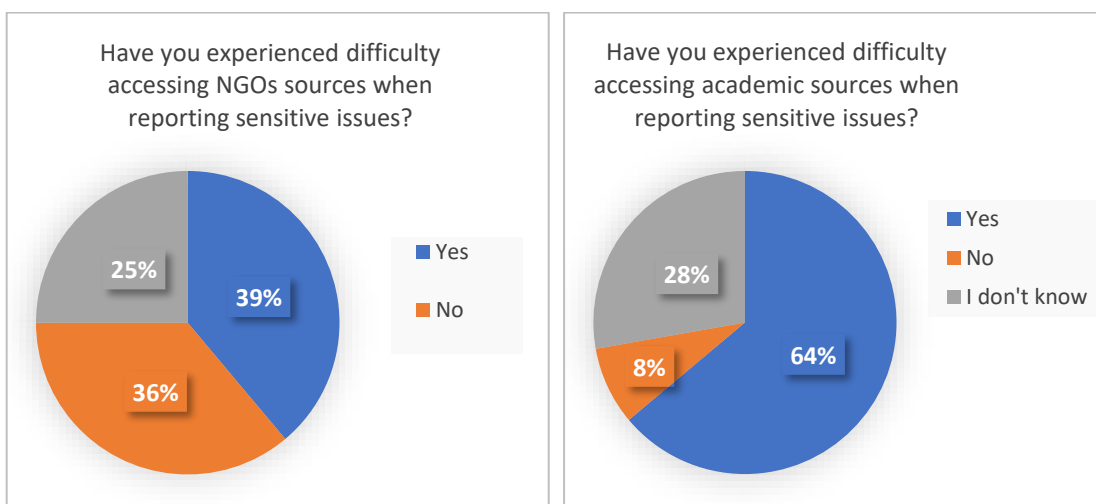


Amongst the total respondents, 72% of them think that journalists have knowledge and expertise to professionally perform their work about average.

## 5.9 Difficulty of Accessing Sources

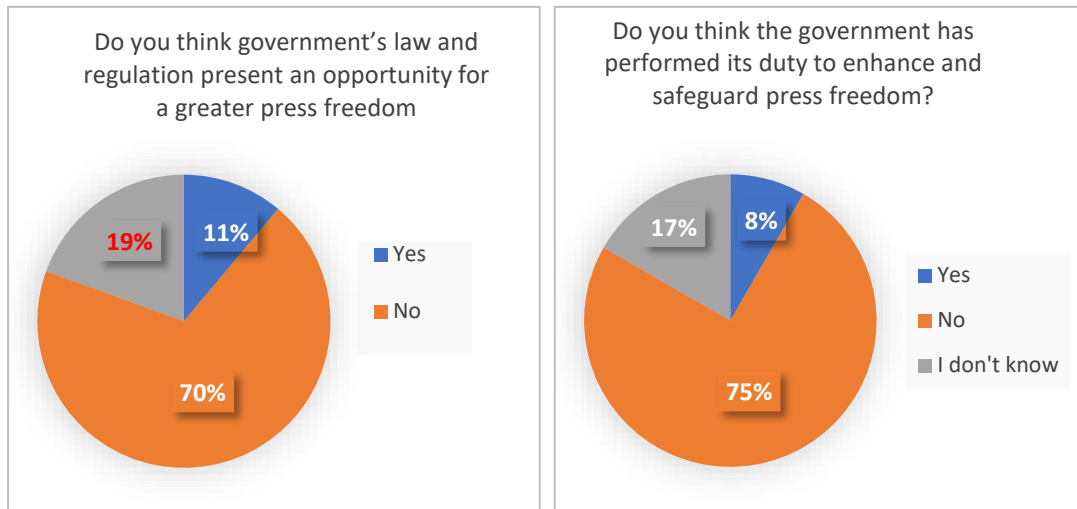


Accessing to critical sources when reporting on sensitive issues remains a challenge. When asked how difficult they have faced when accessing sources, surprisingly 92% of respondents say they have experienced difficulty accessing government sources compares to 75.70% in 2020. Similarly, the challenge to access private sector sources also increase to 72% in 2021 compares to 67.29% in 2020.

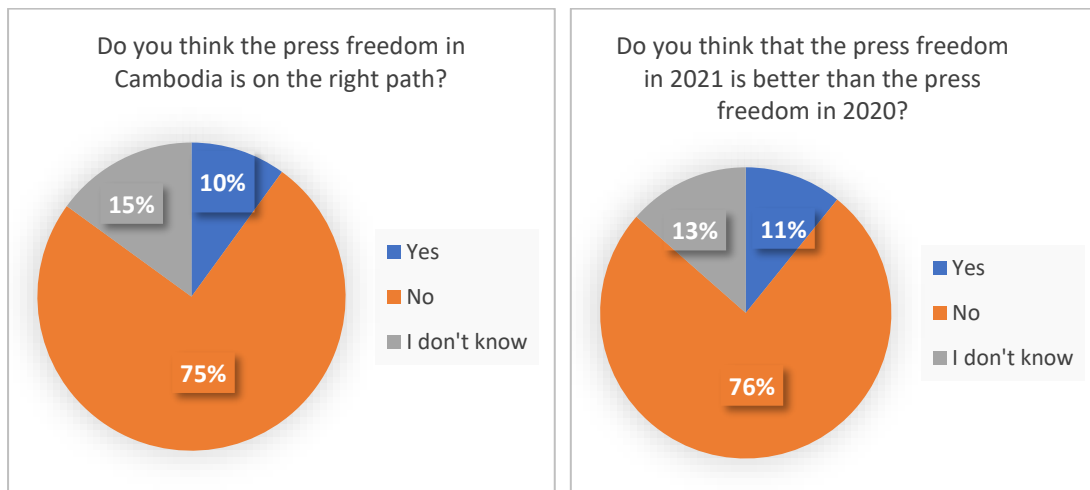


The challenge to access CSOs sources is similar to the previous year. The figure reports 39% of respondents have experienced difficulty accessing NGO sources. However, the percentage respondents who have experienced difficulty accessing academic sources increases to 64% in 2021 compares to 58.88% in 2020.

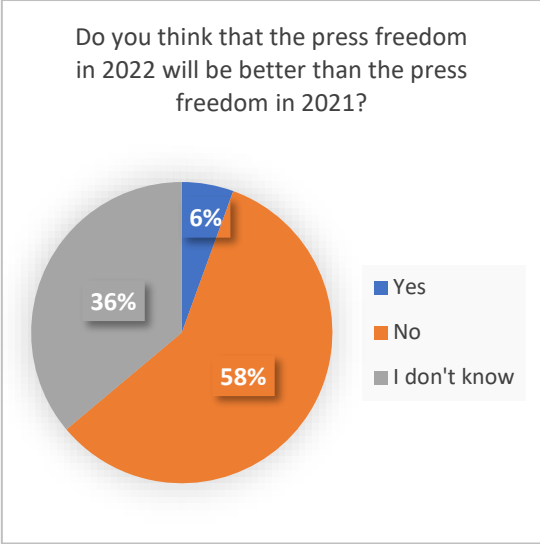
## 5.10 Perspectives on Independent Media



The percentage of respondents who think that the government's law and regulation does not present an opportunity for a greater press freedom in Cambodia increases to 70% compares to 61.68% in 2020. When it comes to the obligation of the government, 75% of the total respondents think that the government has not performed its duty to enhance and safeguard press freedom in Cambodia.



The figure reports only 10% of the total respondents think that the press freedom in Cambodia in 2021 is on the right path. And only 11% of respondents think that the press freedom in 2021 is better than the press freedom in 2020.



Amongst the total respondents, only 6% of them think that there will be improvements of press freedom in 2022.

## VI. Recommendations

Based on literature review and data analysis of the survey, it is recommended that:

### 6.1 Journalist and Media Organization

- 1) Recognise the role of journalists as frontline workers and accord them the protection and services they need.
- 2) Publishers, owners, and editors, especially the online media reporters, must hold themselves to professionalism and the highest code of ethics of journalist.
- 3) Media organizations should commit to providing all support necessary to journalists during a crisis such Covid-19 and in case of an emergency. All media organizations should have security policies and plans detailing emergency procedures as well as the types of assistance in place so that they will provide to their staff, including but not limited to legal representation, medical treatment, psychological counselling and temporary relocation to a safe house.
- 4) Journalists' associations should work independently to protect journalists and to promote professional journalism, media freedom and code of ethics for journalist.
- 5) The media organizations/associations should have a comprehensive plan and resources ready to support the journalists/media staff, including the well-being of their family members especially women with small kids, when they face threats or risks.

### 6.2 Civil Society Organizations and Donors

- 1) CSOs continue their work in the form of supplementary, other than substitute, to produce public outreach materials, train journalists and raise the public awareness about the importance of independence media, how to differentiate between trustworthy and fake news, code of ethics for journalist and so forth.
- 2) Strengthen the solidarity and cooperation between CSOs working in the media sector, media organizations and journalists' associations in the constructive and holistic approach, to enhance rights to information and independent media. This can be done through joint trainings, research studies, national conferences and evidence-based advocacies.
- 3) Work with media outlets and journalists' associations to build the capacity of journalists by offering courses such as security for journalists, reporting sensitive issues and journalism ethics and so forth.

- 4) Provide more supports such as legal support, psychological counselling services, physical and digital security training to journalists reporting on sensitive issues.
- 5) Maintain their strategic position on and ensure that resources are proportionally allocated to citizen journalists who have proven a growing role in promoting press freedom and good governance in Cambodia through their engagement in news creation and dissemination.

### **6.3 Government**

- 1) Enact policies that secure the safety of journalists as well as their sources during Covid-19 pandemic.
- 2) Recommit to protecting media freedom in Cambodia and expedite work on the Access to Information Law in order to ensure that information of both government and private organizations are disclosed to and available to the public. It will also allow the journalists to better perform their work, access wide range of sources and avoid repercussion.
- 3) Repeal existing laws (e.g., defamation law) and amend other regulations that allow threats to media or condone violence against journalists.
- 4) Independent journalists and media outlets face difficulties in getting press cards. Therefore, the Ministry of Information needs to make the press card application process more accessible and non-discriminatory.
- 5) Recommit to the rights to the press and provide opportunities to journalists to cover the government's events (e.g., National events/press conferences) and controversial events (e.g., Friday woman protests, etc.).
- 6) Create a conducive environment for a free and open dialogue between relevant authorities and independent journalists and media outlets to promote independent media and journalism in Cambodia.