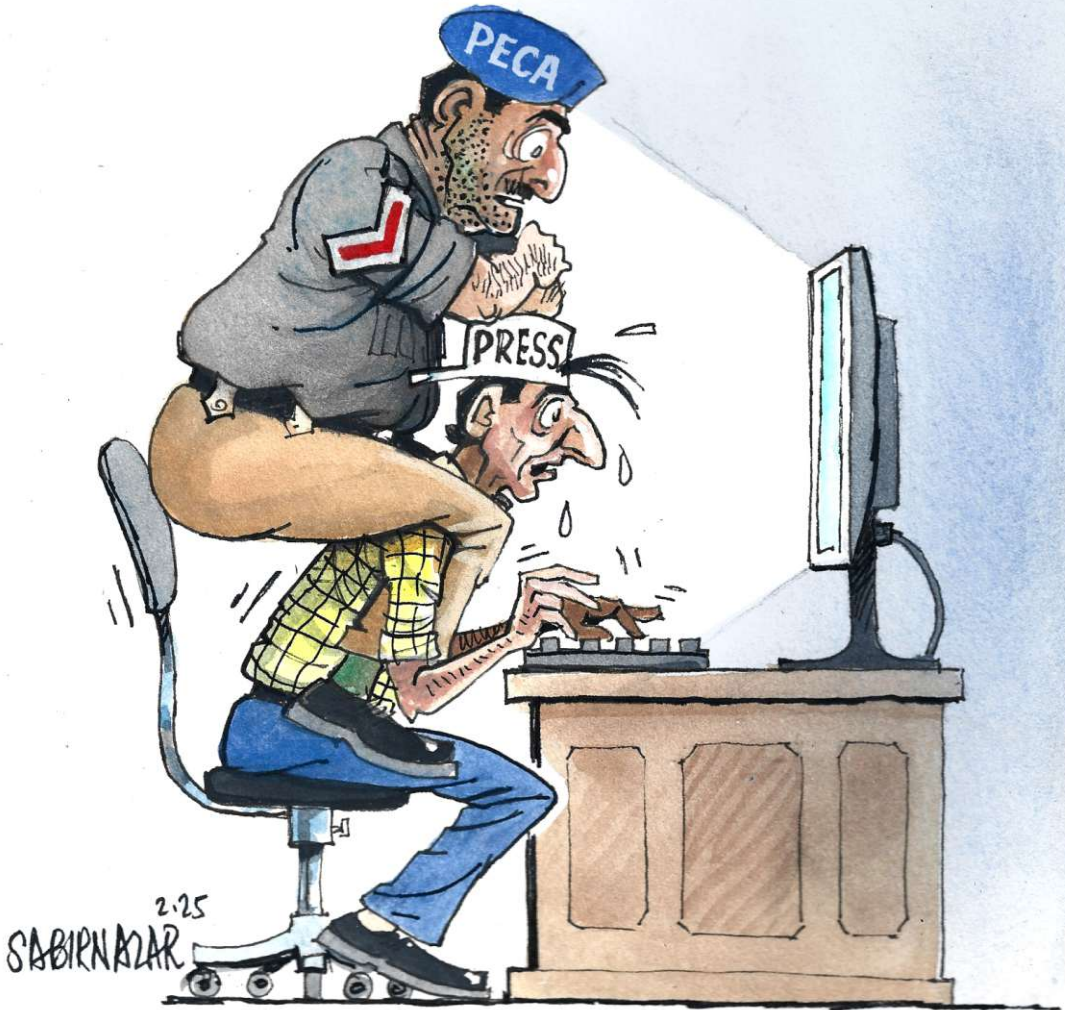


FREE SPEECH AND PUBLIC INTEREST JOURNALISM UNDER SIEGE IN PAKISTAN

May 3, 2025 – World Press Freedom Day
Adnan Rehmat and Iqbal Khattak





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PAKISTAN FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION AND MEDIA REPORT 2025

Description of this report: An annual trend analysis of the state of freedom of expression and media rights and freedoms in Pakistan. Released every year on May 3 – the World Press Freedom Day. The analysis incorporates Pakistan's socio-political-legal and media industry related factors and developments impacting on exercise of Article 19 (freedom of expression) by the public and by media and its practitioners, and the impact of these developments on professional and public interest journalism. Ultimately the report provides insights into the concerns, challenges and triumphs experienced by media, social and political communities of Pakistan in the period under review.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Free speech and public interest journalism under siege

This chapter provides an overview of the freedom of expression and media freedoms situation in Pakistan prevalent during the period May 2024 to April 2025.

The Pakistani media industry is confronting an existential crisis amid an increasingly restrictive environment for free expression and the rapid disintegration of traditional media economic models. This situation was exacerbated by the enactment of amendments to the national cybercrime law, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), in January 2025 that now makes it easier for authorities to arrest, fine and jail journalists, political activists and human rights advocates for online dissent and freedom of expression.

During the period under review, deteriorating conditions of safety and job security for journalists were compounded by significant challenges to both professional integrity as media grappled with disinformation challenges rooted in emaciated access to information practices and financial sustainability in the backdrop of a shifting economic base for media. These difficulties reflect the broader contraction of democratic space and political freedoms in Pakistan. The narrowing scope for independent journalism, a lack of substantive solidarity among media professionals, and escalating economic pressures continue to jeopardize the sector's viability also making business sustainability extremely challenging.

There remains a pressing need for more structured and expanded efforts to foster cohesion within the media industry among its various stakeholders and to enhance collaboration within them, especially those committed to safeguarding freedom of expression and advancing public interest journalism.

However, the industry continues to grapple with declining professional standards, insufficient diversity in media leadership, the absence of economic sustainability due to limited revenue diversification, and a critical shortage of the skills and resources necessary to navigate the sector's ongoing digital transformation.

Without urgent and strategically scaled interventions, the capacity of the Pakistani media to function as a pillar of democracy and accountability will continue to diminish, particularly in the face of state-driven efforts to expand restrictions on media freedoms and free speech. This report examines and outlines the challenges faced by journalists and media professionals during the period May 2024 to April 2025 in the backdrop of a deteriorating political environment. In the period under review the following key trends were documented:

Existential crisis in media: The Pakistani media industry confronted an existential crisis due to restrictive laws like the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) that has produced a chilling effect on public interest journalism and economic challenges, threatening the viability of independent journalism.

Growing censorship: Significant regressions in digital freedom were documented, with measures such as social media bans and internet shutdowns systematically employed against journalists and activists.

New measures were enacted to tighten the legal environment for freedom of expression, including the controversial PECA amendments that criminalize misinformation and expand government control over online content.

Violence against journalists: The period saw alarming levels of violence against media practitioners, with numerous cases of physical attacks, legal threats, including murder of at least five journalists for their journalism work.

Impact of disinformation: The spread of disinformation severely impacted media integrity, with government crackdowns on alleged misinformation, without mitigating media literacy initiatives, raising concerns about censorship and free speech.

Challenges for women in media: Despite some improvements, women generally remain underrepresented in the media sector, particularly in leadership roles, highlighting ongoing gender disparities.

Political polarization: The political landscape became increasingly polarized, with social media serving as a battleground for misinformation and hate speech, exacerbated by government restrictions.

Need for collaboration: There persisted a pressing need for structured efforts to foster collaboration among media stakeholders to safeguard freedom of expression and promote public interest journalism.

GROWING CENSORSHIP THROUGH STATE COERCION

During the period under review, Pakistan experienced significant regressions in digital freedom of expression and access to information. A range of restrictive measures, including prolonged bans on social media platforms, internet shutdowns, throttling of internet access and speeds, the installation of firewalls that degraded internet quality, and the frequent application of legal provisions under the cybercrime law PECA, were systematically employed against journalists and political activists.

These actions posed substantial threats to free speech, public interest journalism, media safety, and the broader process of digitalization. Notable instances of censorship and restrictions included the following:

Clampdown on online expression

In January 2025, the Government of Pakistan enacted an amended version of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), following its passage through both houses of Parliament. The revised legislation introduced several controversial provisions that pose a significant threat to online freedom of expression and the independence of the media.

Among its key provisions, the law criminalizes the dissemination of so-called “fake news,” imposes restrictions on online speech, and expands government control over social media platforms. It prescribes severe penalties for the spread of misinformation online, including imprisonment of up to three years or a fine of Rs. 2 million.

The amendments were met with swift and widespread condemnation from media organizations, civil society, and human rights groups. National and international watchdogs including Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), Freedom Network (FN), Reporters Without Borders (RSF) and International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) called for the immediate repeal of the amendments. Several media associations and rights groups organized nationwide protests to denounce eroding freedom of expression through the PECA amendments.

Big ban on X

In February 2024 the Government of Pakistan imposed an undeclared but effective ban on the social media platform X, with official statements suggesting that the restriction was unlikely to be lifted in the near future. Till the compilation of this report in April 2024 – well over a year since the ban went into effect – the site remained inaccessible without using virtual private networks (VPNs).

Notably, despite the prohibition, government departments and senior officials, including Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, continued to use the platform for official communications, signalling a lack of intent to restore access.

The ban was initially imposed following allegations of electoral fraud in the February 2024 national elections, as well as accusations from opposition parties against key government figures regarding their involvement in the electoral process.

Political parties, media organizations, civil society groups, and human rights advocates consistently called for the platform's reinstatement, arguing that the ban constitutes a violation of Article 19 of the Pakistani Constitution, which guarantees freedom of expression, as well as the country's international legal commitments. However, these appeals remained unsuccessful in the period under review.

Firewall control and internet restrictions

In August 2024, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) confirmed that the federal government was upgrading its Web Management System (WMS) to enhance its ability to regulate and block social media content. The same month, Amnesty International (AI) urged authorities to ensure greater transparency in the deployment of online surveillance technologies.

Concerns over increasing digital restrictions continued to mount in subsequent months. In September 2024, media reports warned that deliberate internet disruptions and extensive online surveillance posed significant threats to Pakistan's digital landscape and democratic freedoms. Digital rights activists criticized the implementation of restrictive web control measures, arguing that such policies were aimed at suppressing dissent against state institutions and undermining democratic principles.

In November, the global think tank Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF) cautioned that while internet restrictions in Pakistan may provide short-term political advantages, they also risk long-term democratic and economic instability due to the substantial costs associated with such measures. Experts highlighted concerns that the government's increasing reliance on stringent internet censorship could hinder the country's digital advancement.

Further criticism emerged regarding Pakistan's approach to data regulation. In August, the Asia Internet Coalition (AIC) warned that the country's proposed data localization policies could have adverse effects on its digital economy. Media reports estimated that widespread internet disruptions had resulted in economic losses amounting to **approximately \$500 million**.

Disruptions to WhatsApp services

In July 2024, WhatsApp users across Pakistan experienced significant difficulties in sending media files over mobile data, prompting a parliamentary investigation into the issue. Despite widespread disruptions, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) did not issue any official statement, while telecommunication operators maintained that they had received no formal complaints regarding the matter.

During a parliamentary hearing, members of the National Assembly Standing Committee on Information Technology questioned the federal government regarding the disruption. They further observed that WhatsApp continued to function normally when accessed via Virtual Private Networks (VPNs), suggesting that the issue was *localized rather than international* in nature.

Restrictions on social media access

In July 2024, the Ministry of Interior referred a decision to the prime minister regarding the Punjab government's request to temporarily block access to six social media platforms for one week during Muharram, citing security concerns.

This request sparked criticism from various quarters, with opponents arguing that blanket shutdowns were an ineffective response to security threats. Instead, they emphasized the need to address the underlying issue—namely, the activities of extremist groups that exacerbate societal divisions—rather than merely restricting online hate speech.

During the same month, NetBlocks reported a nationwide restriction on Facebook access for a single day on Ashura, further raising concerns about the government's approach to regulating digital platforms in the name of security.

CHAPTER 2:

CONSTRICTING LEGAL ENVIRONMENT FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION

The state authorities – at both the federal and provincial levels – enacted new measures or additional initiatives to legislate more coercive measures to toughen up the legal regulatory environment for freedom of expression and media freedoms. This imposed a chilling effect on public interest journalism and made the environment difficult for media practitioners. Key restrictive regulations introduced in the period under review included the following:

PECA 2.0: Expansion of digital regulations and free speech concerns

The enactment of the Prevention of Electronic Crimes (Amendment) Act 2025 in January ignited significant controversy between the state and media practitioners. While the federal government defended the legislation as a crucial measure to combat the spread of misinformation, critics condemned it as “draconian,” arguing that it posed a serious threat to freedom of expression.

The law's ambiguous definitions of false information effectively criminalized the dissemination of allegedly inaccurate content, with offenders facing penalties of up to three years of imprisonment. Additionally, it broadened the scope of what could be deemed unlawful, established the Social Media Protection and Regulatory Authority – a federal body empowered to impose fines of up to Rs 2 million for online content violations – and introduced a new grievance redressal mechanism. In April 2025, a Grade 2- police officer Waqaruddin Syed was appointed the director general of the National Cyber Crimes Investigation Agency. His posting was made under the PECA Amendment Act 2025.

A particularly contentious provision of the PECA 2025 law mandates that all appeals by those charged with alleged violations and convicted must be filed directly with the Supreme Court, circumventing the high courts. Furthermore, the legislation expands the authority of third-party legal entities to file complaints with the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA), raising concerns that such provisions could be misused to suppress dissent and silence critics.

The PECA Act, in February 2025, faced a wave of legal challenges in the country's highest courts, with petitions filed in the Supreme Court and four of the five High Courts – Islamabad, Balochistan, Lahore, and Sindh.

Criminalization of defamation

In May 2024, the Punjab Assembly passed the Punjab Defamation Act 2024, which received approval from the acting governor in June. The legislation broadly defines defamation, allowing legal action to proceed *without proof of actual damage or loss* and imposing fines of up to Rs 3 million.

The law also establishes special tribunals for adjudication, with adjudicators appointed in consultation with the Chief Justice of the Lahore High Court (LHC). These tribunals have the authority to compel offenders to issue an *unconditional apology* and to direct regulatory bodies to block their social media accounts or other platforms used to disseminate allegedly defamatory content.

Following its enactment, the Joint Action Committee, comprising various media organizations, condemned the law as overly restrictive, describing it as “draconian in its current form” and a direct threat to the fundamental right to freedom of expression.

Opposition parties also criticized the legislation. The Pakistan People's Party, a governing coalition partner of the federal and Punjab governments, distanced itself from the law, while Omar Ayub, the National Assembly's opposition leader from Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf, denounced it as “oppressive and tyrannical.”

In September, the Punjab Union of Journalists filed a petition in the LHC challenging the law's constitutionality, leading the court to direct provincial authorities to submit a response.

Establishment of a propaganda taskforce

In July 2024, the federal government established a five-member Joint Investigation Committee tasked with identifying and prosecuting individuals responsible for so-called *disruptive* social media campaigns. By September 2024, the Minister of Information publicly endorsed the government's decision, citing frustration over the absence of effective mechanisms to counter online disinformation.

However, digital rights advocates strongly criticized this investigative approach, arguing that the use of criminal rather than civil law constituted a direct infringement on freedom of expression. They further warned that such measures would likely exacerbate tensions between the state and the public, deepening distrust and undermining democratic engagement.

Military advocacy for online regulations

In 2024, the military emerged as a strong proponent of increased social media regulations, asserting that certain groups were engaging in digital terrorism by promoting anti-state rhetoric online. In July 2024, former Prime Minister Imran Khan criticized this stance, arguing that state authorities were erroneously conflating political dissent with terrorism.

Later that month, the federal government invoked the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) of 2016 to establish special courts tasked with prosecuting individuals accused of disseminating online propaganda. This move raised concerns that opposition leaders already in custody could face additional legal action under these provisions.

In December 2024, the military leadership urged the government to reassess what it described as the *unrestricted* exercise of freedom of speech, cautioning that it was contributing to heightened political and social polarization.

CHAPTER 3:

DETERIORATING SAFETY FOR JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA

Violations galore

The period under review was violent for media practitioners with at least 82 journalists and other media practitioners documented by Freedom Network as victims of various categories of violations in 79 cases. In regional terms the breakdown included:

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – 22 cases
Islamabad – 20 cases
Punjab – 18 cases
Sindh – 14 cases
Balochistan – 4 cases
Azad Jammu and Kashmir – 1 case

This indicates that Khyber Pakhtunkhwa with 22 cases emerged as the most dangerous region for journalism practitioners in the period under review while Islamabad was second with 20 cases and Punjab a close third with 18 cases.

Deaths and injuries

At least five journalists were killed in the period under review – including three in Sindh province and two in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province. These included:

21 May 2024 – Kamran Dawar (Waziristan Times), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
24 May 2024 – Nasrullah Gadani (Awami Awaz), Sindh
11 June 2024 – Muhammad Saad (Freelance), Sindh
19 June 2024 – Khalil Jibran (Khyber News), Khyber Pakhtunkhwa
27 August 2024 – Bachal Ghunio (Awaz TV), Sindh

At least 36 journalists and other media practitioners were physically attacked in separate incidents in Islamabad and the four provinces in the period under review with at least 8 journalists sustaining serious injuries. Islamabad was second with 20 cases and Punjab a close third with 18 cases.

Legal cases, arrests and threats

At least 14 journalists were slapped with legal cases, mostly under PECA law while in 8 instances journalists were arrested or detained in pursuance of these legal cases. In another 8 instances, an equal number of journalists were threatened with consequences for their journalism work, including two who received murder threats.

CHAPTER 4:

DETERIORATING DISSENT LANDSCAPE

Pakistan's 2024 national elections witnessed a significant shift toward digital campaigning and electoral administration, with political parties extensively utilizing social media and digital platforms to engage with voters.

These efforts complemented traditional campaign strategies, such as public rallies, with virtual gatherings and online outreach. However, the increased reliance on digital technologies for political mobilization contributed to heightened polarization in political discourse.

Following the elections, social media platforms became a primary arena for the spread of misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech, particularly from political parties contesting the legitimacy of the election results.

In response, the government implemented a range of restrictive measures, including bans on media platforms, internet suspensions or service degradations, and legal actions against political activists and journalists. These measures raised significant concerns regarding political rights, democratic governance, and freedom of expression.

The suppression of media freedoms and the crackdown on digital expression severely constrained public discourse, stifling free speech and dissent. These restrictions not only undermined democratic principles but also contributed to escalating legal battles and social unrest, as perceived injustices and limitations on digital freedoms fuelled political tensions.

Some international reports released in the period under review measured the causal linkages between deteriorating freedom of expression and degrading democracy in Pakistan's context. These included the following:

Democratic decline in Pakistan

Pakistan experienced a significant deterioration in its democratic standing in 2024, as reflected in its six-place drop in the Democracy Index published by the Economist Intelligence Unit. The 2025 report identified Pakistan as one of the ten worst-performing countries in terms of democratic governance.

The report also underscored a broader global decline in democratic trends, with over one-third of the world's population living under authoritarian rule and 60 countries classified as

authoritarian regimes. Pakistan was ranked 124th globally, with an overall score of 2.84, placing it within the category of authoritarian regimes.

The report further noted that the 2024 general elections in Pakistan, alongside those in other South Asian countries, were characterized by electoral fraud, violence, and allegations of political repression. In particular, it highlighted concerns over state interference in Pakistan's electoral process, further contributing to its democratic regression.

Pakistan's paltry “partly free” status

In 2024, global freedom declined for the 19th consecutive year, with 60 countries experiencing a deterioration in political rights and civil liberties, while only 34 countries registered improvements.

In its annual report released in February 2025, Freedom House classified Pakistan as “partly free,” reflecting a three-point decline from its 2023 ranking and a ten-point decline over the past decade.

Several factors contributed to this regression in Pakistan, according to the report, including electoral violence and repression, ongoing armed conflicts, and the increasing adoption of authoritarian practices.

Notably, restrictions on freedom of expression and limitations on access to information were identified as key drivers of Pakistan's declining political and civil liberties.

CHAPTER 5:

DISINFORMATION AND FAKE NEWS ADVERSELY IMPACTING MEDIA DISCOURSE

In the period under review, the media and free speech practitioners in Pakistan faced several significant challenges related to disinformation. Some of these included:

Misinformation spread: The dissemination of false or misleading information, particularly through social media platforms posed a significant challenge to media integrity and the credibility of information with both the civilian and military leadership during 2024 and 2025 citing it a major problem needing tackling.

Crackdowns and restrictions: The government frequently responded to alleged disinformation in the period under review with heavy-handed tactics, such as invoking laws like the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), which criminalizes the dissemination of misinformation. Several journalists and political dissenters were charged under the law. These measures raised concerns about censorship and the erosion of free speech, particularly in light of vague definitions of what constitutes disinformation.

Political polarization and partisan media: In the period under review, disinformation often came appeared as politically motivated. Various political parties and interest groups utilize social media to spread biased or false narratives to undermine opposition or sway public opinion. This creates an environment where the lines between legitimate political discourse and disinformation become blurred. This, in particular, led to a crackdown on the supporters of Pakistan Tehrik-e-Insaf.

Fragmented media landscape: The rise of informal and informal media outlets, including social media platforms, has contributed to the proliferation of alleged disinformation. Informal media sources often lack editorial standards or fact-checking mechanisms, which further fuels the spread of false information.

Key instances of alleged disinformation-related cases in the period under review included the following:

False information, real damage

In October 2024, violent clashes with the police in Lahore resulted in injuries to 28 students, sparked by protests against an alleged on-campus rape. As the episode unfolded, authorities uncovered a web of disinformation, leading to the registration of a fake news case. The

Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) traced the origins of the false claims to 38 journalists and digital media content creators who had reportedly amplified the fabricated narrative, stoking further unrest.

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan commented, “a number of social media accounts – mostly managed by students and influencers – began posting similar details, along with calls for 'justice'”. A seven-member inquiry committee submitted its findings to the Punjab government, affirming that no rape had occurred and that the protests were fueled entirely by misleading information propagated online.

This episode not only tarnished genuine cases of harassment and assault but also underscored the unchecked proliferation of unverified content across both digital and traditional media, driven either by a lack of rigorous fact-checking or reportedly by non-professional political, financial, or social agendas.

Deepfakes targeting women in politics

There were instances of deepfakes – manipulated audio, images, and videos – being weaponized, both intentionally and unintentionally, to damage the reputations of women politicians, often through sexually explicit fabrications.

In July 2024, following the circulation of an offensive deepfake video targeting Punjab Information Minister Azma Bokhari, fellow female lawmakers vowed to take legal action against the perpetrators. The video was swiftly debunked by the fact-checking platform iVerify.

In February 2025, police filed three cases under the PECA law, accusing individuals of spreading AI-generated deepfakes of Punjab Chief Minister Maryam Nawaz and propagating disinformation targeting female politicians. The FIA later claimed to have traced over 20 social media accounts at the core of the distribution network

Disinformation impacting victims overseas

There were a couple of instances of journalistic disinformation in Pakistan negatively affecting public discourse, triggering consequences that extended beyond borders. In July, a tragic incident unfolded in Southport, UK, where three young girls were killed at a dance event.

Subsequently, false claims circulated on social media portraying the male suspect as an Islamist migrant. This disinformation ignited violent anti-Muslim and anti-migrant riots across the UK, affecting more than 20 locations.

In August 2024, authorities in Lahore arrested Farhan Asif, a Pakistani content producer accused of amplifying this harmful narrative, which had even deceived major outlets like the BBC into believing the fabricated news story was orchestrated by a coordinated team.

Fake news

In September 2024, the Pakistan Telecommunication Authority (PTA) reported the removal of over 44,000 social media accounts, including those of some journalists, for allegedly propagating fake news since January 2024. This included 61 posts published by official accounts of political parties.

A similarly distressing episode occurred in November 2024 when a Pakistani content producer issued an apology for mistakenly advertising a non-existent Halloween parade in Dublin creating confusion and disappointment among thousands of hopeful attendees in Ireland.

CHAPTER 6:

CHALLENGES FOR WOMEN IN MEDIA PERSIST

The representation of women in Pakistan's media sector has improved over time, but significant disparities remained in the period under review. Even though inadequately represented in media in quantitative terms, women are active participants in various forms of media, including print, television, radio, and digital platforms. However, their presence, particularly in leadership roles and key decision-making positions, remained limited in the period under review.

In the period under review some studies shed new light on the specifics of the representational challenges Pakistani women media practitioners faced. These included the following:

From margins to mainstream

A study jointly conducted by Freedom Network and the Women Journalists Association (WJA), in collaboration with International Media Support (IMS), in early 2025, mapped the representation of women in journalists' unions and press clubs across Pakistan's ten largest cities. The findings revealed a concerning underrepresentation of women journalists in these professional bodies.

Notably, only two press clubs, Lahore and Islamabad, reported a slightly more than 10% share of women in their membership rolls. The Lahore Press Club leads with 300 women journalists among its 2,970 members, followed by the National Press Club Islamabad, which has 250 women out of a total of 3,346 members.

In contrast, the Gujranwala Press Club reported no women members. Among journalists' unions, the Punjab Union of Journalists has the highest absolute number of women members, with 300, followed by the Karachi Union of Journalists, which has 125 women out of a total of 1,800 members. The Karachi Union of Journalists is the only union in the sample that reported the inclusion of women in its elected cabinet.

Gender disparities in employment numbers

A gender mapping project, supported by the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ), was conducted by the Women's Media Forum Pakistan (WMFP) network in early 2025. The

project assessed 15 media companies across five regions of Pakistan—Islamabad, Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan.

The findings revealed significant gender disparities within the media sector. In Balochistan, fewer than 10 women journalists were employed, whereas in larger urban centres such as Karachi and Lahore, women constituted up to 35% of union members.

The gender representation at major media outlets also showed troubling gaps. Geo News, despite advocating a gender-positive message, employed only 10% women in Peshawar and had just 10 women among its 125 employees in Islamabad.

A mapping of Aaj News in Peshawar revealed that only 3% of its overall staff were women. Similarly, ARY News in Sindh employed just nine women out of a workforce of 150, with minimal representation in decision-making roles.

Neo News in Lahore employed 67 women out of 853 total staff, while Samaa News had 91 women out of 1,197. At the Karachi-based Jang Group, only 16 women were employed compared to 105 men, further illustrating the gender imbalance in media employment.

These findings underscore the persistent underrepresentation of women in Pakistan's media industry, particularly in decision-making positions, highlighting the need for targeted efforts to address gender disparities within the sector.

CHAPTER 7:

RECOMMENDATIONS

During the period under review, Pakistan's media landscape experienced a decline in both its professionalism and economic viability, reflecting broader challenges to democratic space and political freedoms. The necessity for more structured and expansive initiatives to foster solidarity within the media and between media organizations and stakeholders committed to freedom of expression and public interest journalism has become increasingly urgent.

Critical areas requiring attention include the continued enhancement of media professionalism, the promotion of solidarity among journalists, the diversification of media leadership, the expansion of the media economy, and the provision of support to media practitioners in adapting to and benefiting from the rapid digital transformation of the sector.

Considering that the threats to freedom of expression and safety of journalists are growing in Pakistan, an integrated and collaborative approach needs to be adopted to effectively combat the challenges. This will require the following:

National movement: Launch an inclusive national movement through a grand national coalition of stakeholders to protect and pursue the constitutional guarantee of Freedom of Expression and the right to express dissent with policies and state actions that impinge on the fundamental rights of citizens.

Inclusion: Mobilize support and inclusion of all citizens and civil society actors, including individuals and representative associations of human rights advocates, media, journalists, lawyers and legal community, digital rights advocates, women and minority rights groups, political activists and other free speech activists, in this national movement.

Engagement: As a movement, on behalf of rights holders, engage duty bearers including political parties, national parliament and provincial legislatures, and federal and provincial governments to pursue reversal in recent years of the spate of policy, legislative and administrative actions that restrict legitimate freedom of expression and dissent, both online and offline.

Digital rights: Pursue a national consensus of key stakeholders for a new charter on digital rights of the citizens of Pakistan that guarantees the same constitutional guarantees online as offline, and ensures internet access for all, quality internet and digital rights including the right to digital freedom of expression, social and economic liberties online.

Legal defense: Reactivate and scale up at the federal and provincial levels the Journalists Defense Committee, a collaboration between Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ), Pakistan Bar Council (PBC) and Institute for Research Development and Advocacy (IRADA) that helped defend dozens of victims of state overreach and persecution of citizens, journalists and activists for dissent – to legally counter harassment and legal cases against rights activists and journalists exercising their constitutional right to freedom of expression.

Endorsement: Launch an open petition to enlist endorsement of this national movement by individuals, associations, organizations, institutions and other supporters, both national and international, who support the right to freedom of expression.

FREEDOM NETWORK – A Brief Profile

Freedom Network is an award-winning Pakistan-based independent media and civil liberties organization registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP). It was awarded the French Human Rights Award in 2017 by the Government of France for standing out in defending freedom of expression and human rights agendas in Pakistan.

FN Vision: To defend and promote civil liberties by championing and assisting an informed society that sees media as a key partner in an open, democratic, pluralist and inclusive Pakistan.

FN Mandate:

- DEFEND and promote *freedom of expression*
- STRENGTHEN *safety* of journalists, information practitioners and rights activists
- FACILITATE *media professionalisms* including independent digital *public interest journalism*
- SUPPORT *gender mainstreaming and pluralism* in media.

FN Background

Established in 2013, Freedom Network initially began as a voluntary online effort by a group of friends to advocate for safety of journalists but due to overwhelming response from a variety of stakeholders supporting its advocacy, it was registered as a legal entity with its work becoming formalized in line with best practices. Since then Freedom Network has emerged as Pakistan's premier watchdog on freedom of expression and media professionalism issues through its hard-nosed research, advocacy and capacity building programs.