



ADVANCE SOCIAL SCIENCE ARCHIVE JOURNAL

Available Online: <https://assajournal.com>
 Vol. 05 No. 01. Jan-March 2026. Page#6471-6488
 Print ISSN: [3006-2497](#) Online ISSN: [3006-2500](#)
 Platform & Workflow by: [Open Journal Systems](#)
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22142588>



Gendered Gatekeeping and Professional Autonomy among Women Journalists in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan

Faiq Ali Shah

Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Peshawar, Pakistan.

faiqalishah51@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Women journalists in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Pakistan, work at the intersection of gendered newsroom practices and a conservative social environment. This qualitative study examines how socio-cultural norms shape women's entry into journalism, everyday reporting, career development, and relations with media organizations. In-depth interviews with seven women journalists working in Peshawar were analyzed thematically. Five interconnected barriers emerged: gender-based harassment and unequal public treatment; workplace inequality and restricted access to hard-news beats and decision-making; family restrictions on mobility and career choice; religiously framed expectations concerning veiling and public visibility; and misconceptions that associate women's journalism with entertainment. These constraints operate before, during, and beyond newsroom work, collectively affecting professional autonomy, safety, mobility, and retention. The findings highlight the need for gender-responsive assignment practices, effective anti-harassment and safety mechanisms, mentoring, and greater inclusion of women in editorial decision-making. Broader public and family engagement is also important because occupational barriers are reinforced by social attitudes outside the workplace. The study contributes localized evidence on women journalists in KP and demonstrates that organizational responses must address the wider socio-cultural conditions shaping their professional participation.

Keywords: Women Journalists; Khyber Pakhtunkhwa; Pakistan; Gender; Socio-Cultural Barriers; Qualitative Research; Journalism.

Introduction:

Media institutions help shape public opinion and reflect the norms through which societies understand gender, authority, and public participation. Yet women's participation in journalism remains uneven, particularly in contexts where women's public mobility and visibility are closely regulated. In Pakistan, women journalists have reported threats, harassment, unequal opportunities, and challenges to their professional acceptance (Rehmat, 2017; Sakha & Shah, 2019). These pressures are especially salient in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where local Pashtun customs, gender roles, family expectations, and religiously framed norms may affect whether women can enter and remain in news work.

Culture is used here in a broad sense as a complex of shared meanings, beliefs, practices, symbols, norms, and values (Chambers et al., 2004; Franks, 2013). This perspective is useful because the constraints experienced by women journalists are not confined to a single institution. They may arise at home, in the newsroom, during public reporting, and through television or digital visibility. Women journalists may therefore face objections to their choice of profession, concerns about mobility and interaction with male colleagues, restrictions on dress or reporting locations, and doubts about the legitimacy of their visible professional role.

The limited representation and participation of women in journalism also affects news production. When women are assigned narrowly defined beats, excluded from editorial decisions, or discouraged from reporting in public, journalism loses perspectives important to the coverage of health, education, politics, violence, and everyday community life. Earlier research has identified gender stereotypes, online harassment, safety risks, inadequate support systems, unequal career opportunities, and family resistance as important concerns for women journalists in Pakistan and comparable settings (Iqbal & Iqbal, 2018; Hussain et al., 2023; Sharifa, 2024). However, these issues are often examined separately as occupational, organizational, or socio-cultural problems. This separation can obscure how family expectations, public scrutiny, and newsroom practices interact to shape women's mobility, safety, professional legitimacy, and access to journalistic opportunities.

Qualitative evidence centered on women journalists' own experiences in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa remains limited, particularly regarding how socio-cultural and organizational constraints intersect in everyday professional life. This study addresses that gap by examining women's entry into journalism, reporting experiences, professional authority, career development, and perceptions of organizational responses.

The study asks: (1) How do socio-cultural barriers influence women journalists working in KP? and (2) What do women journalists say about media organizations' responses to these concerns? By providing localized qualitative evidence from KP, the study examines how constraints across family, public, and organizational settings jointly shape women's professional participation and identifies organizational responses that may reduce their effects.

Literature Review

Gendered journalism and representation

Journalism has historically been organized around assumptions about who can move freely, report from dangerous places, cultivate sources, and exercise editorial authority. Although these expectations are often presented as gender-neutral, journalistic norms and organizational cultures can privilege masculine forms of mobility, availability, authority, and risk-taking (de Bruin, 2000; North, 2016; Steiner, 2012). Consequently, women may be positioned as more suitable for less prestigious or less risky assignments, while men are more readily associated with politics, crime, conflict, and other forms of hard news.

Research across different national contexts suggests that women's numerical presence in journalism does not necessarily translate into equal professional authority. Women may enter newsrooms while continuing to encounter gendered hierarchies in story assignments, promotion, leadership opportunities, and access to influential professional networks (Rao &

Rodny-Gumede, 2020; Silveirinha et al., 2023; Urbániková & Čaladi, 2024). Such cultures shape whose expertise is recognized, who receives high-status assignments, and who participates in decisions about the news agenda. Informal networks and masculinized newsroom cultures may further advantage men in assignments, promotion, job security, and professional advancement (Blumell & Mulupi, 2024).

In Pakistan, women journalists have similarly reported professional hazards, rejection, discrimination, and limited acceptance within a historically male-dominated profession (Rehmat, 2017; Sakha & Shah, 2019). Sharifa (2024) identifies occupational exclusion, gendered discrimination, harassment, and barriers to career progression among Pakistani women journalists. Such evidence suggests that gender inequality is embedded not only in individual prejudice but also in everyday routines through which assignments, authority, and professional competence are defined.

These patterns are particularly significant in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, where expectations concerning women's household roles, mobility, and public visibility may affect both entry into journalism and career development. Family and community resistance can constrain women's career choices and participation in public-facing occupations (Sharifa, 2024). Recent research from politically marginalized districts of KP also identifies regional neglect and the underrepresentation of women and youth within the wider media environment (Khan & Khanum, 2026). The issue, therefore, extends beyond numerical representation to women's substantive access to the professional practices through which journalistic authority is developed.

Safety, harassment, and public visibility

Women journalists may experience gender-based harm in both physical and digital environments. Research has documented threats, attacks, sexual harassment, cyberbullying, and other forms of hostility that affect women's safety and professional participation (Rehmat, 2017; Chen et al., 2020; Hussain, 2019). Harassment can influence the stories women pursue, the spaces in which they report, and their willingness to maintain a visible public presence.

Research on Pakistani women journalists demonstrates the gendered character of online abuse. Hussain et al. (2023) found that women journalists are subjected to offensive and gender-based trolling targeting both their professional work and personal lives. Similarly, Siddiqua et al. (2023) show that online harassment can involve moral policing, threats, gendered insults, and attempts to regulate women's public expression. Professional visibility may therefore expose women to scrutiny connected not only to their journalism but also to wider expectations concerning gender and respectability.

The consequences extend beyond immediate physical or psychological harm. Women journalists may limit audience interaction, avoid particular locations or topics, or withdraw from highly visible roles in response to anticipated hostility (Chen et al., 2020; Miller, 2023). When harassment restricts mobility, beat choices, public engagement, or on-camera visibility, it can also limit professional autonomy and access to career-defining opportunities.

In conservative and conflict-affected settings, television appearances and public reporting may generate reputational harm, hostile attention, moral judgment, and pressure on family

relationships. Wider scholarship on Pashtun lived experience also illustrates how conflict, surveillance, and structural regulation can shape everyday mobility, identity, and visibility in public space (Khan, 2026). Everyday intimidation, unwanted attention, hostile comments, and reputational scrutiny can therefore shape how women navigate public spaces and perform journalistic work. Occupational safety must consequently be understood not only in terms of physical threats but also in relation to the social meanings attached to women's professional visibility.

Cultural and organizational constraints

Cultural norms surrounding modesty, dress, gender roles, and women's public visibility can affect women's freedom to report and participate in news media (North, 2016; Sharifa, 2024). However, culture should not be treated as a fixed or uniform explanation for exclusion. Gender norms are interpreted and negotiated through particular social relationships and institutional practices. Research on Pashtun cultural expression similarly shows that women may exercise situated agency within patriarchal and moral constraints rather than simply conforming to or rejecting them (Khan & Ashraf, 2026). Family or community expectations may therefore influence mobility, working hours, interaction with male colleagues, dress, and visible forms of journalism in negotiated and context-specific ways.

Organizational arrangements can simultaneously reproduce inequality through gendered beat allocation, informal permission structures, weak mentoring, exclusion from decision-making, and unequal access to leadership opportunities. Blumell and Mulupi (2024) emphasize the importance of mentoring and professional networks, while research identifies persistent disparities in newsroom leadership and editorial authority (Blumell & Mulupi, 2024). International studies similarly show that informal networks, masculine norms, and unequal access to promotion and influential professional relationships can sustain organizational inequality (Blumell & Mulupi, 2024; Urbániková & Čaladi, 2024).

The distinction between socio-cultural and organizational constraints is therefore analytically useful but difficult to maintain in practice. Newsrooms may reproduce external assumptions about women's mobility, vulnerability, suitable assignments, or appropriate forms of visibility. Conversely, reliable transport, safety procedures, mentoring, institutional support, and equitable access to professional opportunities can reduce the effects of these external pressures and strengthen women's professional autonomy.

The Intersection of Family, Public Space, and the Newsroom

Women journalists' careers cannot be understood by examining the newsroom in isolation because organizational structures, family responsibilities, public attitudes, and broader gender norms operate together. Research across different contexts identifies family obligations, gender stereotypes, discrimination, masculine newsroom cultures, and harassment as interconnected barriers to career development and retention (Urbániková & Čaladi, 2024; Blumell & Mulupi, 2024). Newswork commonly requires irregular hours, mobility, travel, and interaction with unfamiliar people and powerful sources, which may create additional pressures when families or communities regard these activities as inconsistent with expected gender roles. Workplace

challenges may therefore intersect with pressures arising from families and wider society rather than functioning as separate domains (Sharifa, 2024).

Public space represents another important site of intersection. Reporting requires journalists to engage with strangers, officials, political actors, and audiences, yet women's visibility may generate additional scrutiny concerning appearance, respectability, and the legitimacy of their public presence. Gendered harassment may arise not only from the content of women's reporting but also because their visibility challenges expectations about who should speak, appear, and exercise authority in public (Miller, 2023; Siddiqua et al., 2023). Research on digital narratives in KP further indicates that media meanings and audience perceptions are shaped by the province's particular socio-political and cultural context (Khan & Shah, 2025). These pressures can enter the newsroom when concerns about safety or family restrictions shape assignment decisions, accompaniment requirements, access to field reporting, and participation in high-status beats. Although such arrangements may be framed as protective, they can also limit professional autonomy and the experiences through which journalistic authority develops. Taken together, the literature indicates that harassment, safety threats, workplace discrimination, family restrictions, and public scrutiny operate across interconnected sites of women's professional lives. Organizational practices may reinforce these pressures or mitigate them through transparent assignment systems, safety support, mentoring, and women's participation in editorial decision-making. Yet limited attention, particularly in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, has been given to how these processes jointly shape women's entry into journalism, everyday reporting, professional authority, and retention. This study addresses that gap by centering women's accounts of how family life, public reporting, and newsroom practice intersect. It thereby provides the basis for a theoretical framework combining feminist approaches to journalism with gendered gatekeeping to examine how regulation across the family, public sphere, and media organization shapes women's professional autonomy and participation.

Theoretical Framework: Feminist Media and Gendered Gatekeeping

This study combines a feminist media perspective with gendered gatekeeping to examine how women journalists' professional opportunities and constraints are produced across interconnected family, public, and organizational settings. Feminist media scholarship conceptualizes journalism as a gendered field in which apparently routine norms and definitions of professional competence may privilege masculine patterns of mobility, authority, networking, and risk-taking (de Bruin, 2000; Steiner, 2012; North, 2016). Gender inequality may therefore be reproduced not only through explicit discrimination but also through everyday practices such as beat allocation, assumptions about availability for field reporting, access to influential networks, and participation in editorial decision-making.

Gendered gatekeeping provides a complementary framework for identifying how these inequalities are enacted. Gatekeeping theory focuses on the processes through which access, resources, assignments, authority, and public recognition are distributed (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; Riedl et al., 2022). From a gendered perspective, apparently neutral decisions concerning beat allocation, field assignments, professional mobility, on-screen visibility, and editorial

participation may create unequal opportunities for women. Repeated assignment to less prestigious or less visible work, for example, can limit access to the experiences through which professional authority and career advancement are developed.

The framework distinguishes five interconnected analytical mechanisms. Restricted access to particular beats, field assignments, or other professional opportunities is treated as gendered gatekeeping of access; limited involvement in editorial decision-making or recognition of professional competence as gatekeeping of authority; requirements for permission, accompaniment, or approval as organizational control over mobility; scrutiny concerning appearance, television participation, or public presence as gendered regulation of visibility; and family concerns regarding mobility, working hours, interaction with male colleagues, or the legitimacy of journalism as a profession as pre-organizational constraints. These mechanisms are analytically distinct but may operate together across family life, public space, and media organizations.

This broader approach extends gatekeeping beyond formal editorial decisions. Family expectations may affect women's availability for irregular hours or travel, while public scrutiny may generate safety and reputational concerns that subsequently influence newsroom assignments and mobility. Newsroom practices can either reproduce these pressures or provide resources that help women negotiate them. Importantly, the framework does not treat Pashtun culture or religion as fixed explanations for women's exclusion. Instead, it examines how particular expectations concerning mobility, gender interaction, dress, visibility, and professional participation are interpreted and negotiated within specific social and organizational contexts. This is consistent with scholarship showing that women journalists' careers are shaped through interactions among organizational culture, social expectations, public visibility, and professional authority (Chambers et al., 2004; Franks, 2013; Silveirinha et al., 2023).

Comparative scholarship further demonstrates that women's journalistic authority can be shaped by gendered organizational cultures, prestige hierarchies, harassment, and unequal access to opportunities across physical and digital environments (Byerly, 2011; Hardin & Shain, 2005; Javed, 2025; Siddiqua et al., 2023). UNESCO (2021, 2022) similarly identifies gender-based violence and harassment as significant threats to women journalists' safety, participation, and freedom of expression. Together, this scholarship supports an understanding of harassment, restricted mobility, unequal assignments, family resistance, and limitations on public visibility as interconnected rather than isolated constraints on professional autonomy.

Applied to the first research question, the framework examines how socio-cultural barriers operating across family, public, and organizational settings shape women journalists' mobility, safety, visibility, and access to professional opportunities. Applied to the second research question, it examines whether organizational practices and responses mitigate or reproduce these constraints. Feminist media scholarship therefore provides the broader understanding of journalism as a gendered institutional field, while gendered gatekeeping identifies the specific mechanisms through which access, authority, mobility, and visibility are enabled, restricted, or negotiated.

Method

Research design and participants

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how women journalists experience and interpret socio-cultural and organizational barriers in their professional lives. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study sought to examine participants' subjective experiences, meanings, and negotiations rather than estimate the prevalence of particular barriers numerically. Qualitative interviewing is particularly useful for examining professional experiences and the meanings individuals attach to their working lives (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). The study involved seven women journalists from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) who were working in Peshawar at the time of data collection. Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, with eligibility requiring at least two years of professional experience and an effort to include variation in age, ethnicity, organizational setting, and experience. Participants had between two and 23 years of experience and were associated with print and electronic media. Ten journalists were initially approached and informed about the study; seven agreed to participate, while three declined or did not proceed. The small sample reflected both the limited number of accessible women journalists in the local professional environment and the sensitivity of discussing experiences that could create personal or professional risks. The sample was not intended to be statistically representative of all women journalists in KP but to provide in-depth insight into how gender, mobility, family expectations, public visibility, and organizational practices intersect in journalistic work.

Data collection

Data were collected between 15 March 2023 and 27 March 2023 through semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Four participants were interviewed face-to-face and three online to accommodate their availability and location.

The interviews explored participants' entry into journalism, family responses to career choices, workplace treatment, assignment practices, professional mobility, safety, dress and public visibility, interactions with colleagues, and perceptions of organizational support. Interviews were conducted in Urdu to enable participants to express culturally specific experiences in a familiar language and were audio-recorded with consent.

The original field record did not preserve standardized individual interview durations. Rather than retrospectively estimating them, the study reports this limitation transparently; the interviews prioritized sufficiently detailed accounts rather than a predetermined duration.

Transcription and translation

The Urdu-language interviews were transcribed and translated into English by Niqab Khan, a BS English student at Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad. The translation sought to preserve the substantive meaning of participants' accounts, including culturally specific expressions and descriptions of professional and social experiences. Where necessary, translated passages were reviewed against the original Urdu recordings to ensure consistency with participants' intended meaning.

Because translation involves interpretation as well as linguistic conversion, the analysis focused on the substantive meaning and context of participants' accounts rather than treating individual English terms as exact equivalents of the original Urdu expressions.

Data analysis

The data were analyzed manually using reflexive thematic analysis, informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. The aim was to identify recurring patterns across participants' accounts while retaining attention to the contextual meanings attached to their experiences.

The analysis proceeded in stages. First, transcripts were read repeatedly to develop familiarity with the data and identify initial patterns concerning family expectations, professional mobility, safety, workplace treatment, assignment practices, dress, public visibility, and perceptions of journalism as a profession. Second, relevant transcript segments were manually coded, and codes were compared across participants to identify similarities, differences, and conceptual overlap.

Third, related codes were grouped into candidate themes and reviewed against the transcripts to assess their coherence and analytical distinctiveness. This process produced themes concerning gender-based harassment and unequal treatment, workplace inequality and restricted assignments, family restrictions, religion, dress and public visibility, and misconceptions surrounding women's participation in journalism. Finally, the analysis examined how these themes interacted to shape women's professional autonomy and participation rather than treating them as isolated barriers.

Consistent with reflexive thematic analysis, the study did not seek inter-coder reliability or calculate intercoder agreement. Instead, it aimed to develop a systematic and theoretically informed interpretation of recurring patterns across participants' accounts.

Researcher reflexivity and positionality

Researcher reflexivity was important because theme identification and interpretation are shaped by the researcher's theoretical assumptions, contextual understanding, and engagement with the data. The study therefore remained attentive to how prior expectations about gender, journalism, Pashtun society, culture, or religion could influence interpretation.

Pashtun culture, religion, and family life were not treated as fixed or uniform explanations for women's experiences. Participants' accounts were instead interpreted in relation to specific negotiations involving mobility, public visibility, professional interaction, family expectations, and newsroom arrangements. The findings should consequently be understood as an interpretive account developed through the research process rather than as a completely researcher-independent representation of participants' experiences.

Theme development and analytical rigor

Analytical rigor was strengthened by examining patterns across the complete set of interviews rather than relying on isolated or particularly vivid quotations. Attention was given to both recurring experiences and differences among participants, and final themes were retained only when they provided coherent and distinguishable explanations of the data.

The analysis also considered alternative interpretations and moved between individual accounts and the broader thematic structure. This helped ensure that the final interpretation remained closely grounded in participants' accounts while acknowledging the interpretive character of reflexive thematic analysis.

Sample adequacy and saturation

The study did not use saturation as a fixed numerical threshold. Within its purposive qualitative design, adequacy was assessed in relation to the richness, relevance, and analytical contribution of participants' accounts. Across the seven interviews, recurring patterns concerning family restrictions, workplace inequality, professional mobility, public visibility, safety, and gendered perceptions of journalism provided sufficient conceptual depth for the thematic analysis.

The study does not claim that a larger or more diverse sample would not have generated additional themes. Rather, the sample was considered adequate for an in-depth exploratory account of the participating women journalists within this specific context.

Ethical considerations

All participants provided informed consent before participation. Participation was voluntary, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and intended use of their interview accounts, and interviews were audio-recorded with consent.

To protect privacy and reduce potential professional or personal risks, identifying information was removed from the research materials. Participants are identified using pseudonyms or participant labels (P1–P7), while employer names, organizational affiliations, and other potentially identifying information are not disclosed.

The available research materials document informed consent, voluntary participation, audio recording, anonymization, and removal of identifying information. However, the study record does not contain a documented institutional ethics-approval reference number or formal exemption statement. Accordingly, the study does not claim ethics approval that cannot be documented.

Before journal submission, the author should verify the applicable university ethics policy at the time the research was conducted. If formal institutional review was not required for this type of interview-based research, an appropriate exemption or non-requirement statement should be obtained or confirmed by the relevant institution. If approval was obtained, the approving body and reference number should be inserted.

Findings

Gender-based harassment and unequal treatment in public spaces

P1 (pseudonym; anonymized interview) recalled:

"Once I was reporting in a public place ... some were taking pictures of me and some were shouting from behind ... one of the men pulled out a pistol. When we came back, I was thinking of quitting journalism."

Participants described public reporting as a setting in which their gender made them unusually visible. Several reported being stared at, photographed without consent, shouted at, or subjected to hostile behavior while covering stories, ranging from unwanted attention and verbal harassment to direct intimidation.

One participant described a reporting assignment where people gathered around her, took photographs, and became aggressive when her cameraman intervened. Another recounted being obstructed and physically intimidated while reporting at a hospital, resulting in damage to her phone and loss of reporting data. Although the forms of harassment varied, participants

shared a concern that women's presence as journalists in public spaces attracted forms of hostility not regarded as routine for male colleagues.

Participants linked these experiences to perceptions that visible field reporting remained primarily men's work. Being treated as less legitimate reporters made fieldwork emotionally demanding and influenced how some assessed particular locations, assignments, and risks. Harassment could interrupt reporting, damage equipment, restrict movement, and create safety concerns, sometimes encouraging reliance on male colleagues or avoidance of particular assignments. It therefore affected not only personal security but also women's ability to perform journalistic work.

Workplace inequality, restricted beats, and limited editorial autonomy

P2 (pseudonym; anonymized interview) recalled:

"We are given soft beats ... and men are given hard beats, like politics, crime and courts. It seems that women cannot cover politics, crime or court reporting."

Several participants described newsroom practices in which women were associated more frequently with so-called soft beats, including weather, education, health, and human-interest stories, while politics, crime, courts, and other hard-news assignments were more commonly associated with men. Although experiences varied, participants repeatedly indicated that gender shaped assumptions about the kinds of reporting women were considered capable of undertaking, limiting opportunities to develop broader reporting portfolios.

Participants also described restrictions on independently choosing assignments or leaving the office for reporting, including requirements for approval and dependence on organizational arrangements involving a cameraman or driver. They contrasted these restrictions with the greater mobility and independence they perceived among male journalists.

Limited influence over editorial decisions was another concern. Repeated exclusion from difficult beats, independent reporting, and editorial decision-making could restrict opportunities to build expertise, sources, professional authority, and career experience. Gender inequality therefore operated not only through explicit discrimination but also through routine decisions about assignments, mobility, and editorial participation.

Family restrictions and the negotiation of career choice

P3 (pseudonym; anonymized interview) recalled:

"When I started working as a journalist on TV, my family stopped talking to me ... they pointed fingers at my character."

Family approval emerged as an important condition affecting entry into and continuation within journalism. Most participants described initial concern, hesitation, or opposition from relatives regarding women leaving the home, travelling for work, appearing on television, interacting with male colleagues, and the possible implications of journalism for reputation and marriage prospects.

Participants often had to explain or justify journalism as a respectable profession to parents and relatives. For some, these negotiations were concentrated at the beginning of their careers, while others experienced continuing concerns after entering professional journalism.

Family expectations also shaped practical aspects of professional participation, including mobility, working hours, transport, dress, public appearance, and interaction with male colleagues. Such negotiations could influence whether women accepted assignments, worked late, travelled, or pursued professional opportunities. Professional constraints could therefore emerge before women encountered formal newsroom structures.

Religion, dress, and threats to professional visibility

P4 (pseudonym; anonymized interview) recalled:

“My family was asking me to wear the veil and the TV people did not accept me with the veil. I had a hard time convincing my family that I could not wear a burqa but would wear a hijab.”

Participants discussed religion and dress in relation to wider expectations concerning women’s appearance and public visibility. Their accounts did not suggest a uniform understanding of religious practice; instead, several described negotiating between personal or family expectations regarding dress and the practical requirements of journalistic work.

One participant negotiated with her family to wear a hijab rather than a burqa because a full veil was perceived as incompatible with television reporting. This illustrates how professional requirements and family expectations could create competing demands regarding women’s public presentation.

Some participants also linked religiously framed expectations to mobility, appearance, and the perceived appropriateness of women’s professional visibility. Two specifically reported threats during periods of heightened militancy associated with women appearing on television. For participants in public-facing roles, visibility could therefore involve simultaneous negotiations over family expectations, professional requirements, and personal safety.

Misconceptions about journalism and showbiz

P5 (pseudonym; anonymized interview) recalled:

“People used to call me *dramo wala jiny* [girl from TV drama] ... even today, when I go somewhere, I hear that I am the one from dramas.”

A final theme concerned misconceptions surrounding women’s participation in television journalism. Some participants described community members or relatives associating women’s television appearances with entertainment or showbiz rather than professional journalism.

Women television journalists could be referred to as actresses or associated with drama, music, or film, blurring the distinction between journalism and entertainment and diminishing recognition of their professional identity. These perceptions also contributed to family concerns about whether television journalism was an appropriate or respectable occupation for women. Women journalists therefore sometimes had to explain not only the content of their work but also the legitimacy of journalism itself as a profession. Public visibility could consequently connect professional identity with wider social judgments about respectability.

Integrative pattern: interconnected constraints on professional autonomy

Taken together, the five themes indicate a cumulative and interconnected pattern rather than isolated obstacles. Family expectations could influence mobility, working hours, dress, and the ability to accept assignments; public harassment and reputational scrutiny could reinforce concerns about safety and professional legitimacy; and these pressures could intersect with

newsroom practices involving restricted beats, approval requirements, limited mobility, and reduced editorial participation.

Participants' professional autonomy was therefore shaped across three interconnected sites: family and social expectations, which influenced career choice, mobility, working conditions, dress, and professional legitimacy; public scrutiny and harassment, which generated safety concerns and reputational pressure; and newsroom practices and gatekeeping, which shaped access to assignments, mobility, editorial participation, and opportunities to develop professional authority. These sites could reinforce one another—for example, safety concerns could justify organizational restrictions, while public scrutiny could intensify family resistance to visible professional roles.

The cumulative effect was a constraint on professional autonomy and participation. Participants had to negotiate not only journalistic work itself but also the conditions under which they could move, report, appear publicly, interact professionally, and develop their careers. Their experiences are therefore best understood as shaped by interconnected processes operating across family life, public space, and media organizations.

Discussion

Journalism as a gendered public occupation

The findings show that journalism operates as a gendered public occupation in which routine professional requirements mobility, irregular working hours, interaction with strangers and officials, exposure to conflict, and public visibility can require additional negotiation from women. This supports feminist media scholarship showing that apparently gender-neutral professional norms may privilege masculine patterns of mobility, availability, and authority (de Bruin, 2000; Steiner, 2012; North, 2016).

The significance of these barriers lies in their cumulative rather than isolated effects. Travel restrictions, permission requirements, assumptions about appropriate assignments, public scrutiny, and doubts about women's professional legitimacy can interact to shape career trajectories. Meaningful inclusion therefore involves more than numerical representation; it requires substantive access to independent reporting, professional networks, influential assignments, and editorial participation through which journalistic authority is developed.

Public scrutiny, harassment, and occupational safety

The findings extend existing research on gendered harassment by showing that occupational safety is closely tied to the social meaning of women's public visibility. Previous studies have documented online and offline hostility toward women journalists and its implications for professional participation (Chen et al., 2020; Hussain et al., 2023; Siddiqua et al., 2023). The present findings similarly indicate that harassment can affect not only immediate safety but also anticipatory decisions about locations, assignments, working hours, and visible reporting roles. This suggests that organizational responses should move beyond conventional security measures. Reliable transport, clear procedures for responding to obstruction or harassment, institutional support, and assignment-specific risk assessment can protect journalists without unnecessarily restricting their mobility. Safety should therefore function as an enabling condition for professional participation rather than as a justification for exclusion.

Newsroom practices and gendered professional opportunity

The findings reinforce research showing that gender inequality can be reproduced through routine newsroom practices rather than explicit discrimination alone. The distinction between soft and hard beats is particularly consequential because assignments shape access to expertise, sources, visibility, and professional authority (North, 2016). Repeatedly associating women with education, health, weather, or human-interest reporting while privileging men in politics, crime, and courts can therefore influence long-term professional development.

Restrictions on independent reporting and limited participation in editorial decision-making further illustrate gendered gatekeeping. Although coordination, accompaniment, and safety procedures are legitimate organizational practices, their consequences become unequal when they systematically restrict women more than men. This finding is consistent with research showing that organizational cultures and informal practices can affect access to influential assignments, networks, leadership, and professional advancement (Silveirinha et al., 2023; Blumell & Mulupi, 2024).

Equality in journalism therefore requires not merely equal employment but equitable access to assignments, editorial authority, professional networks, and advancement opportunities.

Family negotiation and the boundary between private and professional life

The findings also support scholarship showing that women's professional participation may be shaped before formal newsroom processes begin (Sharifa, 2024). Family concerns about mobility, working hours, interaction with male colleagues, public visibility, and reputation can affect the conditions under which women enter and remain in journalism.

However, these findings do not support treating families or culture as fixed barriers. Participants described negotiation, adaptation, disagreement, and change, indicating that socio-cultural expectations are actively negotiated rather than uniformly imposed. The additional professional burden lies in women having to negotiate activities that may be treated as routine for male journalists.

Media organizations cannot directly resolve private family relationships, but they can reduce the uncertainty surrounding journalistic work through predictable schedules, reliable transport, clear safety procedures, and visible institutional support. Such measures may lessen the professional consequences of restrictions originating outside the newsroom.

Religion, dress, and the regulation of visibility

The findings concerning religion and dress require similar caution. Participants did not identify religion itself as a uniform obstacle; rather, difficulties emerged when particular interpretations of propriety shaped expectations concerning women's appearance and public visibility. This distinction is important because religious practice, modest dress, and professional aspiration are not inherently incompatible.

The tension becomes professionally significant when expectations concerning veiling or public appearance restrict individual negotiation or conflict with the requirements of broadcast journalism. Threats reported during periods of militancy further demonstrate that visibility may become a security issue when women's public presence is framed as socially or religiously inappropriate.

The appropriate organizational response is therefore not to remove women from visible roles but to provide institutional support, risk assessment, and meaningful choice regarding professional visibility.

Professional identity and the misconception of journalism as entertainment

The association of women television journalists with entertainment or showbiz represents a form of professional misrecognition. When women appearing on television are treated as actresses rather than journalists, their professional credibility can be weakened and family or community concerns about media work reinforced.

This finding extends the broader argument that professional visibility is gendered. Visibility may increase recognition, but it can also expose women to judgments concerning respectability and legitimacy. Greater representation is therefore insufficient unless it is accompanied by organizational recognition, professional authority, and protection.

Theoretical and scholarly contribution

The principal theoretical contribution of this study is to extend gendered gatekeeping beyond the newsroom. Conventional gatekeeping approaches primarily emphasize organizational decisions concerning access, assignments, resources, selection, and editorial authority. The findings suggest that women's journalistic participation may also be shaped before formal newsroom entry and through pressures operating in public and social environments.

The study therefore proposes that gendered gatekeeping can be understood as a socially distributed process through which women's access to journalistic participation is negotiated across multiple sites rather than determined exclusively by editorial actors or formal organizational structures. Family expectations, public scrutiny, safety concerns, and newsroom practices represent distinct mechanisms, but their professional consequences may intersect.

This conceptualization also avoids using "culture" as a broad or static explanation. Instead, it identifies specific mechanisms—including negotiation of professional choices, regulation of public visibility, misrecognition of journalism, unequal assignments, and restricted editorial authority—through which inequality becomes operational. Focusing on these mechanisms clarifies both how constraints are produced and where intervention may be possible.

The study also contributes to discussions of gender equality and democratic media practice. When women are restricted from career-defining assignments, professional networks, and editorial authority, the consequences extend beyond individual careers to the range of experiences and perspectives represented in news production.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This qualitative study provides in-depth insight into participants' experiences but has important limitations. It draws on seven women journalists working in or connected to Peshawar, with participation shaped by accessibility, security concerns, and willingness to discuss potentially sensitive experiences. The findings therefore do not establish the prevalence of particular barriers across KP and should not be statistically generalized to all women journalists in the province.

The study also does not capture the full diversity of women's media work across rural districts, conflict-affected areas, digital outlets, freelance journalism, or different organizational settings.

In addition, the interviews were conducted in Urdu and translated into English, which may have reduced some linguistic or culturally specific nuance.

Future research could use larger or mixed-methods designs to examine the prevalence of gendered beat allocation, unequal access to promotion, digital harassment, and workplace complaint mechanisms. Comparative research across districts and organizations could explore how location, security conditions, language, class, and organizational ownership shape women's experiences. Including editors, male colleagues, family members, journalism educators, and professional bodies could also provide a broader understanding of how participation is enabled or constrained.

Longitudinal research would be particularly useful for examining how these experiences change across women's careers and which forms of organizational support improve retention and advancement. Future studies should also examine positive cases in which families and news organizations actively support women's journalism in order to identify practices that may contribute to institutional change.

Conclusion

This study shows that women journalists in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa experience interconnected barriers involving public harassment, workplace inequality, family restrictions, expectations surrounding dress and visibility, and misconceptions about journalism as a profession. Together, these conditions shape women's ability to enter journalism, undertake field reporting, exercise professional autonomy, and develop sustained careers.

The study's central theoretical contribution is to conceptualize gendered gatekeeping as a socially distributed process operating across family, public, and organizational settings. Women's professional participation is therefore shaped not only by formal newsroom decisions but also by social expectations and public regulation that may subsequently be reinforced or mitigated by organizational practices.

Meaningful inclusion consequently requires equitable access to assignments, professional mobility, editorial participation, advancement, and credible institutional responses to harassment and safety concerns. Addressing these mechanisms is important not only for women journalists' professional equality but also for creating journalism that is more diverse, representative, and responsive to the communities it serves.

Recommendations and Implications

The findings suggest that improving women's participation in local journalism requires coordinated action across journalism education, professional bodies, news organizations, and policymakers. The central priority should be to address safety and gender-based barriers without allowing protective measures to become mechanisms of professional exclusion.

Journalism Education

Journalism schools should integrate reporting safety, digital security, harassment response, professional ethics, and gender-sensitive assignment practices into professional training. Students should also be exposed to women working in political, investigative, broadcast, and digital journalism to challenge gendered assumptions about professional roles.

Professional Bodies

Press clubs, unions, and journalist associations should strengthen mentoring, confidential referral mechanisms, women's participation in professional governance, and collective advocacy on harassment, unequal assignments, and career barriers. They can also support smaller newsrooms that lack formal institutional resources.

News Organizations

News organizations should adopt gender-responsive practices based on transparent assignment procedures, clear harassment and safety policies, equitable access to career-defining beats, mentoring, and digital-security support. Safety measures should be assignment-specific and developed with women journalists, enabling them to participate in risk assessment and decisions about appropriate support rather than being routinely excluded from difficult assignments.

Policymakers and Regulators

Policymakers should strengthen the implementation of protections against workplace and online harassment and support accessible reporting and referral mechanisms across media organizations. Such measures should be developed in consultation with journalist associations and women journalists so that protection enhances rather than restricts professional autonomy.

Implications for Gender Equality

Gender equality in local media should be assessed through measurable workplace outcomes. Relevant indicators include women's access to high-status beats, promotion, retention, editorial participation, bylines and on-air roles, workplace safety, and access to effective complaint mechanisms. Regular consultation and anonymous feedback can help organizations identify informal barriers that may not be visible through formal policies alone.

These indicators provide a practical basis for assessing whether women are able to participate, make professional decisions, raise concerns, and advance on equitable terms. Improvements in these areas can also contribute to more representative and credible journalism.

Acknowledgements

The author gratefully acknowledges **Awrang Khan** for reviewing the manuscript and providing valuable feedback and constructive suggestions. His thoughtful comments contributed to improving the clarity, coherence, and overall quality of the study.

Author Biography

Faiq Ali Shah holds a bachelor's degree in Journalism and Mass Communication from the University of Peshawar, Pakistan. His research interests include gender and media, with a particular focus on gender discrimination, women's representation in journalism, and the effects of media on society.

Declarations

Funding. This research received no external funding.

Competing Interests. The author declares no competing financial or non-financial interests related to this study.

Data Availability. The interview recordings and full transcripts are not publicly available because the study involves a small and potentially identifiable group of journalists. De-identified excerpts may be made available by the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to participant consent and applicable institutional ethics requirements.

References

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Byerly, C. M. (Ed.). (2011). Global report on the status of women in the news media. International Women's Media Foundation.
- Chambers, D., Steiner, L., & Fleming, C. (2004). *Women and journalism*. Routledge.
- de Bruin, M. (2000). Gender, organizational and professional identities in journalism. *Journalism*, 1(2), 217-238. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146488490000100213>
- Franks, S. (2013). *Women and journalism*. Routledge.
- Hardin, M., & Shain, S. (2005). Strength in numbers? The experiences and attitudes of women in sports media careers. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 82(4), 804-819. <https://doi.org/10.1177/107769900508200405>
- Hussain, S., Bostan, H., & Qaisarani, I. (2023). Trolling of female journalists on Twitter in Pakistan: An analysis. *Media International Australia*, 191(1), 100-113. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1329878X221145977>
- Iqbal, I., & Iqbal, A. (2018). The harassment and the violence against the female journalists of Pakistan. *Proceedings of the World Conference on Media and Mass Communication*, 2(1), 30-44. <https://doi.org/10.17501/medcom.2017.2104>
- Javed, H. (2025). Surviving amid gendered disinformation: Analyzing mental well-being of women journalists in Pakistan. *Media Asia*, 52(4), 569-606. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01296612.2025.2546722>
- Khan, A. (2026). Poetry as counter-archive: Cultural trauma, militarization, and narrative agency in Pashtun lived experience. *Human Arenas*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-026-00589-z>
- Khan, A., & Khanum, N. (2026). Media influence on public opinion during the 2024 general elections in underrepresented and politically volatile regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). *Social Sciences & Humanities Open*, 13, 102873. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssaho.2026.102873>
- Khan, A., & Shah, F. A. (2025). The influence of TikTok-based conflict narratives on youth perceptions of violence and heroism in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. *Journal of Media Horizons*, 6(3), 1736–1746. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.16871606>
- Khan, A., Ashraf, S.I. Romance, Resistance, and Symbolism in Pashto Tappa: A Quantitative Content Analysis. *Soc* (2026). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12115-026-01213-0>
- Lindlof, T. R., & Taylor, B. C. (2011). *Qualitative communication research methods* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- North, L. (2016). The gender of “soft” and “hard” news: Female journalists' views on gendered story allocations. *Journalism Studies*, 17(3), 356-373. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2014.987551>
- Rehmat, A. (2017). Life as a woman in Pakistani journalism: Threats, harassment, and rejection. International Media Support.
- Riedl, A. A., Rohrbach, T., & Krakovsky, C. (2022). “I can't just pull a woman out of a hat”: A mixed-methods study on journalistic drivers of women's representation in political news. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990211073454>

- Sakha, T., & Shah, N. A. (2019). Challenges faced by women in journalism: An analytical case study of situation in Pakistan. *Pakistan Journal of Women's Studies: Alam-e-Niswan*, 26(2), 149-172. <https://doi.org/10.46521/pjws.026.02.0012>
- Sharifa, H. (2024). Pakistani women journalists: Occupational hazards in their intersectionalities of gender, culture and profession. *Journalism Practice*, 19(9), 1986-2002. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2024.2308538>
- Shoemaker, P. J., & Vos, T. P. (2009). *Gatekeeping theory*. Routledge.
- Siddiqua, A., Gong, J., & Aksar, I. A. (2023). Twitter trolling of Pakistani female journalists: A patriarchal society glance. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(6), 1075-1093. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437231168306>
- Silveirinha, M. J., Lobo, P., & Simões, R. B. (2023). Observing gender in the newsroom: Insights from an ethnographic study. *Feminist Media Studies*, 24(2), 480-496. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2023.2200581>
- Steiner, L. (2012). Failed theories: Explaining gender difference in journalism. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 89(2), 201-223. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077699012439028>
- UNESCO. (2021). *The chilling: Global trends in online violence against women journalists*. UNESCO.
- UNESCO. (2022). *World trends in freedom of expression and media development: Global report 2021/2022*. UNESCO.
- Urbániková, M., & Čaladi, T. (2024). The many shades of sexism: Female journalists in leadership positions reflect on barriers to career advancement in journalism. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 1-24. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990241240119>
- Rao, S., & Rodny-Gumede, Y. (2020). Gazing past the glass ceiling: Indian and South African female journalists' perceptions of their role and power in the newsroom. *Global Media and Communication*, 16(1), 57-74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1742766519893414>
- Miller, K. C. (2023). The "price you pay" and the "badge of honor": Journalists, gender, and harassment. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 100(1), 193-213. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10776990221088761>
- Hussain, F. (2019). Gender discrimination in media as workplace: A study of media environment in Sindh. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 18(1), 23-42. <https://doi.org/10.46568/pjgs.v18i1.23>
- Chen, G. M., Pain, P., Chen, V. Y., Mekelburg, M., Springer, N., & Troger, F. (2020). "You really have to have a thick skin": A cross-cultural perspective on how online harassment influences women journalists. *Journalism*, 21(7), 877-895. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884918768500>
- Blumell, L. E., & Mulupi, D. (2024). How news organizations cultivate and maintain sexist newsrooms via gendered journalistic norms, sexual harassment, and the boys' club. *Women's Studies in Communication*, 47(3), 268-291. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2024.2342842>