

**State of Media Freedoms and Safety of Journalists
and Other Media Professionals in Sindh**

JOURNALISM IN THE SHADOW OF VIOLENCE



Iqbal Khattak

Freedom Network Special Report - 2024



**State of Media Freedoms and Safety of Journalists
and Other Media Professionals in Sindh**

JOURNALISM IN THE SHADOW OF VIOLENCE

Iqbal Khattak

Freedom Network Special Report - 2024

Acknowledgement:

This report is part of series of special reports produced by **Freedom Network** tracking the state of media freedoms in various regions of Pakistan. This report was produced with support of IMS (**International Media Support - IMS**) although its contents are the sole responsibility of Freedom Network. We are thankful to **Adnan Rehmat**, IMS Pakistan program manager for strategic inputs and support, **Faiza Hassan** for her assistance with data collection, **Farhan Jawaid** for his coordination in its production, **Imdad Buzdar** and **Ahkar Rizvi**, president and general secretary of Sukkur Union of Journalists respectively for their facilitation in arranging focus group discussions in Sukkur. Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were also held in Khairpur, Hyderabad and Karachi in late 2023.

Table of Contents

1 Executive Summary	5
2 Introduction	7
2.1 Methodology	8
3. The state of media freedom in Sindh	10
3.1 Threat actors to free speech.....	10
3.2 Internal threats to journalists ranks and file.....	12
3.3 Poor service structure	14
3.4 Gender in journalism	18
4. The state of safety of journalists	20
4.1 Extreme form of censorship	21
4.2 Legal cases	28
4.3 Harassment, intimidation and dismissals	30
5. Sindhi vernacular media	32
5.1 Why Sindhi-language media is popular?	32
5.2 Sindhi journalists prime targets.....	34
6. Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Act, 2021 ..	38
6.1 What law offers to protect journalists.....	40
6.2 Operationalization of commission.....	43
6.3 A glance at commission's performance in 2023	45
7. Recommendations.....	47

Executive Summary

On an average, two journalists were killed every year in Sindh between the period January 2018 and December 2023, according to data available with Pakistani media rights watchdog Freedom Network. All the killed journalists, including citizen journalist Nazim Jokhio, worked for Sindhi-language media. Three journalists were murdered in Khairpur, two each in Sukkur and Naushero Feroze, and one each in Hyderabad and Jacobabad. The list of killed journalists may have been long had 10 other attempts on lives of journalists not failed.

This report examines challenges freedom of expression is facing in the province and threat actors posing these challenges risking lives of journalists in both urban and rural regions of Sindh. This report is part of series of special reports that Freedom Network is producing to advance its advocacy campaigns for enabling policy and legal frameworks in the provinces to combat deep-rooted impunity for crimes against journalists in Pakistan.

The presence of powerful threat actors, coupled with poor service structure, and little effective proactive protection mechanisms at the government level in Sindh have been contributing majorly to a deep-rooted impunity for crimes against journalists in Sindh. The state of safety of journalists is equally undermined in urban and rural regions of the province. The establishment of a commission to combat crimes against media industry and its practitioners in 2023 is a good policy step in the direction of combating impunity of crimes but without an office, staff and budget it will fail to do its job.

Safety experts call physical elimination the most extreme form of censorship and the murder of 10 journalists in six years reinforces claims that Sindh is prone to this problem. Freedom Network compiled data based on monitoring and documentation between January 2018 and December 2023. Among the threat cases during this period include murders (10), attempt to murder (10), kidnapped (14), arrested (07), detained (09), offline harassment (15), online harassment (01), assaulted (27), injured (26), attack on homes of journalists (04), written threats (02), verbal threats (11), legal cases (45), fined (01) and robbery (02).

One hundred per cent impunity for perpetrators of crimes against journalists makes Sindh an unsafe province for practicing journalism, from professional and policy points of view. The cost of practicing journalism is very high in Sindh. Unless this situation is reversed, journalists will continue to work in a coercive and intimidating environment and media freedoms will remain in peril.

The harsh reality is that free speech comes with a high cost in Sindh province. No single perpetrator for any of documented crimes against journalists has been made accountable so far, making it an environment of 100 per cent impunity.

Rural journalists are mostly untrained in safety and security issues. Even trained journalists are usually not applying safety protocols. One of the common problems most journalists are guilty of is that they do not share threats with their peers as security experts emphasize that they must be shared with trusted persons in family or office or among colleagues. In absence of any clues, it is hard for investigators to begin investigation from an unknown point. “In murder investigation cases, you connect dots to find clues and killers. If you already know that what happened at point A it helps you find other dots also,” the Depury Superintendent of Police of Sukkur said in an interview conducted in his office for this report.

The murder case of citizen journalist Nazim Jokhio is evidence of impunity that influentials be they waderas, landlords, politicians or government authorities enjoy in all parts of the country, and Sindh is no exception.

Nowhere in Pakistan is vernacular media as popular as is Sindhi-language media in the province although nationalism in southern Balochistan and northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces is perhaps stronger. The vernacular media in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is almost non-existing except that Pashto-language Daily Wahdat and Mashriq News channel in Peshawar and Baloch-language Daily Tawar and Wush News channel 1, based in Karachi, represent the two provinces’ token vernacular media.

Chapter 2

Introduction

This report was necessitated after Sindh province thrice emerged as “one of the most dangerous regions in Pakistan for journalists” in Freedom Network’s annual State of Media Freedoms Reports in 2020¹, 2021² and 2022³ to examine why the region was faring poorly with regards to safety of journalists. This report examines Sindh’s media landscape through two distinct assessment lens: (1) What is the state of media freedoms in Sindh province today? and (2) What is the state of safety of journalists in Sindh province today? The report also tries to answer the following key questions for each of the two assessments:

A. What is the state of media freedoms in Sindh today?

1. **MEDIUMS:** What is the snapshot of the kinds and size of media based in Sindh – how many licensed and other kinds of radio stations and TV channels, and approximate print media presence are based in the province?
2. **DIGITAL:** What is the digital footprint of Sindh? Present available statistics about internet users and mobile telephony in in the province.
3. **FREE SPEECH:** What are the key restrictions/practices that curb freedom of expression in general and media freedoms in particular in Sindh? How do these affect portrayal of Sindh in mainstream media of Pakistan? Who speaks on behalf of Sindh in media?
4. **SIZE:** What is the status of associational representation of journalists in Sindh? The approximate size of Sindh-origin journalists/formal media practitioners based within the province. And approximations of the numbers of district-based press clubs and unions of journalists and their membership numbers. Approximately how many women journalists in Sindh and any available estimates of journalists based within the province.

B. What is the state of safety of journalists in Sindh today?

1. **CASUALTIES:** Key statistics about murders of journalists in Sindh since 2018. Available statistics of other types of violations (kidnappings, assault, arrests and intimidation) related to journalists based in the province.
2. **THREAT SOURCES:** The key threat actors and threat trends and the measures or tactics they use to intimidate and hurt journalists and

¹ <https://www.fnpc.org/freedom-network-annual-press-freedom-report-2020/>

² <https://www.fnpc.org/dramatic-escalation-in-climate-of-intimidation-and-harassment-of-media-in-pakistan/>

³ <https://www.fnpc.org/fn-press-freedom-report-2022-islamabad-riskiest-city-for-journalists-2/>

the impact of these on the physical, psychological and digital safety of journalists.

3. **ASSISTANCE:** Kinds of assistance mechanisms are available to journalists—whether from the state authorities or independent sources. Assistance gaps and measures and resources needed to safeguard journalists in Sindh.

2.1 Methodology

Freedom Network used the data it collects from Sindh Safety Hub Network, established in 2016 in collaboration with Karachi Press Club, monitoring and documenting each reported case of attacks, harassment, intimidation or any other threat journalists face in the province, for desk research for this report. The data used for this report is restricted to the period between January 2018-December 2023 – six years. The desk research was followed by focus group discussions and key informant interviews with relevant quarters in four key cities of Sindh in September 2023.

1: The state of media freedoms in Sindh today

Snapshot of the kinds and size of media based in Sindh

Sindh is a land of saints. The province is notable for its diverse culture and geography. Sindh is the third largest province by size, and second largest province by population. It is bordered by Balochistan province to the west, Punjab province to the north, the Indian states of Gujarat and Rajasthan to the east, and Arabian Sea to the south⁴.

Sindh is home to some of the oldest media houses serving Pakistan with flow of information soon after the country's creation in 1947. Karachi, the provincial capital of Sindh, is also recognized as “media capital” of the country.

Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), the first journalistic association for defending freedom of expression and protecting rights of journalists in South Asia, was created in Karachi in 1950. The PFUJ waged battles for press freedom after General Ayub Khan overthrew and exiled president Iskandar Mirza imposing the first martial law in 1958 and this battle continues since then.

Karachi lost its federal capital status after Islamabad was founded in 1960 to be the new headquarters of the federal government. However, with the

⁴ <https://www.unicef.org/pakistan/media/5296/file/Sindh%20-%20Multiple%20Indicator%20Cluster%20Survey%202018-19.pdf>

rapid expansion of the media landscape in the country particularly after the government liberalized airwaves allowing private television channels in 2002, Karachi still serves as the “media capital” of the country.

Sindh is also home to Pakistan People’s Party with the white-coloured sprawling mausoleum complex in Garhi Khuda Bakhsh town in Larkana district serving as the final resting place for two former prime ministers –Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto and Benazir Bhutto - along with other family members.

The Karachi Press Club with its iconic building is a journalism institution in itself and center of free speech even during the darkest days of military rule. In northern Sukkur city, the striking and eye-catching building of the press club reminds visitors of the struggles of Sindh’s journalists for freedom of expression.

Almost every district in Sindh province, as Sukkur Union of Journalists (SUJ) president Imdad Buzdar states, has a press club and sub-union of journalists. There are three major regional unions of journalists which are affiliated with PFUJ – Karachi, Hyderabad and Sukkur unions of journalists. All the three regional unions have sub-unions in each district of Sindh province.

Out of total 140 registered TV licenses issued by Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA)⁵ at least 49 are registered in Sindh covering Sindh specific news and views. Out of 175 commercial radio licenses 31 are either registered in Sindh or working in Sindh. Out of 60 non-commercial registered radio licenses 15 are from Sindh.

The number⁶ of monthly, weekly, fortnightly and daily newspapers published from Sindh stands at 148 of which 99 are dailies, 38 monthly and rest are fortnightly and weekly newspapers. Some 120 of them are published from Karachi alone while rest in Hyderabad and Sukkur divisions and few other cities.

Sindhi-language media is the most powerful in the province with large native audiences and following in rural and urban Sindh alike. No vernacular media in other provinces is as influential as Sindhi-language press. Experts attribute this situation to “greater political awareness” in the province particularly after ‘Movement for Restoration of Democracy’ was launched to oust military dictator General Ziaul Haq from power that he seized in 1979 coup against late Prime Minister Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto.

⁵ https://www.pemra.gov.pk/uploads/licensing/stv/list_of_licences_issued_stv.pdf

⁶ https://www.apns.com.pk/member_publication/sindh.php

State of media freedoms in Sindh

The Pakistan People's Party (PPP) is among the few democratic parties which have been championing for greater space for free speech in the country. As part of Freedom Network delegation, I met PPP Chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari for the first time in Islamabad in April 2018, months before the general elections to seek his commitment to protection of journalists through a legal framework as Pakistan continued to remain among top countries where impunity for crimes against journalists is very high.

"We believe in free speech and PPP will do whatever it can to protect it," Bilawal Bhutto had promised. Party leader and former journalist Farhatullah Babar was also present in the meeting. "If voted to power, PPP will bring legislation to protect journalists."

Three years later, Sindh province became the first province in Pakistan and Pakistan the first country in the world to have legislated on safety of journalists after the party was not able to win required number of seats to form government at the federal level. However, its victory in Sindh proved a blessing in disguise for Islamabad-based media watchdog organization Freedom Network-led advocacy when the ⁷UN Plan of Action on the Safety of Journalists and the Issue of Impunity was launched in October 2013 with its "Islamabad Declaration" fixing duty-bearers and responsibilities for each stakeholder.

3.1: Threat actors to free speech

All arrangements to record talk-shows by renowned journalist late Jan Muhammad Mehar from Sukkur bureau of KTN News channel were completed. Lights were installed, mikes put in place and cameras ready. Host of the 'Today's Talk' show, meanwhile, was gunned down a few yards off his studio on the evening of 13 August 2023 just days before he recorded his first show.

⁷ <https://www.ohchr.org/en/safety-of-journalists/un-plan-action-safety-journalists-and-issue-impunity>



SUKKUR: A view of studio set up in KTN Sukkur bureau where late Jan Muhammad Mehar was to start 'Today's Talk' show for his Sindhi-language channel. Photo by report author

The murder of the journalist took place moments after law-enforcement personnel carried out a flag march – a kind of demonstration to give citizens a sense of security on the eve of Independence Day – all through the city's major streets.

“Look, when you challenge the system it often triggers a strong reaction. Targeting or harassing journalists is the result of this,” Sukkur Senior Superintendent of Police (SSP Operations) Irfan Ali Samo said in a meeting at his office on 9 September 2023.

Village chieftains, usually referred to as *waderas*, landlords, politicians and police, *News One* channel Sukkur bureau chief Abdur Rauf believes, are prime suspects and key threat actors threatening free speech if journalists ask hard questions or challenge the status quo.

Sukkur Union of Journalists president Imdad Buzdar listed four major threats to free speech in his province: (1) political parties, (2) *waderas* or landlords, (3) the establishment including intelligence agencies, and (4) media owners.

“They all have a kind of nexus against free speech. Any sort of report against any interest group can cause serious threats to any journalist in Sindh,” he said. “Our media houses are behaving like a corporate entity. You may lose your job if do not apologize for your report against any of the threat actors.”

“Agents on payroll,” a reference to intelligence agencies’ roles, “within the media community” is harming free speech in Sindh, Buzdar added.

A new actor has also emerged in Sindh threatening media for any report against them. Dacoits in riverine areas of Sindh and Punjab border areas are a new entry to the list of threat actors. They provide shelter to anyone who escapes the law. Mastermind of late Jan Mehar’s murder is believed to have taken shelter with these dacoits who are proving a hard nut to crack for the state despite efforts at the highest decision-making levels to bring an end to these “no-go areas.”

3.2: Internal threats to journalists’ rank and file

Sindh is not different from rest of Pakistan where “division within rank and file” of unions leading to creation of rival factions have weakened the community giving the threat actors an ideal situation to employ the “divide-and-rule” principle. Two press clubs in Sukkur and factions in unions have divided the journalist community. Their members blame each other for challenges they face instead putting up a united fight against the threats they face quite at a regular interval.

Buzdar listed same reasons for internal threats which he believed were responsible for the current situation. “The best hit your enemy wishes to make often comes from within. These actors are out to weaken us from within. And these threat actors seem quite successful so far.”

Two groups of journalists openly struggle for control in Sukkur – the ‘Lala Asad Pathan Group’ and the ‘Imdad Phulpoto Group’. Within a radius of less than two kilometers in Sukkur city, two press clubs exist. One of them appears to have encroached on a public park to make its presence felt. Each group blames the other for all the ills that journalists face. One group is accused of being “hands in glove” with threat actors of free speech. The accused group hits back by alleging that the rival group is “working against the interests of free speech on behalf of these actors.” A vicious circle of allegations and counter-allegations continues to muddy the waters.

Factionalism and groupings within the journalist community is more common today than ever in Pakistan in general, and Sindh is no exception. This did not come about organically. Deliberate attempts were made to make it happen. This factionalism suits the state and the establishment to render the community's strength diluted. It also suits the media owners, some trade unionists in Sindh argue.

Serious efforts by some respected journalists like late Muhammad Ziauddin and late Rahimullah Yousafzai, to help forge unity in rank and file of the divided journalist community at the national level did not succeed.

PPP leader Khursheed Shah belongs to Sukkur and his influence in the region was on ample display at his residence visited to know his thoughts about the situation in the area where he has done politics for decades.

"Journalism is a hard business now," he said, blaming most journalists of "considering themselves above the law." He alleged that journalists were "purchased" today, suggesting that journalists should be taught about morality. "No one, including journalists, are ready to acknowledge their fault."



SUKKUR: PPP leader Syed Khursheed Shah (L) is listening to report author Iqbal Khattak (C). Sukkur Press Club General-Secretary Imdad Buzdar (R) looks on. Photo by Adnan Rehmat

The local journalists' community leadership clearly seemed disturbed by the PPP leader's comments during the session despite the fact that the party forcefully professes public support for free speech. It surprised all when the politician expressed ignorance about late Jan Mehar's murder although he knew him. Shah was elected representative in the National Assembly in both the 2018 and 2024 elections from Sukkur.

Karachi-based veteran journalist Sohail Sangi believes government grants actually "encourage groupings" in unions. He was not at ease to see unions are also getting grants from the successive governments in Sindh.

Vested groups often lie in wait for any opportunity to exploit journalists, some Khairpur journalists reason.

"Different mafias are in search of loose connections about any journalist so they can push forward their agendas. They can exploit personal or family enmities or feuds some journalists may have. Even if you are not part of any family feud and if you are killed for your professional work, they will blame your death for your family feud. This is exactly what is being whispered about Jan Mehar's murder and I just don't believe he was killed over a family feud," community leader Sanaullah Memon in Khairpur district said.

3.3: Poor service structure for journalists

Most interviewees and individual journalists repeated during focus group discussions that poor service structure for journalists working in remote districts of Sindh has made them vulnerable and exposed to greater risks by flirting with "unethical journalism."

"Anyone with some money can now get a newspaper's correspondent card. His background is not checked. What is checked is that he provides guarantee money and orders some 15-20 newspapers to his station. Whether newspapers are sold or not is the headache of the correspondent and not the newspaper's," Sanaullah Memon, general Secretary of Khairpur Press Club said. "Journalism is moving in wrong direction. It is a money game now. You can buy journalism credentials now."

Not all media houses across Pakistan have service structure meeting minimum standards outlined under media industry or labor laws, Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists claims. Long salary delays are common phenomena now. Before the 2024 elections, the coalition government of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif

amended the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulations Authority law to legalize delay in payment of salary for up to two months – a negation of fundamental labor law.

A journalist in Karachi working for one of the biggest media groups approached Freedom Network in 2023 to seek assistance after a libel suit filed against him in Islamabad for his report. His media organization refused to help him both morally and financially. “In such cases, the editor and printer are also accountable. But I was scapegoated,” he spoke on condition of anonymity.

Media houses often do not own their own journalists when they are targeted for their journalism work. In all cases of the killed journalists in Pakistan, no media owner or media organization has filed an FIR on behalf of its murdered journalist, Freedom Network data suggests.

An economic crunch sweeping the country since 2019 has made things worse for the media industry forcing many to cut operation costs by shutting down some bureaus, imposing salary cuts and dismissing many staff from service to cope with the crisis.

The poor service structure problem is not restricted to Sindh province. It prevails in most parts of the country. Poor enforcement of labor laws encourages the situation to deteriorate. The federal government failed to enforce the Wage Board Award for journalists and unions have been unsuccessful in resolving the challenges to a level of its workers’ satisfaction.

Abtak News channel reporter Sirajuddin Shehwani in Khairpur testifies about “use of money” to acquire media card that can buy influence for some journalists. “No background check is conducted before someone is allowed to work for a media group. Media houses are not trying to know the background of applicants.”

All successive Sindh governments in recent decades have provided press clubs and unions with annual grants. However, they always take their eyes off the general non-implementation of labor laws in the media industry in the province.

The International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) is a global body working with national unions of journalists around the globe, including Pakistan, to improve working conditions and protect labor rights in the media industry. Its Pakistan coordinator Ghulam Mustafa in Karachi sounds the alarm bell on this score. “Except for one or two media houses, no other media group is paying their journalists in any district in Sindh province,” he said.

“Such situation is promoting unethical journalism. The irony is the media houses are asking for ‘guarantee money’ from their correspondents while hiring district correspondents,” he added.

These district correspondents do ask for their salaries, but they are invariably told to try to find alternatives by themselves. It is a kind of pushing the district reporters into corrupt practices. With these practices come serious risks to lives of journalists.

Mustafa agrees that unpaid journalists are often “used by interest groups” to achieve own political or other objectives. The IFJ Pakistan coordinator, who himself is a senior journalist and has rich experience and knowledge of working conditions in Sindh, also points to another issue of capacity challenges these remote journalists face.

“These journalists often lack professional capacities to meet challenges related to their professional work. A district reporter has to cover multiple stories. Unlike urban journalists who are responsible for covering specific beats instead chasing multiple stories on all subjects, rural journalists have difficult choices. A small error at times can bring serious harm to any journalist,” Mustafa argues.

Veteran journalist and unionist G. N. Mughal in Hyderabad said salaries were often delayed. “The worst thing a professional in any profession can face is a delay in salaries. Journalists are not getting salaries on time,” the ageing journalist said. “Journalists are very worried.”

Insiders’ role in every profession is critical and journalism is not safe from such planted elements. K. B. Sheikh, who works for GTV News in Sukkur, testified that some fellow journalists can also become a “source of threats” such as using police to warn you against doing a particular story. “Touts are described as ‘great journalists’ and professional journalists are called ‘traitors!’”

Senior Sindhi journalist Manzoor Sheikh also joined our discussion on premises of Karachi Press Club to corroborate what Mustafa was emphasizing. “The poor service structure issue is a widespread problem,” he chipped in. “No contract or no grading. No job description.”

There is no such verified data available to measure the scale of employment in absence of clearly formatted contract system meeting all legal and labor laws obligations.

Sohail Sangi, 72, was more upfront to describe the situation. “If you do not pay

them, the journalists will make money themselves. If you are not paid for your work, then you look for others who pay you in return for special favors. This is where dangers start to hound you,” the veteran journalist with rich experience of working with Sindhi-language media pointed out.

Muhammad Bakhsh has been in journalism for over 35 years in Khairpur district. For him, challenges have always been part and parcel of journalism but feels that these days the challenges are far serious than previously, and often carry the risks of serious harm, including physical. “Those who acquired accreditation cards with money are out to blackmail you and this undermines safety and integrity of those who are genuine practitioners of the journalism trade,” he said. “We the old journalists have lost value in the today’s anything-goes journalism.”

Lifestyles of some journalists make you believe that all this is not possible with mere salary from the media organization. Personal friendships or businesses at the cost of professional integrity and accountability gives predators of free speech a free hand to manage flow of information as per their wishes.

The division in rank and file of the journalist community is exploited to maximum level. When broadcast journalist Hamid Mir survived assassination attempt on his life in Karachi in 2014 some of his journalist colleagues ridiculed him for his claim that he received bullets or tried to find reasons other than that he was targeted for his shows on subjects some interest groups at the state level were unhappy over its telecast.

During the rule of Imran Khan between 2018 and 2022, the community was generally and intentionally divided between pro and anti-Khan camps. Pro-Khan journalists enjoyed the government and the state’s full backing while anti-Khan journalists faced bans, censorship and loss of jobs after full backlash from the government and the state alike.

Anti-Khan political opposition parties also exploited the situation throwing full support to journalists when they were attacked. Opposition leader Shahbaz Sharif⁸ led the opposition leaders’ delegation to visit Vlogger Asad Ali Toor after an attack on him inside his apartment in Islamabad in May 2021.

When the Khan government was toppled through a vote of no-confidence in 2022, the pendulum swung in favor of anti-Khan journalists and pro-Khan

⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/nayadaurpk/videos/maryam-shehbaz-sharif-pdm-leadership-visit-asad-ali-toor/940913019977291/>

journalists began facing the state's ire and the political parties that were part of ruling Pakistan Democratic Movement (PDM) looked the other way to condemn attacks on journalists in their government.

3.4: Gender in journalism

Gender in journalism in Sindh is in a poor state of affairs. Except for Karachi and to some extent Hyderabad, women are not seen doing journalism for various reasons in rural Sindh areas. Lack of encouragement at all entry levels is a contributing factor behind fewer number of women adopting journalism as career and practicing it after their marriages especially.

Press clubs do not have gender policies to promote women in journalism. Special incentives are lacking to encourage women to begin journalism career and greater sense of insecurity at workplaces and in fields are the added problems. Inadequate measures are taken at media houses level to expect more women in journalism with greater safe workspaces and equal pay culture to encourage young women journalists in newsrooms and reporting rooms.

Ms Ghufrana Arian is a regional head of independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan in Hyderabad. The number of women in journalism in her division can be counted on fingertips, she said lamenting that there are only a few women in the profession. "We struggle to find women journalist for our programmes."

There are six women members of Hyderabad Press Club. Ms Sumera Mukhtar is one of them. She works in newsroom for web-based *Ibrat News* channel. "I did a story on women's rights in Naushero Feroze and Jacobabad areas where women are denied rights widely. That story triggered quite a good deal of threats for me," she said, and spoke of dangers women journalists in field can face if they report issues that influential quarters do not like to be reported.

Despite harsher working and safety conditions some women journalists are courageously continue careers in journalism in rural Sindh. Shehrash Khokhar is one of them from Sukkur. "Whenever a women journalist is targeted for her journalism work a 'character assassination tool' is used against her. This is the most lethal tool to use against women journalists," she said.

The journalist is fighting a legal case after she was harassed. "We are facing safety and security threats. If your story is targeting a *wadera*, he targets you. If your story targets police or politician they also target you and your safety can be

compromised,” Ms Shehrash counted threats she and her colleagues are facing.

Media houses, she complained, did not own threats their journalists faced. “Our media houses do not facilitate you if you are facing any threat. You are left alone to tackle the issue on your own.”

Kiran Mirza takes even greater risk doing job with a foreign media organization. She works mostly on human interest and investigative stories for Deutsche Welle (DW) radio. “Since I started my career in 2011, the society has not accepted me as journalist. When I visit other cities for my professional work I am called ‘princess.’ People are asking me why you joined this profession instead welcome and support me,” Ms Kiran lamented.

“We are laughed at by saying: ‘Can women also work as journalist?’ I say yes. Woman can work as journalist and honestly.” She was cautioned by her media organization after murder of two journalists in Sukkur region within a month time. “My organization says my safety comes first and then the story.”

This understanding is missing in Pakistani media houses. If we take number of threats journalists working for Pakistani media houses and journalists working for international organizations the gap is wide suggesting international organizations are taking greater care of their journalists with complete safety protocols and total compliance keeps their journalists far safer despite doing some hard stories against powerful state institutions and actors.

Most Pakistani media houses do not have such policy for their staffers’ safety and security, Sukkur Union of Journalists General-Secretary Imdad Buzdar recalls.

Does the current state of affairs curtail citizens’ right to know and access information? Ms Kiran nods in agreement. “I am asked when will your report go on-air? Certainly, people want to know. So, if journalists do not have free movement how will they collect information?”

A woman journalist in Karachi drew attention to another issue – no equal pay regime for women journalists. “We do not even get salaries our men counterparts are getting,” she said wishing not to be named. “There is disparity in salaries women journalists are getting.”

The state of safety of journalists

The presence of powerful threat actors, coupled with poor service structure, and little effective proactive protection mechanisms at the government level in the province until the establishment of a commission to combat crimes against media industry and its practitioners, leads to a deep-rooted impunity for crimes against journalists in Sindh province. The state of safety of journalists is under question both in urban and rural cities of the province.

From capital city Karachi to smaller town in remote parts of the province the issue of impunity is prevalent everywhere. In Sindh, there is a phrase attributed to police. “Half fry or full fry”, according to journalists, is used against criminals allegedly by the police. These journalists comprehend that they might be made to similar treatment.

Safety experts call physical elimination a form of “extreme censorship” and the murder of 10 journalists in five years reinforces claims that Sindh is prone to this problem.

Freedom Network compiled data based on monitoring and documentation between January 2018 and December 2023. Among the threat cases include murders (10), attempt to murder (10), kidnapped (14), arrested (07), detained (09), offline harassment (15), online harassment (01), assaulted (27), injured (26), attack on homes of journalists (04), written threats (02), verbal threats (11), legal cases (45), fined (01) and robbery (02).

The province witnessed the two most high-profile murder cases involving *The Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl in 2002 and Geo News channel reporter Wali Khan Babar. Both journalists’ killers have somehow escaped punishment owing to poor cases by public prosecutors and elimination of eyewitnesses in Wali Babar’s murder case.

With 100 percent impunity for perpetrators of crimes against journalists makes Sindh unsafe province for practicing journalism. The cost of doing journalism is very high in Sindh. Unless this situation is arrested journalists will continue to work in feared environment.

4.1: Extreme form of censorship

The harsh reality is that free speech comes with high cost in Sindh province. No single perpetrator for any of documented crimes against journalists has been made accountable so far. A complete 100 percent impunity prevails in the province where the quest for information is greater.

The family of reporter Muhammad Anas, working for *KTN News* channel of Kawish Media Group in Sukkur, has urged him to move elsewhere after his colleague and senior journalist Jan Muhammad Mehar was killed by gunmen effortlessly in heart of Sukkur in 2023.

“His killing shocked us, and we are in a state of great insecurity,” he said while taking me around his channel’s bureau in Sukkur city where the late journalist’s studio was ready for recording talk-shows whereas Sukkur police sealed the murdered journalist’s office to preserve potential forensic evidence to use against perpetrators of crime.

Jan’s murder was talk of the town in Sindh. The deceased looked more than a journalist personality. His life size portrait hangs inside Sukkur Press Club while a Sindhi nationalist party also put on display a poster with late Jan Mehar’s photo to keep supporters engaged outside main gate of Hyderabad Press Club.

It is rare that a Sindhi journalist’s murder was so well and persistently highlighted inside Sindh.

The government’s response was swift to order Joint Investigation Team for investigation. His murder case was handed over to Counter Terrorism Department of Sukkur Police. Deputy Superintendent Police Counter Terrorism Department Abdul Qadoos took charge of Investigation Officer for



SUKKUR: A poster inside Sukkur Press Club pays tribute to late Jan Muhammad Mehar. Photo by report author



SUKKUR: SSP Operations Irfan Ali Samo (2nd Right) speaks to Freedom Network at his office discussing safety and security of journalists and threat actors targeting journalists in Sukkur division. Photo by Adnan Rehmat

the journalist's murder just two days before I met him and he started examining the murder case file. "I will soon meet eyewitnesses while geo-fencing of the case is done and the accused is nominated," he said in his decaying official residence inside Police Lines in Sukkur city. "I will use my 33 years of experience of criminal investigation to track down killers of Jan Mehar," the bearded police official, who was renowned for professionalism, resolved.

Sukkur Senior Superintendent Operations Irfan Ali Samo knew late Jan Mehar closely. "Journalists are half cops and vice versa. Jan Mehar was exposing *waderas*. He was exposing anti-state elements. His facts were exposing many people. His murder was a big tragedy," he said.

"As for journalists in Sindh, they are exposing *waderas*, landlords, politicians and tribal system. And that is why they are targeted," Samo said, listing free speech predators in the province.

Police duty, the official said, was to protect journalists. The Sindh Police, however, seems to be failing in its duty if the official's statement is taken on its face. He avoided to acknowledge that the free speech predators somehow enjoy complete patronage of the police also.

By the end of 2023, Sukkur Police had made no arrest of the main accused so far – several months after the murder of the journalist - who was believed to have taken shelter with dacoits in "no-go areas" in Sindh province.

Family feuds or personal enmities are blamed for most journalists' murders to take the case off list of free speech violations. Jan Mehar, who received six bullets, is no exception. Doing so, attention from likely motive of his murder is taken away from professional work to a family feud or personal enmity. Such move makes the case less attractive for media coverage or media watchdog organizations.



HYDERABAD: A Sindh nationalist party poster outside Hyderabad Press Club pays tribute to late Jan Muhammad Mehar. Photo by report author

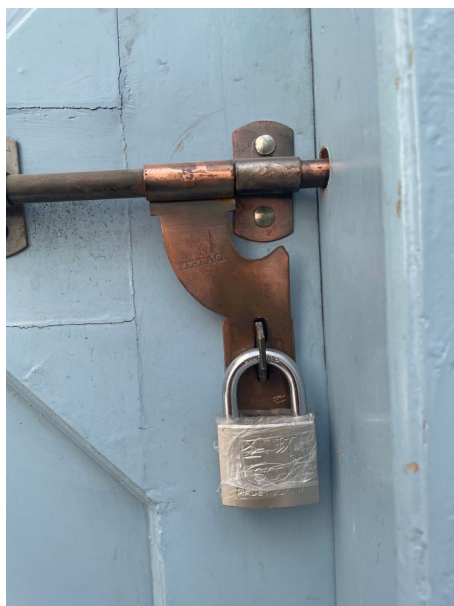
Murder cases of journalists in rural Sindh do not make headlines in mainstream media in the country while Sindhi-language media reports these cases quite regularly. The mainstream media's lukewarm response encourages predators to step up pressure on media. As long as media brings pressure on law enforcement agencies, the murder cases of journalists will remain unresolved and impunity levels high.

Rural journalists are mostly untrained about safety and security issues. Even trained journalists are usually not applying safety protocols. One of the common problems most journalists are guilty of is that they do not share threats with their peers as security experts emphasize that it must be shared with trusted persons in family or office or among colleagues.

In absence of any clues, it is very hard for investigators to begin investigation from unknown point. "In murder investigation cases, you connect dots to find clues and killers. If you already know that what happened at point A it helps you find other dots also," DSP Qadoos said.

Almost all the people who I met to discuss Jan Mehar's murder case they all said he did not share his threat with anyone. "In the past, I helped Jan Mehar solve some issues. This time he did not even hint that he has had any issue in family or personally," Irfan Ali said ruefully.

On an average, two journalists were killed every year in Sindh between the period January 2018 and December 2023, according to data available with Freedom Network. All the killed journalists, including citizen journalist Nazim Jokhio, worked for Sindhi-language media. Three journalists were murdered in Khairpur, two each in Sukkur and Naushero Feroze, and one each in Hyderabad and Jacobabad, as per the data. The list of killed journalists may have been long had 10 other attempts on lives of journalists not failed.



SUKKUR: Local police sealed room which late Jan Muhammad Mehar used as his office in KTN Sukkur bureau. Photo by report author.

Aziz Memon worked for *KTN News* channel from Naushero Feroze. Days before his slain body was discovered from a canal in his district, the journalist released a video message⁹ in which he claimed his life had been made “miserable” as a police official and some functionaries of Pakistan People’s Party were chasing him for his report that participants of widely publicized “train march” of party chairman Bilawal Bhutto Zardari participants were allegedly “paid.”

The PPP denies the allegation. However, no independent investigation was conducted to probe why and who killed the journalist.

Freedom Network runs ‘Pakistan Safety Hubs Network’ across Pakistan in collaboration with Karachi, Lahore, Quetta, Islamabad and Peshawar press clubs where threat cases against journalists are monitored and documented.

Pakistan Journalists Safety Fund (PJSF), an integral part of Pakistan Safety Hubs, is a rapid assistance mechanism to assist journalists at risk. Four different assistance categories serve journalists who face serious risk to their lives. The categories include inland relocation, legal and medical assistance and financial support to deceased journalist families. Freedom Network literally saved more than 150 lives of journalists through PJSF since 2016.

In comparison to PJSF, no such other assistance mechanism is available any at any level in Pakistan to save lives of journalists, Freedom Network desk research confirms. The journalists assisted through PJSF were all safe giving 100 percent result to keep journalists safe. Why has no such mechanism been developed at the government level?

The murder case of citizen journalist Nazim Jokhio is evidence of impunity by influentials be they *waderas*, landlords, politicians or government authorities enjoy in all parts of the country and Sindh is no exception.

If you click hyperlink¹⁰ of M. Jibran Nasir tweet it shows a video message of deceased citizen journalism Nazim Jokhio, who is heard speaking in Sindhi language and talking about a vehicle and its occupants threatening him for his video which is about houbara bustard hunting after Justice (Retd) Jawad S. Khawaja, Justice Dost Muhammad and Justice Qazi Faez Isa, who is now the chief justice of Pakistan, lifted ban on houbara hunting¹¹.

⁹ <https://twitter.com/siasatpk/status/1229113448543531010>

¹⁰ https://twitter.com/MJibranNasir/status/1514305780106899456?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw%7Ctwcamp%5Etweetembed%7Ctwterm%5E1514305780106899456%7Ctwgr%5E8380bb4bb7647ccd2825d3c7fb631843a1408785%7Ctwtcon%5Es1_&ref_url=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.dawn.com%2Fnews%2F1685132

¹¹ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1234663>

Pakistan People's Party Member of Sindh Assembly Jam Owais and his four servants were acquitted in Nazim's murder case¹² after the influential Jam family reportedly influenced the helpless family of late citizen journalist to agree to "out-of-court settlement."

Out-of-court settlement gives the aggrieved and accused parties an opportunity to settle murder or other personal issues mutually using local but undocumented dispute resolution mechanisms. Usually, the influential parties resort to this methodology against the poor prosecuting sides.

Late Nazim family's out-of-court settlement resulting in clemency for the accused weakened the case against combating impunity through legal framework and encouraged threat actors to continue targeting journalists if they challenge the status quo.

Karachi-based investigative journalist Adil Jawad worked on many murder cases of journalists and latest case he is following is of Jan Mehar. "Threat actors are checking fault lines of journalists first. They plan accordingly for each case based on findings about these fault lines," he said. "Once the fault lines are determined the system is used to take out the threat."

His early investigation into causes of journalist murders includes poor standard of journalism, lower income family background of journalists, growing influence of journalists threatening status quo and increasing gulf between journalists and "digital activists," who he refers to "digital journalists."

"In my opinion, Jan Mehar's murder is also linked to political ambitions of the late journalist. It may be the case that his growing journalistic stature may have been seen as a threat to already such influential among the political elite," he shared his thesis.

Mazhar Abbas served Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists twice as secretary-general from 2005-7 and 2007-09. Most of his 45 years career in journalism spent in Karachi and he keeps a close eye on Sindhi media. He believes all the successive governments are "responsible for promoting impunity for crimes against journalists by not going after killers and perpetrators of crimes against media in Sindh."

¹² <https://www.dawn.com/news/1731343>

“Instead of bringing killers to justice, the Sindh governments just compensate bereaved families by paying money to keep the aggrieved family quiet,” Mazhar said.

After more than six hours of surface travel to meet journalists of metropolitan city where one might sense better situation than noted in some rural Sindh cities but that is not the case. While threat categories and threat actors are not the same, serious threats loom large over critical journalists. The city keeps changing hands of threat actors, meanwhile.

A guard keeps watchful eyes on everyone entering Karachi Press Club. Unknown faces are stopped to inquire who they are and whom they are going to meet as the main gate of the club is mostly locked for safety purposes.

“Red lines for reporting are taken good care of by journalists,” Karachi Press Club president Saeed Sarbazi says. “These red lines are set by the owners themselves. I am bound to not work beyond these red lines. My reports should not clash with these red lines,” he said, carefully choosing words to describe the situation and take care of personal safety also.



Saeed said: “You can say we are self-censoring because the biggest threat at the moment is job security. I am under compulsion to report what my owner wants. I cannot report what should or must be reported to uphold public interest journalism principles.”

KARACHI: A guard keeps close eyes on everyone for entry on to premises of Karachi Press Club. Photo by report author.

Journalists in Karachi are no longer under threat from a major urban-based political party. After the state brought some order to the metropolitan city threat actors also changed hands. In most cases, state threat actors are believed to have been abducting journalists and dictate editorial lines for media houses.

4.2: Legal cases against journalists

Not many people outside Sindh may know Akhlaq Jokhio – who edits *Daily Saaheti Awaz* in Naushero Feroze until it was banned in 2021 for reviewing judicial orders. He was booked in more than 50 criminal and civil cases since 2013 when he launched the first-ever community newspaper from Naushero Feroze district.

“I was booked in some 12 criminal cases, including for alleged murder, and over 50 civil suits,” the soft-spoken Jokhio said. In most cases he was acquitted while some still linger. The first case was registered against him in 2013 and the last case in 2021.

“Why am I booked?” He laughed at my question. “Simply for journalism work. I never bargain over three issues: health, education and agriculture. I focused these subjects in my editorials. *Waderas* are using police to register as many cases as possible against you,” he said.



Akhlaq Jokhio – Freedom Network photo

When he won his case in Sindh High Court he was dragged to the Supreme Court where a three-member bench found him innocent dismissing all charges against him. The motive for influential petitioners entangling journalists in legal cases is not legal victory but just to exhaust them mentally and physically and financial cost is separate.

“If I was not supported financially by a civil society organization, the cost to defend my case in the Supreme Court was very challenging to meet as apex court level lawyers demand huge legal fees,” Akhlaq said, speaking of the financial cost of facing these legal cases.

Jokhio is a living case study to demonstrate how free speech threat actors enjoy state patronage to suppress or silence journalists using legal frameworks. The federal governments of PM Imran Khan and PM Shehbaz Sharif used

controversial 'Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act 2016,' commonly known as PECA, against those journalists who were critical of their policies.

During the period of January 2018 and December 2023, at least 45 legal cases were registered against journalists ranging from murder to ransom, kidnapping and smuggling.

Ravi Kumar is a minority journalist. He is also occupied with pursuing murder case of his brother journalist Naresh Kumar. It has been years since Naresh was crushed in a road accident which Ravi believes was deliberate to kill his brother on 01 October 2022. "No arrest is made in my brother's murder case so far," Ravi said.

The country's criminal justice system is more tilted in favor of those who can afford to pay hefty fees of lawyers.

"It is very unfortunate that our criminal justice system seems to be failing in providing speedy and efficient justice. Due to expensive processes and procedures poor and marginalized cannot afford to hire good lawyers or compete those with resources. Therefore, the justice system is not delivering," jurist Muhammad Aftab Alam laments.

Filing legal cases against journalists is a routine matter in Sindh province. Most cases are registered with involvement of *waderas*, landlords or politicians. In many cases, police target journalists if they report lawlessness or growing crimes in their respective areas.

Hyderabad-based veteran jurist Muhammad Yousaf Leghari believes media houses are not standing with cases involving journalists. "The accused, be they officials or private individuals, engage highly paid lawyers while journalists lack resources to pay huge fees and neither do their organizations support them," he underlined grey areas.

He suggested the journalist union leaders to ink memorandum of understanding with lawyer bodies to ensure that legal cases involving journalists are well taken up and represented by good lawyers to fight back impunity for crimes against journalists in the province.

Investigative journalists, reporter Nasir Sheikh believed, were more vulnerable. "I did a story for *Ummat* newspaper against Sindh Arid Zone Development Authority. The story targeted four top officials of the authority. They filed legal case and engaged highly paid lawyers. Neither my office offered me legal

assistance, nor I could afford to engage big names in the profession,” he said.

“My office even cursed me for dragging the organization into this legal case. I agreed to out-of-court settlement in the given situation because I was lacking resources while my office was reluctant to support me,” Nasir painted a dismal situation for journalists facing legal cases.

4.3: Harassment, intimidation and dismissals

Journalist Muhammad Hussain Khan filed a story on alleged torture of prisoners in Hyderabad prison. His report was based on photos he received from unknown sources. *Dawn* newspaper carried his report headlined: “Chamber of tortures.” The prison authorities registered a case against him. The journalist secured pre-arrest bail to avoid possible arrest. The charges against the journalist were withdrawn after four years. A hard question to a nationalist Sindhi leader landed Hussain Khan again in hot waters with party supporters and activists did not like his questions.

Hussain listed many other instances to concur with the general impression that journalists are harassed for their reporting. “Legal cases are made [against you] or you are dragged into controversies taking your energies away from your professional work,” he said on the premises of Hyderabad Press Club.

“A full campaign is started against journalist if his or her story targets any government authority, individual groups or political parties,” Hyderabad Press Club secretary Hameedur Rehman, who works for 92 News channel, joined the discussion on state of harassment and intimidation journalists face for their professional work.

It is a kind of method adopted against every journalist if he or she does any investigative story, he adds. “They are using social media to defame journalists.”

Hyderabad Press Club was twice attacked without any reason. “Every time religious groups take out a protest demonstration, they head towards our club to target journalists,” the club secretary lamented.

Journalist Imdad Buzdar’s children were targeted in apparent bid to send him a warning signal. Burglars broke into residence of *Dawn* newspaper’s Wasim Shamsi in Sukkur to warn him against his reporting.

Journalists that get organizational support in time of crisis sail through the

troubled waters smoothly. Muhammad Hussain was lucky unlike many other journalists who do not get support from their organizations.

Munir Raja works for *Time News* in Hyderabad as reporter. He pointed out that media houses “get messages mostly from government authorities demanding dismissal of journalists who file unfavorable story against them. If the organization does not dismiss the targeted journalist the government stops giving advertisement. My employer [*Kawish* newspaper] received such calls three times from CM House [in Karachi] demanding my dismissal from the newspaper although my story was full of evidence.” Munir’s personal testimony validates his claims.

Chapter 5

Sindhi vernacular media

Nowhere in Pakistan is vernacular media as popular as is Sindhi-language media in Sindh although nationalism in southern Balochistan and northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa provinces perhaps is even stronger. The vernacular media in Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is almost non-existing except that Pashto-language Daily *Wahdat* and *Mashriq* News channel in Peshawar and Baloch-language Daily *Tawar* and *Wush* News channel¹³, based in Karachi, represent the two provinces' token vernacular media.

Punjab is conspicuous by absence of any noted vernacular media across the province.

Vernacular media in both Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Baluchistan are no match for Sindh's lively counterpart. Experts offer multiple reasons for this phenomenon.

Dr Jabbar Khattak is a veteran journalist based in Karachi and owns Sindhi-language Daily *Awami Awaaz*. He was a political activist and most of his well-wishers and friends refer to him as “comrade” as mark of respect. “Sindhi media is progressive and liberal and adopted technology first,” he said.

5.1: Why Sindhi-language media is popular?

“Political awareness, I think, is the major factor with political activists joining journalism profession,” Jabbar Khattak responded to question why Sindhi-language media is so popular.

Late military dictator Ziaul Haq elicited public fury after he prolonged his rule from 90 days to over a decade for one excuse or another and political parties joined hands to launch the Movement for Restoration of Democracy (MRD) in 1981. The movement was rooted in Sindh rural areas and late Benazir Bhutto led it to end military rule and restore democracy.

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC8Y2g1wCIU3zUB6WGnEwtYg>

“I think the political awareness MRD has brought about gave Sindhi-language media a new life. Sindhi-speaking people began following the vernacular media both in Sindh and outside Sindh also,” Dr Jabbar said, providing historical perspective.

Kawish Media Group is one of the leading vernacular media groups in Sindh. Other actors also emerged to threaten it. But the group still sways the viewers and market both.

As Geo News or ARY News are top-rated Urdu-language channels, Kawish Television Network (KTN) channel enjoys same status among the Sindhi-speaking audiences.

KTN channel Hyderabad bureau chief Asghar Khanothi calls Sindhi media “the bold and the beautiful.” The mainstream media, he alleges, does not properly highlight Sindh issues, including problems of peasants, bonded laborers, and water and human rights.

In 1992, the military was ordered to take action against dacoits in Sindh. A group of 15¹⁴ army personnel “kidnapped” and later “executed” nine villagers from Tando Bahawal. The Sindhi media took up this story and helped Mai Jindo get justice for her two executed sons and son-in-law and the culprits were convicted and court marshaled. Major Arshad Jameel Awan, who was the leader of the group, was also sentenced to death.

“The BBC Urdu story had a hint in its story about killing of innocents in its last para while the Sindhi media headlines said: “Innocent villagers were killed.” Asghar said such bold editorial policy made the Sindhi vernacular media popular among Sindhi-speaking people.

The murder of ten-year-old child maid Fatima¹⁵, who died in gruesome conditions, was major headline of Sindhi media on daily basis. The Sindhi media keeps such stories alive to force authorities do something for the aggrieved families.

Human rights make cornerstone of Sindhi media editorial policy. “We have zero tolerance for human rights violations,” KTN channel bureau chief said.

¹⁴ <https://tribune.com.pk/story/348750/a-mother's-pain-mai-jindo-is-not-sure-if-it-was-all-worth-it>

¹⁵ <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40264667/fatima-murder-case-police-arrest-pir-fayyaz-shah>

Human rights violations also echoed in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan during military operations against the banned militant outfit Tehrik-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) and nationalist insurgent groups in Balochistan. However, the two provinces lack vernacular media to take up these violations as the mainstream media did not effectively report these violations to force the security establishment to take extra care about local residents' fundamental human rights while combating these banned forces.

IFJ Pakistan coordinator Ghulam Mustafa said most mainstream media groups grounded to a halt some operations or retrenched staff to reduce financial cost in rural Sindh areas and Sindhi-language media was still out there to report stories the rest of Pakistan is unaware of.

Water distribution among provinces has been a political issue and nationalist parties always exploited the issue to attract voters or keep supporters engaged. "Sindh share in its water is illegally used and water has special meaning for people of Sindh," Asghar spoke of issues the Sindhi media takes up regularly.

Strong feudal system, the journalist pointed, was a major challenge Sindhi media is facing. "We make many compromises to keep our media working," he reacted to a question that revenue streams may also include government advertisements successive Sindh governments used as leverage against the powerful Sindhi media.

List of threat cases against journalists in Sindh province monitored and documented between January 2018-December 2023 (Source Freedom Network)

5.2: Sindhi journalists prime targets

The independent editorial policy of Sindhi media comes with a cost. Eight out of 10 journalists killed between January 2018 and December 2023 all worked for Sindhi media organizations and were Sindhi-speaking journalists. This human cost of the editorial policy comes with other challenges such as intimidation, government advertisement withdrawal, fake police cases and harassment also.

Sindh emerged thrice as a dangerous province for journalists in Freedom Network's annual State of Press Freedom Reports in 2020, 2021 and 2023.

List of Journalists Killed in Sindh 2018-2023

#	Name	City	Media Organization
1	Ali Sher Rajpar	Naushero Feroz	Daily Awami Awaz
2	Ilyas Warsi	Hyderabad	Daily Kawish
3	Aziz Memon	Naushero Feroz	KTN channel
4	Zulfiqar Mandrani	Jacobabad	Daily Koshish
5	Ajay Kumar Lalwani	Sukkur	Urdu Daily Puchano
6	Nazim Jokhiyo	Karachi	Citizen Journalist
7	Ishtiaq Sodhero	Khairpur	Sindhi weekly Chinag
8	Naresh Kumar	Khairpur	Mehran TV channel
9	Asghar Khund	Khairpur	Sindhi Daily Sobh
10	Muhammad Mehar	Sukkur	KTN channel

Source: Freedom Network

The above two charts leave nothing to doubt that the vernacular Sindhi media is paying a huge cost. It is serving the public right-to-know and access to information rights under the Constitution of Pakistan. It does not, however, get the support from the state to bring perpetrators of crimes to justice. In absence of clear commitment of the provincial government until August 2021 when Pakistan People's Party and all opposition parties in the Sindh Assembly joined hands to legislate on safety and protection of journalists.

“Murder of one journalist is a message for other journalists,” Mazhar Abbas notes. “The frequency of this message is increasing as we see more journalists are getting killed. The killers are still at large. Impunity is taking roots and I believe these threats will stay on.”

Photos of killed journalists



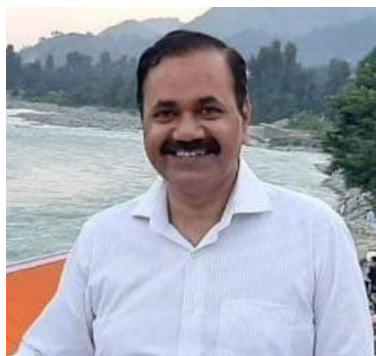
Ali Sher Rajpar



Ishtiaq Sodhero



Nazim Jokhiyo



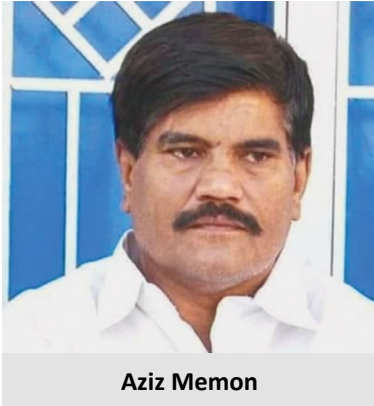
Jan Muhammad Mahar



Ghulam Asghar Khand



Ilyas Warsi



Aziz Memon



Zulfiqar Mandarani



Ajay Kumar Lalwani



Naresh Kumar

Threats against journalists in rural Sindh mostly go unreported in mainstream media. This often leaves media watchdog organizations in the dark to document these violations and plead their situation with policy and decision-makers – both in Islamabad and Karachi.

Asghar Khanothi agrees with this assessment. “Sindhi-language media is not followed outside Sindh and perhaps it is the reason attacks on us do not get attention of national and international media watchdog organizations. Our safety and security concerns remain local and not national or international outcry is ever noted to bring an end to this impunity.”

Mazhar’s apprehension that these threats will stay on is a strong feeling one can find across the province. The Sindh law on combating impunity can help this apprehension go away.

Chapter 6

Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Act, 2021

Sindh took the lead among all provinces in Pakistan to pass a special law on combating impunity for crimes against journalists in its territory. All this was possible after all stakeholders, including Freedom Network, the working journalists, editors and unions, press club, provincial government and opposition parties in the Sindh Assembly, joined hands to help pass “The Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Act, 2021” in on 04 August 2021 unanimously.

It took a long time to come. A sustained advocacy program under Freedom Network-facilitated Pakistan Journalists Safety Coalition (PJSC)-Sindh chapter brought all stakeholders together with a single-point agenda of combating impunity. “I think the PJSC platform and stakeholders’ support proved instrumental to help pass this law,” PJSC-Sindh chapter chairperson Aamir Latif says.

As part of advocacy, Freedom Network requested an audience with Pakistan People Party (PPP) chairman Bilawal Bhutto-Zardari to seek his personal and party commitment to joining hands with PJSC – an advocacy platform where primary stakeholders, human right activists, Sindh Commission on Status of Women, civil society organizations and political parties joined hands to help protect journalists through a legal framework.

Bilawal received Freedom Network Executive Director Iqbal Khattak, International Media Support representative Adnan Rehmat and IRADA Executive Director Muhammad Aftab Alam along with long time democracy and free speech champion Farhatullah Babar, who is also a member of the PJSC on 23 April 2018 in Islamabad.

“People’s Party will be the first party to go for such legislation if we win the [2018] elections,” Bhutto promised in the meeting after agreeing that the impunity of crimes against journalists in Pakistan was unacceptable and the community must be protected if democracy was to be strengthened.

While the PPP did not win required number of National Assembly seats to form a government at the federal level in the 2018 elections but the party secured absolute majority to form government in Sindh province. Bilawal Bhutto kept his promise and through his party first helped pass the “Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Act, 2021” in Sindh province and then in November 2021 lent his party’s support for the passage of the “Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals Act” in the National Assembly.

In Aftab Alam’s opinion, the Sindh law is “more progressive and inclusive” extending protection umbrella beyond journalists – allowing other media practitioners also to benefit from the first-ever rapid response mechanism at government level aiming to fight back the deep-rooted impunity for crimes against journalists with no punishment to anyone attacking free speech in the province.

The passage of the law was seen as a “great achievement” that the PJSC-Sindh chapter made through a sustained engagement policy. Karachi Press Club, all factions of Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and Karachi Union of Journalists, Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (CPNE), Sindh Commission on Status of Women (SCSW), Alliance for Electronic Media Editors and News Directors (AEMEND), Freedom Network, and Human Rights Commission of Pakistan played their due roles to forge a united front along with the treasury and opposition benches in the Sindh Assembly to help end impunity.

The law says it aims to enable those responsible for crimes of violence against journalists to be brought to justice and to create an environment favourable to professional, independent journalism that serves the public interest.

As most laws certainly warrant improvement, it is the case with “The Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Act-2021” also. Global media rights organization Reporters Without Borders and its partner in Pakistan Freedom Network issued a joint statement on 12 July 2021 to hail the law and made four recommendations¹⁶ to consider accommodating in subsequent version of the law, which include:

- **“Special public prosecutor:**

A special public prosecutor is needed to comply with the UN Plan of Action. The Sindh authorities must therefore ensure that the law creates the position of an independent special prosecutor with their own powers. This is the only way to

¹⁶ <https://rsf.org/en/rsf-and-partner-hail-pakistani-law-protecting-journalists-call-improvements>

counter the influence that individuals or groups may try to use to undermine police investigations and evidence collection, and thereby prevent crimes against journalists in connection with their work from being punished.

- **Representative decision-making body:**

The composition of the Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Media Professionals that is created by the law must be revised because, as it stands, only one of its nine members represents journalists and the other eight are government officials and representatives of media owners and editors. Journalists must be better represented.

- **Gender balance:**

The law contains absolutely no provision regarding a gender balance, which will tend to perpetuate the discrimination to which women journalists are routinely subjected in Pakistan. FN and RSF insist that at least a third of the Commission's members are women.

- **Extend protection to families:**

In view of the different kinds of threats or attacks to which journalists are subjected, and which sometimes also target family members, FN and RSF recommend extending the protection to families of the targeted journalists, when required.”

All stakeholders praised the Sindh government for passing the law. However, the provincial bureaucracy took almost 14 months to notify establishment of “Commission for the Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners (CPJMP)” on 14 December 2022.

Renowned jurist Rasheed A. Razvi was nominated chairperson of the commission. He was nominee of the journalist community and other stakeholders also. All factions of unions of journalists both at federal and Sindh levels agreed to nominate journalist Faheem Siddiqui while Jabbar Khattak represents the CPNE and Dr Tauseef Ahmed is the HRCF nominee. Gender balance of commission's composition is conspicuous, however.

6.1: What does the Sindh law offer to combat impunity for crimes against journalists?

Aftab Alam calls this law “a progressive” piece of legislation, pointing out that the law says the government “shall take effective steps to ensure that every

journalist and media practitioner's right to life, safety and security as provided under Article 9 of the Constitution are safeguarded."

It adds: "The government shall ensure that take effective measures are taken to protect journalists and other media practitioners from acts of violence, including but not limited to those listed in the *Schedule*."

The law also bars authorities from using counter-terrorism or security laws to arbitrary use them to "hinder the work of journalists and other media practitioners." The clause allows journalists access to conflict-affected areas without threats, intimidation and harassment on part of government to deny reporting from those areas.

Under the Sindh law, no person or institution, whether private or public, shall engage in any act that violates or threatens the right to life and security of any journalist or media practitioner.

Protecting sources has always been an issue for journalists as authorities found harassing journalists to seek sources of their information. The law provides protection to journalists against "disclosures of professional sources of information, communication, and correspondence."

"(The) Government shall take necessary steps to protect journalists and media practitioners from harassment, violence, and threats of violence by any person or groups of persons or public or private institution or authority in both physical as well as online and digital spaces."

Lack of adequate efforts to combat impunity for crimes against journalists in Pakistan has encouraged press freedom predators forcing self-censorship among journalists to stay safe as both the state and media houses failed to take effective steps for their protection. The law specifically asks the Sindh government to deploy and implement "effective strategies for combating impunity for crimes against media."

Part-V of the law speaks about roles and responsibilities media houses' owners to provide training and insurance to their staff members. "The employers shall be responsible for providing adequate insurance and training for journalists and other media practitioners, who may be at risk of being attacked, injured, or killed because of their work," it reads.

During my visits to a number of press clubs and meetings with senior union leaders and journalists I found there was not much awareness about the law

and commission's roles and responsibilities to keep the community protected across the Sindh province.

As the media is being pushed to the edge of its existence in Sindh, the low level of understanding about the law and the commission's operationalization should be a matter of concern for the commission's members and the provincial government alike.

"I heard of the law but have little information about it," a senior office-holder of a regional union of journalists confided wishing not to be named. A number of journalists echoed the same feelings giving an impression that no communication strategy was adopted to spread the word about the law and the commission across the community members to benefit from the law as much as possible.

During my travel across several Sindh cities where meetings with unions and press clubs' senior management were held, I found most of them were not aware of establishment of the commission. A complete information gap was noted during these interactions with these leaders. "No, we don't know much about the law nor the commission," journalists in Sukkur, Khairpur and Hyderabad said.

This outreach gap is not a good omen for the commission nor the journalists. In absence of a communication strategy and clearly bridged relationships between the commission and the journalist community the law will remain disused, and impunity will stay stronger.

In a meeting in his office in late 2023, Razvi acknowledged that as long the commission did not reach out to journalists in remote parts of the province the commission's success would remain a distant dream. "Big cities' journalists may get assistance but attacks on reporters working in small towns go unnoticed. We want to reach there," he expressed his intent.

Over a year after the commission was notified the regional coordination system was not yet devised to allow greater accessibility for remotely stationed journalists at divisional level across the province minimizing travel distance, time and cost while invoking the law to combat impunity.

Chairperson Razvi acknowledged the problem, saying he planned to open regional coordination offices once logistic, administrative and financial needs of the commission were met.



KARACHI: PISC-Sindh chapter members in a group photo with CJPMP chairperson Rasheed A. Razvi (third from L – seated) during a meeting of PISC with CJPMP in February 2023. It was the first between PISC-Sindh chapter and CJPMP after the commission was notified in December 2022. Freedom Network photo

6.2: Operationalization of Commission

Until 15 September 2023 when I met the commission chairperson and its members in Karachi at his office, the Sindh government was grossly amiss in being negligent by not looking into logistic, administrative and financial needs of the commission for smooth transaction of official business at the earliest.

“We have not even been given pens or papers, nor chairs, staff or an office to sit and work,” chairperson Rasheed A. Razvi complained in his personal office in DHA Karachi on 15 September 2023. “Our budget was not sanctioned (during 2023-24) provincial budget but grant in-aid of Rs.50 million was provided. We are trying to establish an office and engage a full-time secretary (for the commission) to begin working on combating impunity,” he went on say.



**GOVERNMENT OF SINDH
INFORMATION DEPARTMENT
Karachi dated the 14th December, 2022**

NOTIFICATION

No.SOC/INF/Commission/SPOJ&OMPA/2022-23: In pursuance of sub-section (1) of section 8 of the Sindh Protection of Journalists and Other Media Practitioners Act, 2021 (Sindh Act No. XX of 2021), the Government of Sindh are pleased to establish the Commission for the Protection of Journalists and other Media Practitioners (CPJMP) in accordance with sub-section (2) of section 8 of the said Act, with immediate effect, as follows:-

1.	Retired Justice Rasheed A Rizvi	Chairperson
2.	Secretary, Information Department, Government of Sindh	Ex-officio Member
3.	Secretary, Home Department, Government of Sindh	Ex-officio Member
4.	Secretary, Law Department, Government of Sindh	Ex-officio Member
5.	Secretary, Human Rights Department, Government of Sindh	Ex-officio Member
6.	Mr. Faheem Siddiqui, Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists	Non-official Member
7.	Mr. Kazi Asad Abid, All Pakistan Newspaper Society	Non-official Member
8.	Dr. Jabbar Khattak, Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors	Non-official Member
9.	Mr. Muhammad Athar Kazi, Pakistan Broadcasters Association	Non-official Member
10.	Mr. Ayaz Hussain Tunio, Sindh Bar Council	Non-official Member
11.	Professor Touseef Ahmed Khan, Human Rights Commission of Pakistan	Non-official Member
12.	Ms. Shazia Umar, Member, Provincial Assembly of Sindh	Non-official Member
13.	Syeda Marvi Faseeh, Member, Provincial Assembly of Sindh	Non-official Member
14.	Mr. Ghulam Fariduddin, APNEC	Non-official Member

2. The Chairperson and Non-official Members of the Commission shall hold office for a period as provided under section 10 and 8 of the said Act, respectively.

3. The Commission shall performs functions as assigned to it under the said Act.

**(IMRAN ATTA SOOMRO)
-SECRETARY TO GOVT. OF SINDH-**

Rasheed Razvi and his team, in the meanwhile continued responding to distress calls of journalists facing serious threats and attacks. “We have continued to work despite lack of operational resources,” he said.

Chairperson Razvi, unfortunately passed away in Karachi due to illness on February 3, 2024, at the age of 74, bringing to an end his valiant efforts at operationalizing the commission. Until the end he remained a steadfast supporter of safety of journalists. He was instrumental in successfully providing relief to several journalists that had been targeted in threats, attacks and even kidnapping. Before his sad passing, he had signed a memorandum of understanding with Freedom Network aimed at providing technical assistance to the Commission in creating a standardized system of tracking threats and violence against media and journalists in Sindh and a response and relief mechanism.

6.3: A glance at commission’s performance in 2023

In its annual 2023 impunity report¹⁷ – “One Step Forward, Two Steps Backward” - Freedom Network made a comparative analysis of performance of the commission obtaining official data from the Razvi-led commission to examine how it combated crimes against journalists during its first nine months since its notification.

The following lines of the impunity report below are reproduced to argue why the commission needs strengthened to prove its mettle against impunity:

“In its first nine months, the CPJMP received a total of 10 formal complaints. From amongst these, the Commission successfully helped recover two missing journalists from Karachi, got one released from detention, and addressed another’s safety issue. In one case, the victim failed to contact the commission after a commission member lodged the complaint on his behalf. Similarly, no relevant departments, such as Home Department and Sindh Police, shared any progress report with the Commission in three cases, according to its data.

During the same period of nine months, Freedom Network monitored and documented at least 20 cases of threats against journalists, including murder of two journalists and as many abductions, in Sindh province. This means that due to paucity of resources that can help establish adequate systems, at least 50% threat cases against journalists in Sindh remained unreported to the Commission.

¹⁷ <https://www.fnpc.org/justice-for-journalists-one-step-forward-two-steps-back/>

Two journalists were murdered in Sindh in September 2023 alone. The case of only one journalist – Jan Muhammad Mahar – was reported to the Commission which sought report from Sindh Police. However, the case of murder of the second journalist – Asghar Khand – went unreported.

In this period, the Commission held three regular and four executive committee meetings to take stock of its mandate and implementing it, as well as the state of violations against media practitioners in the province. Chairperson Razvi formed the executive committee for rapid response to cases of serious nature received at the Commission.

Considering that the Commission has not been given an office by the Sindh government, support staff or even a bank account in its first nine months, it is remarkable that the Commission was able to help several journalists in serious cases, including recovery after kidnapping and freedom from illegal detention.

The commission is not receiving the kind of support from the Sindh bureaucracy as the provincial government lent its support during legislation providing legal framework against crimes against journalists in Sindh province. In most meetings, the home secretary, who is member of the commission, was absent nor his office was responding to stressful calls the commission forwarded after received from under-attack journalists or media watchdog organizations such as Freedom Network.”

In their meeting with Caretaker Chief Minister Maqbool Baqar on 15 September 2023 in Karachi, the commission members highlighted the “non-cooperative attitude” of the provincial bureaucracy under discussion. The chief minister responded promptly and summoned the home secretary with caution that the Home Office – responsible for maintaining provincial law and order situation and key government resource authority to bring perpetrators of crimes against journalists to justice – support to the body should be top priority of the Home Office.

Frustrated with the provincial bureaucracy’s lukewarm behavior, the commission made a request to Freedom Network to provide it with technical support the media watchdog organization has expertise to offer complaint lodging, case tracking and liaising systems with to bridge between complainants and provincial and district administration.

A memorandum of understanding (MoU) was signed between the CPJMP and Freedom Network in Karachi in September 2023 to provide the commission with nine-point technical assistance.

Chapter 7

Action plan for combating impunity – Recommendations

Considering that journalists and other media professionals as well as the media in Sindh is facing a myriad of threats, there is a lot that needs to be done to ensure that journalists and other information practitioners can be provided the safety and protection that they deserve. In view of the findings of this report, the following are the minimum measures that need to be undertaken to this effect:

- Professional and safety-related trainings need to be held for journalists and other media professionals in Sindh, especially in the interior of the province, to better equip them with tools to work professionally and safely.
- The Labor Department of Sindh government needs to mobilize resources to ensure labor laws are effectively implemented across media houses, especially clauses related to workplace safety and hazards, to combat the threats and violence that the province's journalists and other media professionals face in line of their work.
- The Sindh Bar Councils' regional bars and regional unions of journalists need to formulate formal working partnerships to jointly combat impunity through legal actions, including prosecuting crimes against journalists and other media professionals.
- The Sindh provincial government must immediately provide an office, appropriate equipment, staff and adequate budgetary resources to effectively operationalize the Sindh Commission for Projection of Journalists and Other Media Professionals (CPJMP).
- Regional coordination offices of the CPJMP must be set up at the division level in Sindh to provide prevention, protection and prosecution resources for safety of journalists and other media professionals across Sindh.
- Media law clinics and orientation workshops should be held in all press clubs and journalists' unions offices across Sindh province to provide

literacy about the Sindh legislation on safety of journalists as well as other national media and journalists' related laws.

- The CPJMP, in partnership with civil society organizations, such as Freedom Network, must move forward to enforce full compliance of the Sindh legislation on safety of journalists and conduct annual compliance audits of the law.
- The CPJMP must adopt best practices and a professional approach, in partnerships with relevant media development groups where appropriate, to create an effective response and relief system that incorporates the '3P' approach to combat impunity of crimes against journalists and other media professionals – prevention, protection and prosecution.

ABOUT FREEDOM NETWORK (www.fnpk.org)

Freedom Network is a Pakistan-based independent media and development sector research, advocacy and training organization registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP). It was established in 2013. In 2017, Freedom Network was awarded the prestigious global French Human Rights Prize 2017 by the Government of France for “its efforts for safety and protection of journalists and promotion of freedom of expression.”

OUR MISSION: To protect civil liberties, including freedom of expression and access to information, and promote an informed society that sees media as a key partner in a democratic and pluralist Pakistan.

OUR OBJECTIVES AND EXPERTISE:

- 1. To serve as a watchdog on the right to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and Internet and of civil society**
 - a. Through 24/7 monitoring of the rights to freedom of expression, including freedom of the press and online
 - b. Through monitoring and documenting violations of freedom of expression, including Freedom of the press and Internet
 - c. Through researching the causes, symptoms and case studies of the violations of freedom of expression in all forms of media
 - d. Through monitoring violation of the right to expression of non-media sections of society such as human rights groups, development practitioners, and the performing arts industry
- 2. To promote an ethical and professional media**
 - a. By promoting, supporting and conducting advocacy, research, analysis and training initiatives for media
 - b. By promoting, supporting and conducting initiatives to help civil society strengthen its stake in a pluralistic, independent, open and professional media with emphasis on professional ethics and journalism best practices
 - c. By strengthening the interface between media and civil society by improving professional development communications within and for development sector organizations as well as for their supporters and donors.
 - d. By promoting a culture of safety and security for journalists and media houses through advocacy, research and training on issues of safety and impunity against journalists.
- 3. To serve as an advocate for freedom of expression and access to information as fundamental rights**
 - a. Through a broad range of advocacy, research and analysis initiatives
 - b. By promoting and building synergies between and among media and civil society stakeholders
 - c. By promoting citizens’ participation on issues relating to freedom of expression and access to information
 - d. By conducting assessment missions, studies, research, translations of resources in multiple languages on its own and for other organizations for wider national and international audiences