

## Gender in Journalism

### Freedom Network Pays Tributes to Gender in Journalism to Mark International Women's Day - 2015

Miss Sadia Qasim Shah is working in one of the two most dangerous conflict-ridden and conservative regions of Pakistan – northwestern Khyber Pakhtunkhwa near the border with Afghanistan. But she is not ready to give up her struggle for continuing journalism in the face of an adverse environment.

"I'm not disheartened over the situation I am facing where I try to take advantage of being female journalist," Ms Sadia was talking to Freedom Network [FN], Pakistan's first media watchdog organization for this report on the state of 'Gender in Journalism' in Pakistan on the eve of the International Women's Day falling on Sunday (March 8).

Pakistan is among the countries declared as one of "the most dangerous for journalists" where the state of women's rights leaves much to desire improvement. Similarly, female journalists are finding an absence of policy by the media organizations and the state to encourage gender in journalism adding to their problems. Low percentage of females in this difficult profession i.e 7%, shows why it's difficult to be a female journalist.

Pakistan saw a sudden surge in the number of journalists from 2,000 in 2002 to 18,000 in 2014. The jump was made possible after the media was liberalised by military dictator General Pervez Musharraf. The boom in media, electronic in particular, also helped females to join the field. However, women journalists till today face not-so-friendly environment and discrimination by the media organizations and the state appears not helping them make their presence felt.

Extreme security threat, absence of policy encouraging women in media, poor working conditions and poor wages are issues affecting this vital growth.

It's only in major urban centres such as Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad, Peshawar and Quetta that some female presence is felt. A small exception could be some cities in the Punjab and Sindh provinces. However, one may not find women journalists in places except Balochistan's Quetta and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Peshawar.

The tribal areas bordering Afghanistan saw an abrupt demand for local journalists after the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States. These areas earned spotlight for al-Qaeda and Taliban militants. But female journalist in these areas is still a dream.

Feminists have since long been arguing that the media in Pakistan is not gender sensitive and women's perspectives in news story is mostly missing. Under-representation of women in media means almost half of Pakistan's population – some 90 million are not properly spoken for.

Despite setbacks to gender representation in Pakistan, some positive developments have been women holding important position of editor. However, no woman is seen working as director news or assignment editor at any TV channel.

### **'Lack of encouragement'**

"I don't think there is an environment which encourages women to do journalism," Ms Sadia, working with *Dawn* newspaper in Peshawar and Washington-based Pushto language *Deewa Radio*, went on to add. "Usually, one woman is working in one media organization and it suggests the media houses have devised a policy to create one position for gender," she believes. Ms Sadia refers to lesser number of women in media in her province as evidence that being female journalist "you have to face certain problems."

Ms Javeria Tareen, a female journalist from Balochistan, seconds Ms Sadia. "Female journalists do not have many options to excel in the profession," says Ms Javeria, who hails from insurgency-hit Balochistan province where the media is under attack from all sides for a long time.

"When I started my career in journalism I was desirous of becoming a crime reporter. But I was told crime beat is reserved for men," the young journalist who just returned from the US after completing her fellowship regrets.

What is common among these journalists is a desire to work as investigative reporters. However, they seem disappointed to learn that they "better stay away from dangerous situations."

Hence, "no investigative journalism by women at all," she says.

Award-winning TV anchor Ms Asma Shirazi echoes similar feelings. "There is no trend to give women opportunities in journalism," she bluntly says. "Ironically, demand for glamorous role for women has increased, but journalistic roles nosedived," Ms Asma, the first Pakistani TV journalist to win Peter Mackler Award last year in Washington, adds.

"No equal opportunities are there for women in journalism. They face every type of harassment and challenges. The women in journalism stand today where they were 15 years back," she says looking seemingly disappointed.

With the state seemingly not protecting rights of all citizens they themselves are fighting for their rights. Fauzia Shahid is among those women who is struggling hard, even today, to get recognition for her work despite being in the field for the last 40 years.

Stepping in the profession on March 8, 1975, she is the only female in South Asia to have served the journalists' representative body as general secretary. She won elections to the position of general-secretary of Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists in 1997 union elections. "The liberal and open posture of our society has changed and this has affected the growth of

women in journalism - both from professional capacity and numerical perspectives," she argues.

The veteran journalist finds young female journalists rightly "ambitious" saying women journalists' stories have less "bounced back" than their men counterparts. "Women journalists are eyeing top positions in journalism but they rely on male journalists. This approach may not help them. In journalism, you need first-hand information."

She says thriving TV journalism is attracting young women but they get exposed to dangers.

What makes Fauzia worried is growing influence of money in journalism. "What is affecting professional capacity is the increasing trend of money in TV journalism," Ms Fauzia argues while referring to "attractive offers" from a TV channel yet to be launched.

Changing media environment means women are least interested in print media. Ms Sadia says, "You may not find more than one female journalist in two or three national-level print media organizations. However, more are attracted by TV channels for simple reason of glamour and better wage packages.

#### **'Culture barriers'**

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan are unique. With conservative background, women face more restrictions to work in public places in the two provinces. "Our culture norms make our work somehow harder. You need to go out and meet men also. But our culture norms don't allow that," Ms Sadia points to social problem affecting her professional work.

However, the culture barrier is helping female journalists when men find it difficult to do stories on women issues. "I take advantage of this situation by exploiting the status of being a female."

#### **'Bravery'**

Working as female journalist in Quetta where security environment is extremely volatile for many reasons needs a big heart. Ms Javeria has her own challenges. "I was interested to do a story on Chechen women who were killed in an encounter with law-enforcement personnel in Quetta some years back. But Akhtar Mirza, *Jang* newspaper's resident editor in Quetta, stopped me from doing this story saying: This is very sensitive issue and don't get involved," she narrates.

She is among four to five female journalists working in Quetta where two journalists were shot dead in their office in August last year while others got caught between the state and non-state actors.

Ms Sadia takes all possible measures to stay safe in Peshawar where the state-run intelligence agencies can pick you from just outside your office or Taliban can plant bomb beneath your car

to blow you up. However, attraction by TV journalism also takes female journalists closer to dangers.

“Female journalists working in TV channels face more safety risk than those working in print media,” Ms Fauzia accepts. Several female journalists working with TV channels faced harassment from workers and supporters of Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf party last year during the agitation former cricket Imran Khan led against the federal government.

***Freedom Network thanks volunteers who helped talk to some female journalists while preparing this short report on ‘Gender in Journalism.’***