JOURNALISM IN SOUTH PUNJAB

STATE OF MEDIA FREEDOMS, ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS AND OTHER MEDIA PROFESSIONALS IN **SOUTH PUNJAB** > THE WAY FORWARD

Adnan Rehmat & Iqbal Khattak

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Chapter 1

Executive Summary

The state of media freedoms and the safety of journalists in South Punjab highlights an alarming and complex set of challenges. Journalists in this region operate under intense pressure from entrenched political, bureaucratic, and feudal interests, making South Punjab one of the most challenging regions for media professionals in Pakistan. This report examines these issues in depth, analyzing the structural barriers, safety concerns, and gender-based disparities faced by journalists and other media professionals.

Journalists in South Punjab face a wide spectrum of threats, including direct violence, censorship, legal intimidation, and economic exploitation. Physical attacks, such as the murder of journalists like Ashfaq Sial in Muzaffargarh in May 2024, exemplify the extreme risks faced by reporters who dare to expose corruption and injustice. Legal harassment, often in the form of false First Information Reports and defamation suits, further complicates their work. Economic challenges, driven by the decline of print media and inadequate institutional support, have left many journalists in precarious conditions, with stagnant wages and limited access to training or resources. Exploitative practices, such as requiring journalists to secure advertisements to retain their positions, further erode the integrity of the profession.

Gender dynamics present additional hurdles, with women journalists facing threats, harassment, and a lack of institutional protection. Many are confined by societal norms that restrict their mobility, and cases of violence against women journalists are often ignored by authorities. The marginalization of transgender individuals in journalism further reflects the lack of inclusivity in the region's media landscape.

Despite these systemic challenges, journalists in South Punjab continue to persevere, often at great personal and professional risk. Their resilience is a testament to their commitment to the profession and their communities. However, without systemic reforms, these challenges will continue to erode the role of journalism as a pillar of democracy. This report calls for urgent action to address these issues, including strengthening legal protections, providing economic and institutional support, addressing gender disparities, and ensuring the safety of journalists in South Punjab.

Chapter 2

Introduction

Journalism in South Punjab operates under challenging and often dangerous conditions. This report explores the myriad challenges faced by journalists and other media professionals in the region, providing a detailed analysis of the structural and systemic barriers that undermine press freedom, gender inclusivity, and the safety of those working in the media.

South Punjab is a region marked by its unique socio-political, linguistic, and economic landscape. Despite its distinct identity, it remains underrepresented in national media discourse, with most major outlets prioritizing urban centers like Lahore, Karachi, and Islamabad only. This marginalization creates an information vacuum, where local issues often go unreported or are misrepresented. Compounding this neglect is the decline of print journalism, once a cornerstone of regional media, now struggling under the weight of rising costs, dwindling government support, and competition from electronic and digital platforms.

The threats to journalists in South Punjab are multifaceted. Reporters face direct violence from powerful local actors, including feudal lords, political elites, and extremist groups besides state actors, including powerful intelligence agencies. Legal challenges, such as frivolous lawsuits and false FIRs, are frequently used to intimidate journalists and stifle critical reporting. Economic exploitation is rampant, with many journalists forced to operate under exploitative contracts or seek external funding to sustain their work. These systemic issues are further compounded by a lack of training and resources, leaving journalists ill-equipped to navigate the complexities of their profession.

The gender dynamics within South Punjab's media landscape add another layer of complexity. Women journalists face significant barriers, including harassment, restricted mobility, and a lack of institutional support. Transgender individuals are almost entirely excluded from the profession, and their stories are often overlooked in media coverage. These disparities reflect broader societal inequities that permeate the media industry in the region.

This report draws on extensive desk research, focus group discussions, and interviews conducted with journalists, media professionals, and press

organization leaders in November-December 2024 in Multan, Bahawalpur and Dera Ghazi Khan. Through their voices, the report paints a comprehensive picture of the challenges and resilience of South Punjab's journalists. The findings highlight the urgent need for reforms to ensure the safety, independence, and inclusivity of the region's media.

By examining the state of media freedoms in South Punjab, this report aims to raise awareness of the systemic issues plaguing journalism in the region. It also serves as a call to action for policymakers, media organizations, and civil society to take concrete steps toward creating a safer and more equitable media environment. Only by addressing these challenges can journalism in South Punjab reclaim its role as a defender of democracy and a voice for the voiceless.

2.1 Governance Structure in South Punjab

The governance structure in South Punjab has been shaped by a rich cultural history and contemporary administrative challenges, reflecting the region's unique socio-political dynamics. South Punjab, home to diverse linguistic and cultural traditions, has long struggled with governance inefficiencies, socio-economic disparities, and political marginalization. The establishment of the South Punjab Secretariat (SPS) in 2020 marked a significant step toward addressing these issues by decentralizing governance and empowering local administrations. However, the journey to achieve effective governance in South Punjab remains complex, rooted in historical legacies and shaped by evolving administrative reforms.

MULTAN: The office of Additional Inspector General Punjab Police for South Punjab is part of Punjab government plans to decentralise governance system to address issues of South Punjab at its doorsteps. Photo by Freedom Network

Historically, South Punjab has been a region of distinct identity. Multan, a recognized province during the Mughal era, was merged with Punjab during the Sikh reign, while Bahawalpur retained its status as a princely state until its integration with West Pakistan in the 1950s. The abolition of the One Unit Scheme in 1970 reduced Bahawalpur's provincial status to that of a division within Punjab, fostering feelings of deprivation among its residents. These historical transitions have fueled demands for greater regional autonomy and recognition, particularly from the Saraiki-speaking majority, who advocate for the preservation of their linguistic and cultural heritage. This has led to parallel movements for a Saraiki province, and for the restoration of Bahawalpur's provincial status. Together, these demands underscore the region's vibrant yet divided identity.

Governance in South Punjab has historically been marked by centralized decision-making, which has often prioritized northern Punjab in resource

allocation and development initiatives. Despite accounting for 45% of Punjab's land area and 32% of its population, South Punjab lags behind in key development indicators, including literacy, healthcare access, and poverty alleviation. Recognizing these disparities, the Punjab government established the SPS to decentralize administration and bring governance closer to the people. The Secretariat, based in Multan and Bahawalpur, aims to improve service delivery, ensure equitable resource distribution, and foster greater inclusivity for the region's citizens.

The South Punjab Secretariat oversees 17 administrative departments, including agriculture, health, education, and infrastructure, and is led by an Additional Chief Secretary (ACS). Its mandate includes coordinating development projects, addressing local grievances, and optimizing resource utilization. However, systemic challenges persist. Financial and administrative powers remain heavily centralized in Lahore, limiting the Secretariat's autonomy and efficiency. Additionally, only a fraction of the envisioned departments have been devolved to the SPS, further constraining its capacity to address regional issues effectively.

South Punjab's governance challenges are deeply intertwined with its socio-economic realities. The region faces high poverty rates, limited access to basic services, and a reliance on agriculture, which necessitates targeted reforms. The SPS has introduced initiatives such as Integrated Pest Management to improve agricultural productivity, afforestation projects to combat environmental degradation, and the establishment of transgender schools to promote inclusivity. While these initiatives mark progress, they are insufficient to address the region's systemic issues fully. Human resource shortages, delayed infrastructure projects, and overlapping administrative responsibilities between Lahore and the SPS undermine the Secretariat's effectiveness. Greater financial and administrative autonomy for SPS officials, combined with increased citizen engagement, is essential for achieving sustainable governance reforms.

The demand for a separate South Punjab province reflects long-standing grievances over political marginalization and unequal resource distribution. Advocates for a Saraiki province emphasize linguistic and cultural identity, while others prioritize administrative reforms to address governance inefficiencies without redrawing provincial boundaries. Political parties have historically capitalized on these demands to secure electoral support, but achieving consensus on the issue remains elusive. The debate highlights the complexity of balancing regional aspirations with national priorities.

To strengthen governance in South Punjab, several key measures are necessary. Expanding the administrative powers of SPS secretaries would enable more

responsive decision-making and efficient resource management. Equitable distribution of development funds and addressing underutilization of allocated budgets are critical for reducing disparities. Regular consultative sessions with local stakeholders can enhance citizen engagement and build trust in governance institutions. Addressing human resource gaps through recruitment and training will bolster the Secretariat's operational capacity. Furthermore, promoting inclusive development initiatives, such as job quotas for South Punjab residents and targeted social programs, can help address socio-economic inequities and foster regional integration.

In conclusion, the governance structure in South Punjab exemplifies Pakistan's broader struggle to balance centralization and regional autonomy. While the establishment of the South Punjab Secretariat is a significant step toward addressing regional disparities, achieving its objectives requires systemic reforms, collaborative political engagement, and active citizen participation. By prioritizing inclusive governance, equitable development, and responsive policies, South Punjab can become a model for addressing regional disparities and strengthening Pakistan's federal structure. Empowering local institutions to reflect the aspirations and needs of South Punjab's diverse population is essential for achieving sustainable and effective governance in the region.

2.2 Methodology

The Freedom Network collected this data through desk research as well FGDs and key informant interviews in Multan, Bahawalpur and Dera Ghazi Khan in the period November 2024.

2.3: The State of Media in South Punjab

The media landscape in South Punjab reflects broader challenges of regional disparity, linguistic diversity, and structural neglect. Unlike Sindh, where vernacular media thrives, South Punjab lacks newspapers in the Seraiki language. "Punjabi and Seraiki are not official languages like Sindhi, which is why there is no recognition for Seraiki newspapers," explained Mian Ghaffar Ahmad, Editor of *Daily Qaum*, Multan. This linguistic marginalization is mirrored in the national media's disproportionate focus on five major cities — Lahore, Karachi, Islamabad, Peshawar, and Quetta — leaving South Punjab underrepresented and its unique issues unheard on a national level.

MULTAN: Additional IG South Punjab Muhammad Kamran Khan (R) meets Freedom Network Fact-Finding team investigating state of press freedom in South Punjab. Photo by South Punjab Police Office

Like the rest of the country, print media in South Punjab has been in steep decline, driven by rising costs and changing consumer habits. "The cost of newsprint has skyrocketed, making it impossible for newspapers to survive. A newspaper that costs 70 rupees to print cannot be sold for 20 rupees," explained Shaukat Ashfaq, Group Joint Editor of *Daily Pakistan*, Multan. He added, "while traditional print newspapers were read by about 10 people, the same content, when circulated through social media, now reaches thousands."

The Multan Press Club serves as a cornerstone of journalism in the region, boasting 714 members at the end of 2024. However, only 150 of these members are actively working journalists. "Many journalists have lost their jobs but retain their memberships as a gesture of solidarity," said Shakeel Anjum, President of the Multan Press Club. He further noted that the press club had not expelled members who were laid off, highlighting the precarious situation of journalism in the region. According to him, the press club has also embraced change by revising its constitution to include digital journalists.

The lack of diversity in media offerings remains a challenge. "The only Seraiki-language daily published in Multan is *Jhok*," Shakeel Anjum pointed out. Meanwhile, rural areas of South Punjab face even greater hurdles in media access. "In many rural areas, there is no access to digital media; people rely entirely on print and electronic media," shared Mazhar Khan, a journalist with *Daily Khabrain*, Multan.

The number of journalists in South Punjab has declined dramatically over the years. “At one time, there were 500 newspaper professionals in Multan, but now there are only 150,” Mazhar Khan remarked, emphasizing the diminishing opportunities for journalists in the region.

Local newspapers play a critical role in representing regional voices. However, these outlets face significant challenges. “Local newspapers lack adequate patronage from both the government and media organizations. We are very low on the food chain,” said Aftab Nawaz Mastoi, a journalist with *Daily Ausaf*, Jampur.

South Punjab remains underrepresented in the national media, leading to further marginalization of its issues and communities. “National media coverage of South Punjab is minimal, and this situation has deteriorated over time,” said Jamshed Rizwani, Editor of digital platform *South Today*, Multan. He added, “even though the Multan Press Club has over 700 members, only a fraction of them are actively working, reflecting the challenges faced by the region’s

MULTAN: Former Punjab governor Malik Rafiq Rajwana (Centre) speaks to Freedom Network on state of press freedom, issues of safety and security of journalists in South Punjab. Photo by Freedom Network

journalists.”

This sense of exclusion is exacerbated by the lack of advocacy from Central Punjab's journalists. "No journalists from Central Punjab raise their voices for the problems we face (in the South), yet we often advocate for issues faced by journalists in other parts of the country," lamented Shahid Niaz, President of the Press Club in Vehari. His concerns echo the broader frustrations of South Punjab's journalists who feel abandoned by their peers in the mainstream media.

The challenges faced by the media in South Punjab are a microcosm of the region's broader socio-political marginalization. "South Punjab is deprived of its rights, and this deprivation is reflected in its journalism," said Aftab Nawaz Mastoi of *Daily Ausaf*. Addressing these issues requires systemic interventions, including increased patronage for local newspapers, equitable representation in national media, and expanded digital infrastructure to bridge the urban-rural divide.

Despite systemic neglect, the resilience of South Punjab's journalists remains a beacon of hope. "We fight not just for the survival of journalism but for the recognition of South Punjab's issues," concluded Anjum Pitafi, President of the Multan Union of Journalists. Only through coordinated efforts can the media in South Punjab evolve to reflect and address the needs of its people.

Chapter 3

State of Media Freedoms in South Punjab

The state of media freedoms in South Punjab reflects the broader challenges faced by journalists operating in marginalized and politically sensitive regions. South Punjab's unique socio-political context, combined with systemic inequities and safety concerns, has created an environment where journalism is fraught with risks and obstacles. Journalists in the region are often caught between powerful political elites, bureaucratic pressures, and societal norms that limit their ability to perform their role as watchdogs of democracy.

South Punjab is characterized by a distinct identity, yet it remains underrepresented in national discourse. The region's media operates under significant constraints, ranging from direct threats to self-censorship driven by economic and institutional vulnerabilities. Press freedoms are curtailed not only by state actors but also by non-state actors, including local feudal lords and extremist groups, who use intimidation and violence to suppress dissent. Meanwhile, the financial instability of media organizations, compounded by declining support for print journalism and the challenges of transitioning to digital platforms, further undermines the independence and sustainability of journalism in South Punjab.

This chapter examines the state of media freedoms in South Punjab, exploring the complex interplay of systemic barriers, safety concerns, and gender disparities that journalists face. Divided into thematic sections, the chapter draws on firsthand accounts from journalists, media professionals, and press organizations to provide a comprehensive understanding of the realities on the ground.

3.1 Threat Actors to Free Speech

South Punjab is considered one of the most challenging regions for journalists in Pakistan due to the entrenched nexus of feudal lords, bureaucrats, and politicians. "South Punjab is the most difficult to work in across the whole country because there is a nexus of feudals, bureaucrats, and politicians.

Journalists in this area have to fight against this nexus, not just individuals. In situations of conflict, they join hands against journalists," explained Mian Ghaffar Ahmad, Editor of *Daily Qaum*.

MULTAN: A view of Press Club, Multan. Photo by Freedom Network

Journalists in the region face significant threats from official circles, including administration, police, and political figures. "The threat level from officials is high in this region. All of them want to influence reporting," stated Mazhar

Khan, a journalist with *Daily Khabrain*. These attempts to influence reporting create a stifling environment for journalists, making it harder for them to operate independently.

“Political intolerance has grown since 2018, and this has serious implications for the safety of journalists,” says Rafiq Rajwana, former Governor of Punjab. “If, as a journalist, I claim my right to freedom of expression, that freedom is not unbridled. There are certain restrictions. However, if I speak the truth and am victimized for it, that is unacceptable. Freedom of expression is a human right and a fundamental right,” he adds.

“Our history is full of tragic stories of violence against journalists, including murders. Instead of learning from these experiences, we are heading further into a dangerous zone. Government intervention and efforts by human rights activists are required to ensure journalists’ protection,” Rajwana emphasizes. “We must clearly define what journalism is and who qualifies as a journalist. Not everyone working in media can claim to be a journalist,” he remarks. “Local news published in newspapers here often remains unheard and dies within the region, even if it concerns provincial or federal government matters,” he notes.

Farooq Sheikh, General Secretary of the District Press Club in Muzaffargarh, shared a recent personal experience that underscores the gravity of these threats. “We have seen threats in every period. However, this is the toughest period. An opposition leader shared his video clip, and only for sharing that video, I received calls from secret (intelligence) services.”Not all journalists see the situation as uniformly bleak. “The situation is not as bad as it is portrayed to be. There is a serious issue of the lack of training for journalists, but people here enjoy lots of freedom of expression,” remarked Riaz Jazab, a journalist with *Daily Baithak*. This suggests that, while systemic issues exist, there are areas where journalistic freedoms are still relatively intact.

Instances of direct interference by authorities are common. “Administration and police officers try to put pressure on journalists and dictate their work. At times, cases are even registered against them,” said Abdul Majid Gil, a reporter for *Dawn* newspaper, Bahawalpur. He emphasized the importance of resisting such pressures and noted that the Bahawalpur Union of Journalists plays an active role in defending the rights of journalists. “We try to fight against these pressures, and the Bahawalpur Union of Journalists contests their cases. I am available as the president of the union to support them,” he added.

The dominance of administrative officials in smaller districts further exacerbates the challenges for journalists. “A deputy commissioner or a superintendent

of police acts like a governor in smaller districts," commented Shahid Niaz, President of the Press Club in Vehari. This centralized authority often leads to the suppression of press freedoms and creates an environment of fear and self-censorship.

The Indus riverine or 'katcha' areas of southern Punjab and northern Sindh have long posed policing challenges due to dense vegetation, winding waterways, and poor infrastructure, enabling dacoit gangs to evade law enforcement and establish strongholds. Over time, such criminal elements have capitalized on the terrain for activities like shelter, smuggling, and kidnapping for ransom. As a result, local communities often live under constant threat, subjected to extortion and violence, and many comply with these gangs simply out of fear or the absence of state protection. Journalists and humanitarian workers, too, encounter significant risks when attempting to cover these areas, including intimidation and abduction, which severely restricts the flow of reliable information.

Extremist groups, driven by ideological or sectarian agendas, often regard independent reporting as a direct challenge to their narratives. Consequently, journalists who investigate or expose their operations, funding, and recruitment efforts risk severe repercussions, including death threats, abductions, or targeted attacks. Intimidation — either through menacing warnings or explicit acts of violence — serves to deter media coverage, stifle public awareness, and maintain an atmosphere of fear. In high-risk urban centers where extremist networks may operate more clandestinely, reporters face additional pressure to self-censor or avoid sensitive topics for fear of retaliation, further undermining the free flow of information and public understanding of critical security issues.

3.2 Poor Service Structure in South Punjab

The service structure for journalists in South Punjab remains a critical concern, undermining the profession and the quality of journalism in the region. "Correspondents don't get any payment. Newspapers were operating mainly on government support. Since the inception of electronic media, the government has lost interest in print media. Still, print media has survived in difficult situations," explained Mian Ghaffar Ahmad, Editor of *Daily Qaum*.

Print journalism in South Punjab continues to rely on government advertising, but this support has significantly dwindled. "The print media survived on government advertisements, which have gone down and may vanish altogether in the future. At the same time, businesses have stagnated, and newspapers are

redirecting their resources to digital media," said Shaukat Ashfaq, Group Joint Editor of *Daily Pakistan*, Multan.

Job security is a major issue for journalists, deeply affecting their ability to work freely. "Thousands of journalists lost their jobs when the decline of print media began after 2018. Those who remain in journalism are barely surviving on petty wages. Some newspapers even demand journalists deposit monthly sums to retain their positions," highlighted Shakeel Anum, President of the Multan Press Club.

MULTAN: Jamshed Rizwan (6th from R), editor of 'South Today' digital platform, is seen in group photo of his team members with Freedom Network fact-finding team visited South Punjab in November 2024 to assess state of press freedom and issues of safety of journalists. Photo by Freedom Network

The economic challenges are further compounded by stagnant wages in the case of journalists who are paid at all. "Except for a channel or two, wages have not increased in the last five to seven years, while inflation has risen significantly. A journalist who threatened to quit his job due to low pay was asked to leave without any resolution," shared Mazhar Khan, a journalist with *Daily Khabrain*. The financial strain has led to tragic outcomes. "A cameraman committed suicide in Multan last week due to unemployment," noted Iftikhar Hassan of *Samaa News* channel in Multan.

Journalists in South Punjab are often undertrained, which affects the quality of reporting and limits professional growth. "Journalists need training, but this is not provided to them in this area," said Shahid Niaz, President of the Press Club

in Vehari. Adding to the challenges, the issuance of press cards has become a corrupt practice. “Newspapers have given press cards to people who have nothing to do with journalism,” Niaz added.

District-based journalists face even more severe exploitation. “Newspapers require district journalists to arrange a certain number of supplements annually or pay a set amount monthly. This practice forces journalists to prioritize generating business and securing advertisements, which compromises their journalistic integrity,” remarked Riaz Jazab, a journalist with *Daily Baithak*.

“I report human rights issues in the Seraiki belt of Punjab,” says Nazir Ahmed, HRCP Council Member in Multan. “Journalists in this part of the province face economic hardships. Many are underpaid, and salaries are often delayed. Secondly, any reporting that goes against *muqtadar halke* — a term used for intelligence agencies or the all-powerful military establishment, or corporate firms — does not get published or broadcast,” he explains.

“Thirdly, new journalists lack training. They need capacity building, especially in human rights reporting. Such training would improve their reporting skills,” Ahmed adds.

The financial insecurity and exploitation faced by journalists in South Punjab highlight the urgent need for systemic reforms. The absence of institutional support, declining job opportunities, and lack of proper training continue to erode the foundation of journalism in the region. As Shahid Niaz aptly summarized, “The current structure not only disrespects the profession but also compromises the very essence of journalism.”

3.3 Gender inequality in journalism in South Punjab

The South Punjab region, particularly the Seraiki-speaking districts of Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan, is one of the most culturally conservative and patriarchal regions of Pakistan. The media landscape in this region reflects broader societal norms that shape the gender dynamics in every sphere of public and private life. The few women journalists in South Punjab, despite being active participants in the journalistic profession, face significant barriers and challenges related to gender inequality and inequity.

Underrepresentation in regional representative associations: “Some of the key challenges women journalists face in South Punjab include membership to press clubs and journalists’ unions, workplace harassment, low visibility in the

mainstream media, wage disparities, and the unique difficulties posed by the conservative cultural context," said Aneela Ashraf, who as a journalist based in Multan, has worked for a string of regional and national media, including print, electronic and digital media. She is also a media trainer and advocate for gender equality in media.

Press clubs and journalists' unions are vital institutions that provide resources, networking opportunities, and legal and professional support for journalists. However, women journalists in South Punjab face significant challenges in gaining membership in these organizations, although the challenges relate not just to willingness by these institutions to allow women to become their members but also cultural and social impediments. In cities like Multan, Bahawalpur, and Dera Ghazi Khan, which serve as the regional media hubs, women journalists are often marginalized and excluded from these professional bodies.

There are less than a dozen women members of these press clubs combined that have hundreds of male journalists as members. "While formal membership requirements may not explicitly discriminate against women, the informal dynamics within these clubs and unions tend to not actively seek out memberships and sometimes to even exclude them," said Aneela Ashraf.

The local press clubs, in many cases, are dominated by male journalists who often perceive the role of women journalists as secondary. This perception manifests in the underrepresentation of women in leadership positions within these organizations, and in some cases, women are not even allowed to attend meetings or have their voices heard in discussions about press freedom, policy decisions, and professional rights.

The dominance of male journalists in these spaces also makes it difficult for women to access the networks that are essential for career advancement or safety against social and workplace harassment. Women journalists in the region are often discouraged from joining unions or participating in media-related events due to the social and professional hierarchy that marginalizes them. In some cases, there may be subtle or overt resistance from male colleagues who view women's participation in journalism as out of place in a conservative society.

Low numbers of women journalists in South Punjab media landscape: One of the most visible signs of gender inequality in the media landscape of South Punjab is the strikingly low number of women journalists working in the region. This disparity is rooted in both societal attitudes towards women's roles and

the barriers that prevent them from entering the profession in the first place. In the Seraiki-speaking regions of South Punjab, cultural and religious norms often restrict women's mobility and public participation.

Many families view journalism as an inappropriate or dangerous profession for women, associating it with the public sphere's perceived immorality and the risk of exposure to harassment. The patriarchal structures in these communities also discourage women from taking on roles that would involve reporting on sensitive topics or engaging in investigative journalism, which are viewed as being outside the traditional roles of women.

"But this is not the full picture. Even when women do enter the profession, they often face pressure to cover 'soft' stories, such as those related to lifestyle, fashion, or human interest, rather than hard news or political reporting, which are dominated by male journalists," said Aneela Ashraf. "This division reinforces the perception that women's voices are not suited for important or authoritative narratives."

Hazardous working conditions and workplace harassment: Workplace harassment remains a distinct obstacle for women journalists in South Punjab. There have been cases of sexual harassment and verbal abuse, partially reflecting rigid gender norms and contesting of women's presence in the public sphere. "Sometimes, women media practitioners face harassment from male colleagues and even social and political figures they encounter when reporting," said Aneela Ashraf.

The harassment can range from inappropriate comments and physical intimidation to more serious threats to their safety and well-being. At the state-run Pakistan Television (PTV) Centre in Multan, in mid-2024 a senior producer was accused by a digital journalist and documentary maker, who used to host a primetime show, at the Centre, of resorting to sexually harassing her. An official inquiry conducted to investigate the allegation concluded in a written notification that the accused was guilty of harassing the woman journalist.

"For women journalists, the lack of institutional support from their employers or sometimes from representative bodies of journalists to tackle such harassment exacerbates the situation. The absence of effective grievance mechanisms within media organizations means that many women choose to stay silent, fearing repercussions for speaking out," said Aneela Ashraf.

"Moreover, cultural norms around modesty and the treatment of women can create an environment where female journalists are subjected to additional

scrutiny regarding their attire, behaviour, and interactions with male colleagues. In some instances, media organizations may subtly encourage women to adhere to certain expectations of femininity, which can restrict their ability to work freely and assertively," she added.

Wage inequality for women journalists: Wage inequality is another pervasive issue that women journalists in South Punjab face. "While even male journalists of the region face wage-related problems such as being underpaid, female journalists are frequently paid less than their male counterparts, even when they have similar qualifications, experience, and responsibilities," Aneela Ashraf pointed out. This wage gap reflects the broader societal view that women's work is less valuable than men's, a belief that is often ingrained in the professional environment of local media outlets.

Challenges of practicing journalism by women in the region: South Punjab projects conservative cultural and social values, which can create barriers for women journalists. The region, particularly along its borders with Balochistan and Sindh, is heavily influenced by feudal traditions, where patriarchal attitudes towards women's mobility and authority in the public sphere are entrenched.

"Women journalists who wish to report on issues such as gender-based violence, political corruption, or economic inequalities often face resistance from local communities and authorities who may see these topics as taboo or threatening to the social order," said Aneela Ashraf. "In some cases, women journalists face not only professional challenges but also personal risks when reporting on contentious issues. The pressure to conform to traditional gender roles can make it difficult for women to fully exercise their journalistic freedoms."

"It is very difficult for women to work as journalists. I focus on women's issues, but women journalists enjoy no freedom," shared Naghma Anjum, a woman journalist from Jampur town in Rajanpur district. The barriers are not only professional but also deeply personal, as societal expectations often restrict women from even leaving their homes for work. "When we go out, government officers can blackmail and threaten us," she added, emphasizing the precarious environment in which women operate.

DERA GHAZI KHAN CITY: A big billboard congratulates a reporter who joined Khabrian newspaper. The joining coincides with 32nd anniversary of the newspaper. Photo by Freedom Network

Incidents of violence against women journalists further highlight the gravity of the issue. “A woman journalist was beaten up at her home, but she received no justice. The Rajanpur district police officer’s office called us twice but did nothing to address the situation,” recounted Naghma, pointing to the systemic apathy toward gender-based violence within journalism.

The lack of representation extends beyond the newsroom, impacting the coverage of issues faced by women and transgender individuals. “Reporting for women and transgender individuals is almost entirely absent, except for women in high positions,” remarked Farid Ullah, a journalist with the Dawn. This neglect underscores the media’s failure to address the challenges and needs of marginalized groups, further silencing their voices.

Chapter 4

The State of Safety of Journalists in South Punjab

Journalists in South Punjab face significant safety challenges, with threats coming from various directions, including state actors, powerful local elites, and extremist groups. “Every day, someone gets angry. Journalists face various threats to the extent that an eye of a journalist was gouged out,” remarked Mian Ghaffar Ahmad, Editor of *Daily Qaum*. The dangers are compounded by systemic issues, such as a lack of institutional support and growing hostility towards the press.

The dangers faced by journalists can be life-threatening. “Ashfak Sial, a journalist in Muzaffargarh, was killed for reporting against a Tahsildar. Fortunately, his murderers were arrested,” said Iftikhar Hassan of *Samaa News* channel, Multan. Despite such incidents, many cases of threats and violence against journalists go unreported. “It is ironic that while journalists report on the problems of others, the threats they face are rarely reported,” observed Anjum Pitafi, President of the Multan Union of Journalists.

Journalists in South Punjab also recall periods of heightened insecurity. “In the 2000s, we felt unsafe due to threats from religious extremists,” noted a senior journalist. However, some journalists view the current environment differently. “If you are not victimizing anyone on personal grounds, there’s no reason to feel unsafe as a journalist in South Punjab. Some stray incidents may happen, but they are usually handled by the union,” said Amin Abbasi, a journalist with Geo News channel in Bahawalpur.

4.1 Extreme Forms of Censorship

Journalists in smaller cities face additional challenges, with censorship and surveillance restricting their ability to report freely. “In smaller cities of South Punjab, journalists have to be extremely careful while reporting due to the threats they face,” said Anjum Pitafi. Even social media, which has provided a platform for independent voices, is not immune to monitoring and control. “Our social media accounts are now monitored, and we face repercussions for what

we post," noted Farooq Sheikh, General Secretary of the District Press Club in Muzaffargarh.

The safety of journalists in South Punjab continues to be under significant threat, with numerous cases of violence, harassment, and intimidation reported over recent years. The following table provides an overview of the threats and violations reported from 2021 to September 2024. These cases highlight the persistent dangers faced by media professionals in the region.

Cases Reported from South Punjab 2021-September 2024

Threats/Violations	# of Cases
Assault resulting in injury	7
Assault (Manhandling)	6
Arrest	5
Threat to Murder	4
Murders	2
Attempt to Murder	1
Legal Cases	1
Attempt to Kidnap	1
Kidnapped	1
Total	**28**

Note: This data is compiled by Freedom Network using Pakistan Press Club Safety Hubs Network. There are two safety hubs operating in Punjab – one in Lahore and other in Multan.

While many journalists report facing pressure and censorship, others disagree. "I have never been pressured in my decades-long career as a journalist," said Amin Abbasi, presenting a more optimistic perspective.

"Victimization of journalists can happen for various reasons and at the hands of different actors — politicians through political victimization, police or district administration, and even due to personal issues that are sometimes misrepresented. In some cases, the police have been unfairly accused, such as when a journalist's murder was later revealed to be due to personal reasons rather than targeted violence against the press," says Muhammad Kamran Khan, Additional Inspector General, South Punjab.

“All cases ultimately come to the police. With social media, journalists can now disseminate their problems quickly, forcing police action. Over the last ten months, many journalist-related cases were reported to us. However, we found no evidence of organized crime or targeted attacks against journalists due to their profession, except for one case where a journalist was victimized by the district administration for reporting on hospital corruption. We intervened and resolved the issue,” he adds.

“Unlike Karachi, we have not seen cases of targeted killings or organized threats to journalists in South Punjab. Most incidents are related to personal disputes, often involving business conflicts such as property matters,” Kamran Khan explains. “I have no information about the Punjab Journalists Protection [Coordination] Committee [set up during the last caretaker setup with a mandate to combat impunity for crimes against media and its practitioners],” he states.

4.2 Legal Cases against Media Practitioners in South Punjab

Legal challenges are another tool used to suppress journalists in South Punjab. “I have faced three cases, including one of defamation for Rs.420 million, for reporting on the famous case of Mukhtar Mai, a rape victim. It has become routine for people to file frivolous notices, and the courts enable this culture,” explained Mian Ghaffar.

False accusations and FIRs are a common tactic to intimidate journalists. “Last year, three FIRs were registered against me. While you sit here, you may learn that a case has been filed against you a hundred kilometres away,” said Mazhar Khan. The situation in rural areas is often worse. “If false FIRs can be registered against journalists based in Multan, imagine what journalists in rural areas are facing,” emphasized Iftikhar Hassan.

In some cases, the very sanctity of press institutions is undermined. “Our press club in Dera Ghazi Khan has been sealed for six months. The issue began when PTI officials held a press conference at our premises. Police arrested those officials, and we protested, claiming it was against press freedom. This led to threats from secret services and our arrest under 3 MPO (Maintenance of Public Order on accusations of anti-state activities. We were tortured and jailed for 28 days. We were told to leave journalism and relinquish our posts in exchange for our release,” recounted Sher Afgan Buzdar, President of Dera Ghazi KhanPress Club.

Journalists in other areas face similar struggles. “A newspaper in Layyah was fined one million rupees, while another faces trial. Many journalists are unaware of changing laws, and the legal landscape has become hostile toward them,” said Faridullah of *Dawn*.

The exploitation of journalists is further evident in how legal tools are used to suppress dissent. “All we wanted was for politicians to be arrested outside our press club, not inside. Instead, an FIR was registered against us using another journalist as the complainant. After 28 days in jail, where we were tortured, our press club was sealed, and a dacoity case was registered against us when we reopened it,” recounted Ghulam Mustafa, a journalist from Dera Ghazi Khan.

DERA GHAZI KHAN CITY: A view of Dera Ghazi Khan Press Club. Photo by DG Khan Press Club

Authorities have closed local Dera Ghazi Khan Press Club 2 June 2004 after opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf leaders’ press conference was disrupted with police entering the premises to stop the opposition leaders from speaking to journalists.

DERA GHAZI KHAN CITY: Authorities sealed the press club on 2 June 2024 after police disrupted a press conference by opposition Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf local leaders. Photo by press club.

Dera Ghazi Khan district is among the poorest in Punjab province and the press club is only available platform the local population are using to share their problems and issues with the government in Lahore using the vital link the press club is offering.

A Human Rights Commission of Pakistan's fact-finding report in November 2024 also shed light on the closure of the press club which is closed until 31 December 2024 despite a local order's order to de-seal it. The local administration went into appeal against the court's order and the issue is pending unresolved denying local population a platform to connect with their elected representatives and the Punjab government.

DG Khan Press Club President Sher Afgan Buzdar was arrested on 7 May 2024 under 3 Maintenance of Public Order law and freed on 3 June the same year.

DERA GHAZI KHAN CITY: Local journalists and others from adjoining districts attend a meeting with Freedom Network team. Photo by Freedom Network

The DG Khan administration even disrupted a meeting of Freedom Network fact-finding team with journalists from Rajanpur, Layya and DG Khan on 21 November 2024 when plain-clothed administration officials and cops in Punjab Police uniform disrupted and forced an early end to the meeting discussing safety challenges and state of media freedom in Seraiki belt of Punjab – commonly known as "South Punjab" - and expelled Freedom Network Executive Director Iqbal Khattak, his team and media development expert Adnan Rehmat and Pakistani media watchdog Freedom Network team from Dera Ghazi Khan district on Thursday – 21 November 2024.

"You have to finish the meeting and leave the district," a district administration official who introduced himself as "Tehsildar Chaudhry Haneef," accompanied

by a Punjab Police official with his badge on his right chest inscribed with "SHO (Muhammad) Younas," from Saddar Police Station told Iqbal Khattak.

DERA GHAZI KHAN: South Punjab Police SHO Younas and his cop stand guard outside a hotel where a meeting of Freedom Network with local journalists discussing safety and security issues was disrupted without assigning any reason. Photo by Freedom Network

The district administration official and SHO Younas failed to show any written order or cite any legal provision allowing them to disrupt and force an early end to the meeting and asking Iqbal Khattak, Freedom Network team members and local journalists, including a woman journalist, attending the discussion on safety and security challenges to "wind up the meeting and the leave the venue."

What the local journalists spoke of intimidation, enforced censorship, self-censorship intelligence agencies personnel's threats and violence minutes before the team raided 'Overseas Banquet Hall – Hotel and Suites' stood proven when the meeting was disrupted and forced to end prematurely.

No charge-sheet was framed nor any citation of violation of any law was given by the raiding team except that Tehsildar Haneef said: "The AC ordered."

Chapter 5

Media development roadmap for South Punjab: *Recommendations*

Addressing the challenges outlined in this report is crucial for the development of a free and independent media, and a sustainable media landscape in South Punjab. The focused group discussions and interviews conducted for this report in the region generated the following key recommendations for a professional media in in South Punjab:

- **Journalists need institutional support:** Empower and capacitate journalists through long-term and continuous institutional support from media development groups.
- **Media freedoms require advocacy:** Support journalists and media associations such as press clubs and journalists' unions in South Punjab with training and resources on campaigning around freedom of expression within the region.
- **Native media needs networking with national peers:** Help press clubs and journalists' unions in South Punjab (especially those in Bahawalpur, Dera Ghazi Khan and Multan) network with their counterparts in the rest of Pakistan, especially with Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and key press clubs in Lahore and Islamabad.
- **Digital media needs assistance:** Provide capacity building and technical resources for South Punjab-based native independent digital media platforms, especially those managed by or those who involve women, and their linkages with national and international counterparts for best practices and knowledge resources.
- **Women journalists need support and resources:** Support women media practitioners based in South Punjab, especially Multan, with capacity building and resources to further professionalize their work and conducting gender sensitization drives within the native media industry to build

support for greater inclusion of women in all sub-sectors of the local media.

- **Journalists need safety trainings:** Advocate for formal legal and legislative framework in South Punjab on safety of journalists as enshrined in the federal and Sindh provincial laws on safety of journalists.
- **Right to information regime needed:** Advocate for formal legal and legislative framework in South Punjab on access to information as enshrined in the federal and provincial RTI laws and practices for an enabling access to information regime.
- **Media and civil society need engagement:** Support a formalized interface among native media, civil society, and academia to foster professional collaboration toward creating a more informed society and strengthening democratic processes in South Punjab.
- **Media and industry need interfacing:** Strengthen the linkages between native media of South Punjab and the local academia and business industry to support sustainability initiatives for local media platforms.
- **Journalism education needs support:** Support institutions such as local universities and media associations to improve journalism curricula and training courses to promote media professionalism.
- **Expanding 'Punjab Journalists Protection Coordination Committee' (PJPCC):** A resonse mechanism set up under the Punjab government's administrative order in 2023 may also have a sub-office in South Punjab

ABOUT FREEDOM NETWORK

Freedom Network is Islamabad-based independent media watchdog and development sector research, advocacy and training organization. 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.

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