

Overloaded and underpaid, journalists have to choose between family and profession

Due to difficult working conditions, lack of contracts or non-compliance of them, non-payment of insurance and threats of physical violence, a record number of journalists in Albania are giving up from their profession.

By Bardha Nergjoni and Denis Tahiri

Miranda Sadiku, who has a career of 20 years as a reporter in Elbasan city, chose another profession when found herself unemployed after staff reduction of journalists in ATSH.

“I decided to choose another profession because the print media, in which I had a specialization, couldn't offer me more than minimal payment”,-she said.

Now she is the mother of two daughters and she says that it was not an easy decision to give up journalism, but she must choose between family and career.

“Even though I didn't want to give up journalism, the pressure from redactors, the fact that the news should be written in the time when it happened, following the news in real time, made me make a decision between my family and career”,-she said.

Sadiku is not the only person who is giving up journalism during these years, various studies show that people who work in media are losing faith in their country, and are applying for asylum in the west Europe.

Aleksandër Çipa, the head of Albanian Union of Media, said that this trend started in 2018 with over 45 requests for asylum by journalists registered and the trend hasn't changed in the past years “It is still a trend during the period 2020-2021, well known journalists are leaving their country for better payment and better conditions.

Media professionals say constantly that the bad conditions at work, extended working hours, non-implementation of contracts, absence of social security are most of the reasons why journalists are giving up their job.

“I think that reporters have a lot of reasons for giving up their job because they are always in the line to get the news first,”says Erion Muça, labor rights expert. “There is a disbalance between time spent with family and time at work”.

Based on a study by IDRA released in 2019, 1 out of 3 professional journalists would not suggest journalism to younger generations.

The girls and women who work as journalists are abandoning journalism also because of stereotypes based on their gender, which means that they are paid lower wages.

Basen on a study of Helsinki's Comunitte, published in may of 2020, more than 80% of journalists women feel worse paid than their male colleagues.

“I think that women are more vulnerable to abandon this job, because I never watched a woman reporter that is 50 years old,”said Dhoriela Çule, journalist of Top Channel in Korça city.

“Media market in Albania is focused on new image and it is also built in such a way that it is difficult for an old woman to work as a journalist,”she said painfully.

Without social security and insecure

Based on the data of The Union of Albanians Journalists, in 2019 there were 6200 journalists, 2376 of which were professional journalists. Anyway, this number is higher if we don't forget the informal media market.

Dhorjela Çule has been working as a journalist for 11 years, but she has social security for 9 years and she also worked in two places at the same time.

“Actually at the beginning it was the late payment that made me do two jobs at the same time, but also the expenses we have: fuel, vehicle maintenance, work equipment that we mainly provide ourselves, ”she said.

Now Dhorjela accepted the fact that being a journalist means that she can't take a vacation.

“Maybe It seems a bit absurd to ask for normality for such a profession but I believe that we need more security, moral, and financial assessment considering also the fact that we are available 24 hours a day and that we work on Saturdays, Sundays and holidays," said Çule.

Also Entela Duka, who has a similar career as journalist, confirms the same thing about social security, there are more years of actual work than social security coverage.

“I have worked in the media for 12 years, but not more than half of it is covered by security,” she said.

Koloreto Cukali, head of the National Media Council, says that the right to paid leave, sometimes even the right to have maternity leave after giving birth, is commonly violated by the Albanian media.

“It is not about the online Media, but also for the TV, sometimes for the most important Media Institutions”said Cukali who confirms that there is no journalist who has a free weekend, also he said that the 6 days work week is now a normality for Albanian media.

Cukali complained that Albanian institutions are not committed to implement the Labor Code in the media field. "The fact that these right violations are constantly happening, means that this inspectorate is either totally corrupt, or is totally incompetent, so it must be dissolved and rebuilt as an institution," he added.

Cukali said that the most discriminated employees of the media market are female journalists.

"The panorama of the Albanian market in general shows that girls and women are underpaid, compared to their male colleagues," he said.

According to Cukali, in addition to low salaries, female reporters often face sexual harassment at work.

“They work in the same way as men, but there is not any advantage to their workplace,” he said. Violations are not accompanied by sanctions.

Public institutions accept that there are problems but there is not any in-depth report on the specifics of media employees.

According to the State Labor Inspectorate, in 2019, nationwide inspections were conducted in 47 private and state media entities with 472 registered employees. From these inspections, only 2% of the employees have resulted without a contract and 1 punitive measure and 3 “warning” measures have been taken.

The study concluded that numbers are higher than what inspections show. Based on a study of “Citizen Channel”, 4% of professional journalists do not have any work contract.

The informal market is particularly pronounced among young journalists. According to the same study, about 61% of journalism students who work or do internships in the media do not have a written employment contract with the employer.

The head of the Labor Inspectorate in Korça, Eris Papa stated in a written response that in this region inspections have been carried out on entities exercising their activity in the field of media and a number of violations of the Labor Code have been ascertained.

“It is true that a number of violations of labor legislation have been found, such as work on weekends, work done on national holidays, non-compensation of overtime hours performed by employees, as well as violations related to safety and health in the workplace,” said Papa.

Even though there is a lot of violence found, the inspectorate has not taken administrative or any other measures against media institutions.

Employment contracts are missing or not enforced

E.T works at two places but the social security is paid for only one job and for its minimum wage. Because she should have gone to work even when she had the maternity leave, she said that the failure of the contract is a deal between employer and employee. “I do not remember celebrating the holidays with my family,” she said. “I often had to go to work on Sundays because of the nature of the news even though I knew they belonged to me,” added the journalist, who preferred to remain anonymous.

There are also many cases where even though journalists had a contract and paid insurance, they found out later that the employer left them without contributions for years.

Jerola Ziaj, today a reporter for A2 CNN television, says that like many other colleagues, she has lost many years of contributions. “For 5 years I worked for a national media where at the end of my working period I found out that I had no insurance,” says Ziaj.

“I have decided to change jobs and one of the reasons has been the issue of insurance,” she added.

According to experts, the media market in Albania is an unregulated market in terms of the legal relationship between employer and employee.

Erjon Muça says that statistics show that journalists are paid the minimum wage and only a fraction of the real wage is declared by the employer at the Social Insurance Institute, but there are also cases where an employment contract that regulates and should regulate legal relations, rights and obligations of parties at work, is absent.

"Statistics of recent years show that 3,1% of journalists do not have employment contracts," said Muça. Muça emphasizes that many of the rights of journalists as employees, which are specified in the Labor Code or in the contract between the parties, are not respected.

"The media should be the model sector in respecting the rights in the employer-employee relationship, taking into account the fact that journalists must be the voice that protects the rights of workers in other sectors. "This is the paradox that has accompanied the journalist over the years," he added.

Threats and self-censorship

The difficulties of journalists and especially those who report right violations are not limited to contracts and social security, but are multifaceted. They commonly face pressure and threats of physical violence.

Jerola Ziaj recalls an event that happened in Himara (Vlore), when after a tiring day of reporting she and her family faced threats.

"The message we received from the police was not to approach them because they were dangerous and after a terrible day of reporting I found in front of my house a person who threatened me because of the title (true) of the article related to that event," Ziaj remembered. She said that the intimidator stated that he had solved the matter with the police and that journalists were getting involved in things they shouldn't.

"The perpetrators were arrested, fortunately, and I do not know what happened to them," she said. "It's one of those days where you realize the killers are on the other side, the police on the other and you're in the middle," the A2 CNN reporter said.

Such confrontations with threats push Albanian journalists towards self-censorship. According to IDRA's study of 2019, self-censorship remains widespread in the Albanian media. More than ¾ of the surveyed journalists thought that "almost all media censor themselves".

Missing trade unions

Experts and leaders of journalists associations often have different opinions about the situation of the media in Albania, but agree on one point: the lack of genuine Unions, which can negotiate contracts and salaries, has brought the media to a critical point.

"In most cases, the contracts are drafted according to the interests of the employers," said Koloreto Cukali, chairman of the Albanian Media Council, who stressed that these contracts

often do not include the exact salary of the journalist, which limits her/his ability to address disputes to the courts.

"These contracts intimidate the journalist," said Cukali. "We need contracts implemented not individually, but through Unions," he added.

Focusing on the general situation of journalists, Aleksandër Çipa also agrees that the biggest problem of the media labor market is that there are no trade union structures to guarantee the implementation of law and labor rights.

"Unfortunately we do not have such a history and the tragedy is even greater when you notice that it is missing after almost three decades of democratic system. Albanian legislation and the standard required within the European media standard is non-negotiable," said Çipa, while adding that in Albania Unions do not exist either on public television or in large private media companies with hundreds of employees.

According to the head of the Union of Albanian Journalists, the role of media as a contract administrator continues to be dominant in the employer-employee relationship, devaluing the professionalism of employees and editors decision-making about their careers.

"By international standards, and mainly European ones, the authority to recruit at these editorial levels rests with the editor," said Çipa.

The article/video in local language

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Nga **Bardha Nergjoni**/Video: Denis Tahiri

Miranda Sadiku, me një karrierë 20 vjeçare si reportere në qytetin e Elbasanit, zgjodhi një profesion tjetër kur e gjeti veten të papunë pas reduktimit të stafit nga Agjencia Telegrafike Shqiptare disa vite më parë.

"Vendosa të ndërmarr një tjetër drejtim duke parë se media e shkruar, ku unë isha e profilizuar, nuk ofronte as pagën minimale për jetesë," thotë ajo.

Tashmë nënë e dy vajzave, Sadiku thekson se vendimi për ta braktisur gazetarinë nuk ishte i lehtë, por asaj iu desh të zgjidhte midis profesionit dhe familjes.

"Edhe pse nuk dëshiroja ta braktisja profesionin, oraret e bëfta të ndjekjes së lajmit, shkrimi që duhet