

CENSORSHIP, COERCION AND COURAGE:

The Struggle for Freedom of Expression, Media
Freedoms and Safety of Journalists in Pakistan

THIS 2026 PAKISTANI MEDIA AND JOURNALISM LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS REPORT:

- Captures the overlapping pressures from state and non-state actors, and the precarious environment for journalists.
- Highlights the convergence of legal, economic and social barriers that undermine media independence and democratic discourse.
- Emphasizes the extreme forms of censorship, intimidation, and the resilience of journalists operating under threat.

Adnan Rehmat & Iqbal Khattak

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In recent years, Pakistan's media landscape is defined by a dangerous mix of **censorship, coercion** – and remarkable **courage** – with journalists facing severe threats like violence, abduction, legal intimidation (especially through controversial cybercrime law PECA, Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act), economic pressure (politicized advertisement, unpaid work as well as denial of government advertising for critical publications), and self-censorship to navigate a climate where both state and non-state actors restrict reporting, especially in conflict zones. Despite federal and Sindh provincial laws for journalists' protection in 2021, impunity remains high, with severe challenges to press freedom driven by political control, surveillance and disinformation.

During 2024 and 2025, Freedom Network and its partner International Media Support (IMS) conducted detailed, on-ground regional assessments across Pakistan – including the four provinces, Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK) and Gilgit Baltistan (GB) – examining and analyzing the states of freedom of expression, media freedoms and safety of journalists. Separate detailed reports were published bringing to light findings and recommendations suggested by dozens of media practitioners and media institutions that were consulted. Often disturbing key patterns emerged including, but not limited to the following:

Principal challenges

- **State and non-state coercion:** Journalists face threats, abductions and violence from militant groups, security forces and even political actors, especially in areas like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP).
- **Censorship and self-censorship:** Government control, through bodies like broadcast media regulator PEMRA [Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority] and laws like PECA, have created a climate where journalists censor themselves to avoid repercussions.
- **Economic pressures:** 'Soft censorship' occurs through politicized advertising, delayed payments, denial of public sector advertising to dissenting media outlets and even 'story kills', weakening media independence and freedoms.
- **Digital threats:** Digital censorship and surveillance of media practitioners including spyware are growing tactics to silence dissent.
- **Impunity:** Despite federal and provincial laws on safety of journalists enacted

in 2021 perpetrators often escape justice, fuelling more violence.

Manifestations of the struggle

- **High risk profession:** Consistently throughout this century, Pakistani media finds itself ranked by the likes of Reporters Without Border (RSF), Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) and Freedom Network (FN) among the most dangerous countries for journalists, with high fatality rates, particularly in conflict areas.
- **Legal intimidation:** Controversial laws like PECA are increasingly being used to stifle critical reporting, leading to court cases and harassment.
- **Disorder in the newsroom:** Misinformation – majorly contributed to muted access to official information – is eroding public trust in media, while journalists struggle with pressures from political polarization and disinformation campaigns.

The courageous response

- **Resilience:** Journalists and other media practitioners – including those hounded away from professional media outlets by under state pressure and using the online space to exercise media freedoms – continue to report on sensitive issues despite immense personal risk, highlighting the importance of a free press for democracy.
- **Persistent advocacy:** Many national and international organizations and platforms, including Pakistan Journalists Safety Coalition (PJSC), various factions of Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), press clubs, All Association of Electronic Media Editors and News Editors (AEMEND), Council of Pakistan Newspaper Editors (APNS), All Pakistan Newspaper Society (APNS), Pakistan Broadcasters Association (PBA), RSF, CPJ, IFJ and others continue to challenge these restrictions, advocating for legal reforms and better protection.

The series of regional media assessment reports indicate key patterns in three broad areas:

Freedom of expression

While Pakistan's constitution guarantees freedom of expression, the reality for journalists is starkly different. Across all regions – AJK, Balochistan, GB, Islamabad, KP,

Punjab and Sindh – journalists face systemic intimidation, legal harassment, and coercion. State institutions, including police, intelligence agencies and district administrations, routinely interfere with reporting, using vague laws such as PECA and the Punjab Defamation Act to suppress dissent and critical coverage. These legal instruments are frequently weaponized, creating a culture of prior restraint and self-censorship. Non-state actors, including militants, mafias and extremist groups, further restrict expression through threats, violence, and targeted killings, especially in conflict-prone regions. Political parties and local power brokers also exert pressure, often in collusion with state actors, to control narratives and silence opposition voices.

Media freedoms

Media freedoms in Pakistan are undermined by a combination of legal, economic, and socio-cultural pressures. Censorship is pervasive and takes extreme forms –ranging from outright bans and suspension of advertisements to digital surveillance and connectivity blackouts. State-imposed controls are reinforced by militant-imposed censorship, particularly in KP and Balochistan, where reporting on security operations or militant activities can result in violence or death. Economic pressures, such as the strategic withholding of government advertising and financial suffocation of critical outlets, ensure compliance without overt bans. Media ownership structures and weak business models further compromise editorial independence, with commercial interests often overriding journalistic integrity. Press clubs and unions, intended as safeguards, are themselves politicized and fragmented, offering little protection or solidarity.

Safety of journalists and other media practitioners

The safety of journalists and other media practitioners in Pakistan is gravely compromised. Threats and intimidation are common, extending to journalists' families and personal lives. Legal harassment – including defamation suits, fabricated criminal charges, and arbitrary detentions – is used to silence critical voices. Physical violence, including targeted killings, abductions, and torture, remains a constant threat, particularly in regions with active militant or separatist movements such as in Balochistan. Economic coercion, such as job insecurity, wage theft and arbitrary dismissals, further weakens journalists' ability to resist pressure. Women journalists face additional barriers, including exclusion from professional networks, wage disparities, lack of facilities and gender-based harassment. Institutional responses to these threats are weak or absent, with impunity prevailing in most cases. The absence of systematic data collection on threats and attacks further obscures the scale of the problem and reinforces a climate of fear and self-censorship.

Recommendations – the way forward

This report paints a picture of a Pakistani media landscape where freedom of expression and media freedoms are systematically curtailed by a convergence of state and non-state actors, legal and economic instruments, and entrenched socio-cultural barriers. Journalists operate in an environment marked by fear, self-censorship and impunity, with little institutional support or protection. Comprehensive reforms – including legal, institutional and economic – are urgently needed to safeguard the rights and safety of journalists and to restore the media's role as a pillar of democratic accountability. A roadmap for reforms is outlined in the last chapter.

Islamabad, 2026

CHAPTER 1:



Classifications of Threat Actors to Freedom of Expression and Media Freedoms in Pakistan

***Situationer:** Freedom of expression in Pakistan is constitutionally guaranteed, yet the lived reality for journalists and media professionals across the country reveals a landscape marked by intimidation, coercion, and systemic barriers. Threat actors vary across regions, but they converge in their capacity to silence dissent, restrict independent reporting, and undermine the media's role as a democratic watchdog. This analysis synthesizes testimonies from eight distinct regions of Pakistan – Azad Jammu and Kashmir (AJK), Balochistan, Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), Islamabad, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), northern, central and southern parts of Punjab, and Sindh – detailing pressures shaping Pakistan's media environment.*

1.1. State institutions and legal instruments

Across Pakistan, state institutions remain among the most consistent threat actors to free speech. Journalists frequently encounter direct interference from police, district administrations and intelligence agencies. In Central Punjab, police cases are routinely lodged on flimsy grounds, creating a chilling effect on local reporting. In North Punjab, covert interventions include phone calls, visits and legal complaints designed to deter publication. In KP, intelligence agencies weaponize the PECA law, particularly its vague defamation clauses, to intimidate reporters covering military operations or enforced disappearances. Similar patterns are evident in Balochistan, where the state acknowledges its responsibility to protect journalists but fails to implement effective mechanisms, leaving reporters vulnerable to both militants and security forces.

Legal frameworks have become frontline tools of suppression. The Punjab Defamation Act of 2024 introduced special tribunals and fines up to Rs3 million, raising costs and chilling investigations before they begin. PECA amendments in 2025 expanded the scope of “fake information” clauses, making it easy to accuse journalists and difficult to defend against charges. These laws, while ostensibly designed to regulate digital spaces, have been repeatedly weaponized to silence critical voices, reinforcing a culture of prior restraint.

1.2. Non state actors: militants, mafias and extremist groups

Non-state actors exert equally formidable pressure on journalists. In KP, militant organizations such as the Tehrik Taliban Pakistan (TTP) issue public warnings, demand favorable coverage and carry out targeted killings. In Balochistan, separatist groups suspend newspaper distribution and threaten media houses that fail to align with their messaging. GB presents a different dynamic, where extremist religious organizations and land mafias intimidate journalists reporting on terrorism or property disputes. In South Punjab, sectarian groups and extremist networks retaliate against independent reporting, using threats, abductions, and violence to deter coverage.

Criminal networks compound these risks. Narcotics dealers in Central Punjab have attacked journalists' offices, while kidnap-for-ransom gangs in southern KP retaliate against investigative reporting on trafficking routes. In Sindh, dacoit gangs in riverine areas provide shelter to fugitives and pose new threats to journalists, with the murder of Jan Muhammad Mehar in 2024 believed to be linked to such networks. These actors exploit weak state protection and geographic vulnerabilities, creating zones where independent reporting is nearly impossible.

1.3. Political parties and local power brokers

Political actors across Pakistan routinely seek to influence media narratives. In AJK, journalists report intimidation from powerful individuals and organizations, with caste affiliations shaping reactions to news coverage. In North Punjab, political bans and informal instructions restrict television coverage of opposition leaders, while in South Punjab, political intolerance has grown since 2018, intensifying risks for journalists. In Balochistan, politicians often dismiss attacks on journalists as “societal issues,” framing violence as a cultural trait rather than a violation of democratic norms.

Local power brokers, including feudal landlords and tribal leaders, exert disproportionate influence in rural areas. In Sindh, waderas and landlords are identified as prime suspects in threats to free speech, often acting in concert with political parties and police. In Balochistan, tribal chiefs have been directly implicated in violence against journalists, with cases such as the killing of Anwar Jan Khetran in 2022 underscoring the lethal consequences of challenging entrenched authority. These actors blur the line between political and social pressures, embedding threats within local structures of power.

1.4. Economic pressures and media ownership

Economic vulnerability is a pervasive threat across regions. Journalists in GB and AJK describe themselves as financially weak, making them easy targets for bureaucrats

and business interests. In North Punjab, unpaid labor and dependence on advertising revenue create conditions where “censorship by finance travels faster than a legal notice.” Media houses, increasingly operating as corporate entities, prioritize commercial interests over journalistic integrity, often dropping stories after pressure from advertisers or political patrons. Media ownership itself functions as a threat actor. In Sindh, union leaders point fingers at some media owners with journalists losing jobs if they fail to apologize for reports critical of powerful groups. In Central Punjab, weak institutional support from unions and press clubs exacerbates insecurity, leaving district-level journalists without protection. Economic coercion thus operates alongside legal and political pressures, reinforcing self-censorship and silencing dissent. Continued denial of public sector advertising to critical groups, such as Dawn, also impacts media's ability to retain and pay journalists well.

1.5. Socio-cultural pressures and journalistic disunity

Socio-cultural dynamics further complicate the media landscape. In AJK, caste affiliations determine reactions to reporting, with journalists judged through the lens of their community identity. In GB, ethnic and sectarian divides amplify risks, with reporters warned not to cover certain areas or topics. Sectarian tensions across GB and South Punjab create hostile environments where even honest opinions can provoke violence. Gender exclusion is particularly stark in Punjab. Women journalists in most Punjab districts, including southern parts of the province, are largely absent from press clubs and denied assignments, reflecting systemic barriers to participation. In Central Punjab, women journalists describe PECA as a constant threat, with limited institutional support to resist harassment.

Internal divisions within the journalist community weaken collective resistance. The apex body of journalists in Pakistan – the PFUJ – has at least five factions. This factionalism within unions and press clubs has in recent years diluted solidarity, with rivals accusing each other of collusion with threat actors. This fragmentation suits both state institutions and media owners, who exploit divisions to undermine collective bargaining power. In most places, particularly districts other than the federal and provincial capitals, unions are unable to provide adequate support to their members, leaving many journalists isolated.

1.6. Regional variations and common threads

While threat actors vary across regions, common threads emerge. In conflict-prone areas such as Balochistan and KP, militants and security agencies dominate the threat landscape. In Punjab, legal instruments, economic coercion, and political bans are more prominent. In AJK and GB, socio-cultural structures – caste affiliations, ethnic identities and sectarian divides – shape the risks journalists face. In Sindh, a nexus of

political parties, landlords, intelligence agencies, and media owners converges to suppress dissent, compounded by internal divisions within the journalist community. Despite these variations, the cumulative effect is strikingly similar: a culture of fear, self-censorship, and prior restraint. Journalists across Pakistan describe their work as operating “between crossfires,” navigating overlapping pressures that leave little room for independent reporting. The absence of systematic data collection on threats further obscures the scale of the problem, reinforcing impunity and weakening accountability.

Summary: *The threats to free speech in Pakistan are multifaceted, reflecting the country's diverse geography, demography and political structures. State institutions, non-state actors, political parties, economic pressures, socio-cultural dynamics and disunity in journalists' ranks converge to create an environment inimical to independent journalism. Regional variations highlight the complexity of these challenges, but the common threads reveal a systemic crisis that undermines democratic discourse.*

CHAPTER 2:



Non-Amenable Service Structure and Conditions for Media Practitioners in Pakistan

Situationer: *The service structure for media practitioners in Pakistan remains profoundly inadequate, undermining both the sustainability of journalism as a profession and the quality of information available to the public. Across diverse regions – AJK, Balochistan, GB, KP, northern, central and central regions of Punjab province and Sindh – in journalists face systemic neglect, financial insecurity and institutional failures that collectively erode the foundations of the media industry. This analysis synthesizes regional testimonies and outlines the structural deficiencies shaping Pakistan's media landscape.*

2.1. Financial insecurity and wage violations

One of the most consistent features of Pakistan's media service structure is the prevalence of low wages, delayed payments, and outright non-payment. In Azad Jammu and Kashmir, journalists often receive no salary at all, with some covering multiple districts on behalf of national outlets without compensation. In Balochistan, salaries are not only lower than in other provinces but frequently delayed for months due to government advertising quotas, leaving reporters unable to meet basic living costs. Gilgit-Baltistan presents similar challenges, where even prominent media houses have failed to pay staff for years, forcing journalists to remain in the profession out of passion rather than financial viability.

In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, wage delays of up to two months are routine, with salaries as low as PKR 12,000—well below provincial minimum wage thresholds. North Punjab illustrates the bleakness of the situation further: many journalists working with major channels receive no salary, relying instead on parallel businesses or tokenistic media cards that provide affiliation without livelihood. Central Punjab reflects the same pattern, with pay cuts of up to 40 percent imposed by leading newspapers and never restored, leaving journalists working below minimum wage. In South Punjab, stagnant wages have persisted for years despite inflation, with some newspapers demanding deposits from journalists to retain positions. Sindh mirrors these conditions, where salary delays are widespread and many district correspondents are told to “find

alternatives” themselves, pushing them into corrupt practices. The cumulative effect is a profession marked by chronic financial insecurity. Journalists across Pakistan are denied even the minimum wage guaranteed under labor laws, with wage theft and arbitrary dismissals commonplace. This economic fragility not only undermines livelihoods but also compromises journalistic integrity, as practitioners are forced to seek alternative sources of income or favors from interest groups.

2.2. Media economy: dependence on government advertising and weak business models

The media industry's dependence on government advertising exacerbates structural weaknesses. In AJK, local outlets rely almost entirely on the Press Information Department (PID) for revenue while in Balochistan, federal quotas are absorbed by national bureaus, leaving regional newspapers starved of funds. South Punjab's print media has historically survived on government advertisements, but this support has dwindled, forcing newspapers to redirect resources to digital platforms.

The reliance on state patronage creates vulnerability to political manipulation and delays in disbursement. Newspapers in Balochistan, for example, struggle under seven-month delays in advertisement payments, procuring paper on loan and cutting staff to survive. In Sindh, successive governments provide grants to press clubs and unions but fail to enforce labor laws, perpetuating dependence without structural reform. Across regions, the absence of diversified revenue streams leaves media houses unable to sustain operations independently, reinforcing cycles of insecurity and control.

Conversely, the selective denial of government advertisements also impacts journalism viability. During 2024-25, the government continued its long-standing unannounced ban on advertisements to the Dawn media group. Media associations such as APNS, PBA, AEMEND and PFUJ say this denial of official advertising has evolved from a targeted restriction on the flagship newspaper for its critical and independent editorial policy to a comprehensive blockade impacting its viability. The government never issued formal notifications for the ban but instead withheld advertising for major national campaigns that were distributed to almost all other mainstream media.

2.3. Job insecurity and arbitrary dismissals

Job security is virtually non-existent across Pakistan's media sector. In AJK, journalists risk dismissal without explanation after publishing stories. In KP, abrupt terminations in recent years have rendered dozens of reporters, cameramen and editors jobless.

Central Punjab highlights the plight of highly educated journalists with decades of experience who have lost jobs due to shrinking opportunities, while South Punjab reports thousands of layoffs following the decline of print media.

Sindh reflects the broader national trend, where economic crises have forced media houses to shut bureaus, impose salary cuts, and dismiss staff. In all cases dismissals occur without due process or protections leaving journalists vulnerable to exploitation and unable to plan sustainable careers. The absence of formal contracts, grading systems, or job descriptions further compounds insecurity, particularly in rural districts where correspondents are treated as expendable.

2.4. Exploitation of district correspondents

District-level journalists across Pakistan face some of the harshest conditions. In North Punjab, correspondents are expected to generate revenue themselves through advertisements, sometimes even asked to contribute money to media houses during crises. South Punjab newspapers require district reporters to arrange supplements or pay monthly sums, prioritizing business generation over journalistic integrity. In Sindh, “guarantee money” is demanded from correspondents, with little regard for professional background or capacity.

These practices commodify journalism, reducing reporters to revenue agents rather than information providers. The issuance of press cards to non-journalists in South Punjab and Sindh further undermines credibility, allowing individuals with no connection to journalism to exploit privileges while genuine practitioners remain unpaid. Such exploitation erodes professional standards and fosters unethical practices, as journalists are pushed into compromising positions to sustain themselves.

2.5. Lack of professional development and training

Professional development opportunities are scarce across regions, leaving journalists ill-equipped to adapt to technological and industry changes. In Central Punjab, district-level journalists lack training in new technologies, forcing them to rely on personal resources. South Punjab highlights the absence of capacity-building in human rights reporting, while GB suffers from limited academic programs, with only one journalism degree offered at Karakoram International University.

Sindh underscores the issue further, where rural journalists must cover multiple stories across diverse subjects without specialized training, increasing the risk of errors with serious consequences. The gap between academia and industry remains wide, discouraging young entrants and weakening the profession's future trajectory.

Without systematic training and professional development, journalists struggle to meet evolving demands, reinforcing cycles of insecurity and exploitation.

2.6. Weak enforcement of labor laws and union fragmentation

Poor enforcement of labor laws is a nationwide problem. Despite Pakistan's ratification of numerous ILO conventions, journalists routinely work up to 15 hours without overtime, health or safety protections. The statutory Wage Board Award remains unenforced, and amendments to regulatory laws have legalized salary delays, undermining fundamental labor rights.

Union fragmentation further weakens collective bargaining power. In Sindh, rival factions within press clubs and unions dilute solidarity, leaving journalists divided and vulnerable. Across regions, unions provide selective support, often aligning with authorities or excluding non-members. This lack of unified representation prevents journalists from effectively challenging exploitative practices or advocating for structural reforms.

Summary: *The poor service structure for media practitioners in Pakistan is systemic, cutting across regions and media formats. Financial insecurity, dependence on government advertising, job precarity, exploitation of district correspondents, lack of professional development and weak enforcement of labor laws collectively undermine the profession. These deficiencies not only compromise the livelihoods of journalists but also erode the integrity of journalism itself, fostering unethical practices and weakening the media's role as a democratic institution.*

CHAPTER 3:



Gender Inequities in Pakistani Journalism and Media Practice

Situationer: *The state of gender representation in journalism and media practice across Pakistan reflects a persistent imbalance rooted in systemic deficiencies of service structures. Despite regional variations, a common thread emerges > women journalists face exclusion, inadequate institutional support, wage disparities, and unsafe working conditions that collectively undermine their participation in the profession. Across diverse regions – AJK, Balochistan, GB, KP, northern, central and central regions of Punjab province and Sindh – this analysis highlights how poor service structures perpetuate gender inequity in the Pakistani journalism landscape.*

3.1. Institutional exclusion and press club membership

Press clubs and unions, which serve as professional anchors for journalists, remain largely inaccessible to women across the Pakistani journalism landscape. By 2025 in AJK, only two women had been granted membership out of 85 press club members, while GB records showed just two permanent female members in its press club in a list of over 100 male counterparts. South Punjab reflects similar exclusion with fewer than a dozen women members across major press clubs in Multan, Bahawalpur and Dera Ghazi Khan districts. Sindh's Hyderabad Press Club counted only six women members, underscoring the marginalization of female journalists in representative bodies. These figures reveal a structural failure to integrate women into professional networks, depriving them of resources, mentorship, and collective bargaining power.

3.2. Wage disparities and financial insecurity

Across Pakistani provinces and regions wage inequity among genders emerges as a defining barrier. In KP, women reportedly earn between 20 and 40 per cent less than men for equivalent roles, while many remain unpaid stringers. In North Punjab, women were the first to lose jobs during the decline of print media and subsequent downsizing in recent years, reflecting their vulnerability in precarious employment structures.

Sindh's women journalists similarly report unequal pay compared to male colleagues, with no formal equal pay regime in place. GB highlights the discouragement caused by unpaid or poorly paid positions, leading women to avoid or abandon journalism for more financially secure professions. These disparities are compounded by the absence of maternity leave, childcare facilities, and transport allowances, reinforcing the perception that journalism is unsustainable for women.

3.3. Lack of facilities and workplace infrastructure

Basic workplace infrastructure remains inadequate across Pakistan's media landscape. In North Punjab, women journalists reported the absence of washrooms in newsrooms, while in Central Punjab, facilities such as separate bathrooms and childcare support were largely unavailable. Although incremental reforms have been introduced – such as the Faisalabad Press Club providing a separate room and washroom for women – these remain exceptions rather than norms. In Balochistan, internship opportunities for women are limited due to the absence of essential facilities like shuttle services and safe working hours. The lack of gender-sensitive infrastructure reflects a broader neglect of service structures, discouraging women from entering or sustaining careers in journalism.

3.4. Safety concerns and institutional neglect

Safety and security constitute another dimension of poor service structures with regards to gender. Women journalists across most regions face harassment, threats and character assassination, often without institutional support. In AJK, women reported online harassment and indirect threats following investigative reporting. In Balochistan, women were discouraged from field assignments due to violent conflict, with editors failing to provide logistical or financial support for hazardous coverage. In Sindh, journalists recount threats from feudal elites, politicians and police with media houses refusing to take responsibility for their safety.

Not even the best-known Pakistani women journalists remain immune from targeted attacks, including intimidation, threats, trolling and doxxing. These include Asma Shirazi, Benazir Shah, Sana Mirza, Gharida Farooqi, Saba Eitizaz, Shaheena Shaheen, Faiza Gilani and others. The absence of protective policies within Pakistani media houses contrasts sharply with international organizations, which enforce safety protocols and prioritize journalist security. This neglect not only endangers women but also curtails their ability to report freely, undermining citizens' right to information.

3.5. Cultural conservatism and restricted mobility

Poor service structures intersect with cultural conservatism to restrict women's mobility and professional growth. In KP, women journalists are largely confined to Peshawar, with negligible presence in rural districts due to family opposition and lack of safe transport. In South Punjab, patriarchal norms discourage women from covering hard news, relegating them to “soft” beats such as lifestyle or human interest stories. GB reflects similar pressures, where societal stigma and hostile environments prevent women from reporting openly, despite high literacy rates in areas like Hunza. These restrictions are exacerbated by the absence of institutional mechanisms – such as safe transport, gender-sensitive policies, and grievance redressal systems – that could otherwise mitigate cultural barriers.

3.6. Professional training and digital transition

The decline of print journalism and the rise of independent digital platforms in Pakistan have created new challenges for women. In North Punjab, women attempting to transition to digital media faced obstacles due to lack of training and institutional support. Many reported being objectified and judged on appearance rather than professional competence. In GB, women increasingly turned to digital and citizen journalism, finding online spaces more accessible than legacy media. However, the absence of structured training programs and financial incentives limits their ability to sustain careers in digital journalism. Across regions, universities and media houses have failed to provide adequate professional preparation, leaving women under-equipped to navigate evolving media landscapes.

3.7. Harassment and character assassination

Harassment remains a pervasive issue, compounded by weak institutional responses. In AJK, women journalists reported character assassination and innuendos during interviews. In Sindh, harassment often escalates into legal battles, with women left to defend themselves without organizational backing. South Punjab highlights cases of sexual harassment within state-run media, where official inquiries confirmed misconduct but failed to establish effective grievance mechanisms. The reliance on “character assassination tools” as a means of silencing women journalists reflects both societal hostility and institutional apathy, reinforcing gender inequity within the profession.

3.8. Regional disparities and common patterns

While regional contexts differ, common patterns of poor service structures emerge. In AJK and GB, underrepresentation in press clubs and unions reflects systemic exclusion. In Balochistan and KP, safety concerns and lack of logistical support discourage women from field reporting. In Punjab, wage disparities, inadequate facilities, and cultural stigma push women out of journalism. In Sindh, threats from feudal elites and lack of institutional safety policies highlight the vulnerability of women in rural areas. Despite isolated reforms – such as separate facilities in Faisalabad or women's sections in Peshawar Press Club – the broader landscape remains resistant to inclusive change.

Summary: *The evidence underscores that gender inequity in journalism in Pakistan is not merely a product of cultural conservatism or societal attitudes but fundamentally rooted in poor service structures. Exclusion from press clubs, wage disparities, lack of facilities, unsafe working conditions, inadequate training and weak institutional responses collectively create an environment where women are marginalized and discouraged from pursuing journalism. These systemic deficiencies not only silence women's voices but also compromise the integrity and inclusivity of Pakistan's media landscape. Addressing these structural barriers requires comprehensive reforms – ranging from equal pay policies and safe workplace protocols to inclusive press club memberships and professional training programs. Without such measures, journalism in Pakistan will remain male-dominated, failing to represent half of the population and undermining the democratic principle of balanced and equitable reporting.*

CHAPTER 4:



Topography of Censorship in Pakistan

Situationer: *The state of journalism in Pakistan is marked by pervasive censorship that manifests in diverse and extreme forms across its regions. While the country's constitution guarantees freedom of expression, the lived reality for journalists reveals a landscape where state institutions, militant groups, economic pressures, and social hierarchies converge to silence independent voices. The cumulative effect is a media environment where self-censorship dominates, investigative reporting is stifled, and accountability is undermined.*

4.1. State-imposed controls and legislative restrictions

Across Pakistan, state institutions exercise significant control over journalistic content. In AJK, legislation has been expanded to include government figures within the definition of “community,” enabling imprisonment for criticism and effectively criminalizing dissent. Journalists recount the banning of outlets and suspension of advertisements for newspapers critical of the government, demonstrating how administrative measures are weaponized to suppress independent reporting. Similarly, in GB, despite the absence of formal jurisdiction, regulatory authorities such as PEMRA intervene to restrict channels, while licenses for television and FM stations are issued from Islamabad, denying local autonomy.

In KP, directives from security institutions prohibit coverage of militant attacks, civilian casualties, and enforced disappearances, mandating reliance on official statements. The PECA law has become a feared instrument, with journalists facing notices and FIRs for content deemed defamatory to state institutions. Central Punjab reflects similar patterns, where defamation cases and PECA provisions have entrenched self-censorship. Journalists describe the act as a “Damocles' sword,” deterring critical reporting and reinforcing silence.

4.2. Militant-imposed censorship and parallel controls

Beyond state intervention, militant groups impose parallel censorship regimes. In KP's

merged tribal districts, factions of Tehrik Taliban Pakistan (TTP) has issued edicts banning “anti-jihad” content, threatening journalists with violence. Distribution of national dailies was halted in Bajaur district after coverage of civilian deaths, underscoring the extent of militant influence. In Balochistan, banned organizations bypass local media entirely, sending claims directly to international outlets, reflecting the silencing of domestic voices. These militant-imposed restrictions create information blackspots, where independent reporting is virtually erased.

4.3. Economic pressures and financial censorship

Economic vulnerability has emerged as a potent form of censorship, particularly in Punjab province. In North Punjab, district-level reporters, often unpaid or severely underpaid, avoid sensitive issues to protect their livelihoods. Advertisements are strategically withheld from critical outlets, as seen in the case of Dawn, which has been denied advertisements due to its divergent stance. This financial suffocation ensures compliance without overt bans, creating an environment where censorship travels “faster than a legal notice.” In Balochistan, authorities manipulate the media landscape by diverting advertisement quotas to government-controlled platforms, sustaining compliant voices while marginalizing independent ones. The economic model thus becomes a mechanism of control, reinforcing censorship through resource allocation.

4.4. Digital surveillance and connectivity blackouts

Digital platforms, once seen as spaces for relative freedom, are increasingly subject to surveillance and algorithmic suppression. In AJK, Kashmiri voices are silenced by international platforms whose algorithms prioritize state narratives. GB journalists highlight how firewalls and algorithms filter out critical issues, reducing the reach of digital media. In South Punjab, social media accounts are monitored, with journalists facing repercussions for posts deemed critical.

Connectivity blackouts exacerbate these challenges. Balochistan has witnessed repeated internet shutdowns, sometimes lasting months, including in 2025, impeding communication and restricting citizen journalism. In KP, mobile data services were suspended in multiple districts during 2025, preventing real-time reporting. These measures shrink spaces for independent voices, isolating communities and reinforcing censorship.

4.5. Violence, intimidation and impunity

Extreme forms of censorship against journalists and other media practitioners are also enforced through violence and intimidation. In Sindh, the 2024 murder of senior

journalist Jan Muhammad Meher in Sukkur exemplifies the high cost of free speech. Family feuds or personal enmities are often cited to deflect attention from professional motives, reducing accountability and discouraging coverage.

South Punjab records numerous cases of assaults, threats, arrests and murders between 2021 and 2025 highlighting the persistent dangers faced by journalists. While officials downplay these incidents as personal disputes, journalists emphasize the role of political victimization and administrative harassment. In AJK, women journalists report harassment and character assassination, further discouraging participation. Across regions, threats are often unreported or unshared, leaving journalists vulnerable and investigations stalled.

4.6. Institutional and social pressures

Press clubs and unions, intended to safeguard journalistic rights, are themselves subject to politicization and administrative control. In AJK, press clubs have been mired in litigation, while in Balochistan, local administrations restricted political parties from organizing events at press clubs, only reversed after judicial intervention. In South Punjab, journalists describe surveillance and monitoring even within press clubs, undermining their role as safe spaces.

Social hierarchies further compound censorship. In AJK, journalists from marginalized tribes face pressure within their own communities, while those from influential groups escape consequences. In Sindh, journalists exposing landlords, politicians, and tribal systems are targeted, reflecting how entrenched power structures enforce silence.

4.7. Self-censorship as survival strategy

The cumulative effect of these pressures is the normalization of self-censorship. Journalists across regions admit to maintaining internal “red line” lists, deciding what not to cover before determining what to report. Investigative journalism has become rare, particularly in GB where reporters acknowledge being “accustomed to self-censorship.” In Central Punjab, threats and legal harassment have succeeded in establishing silence, while in North Punjab, financial precarity reinforces cautious reporting. Self-censorship thus emerges as both a survival strategy and a systemic outcome of extreme censorship.

Summary: *The evidence from Pakistan's provinces and other regions reveals that extreme forms of censorship are not isolated incidents, but rather systemic practices embedded in political, economic and social structures. State directives, militant bans, financial suffocation, digital surveillance, connectivity blackouts, violence and institutional pressures collectively silence independent journalism. The persistence of impunity, particularly in cases of violence against journalists, further entrenches this environment, discouraging accountability and transparency. The result is a media landscape where freedom of expression is curtailed, investigative reporting is rare, and citizens' right to information is compromised. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive reforms, including protection laws, independent regulatory frameworks, equitable financial models and robust safety protocols. Without such measures, journalism in Pakistan will remain constrained by extreme forms of censorship, undermining democratic discourse and the role of media as a pillar of accountability.*

CHAPTER 5:



Legal and Other Leagues of Manipulation and Coercion Against Journalists

Situationer: *The legal environment surrounding journalism in Pakistan reflects a layered convergence of colonial-era provisions, contemporary statutes and administrative practices that collectively constrain independent reporting. Across the country, the media faces punitive laws, opaque procedures and institutional pressures that blur the boundary between lawful regulation and coercive control. The result is a climate of uncertainty and self-censorship, where litigation, legislation and administrative discretion function as overlapping tools to deter scrutiny of governance, security operations, and public interest issues. A pattern of weaponized litigation is evident wherever reporting touches politically sensitive movements or local power structures.*

5.1. Journalists treated as troublemakers

Charges of treason, terrorism or public order violations have been initiated against journalists documenting protests and accountability movements, often without transparent access to police FIRs or timely disclosure of evidence. Such opacity is not incidental; it converts legal procedure into deterrence, elevating the “process as punishment” dynamic and signaling consequences for those who report beyond official narratives. Defamation suits seeking exorbitant damages compound this pressure, especially in jurisdictions where special tribunals and accelerated timetables exist, raising defense costs and compressing procedural safeguards. Even where courts ultimately acquit journalists, the resource drain and psychological stress achieve the practical aim of silence.

5.2. Criminalizing dissent

Legislative instruments intensify the risks to Pakistani journalists. Amendments to criminal provisions that expand the scope of “public tranquility,” “obstruction of official duties,” or “community” to include government officials shift criticism into a penal frame. In several areas, the PECA law of 2016, amended in 2025, has become central

to punitive enforcement against online speech in Pakistan. Journalists report the law's invocation, or explicit threat of invocation, for social media posts critical of state agencies, political figures, or security operations. The increase in maximum penalties to 10 years' imprisonment for alleged "disinformation" magnifies the chilling effect, especially when content takedowns and blocking orders precede any hearing, arrive without clear timelines, and lack accessible repositories of outcomes or acquittals. The administrative sequencing – remove first, justify later – instills prior restraint as a rational survival strategy.

5.3. Communications throttling of journalists

Communication controls operate alongside legal threats. In districts experiencing heightened security incidents or mass mobilization, especially Balochistan and KP, mobile network shutdowns have extended for weeks or months, interrupting newsgathering, verification, and dissemination. The restriction of connectivity not only impedes journalistic work but also narrows public space for association and expression, effectively turning technical regulation into a governance instrument. Where press clubs historically function as hubs for solidarity, welfare, and access, litigation and administrative orders freezing accounts or sealing premises disable these institutions, isolating journalists from collective support at moments of maximum vulnerability.

5.4. Economic strangulation of journalists

Economic dependency further skews the playing field for journalists in Pakistan. In areas where private advertising markets are weak, media outlets rely on government advertising, creating a lever for punitive withdrawal in response to investigative reporting. Journalists recount direct calls from political offices to information departments instructing financial sanctions against outlets and pressure on sources.

This linkage of editorial content to economic retaliation discourages watchdog reporting and incentivizes self-censorship before publication. Where harassment escalates, it often extends beyond the newsroom to family livelihoods, including informal blacklisting from public employment, illustrating how punitive logic crosses personal-professional boundaries.

5.5. Physical and psychological violence against journalists

Physical and psychological intimidation of journalists across Pakistan remains a persistent feature. Accounts of beatings, torture, enforced disappearance, and fabricated nationality challenges reflect an environment where coercion is normalized and accountability diffused. Sectarian polarization compounds risk: newspapers

divided along communal lines and threats leveraged through sectarian actors fragment professional solidarity and elevate personal danger. Intelligence operatives and local administrative officials have disrupted fact-finding meetings by civil society groups, forced premature closures of discussions on safety and media freedom, and expelled participants without written orders or cited legal authority. Such actions affirm what journalists report moments earlier – intimidation, enforced censorship, and self-censorship driven by credible threats of reprisal.

5.6. Laws and regulations as deterrents against journalists

Regional case patterns illustrate the range of laws and regulations used as deterrents against journalists. In conflict-affected areas, aggressive PECA application and stalled enforcement of protective legislation leave reporters susceptible to frivolous FIRs under penal provisions for “defamation” or “incitement.” Where colonial-era laws remain in circulation, routine newsgathering – seeking official comment, covering police encounters, or attending political press conferences – has been reframed as “obstruction in the discharge of official duties,” enabling arrests and confiscation of equipment. Logs from journalist unions record dozens of FIRs in a single year under PECA, alongside fabricated cases under other statutes, producing cumulative uncertainty. When content moderation precedes transparency, the lesson is learned before any adjudication; the legal arena becomes a compliance theater where the rational choice is silence.

5.7. Targeting media institutions

Institutional closures demonstrate the societal cost of legal suppression of journalists in Pakistan. In poor districts where the press club functions as a public conduit to provincial government, sealing the premises denies communities a platform to surface grievances and engage officials. Even where courts order de-sealing, administrative appeals prolong closure, effectively nullifying judicial relief and extending suppression through procedural inertia.

Arrests under public order laws, detention, and reported torture of press club leaders highlight how associational spaces are policed to deter resistance to administrative overreach.

Access to justice is uneven. High-stakes criminal and civil litigation against journalists routinely places them opposite well-resourced petitioners represented by expensive counsel. Media organizations often fail to provide legal assistance, leaving reporters to negotiate settlements or endure prolonged legal contests they cannot afford.

Minority journalists face compounded vulnerability, including unresolved violent crimes against family members, with investigative trajectories stalled and accountability elusive. Jurists and legal experts note systemic imbalances in the

criminal justice system that favor those with resources, urging structured agreements between journalist unions and bar associations to ensure representation and contest impunity for crimes against journalists. Institutional spaces such as press clubs are not immune from intimidation. In AJK, press clubs have been politicized and litigated against, undermining their role as safe havens. In Sindh, Hyderabad Press Club was attacked multiple times by religious groups during protests, directly targeting journalists. These assaults on collective spaces erode solidarity and reinforce vulnerability.

5.8. Collective resistance and its limitations

Despite pervasive harassment, journalists continue to resist through collective action. In AJK, press clubs and associations have organized protests against threats, confronting administrations directly. In KP, unions staged demonstrations demanding federal intervention to curb impunity. In South Punjab, petitions to protection committees highlight attempts to institutionalize safeguards. However, these efforts often fall short due to weak enforcement, politicization of press clubs, and lack of organizational support. Sindh illustrates the importance of organizational backing, where journalists with support from their media houses navigate crises more effectively. Yet many remain isolated, with employers unwilling to confront powerful actors. The absence of systematic data collection on threats, particularly in Punjab, further obscures the scale of violations and reinforces impunity.

Summary: *Three structural dynamics obstruct and intimidate journalists in Pakistan. First, the expansion and elastic interpretation of penal and cyber laws enable the state and powerful private actors to convert criticism into prosecutable offense, particularly in the digital sphere. Second, administrative practice – network shutdowns, content blocking and institutional sealing – operates as de facto censorship without proportional safeguards or transparent oversight. Third, resource asymmetries in litigation, combined with limited organizational backing for journalists, transform courts from arenas of rights protection into instruments of attrition. These dynamics collectively narrow the space for independent journalism and degrade public access to reliable information on governance, corruption, and security. The cumulative impact is a national media environment where prior restraint, self-censorship, and strategic silence become rational adaptations to legal risk. Even where journalists ultimately prevail in court, the deterrent function of the process – cost, time and exposure – achieves its objective.*

CHAPTER 6:



Recommendations: A Reform Roadmap for Media Development and Journalists' Safety in Pakistan

To counter challenges to professional and independent media sector and community of journalism and public interest information practitioners in Pakistan, the following reform roadmap is suggested, derived from multiple focused group discussions and key informant interviews from media practitioners and media associations from AJK, Balochistan, GB, Islamabad, KP, Punjab and Sindh:

1. Provide institutional support for journalists: *Empower and capacitate journalists through long-term and continuous institutional support from media development groups and associations across all regions of Pakistan.*

2. Sustain advocacy for media freedoms: *Support organized advocacy efforts for freedom of expression by equipping journalists and media associations with training and resources to campaign for media rights.*

3. Ensure safety of journalists and strengthen safety commissions: *Support and capacitate the Safety Commissions established under the federal and Sindh laws on safety of journalists and establish similar legislative guarantees and support institutions in AJK, Balochistan, GB, KP and Punjab.*

4. Strengthen right to information regimes: *Promote and strengthen the implementation of RTI laws – federal and provinces legislations – and enact similar legislation for AJK and GB – to guarantee access to information and create an enabling environment for transparency and accountability.*

5. Support digital media viability and entrepreneurship: *Provide capacity building, technical resources and shared mechanism and digital production facilities for independent digital media platforms and facilitate their networking with national and international counterparts to strengthen innovation, viability and professionalism.*

6. Strengthen gender affirmative measures within media: *Make media women friendly by supporting women media practitioners with targeted capacity building, resources and gender sensitization drives to enhance professionalism and inclusion in the media sector; and enacting gender equity policies for all media including independent digital media.*

7. Strengthen networking and collaboration within media: *Facilitate networking opportunities for regional press clubs and journalists' unions with their national peers, including major press clubs and the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, and support collaboration between them and with international counterparts.*

8. Promote and strengthen media and civil society interface: *Support the establishment of formalized interfaces among media, civil society and academia – including with media studies departments at universities and colleges – to promote professional collaboration, informed societies and stronger democratic processes.*

9. Promote and strengthen media and industry linkages: *Strengthen connections between local media, academia and business and tech industries to support sustainability initiatives and professional development.*

10. Strengthen journalism education: *Assist universities, colleges and their media studies departments in improving journalism curricula and training courses to promote media professionalism and adapt to emerging challenges, including on public interest digital content creation, countering disinformation and climate and development journalism.*

