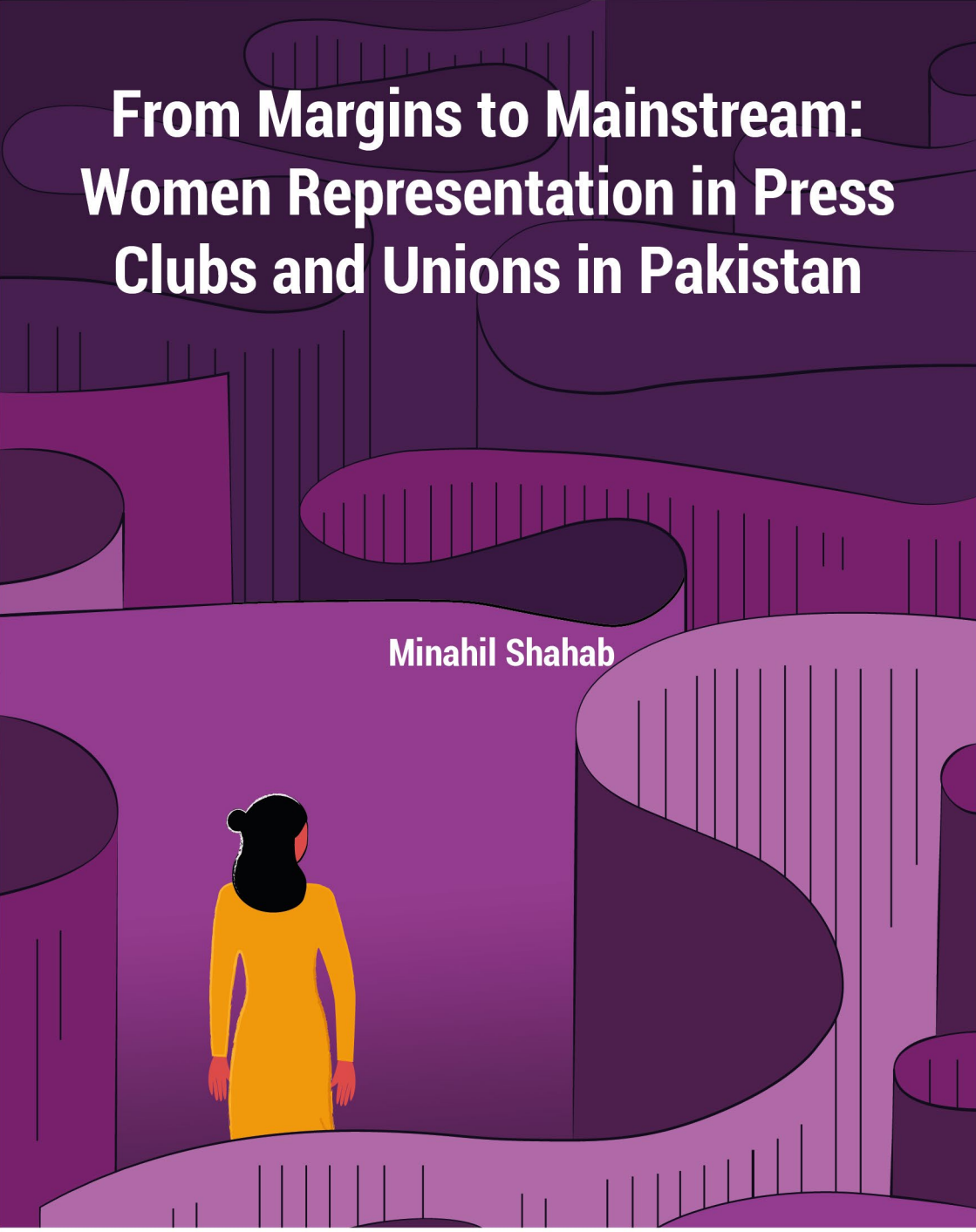
From Margins to Mainstream: Women Representation in Press Clubs and Unions in Pakistan

Minahil Shahab



FREEDOM NETWORK
DEFENDING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Women Journalists Association of Pakistan

IMS

From Margins to Mainstream: Women Representation in Press Clubs and Unions in Pakistan

Minahil Shahab

FREEDOM NETWORK
DEFENDING FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

Women Journalists Association of Pakistan

IMS

Acknowledgements

This report was produced by Freedom Network in collaboration with the Women Journalists Association of Pakistan (WJA), with the assistance of IMS (International Media Support). We would like to thank Fauzia Kalsoom Rana, co-founder and convener of WJA, and Myra Imran, the co-founder of WJA, for their support in the preparation of the report. We are also grateful to Adnan Rehmat, Iqbal Khattak, Farhan Jawaid, Faiza Hassan and Waqas Naeem for their contributions in getting the report ready for publication. Our gratitude extends to the team of Freedom Network's Safety Hub Coordinators at press clubs around the country who helped collect preliminary data for the research. Finally, we would not have been able to complete the study without the kindness and cooperation of the women journalists who have served in leadership positions at press clubs and journalism trade unions and who took the time out to speak with us to share their experiences. We thank you sincerely and we hope this report will inspire many more women journalists to actively participate in press clubs and trade unions to claim their rights and advocate for inclusive and equitable policies in the media sector.

Disclaimer

The content of this publication and the views expressed in it are solely of the author and based on the data collected and the views shared by people surveyed for the research. They do not necessarily reflect the views of Freedom Network, IMS or WJA. Freedom Network, IMS and WJA cannot be held liable for the content of the publication. Any error, omission or inaccuracy is purely un-intentional and regretted.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary **4**

Introduction **7**

Methodology **9**
Limitations 11

Findings & Analysis **13**
Women's Representation in Press Clubs 13
Women's Representation in Trade Unions of Journalists 15
Insights from Women Leaders at Press Clubs and Unions of Journalists 16

Summary of Insights into Key Issues **21**

Conclusion **22**

Recommendations **23**

Executive Summary

Women journalists in Pakistan continue to face systemic barriers that restrict their participation in the media sector. Pakistani women journalists not only struggle with institutional exclusion but also encounter workplace discrimination, pay disparities, and cultural biases that reinforce journalism as a male-dominated profession. In addition to these structural challenges, many female media professionals face significant safety risks, particularly harassment and online abuse, which disproportionately affect their ability to report on politics, human rights, and gender-related issues. These barriers seem to extend to the representative bodies of journalists, the press clubs and journalist trade unions where leadership structures are dominated by men and the participation of women appears to be marginal with limited access to decision-making roles.

If press clubs and trade unions of journalists provide institutional and advocacy support to women journalists, it can help improve the diversity, equity and inclusivity in the news industry and also help women journalists in strengthening their professional careers. However, little is known about the extent of women's political participation and representation in the press clubs and journalist unions and their experiences of leadership and membership. This study seeks to fill the gap in information by mapping the presence of women journalists in Pakistan's press clubs and journalist unions, examining their participation in leadership structures and identifying the barriers that prevent them from accessing these spaces.

The report documents the experiences of women who have attained leadership positions at these representative bodies, assesses the impact of their initiatives, and evaluates the challenges they face in navigating press club and union politics. The study also provides actionable recommendations for reforming these institutions to ensure that women not only gain access to them but also have meaningful participation in decision-making.

The study used surveys to collect quantitative data of women's representation at press clubs and unions with qualitative insights from current and former women office bearers of press clubs and unions. Membership and leadership data was gathered from press clubs and journalist unions in 11 cities, including Lahore, Karachi and Islamabad. A structured survey of 21 women office bearers of press clubs and journalist unions was used to capture their motivations, experiences, challenges, and perspectives on institutional reforms. While some

press clubs and unions were reluctant to provide membership records, and inconsistencies in union structures across cities posed challenges, the findings present a clear picture of the gender disparities within these institutions. The findings reveal that:

- Women's membership in press clubs and unions remains alarmingly low, with some press clubs, such as Gujranwala, having no female members at all.
- Female members of unions and press clubs who contest elections often face biased processes, lack of male support, and skepticism about their leadership abilities.
- Many women journalists who contest for leadership roles at unions and press clubs do so with the goal of increasing female representation, advocating for workplace reforms, and tackling harassment.
- While several women reported success in raising the profile of women journalists, efforts to expand membership and increase decision-making inclusion had mixed outcomes.
- The rigid policies and structures of press clubs and unions make it particularly difficult for digital journalists, many of whom are women, to gain membership, leaving them without institutional support despite their growing role in the industry.
- There was broad consensus among the women journalist respondents about the need for structural reforms at press clubs and unions, including creating reserved leadership seats, adopting gender ethics policies, and developing institutional support mechanisms for women journalists.

To address these issues, the study offers the following recommendations:

1. Institutional reforms

- **Reserved Seats for Women:** Introduce reserved positions for women in leadership roles, such as Vice President, in both press clubs and unions. This measure would ensure women's representation in decision-making bodies.
- **Dedicated Facilities:** Establish separate rooms and other necessary facilities for women members in all press clubs and journalist union offices to create safe and supportive environments for their work.
- **Gender-Sensitive Governance:** Review and amend the constitutions and charters of press clubs and journalist unions to include a gender lens, ensuring that organisational structures actively promote inclusivity and equity.

2. Gender Ethics Policies and Support Systems

- **Written Gender Ethics Policies:** Develop comprehensive gender ethics policies to outline expected behaviours and protocols for addressing gender-based harassment and discrimination. Disseminate these policies to all members.
- **Support Committees:** Create dedicated committees to monitor and enforce gender ethics policies, ensuring timely action on complaints and protection for women members.
- **Anti-Harassment Initiatives:** Implement targeted programmes to tackle harassment within press clubs and unions, with clear reporting mechanisms and accountability frameworks.

3. Membership Expansion and Inclusion

- **Proactive Membership Drives:** Encourage the inclusion of women journalists, particularly those working in digital media, by eliminating structural barriers and revising membership criteria. Special outreach should be conducted in regions with low representation.
- **Recognition of Digital Journalists:** Recognise digital journalists as legitimate members of press clubs and unions. This inclusion is critical for women journalists, as digital journalism often provides flexible work models that suit their personal and professional responsibilities.

The findings highlight that while some progress has been made to improve female participation, significant barriers continue to prevent women from fully participating in Pakistan's press clubs and journalist unions. Without systemic reforms, these institutions will remain exclusionary, reinforcing gender disparities in journalism and failing to stand up for the labour rights and professional development of women journalists. Implementing the recommended changes can ensure that press clubs and unions become genuinely inclusive spaces that empower women journalists, contributing to a more equitable and representative media landscape.

Introduction

Women journalists in Pakistan face entrenched structural barriers that severely limit their career progression and access to leadership roles. Despite constituting a growing segment of the journalism workforce, women remain significantly underrepresented in key decision-making positions. Various media studies indicate that women hold less than 5% of top editorial roles in Pakistan's mainstream media[1]. Additionally, workplace discrimination, wage disparities, and hiring biases restrict their ability to compete on equal footing, while the absence of women-focused policies further entrenches journalism as a male-dominated profession.

Beyond structural exclusion, safety concerns present another major hurdle. Reports from media rights organisations reveal that women journalists in Pakistan experience high levels of harassment, both online and offline, with digital attacks increasingly targeting female reporters who cover sensitive issues such as politics, human rights, and corruption. Research by the Digital Rights Foundation shows that nearly 70% of women journalists in Pakistan have faced some form of online harassment,[2] forcing many to self-censor or even leave the profession. The risks intensify for those working in conflict zones or reporting on gender-based violence, where threats often escalate to physical harm.

In this challenging environment, journalists typically look up to the press clubs and journalist unions—institutions designed to provide professional support and protection—to highlight their concerns and advocate for resolving their problems.

Historically, press clubs and journalist unions have played a pivotal role in shaping media discourse and protecting journalistic rights in Pakistan. However, their traditional structures have contributed to the underrepresentation of women. For instance, a 2015 report, *The Press Clubs of Pakistan*, found that 69 out of 86 press clubs had no registered female members,[3] underscoring an institutional bias that perpetuates gender inequity. More recently, a gender

[1] Wilson Center. (2010). More Women in the Pakistan Media: The Way Forward. Accessed online at: https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/more-women-the-pakistan-media-the-way-forward
[2] Salman, H. (2022). Addressing online attacks on women journalists in Pakistan. Accessed online at: https://digitalrightsfoundation.pk/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Policy-1.pdf
[3] Ahmad et al. (2015). The Press Clubs of Pakistan. Accessed online at: https://www.individualland.com/downloads/the_press_clubs_of_pakistan.pdf

audit conducted in 2024 by the Women Journalists Association of Pakistan (WJA) and Freedom Network revealed that women occupy only a small fraction of positions within Pakistan's journalism and media organisations[4]. This audit not only highlighted the low number of women in prominent roles but also pointed to challenging work environments and societal pressures that discourage or restrict women from pursuing journalism careers.

In response, the Women Journalists Association of Pakistan (WJA) has dedicated its efforts to advancing the rights, representation, and professional interests of women in the media. As part of its mission, WJA has prioritised the demand for a 33 percent representation of women within journalist trade unions, press clubs, and other representative bodies. This call for reform reflects a growing recognition of the gender disparities that persist within the country's media sector, despite the potential of these institutions to reduce inequities through more inclusive practices and proactive reforms.

Despite widespread awareness of these challenges, there remains a significant research gap regarding how women journalists participate in the political structures of local press clubs and journalist unions—key arenas for demanding rights and effecting change in the profession. Building on previous research and advocacy efforts, this study aims to comprehensively map the presence of women journalists in press clubs and journalist trade unions across Pakistan. By enumerating their membership and documenting the experiences of those in leadership roles, the study seeks to shed light on the pathways and barriers women encounter, offering critical insights into the broader gender dynamics within Pakistani journalistic institutions.

[4] Rana et al. (2024). Unequal Newsrooms: A Gender Audit of Pakistani Newsrooms. Accessed online at: https://www.fnpk.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/PDF-Gender-Audit-Report-FINAL.pdf

Methodology

The study intends to determine the level of representation of women journalists at press clubs and trade unions of journalists and determine the effectiveness of these institutions in advancing gender equality in the media sector. It has the following research questions.

1. What is the number and percentage share of women journalists at selected press clubs and trade unions of journalists across Pakistan?
2. What are the challenges faced by women journalists to actively participate in the politics of press clubs and journalist unions?
3. What are the motivations of women journalists to engage in the politics of press clubs and journalist unions?
4. What are the achievements of former and current women leaders of press clubs and journalist unions, and how have these contributed to women's participation?
5. What are the recommendations by women journalists to bring structural reforms at press clubs and journalist unions to improve gender equality, inclusivity and diversity at these institutions?

The study used surveys to collect primary data to determine the share of women's representation within press clubs and journalist unions as well as to document the experiences of women journalists who have remained in leadership positions at press clubs and journalist unions.

The data was collected in two stages. In the first stage, Freedom Network's Safety Hub Network coordinators, who are stationed at six press clubs across the country to monitor threats against journalists and media, reached out to the administrations of press clubs and trade unions of journalists in 11 cities to obtain information on their membership composition, leadership structures and the extent of women's participation and representation. The data was compiled to provide a statistical overview and comparative analysis of women's representation at press clubs and trade unions.

The research was limited to the press clubs and journalist trade unions in the following 11 major cities across Pakistan, to make use of the existing connections of Freedom Network's Safety Hub Network: Multan, Lahore, Gujranwala, Faisalabad, Islamabad/Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Gilgit, Muzaffarabad,

Quetta, Karachi and Hyderabad. This meant a sample of 11 press clubs and 11 trade unions of journalists. Where separate factions existed of the trade unions, attempts were made to collect data from all factions. The details of the press clubs and trade unions contacted for research in these cities are given in Table 1.

Table 1: Press clubs and trade unions in the research sample

S. No.	Province	City	Identified Press Club/Trade Union
1	Punjab	Lahore	Lahore Press Club; Punjab Union of Journalists
2	Punjab	Gujranwala	Gujranwala Press Club; Gujranwala Union of Journalists
3	Punjab	Faisalabad	Faisalabad Press Club; Faisalabad Union of Journalists
4	Punjab	Multan	Multan Press Club; Multan Union of Journalists (two factions)
5	Federal Capital	Islamabad (incl. Rawalpindi)	National Press Club; Rawalpindi Islamabad Union of Journalists
6	Khyber Pakhtunkhwa	Peshawar	Peshawar Press Club; Khyber Union of Journalists
7	Balochistan	Quetta	Quetta Press Club; Balochistan Union of Journalists
8	Sindh	Karachi	Karachi Press Club; Karachi Union of Journalists
9	Sindh	Hyderabad	Hyderabad Press Club; Hyderabad Union of Journalists
10	Gilgit-Baltistan	Gilgit	Gilgit Press Club; Gilgit Baltistan Union of Journalists
11	Azad Jammu and Kashmir	Muzaffarabad	Central Press Club Muzaffarabad; AJK Union of Journalists Muzaffarabad

Although Rawalpindi is part of the Punjab province, it was combined with federal capital Islamabad because the twin cities have a joint trade union of journalists and the Rawalpindi Press Club, which historically had its own elected leadership structure, is now reportedly run as a camp office of the National Press Club Islamabad with the same governing body.

All 11 press clubs provided membership statistics. However, data was not available for the trade unions of journalists in Gujranwala, Faisalabad, Hyderabad, Muzaffarabad and Gilgit. Therefore, the findings and analysis for the unions is based on six trade unions only.

In the second stage, WJA conducted a mapping to identify the women journalists who currently hold or have previously held leadership positions within press clubs and unions. The identified women journalists were then contacted to fill a survey questionnaire to capture qualitative insights about their vision and experience of challenges and opportunities for women's participation in the political structures of press clubs and trade unions. The survey also collected their perspectives and recommendations regarding gender equality in the journalist bodies and the impact of workplace policies in the media sector on women's representation. The data was analysed in line with the four themes identified in the survey questionnaire: challenges for women's leadership roles in press clubs and unions, motivations to participate in press club and union politics, achievements while in office and recommendations for reforms to make press clubs and unions gender equitable and gender responsive spaces for journalists. Other common insights were also identified through textual analysis and included in the findings and analysis.

Limitations

Several limitations affected the scope and generalisability of this study:

1. **Union Structures and Group Dynamics:** Many unions in Pakistan operate in factional groups, creating inconsistencies in membership data and limiting the ability to obtain comprehensive or consolidated records.
2. **Data Availability Issues:** Many press clubs and unions lack formal data archives of their membership, resulting in gaps in official records on membership composition, gender distribution, and institutional policies. In such cases, estimates were used based on survey responses and available documentation.
3. **Convenience Sampling:** The selection of unions and press clubs was based on convenience and accessibility, especially considering geographic and logistical constraints. As such, the sample is indicative of specific regions and organisations and may not fully represent the national landscape.
4. **Verification Challenges:** While efforts were made to verify data through official documentation, some organisations were reluctant or unwilling to share information. Consequently, the study's findings rely on the most accurate estimates available through surveys and secondary data.

These limitations underscore the need for more comprehensive data collection practices within Pakistan's press clubs and unions. Despite these challenges, the findings of this study provide valuable insights into the gender dynamics and barriers that affect women's representation within Pakistan's journalistic institutions.

Findings & Analysis

This section provides the findings of the surveys conducted to determine the current levels of women's representation at press clubs and trade unions and the perceptions of current and former women leaders at the press clubs and trade unions.

Women's Representation in Press Clubs

The data shows that the participation of women journalists in local press clubs is limited, with only two press clubs reporting slightly more than 10% share of women in their member rolls. The number of women journalists who are members of local press clubs also falls off steeply outside the cities of Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad and Faisalabad.

1. Membership Composition:

a. The Lahore Press Club leads all the other press clubs in the sample in terms of total absolute number of women members, with 300 women journalists among its 2,970 members (10.1% of the total).
b. The National Press Club Islamabad also shows significant female membership (3,346 total, 250 women), with women accounting for 7.5% of its total press club members.
c. The press clubs in cities such as Gilgit (25 total, 2 women) and Muzaffarabad (80 total, 3 women) have very low representation of women journalists in absolute numbers, but still include women in their elected cabinets, reflecting an attempt at inclusivity despite small pools of candidates.
d. The Gujranwala Press Club has no women members, illustrating a complete lack of gender representation. It was the only press club out of the 11 press clubs in the sample with an all-male membership body.

2. Percentage Share of Women's Representation:

a. Faisalabad Press Club reported the highest percentage share of women members, with nearly 12% of its members being women journalists.
b. Despite relatively higher absolute numbers, women's membership percentages remain low in the press clubs at large cities, with Karachi at approximately 9%, Islamabad/Rawalpindi at 7.5%, and Lahore at 10.1%.

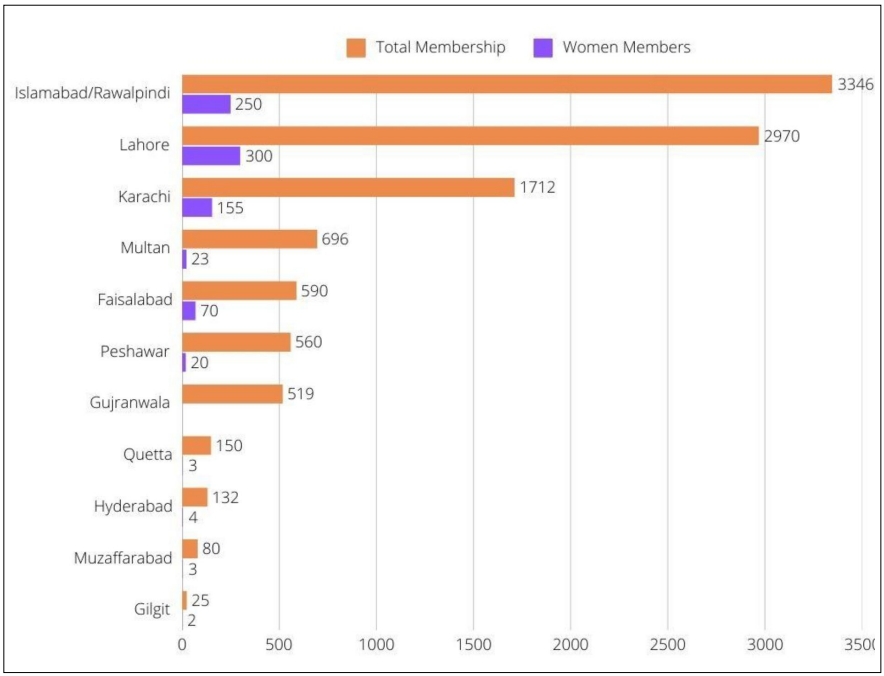
c. Press clubs at smaller cities such as Gilgit (8%) and Muzaffarabad (3.75%) show higher proportional representation relative to their total memberships, but the absolute numbers remain negligible.

3. Leadership in Elected Cabinets:

a. The press clubs in Lahore, Islamabad/Rawalpindi, Faisalabad, Gilgit, Muzaffarabad, Quetta, and Karachi have women journalists in their elected cabinets, signaling progress in leadership inclusion.

b. The press clubs in Multan, Gujranwala, Peshawar, and Hyderabad have no women in their elected press club cabinets, demonstrating persistent gender gaps in decision-making roles.

Figure 1.1: Total membership compared to women's membership in press clubs across various cities in Pakistan, highlighting the gender disparity in representation.



Women's Representation in Trade Unions of Journalists

The trend of women journalists' participation and representation in their city-based trade unions of journalists follows the trend of their representation at press clubs. Where data was available, all trade unions in the sample except one reported fewer than 10% female members. In cities such as Karachi, Islamabad and Multan, the number of women journalists who are active in trade unions of journalists is lower than the registered number of women journalists at their respective press clubs, indicating a further barrier for women journalists towards representing the interests of journalists and advocating for their labour rights.

1. Membership Composition:

a. The Punjab Union of Journalists based in Lahore leads with the highest absolute number of women union members (300), aligning with its press club data. The Karachi Union of Journalists follows with 125 women union members out of a total of 1,800.

b. Journalist trade unions in some cities, such as Gujranwala and Faisalabad, do not maintain formal records of union membership, creating challenges in analysing gender representation comprehensively.

c. Multan shows minimal representation with only nine women members across the two main journalists union factions in the city, which have an overall membership of over 250 journalists.

2. Percentage Share of Women's Representation:

a. The Rawalpindi Islamabad Union of Journalists includes 150 women members out of 2,640 total members, resulting in a mere 6% representation, lower than the women's representation at the National Press Club Islamabad.

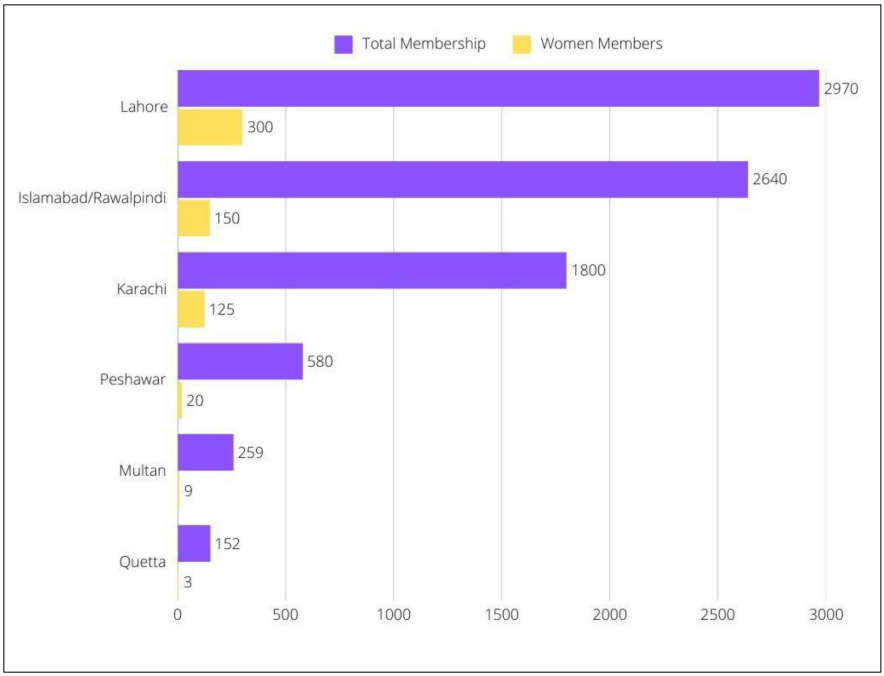
b. Around 7% of the members of the Karachi Union of Journalists are women journalists, again slightly lower than the press club proportion of women members in the city.

3. Leadership in Elected Cabinets:

a. The Karachi Union of Journalists is the only journalist trade union in the sample that reported inclusion of women in the union's elected cabinets, highlighting a significant leadership presence compared to other cities.

b. The journalist unions in Peshawar and Multan lack female representation in elected union cabinets, mirroring trends in the press club data from these cities.

Figure 1.2 Total membership compared to women's membership in journalist unions across various cities in Pakistan, highlighting the gender disparity in representation.



Insights from Women Leaders at Press Clubs and Unions of Journalists

To complement the quantitative analysis, qualitative data was gathered to delve deeper into the experiences and perspectives of women journalists who have served as office bearers in press clubs and unions across Pakistan.

Through a detailed survey with seven female press club office bearers and 14 women trade union leaders who had served in various leadership positions in the past, the data captures the challenges they faced, their motivations for

seeking leadership roles, the impact of their initiatives, and their views on systemic reforms needed to foster gender equity within these institutions. This qualitative approach provides a nuanced understanding of the barriers and opportunities women encounter in these traditionally male-dominated spaces.

Leadership Challenges

A recurring theme among respondents from press clubs and unions was the lack of a "level playing field" for women compared to men, both during elections and while serving in leadership roles. Several women highlighted the biases they faced, including skepticism about their leadership capabilities. For instance, one respondent noted that it took time for colleagues to accept her as the chief executive of a press club, a role traditionally held by men. Others shared concerns about insufficient support from male colleagues and their recommendations being ignored. Fear of not receiving enough votes to win or being excluded from resources needed to meet leadership goals was also common.

Among the trade union respondents, many identified male colleagues' lack of support and insufficient access to decision-making platforms as significant obstacles. Challenges such as being excluded from key committees, having recommendations ignored, and limited access to resources hindered several respondents from fully achieving their goals. For instance, some participants explicitly mentioned facing harassment and troubling behaviour from male colleagues, while others noted systemic biases that undermined their leadership potential.

The struggles are further compounded by societal perceptions that women are less suited for leadership roles.

Despite these challenges, the respondents repeatedly put emphasis on their resilience and determination to challenge these stereotypes and carve out leadership spaces for themselves and future generations of women journalists. Many press club respondents took pride in creating space for other women to lead and breaking the negative gender stereotypes associated with women.

Motivations for Contesting Elections

The primary motivators for the office bearers at both unions and press clubs were a desire to address gender disparities and amplify the voices of women journalists. Among the press club respondents, many women aimed to raise the profile of women in journalism, bring more women into press clubs, and create safer and more inclusive environments.

The need to tackle harassment, support digital journalists, and ensure greater female participation in decision-making processes featured prominently in their motivations. Among the union office-bearers, many sought to break gender barriers and inspire other women to take on leadership roles. Some respondents noted their motivations were rooted in the absence of women in key positions, while others were encouraged by colleagues to run for office.

A notable concern raised by press club respondents was the persistent obstacles faced by digital journalists in gaining recognition and inclusion in press clubs, as they are often not considered "traditional journalists." This issue is particularly critical for women, as digital journalism offers a flexible work model, such as freelancing or working from home, that accommodates additional responsibilities, especially for mothers. Ensuring the inclusion of digital journalists in press clubs is not only a step toward modernising these institutions but also a necessary measure to support women journalists who rely on these models to balance professional and personal demands. Respondents stressed the importance of creating initiatives that recognise and address these unique challenges, paving the way for a more equitable and inclusive press club structure. For trade union respondents, supporting digital journalists and advocating for their inclusion in unions was also a key priority. Given the flexibility of digital journalism, particularly for women balancing professional and personal responsibilities, respondents highlighted the critical importance of recognising this growing segment within unions.

Trade union respondents also had a notable focus on involving more women in decision-making processes and addressing harassment faced by women journalists.

Achievements and Barriers to Progress

Most respondents reported raising the profile of women journalists, describing this as one of their major successes. However, other initiatives, such as increasing women's membership and decision-making participation, had mixed results. While some office bearers managed to involve more women in decision-making processes, others found their efforts hampered by structural limitations. Initiatives to tackle harassment and support digital journalists achieved varying degrees of success, with responses ranging from "succeeded mostly" to "succeeded a little." These mixed outcomes highlight the ongoing struggles of navigating male-dominated spaces and the need for institutional support.

While challenges persisted, many trade union female respondents reported tangible achievements in their leadership roles. Raising the profile of women journalists and advocating for gender equity were frequently identified as successes by the respondents. For instance, the majority described efforts to increase women's participation in decision-making processes as having "succeeded mostly" or "succeeded a little."

However, initiatives to tackle harassment and support digital journalists achieved varying levels of success. While some respondents described these efforts as successful, others noted the resistance to such reforms within unions. The mixed outcomes indicate incremental progress rather than transformative change.

Efforts to create special support initiatives for women within unions also saw limited success. Most respondents felt that entrenched biases and systemic inefficiencies restricted their ability to implement meaningful reforms. This underscores the need for sustained advocacy and institutional reforms to achieve long-term progress.

Perspectives on Systemic Reforms

There was a strong consensus among press club and union respondents about the need for systemic reforms to create a more inclusive environment in press clubs. All participants supported the idea of reserved seats for women in leadership roles, such as vice presidents, and the establishment of dedicated facilities for women members within press clubs.

Written gender ethics policies and support committees were seen as essential measures to safeguard women and address discrimination. Many respondents stressed the importance of going beyond tokenism, advocating for meaningful inclusion in decision-making processes and constitutional reforms to integrate gender sensitivity into press club operations. However, there were occasional divergences in views. While most press club respondents supported the inclusion of digital journalists in press clubs, one respondent expressed uncertainty about this shift, reflecting broader discussions about integrating new media into traditional journalism structures.

Inclusion of digital journalists, particularly women, was another key area of focus for union respondents in terms of structural reforms. While many supported opening union memberships to digital journalists, some respondents expressed reservations, reflecting broader debates about the recognition of non-traditional journalism. Reforming union charters with a gender lens,

sensitising members to women's rights and needs, and creating gender-friendly processes were also frequently cited as critical reforms.

A Path Forward for Gender Equity

The reflections of the press club and union office bearers underline the progress made and the persistent challenges in achieving gender equity within press clubs and trade unions of journalists in Pakistan. Their efforts have paved the way for greater inclusion, but the mixed success of their initiatives underscores the need for continued advocacy and institutional change. Proactive reforms, such as reserved leadership seats, gender-sensitive policies, and enhanced support systems for women, are essential to ensure that press clubs evolve into spaces that foster diversity and inclusion. The collective experiences of these leaders serve as a roadmap for future efforts to amplify the voices of women journalists and dismantle the barriers that hinder their full participation in the field.

Summary of Insights into Key Issues

2. **Raising Women's Profile:**
    - Most respondents reported success in raising awareness about the contributions of women journalists. These efforts were described as "mostly succeeded" by a significant number of participants, highlighting incremental progress.

3. **Increasing Women's Membership:**
    - Lobbying to bring more women into unions as members or in leadership positions saw mixed results, with most respondents describing the initiative as "succeeded a little."

4. **Countering Harassment:**
    - Efforts to tackle harassment were relatively more successful, with several respondents noting progress in this area. However, continued advocacy is needed to solidify these gains.

5. **Supporting Digital Journalists:**
    - The inclusion of digital journalists, particularly women, remains a contested issue. While some respondents succeeded in advocating for their inclusion, resistance persists, reflecting the need for greater recognition of digital media's role in modern journalism.

Conclusion

The data on women's representation from press clubs and unions from 11 cities and the qualitative responses from the 21 office bearers underscore the systemic barriers that women face in press clubs and journalist unions, including biases, resource constraints, and exclusion from decision-making processes.

Despite these challenges, their achievements in raising women's profiles, tackling harassment, and advocating for inclusion reflect their resilience and commitment to change. However, the mixed success of their initiatives highlights the need for sustained reforms, including constitutional changes, reserved leadership seats, and gender-sensitive policies, to ensure press clubs and unions evolve into more inclusive and equitable spaces.

The participation and representation of women journalists in the media sector in general and the representative bodies of journalists in particular remains low. Press clubs and trade unions of journalists have a key role in introducing and sustaining equitable and inclusive practices in the media industry. These institutions will fail to do so unless they make their internal composition and leadership more diverse, inclusive and gender responsive.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and analysis, the study recommends the following measures for the elected representatives and governing bodies of the press clubs and journalist unions.

1. Institutional reforms

- **Reserved Seats for Women:** Introduce reserved positions for women in leadership roles, such as Vice President, in both press clubs and unions. This measure would ensure women's representation in decision-making bodies.
- **Dedicated Facilities:** Establish separate rooms and other necessary facilities for women members in all press clubs and journalist union offices to create safe and supportive environments for their work.
- **Gender-Sensitive Governance:** Review and amend the constitutions and charters of press clubs and journalist unions to include a gender lens, ensuring that organisational structures actively promote inclusivity and equity.

2. Gender Ethics Policies and Support Systems

- **Written Gender Ethics Policies:** Develop comprehensive gender ethics policies to outline expected behaviours and protocols for addressing gender-based harassment and discrimination. Disseminate these policies to all members.
- **Support Committees:** Create dedicated committees to monitor and enforce gender ethics policies, ensuring timely action on complaints and protection for women members.
- **Anti-Harassment Initiatives:** Implement targeted programmes to tackle harassment within press clubs and unions, with clear reporting mechanisms and accountability frameworks.

3. Membership Expansion and Inclusion

- **Proactive Membership Drives:** Encourage the inclusion of women journalists, particularly those working in digital media, by eliminating structural barriers and revising membership criteria. Special outreach should be conducted in regions with low representation.

- **Recognition of Digital Journalists:** Recognise digital journalists as legitimate members of press clubs and unions. This inclusion is critical for women journalists, as digital journalism often provides flexible work models that suit their personal and professional responsibilities.

ABOUT FREEDOM NETWORK (www.fnpk.org)

Freedom Network is a Islamabad-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 French Republic's "Human Rights Prize" 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.