

BEYOND THE BYLINE

THE UNTOLD STORIES OF PAKISTANI WOMEN JOURNALISTS



Institute For Research
Advocacy And Development

Beyond the Byline:
The Untold Life Stories of
Pakistani Women Journalists

By

Institute for Research, Advocacy and Development (IRADA)

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CREDITS

Authors: Rahemeen Malik, Ayun Manto & Laiba Ahmed

Editors: Salwa Rana & Waqas Naeem

Cover illustration: Aeman Malik

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List of Abbreviations

WJAP – Women Journalist Association of Pakistan

KPK – Khyber Pakhtunkhwa

ICIMOD – International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development

DigiMAP – Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan

IRADA – Institute for Research, Advocacy & Development

OCCRP – Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project

NPC – National Press Club

RIUJ – Rawalpindi Islamabad Union of Journalists

PFUJ – Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists

HRCP – Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

FNF – Friedrich Naumann Foundation

NUST – National University of Sciences and Technology

IBA – Institute of Business Administration

TRT – Turkish Radio and Television Corporation

CPDI – Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives



Editor's Note

As we celebrate the extraordinary contributions of women journalists from across the country, we are honoured to present this collection of stories, a testament to their resilience and empowerment. This initiative, a labour of dedication and passion, seeks to highlight the challenges faced by women working in the Pakistani media industry, especially in marginalised communities, and their steadfast perseverance in overcoming the many challenges they face every day.

Working and living in areas that are deeply rooted in gender inequality, these women face overwhelming challenges, from social constraints to threats and harassment, both in and out of the newsroom. Yet, despite these obstacles, they have refused to be silenced. Through their reporting and leadership, they give voice to the unheard, highlight critical issues, and push boundaries in spaces where their very roles are often undermined and scrutinised.

Their incredible work not only informs the public but also challenges the status quo, creating space for future generations of female journalists to step forward. We hope these accounts will inspire greater awareness of the struggles faced by women in the media, particularly in the most neglected corners of our country. More importantly, we hope it promotes meaningful dialogue and transformative action toward creating a more inclusive, safe, and supportive environment for women and other gender minorities in Pakistani journalism.

We wish to see this research serve as a source of inspiration for striving female journalists and students of journalism alike. The experiences shared here are not just accounts of struggle; they are symbols of hope, motivation, and a call to action for the current and next generations of journalists and reporters.

We are deeply grateful to the courageous women who contributed to this project. Thank you for sharing your journeys, even when they are painful to recall, and for your unwavering commitment to the profession, and for paving the way for others. Your voices are critical to the development of the media industry, and we are privileged to be able to amplify them.

Together, we aim to continue to uplift and empower our colleagues in the industry, fostering a more inclusive and equitable environment for future women in journalism.

Salwa Rana



Introduction

Women journalists contribute significantly to Pakistan's media landscape, often highlighting underreported issues affecting women and marginalized communities while facing multiple barriers, including societal expectations, workplace discrimination, and restricted mobility, which can limit their ability to cover certain stories.

According to a study conducted in 2024 by Freedom Network and the Women Journalists Association of Pakistan (WJAP), titled "Unequal Newsrooms: A Gender Audit of Pakistani Media Organisations", there were substantial gender disparities in Pakistan's media industry. Surveying 15 media outlets, it found women comprise only 11% of the news workforce, with few in leadership roles, and most organizations lack legally required anti-harassment committees and maternity and paternity leave policies. The audit also identified that 75% of newsrooms are "gender blind," failing to address gender-based issues that impact workplace dynamics.

Despite numerous hurdles, many Pakistani women persist, finding ways to advance in media organizations and establishing support networks. Female journalists in Pakistan increasingly leverage digital media platforms to amplify their voices and reach broader audiences, challenging traditional narratives and pushing for social change. Initiatives for gender-sensitive policies within media organizations are emerging but require substantial reinforcement to create a supportive environment for women in journalism.

This anthology presents stories of women journalists working in both traditional and digital media, who have made a name for themselves despite the unique challenges they faced on a daily basis. Our journey starts off with **Wagma Feroz**, one of the only women from the tribal districts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (former FATA region) to pursue journalism, who has used performing arts and documentaries to highlight local issues. Moving north from

there, we follow the work of **Shereen Karim**, one of the very few female journalists in Gilgit Baltistan, who is now using digital videos alongside her print journalism to tell the stories of local communities. In the federal capital, we meet **Shazia Mehboob**, who manages her very own digital media platform The Pen PK, and **Myra Imran**, a veteran journalist who has held press club and trade union leadership positions and also contributed to the founding of Women Journalists Association of Pakistan. Heading back to the provinces, we meet **Laiba Hussan**, a broadcast journalist based in Peshawar who navigates societal challenges to persevere in the male-dominated industry., In Sindh's Tharparkar, we hear from **Mariyam Sadiqa**, the only female journalist there with an incredible story of struggle and achievement. In Balochistan, we see two pioneering women journalists at work: **Sadia Jahangir**, a journalist based in Quetta whose passion for work persists beyond life-threatening challenges in the region, and **Attiya Akram**, also a journalist in Quetta who believes change is only possible with a positive mindset despite the barriers. Finally, we end with the heroics of Fauzia Kulsoom Rana, a journalist based in Islamabad and a born leader, who co-founded the Women Journalists Association of Pakistan, an organisation that supports and empowers women journalists across the nation.

Throughout the anthology, several key themes are present undeniably: the barriers women journalists face, the resilience they embody, and the transformation they are bringing to Pakistani media. Through the lens of personal stories, the study underscores the importance of women's presence in newsrooms, highlighting how their contributions impact media content and influence societal attitudes toward gender equity.

By narrating these stories, this study not only highlights the challenges and triumphs of women journalists in Pakistan but also advocates for meaningful change. It highlights the pressing need for gender equality, enhanced workplace protections, and a shift in cultural norms that have historically limited women's roles in journalism. By amplifying their voices, this

anthology aims to inspire future women journalists, underscoring that, despite obstacles, their contributions are essential to the growth of Pakistani media and the development of a more informed and just society.

Wagma Feroz: Art & Journalism for Social Change

Wagma Feroz is a documentary filmmaker, rights activist, and journalist based in Peshawar, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP). She has worked as a freelance journalist for the BBC and has been involved in various roles promoting peace, gender equality, and human rights through media and filmmaking.

Wagma Feroz wanted to study psychology, never intending to pursue journalism. However, she had always wanted to make a change in the world. She saw injustices around her from a young age and says she has always done her best to help and guide the women around her. Wagma was born and brought up in Mohmand, a region bordering Afghanistan that was formerly part of Pakistan's Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and officially merged into the KP province as a district in 2018 after the 25th Constitutional Amendment.

Wagma lived in Mohmand until she was 12 years old, when a terrible incident took place where she was abandoned on the side of the road by her school van. She was told there was not anyone else from the school who lived in her neighbourhood, and the bus was not going to travel all the way for her. She arrived home crying. She says she realised then that Pakistan and its systems were not built for people like her, for women of low social standing. Her family decided to move out of Mohmand after that, settling in Charsadda for some time before sending Wagma to pursue higher education in Peshawar.

While Wagma did not feel supported by her country, she had immense support from her father, whom she credits for much of her success and achievements. She spares no breath heaping praise on the sacrifices her father made to get her, and her sisters educated. Her father sold off his property, she says, and faced continuous criticism from his own family, all for the sake of providing a stable education for each of his daughters. Wagma says he had to

endure a great deal of harassment, facing criticism from family members for educating his daughters, getting accused of “turning his daughters into men” and often being told that educating daughters was a waste of resources, that there was really no point to it since they were destined for marriage alone. Her father remained headstrong in the face of this resistance and educated all five of his daughters, even sending Wagma to pursue graduate and post-graduate studies in other parts of the country. She sees her father and his efforts as instrumental in all of her successes.

Growing up, Wagma says she closely witnessed the harassment and mistreatment of women around her. She did not understand why her friends and classmates were being pulled out of school, but as time went on, she understood how little value women’s education holds in Pakistan. She realised that most fathers will not invest resources to educate their daughters and would rather see them as loyal partners to a well-earning husband. This disturbed Wagma, she says, and she wanted to do something about this, but at the time she did not understand how, so she simply advanced her own education through high school, college and later university. Wagma says she understood the importance of education as a tool to help achieve your goals. She saw the women around her deprived of the same opportunities she was given, and she wanted to bring about change in their lives. To see women’s education, women’s dreams, be given the same level of importance as that of a man. When she got the chance to go to university in Peshawar, she began working on social projects to better her community.

This was where she learned what a “Social Action Project” is, she says. The British Council had come to her University to teach the students the means to bring about social change, where she also attended a three-day training course on how to create an effective social action project. This training was a life changing experience for her, she says, and set her on a path of delivering real-world change. She felt she finally had the tools to realise the social change she had always wanted to bring about. She could finally realise her own dream

and ambitions to see Pakistan a better place for all of the mistreated women she saw growing up, so that the next woman with big dreams born in small towns, such as Mohmand, would not have to undergo the same hardships she did. Her first step after completing her training was to register her own organisation *Torsaro Saadar*, which translates to *Women Protection* from Pashto. She was determined to see *Women Protection* thrive and make real social change.

Wagma's first project was for someone close to her. A friend of hers would share stories about the harassment she faced living in her hostel. People would verbally abuse her, hoot at her, even follow her back to her hostel. This friend could not even tell her family about the harassment, out of fear that she would not be allowed to study and work independently. Wagma created the panel "Verbal Harassment and its Psychological Effects" where she got dozens of men and women from her university together to share in discussions about harassment and abuse, specifically to pose the question of why harassment happens and to find solutions.

After the panel interventions, Wagma says she shifted her focus towards art, specifically theatre, to influence people because she figured that rational, intellectual discussions were not changing anyone's mind. She says she wanted to present something more emotionally driven, and more specifically catered to the communities that would host her. To bring about real change, discourse and discussions might change the minds of a few people, but art could emotionally resonate with whole communities, she says. Using art as her medium to instil feelings and drive empathy in the community for women and the marginalised, she and her troupe started preparing 10-minute-long theatre performances to raise awareness about specific social issues plaguing that area. Her street performance troupe performed in Peshawar's streets and bazaars, focussing on local people. It found a great deal of success, she says.

“In Pashtun society we have this term called ‘Dumtob’ as a derogatory term for someone who does art related things... At the start they were really suspicious... but when they listened to the whole thing then their response was positive.”

Wagma and her team would perform in bazaars and on the street, with no special seating, or equipment. The men in the group’s plays would put on dupattas to play women. If women had performed on the street their names would be tarnished, she says, and they would be likened to sex workers. They would be called street performers, she adds, and their message would be disregarded as they would be seen in a more degrading light. Wagma could not risk the safety of herself and her performers. She and her team were very careful not to spark outrage or controversy anywhere they went, especially when they were handling sensitive topics. The performance focused on the issues, with no real costumes and minimal props. People would simply stand around and watch her group perform. She and the other women would organise these open theatres, and the men would act in them. They would also take care not to be seen as outsiders coming to the locals and preaching, she says, rather trying to understand the community and learning about their issues from them. So, they would arrive a week in advance at the towns they were going to perform in and knock on random houses to ask around for what issues specifically affected the residents. Broader issues are known to everyone, she says, but if they could strike at the heart of a specific issue, then they could really connect with their audience. Only when they found the issue they were going to tackle did they start preparing the performance itself, Wagma says. Another way they made the performance inclusive was by recruiting people from that town itself. At the start the locals were extremely wary of them, she says. They would be suspicious and ask them questions, but when the audience saw their own people performing in their own accents, they

felt much more connected to the performance, and did not see them as outsiders. They were much more receptive to the message, she says.

Wagma says she and her team took a great many precautions to ensure that their message got through to their audience, that they were delivering a relevant message, and that they did not spark any controversy or ire. This way, they could really connect with the audiences they were performing in front of and deliver their message effectively. Wagma was doing great work that she was proud of, but she says she was constantly walking a thin line. If the audience turned on her and her performances, then they would be in legitimate danger because of the emotions that art can stir up. If the discomfort of acknowledging and seeing a community's own social issues was turned into the performers, then Wagma and her troupe could be in severe danger. The women were able to perform when the troupe were performing in women's only schools where they would invite the mothers of the children as well. Getting permission to let male performers in these spaces was tough, but they managed to bring younger men to perform with them, yet another precaution Wagma and her team were forced to take.

These precautions were necessary. A street theatre performance about child marriages in Swat caught the ire of religious leaders in the area who proceeded to beat up the men in the troupe, Wagma says, this was a harrowing experience, and performances were halted for a while afterwards as the performers had to physically and mentally recover from this traumatic experience.

"It seemed like the very people I'm working for are against my job."

Wagma started work in journalism during the COVID-19 pandemic. She says she wanted to become a journalist to expand her social reach beyond the communities she was raising awareness in. She underwent international

courses and training in journalism online, before starting to find freelancing work. Her first article was about depression among women in KP, which she submitted to the *BBC*. She continued writing articles focused on mental health and women's issues in KP. Wagma took it upon herself to write on such topics in her province after noticing they were not getting the coverage that was due, she says she wanted to talk about her own experiences through the lens of gender, and wanted to improve the world for other women around her and diversify the kinds of stories that were being written in the press. She says she saw so many women's stories left untold and wanted to bring them to light.

Wagma did not have any connections in the industry, but she would send her articles to organisations, such as the *BBC*, which would then publish them. She says she felt pride in her writing, but also isolation, and a growing need for a mentor. She mentions that most journalists in KP work in isolation and wished that she had someone she could call an ally in the industry. This feeling was exacerbated by the male-centric nature of the press clubs and other organisations. Wagma Feroz felt alone in journalism, only really engaging with the news organisations that she would submit her work to. She says she is grateful for these media outlets, but she felt a sense of isolation while working with them and not with her fellow journalists. She started to make short films and documentaries so that her name would get known to more publishers. She says she started to get scouted, and international organisations such as *DW* and *Voice of America* began to ask her to write specific articles for them. While she acknowledged this growth in her career, Wagma felt she wanted a more permanent, stable job where her organisation would be responsible for her.

While Wagma's parents remained supportive, and a constant rock for her, the rest of her family was extremely critical of her decisions, especially her maternal uncles who she says seemed to despise her. Wagma was also ordered to stay away from their daughters due to the fear that she may "corrupt" them. She was once part of a training seminar, when some news coverage of the event showed her cousin sitting in the audience. This caused

a massive fight in her family, she says, where her uncles even threatened her mother. Wagma says her mother is scared for Wagma's safety, and constantly attempts to dissuade her from social work and journalism. Wagma says she feels ostracised and rejected by her own relatives and her own people. She feels like if she were to attempt working for the community in her own hometown, the backlash would put her in far more danger than if a theatre performance fails in other towns or cities. Within her community, she says she and her father are known figures, and if she is accused of being a woman of "questionable character" then her own community would "take responsibility" for her and feel far more personally threatened than if she were an outsider. This would put both her and her father in real danger. After having already faced such violent backlash from her close relatives and putting her mother in danger at the hands of her uncles, Wagma feels petrified when thinking of performing in Mohmand or Charsadda.

Another demotivating factor for Wagma was the feeling of the very people she works for turning against her, especially when other women try to hold her back, belittle or criticise her. She feels that female leaders in the social sector tend to block the growth of female juniors mainly because women are also indoctrinated to further patriarchal values and the subordination of other women.

There is also the bombardment of online harassment that disturbs Wagma deeply, especially when misinformation is spread about her. She says people have accused her of hoarding wealth and working on social issues just to cash in international checks. In reality, Wagma leads a middle-class lifestyle, she says, so this perception is troubling for her. The worst of online harassment came when she did an interview with the *BBC*, which went viral among the Pashtun community leading to an alarming level of harassment and hate mail. This involved people denouncing her from the Pashtun community online, commenting on her appearance with short hair or when her dupatta came slightly off centre. This video even reached her father, who was extremely

distressed by witnessing this level of hatred against his daughter. Wagma says she cried reading the cruel and nasty comments left by these people and was deeply shaken by the unanticipated response to an ostensibly harmless video.

Soon after this harrowing experience, Wagma went on to win the Norwegian *Stepanus Prize* for her documentary short focused on religious freedom including an interview of a Christian woman in KP. This further distanced Wagma from her hometown and her own community as she felt that she was being given so much more acceptance, recognition, and now, accolades from international communities. Wagma says she was ecstatic at her work being acknowledged on an international scale, and this rejuvenated any doubts she had about whether journalism was right for her. This is the most prestigious award she has won. Even more than winning her award, Wagma says what motivates her is seeing her father post about her award on his Facebook. From there, Wagma would often get comments from men saying they want their daughters to be like her. She tells them to be more like her father, kind and supportive, if they also wished to see their daughters succeed. In moments like these, Wagma feels like she is making a real difference, and that there remains understanding, empathy and community within Pakistan. It gives her hope that she can really make a change even in the most patriarchal societies.

Wagma's future plans and aspirations are ambitious. Wagma is currently founding a women's only theatre troupe in Peshawar. She wants to revitalise journalism education to further modernise it and make it more inclusive for women and gender minorities. She says she wants to build her own institute, which may use modern technology and teach media journalism through modern means, not through outdated means as done presently. Wagma has always been driven, with dreams and desires she desperately wants to see realised. As soon as she gets the opportunity to see them through, she jumps at it and has been grinding her teeth against the social issues she has encountered ever since. She is relentless in her pursuits, and she does not

plan on giving up anytime soon. If not for her own sake, then for the sake of everything her father has done for her.

Shereen Karim: The Digital Pioneer in the Mountains

Shereen Karim is a pioneering journalist from Gilgit-Baltistan, Pakistan, known for her work in a male-dominated media environment. She has been working as a journalist for over eight years, primarily focusing on gender-based violence, women's issues, and social and climate change topics. Shereen has contributed to various media platforms, including Independent Urdu, the Pakistan Press Foundation, and BBC Urdu. She is also one half of the impressive Gilgit-based digital media outlet, Women TV GB.

Shereen's story is a powerful testament to female empowerment and resilience. She has tirelessly worked in a field traditionally dominated by men, carving out her own space in this challenging environment. As one of the few women journalists in Gilgit, she has become a focal point for change, navigating the complexities of a male-dominated profession and society. Overcoming numerous obstacles has not been easy for Shereen. However, her dedication and perseverance have allowed her to rise above these challenges. Her journey serves as an inspiration for young women not only in Gilgit but throughout Pakistan, encouraging them to pursue careers in journalism and break through societal barriers.

Shereen's journey began when she decided to pursue media studies in her Undergraduate studies. She excelled in her studies, finishing second in her class with excellent grades. During her studies, she wrote a story regarding the involvement of child labour in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) and the lack of media coverage on the issue. This story caught the attention of two newspaper companies, who offered her a job as a reporter. However, the companies required her to work as an intern without pay. At the time, Shereen says, there were no news channels or national media presence in Gilgit, and the local

newspapers were printed in Islamabad the previous day and transported to Gilgit.



Figure 1 Shereen Karim receiving a certificate for participation in training on climate change storytelling

She says she worked with various local newspapers, including *Daily Ausaf* and *Weekly Azaan*, gaining valuable experience and honing her skills. The rise of social media during the COVID-19 pandemic inspired Shereen and her colleague Kiran Qasim to create their own YouTube channel called *Women TV GB*. Shereen embraced the opportunity to expand their reach and influence. The YouTube channel created on December 23rd, 2019, has garnered an impressive following with over 180,357 views, 2.03 thousand subscribers, and 741 videos. The channel features reporting and videos highlighting issues affecting women, as well as their inspiring stories, such as the first female police officer of Gilgit, women artisans creating handmade rugs, and Amina Hanif, a Gilgit native, attempting to summit K2. Additionally,

the channel promotes winter tourism in Gilgit, showcasing the region's breathtaking beauty and attractions, making it a unique and captivating platform that celebrates women's empowerment and cultural heritage.

Recognizing the potential of digital platforms, she began sharing her insights and stories online, becoming one of the pioneers of digital journalism in Gilgit-Baltistan. Shereen's dedication and hard work paid off, she says, and her followers engaged with her through her public Facebook account, tagging her on relevant issues. She says she recognized that the age of newspapers was coming to an end, and she further developed her social media presence not only during the pandemic but also in the years that followed. She would later use her presence to great effect, becoming a household name in the region for news and information, especially on women's rights.



Shereen says her father encouraged her to pursue her interests, never discouraging her from her dreams. She holds her father in high regard for the unwavering support he has provided her throughout her professional journey

and frequently advocated for her at every opportunity he had. However, as she delved deeper into journalism, she says she faced the harsh realities of the industry, including inadequate pay that barely covered her daily travel expenses. The commute often presented significant challenges, especially for a woman. Navigating the streets alone, Shereen says she encountered the scrutiny of onlookers who questioned her intentions and safety. She talks about her experience travelling alone:

“There are a thousand people looking at you and asking you questions like ‘Where are you going? What are you doing?’ Sometimes I would be out late, and they would ask me what I am doing out so late, or where I am going that is so far. You know how our society is. I faced many challenges using public transport that were pushing me out of this field.”

The societal norms in Gilgit often put women in vulnerable positions, particularly when travelling alone or working late hours, according to her. Despite these challenges, Shereen remained steadfast in her commitment to journalism.

Due to the harsh working conditions, Shereen's journey took an unexpected turn when she left journalism for a period of two years to pursue teaching. This decision was largely motivated by irregular pay that made it difficult for her to continue in the profession. This is a consistent issue for many journalists in Gilgit, she says. Gilgit-Baltistan's media landscape is characterised by a lack of full-time journalists, with many professionals relying on side businesses to supplement their income. Shereen Karim was no exception, but she found herself drawn back to journalism, this time working with international organisations such as *BBC Urdu* and *Independent Urdu*. After

completing her postgraduate degree, Shereen found that the reality of the job market did not meet her expectations. While her father initially supported her, she also utilised freelancing and teaching to support herself.

Throughout her career, Shereen says she has taken advantage of numerous training opportunities offered by organisations such as the *Pakistan Press Foundation*, *Media Matters for Democracy*, and the online news platform *Pamir Times*. These programs have helped hone her skills and stay up to date with the latest developments in the field. Shereen Karim feels she has emerged as a significant voice in the realm of local journalism, particularly focusing on climate change and women's issues in Gilgit-Baltistan. Her passion for these subjects has driven her to represent her region on international platforms, showcasing the pressing challenges faced by her community.

Shereen finds freelancing to be a rewarding avenue within journalism. She enjoys the independence it offers, allowing her to write stories in Urdu and collaborate with international institutions on climate-related documentaries. It has also provided her with good earnings and a supportive network of fellow journalists, she says. Her circle includes both male and female colleagues, many of whom she met during training programs. Together, they share opportunities and collaborate on various projects, creating a community that fosters growth and support. This has also established a sense of camaraderie between them, and they offer much needed support working in this particular field of work.



Working in a male-dominated field comes with its own set of challenges, particularly for women. Shereen acknowledges the societal pressures she faces, especially regarding her appearance and behaviour in public. This cultural expectation often leads her to be mindful of her attire, ensuring she presents herself appropriately during interviews and public appearances. Shereen also reflects on her decision to wear a face mask during her early reporting days. "It provided a sense of safety," she explains, as it allowed her to navigate public spaces with less scrutiny.

“I figured that we need to work within the bounds of our society. That if we walked about openly then I would not be accepted.”

Despite the challenges, Shereen has grown accustomed to the attention she receives while working. “When you’re walking alone, people stare so much, but now I’m so used to it that I hardly care or notice,” she shares. She says she has faced criticism and harassment, both in person and online, but she has learned to manage these experiences without letting them deter from her passion for journalism. “At the beginning, I’d be tense about it, thinking about leaving the profession, but I’ve come to realise that I must continue,” she affirms. In a patriarchal society such as Pakistan, it is particularly challenging to navigate a field that is dominated by men. Shereen’s challenges are representative of the difficulties encountered by numerous young women in Pakistan, encountering scrutiny from all directions and confronting it directly on a daily basis.

“Media is something difficult, especially for a woman writing for women”



Despite all the obstacles, she has worked tirelessly to improve her skills, and also gain significant international exposure, including attending a training session in Nepal. Shereen's selection for this prestigious event came through a training program organised by the *International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development* (ICIMOD). A colleague recognized her potential and encouraged her to apply, highlighting her dedication to writing about climate issues. With her father's support, she submitted her application, showcasing her research and stories about the glaciers of Gilgit-Baltistan and the dangers posed by the region's climate. Upon her selection, Shereen travelled to Nepal, where she participated in training sessions designed for journalists from across the participating countries. This experience not only enhanced her skills, she says, but also solidified her belief that she was meant to be in the field of journalism.

“When I came back from Nepal, I realized that I really was made for this field that I happened upon by chance”

Through her work, Shereen aims to bridge the gap between local challenges and global conversations, particularly regarding climate change and gender equality. She understands the unique struggles faced by women in her region and uses her platform to advocate for their rights and address the socio-economic challenges they encounter. Shereen Karim believes that her most impactful stories are those that highlight the challenges faced by women and the pressing concerns surrounding climate change. "I feel like my best stories are the ones where I focus on the environment," she states, noting that this topic not only resonates with her personally but also garners appreciation from her audience.

One of her standout achievements was a feature story about the difficulties women encounter while using public transport, she says. This story gained significant traction, going viral on both national and international platforms. Shereen's unique approach to feature writing allowed her to delve

deeper into the subject, providing a nuanced perspective on the harassment women face in public spaces. "When we write news, we can mention that women face problems, but we can't specify what those problems are," she explains. In her feature, she conducted interviews with real individuals, capturing their experiences and shedding light on the realities of their struggles.

The impact of her work is evident, as it has not only raised awareness but also prompted action from the government regarding the issues she reported. One notable example was her investigative piece on the harassment women face in public transportation. The story went viral nationally and internationally, sparking widespread awareness. Through feature stories, she shared personal accounts of victims, highlighting the grim reality. In Gilgit, public transport consists of Suzukis, where previously, two women would often be seated in the front seat, leading to conflicts. Following her story, the police implemented a policy reserving the front seat for one woman. After discussing the public transport challenges with the GB Chief Secretary, Shereen advocated for a solution, leading to the introduction of a pink bus service specifically for women in Gilgit-Baltistan. This initiative was a direct response to her reporting and highlighted the importance of addressing women's mobility issues in the region.

She is currently working with *We News* and is one of the few full-time journalists working in Gilgit-Baltistan. She is a testament to the hardworking nature of the women in the area. She says she is paving the way for many other young women from Gilgit by showcasing the success that comes when young women are allowed to pursue their dreams.

Shazia Mehboob: Wielding the Pen of Perseverance

Shazia Mehboob Tanoli is a journalist based in Islamabad, known for her work with prominent media outlets such as The Express Tribune and Express News TV. She has written extensively on various social issues, including women's rights, workplace harassment, and the challenges faced by women in Pakistani society. She is also the founder of the news website The Pen PK.

Imagine a young girl from a small village in District Mansehra, where the sound of pens scratching on paper was a rarity, and the dreams of women were often silenced. But one girl, Shazia Mehboob Tanoli, went on to defy odds and shatter glass ceilings to achieve success in the field of journalism where women are often underrepresented. With a fierce determination in her heart, Shazia has overcome countless obstacles to become a leading voice in her community. Today, Shazia is a journalist, and educator who has illuminated the lives of countless individuals through her words and wisdom.

Born and raised in a humble village, Shazia's love affair with learning began at a young age. She says she pursued her education with unwavering dedication, graduating from the University of Punjab and later earning her MSc from Fatima Jinnah University and MPhil in International Relations from Quaid-e-Azam University.



Her family's support was a crucial element for her success. "I come from a remote village in the Hazara division, where schools are far away, and societal pressures often discourage parents from sending their children to school. Many students, including myself, had to drop out due to these challenges. However, my family was supportive and relocated from the village to Rawalpindi solely for my education," she recalls. As she walked the halls of academia, Shazia's voice grew stronger, and her message clearer. But Shazia's journey was not without its trials. She faced financial struggles, societal expectations, and the weight of being a woman in a male-dominated field. Yet, she persevered, using her words as a sword to cut through the noise and her heart as a shield to protect her dreams.



Shazia's remarkable career trajectory is a shining example of her unyielding determination and passion for journalism. Beginning in 2011 as a translator on the news desk, she quickly demonstrated her capabilities and rose through the ranks. Within three years, she was promoted to feature writer, showcasing her creativity and storytelling skills. Shazia's career continued to advance as she joined prominent media outlets, including the *Express Tribune* and *The Nation*, where she worked as a news editor. Additionally, she freelanced for *The News International* and *Dawn*. Her expertise further developed during her tenure as senior sub-editor at *92 News*. She has also been a regular contributor to *Dawn's EOS*, *The Express Tribune*, and *The News International*, a partnership that continues to this day.

Throughout her career, Shazia has consistently pursued opportunities for growth and development. She says she attended morning workshops to enhance her skills and expand her knowledge, and also pursued her MPhil in the mornings while working in the evenings. Additionally, she actively participated in training sessions and workshops to further develop her professional skills and expertise. Despite her accomplishments, Shazia felt that her talents were not being fully utilized, leading her to take a bold step and

forge her own path. She sought out opportunities that would allow her to excel and reach her full potential, all while balancing her job, MPhil program, and professional development activities. She became a visiting faculty member at Quaid-e-Azam University and Fatima Jinnah University, inspiring a new generation of women to find their voice.



The Pen PK marks a significant turning point in Shazia Mehboob Tanoli's life, as it represents the culmination of her dedication, innovation, and determination. For the past two and a half years, she has served as the founder and editor of this digital media platform, successfully monetizing it within just one year. She has also mentored around six interns in creating engaging content and received support from five qualified professionals who have generously volunteered their time to *The Pen PK*. Initially, *The Pen PK* was a one-woman show, with Shazia single-handedly building the platform from scratch without any resources or team. However, she acknowledges the invaluable support of Farhan Younus, who provided technical expertise to establish and develop their digital presence. His contributions were instrumental in bringing Shazia's vision to life. "The primary purpose of THE PEN PK was not to create a profit-making organization, but rather a representative platform that provides opportunities to colleagues who have valuable insights to share but lack the

resources to do so. I established a strong network to gather stories from remote areas, working with talented writers whose work was previously unpublished. My role is to provide guidance, refine their stories, fill in the gaps, and give them a polished shape. Now, I receive stories from all over Pakistan on a daily basis," she says.

Shazia's role extends beyond editing and mentoring, as she provides guidance, refines stories, fills in gaps, and gives them a polished shape. Her network has expanded, she says, receiving stories from all over Pakistan daily. *The Pen PK's* primary purpose is to provide a representative platform for journalists who have valuable insights to share but lack resources to tell their stories online.

Through her tireless efforts, Shazia says she has established a thriving digital media platform, transforming the media landscape one story at a time. Her dedication to mentorship and innovation has created opportunities for talented writers to share their work, making *The Pen PK* a shining example of innovation and determination.

The importance of mentorship cannot be overstated in Shazia's journey. Her guidance and support have been instrumental in nurturing talent and creating a platform where colleagues can share their valuable insights. Her ability to refine stories, fill in gaps, and give them a polished shape has been invaluable to the success of *The Pen PK*. Moreover, her willingness to acknowledge the support of others, such as Farhan Yonus, highlights the importance of collaboration and teamwork in achieving success.

Shazia says she has dedicated her career to amplifying the voices of the unsung heroes. Her mission is to bring to prominence research that might otherwise be neglected and to share transformative stories that inspire positive societal change. Shazia's career path from a remote village in Hazara to the esteemed newsrooms of *Express News* demonstrates her unwavering commitment and extraordinary determination.

In the face of considerable health challenges and formidable societal pressures, Shazia has pursued her aspirations with remarkable tenacity and steadfast resolve. These societal pressures encompass deep-rooted cultural norms and entrenched gender biases that have historically constrained women's opportunities and voices. Shazia's ability to surmount these obstacles, while managing personal health issues, highlights her exceptional resilience and dedication. Her journey not only reflects her individual fortitude but also signifies a broader struggle against systemic barriers that impede progress and innovation.

Shazia appears to have a gift for unearthing hidden stories, and during the pandemic, she came across a young NUST graduate who was struggling to find employment. He had resorted to selling fruits in an upscale area, utilizing his marketing skills to make ends meet. Shazia says she recognized the potential of his story and shared it with the world. The response was overwhelming. Within a day, a NUST alumnus and company owner reached out, offering the young man a job in his specialized field. This heartwarming instance demonstrates the ripple effect of Shazia's storytelling.

But that is not all. Shazia says her passion for amplifying underreported issues led her to share the story of two university students who initiated a donation drive to address the lack of internet access and library facilities in their district. Her article sparked a remarkable response from the local community, she says, which came together to establish a free library. Today, that library has become a state-level library, serving as testament to the power of community-driven initiatives.

Shazia's journey is also an important example of why journalism matters. Her stories not only shed light on important issues but also inspire collective action. Through her work, Shazia has shown that journalism has the ability to transform lives, bring communities together, and foster meaningful change.

Shazia has also represented her journalism work and The Pen Pk at the international level. She says her journey to Singapore in 2023 for a residential fellowship was a formative experience. She says she typically applies for human rights scholarships, but in 2022, she was selected for the Asia Journalism Fellowship – a completely online experience due to COVID-19. At first, she was hesitant, craving the thrill of physical work. But fate had other plans. She reapplied the following year and was once again given the opportunity to participate. It was a residential fellowship, tailor-made for her passion for in-depth reporting on women's issues, minorities, and human rights.

Shazia says her work received unprecedented positive attention during the fellowship. She says she delivered a show-stopping presentation, which boosted her confidence to new heights. The experience ignited a fire within her, she says, propelling her to pursue her goals with renewed determination. Shazia earned the prestigious *Equitable Asia* award for journalism by Oxfam, becoming one of the top three journalists from Pakistan to receive this certificate. She also received the *Agahi Award* for two consecutive years in 2020-21 and another award for outstanding investigative journalism. She also received an excellence in peacebuilding award in 2023.

With an unrelenting passion for journalism, Shazia Mehboob Tanoli has transformed her enthusiasm into a potent force for positive change. Embracing a growth mindset, she has developed the resilience to reframe challenges and propel herself forward with renewed determination. Throughout her remarkable journey, Shazia has established herself as an incredible journalist, shattering glass ceilings and defying stereotypes with ease. Her trajectory from a human rights enthusiast to a globally acclaimed journalist is a testament to her indomitable spirit and unwavering commitment.

She is a founding member of *Digital Media Alliance of Pakistan (DigiMAP)*, the country's first-ever collective of digital media outlets

representing public interest journalism and digital journalists. As one of the 36 members, Shazia says she has the privilege of shaping the alliance's vision and contributing to its growth. Moreover, she holds the communication secretary portfolio in the alliance. She says she is honoured to be part of a groundbreaking organization that is paving the way for digital media excellence in Pakistan.

Her numerous accolades, including the prestigious Equitable Asia Award, two *Agahi Awards*, and various other recognitions, solidify her position as a formidable force in the field. Notably, her involvement as a content producer with the *Institute for Research, Advocacy & Development (IRADA)* and their project on diversity and pluralism in media was the runner up among all content produced under IRADA's program Furthermore, she says her fellowship with the *Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)* at the South Asia level is a crowning achievement for her journalism career, and she has also won the Outstanding Investigative Journalism Award from the Pakistan Press Foundation, cementing her status as an investigative reporter. Shazia's professional story is a true inspiration, and her dedication will undoubtedly continue to inspire future generations.

Myra Imran: The Leader Fighting for Rights

Myra Imran is a renowned Pakistani journalist known for her work on human rights, particularly women's issues. She is the Deputy Editor at JournalismPakistan.com and a Staff Reporter for The News in Islamabad. Recognized with several awards, including the Media Woman of the Year and Benazir Women in Leadership Award, she is also the vice president of The National Press Club and Rawalpindi Press Club.



Myra's remarkable journey is a shining testament to the transformative power of resilience and determination. Born into a traditional Pakistani household, she was conditioned to believe that her primary purpose in life was to marry and start a family. However, Myra's aspirations stretched far beyond these societal expectations. Despite being orphaned at a young age and facing a multitude of challenges, she unwaveringly pursued her educational and professional goals with unrelenting passion.

Myra says she persevered in pursuing her postgraduate degree, despite her family's discouragement and their belief that higher education was unnecessary and that the fees could be better spent on her marriage. Myra says she felt like "a lone warrior," battling against societal norms and expectations that sought to hold her back. The isolation was a heavy burden, making her question her own worth and the value of her dreams. Yet, she refused to let negativity define her and drew strength from within to keep pushing forward, pursuing a postgraduate degree. This bold decision underscored her commitment to education and her refusal to be swayed by the limitations placed upon her. Myra's experiences reflect the common phenomenon of women being undervalued and marginalised in pursuit of their educational goals. Through her unwavering dedication, Myra has achieved academic success and paved the way for others to follow in her footsteps, serving as a light of hope for women seeking to overcome obstacles and reach their full potential.

During her master's program, Myra says she would often accompany her friend to the media industry, where she stumbled upon an opportunity that would change her life. She was referred to *The News* and joined as an intern, although she had never intended to pursue journalism initially. Her primary goal was to complete her master's degree, but fate had other plans.

Myra's journey in pursuing a career in journalism, a male-dominated field, exemplifies that women in non-traditional professions often face scepticism and rejection from society. A time came when she had to live alone for work, she says. It was a daunting experience for her, especially since she came from a traditional background where independent women were frowned upon. She faced numerous challenges, including constant scrutiny and judgement from



people around her, who would often make up false stories and accusations involving her character. simply because she worked late hours at *The News* and returned home around 10 pm. Her family viewed journalism as a questionable profession, she says, associating it with activism and negativity. The late hours she kept, a necessity in the demanding field of journalism, fuelled further judgement from those around her. Despite these obstacles, Myra persevered, pursuing her education and excelling in her role at *The News*.

Myra's experience highlights the struggles women encounter when defying conventional gender roles and entering male-dominated fields. The attempts to malign their characters, perpetuated by societal scepticism and rejection, significantly impact their personal and professional development. The difficulties Myra faced in navigating independence, criticism, and judgement underscore the challenges women encounter in their quest for growth and self-actualization. Through Myra's journey, we see the profound

impact of societal attitudes on women's lives and the importance of perseverance in the face of adversity.

Myra's foray in the National Press Club in Islamabad was marked by the stark reality of women's underrepresentation and marginalisation. Despite her exceptional talent and passion for reporting, she faced numerous challenges in a male-dominated environment where female voices were often silenced. The lack of women in positions of power and the dearth of opportunities for growth were palpable, she says.

Myra's career in journalism began at the desk, a challenging starting point, but she soon moved into reporting and truly found her stride. Her groundbreaking story on an acid burn survivor even prompted the Supreme Court of Pakistan to consider legislation on the issue, cementing her role as a prominent journalist reporting on human rights and gender. Myra's trade unionism expanded as she co-founded the Women Journalists Association, aiming to address the systemic gender disparities in journalism. She was joined by her colleagues, Fauzia Kulsoom Rana, Sadia Khalid and Humaira Sharif, who shared a vision to have a platform to raise the voices and concerns of women journalists, especially to demand fair and equitable treatment of women media professionals in the newsrooms and representative bodies of journalists. Although they were relatively unknown reporters at the time, she says, they recognized the importance of forming an advisory board to bolster their initiative.

The association received invaluable guidance and support from esteemed journalist and anchor, Quatrina Hussain, Fauzia Shahid, Absar Alam and other respected figures also lent their credibility to the group by joining the advisory board, Myra says. Despite facing intense backlash, false allegations, and resistance to change, the association kept working on its structure and advocacy for rights for women journalists, she says.

Then came what she was least expecting, a malicious attack on her professional integrity when false rumours were circulated about her allegedly receiving funds from the US Embassy. The rumours quickly spiralled out of control after a slanderous mass email was sent out, questioning her journalism credentials. Despite her initial distress and disappointment, Myra says she found support in her husband Imran Naeem Ahmad, who stood beside her instead of demanding her to restrict herself professionally. With his encouragement, Myra confronted the rumours head-on, seeking guidance from friends and colleagues at the National Press Club (NPC). The president of the NPC, Afzal Butt, offered to investigate, and ultimately, the rumours were dismissed. Myra says this experience taught her the importance of resilience and the value of a strong support system in the face of malicious character attacks.

She says she also realises that sometimes, things do not go as planned, but that does not mean they will not work out in your favour. That crisis became the starting point for her political career in the NPC and on the other side, their website, *Journalism Pakistan*, got more publicity. She says she has learned that perspective makes a huge difference, and sometimes, what seems like a setback can actually be a stepping stone to success.

After facing opposition and scepticism, women journalists finally achieved a major breakthrough in their fight for equality, Myra says. They gained recognition and acceptance within the NPC, a milestone marked by their increasing participation in meetings and leadership roles. The turning point came in 2004 when they organised a successful conference for women journalists, leading to an amendment in the press club constitution that paved the way for women to hold key leadership positions.

Myra went on to win the elections for joint secretary on the reserved seat twice and later won elections four times for the Vice President position at the NPC. She also remained Vice President for Rawalpindi Islamabad Union of

Journalists (RIUJ). Today, women hold important positions in the NPC on reserved and also on general seats, including secretary, one vice president, one joint secretary and two governing body members. This achievement demonstrates the power of collective action and perseverance, setting a precedent for future generations of women journalists. However, despite this progress, there is still much work to be done, Myra says. Women in journalism face numerous challenges, and it is essential to continue advocating for better working conditions, more opportunities, and a stronger voice for women in the media, she says. The fight for gender equality is ongoing, and Myra says they must continue to push for progress.

To have a platform for this purpose, Myra and her colleague Fauzia Rana relaunched the *Women Journalist Association of Pakistan* (WJAP) with the support of the *Aurat Foundation*. Her unwavering commitment to creating a more inclusive and equitable environment for women in journalism continues to inspire, even in the face of ongoing challenges.

In her journey for regrouping, she again faced a malicious campaign against her. This time, in a famous current affair show, she was blamed to be among the group of politicians and journalists who were scheming to topple the government along with the US Embassy. But this time, she was well prepared to face such campaigns.

The experiences of Myra and her peers underscore the significance of leadership and collaboration in overcoming barriers in the media landscape. As Myra and her colleagues continue to advocate for women's rights in journalism, she says they aim to inspire the next generation of female journalists, ensuring that their voices are heard and respected in an industry that has historically marginalised them and involving them in activism and leadership to transform the local press clubs and representative bodies of journalists into inclusive and gender-sensitive platforms.

Laiba Hussan: The Rebel Dreaming for Success

Laiba Hussan is currently a reporter for Aaj News and an award-winning filmmaker, and multimedia journalist. She has received multiple accolades for her work, including recognition as a runner-up at the IBA Karachi awards for her story on the unintended consequences of solar energy on Peshawar's drought crisis and winner of the Bint-e-Hawa achievement award.



Laiba Hussan grew up with a dream. Born into a family where the women were deprived of education beyond the 5th grade, she spent many formative years moving between Islamabad and Swabi, encircled by individuals who did not consider the time or expense of educating women to be worthwhile. *“They believe there is no benefit from investing in women, so they only invest in their men,”* she says, talking about her family. Surrounded by the notion that women are born exclusively to be married, Laiba’s father was rarely present, spending most of his time abroad in Saudi Arabia due to work. She says he had a modest

amount of money, so he shrugged his shoulders and permitted Laiba, her brother, and her sister to finish their primary education. Laiba herself, however, always looked outwards into the world. She wanted to make her voice heard, she says. But that was not enough. She says she wanted to “speak to all of Pakistan.” She was motivated by the talk show hosts she observed on television and desired a platform similar to theirs for herself. She aspired to appear on television and wanted to study television journalism, but her father strongly opposed it. If she wanted to further her education, she had two options: study Islamic Studies or nothing. Laiba says she felt her family would not allow her to evolve beyond their image of a woman—a demure, quiet, traditional lady whose identity is built on the man she is married to. Laiba wanted more than that. As a result, she fled from home and severed all relationships with her family, she says. Laiba, with only 2000 rupees in her possession, found herself alone in the bustling city of Peshawar.



Laiba says she first resided in a hostel where a friend lived. There she initiated her job search immediately. Finding NGOs and employment opportunities that aligned with her qualifications was a challenging task. However, Laiba was relentless. This was the first step to fulfilling her dream, she says, and soon after, she found a job. Furthermore, she successfully secured a

grant from an NGO to further her education. Laiba was making something of herself and building a platform on which she kept climbing. She began working as an intern for a small-time digital platform and excelled at the work. She was hired on a full-time basis and was the only woman in Peshawar doing active journalism on the road at the time, she says.

Laiba received online harassment and cyberbullying after uploading a video of a news report that featured her, but it did not bother her too much because she had much bigger concerns, such as keeping herself afloat and paying her bills and university tuition. *"I came into this field because of my childhood dream of being on TV. But when I came to TV, I realised that it is a lot more complicated than simply being in front of a camera,"* she says. She continued to take advantage of any opportunities that came her way, including training and freelance work.

Laiba says she became disheartened upon joining a news channel and immersing herself in the realm of mainstream media, as she witnessed the unfavourable conditions faced by women in the industry. She observed that mainstream news channels exclusively employed women to add colour to the screen for segments such as the weather report and only employed a single woman in their entire crew. She talks about her experience solemnly, "When you are a woman working in mainstream media you just get sent to be the weather lady. You were not given any space. This hurt me quite a bit because I had been watching these channels since I was a kid when there was a big boom in mainstream media." She was eager to express her opinion and have her voice heard by the world, she says. However, she was merely asked to read lines while standing in front of a teleprompter, surrounded by men who were engaged in more significant political affairs. This further added to her disheartenment, saying *"they don't believe women can have a voice in politics,"* so she seldom found employment opportunities that allowed her to express her opinions freely, she says. In reality, she was actively discouraged from it. During one of the trainings she attended, she says she casually discussed her mistreatment

as a woman in Peshawar. She says this information was relayed back to her office, which terminated her employment and informed other companies that she was a problematic woman and should not be hired. Individuals who express their opinions are subjected to blacklisting, and media organisations frequently contact a potential employee's former employer to assess their suitability. In the case of women, this inquiry often extends to evaluating their moral character. Every company that Laiba left felt its pride wounded by her decision to join another workplace, she says, and they would speak ill of her because of it. Laiba remained unemployed for some time, relying on freelance work and independent projects to support herself while also continuing to participate in training workshops and fellowships. Fortunately, she received a scholarship during her second year at university, greatly relieving her financial burden and making her living situation easier.

Despite her personal brilliance, her university experience was challenging. Laiba excelled at most things she attempted, including her university studies, but her teachers did not make things easy for her. A woman alone in a city is assumed to be a bad, immoral woman due to the misogynist attitudes in society and patriarchal beliefs about strict gender roles. In the absence of a male presence, Laiba was not receiving the recognition she deserved for the quality of her work, she says. She would also acquire the majority of her knowledge outside of lectures and classes, which further irritated some of her teachers. Consequently, she believes they would intentionally grade her exams extremely critically in class. Regardless, she continued to excel and pass her exams.

Laiba's biggest job was with *PTV*, Pakistan's State broadcast. *PTV* had recognized the quality of Laiba's work and had hired her as an employee, she says. As her first opportunity with the company, she was scheduled to broadcast nationwide as an anchor. The only problem, Laiba discovered, was that she would be working as a co-host alongside one of her teachers. Her teacher was not pleased with this, she says. He took it as a personal insult that

one of his students, a woman, would rise to the same position he held. The notion that Laiba could be perceived as his professional equal was too much for his ego to bear, and as a result, he terminated her employment prior to her starting her first day at work, she says. He later purposefully failed one of Laiba's papers, she adds, forcing her to pay extra money to retake the exam. Laiba was extremely hurt and angered by this. From the beginning, nothing she had to go through was fair. Yet, she soldiered on.

The absence of opportunities provided by her university was also a challenge. She noticed that the men around her, the ones who the teachers adored, were the only ones who were recommended for job opportunities, sent to trainings, and promoted as the cream of the university crop. This was blatant favouritism, she says. Laiba felt that despite doing better work than her male counterparts, they were presented with more opportunities. Laiba believes this was simply because she was unable to befriend the faculty, unlike others who would regularly socialise with them after class.

When Laiba's father contacted her after two years, he did not offer any apologies for his absence or ask about why she left. Her father reestablished a relationship with her as an equal after witnessing her living independently and working toward her aspirations, she says. He understood Laiba's work and could finally see how hard she had worked to get where she was. The rest of her hometown's community, however, did not give Laiba this opportunity. Any woman seen on television is often believed by conservative quarters to be involved in immoral activities, thereby leading to the development of extremely negative feelings about any publicly visible woman. Despite Laiba's attempts to explain things to them, they refused to listen. Laiba only considers her father and siblings to be family now, she says. She found a new family not long after she married her husband. Her husband not only understood her work, but he also possessed immense respect for her hard work and integrity.



Laiba began to get more jobs and eventually found herself living her dream. She was an anchor, front and centre on television, but it turned out that it was not what she wanted. She wished to speak her truth, to have her voice heard around the world. Although it was her voice, the words were those of someone else. She was placed in front of a camera and instructed to read a script word for word, she says. She was heartbroken and was left feeling confused and lost, she says. Even as a news anchor on television, she felt unheard. This was until Laiba realised that she was not suited to become a news broadcaster and that her true calling was as a field journalist and a reporter. A space in which she could pursue her own projects, write her own words, and develop her own narratives. She began working as an investigative journalist for international organisations and mainstream media, writing stories about women's issues. She wrote about domestic violence and transgender individuals and discovered what the little girl in her sitting in front of the television years ago, watching Kashif Abbasi, had desired to be. She was

finally realising her dream: to project her voice into the world. To let it be heard. "My identity is the stories I write," *Laiba* says.

When Laiba began focusing her efforts on investigative journalism and women's issues, she was quickly recognized and awarded for her achievements. Her reporting continued in visual media, as she created documentaries and short films. She received the *Bint-e-Hawa* award in recognition of her efforts on women's issues. This award was a joint effort between the KP government and a private organisation. When she produced her most significant documentary yet – *Dreaming to Survive* – she made a plan to continue making documentaries and advocating for women's issues.

Dreaming to Survive is a documentary about women's issues that follows the story of a transgender woman. This documentary shows the journey and struggle of a trans woman, from being molested as a child to struggling to make a living through prostitution, working with religious rituals, and eventually opening her own clothing boutique and becoming a fashion designer. This documentary emphasises the main character's humanity and her struggle to survive before building something for herself. Prior to making this documentary, Laiba had never interacted with a trans person in such an open way, she says. She entered this project with the unfortunate preconceived notion prevalent in her hometown that all trans people are prostitutes, but during the production Laiba says she was completely inspired by her subject's story. She was anxious about submitting her documentary, which she had created for the competition *Her Story*. Her documentary was screened throughout Pakistan, in addition to earning the highest award for her work, she says. *Dreaming to Survive* was screened in Quetta, Karachi, Lahore, and Peshawar. Laiba was extremely proud of her work, and she believes that the rest of her industry was equally proud of it. This was her biggest recognition yet and she felt on top of the world as if she were living her own dream through this documentary. Laiba says she intends to continue working on issues of transgender persons in Pakistan in the future, as they are central to her work on women's issues.



Farzana Ali has been a prominent mentor in Laiba's career. Farzana, the bureau chief of *Aaj TV*, extended an invitation to Laiba to join the organisation as a full-time employee under her supervision. For the first time, Laiba found herself working under a female supervisor. She felt a sense of relief as she was motivated, inspired, and driven to perform at her highest level under Farzana's guidance. She says she felt that she was finally permitted to prioritise her role as a journalist in the workplace for the first time, without having to consider her gender-based obstacles. Laiba was always afraid of being a subject of gossip and rumours, especially knowing how men talked about other women around them. Under the guidance of Farzana Ali, she says she found a support system to help navigate this. She also found a work environment that was designed with the utmost consideration for women's safety, actively disregarding and preventing the spread of any such rumours. Previously, Laiba would have to save up her vacation days, working Sundays and even Eid holidays, just to afford to attend training and workshops, but her employer would still be unhappy with her. However, while working for *Aaj TV*, Laiba says she is actively encouraged to attend training, workshops, and fellowships, and she is instructed to write about everything she learns at each one when she returns.

Nevertheless, her work environment is insufficient to resolve all of her issues. Other women journalists in Peshawar, such as Wagma Feroz, have also said that the city continues to be a hostile environment for journalists. Laiba also refers to the federal ban on reporting on the Chairman PTI, Imran Khan, which, according to her, caused the people of Peshawar to direct their anger towards journalists accusing them of not covering him or his part. . “She also talks about her general experience reporting in Peshawar, “people would scream at me to put on my dupatta properly, and one time someone grabbed my dupatta and threw it on my head.”

Lastly, Laiba says her greatest obstacle is not gender-based; rather, it is a struggle for freedom that has faced all Pakistani journalists in Pakistan. Laiba wishes to write about far more topics with far more candour than she is permitted to do when working in Pakistan. Pakistani laws and norms are far more restrictive than Laiba would like, and she frequently has to censor or cut down her work to fit within those constraints, she says. “You cannot work and write freely in mainstream media. You have many restrictions, from our editors.” She envies her peers who work for international organisations in Pakistan for their ability to write honestly, freely, and in an unfiltered manner. She wants that kind of freedom for herself.

Laiba's long-term goal is to establish her own digital organisation that provides a safe and secure environment for women, similar to the one she has been given through *Aaj TV*. One that hires new, young minds to work on important issues and publishes them online to reach the broadest possible audience. An organisation that creates a space where journalists can speak freely and openly without restraints, she says. She mentions the Indian company *Brut* as an inspiration for this project, and she wishes to see a similar company in Pakistan.



Laiba's life story could be titled *Dreaming for Success*, for she never stopped dreaming since she was a child. Dreams that she never let go of, and that she scratched and clawed to achieve. She put herself in the most vulnerable situation possible to make her dreams come true. Laiba succeeded and thrived due to her own brilliance. She had a talent for writing stories and was recognized for her abilities everywhere she went. At times, this talent garnered her success. Other times, this added to the complexity of her journey. She aspires to envision a future for Pakistan where all women, in her position, possessing the same determination as her, can attain the same level of success that she has achieved.

Mariyam Sadiqa: The Voice in the Desert

Mariyam Sadiqa is a pioneering journalist based in Tharparkar, Sindh, recognized as the only female reporter in the region. She works for Neo News, a prominent television news channel in Pakistan. Mariyam's role as a journalist is significant not only for her contributions to media but also for her representation of women, especially in rural areas like Tharparkar. Her work highlights local issues and brings attention to the challenges faced by the community, making her an important figure in regional journalism.



Mariyam Sadiqa has always been close to her family, especially her mother, who has been a staunch supporter of all of Mariyam's pursuits even when it appeared that the entire world was against her. All of Mariyam's family members are Pashtun, born in Mirpur Khas, and Mariyam describes them as being extremely conservative. She was never keen on following the traditional gender roles. She wanted to go to the office and delve herself into books and numbers. She would rarely do housework or play with her dolls, she says, but she enjoyed reading the newspaper every day. She also enjoyed listening to the radio. Mariyam's earliest dream was to become a radio announcer, as there was no television at the time. However, Mariyam's family did not provide formal

education to their female members. Mariyam became the first in her family to receive an education, she says, as her sisters did not have the opportunity. This was a result of Mariyam's protests and her mother's support in advocating for her studies. Mariyam's parents relocated to Mithi, a town in Tharparkar and she enrolled in grade 1 at the age of five. Mariyam thoroughly enjoyed her time in school, relishing the opportunity to engage in regular reading and learning. Mariyam says her mother too was overjoyed to witness her daughter explore her passions and advance in life beyond the expectations of any other woman in their family. However, Mariyam's education came to an abrupt end when, at the age of 13, she was married off to a 33-year-old police officer her father was acquainted with.

Mariyam was unable to hold a pencil or notebook for the following six years, during which she gave birth to four children, she says. She held contempt for how regressive the thinking of the individuals around her was. She desired to pursue further education, without her identity being solely defined as someone's wife. She was prohibited from engaging in any of her interests or leaving her house, she says. Mariyam was unable to attend the local news station's request to serve as a reader due to her father's objections to the male-dominated office environment. She was truly miserable during those six years, uncertain of what direction her life would take.

At the age of 19, Mariyam and her family relocated to the larger town of Tharparkar, where she was finally permitted to complete her education. She completed a substantial amount of education as soon as she was afforded the opportunity, completing grade 9, matric, and her undergraduate degree. Mariyam was naturally motivated to utilise her education, and she would frequently sneak out to the local station to work as a news reader for the radio, with the assistance of her mother, she says. This was among the only bits of agency Mariyam had at this time, and she remains extremely grateful to her mother for supporting her throughout her life. Mariyam's husband knew she was going to the local station, but despite his concern for her safety due to her

young age, he would not stop her. At least not initially. When it became clear that Mariyam was not going to stop or slow her journey into the media, her husband reacted strongly, she says. There was a stigma associated with women working in media—the locals considered women in media to be of bad or immoral character because the women showed their faces so publicly. Mariyam's husband called his family, and they all tried to persuade Mariyam to stop her pursuit of a career in media, she says. Mariyam remained unconvinced, and they could not simply confine her to her residence. After much discussion, it was decided that someone would accompany Mariyam to work to ensure her safety. Mariyam agreed, and her husband or brother would frequently drop her off at the local radio station in her father's police car. She finally felt like she had her family's support and was able to do what she had always wanted.



Despite her advancing career, her children remained a priority in her life, and she felt as if she was growing up with them, she says. She felt as if she was living two lives at the same time, constantly switching between them.

With Mariyam's successful entry into the media industry, she could now fully engage in her work with Sindhi newspapers. Initially, she commenced her career at *Awami Awaz*, where she contributed by writing journals, articles, and stories for the newspapers. Subsequently, she transitioned to *Muqadma*, where she continued her work for the next several years. Following this, she was granted her most significant opportunity when she appeared on television to report on the extensive floods that devastated Sindh in 2010, in collaboration with *Tharparkar Media*. This was Mariyam's first taste of field reporting. Despite the harrowing circumstances, she experienced a strong sense of camaraderie with her colleagues and was able to capture cherished memories and light moments during those harsh field reporting visits, she says. After a six-year tenure at *Neo News*, she transitioned to *Hum News*, where she served as a supervisor for an additional two years. Finally, she returned to *Neo News*, where she has now been for the past 12 years. She worked as a district reporter, travelling throughout Tharparkar and collaborating closely with local non-governmental organisations.

Mariyam first got involved with NGOs through a Turkish news platform, TRT, working for credit rather than pay, she says. She had to choose an NGO whose office she could walk to, as Mariyam would have preferred to avoid the spread of negative rumours and the ensuing conflict in the house. As they lived in a relatively small town, this did not pose an issue. Every NGO Mariyam would continue to work with would have a location she could walk to. Mariyam's husband's trust in her grew over time, allowing her to take on increasingly bigger projects, she says.

Mariyam's circumstances appeared to be improving. She was engaged in her work, she simultaneously held a prominent position on the radio, delivering news updates, and enjoyed the company of a good group of colleagues. However, her contentment was abruptly disrupted by an unforeseen tragedy. Following the death of Mariyam's husband, her life began to unravel.

There were no close relatives or siblings of her husband, she says. Mariyam's parents would not support her either, leaving Mariyam to have to raise her four children alone. The eldest among her children was 12 at the time. Following the 40-day mourning period at home after her husband's death, Mariyam departed with a determined resolve to do whatever it took to provide for her children, she says. She worked harder than ever before, to earn her livelihood as a news reporter, complete all of her house chores, and be able to provide for her children with a relatively stable home. Mariyam's income was insufficient, yet she allocated all of it towards her children, she says.



This is particularly remarkable given that Mariyam's monthly salary is only 10,000 rupees. Mariyam says regarding her small pay, *"It is barely anything. I buy a slipper and pay for my internet and my salary is gone."* Despite the abysmally low amount, this is still proportionally higher than the majority of

what other local news reporters earned, who were engaged in strictly volunteer work. Her travel expenses were not even reimbursed by her news agency, she says. If there is a newsworthy story on the other side of town, petrol prices must be paid out of pocket to get to the location and report on it, which upsets Mariyam greatly.

Mariyam's job did not necessitate an excessive amount of her time, she says; she was only occupied on specific days and had more flexibility with others. Speaking on her work, she adds, "I find this work really fulfilling. There is not a lot of work, and I have kids so I need all of the free time I can get for them." However, her personal life consistently required her attention. Even on slow workdays, Mariyam would be rushing back and forth from her home to her work to make sure she met all of her responsibilities. Mariyam also acquired the ability to work without a plan, as a newsworthy story could arise unexpectedly, necessitating her immediate departure from her duties to travel to the news site. Mariyam says she has learned to be able to think quickly and be ready to tackle any problem that came her way.

Throughout this, Mariyam has received little support. Additionally, she has never encountered any other woman in her field in the region, nor has she maintained any relationships with the local press club. Her only genuine allies have been her husband and her colleagues, with whom she has maintained close professional work relationships. She remains the only female journalist in Tharparkar.

One of Mariyam's most memorable experiences is attending workshops and training in Karachi or other regions of Sindh. She remembers spending time in Karachi with civil society organisation *CPDI* for a training where she interacted with a variety of professionals and experts. It significantly broadened her worldview by exposing her to a multitude of new perspectives, she says.

Mariyam has attained a moderate level of success in her career as a journalist, with her accomplishments serving as evidence of this. She has faced significant adversity in life, yet she has consistently maximised every opportunity presented to her. Today, two of Mariyam's children have successfully completed their college education. One of them is currently enrolled in college, while the youngest is pursuing a matric degree. Mariyam says she succeeded in providing education to her children, and she experiences a profound sense of pride for each of them as well as for herself. She was able to offer them the opportunities that she herself had to overcome significant obstacles to achieve. Mariyam is also establishing a social media presence for herself by creating a Facebook page under the name *Thar Diary* and a YouTube account under the name *Thar Vlogs*. She uses her vlogs as a kind of journal, showcasing her days living in Thar alongside serene footage of sceneries around Thar. Mariyam's YouTube account has achieved significant success, accumulating thousands of views and recently becoming eligible for monetization, which Mariyam finds to be an exciting prospect for the future of her journalism.

Attiya Akram: Manifesting the Spirit of Journalism

Attiya Akram is a pioneering female journalist from Balochistan who began her career in 2006 as a reporter for ARY News, making her the first female reporter in Quetta. Over her 17-year career, she has faced numerous challenges, including risks to her safety while covering sensitive topics.

Attiya Akram's story is one of spirit. She was born the only daughter to a Pashtun family in Quetta, where she completed her education without much struggle as her family wholeheartedly supported her pursuits, she says. She graduated from Balochistan University with a degree in Marketing and Communication before pursuing further education within Balochistan with a postgraduate study in International Relations. "My father has defined my life and goals," she says. Upon discovering her father's disappointment in not having a son and the subsequent criticism he faced from his brothers, Attiya dedicated herself to ensuring her father's name would be immortalised. She says, "I felt that while sons were important, daughters were also very important. Daughters can also keep the father's name alive, and this thought boosted me up a lot." Attiya's father always supported her and was a reliable rock behind her throughout his life, she says. With her father at her back, Attiya felt like she could take on the world. His stern nature instilled in Attiya a resolute determination to pursue her goals without any hint of complaint. Attiya is not fond of complaining or wishing that circumstances were more favourable to her. Regardless of the circumstances, she would continue to persevere until she achieved her objective. Ultimately, she says she would like to demonstrate to her father that having a daughter can be valuable and meaningful.

She pursued a career in journalism with the intention of ensuring that her father's name was prominently displayed on a platform of the highest calibre, she says. In 2006, Attiya joined *ARY News* shortly after entering the field, after learning of a job opening there through a friend. She has not left the company since. Although Attiya entered this field with motivation, she quickly developed

a passion for journalism, she says. She had the opportunity to travel extensively throughout Balochistan, work in close proximity to every sector and field of society and interact with influential individuals. Even when she was at home, she says she would find herself thinking about her stories and the upcoming workday. Work truly excites Attiya, she says. She enjoys working as a journalist and encourages others to follow her into the field and discover the joy of reporting for themselves.



Attiya's father provided ongoing support to her while she was working, she says, *"I am standing here today because of my father."* With her father's support, she experienced an overwhelming sense of empowerment, as if she possessed the ability to confront any challenge and emerge unscathed. Attiya's extended family strongly disapproved of her pursuing a career in journalism, she recalls. They asserted that women are only suited for the profession of teaching, and any other occupation is indicative of poor moral qualities. "This situation escalated into a contentious matter, leading to male members forcefully entering my house during the early stages of my career to get me to quit journalism," she says. They demanded that Attiya cease her work, threatening to discontinue their own work if she did not comply. Attiya's father remained relaxed even in such a hostile environment, she says. He informed his brothers that Attiya did not require permission from anyone to work as long as he was alive, that he trusted Attiya, and she was allowed to do whatever she wanted.



When Attiya's first story went live, she recalls watching the news with her father, "When I wrote my first story and they announced on TV that this was written by Atiya Akram, my dad had tears in his eyes." This was the first time Attiya had seen her father cry, she says, and she realised that she had accomplished her goal. Her father was extremely proud of her, and she was overjoyed to see him so happy and to be able to show him his name immortalised on national television. This strengthened her determination to continue working as hard as she could. Attiya's father passed shortly after, but her uncles never bothered her again. When her father died, Attiya felt her back grow cold, as if the mountain of strength behind her had vanished for the first time in her life, she says. She felt alone, afraid, and vulnerable. This only strengthened her resolve to keep working. She despised perceiving herself as a victim and took satisfaction in her ability to persevere regardless of the circumstances. She says, "I do not agree at all with this notion that women are weak. I, Alhamdulillah, am not weak or some poor lady at all."



Attiya has been lucky enough to be surrounded by extremely supportive and helpful men who have lifted her up. She sings the praises of her bureau chief at *ARY News*, Abdul Sattar Kakar, who treated her like a daughter and taught her everything she needed to get started in her field, she says. Later, Mustafa Khan Tareen became like an older brother to Attiya. Through her hard work and diligence, Attiya has gained the respect and admiration of everyone in her office and maintains that the men she has worked with from the very beginning treat her with the utmost respect, viewing her as a peer and an equal. She says she experiences a strong sense of camaraderie with her colleagues, regardless of gender, and feels secure in their presence. Attiya has nothing but praise for her coworkers and the way she has been treated by

them. She firmly believes that through hard work, integrity, and producing good journalistic work, she has risen to the top of her field.

Attiya joined Quetta Press Club after being invited by the press club leadership. She has a strong relationship with the press club and is frequently asked to accompany her seniors to workshops, trainings, and fellowships across the country, she says. Later, as she gained experience and continued to produce high-quality work, she was invited to join the executive body, which she gladly accepted. She feels her input is valued by the club, and she feels included in the decision-making process.

The safety of journalists is the most significant challenge, according to Attiya. She has witnessed new journalists plunge headfirst into dangerous situations, and numerous colleagues have been killed in blasts and attacks. She maintains that a journalist can remain secure as long as they adhere strictly to the professional rules of journalism and do not exceed their established boundaries. She has always followed safety protocols in her work and also advises any new journalist entering the field to do the same. She is of the opinion that journalists will never encounter any problems as long as they adhere to these principles and are aware of when to pursue a story and when to let it go.

Attiya asserts that journalism necessitates an immense amount of patience. She also claims that her male colleagues try to ensure her safety. People try to bother and tease Attiya in her field, she says, but she is not bothered. Attiya appears to have experienced harassment, leering, and threats at work, but she dislikes seeing herself as a victim, so she chooses to power through it all, appearing to possess the strength to overcome any obstacle. She says, "Problems do not break you; they make you stronger. They take away your weaknesses that would have caused you to stop progressing." She claims she has never been harassed by her coworkers, and she scoffs at the idea of slandering the names of her colleagues. She asserts that a woman will be

treated with the utmost respect as long as she maintains her proper boundaries with her coworkers and never infringes on them.

Attiya is someone who always finds a way to deal with whatever situation she finds herself in. She always looks at herself, she says. Confronted with difficulties, she chose to focus inward and fortified herself against the negativity. Her internal strength makes her navigate difficult situations with grace. Attiya is proud of her undying spirit and her ability to spread the positivity and joy of journalism to all.

Sadia Jahangir Durrani: Strength in the Face of Adversity

Sadia Jahangir is a Pakistani journalist currently working as a bureau chief at Public News. She is known for her resilience in reporting from a challenging and conflict-ridden region despite facing significant threats.

In a region where adversity reigns supreme, one woman's story is a shining example. From the rugged landscape of Balochistan emerges a tale of unwavering resilience and determination. Sadia Jahangir, who has shattered glass ceilings and defied conventions to reach the peak of her career, overcame numerous obstacles to become an inspiring role model for women in Balochistan.

The youngest sibling in her family, she was raised by her mother, a dedicated government teacher, as a single parent in Balochistan—a challenging task. Her eldest sister is a homemaker, and both she and their mother were instrumental in supporting the siblings' education and well-being, Sadia says. Throughout their journey, their mother served as the glue that held the family together, providing unwavering support and guidance.

Tragically, her mother passed away in 2005, leaving a profound void in Sadia's life. Although she had completed her undergraduate studies by then, her mother's illness necessitated that Sadia step in to care for her and manage the household. With no financial safety net, her sister's income became crucial for their survival. Consequently, Sadia felt compelled to abandon her academic aspirations to support her family during this difficult time.

Following her mother's death, Sadia found the strength to begin anew. Drawing inspiration from her mother's spirit and resilience, she resumed her education with renewed determination. Sadia's journey reflects not only her personal growth but also the enduring legacy of her mother's love and

sacrifice, motivating her to pursue her dreams and honour the values instilled in her throughout her upbringing.

Sadia was captivated by the news anchors she saw on television, she says, mesmerised by their ability to convey stories and connect with viewers. Although she had no idea what went on behind the scenes, her curiosity fuelled a determination to uncover the world of journalism. Despite the many obstacles she faced, she persevered in her pursuit of her dreams, bolstered by the unconditional support of her sisters.

While in her final year of her postgraduate studies, Sadia began an internship at *Geo News* in 2007. She was joined by four other girls from diverse backgrounds—two Persians, one Punjabi, and herself, a Pashtun. However, after just one week of training, the other three girls left due to security concerns, she says. Feeling torn and hesitant, Sadia's sisters sensed her uncertainty and encouraged her to continue. They urged her to embrace this opportunity and shine, and with renewed determination, Sadia accepted the challenge and poured her heart into the internship. The encouragement of her sisters was invaluable to her, as it instilled in her the importance of having individuals who have faith in her, particularly during the initial stages of her career, she says.

Sadia remembers when she sat across from one of Pakistan's leading journalists, Nasir Baig Chughtai, her interviewer, feeling a sense of determination wash over her. He addressed her with a stern expression and stated, "Sadia, I would like to clarify that I am not interviewing you as a female reporter; rather, I am interviewing you as a full-fledged journalist. Do not get caught up in gender stereotypes. In the field, you will not say 'I am a lady reporter,' but rather 'I am a reporter.'" His words resonated deeply with her, she says, and she knew at that moment that she was ready to take on this challenge.

Fast forward to her first day at *Geo News*, when Sadia received her first paycheck of 8,000 rupees. It was a humble beginning, but she was determined

to make a name for herself in the industry. As her hard work paid off, her salary was later increased to 15,000 rupees, affirming that her efforts were recognized, she says.

In 2009, Sadia got married, and she found herself torn between her career aspirations and her new role as a wife. Faced with the decision of whether to continue working or take a step back, she turned to her husband, also a journalist, who left the choice entirely up to her. Fortunately, her mother-in-law—a strong, working woman -- also encouraged her to pursue her career. Additionally, her sister-in-law provided constant support, reinforcing her resolve. With their encouragement, Sadia decided to continue working. Although it was not always easy to balance her professional and personal life, she knew she had made the right choice. As a reporter, she was committed to making a difference in the world, driven by her passion and dedication to her craft, she says. Sadia's story highlights the crucial role of family support throughout her journey, demonstrating how her loved ones consistently served as pillars of strength during every challenge she faced. From her early days as a student to her career as a reporter, her family was there to uplift and encourage her.

She faced numerous challenges as a working mother, juggling her career and family obligations, she says. Following the birth of her son in 2010, she considered leaving her job due to the demands of motherhood. However, she was determined to continue working and started again when her son was just two months old. Managing her workload and family responsibilities was a constant struggle. Her husband's work schedule often conflicted with hers, and they had to rely on each other to balance their duties, she says. Despite the challenges, she persevered and sought support from her loved ones.

In a society where women are still expected to bear the majority of domestic responsibilities, Sadia encountered a harsh reality at work. She recalls when she requested a Sunday off to care for her family and home, her boss

responded coldly, stating that it was not his problem. This interaction highlights the ongoing challenges working women face in balancing their professional and personal obligations, demonstrating that there is still a long way to go in providing adequate support for women in the workplace.

It is crucial for employers and society as a whole to recognize the heavy burden women carry when juggling work and family duties. Initially feeling frustrated and considering quitting, Sadia persevered. She later learned that her company had a policy allowing women to take time off when needed. Armed with this knowledge, she confidently asserted her rights and sought support from the Human Resources department. From that point forward, Sadia says she was able to balance her work and family responsibilities with a renewed sense of empowerment and self-assurance.

Sadia's experience highlights the importance of clear policies, open communication, and a supportive work environment for working women. By fostering a culture that values and supports its female employees, organisations can help create a more equitable and inclusive workplace that enables women to thrive both professionally and personally.

When her sister-in-law passed away, Sadia was confronted with the stark reality of how unsupported her workplace truly was. She had to attend the funeral, a deeply emotional event, and then rush back to the office, only to discover that her husband had already left to pay his respects. It was an incredibly difficult time for her, and she realised that she needed a change.

What struck her the most during this challenging period was the glaring pay disparity at her job. Despite being one of the more experienced journalists, she was earning only 35,000 rupees, while younger journalists who had joined after her were making between 50,000 and 60,000 rupees. This inequity felt like a bitter pill to swallow, especially as she reflected on her dedication and hard work, she says.

Amidst this turmoil, Sadia received an offer from *Samaa TV*, a chance that felt like a beacon of hope. Eager for a fresh start and the opportunity to be valued for her skills and experience, she jumped at the chance. This decision marked a significant turning point in her career, she says, igniting a renewed sense of purpose and determination. Sadia was ready to embrace new challenges and pursue an environment where her contributions would be recognized and rewarded.

As a woman journalist in Balochistan, she knew she deserved better. The conditions were treacherous, with bomb blasts and shootings occurring regularly. She worked in a high-stress environment, often covering traumatic events, yet her pay did not reflect the risks she took.

Determined to make a change, she decided to leave *Geo News* and join *Samaa TV*, where she began focusing on women's issues. However, even at *Samaa TV*, she faced challenges. One of her colleagues questioned why he was assigned only evening or night shifts, but she understood that she could not work those hours due to the critical situation in Balochistan. They were tasked with covering news of bombings and shootings, a heavy burden to bear. Despite these obstacles, she persisted, fully aware of the significance of her work and resolute in her commitment to effect change. Still, she says she could not shake the feeling that she deserved better pay and more support, given the challenges she faced as a woman journalist in such a volatile region.

Tragedy struck when two of her colleagues were martyred in the Alamdar Road bombings in 2013, and the weight of responsibility fell heavily on her shoulders. She vividly remembers that night; she had just finished her work and was saying goodbye to her colleagues outside the office as they headed out to cover the news. It was the last time she saw them.

When she returned home, she received the horrifying news of a bomb blast on Alamdar Road. Frantically, she tried to reach her colleague, but her attempts were in vain. Upon arriving at the scene, her worst fears were

confirmed—they were gone. The memory of that day still haunts her: the phone call, the gruesome discovery of body parts, and the trauma that followed. As the only woman in the office, she found herself alone in covering their funeral. While reporting, she heard the words "ALLAH HU AKBAR," which brought tears to her eyes. Despite the overwhelming grief, she continued to report on the incident, feeling as though she had lost family members.

Having spent countless hours with her now deceased coworker, sharing moments of joy and hardship, the bond they had shared was strong, and the pain of their loss cut deep. Even now, she often reflects on the thought that if something were to happen to her, her colleagues would be the first to come to her aid. The incident left an indelible mark on her, serving as a constant reminder of the risks and sacrifices that come with being a journalist in a conflict zone.

Another challenging assignment came her way when the Sardar Bahadur Khan Women's University came under attack in 2013. On that day, she had brought her four-year-old son to the office, and her heart was heavy with worry for his safety. Thankfully, she had dropped him off at home before heading to the scene, but the anxiety lingered.

As she arrived at the university, the situation was critical. The sounds of gunfire and screams filled the air, heightening her fear. In a moment of chaos, she witnessed the District Commissioner being shot right in front of her. Her heart raced as she found herself caught in the turmoil, but she says her journalistic instincts kicked in, helping her navigate through the chaos. Despite the danger, she reported live from the scene, providing crucial information to the public about the unfolding situation.

Those were trying times, but she persevered, determined to fulfil her role as a journalist. Her courage and resilience in the face of adversity shone through, and her reporting made a significant difference, she says. She proved

that even in the most challenging situations, a journalist's commitment to truth and accountability remains unwavering.

She has a vivid and strong memory of the day Rs. 5000 from her salary was deducted just because she had breakfast at her desk while working on a task, a stark reminder of the lack of support for women in the workplace. As a female journalist, she faced numerous obstacles, including the challenge of balancing the demands of her job with domestic responsibilities, childcare, and personal obligations. Unfortunately, many men in leadership positions fail to understand the magnitude of these responsibilities, further exacerbating the challenges women faced in achieving success.

As she navigated the difficulties of her profession, she encountered countless young women striving to make their mark. These women were often deprived of essential resources, such as transportation for field assignments, which left them vulnerable and marginalised. Knowing that they were enduring similar struggles, her heart went out to them.

She says she took comfort in her marriage and the flexibility it provided her with, despite the challenges. But the guilt of leaving her children behind lingered. She would never forget the image of her exhausted son, fast asleep in the car after school ended, waiting for her to finish work. The pain of not being present for important moments with her children still echoed profoundly.

Now, as the Bureau Chief at *Public News*, she works tirelessly, her days a whirlwind of deadlines and responsibilities. The weight of her duties often feels overwhelming, yet she persists, fuelled by a fierce dedication to her craft and a deep commitment to the truth. Each challenge she faces only strengthens her resolve, reminding her of the importance of her work and the impact it can have on her community. Her unwavering spirit serves as an inspiration to those around her, proving that even in the face of adversity, determination and passion can pave the way for success. She says her new role puts her in a

position where she can be a mentor for young women in journalism and provide them the support, she herself was unable to receive in her work.

The reality is that women are forced to sacrifice different aspects of their lives, perpetually torn between their professional aspirations and personal responsibilities. It is a difficult balancing act, one that requires immense strength and resilience. It is imperative for the society and the news industry to acknowledge and endorse women in their challenges, offering them the necessary resources and empathy to flourish.

Sadia's career recounts a story of unrelenting passion and unyielding strength. A mother, journalist, and woman, Sadia Jahangir is a force to be reckoned with.

Fauzia Kalsoom Rana: The Brave Champion of Women Journalists

Fauzia Kalsoom Rana is the founder and convenor of the Women Journalists Association of Pakistan (WJAP). She has been instrumental in highlighting and advocating for the rights of women journalists in Pakistan, particularly through initiatives such as the gender audit of Pakistani media organisations. Her work focuses on addressing gender disparities and improving working conditions for women in the media industry.

From the humble beginnings of a rural town to leading a massive organisation like the *Women Journalists Association of Pakistan (WJAP)* on a national scale, Fauzia Kulsoom Rana is a powerhouse and has seen it all. She asserts her presence and demands the respect that she rightly deserves, all the while maintaining a delicate balance between her strength, empathy, sharp intelligence, quick wit and zest for life.



Behind a strong and assertive woman is a girl who grew up enthusiastic for education and learning in a small town near Sahiwal. A younger Fauzia would cross three villages on foot and a canal by boat to get to school. She and her siblings regularly stood at multiple bus stops early in the morning to catch the local buses. Fauzia completed her matriculation in science and subsequently pursued her first year of college studies in Sahiwal, majoring in statistics, economics, and psychology. Following a relocation to Rawalpindi, she earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from a girls' college on Murree Road.

Fauzia is a born leader. During her college years, Fauzia demonstrated exceptional leadership skills, serving in various capacities such as head of college and class representative. Her active participation in co-curricular activities was noteworthy, as evidenced by her attainment of a Girls Guide certificate and involvement in debates and public speaking, where she frequently composed her own speeches. While she was in college, she was elected as the president of the student body by a significant margin. Subsequently, she enrolled at Quaid-e-Azam University, where she continued to exhibit strong leadership by holding the position of class representative.

Fauzia recalls an incident from her days at Quaid-e-Azam, which may have marked the start of her activism and quest for justice. In the final years of the course, she and her classmates noticed a troubling pattern during their viva exam. They observed that students who had a vague understanding of the concepts were receiving higher scores than those who demonstrated a stronger understanding of concepts. At the time, the concept of harassment was not widely recognized or understood the way it is now in 2024, Fauzia says. Rumours began to circulate that certain teachers were awarding higher marks to female students, even when the top-performing male students did not receive similar recognition.

Despite facing biases from some faculty members, Fauzia and her colleagues decided to bring this issue to the university administration's

attention. They proposed the idea of conducting open-room viva exams, where the evaluation process would be transparent, allowing everyone to witness it firsthand. This initiative aimed to ensure that only deserving students received the appropriate marks.

During this process, Fauzia and her peers uncovered evidence of a faculty member engaging in inappropriate conduct with the students. The individual was promptly reported to the Vice Chancellor and the Dean of the university, exposing their misconduct. Fauzia, along with her peers, successfully completed their semester. Fauzia's need for equity and equality can be observed throughout the course of her professional and personal life. She is renowned for raising her voice for the right reasons, thereby drawing attention to the injustices that plague her news community.

An experience that deeply resonated with Fauzia is also one she very proudly narrates. On this particular occasion, she needed to pay her electricity bill and decided to take her younger brother with her to the bank. They arrived at the bank around 4:30 pm, with thirty minutes remaining before closing time. Despite this, the officer on duty refused to accept the bill, claiming it was too late. Fauzia persistently attempted to reason with him, but he continued to insist that the bank's operational hours had ended. As others waited in line, Fauzia remembered her father's advice: "If a government office claims they cannot perform a task, ask them to put it in writing and stamp it." Acting on this wisdom, Fauzia requested the officer to provide a written and stamped statement confirming that the bill could not be accepted despite there being thirty minutes left before closing. Faced with this request, the officer relented and agreed to submit the bill. As a result, not only was Fauzia's bill accepted, but others in line were also able to complete their transactions. This experience filled her with a sense of satisfaction and faith that she could achieve anything she put her mind to.

It was also at this moment that Fauzia realised the spirit of journalism was already a part of her—the inherent drive to address and correct wrongs whenever she encountered them. Although she says she has faced significant challenges in the field of journalism, including low pay and multiple layoffs, these obstacles have not diminished her passion for the profession. She remains optimistic and steadfast as ever.

The setbacks Fauzia faced in her journalism career would question anyone's resolve, but her ability to stay firm appears to be her superpower, never quivering in the face of any challenge. As a producer for the renowned exposé show *Sar-e-Aam*, Fauzia discovered a tragic tale of a man who pretended to be a transwoman in order to lure women and sexually assault them. During the enactment of this story, Fauzia was caught in the video, and her name was aired as part of the credits on the show.

As a result, a prevalent rumour circulated suggesting that Fauzia was involved in the incident as one of the women targeted by the perpetrator, causing her colleagues to doubt her integrity, she says. The news of this reached her family who also berated her and expressed suspicion about the nature of the activities she undertook in her career. This time was undoubtedly one of the most difficult ones in her career, she says. She wanted to quit journalism altogether but made the decision of exclusively working in radio for a few months to minimise public exposure. For her, society and the media industry let her down once again, as a woman but also as a journalist, receiving no appreciation for uncovering a story that ultimately benefitted the survivors of sexual assault.



A few years later, Fauzia returned to the mainstream media. This time she was more cognizant of the kind of steps women in the industry must take to keep themselves safe, while also raising voice for the injustices committed against them. She says she also has a strong conviction regarding the workplace harassment that women experience, and she particularly emphasises women's intuition when it comes to identifying individuals in the industry who mistreat them. She considers men who make inappropriate comments towards other women journalists under the guise of "compliments" to be a significant challenge that women in the media industry encounter. She consistently adopts a firm stance against influential men who may have harmed her or her female colleagues.

Fauzia's passion for journalism and her commitment to women's empowerment led to the creation of the *Women Journalists Association of Pakistan* (WJAP) in 2021 and is one of the earliest and largest alliances of women journalists across the country. The aim of WJAP is to promote equitable representation and create a more supportive professional environment for women in media by providing advocacy, networking opportunities, and

resources. It is the culmination of over 15 years of activism by Fauzia for women journalists in Pakistan, she says, and she has spearheaded the alliance to grant it the recognition it deserves across the media industry in Pakistan. Through WJAP, women journalists have been provided capacity-building training to improve their work, in addition to advocacy against layoffs and mistreatment.

Prior to the formation of WJAP, Fauzia was a member of the *Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists* (PFUJ) and served as an active delegate for over a decade. She was also one of the few women to do so. Furthermore, she also held the position of Joint Secretary at the National Press Club in 2019.

In 2014, Fauzia, along with her colleagues, had organised a conference on May 3rd in Lahore to commemorate National Press Day in collaboration with the *Aurat Foundation*, *Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF)*, the *NPC*, and *RIUJ*. Fauzia says they were also graciously hosted by the late Asma Jahangir during this conference, a memory she cherishes to this day. Fauzia found herself, once again, to be the only woman among the attendees at the conference. The event aimed at addressing the challenges faced by journalists and advocating for their rights in discussions with the government. Despite the media freedom ordinance introduced during the tenure of now late former President General (retd) Pervez Musharraf, women's representation in the media remained significantly limited.

To address this issue, Fauzia and the organising committee invited approximately 100 women journalists from across Pakistan to participate in the conference. The primary objective was to advocate for the reservation of seats for women within the field of journalism, she says. As a result of these efforts, they successfully secured the allocation of four reserved seats for women journalists at the press club in Islamabad. While the NPC adopted this decision, Fauzia believes that its full implementation remains pending, and she has vowed to do everything in her power to fix this.

Fauzia's career has also been punctuated with numerous challenges of job insecurity faced by a majority of media workers in the past decade. During the COVID-19 pandemic, this issue peaked, and even though she, along with many others, were overworked, they were eventually laid off and not given their due wages and salaries. Prior to this happening, an informal group of women, including young female journalists, had already been formed.

However, a complaint arose against a prominent member of this group, alleging that she had received significant financial gains from a controversial source. Fauzia, who was active within the NPC leadership at the time but not personally acquainted with the accused member, witnessed how these allegations led to a series of internal disputes. Several women, disenchanted by the allegations, departed from the group, placing Fauzia in a challenging situation once more. Nevertheless, she persevered.



During this period, when female journalists were terminated from their positions, the matter was not openly acknowledged or discussed within or

outside of the media industry. Fauzia experienced this herself when she did not receive her salary for seven months, despite the press club president's responsibility to ensure payment. Similarly, online platforms often failed to pay their employees following layoffs. Fauzia encountered an immense personal tragedy during this period: her brother's passing. The emotional toll of this loss meant that she was unable to follow up on her unpaid dues, leaving her without a salary for five to six months. Fauzia recalls this period as extremely bleak and challenging, but this was still not enough to discourage her from pursuing this matter not just for herself but for others who had faced similar issues at the hands of media houses.

These troubles, the lack of transparency and the unfair treatment of employees spurred the creation of WJAP. However, despite Fauzia mobilising people around her to carry out protest demonstrations to demand fair wages and payment of salaries, they did not receive the payments they were owed. This money was directed elsewhere, without the knowledge of Fauzia and her peers who remained aggrieved, she says. The need for an all-women group at this time was further realised and Fauzia pushed her agenda despite pushback from more powerful male colleagues in the trade union and press club politics. In Fauzia's opinion, this alliance has been seen as a threat by the older journalists' groups that are led mostly by men, or women that are allied with these men and those who serve their interests.

Regardless of the rejection WJAP received, Fauzia remains grateful for many other colleagues, both male and female, who supported the group and even provided office space for her and her peers to come and work from. Witnessing the alliance taking off, she says more and more women continue to become a part of WJAP, which is a testament to Fauzia's dedication and resolve. Fauzia's story is an inspiration to us all, especially to those women who are often silenced or deemed "problematic" for raising their voices. Fauzia claims that being called "loud" is taken as a compliment by her and it means

she will not stand for any wrongdoing inflicted on her or any woman she stands for.

As an active and staunch supporter of women's rights, Fauzia Kalsoom Rana is ambitious to take the cause to a higher level. She believes that not only women journalists but every woman, who is being deprived of her rights needs awareness and protection, and she goes to stand for them. After having covered a strenuous and long path in the field of women's rights, Fauzia believes that it is just a beginning, and being an active part of *Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCPP)*, she will continue her struggle.

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