

JOURNALISM IN GILGIT BALTISTAN

STATE OF MEDIA FREEDOMS,
ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND
SAFETY OF JOURNALISTS AND
OTHER MEDIA PROFESSIONALS
IN GILGIT BALTISTAN >
THE WAY FORWARD

Pakistan

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Executive Summary

This report examines the state of media freedoms in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB), the mountainous northern region in Pakistan with a rich history of journalism but currently facing significant challenges that hinder free expression and the safety of journalists. Drawing on desk research, focus group discussions, and interviews conducted in late 2024, the report delves into the evolution of media in GB, the constraints on media freedoms, threats to free speech, the precarious service structure for journalists, gender disparities within the profession, and the overall safety of journalists in the region.

In the contemporary media environment, national and international outlets have correspondents in GB but offer limited coverage, often focusing on tourism rather than addressing deep-rooted socio-political and economic issues. The presence of national media is limited, and significant gaps in coverage persist. Broadcast media, particularly FM radio, lacks diversity and offer limited current affairs or news programming. Print media, while barely sustainable, is heavily dependent on government advertising revenue, which compromises editorial independence. Moreover, many newspapers are “dummy” publications existing solely for advertisement purposes.

Like elsewhere in Pakistan, digital media has emerged as a significant platform for current affairs in GB but faces substantial obstacles. Limited internet access, unreliable services from the sole provider—the Special Communications Organization (SCO)—and financial constraints hinder its growth. Notable digital platforms like Pamir Times (PT), Gilgit Media Network (GMN), and Ibex Media Network (IMN) strive to fill the information gap but struggle with sustainability due to financial and technical challenges. Despite these hurdles, digital media continues to play a crucial role in disseminating information and engaging the local population.

Media freedoms in GB are constrained by geographic isolation, a restrictive political environment, suffocating socio-economic conditions, inadequate infrastructure, and increasingly coercive state oversight. Local voices and concerns remain underrepresented, and national and international media offer superficial coverage, neglecting critical regional issues. Journalists face

threats from various actors, including businesses, politicians, bureaucrats, and state-owned enterprises and actors. Bureaucrats, in particular, pose significant challenges due to their influence and the financial vulnerabilities of journalists.

Ethnic and sectarian pressures exacerbate the risks faced by journalists, who may be targeted based on their ethnicity or religious background. Reporting on sensitive topics such as security issues invites additional scrutiny and potential retaliation from state agencies. Physical and psychological threats are common, with instances of harassment, intimidation, and violence reported by media professionals. Despite these challenges, there exists a sense of solidarity among journalists, though it offers limited protection.

The poor service structure for journalists in GB is a significant concern. Many journalists are unpaid or receive minimal compensation, leading to financial insecurity and deterring new talent from entering the profession. Dependence on government advertising compromises editorial independence, as critical reporting can result in the withdrawal of financial support. The absence of formal contracts, job security, and employment benefits undermines the profession's viability. Educational opportunities are limited, with only one journalism degree program available in the region, restricting professional development.

Gender disparities further impede media freedoms in GB. Women constitute a minuscule fraction of journalists, facing societal pressures, gender-based violence, and financial challenges that discourage participation in journalism. Underrepresentation of women leads to inadequate reporting on gender-specific issues such as domestic violence and honour killings. Societal and financial barriers make it difficult for women to pursue careers in journalism, and the lack of an enabling environment hinders their ability to contribute meaningfully to the media landscape.

The safety of journalists in GB is compromised by various forms of censorship, legal harassment, intimidation, and threats of dismissal. Although regulatory bodies like the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA) lack formal jurisdiction in GB, they influence media operations, leading to ad-hoc censorship. Denial of access to information further hampers journalistic work, as government officials often refuse to provide necessary data. Self-censorship is widespread due to fear of repercussions, especially when reporting on sensitive topics.

Legal harassment and intimidation are prevalent, with journalists and activists facing charges under various laws. Media outlets critical of the government may

face withdrawal of advertisements and other financial pressures. Reports of physical threats, home raids, and forced disappearances of journalists highlight the severity of the situation. The lack of an independent regulatory framework exacerbates these issues, leaving journalists vulnerable to both state and non-state actors.

In conclusion, the media environment in Gilgit-Baltistan is fraught with challenges that severely limit freedom of expression and the press. Journalists operate under constant threat from various actors, face financial instability, and lack institutional support. Gender disparities further exacerbate the situation, limiting diverse perspectives in media coverage. These factors contribute to a media landscape where self-censorship is common, and critical socio-political issues remain underreported.

Addressing these challenges is crucial for the development of a free and independent media in Gilgit-Baltistan. Empowering journalists through institutional support, enhancing media freedoms, supporting digital media, promoting gender equality, ensuring journalist safety, supporting an enabling access to information regime and fostering professional development are essential steps toward creating a more informed society and strengthening democratic processes in GB.

Chapter 2

Governance and Legal Framework in Gilgit-Baltistan

Gilgit Baltistan's historical trajectory has been shaped by its remote geography, strategic location, and socio-political dynamics. Before independence, GB experienced three distinct historical phases: the pre-7th century era, characterized by limited accessibility; the monarchs' invasion period (8th-18th centuries); and the European colonization and Dogra rule era (1840-1947). Each phase left a lasting impact on the region's governance and socio-political fabric.

After achieving independence from Dogra rule, GB aligned with Pakistan. This process unfolded over several months, with key regions such as Yasin, Gilgit, Hunza, and Nagar joining Pakistan by the end of 1947. Baltistan followed in 1948. Despite this affiliation, GB's constitutional status has remained ambiguous. The region is officially treated as part of the broader Kashmir dispute, with Pakistan reluctant to grant it provincial status due to potential implications for its stance on the Kashmir issue.

GB is not represented in Pakistan's upper (Senate) or lower (National Assembly) houses. This absence of representation highlights a significant governance gap, leaving the region's residents without a voice in national decision-making processes.

The governance of GB has undergone significant changes, reflecting efforts to provide local representation and administrative autonomy. Initially governed directly by Pakistan's federal authorities, the region was managed under the Ministry of Kashmir Affairs and Northern Areas (KANa). Over the time, reforms introduced advisory councils, leading to the establishment of legislative bodies.

The first administrative structure for GB was the Advisory Council, established in 1970. This council, composed of 21 members, represented different areas within GB. In 1975, Prime Minister late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto introduced the Northern Areas Council Legal Framework Order, marking a shift toward more structured governance. This order abolished the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR) and

introduced elected representation in the Northern Areas Council, which evolved over successive terms.

The Northern Areas Legislative Council replaced the earlier council in 1994 under Prime Minister late Benazir Bhutto's government. The Legal Framework Order of 1994 expanded the council's powers and introduced party-based elections. However, despite these developments, ultimate authority remained with federal government, limiting the council's autonomy.

In 2000, the Northern Areas Legislative Council was upgraded to a legislative assembly, granting it limited legislative powers. This transformation was formalized under the Gilgit Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order of 2009, which renamed the region as Gilgit Baltistan and established the Gilgit Baltistan Legislative Assembly (GBLA). The assembly gained authority over 61 local matters, while the position of Chief Minister was created to lead regional governance. Despite these advances, the federal government retained significant control, and GB remained excluded from Pakistan's constitutional framework.

The governance framework of GB has critical implications for fundamental rights, particularly press freedom and freedom of expression. The absence of constitutional status limits the region's ability to implement comprehensive legal protections for these rights. Journalists and media outlets face significant challenges, including threats, censorship, and a lack of institutional support. The Gilgit Baltistan Empowerment and Self-Governance Order of 2009, while a step forward, does not explicitly address press freedom or safeguard journalists. Security concerns and geopolitical sensitivities further exacerbate these issues, leading to self-censorship and restricted reporting on sensitive topics.

Freedom of expression in GB faces similar constraints. While the legislative assembly provides a platform for local governance, its limited powers prevent effective advocacy for greater rights. Civic participation remains restricted, and activists advocating for constitutional integration often encounter legal and administrative hurdles.

GB's strategic location at the crossroads of South Asia, Central Asia, and China adds complexity to its governance and rights landscape. The region plays a key role in initiatives such as the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), enhancing its geopolitical significance. However, this has also led to increased security concerns and restrictions on information flow, further limiting press freedom and civic expression.

Pakistan's stance on GB as part of the Kashmir dispute complicates efforts to address these challenges. Any move to grant constitutional status or expand local governance powers is viewed as potentially weakening Pakistan's position on Kashmir, contributing to the region's governance limbo.

Chapter 3

Introduction

The media landscape in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB) has a rich history that dates back to the pre-Partition days, with early contributions to papers like *Zamindar*, which had a correspondent in the region during that time. However, freedom of expression remained restricted for a long time due to the imposition of the Frontier Crimes Regulation (FCR). In response, many literate people from GB began publishing newspapers in other parts



GILGIT: A view of Gilgit Press Club. Photo by Freedom Network

In 1956, a major development occurred when *Bad-e-Shumal*, a newspaper focusing on GB's issues, was launched from Lahore by journalists from the region. This marked a pivotal moment for media in GB, as it allowed regional issues to gain visibility. Further advancements followed in 1972 when the GB community based in Karachi launched the *Sada-e-Baltistan*, a fortnightly newspaper aimed at highlighting local concerns. Another milestone was

reached in 1988 with the establishment of the weekly newspaper *Siachin* from Rawalpindi. *“These publications were instrumental in creating a media voice for the people of GB,”* says Qasim Nasim, CEO of Siachin Times, a web channel.

In terms of modern media, key Pakistani electronic and print media have correspondents stationed in GB, and they report regularly on events in the region. Qasim Nasim points out that international media also covers GB through local stringers, with outlets like the BBC and *Arab News* having representation in the region. He adds that international channels often gather information from local journalists to report on GB’s issues.

However, in view of many journalists, the presence of national media remains limited in GB, and significant gaps in coverage persist. Jamil Nagri from *Dawn News in Gilgit* notes that *“National media has a limited presence in GB. In terms of coverage, you will hardly find hard-hitting stories reported from the region. The stories covered are usually soft stories, and deep-rooted political, constitutional, and health issues do not find coverage in national mainstream media.”* According to Nagri, *“National media looks at GB as a tourist destination, and media outlets don’t have much interest in the area because they don’t have economic interests or a large viewership in the region due to its small population.”*

Local voices and concerns remain underrepresented. Aqeela Bano, a civil society activist from Hunza, highlights, *“Our real issues don’t get highlighted due to the absence of effective media coverage.”* Media coverage in GB tends to focus predominantly on calamities and tourism, as these are the stories that attract attention from both national and international outlets. This selective focus leaves many critical local issues unreported.

In addition to limited national media presence, FM radio in GB has also struggled to provide diverse content. Shabbir Mir, Bureau Chief at *Hum News* TV channel in Gilgit, explains that *“FM 99 was the first FM channel in GB. It had a license for entertainment. FM channels are mostly entertainment channels. No current affairs or news FM channel exists in GB.”*

Print media in GB, while sustainable, largely depends on advertising revenue from the government. Shahid Nadeem of the Gilgit Media Network explains, *“Funds available with the Information Department go to local newspapers and national media in the form of advertisements. National media does not enjoy much influence here because they rarely cover GB’s issues.”*

However, despite this financial model, or perhaps because of it, many

newspapers in the region are merely “dummy” publications, existing solely for purposes of collecting public sector advertising shares. According to Nadeem, of the 33 newspapers printed in the region, only eight or nine are actively produced and circulated within the region.



SKARDU: Journalists in discussion about state of press freedom in Gilgit -Baltistan. Photo by Freedom Network

Digital media has grown in significance in GB but faces numerous challenges. According to Shahid Nadeem of the Gilgit Media Network, *“75% of residents in Gilgit-Baltistan don’t have internet access that meets international standards. Fast, secure, and easy internet service is not available to the common citizen.”* This lack of reliable internet access hinders the region’s ability to develop a robust digital media ecosystem. Nadeem explains that there is only one internet service provider operating in GB, and most digital channels are based in Gilgit and Skardu. *“Pamir Times,”* he adds, *“was the first digital news platform that started nearly two decades ago, and it remains one of the most influential.”*

The region’s only internet service provider, Special Communications Organization (SCO), presents its own set of challenges. Mohammad Hussain Azad from Dunya Media Group shares the frustrations that come with the unreliable service: *“The promised 4G is slower than 3G in this area. Since SCO is an military-based institution, it is heavily controlled. When we need internet the most, it is either slowed down or shut off completely. It becomes very difficult to send reports and materials to our channels.”*

Jamil Nagri from Dawn News channel explains that digital media is hindered by the lack of a private sector and limited subscribers. *“There aren’t many*

subscribers or followers due to the smaller population. We need subscribers to monetize. No large platforms are operating in the area, but people are talking, and they are starting to engage with digital platforms.”

Pamir Times is the oldest digital platform in the region. One of the key players in GB’s digital media landscape is the Gilgit Media Network (GMN), which was set up in 2018. Muhammad Tahir Rana, the CEO of GMN, notes that the platform in 2024 had around 235,000 followers from the 1.7 million population of GB. *“Our content covers political, social, and cultural issues from across GB. We also face significant financial and technical challenges in sustaining our operations,”* he adds. GMN also produces a range of content, including dramas, documentaries, and paid media, with monthly expenses reaching PKR 200,000.

Another prominent digital platform in the region is the Ibex Media Network, which focuses on social and political stories from GB. Muhammad Irshad, Business Manager of Ibex Media Network, explains, *“We operate across all digital platforms and focus on content related to tourism, border trade, and fisheries, among other topics. We have offices in both GB and Islamabad, and our content reaches audiences in over 100 countries.”* Ibex employs 22 staff members across its offices, and their reach continues to expand both locally and internationally.’



GILGIT: Muhammad Irshad (L), business manager of Ibex Media Network, is briefing team of Freedom Network. Photo by Freedom Network.

Despite these advancements, Kiran Qasim, a woman journalist with *Daily Ausaf* in Gilgit city, notes that digital media in GB often falls short of addressing critical local issues. *“Media persons tend to focus on the beauty of the area, but they hardly talk about real problems. For instance, issues like sewage flowing into rivers are not discussed.”* Qasim highlights the difficulties of making digital media sustainable in GB, where the private sector is almost non-existent.

She concludes, *“Digital media is hugely important, but sustaining it is a major challenge given the lack of corporate sector.”*

3.1 Methodology

Freedom Network collected this data through desk research as well conducting detailed focused group discussions (FGDs) and interviews of key informants in the Skardu, Gilgit and Hunza regions within GB in late 2024.

Chapter 4

State of Media Freedoms in Gilgit-Baltistan (GB)

The media landscape in GB faces numerous challenges, rooted in the region's geographic isolation, political environment, and socio-economic conditions. Modern-day media freedom remains constrained by a lack of infrastructure, limited access to national media, and growing state oversight.

In recent years, both national and international media coverage of GB has been largely superficial, focusing more on tourism and natural beauty than on the region's deep-rooted socio-political and economic issues.

Digital media has emerged as an important platform for local voices. However, with limited internet access, unreliable services from the region's sole provider, the Special Communications Organization (SCO), and financial challenges, even digital media faces significant barriers to growth.

In this context, the state's control over media and the threats faced by journalists from both government actors and private entities further stifle freedom of expression. Journalists reporting on sensitive topics—ranging from political issues to security matters—often face harassment, censorship, and legal challenges. Local voices like those of Ali Ahmad and Muzaffar Hussain highlight the dangers associated with reporting against entrenched interests such as state-backed construction projects or religious extremism. The overall lack of financial and institutional support, combined with these threats, presents an increasingly hostile environment for journalists working in the region.

The following sections delve deeper into the specific threats to free speech, the poor service structure for journalists, and the gender disparities that impact media freedom in Gilgit-Baltistan.

4.1 Threat Actors to Free Speech

Journalists in Gilgit-Baltistan do not face the same kinds of threats commonly experienced by their counterparts in other parts of Pakistan. However, specific

groups still pose significant challenges to press freedom. According to Javed Iqbal, General Secretary of the Gilgit-Baltistan Union of Journalists, *“The main threats we face here come from businesses, politicians, and bureaucrats. Bureaucrats, in particular, are the most threatening because journalists in this area are financially weak, making us easy targets. You cannot speak out against powerful business interests without risking retaliation.”* He adds that, while many people feel afraid, there is growing dissent, with more individuals beginning to question those in power.

Baba Jan of the Awami Workers Party highlights threats from state-owned construction projects in the region. He notes, *“State-owned contracting workers operating in the area are above accountability and criticism. Construction is also happening in environmentally sensitive areas, like within the rivers, and when you raise your voice against it, you might receive threatening calls from officials.”*



KARIMABAD: A woman passer-by walks through a road in front of Hunza Press Club. Photo by Hunza Press Club

The problem of restricted media freedom is further compounded by social and geographic identities in the region. Ali Ahmad, a journalist from Hunza Valley, elaborates on the localized nature of threats: *“Threats often emerge due to geographical and ethnic issues. If you report on an incident in a particular area,*

local residents may get angry for highlighting their region in a bad light. Once you report the news, people try to identify your ethnicity or religious background and interpret the story through that lens. This creates a threat, and I have been told not to report on certain areas."

Journalists in border areas face additional scrutiny, particularly when reporting on security-related issues. Mohammad Hussain Azad, a journalist from Skardu, shares his experience: *"We face immense pressure when we report on incidents like the Gayari avalanche. Sometimes, we can't even report positive news if it is linked to security. We often resort to self-censorship. Even digital media is monitored now. If we report on something like the Frontier Works Organization (FWO) building the Gilgit-Skardu Road, it gets turned into a security issue. The same happens if we report anything critical about the Special Communications Organization, which controls internet services here."*

Azad recalls a specific instance in 2012 when an incumbent chief minister openly threatened him at a press conference, demanding that his channel fire him. Azad notes, *"The chief minister not only threatened me but also talked to the owner of my channel, asking them to fire me. He even offered them an alternative if they complied."*

Muzaffar Hussain, a journalist from Skardu, shares multiple examples of the physical and psychological threats faced by journalists in the region. In one instance, he wrote a report for *Jahd-e-Haq* magazine about Kargil war victims who are still living in camps. *"They have a land compensation issue because they can't return home due to unexploded bombs in their areas. Their water channels and farms have also been destroyed. I wrote that they have become pawns between different government departments. Afterward, I was called in for a 'tea break' and threatened."* Hussain also highlights threats from extremist religious organizations, noting that *"journalists are often threatened for reporting on terrorism or stories that certain groups find unfavourable."*

The threats aren't limited to extremist groups. Hussain explains, *"There is a land mafia operating here, and if you report on their activities, they will not only threaten you but also physically assault you. Similarly, we can't report on the police or the administration. The Governor is notorious for threatening journalists openly."*

Despite these challenges, Mirza Hassan, the Deputy Inspector General of Police of Gilgit Range, notes that GB is a tight-knit community where journalists enjoy solidarity with one another. *"GB is a small society, and there is a strong sense of brotherhood and solidarity among journalists,"* he says. However, he

acknowledges that the situation remains precarious: *“Journalists face physical threats all the time. Even expressing an honest opinion can lead to trouble. Your security is often determined by how strong your connections are within the journalistic fraternity.”*

Hassan adds that sectarian conflicts are also a persistent issue in GB, further complicating the work of journalists. *“Sectarian tensions often flare up, making it even more dangerous for journalists to report freely on sensitive topics.”*



GILGIT: DIG Gilgit Region Mirza Hassan speaks of threats journalists face in GB. Photo by Freedom Network

4.2 Poor Service Structure for Journalists

The poor service structure for journalists in Gilgit-Baltistan is a significant challenge. Javed Iqbal, General Secretary of the Gilgit-Baltistan Union of Journalists, highlights that many media professionals go unpaid for extended periods. *“For the last two decades, I have been associated with a reputable media house. Up until 2015, my organization gave me a contract, and we received a modest payment of PKR 20,000 for assignments. However, since our contract ended in 2018, we have not received any further payment.”* Iqbal explains that many journalists remain in the profession due to their passion for

it, even though they are not compensated. *“If a prominent media house isn’t paying salaries, what can we expect from smaller outlets?”* he adds.

The government has taken some steps to address the issue, such as allocating funds to support journalists. Iqbal explains that *“the current government has allocated PKR 10 crore for a journalists’ endowment fund, which is a positive step.”* However, only PKR 4 million is being allocated annually, which is insufficient for the 200 journalists in the region. *“If the payment of PKR 10 crore is spread out, it will take too long to reach the journalists. We are demanding that at least PKR 5 crore be allocated annually,”* Iqbal says. The federal government in 2024 also announced health insurance for 5,000 journalists from across Pakistan, and GB journalists are requesting that 200 from their region be included in this scheme.

The lack of financial rewards in journalism is pushing young people away from the profession. Dr. Akbar Ali, an Assistant Professor of Media Studies at Korakoram University, recounts the story of one of his students who pursued journalism but eventually left the field. *“He was earning only PKR 10,000 per month. He told me it was better to sit at home and do domestic work than continue in journalism.”* Dr. Akbar Ali believes that without proper incentives, journalism will struggle to attract new talent. *“We need to educate young journalists, and despite the low rewards, we need capable people to highlight the issues. Unfortunately, there is only one journalism degree program at the Korakoram International University (KIU).”*

Journalists working in digital media face similar financial challenges. There is no viable financial model for digital media, and opportunities for advertising revenue are minimal. As Siddiqua Noreen, a human rights activist from Hunza, points out, *“Most journalists in Hunza pursue media as a side business. Many of them have other income sources because they can’t afford to survive solely on journalism wages.”* She adds that there is a substantial gap between the media industry and academia. *“I’ve spoken to many media students, and they can’t even foresee a career trajectory in the field.”*

The absence of formal contracts and proper compensation is another significant issue. Mohammad Ali Anjam, a journalist with *Suno News* in Skardu, highlights that most correspondents work as stringers without any job security. *“Journalists working for national media outlets often do not have a contract letter. National media relies on them because they need someone to provide colourful stories from the region, but they don’t offer proper employment.”* Aqeela Bano, a civil society activist from Hunza, points out, *“Media cannot be our voice until it is free and has its own rights.”*



GILGIT: Journalists and human rights activists pose for a group photo after discussion on safety of journalists and issues of press freedom in Gilgit-Baltistan. Photo by Freedom Network

4.3 Gender in Journalism

The presence of women in journalism in Gilgit-Baltistan has been gradually increasing, but significant challenges remain. Shahid Nadeem from Gilgit Media Network notes that the inclusion of women in journalism has progressed over the years, particularly after the launch of degree programs in digital media and media management in 2010. *“Since we started the program in 2010, more women have joined journalism. Two years ago, we launched a digital media program, and female participation increased even further. Many women feel more comfortable using online spaces rather than joining legacy media, especially given the discouragement they face from their families. However, the situation is slowly changing.”*

Despite this progress, women often face substantial financial challenges in the field. Shireen Karim, a correspondent with *We News*, highlights that low salaries or even the absence of salary discourages many women from continuing in the profession. *“Women have joined professions where they are paid, like the police. In journalism, many women join but leave quickly due to the lack of proper payment.”*



GILGIT: Woman journalist Ms Shireen Karim sharing her views during discussion on safety of journalists. Photo by Freedom Network

In addition to financial barriers, women journalists in GB face societal pressures and gender-based violence. Yasmin Kareem, a gender expert from Gilgit, shares that *“78% of women in the region face domestic abuse and violence, but the media doesn’t portray this issue because women journalists themselves feel afraid of societal pressures.”* Kareem adds that it took 10 years to have the Gender Harassment Law extended to GB, but there is still no enabling environment for women in journalism.

Kiran Qasim, a woman journalist with *Daily Ausaf* in Gilgit, recounts her experience of breaking barriers. *“A few years ago, it was difficult for women to work as journalists. I used to wear a mask on TV. But then I stopped wearing the mask, and we started reporting on public issues. After that, more national media outlets began covering these topics, and other reporters were asked to follow suit.”* Despite these advances, gender disparities remain evident. Qasim notes that out of the 2,004 members of the Gilgit-Baltistan Union of Journalists, only 11 are women. She is the only woman journalist with permanent membership at the Press Club, and many women are discouraged from joining journalism because of poor salaries and transport issues.

Kiran sheds further light on the situation, pointing out that *“There are only two full time women journalists in GB, and I am the only woman member of the Gilgit Press Club, despite many women getting degrees in Journalism. Women*

journalists do not enjoy an enabling environment in Gilgit-Baltistan.” Dr. Akbar Ali, Assistant Professor of Media Studies at Karakoram University explains that women struggle to join journalism because they either remain unpaid or are paid very little. “They also find a hostile social environment. When you go out into the field to interview people, a crowd gathers around you. However, women are turning to digital media, and even women who are not properly educated are turning to citizen journalism.”

Patriarchal social structures in the region also make it difficult for women to raise their voices. Aqeela Bano, a civil society activist from Hunza, points out that while some women have become role models, they don’t represent the majority. *“Women in Hunza have a 99% literacy rate and are leading in many ways, but very few women actually raise their voices.”* She also highlights the troubling rates of suicide and honour killings in the region, which often go unreported. *“If 99% of women in Hunza and Ghizer are literate, why is this area plagued by the highest suicide rates, particularly among women? Many of these suicides are actually murders and honour killings, but these issues don’t get discussed openly.”*

The underrepresentation of women in the media has had a direct impact on the coverage of gender-based violence. Siddiqa Noreen, a human rights activist from Hunza, notes that *“Women are hugely underrepresented in media, and because of this, gender-based violence is hardly ever reported. Only the most prominent and controversial cases make it to the news.”*

Chapter 5

The State of Safety of Journalists

Journalists in Gilgit-Baltistan operate in an environment marked by significant risks, ranging from direct censorship to various forms of intimidation and harassment. Despite GB's distinct geographic and political context, the challenges faced by media professionals here reflect broader trends of media suppression seen across Pakistan. Journalists are often caught between state authorities, powerful business interests, and sectarian actors, all of whom exert pressure to control the narrative. This chapter delves into the multifaceted threats to journalist safety in GB, including forms of censorship, legal harassment, intimidation, and physical violence.

Media professionals in the region frequently encounter obstacles in accessing information, face legal challenges, and must navigate the delicate balance of reporting sensitive issues while safeguarding their personal and professional security. The absence of an independent regulatory framework exacerbates these issues, as PEMRA's lack of jurisdiction in the region allows for ad-hoc censorship measures. The increasing reliance on self-censorship, coupled with financial dependency on government advertisements, further curtails the freedom of the press.

This chapter explores these dynamics in detail, examining the censorship mechanisms, the legal and physical threats faced by journalists, and the broader socio-political factors that hinder the safety and independence of media in GB. Through interviews with local journalists and media experts, this section highlights the lived experiences of those on the frontlines of reporting in one of Pakistan's most politically sensitive regions.

The region is, however, distinguished from rest of Pakistan where no journalist was reported killed in line of duty as it is the case with other regions and provinces. A recent Freedom Network 2024 Impunity Report said some 151 journalists were killed in the last 24 years.

5.1 Forms of Censorship

Journalists in Gilgit-Baltistan face multiple forms of censorship. The challenges

facing journalists are deeply connected to the broader political landscape of Pakistan. Amjad Hussain, member of the Pakistan People's Party, who is also a Member of the Legislative Assembly, states, *"There is no freedom of expression across Pakistan. The political system isn't free, and parliament isn't free. How can we expect the GB government to be free in such an environment?"* He adds that, *"In GB, there are two narratives – the separatists and the integrationists. The integrationist narrative weakens when democracy in GB weakens."*



GILGIT: Member of the Legislative Assembly in Gilgit-Baltistan Amjad Hussain (Right) speaks about state of freedom of expression in Gilgit-Baltistan. Photo by Freedom Network

Former GB Chief Minister Hafeezur Rehman, a leader of PML-N, also highlights the broader context in which journalists operate. *"Our democratic history isn't cherished. GB was granted self-governance in 2009, but before that, the region was controlled by the bureaucracy."*



GILGIT: Former GB Chief Minister Hafeez ur Rehman (3rd from R) shares his thoughts about landscape of journalists in Gilgit-Baltistan. Photo by Freedom Network

According to Muzaffar Ali, a journalist from Skardu, the legal environment also plays a role in restricting media freedom. *“PEMRA (Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority) does not have jurisdiction in GB, but it is still involved in restricting channels. For example, PEMRA asks cable operators to restrict channels whenever it deems fit.”* Ali further explains that licenses for television and FM channels are not issued from GB itself but are instead issued from Islamabad.

The denial of the right to information is another major hurdle for journalists in the region. Rajab Qamar from 92 News explains, *“When we try to confirm a news story and seek information, government officials often refuse to cooperate.”* Zakir Baltistani, a journalist from Skardu, shares his personal experience of filing 14 Right to Information petitions, none of which have received a response. *“We met with the chief minister, who promised to provide instructions, but no changes have occurred.”* Shireen Karim, a correspondent with We News, notes that journalists struggle to obtain data. *“Departments refuse to provide us with data because they are unaware of what information is public and what is not.”*

Hafeezur Rehman adds that efforts to pass Right to Information (RTI) laws have stalled due to external factors, including the Covid-19 pandemic and political interference. He notes that his party is ready to support RTI and journalist protection laws and calls for drafts of these laws to be presented for voting. He emphasizes the need for journalist training, especially in the areas of investigative journalism and climate change coverage.

Shahid Nadeem from Gilgit Media Network highlights the relative freedom that digital media enjoys compared to legacy media. *“We openly discuss issues that legacy media cannot cover due to pressures. However, digital media’s reach has been significantly reduced by algorithms and firewalls. For example, tourism-related news can reach audiences, but coverage of protests doesn’t get the same reach.”* Nadeem further adds, *“If a news item is against the government, it doesn’t find space on national media, but even a small rally in favour of the government gets reported immediately.”* Digital media, however, continues to report on all issues and often receives prompt responses from the government.

Wajahat Ali, the general secretary of the Gilgit Press Club, explains that the impact of firewalls and algorithms on digital media is worsening. *“Popular pages are affected, with critical issues being filtered out while softer issues make it through. We are trying to find alternatives, but we face challenges, including the need to rush to areas with better coverage in order to upload content.”*

Self-censorship has also become a widespread practice among journalists. Muzaffar Ali admits, *“We’ve become accustomed to self-censorship. Investigative journalism is almost non-existent in the region now.”*

5.2 Legal Issues, Harassment, Intimidation, and Dismissals

Journalists in Gilgit-Baltistan face significant harassment, intimidation, and threats of dismissal. Kiran Qasim, a woman journalist working with Ausaf Media Group, explains, *“Since there is no private sector here, we rely entirely on advertisements from the government. When we publish news against the government, they stop our advertisements. Recently, we published an investigative piece on expenses incurred by the Chief Minister’s Secretariat and the Governor’s Secretariat. In response, the government called the Information Department and stopped all advertisements for our outlet.”* Kiran further adds that the chief minister’s office directly intervenes, calling the Information Department to take action against journalists and even the sources who share information with them.

Syed Asadullah Ghazi recounts a specific incident in 2010 when violent protests erupted. *“Police opened fire on protesters, and deaths occurred. I reported the issue to the television channel I was associated with. However, I faced immense pressure to state that the protesters initiated the firing and that the police were merely responding. Due to this reporting, my wife was denied a government job, and the then-Chief Minister, Mehdi Shah, told me that I would never be able to get a government job in the future.”*

Physical and psychological violence against journalists is also common. Mohammad Hussain Azad, a journalist from Skardu, explains, *“Journalists are often beaten up. They find any excuse to vent their anger on us.”* Nisar Abbas from Geo News channel adds, *“I was tortured physically and mentally, and I have also been harmed financially. After reporting on an abduction case, I received a notice from the government questioning my nationality as a Pakistani. My organization had to intervene with NADRA to solve the issue, as the officials fabricated a story claiming my family members were not born in Pakistan.”*

In 2016, Asma Jahangir was denied entry into GB on security grounds. Israruddin, the HRCP GB Coordinator, recounts the aftermath: *“She was allowed to enter later, but her interactions with the media were blacked out because the Ministry of Information instructed local media not to cover her visit. After her*

visit, the media was told to avoid covering human rights issues. Progressive and liberal voices are now served notices under PECA law, and political and rights activists are charged under sedition and blasphemy laws.” He further adds that journalist Fida Ali Shah Ghizri from *Pamir Times* had to leave Pakistan after facing blasphemy charges. The state’s proxies, particularly sectarian actors, have become a major threat to journalists. Israruddin continues, *“Intelligence operatives attacked the Gilgit Press Club after intelligence personnel were denied entry. Newspapers are divided along sectarian lines, and sectarian threats are often used to target journalists.”*

Jamil Nagri from Dawn News recounts another instance of harassment: *“Amjad Bercha, a journalist from Hunza, reported that the DIG Gilgit range harassed a female staff member. The journalist was later harassed, and he moved to his village for safety, but his house was raided at night, and he was forcibly disappeared.”* Nagri adds that during protests for the release of political prisoners, journalists faced pressure from media organizations to share the government’s version of events. However, government officials often refuse to comment, saying that it was a court issue involving other agencies.

Harassment is not limited to physical violence. Journalists often face legal challenges as well. Ali Ahmad, a journalist from Hunza, explains, *“Five years ago, a court case was registered against me for reporting the misconduct of a Tehsildar, a mid-level government official. The case was based on someone else’s news that I published on my digital platform. It was a defamation case that took one and a half years to resolve, but ultimately, the court ruled in my favour.”*



KARIMABAD: Local journalists and CSO members in a group photo after focus group discussion. Photo by Freedom Network

Media development roadmap for GB: *Recommendations*

Addressing the challenges outlined in this report is crucial for the development of a free and independent media, and a sustainable media landscape in Gilgit-Baltistan. The focused group discussions and interviews conducted for this report in the region generated the following key recommendations for a professional media in GB:

1. **Institutional support for journalists:** Empower and capacitate journalists through long-term and continuous institutional support from media development groups.
2. **Advocacy for media freedoms:** Support journalists and media associations such as press clubs and journalists' unions in GB with training and resources on campaigning around freedom of expression within the region.
3. **Networking with national peers:** Helping press clubs and journalists' unions in GB network with their counterparts in the rest of Pakistan, especially Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (including membership of PFUJ) and key press clubs in Islamabad, Karachi, Lahore, Peshawar and Quetta.
4. **Supporting digital media:** Provide capacity building and technical resources for GB-based native independent digital media platforms and their linkages with national and international counterparts for best practices and knowledge resources.
5. **Promoting gender affirmative measures:** Supporting women media practitioners based in GB with capacity building and resources to further professionalize their work and conducting gender sensitization drives within the native media industry to build support for greater inclusion of women in all sub-sectors of the local media.
6. **Ensuring journalists' safety:** Advocating for formal legal and legislative framework in GB on safety of journalists as enshrined in the federal and Sindh provincial laws on safety of journalists.

7. **Supporting right to information:** Advocating for formal legal and legislative framework in GB on access to information as enshrined in the federal and provincial RTI laws and practices for an enabling access to information regime.
8. **Promoting interface between media and civil society:** Supporting a formalized interface among native media, civil society and academia to foster professional collaboration toward creating a more informed society and strengthening democratic processes in GB.
9. **Supporting media and industry interface:** Strengthen the linkages between native media of GB and the local academia and business industry to support sustainability initiatives for local media.
10. **Strengthen journalism education:** Support institutions such as local universities and media associations to improve journalism curricula and training courses to promote media professionalism.

ABOUT FREEDOM NETWORK

(www.fnpk.org)

Freedom Network is a Islamabad-based independent media and development sector research, advocacy and training organization registered with the Securities and Exchange Commission of Pakistan (SECP). It was established in 2013. In 2017, Freedom Network was awarded the prestigious French Republic's "Human Rights Prize" for "its efforts for safety and protection of journalists and promotion of freedom of expression."

OUR MISSION:

To protect civil liberties, including freedom of expression and access to information, and promote an informed society that sees media as a key partner in a democratic and pluralist Pakistan.