

JOURNALISM IN NORTH PUNJAB

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

Pakistan

Minahil Shahab & Adnan Rehmat



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Executive Summary

The media landscape in North Punjab is in a state of crisis, shaped by the collapse of print journalism, the disruptive rise of digital platforms, intensifying censorship, and deepening economic and institutional fragility. This transformation has not only redefined how news is produced and consumed but has also eroded the professional and civic space of journalism, leaving practitioners increasingly marginalized, insecure, and vulnerable.

Once a region of vibrant local newspapers, the districts of the northern parts of Punjab province faces the near disappearance of print journalism. Publications with decades-long legacies have shut down in recent years, circulation has become impossible due to the absence of paper sellers, and even the largest national dailies—such as Jang, Nawa-i-Waqt, and Express—struggle to sell the number of copies that they used to only a few years ago. Escalating costs have made print unsustainable, with the production of a single newspaper costing far more than its market price. In this vacuum, social and digital media have taken over, providing immediacy but eroding follow-up and investigative reporting. Citizens no longer wait for newspapers when news spreads instantly online. For local journalists, however, digital platforms offer limited opportunities due to small coverage areas, poor monetization, and lack of training.

At the district level, official engagement with journalists has sharply declined. Departments now rely on PR [public relations] officers who disseminate information directly via social media, bypassing press clubs and reporters. The once-vibrant culture of accountability through interactions with deputy commissioners and police chiefs has ended. Simultaneously, institutional support has collapsed: Director General Public Relations (DGPR) representatives are absent in districts, independent reporting is sometimes punished with cases related to the controversial Prevention of Cyber Crime Act (PeCA), and press clubs have fragmented due to disputes over recognition and resources. In some towns, multiple rival press clubs exist, often dominated by politically favoured groups and media practitioners with only the loosest links with actual journalist. This fragmentation erodes collective strength and bargaining power.

Economic pressures have worsened the crisis. Advertising—the main revenue stream for newspapers—has become politicized, delayed, or diverted to dummy

publications. Local journalists, often owner-publishers themselves, are excluded from district-level ads, leaving them dependent on arbitrary patronage from the provincial Press Information Department (PID). Media houses, increasingly focused on digital platforms, earn from online traffic while reporters generating content receive little or no compensation. Salaries at the district level are rare, leaving many journalists to survive through side businesses. Even major channels employ unpaid correspondents whose only benefit is a press card. The government's minimum wage laws remain ignored, with journalists paid far less than basic labourers. Union structures have been hollowed out, with memberships inflated for patronage benefits but little functional activity or solidarity.

Legal, political, and informal restrictions have tightened the space for free expression. Sensitive issues—such as misuse of certain laws, the role of the security establishment in politics, district-level governance failures, and minority rights—remain off limits. Television faces immediate directives and takedowns, while digital outlets endure blocking orders. The Punjab Defamation Act passed by the Punjab Assembly in late 2024 and amendments to the PECA law passed by federal parliament in early 2025 have normalized legal intimidation, imposing heavy fines and fast-track tribunals that deter reporting. Journalists describe self-censorship as routine, beginning in the newsroom or even at home in families tied to government employment. Women journalists face exclusion from assignments and press clubs, compounding gender barriers.

Journalists confront threats from multiple directions: district officials, police, security agencies, religious groups, feudal landlords, and criminal mafias. Threats range from covert phone calls and legal harassment to public intimidation by extremist groups including some religious parties. Reports document dozens of FIRs [first information reports] filed under PECA and other laws, alongside physical attacks, harassment, and intimidation. Economic censorship compounds the problem, with advertising withheld from critical outlets. The result is “calibrated journalism,” where names, images, and issues are quietly edited out of coverage to avoid reprisals. Women journalists face layered harassment, online trolling, and exclusion, driving many out of the profession altogether.

The service structure for journalists is characterized by precarity and exploitation. Survival without parallel businesses or customized alternative revenue streams is virtually impossible. Media houses openly disregard labour rights, including working-hour limits, overtime pay, and safety protections, despite Pakistan's commitments under ILO [International Labor Organization] conventions. District correspondents are often expected to finance operations

themselves, sometimes even contributing money to their parent media houses during crises. Women, in particular, are disproportionately affected, with little access to digital training, equipment, or institutional support. Many are objectified, sidelined for younger low-paid graduates, or forced out due to structural and social pressures. The NECOSA [law of 1973 remains unimplemented, and no comparable framework exists for electronic or digital media.

Journalists in North Punjab work in an increasingly dangerous environment, particularly in districts bordering conflict zones such as Mianwali. Sometimes terrorist attacks, threats from local power brokers, and lack of security support from media houses expose them to severe risks. Neither media organizations nor unions have effective mechanisms to safeguard reporters, and legislative protections such as the Journalist Safety Law remain unadopted by Punjab. Commissions mandated under federal media protection laws remain inactive. The result is impunity, with threats and attacks underreported and unaddressed. Even in death, solidarity is absent, as rival outlets rarely highlight the killing of colleagues.

Women journalists bear the sharpest brunt of the crisis. They were the first to lose jobs during the collapse of print and again during the Covid-19 downturn during the period 2020-23. Structural exclusion from press clubs, lack of training, cultural stigma, and workplace harassment further restrict their opportunities. Despite the presence of hundreds of women journalists in Islamabad, most remain unemployed. In smaller towns, women are almost entirely absent from the profession. Where they exist, their work is undervalued, overshadowed by scrutiny of their appearance, and undermined by trolling and gossip. The result is a male-dominated media landscape resistant to inclusivity.

The state of media in the northern Punjab region reflects the convergence of collapsing business models, digital disruption, authoritarian censorship, weak institutions, and social exclusion. Journalists operate in a climate of fear, with fragile incomes, absent protections, and daily threats from state and non-state actors. Women face compounded disadvantages, while the profession as a whole loses credibility and sustainability. Without structural reforms—fair wage frameworks, independent advertising mechanisms, implementation of labour rights, legal protections, and institutional support—the media in North Punjab risks further decline, silencing one of the most important pillars of democracy in the region.

Chapter 2

Introduction

The media environment in North Punjab today stands at a crossroads, marked by the rapid decline of print and the uneven rise of digital platforms. Once sustained by long-established local newspapers and vibrant press clubs, the region's journalistic ecosystem is now grappling with collapsing circulation, economic fragility, and institutional erosion. Rising inflation, changing audience habits, and the spread of social media have upended traditional reporting models, while government patronage, fragmented unions, and shrinking newsrooms have weakened the profession's credibility and collective strength. Against this backdrop, journalists struggle to adapt to digital tools, confront marginalization by official authorities, and face an uncertain future shaped by both financial precarity and emerging technological disruptions.

2.1 Methodology

This study combined focus group discussions with district journalists in North Punjab, covering Attock, Chakwal, Rawalpindi and adjoining districts, together with Islamabad, and key-informant interviews with newsroom and union leadership. Interviewees included the President of the Rawalpindi-Islamabad Union of Journalists (RIUJ), representatives of regional journalist unions, the Women Journalists Association (WJA), beat representatives, and other stakeholders identified through purposive sampling.

2.2 State of Media in North Punjab

The media landscape in North Punjab has undergone a dramatic transformation in recent years, shaped by both economic pressures and the rise of digital platforms. Once home to vibrant local newspapers with decades-long legacies, the region is now witnessing the near collapse of print journalism. Local newspapers that had been in print for more than two decades have closed down in the past two years, while even newspaper sellers are disappearing from the market, making circulation challenging. This decline has not spared the large national dailies either. Newspapers like *Jang*, *Nawa-i-Waqt* or *Express*, which once circulated in thousands, now sell a fraction of that number at many places. Inflation and the digital revolution together have rendered traditional print

unsustainable. “Print media has almost ended. Our local newspaper that had been in print for 22 years has closed in the last two years. Even paper sellers are not available in the market, and circulation has become a challenge,” explained Riaz Anjum of 92 News Chakwal.

The rise of social media has fundamentally altered the consumption of news. “Now news spreads in minutes; people don’t have to wait for the next day’s paper,” Anjum added. While digital platforms provide immediacy, they have also undermined the practice of follow-up journalism. “If people have already watched a news item for the entire day on television or online, why would they read the same in a newspaper the next morning? Newspapers must provide research-based reporting, otherwise they will die,” said Shakila Jalil, a journalist in Islamabad.

For many local journalists, the transition to digital remains difficult. “It is very difficult for digital journalists to showcase their work because their world is very small. In Mianwali, for instance, it takes barely an hour to go around the city. What can a journalist show the world on YouTube from here, compared to someone based in Islamabad?” asked a journalist from Mianwali.

At the district level, executive authorities largely bypass journalists. “All departments have hired PR officers who upload official updates on social media. Journalists are told to take their information from those pages. The old tradition of the Deputy Commissioner or Police Chief meeting press clubs and answering questions has ended,” lamented another journalist from Mianwali. This marginalization is compounded by the absence of institutional support. “There is no government spokesperson in our district anymore. Earlier, we had a DGPR representative, but not now. When we report independently, cases are registered against us,” said another journalist.

Press clubs, once the cornerstone of journalistic community life, face fragmentation. In Bhakkar district, four press clubs now exist due to disputes over resources and recognition. “There was a government press club building, but it was reoccupied four years ago. Since then, three more clubs have emerged, but only one is registered. Ironically, grants were given to a club manned largely by trader-turned-journalists,” explained Syed Aftab Hussain, President of the National Press Club Bhakkar.

Escalating costs of production have worsened the crisis. “The printing cost of a paper is 55 rupees while the market price is only 15 rupees. How can newspapers survive?” asked Shakila Jalil. This economic squeeze has made media houses even more dependent on government advertising, often

distributed arbitrarily. “Newspapers wait endlessly for advertisements from the PID. Without them, they have no revenue model. Since they lack original ideas, they struggle to survive,” she added. Local newspapers, often owned by individual journalists rather than corporate houses, are excluded from district-level advertisements, which are instead allocated to dummy publications or politically favored outlets.

The profession itself is also losing dignity. “There are too many people claiming to be journalists, and as a result, the profession is losing credibility,” observed a journalist in Islamabad. Government patronage has further fragmented journalist unions. “Unions were divided by the Press Information Department, and funds were directed to favourite journalists. They even encouraged some to set up digital platforms, which were then given revenue streams. Meanwhile, others were ignored and deprived of ads,” noted another journalist.

The result has been a hollowing out of institutions. “After plots were allotted to journalists, membership of the [Islamabad-based] National Press Club surged to 3,500, yet barely 50 members attend general body meetings,” said one journalist. Similarly, the traditional editorial structure has disappeared. “The institution of the editor is gone. Media house owners have taken over, and editors survive in only one or two places,” he added.

The collapse of print has also meant shrinking newsrooms. “In large newspaper offices where once 50 journalists worked, only five now remain,” said a journalist in Islamabad. The same trend is seen in Rawalpindi, where one journalist now covers all beats of a bureau while also being required to generate revenue to pay for the office’s expenses, according to Shakila Jalil. Meanwhile, media houses are running digital platforms and earning from them, yet journalists contributing content are rarely compensated. “Journalists create content, but the revenue goes to media houses. Reporters are not paid for their digital work,” explained another journalist.

Most journalists have also failed to retrain themselves for the digital era. The next wave of disruption, artificial intelligence (AI), poses an even greater challenge. “Many of us did not adapt to digital media, and now AI is the new challenge,” admitted a journalist in Islamabad.

State of Media Freedoms in North Punjab

The media space in North Punjab is administratively constricted and economically fragile. Interviewees described a tightening ring of statutory controls, quick-passage laws that empower censorship, and daily pressures that push reporters toward self-censorship. Taboos now include misuse of certain laws, the role of the security establishment in politics, governance failures by district authorities, and hate or targeted violence against minorities and transgender persons. “Only two to three channels even dared to cover a recent blasphemy related program after complaints and PEMRA [Pakistan Electronic Media regulatory Authority] directives. Most pulled back,” said a senior TV journalist in Rawalpindi.

On TV and digital platforms the pressure is most acute. Television faces instant deadlines and frequent directives. Digital teams face blocking and takedowns. Radio and print may sometimes have a little more space because they work slower and can version check, but the red lines are understood. Interviewees described how bans and informal instructions around particular political figures turn coverage into one sided programming. “You cannot show a leader’s picture or tweet, yet entire shows still revolve around them,” said a producer in Islamabad.

Several journalists argued that the newest legal instruments have normalized this environment. The Punjab Defamation Act 2024, with fines up to Rs 3 million and special tribunals, and the 2025 PECA updates are cited as key drivers of fear and compliance. As a result, self-censorship often starts at home, especially in districts where journalists or their families also hold government jobs.

“Digital is a little freer than TV, and a few English dailies like Dawn still push important stories, but local reporters tied to national dailies face the same national constraints. In small districts we cannot report on sectarian flare ups or anything involving the military establishment,” said Nabeel Anwar Dhakku, a freelance journalist who contributes to Dawn and BBC Urdu.

3.1 Threat Actors to Free Speech

Journalists operating from districts in North Punjab describe a threat map that begins with officials and extends outward to religious groups, covert actors, and local landlords and feudals, with the economy of news used as an additional lever. The result is a routine of pressure that produces silence before any story is filed.

“We receive threats directly and indirectly from district administration and police, and also from feudal lords, drug dealers, and real estate tycoons,” said Abid Mughal, President, Regional Union of Journalists. “Sometimes security agencies act in a covert manner.” Reporters traced a familiar sequence: a phone call asking for edits, a visit that warns against publishing, and, if the story is filed, the opening of a complaint that forces the journalist into an expensive and time-consuming process.

Coverage that touches religion or security triggers immediate hazards. “When a program was done on a sensitive blasphemy issue, complaints and directives followed, and only two or three channels dared to cover it,” said a senior TV journalist in Rawalpindi. “Digital teams face blocks and takedowns, TV faces instant directives, print and radio get a little more time, so they can version-check and sometimes carry what TV will not,” added a producer in Islamabad.

Religious extremist groups openly target reporters. “Threats are issued in public speeches, and then the calls and texts begin,” said one district correspondent. “Last year I was threatened by [a religious group]; no organization came to assist except Freedom Network Pakistan,” added Nabeel Anwar Dhakku (Dawn, BBC Urdu). Covert pressure runs in parallel. “Warnings come through intermediaries, and names and images of certain institutions are treated as off limits,” a bureau reporter explained.

Political bans and informal instructions narrow TV even further. “TV channels cannot show [former prime minister] Imran Khan’s picture or tweet, yet entire talk shows still revolve around him,” said Nabeel Anwar Dhakku. “That is not journalism, that is calibration.” The same pattern appears on sensitive social beats. “Women’s health, transgender health, HIV, early marriage, these are treated as taboo on TV. Digital is a little better, but TV discourages this coverage,” said the Islamabad producer.

The use of law has become a frontline tool. According to the regional union, two cases of physical attacks and 31 FIRs in 2025 under PECA, plus eight fake FIRs

under other laws, were recorded against journalists in North Punjab. “Vague ‘fake information’ clauses make it easy to accuse and hard to defend,” one interviewee noted. The Punjab Defamation Act 2024 was repeatedly cited for its special tribunals and fines up to Rs 3 million, which interviewees described as “fast but shallow,” a process that raises costs and chills investigations before they start.

Economics functions as a parallel enforcement track. “Only Dawn pays its correspondents working in small districts. This financial gap puts local journalists at stake,” said Nabeel Anwar Dhakku. Editors described stories dropped without explanation after a commercial call, and correspondents said unpaid labor makes them easy to coerce. “Censorship by finance travels faster than a legal notice,” one reporter said.

Internal capture inside newsrooms completes the loop. “Some media groups support parties, some back institutions. Ethical and impartial journalism is rare,” said a senior producer. Younger reporters learn the lesson quickly. “Self-censorship starts at home. In districts where families work in government, the first edit is in the living room,” a Chakwal-based journalist said. Women face the sharpest edge of this pressure. “In Attock, Chakwal, Fateh Jang, and Sargodha districts women are almost entirely absent. Where they are present, they are kept out of press clubs and denied assignments,” said Fauzia Kulsoom Rana, President, Women Journalist Association.

The cumulative effect is prior restraint in practice. “Restrictions come wrapped in law, but the daily effect is intimidation by local power centers and selective enforcement by authorities. Without payment and protection, you get silence,” said Abid Mughal. Interviewees added that there is no single institution that systematically collects threat data in these districts, which keeps the true scale obscured and reinforces impunity.

3.2 Poor Service Structure

The service structure for journalists in North Punjab reflects deep-rooted financial insecurity and systemic neglect, leaving the profession in a precarious state. At the district level, survival as a full-time journalist has become nearly impossible. “If a journalist is not running a parallel business, he can’t survive as a journalist,” explained Riaz Anjum of 92 News Chakwal. Even those working with major channels often receive no salary.

“I work with a major channel, but I am not paid anything for my work. Institutions only give us a name and identity. If we don’t have other sources of income, we cannot survive. There is hardly any newspaper paying enough to sustain a journalist. The future of journalism appears bleak to us,” Anjum added.

This economic fragility extends beyond print to electronic media. “You cannot survive on your salary any longer. The same is true for electronic media, except for a small number of journalists who are privileged. Media persons are not being paid enough to survive,” said Syed Aftab Hussain, President of the National Press Club, Bhakkar. In places like Mianwali, there is no concept of media houses paying reporters. Journalists are kept only so that, in case of a major incident, someone is available to send a short video clip or a few written lines. Media cards are provided, but these serve more as tokens of association than guarantees of livelihood.

Most journalists at the district level are facing a severe financial crisis. A journalist from Mianwali explained that many individuals treat journalism as a part-time pursuit while sustaining themselves through other businesses. This influx has also allowed people with no connection to journalism to acquire press cards, using them for easy access to bureaucrats’ offices or for other privileges. Genuine journalists, however, remain in serious trouble, and both media houses and the government are blamed for this situation.

Even the basic economics of newspaper production weigh heavily on small outlets. “Many non-industrial areas do not get advertising from businesses. Government advertisements are also not available, and when they are, it takes months to receive meagre payments. Unlike large newspapers, we even face difficulties in purchasing printing paper. Sometimes presses remain shut due to electricity outages, delaying publication until the next day, yet the cost still has to be paid while the news becomes outdated,” explained Syed Aftab Hussain.

The absence of a fair wage framework further deepens the crisis. According to one journalist, the government’s minimum wage policy fixes Rs. 35,500 as the basic salary for a labourer, yet journalists with graduate and postgraduate degrees are paid far less. “Even a leading paper like Jang is paying below this amount to many journalists,” he said. Media houses are also accused of openly disregarding legal and financial obligations. “They don’t follow the law, they don’t pay taxes, and they don’t pay journalists properly,” said a journalist in Islamabad.

“At the district level, the situation is even more difficult because there is no concept of paying salaries to correspondents. Instead, they are given media cards or authority letters and expected to generate revenue themselves through advertisements,” says Shakila Jalil, a journalist in Islamabad. “Journalists are sometimes asked to contribute money to the media house in times of crisis, while correspondents from rival groups are appointed if they refuse. This economic precarity intersects with gender to further disadvantage women” she adds.

Despite the passage of the NECOSA law in 1973 to regulate print media, its provisions on welfare and protection remain unimplemented, and there is no corresponding legislation for electronic media. Although Pakistan has ratified 36 ILO conventions, journalists work far beyond the standard eight-hour day, often giving ten to fifteen hours without any protections for overtime, health, or safety. This absence of labour rights enforcement has left journalists overworked, underpaid, and increasingly disillusioned.

3.3 Gender in Journalism

The decline of print journalism has affected women journalists in North Punjab most severely. In Rawalpindi and Islamabad, they were the first to lose jobs when newspapers began shutting down, and their smaller numbers made them particularly vulnerable. “They were already facing problems in newsrooms where even the basic need of washrooms was absent. When downsizing began, women were the first to be fired,” recalled Shakila Jalil, a journalist in Islamabad.

The crisis deepened during the Covid-19 pandemic when women employed in print were again targeted for layoffs. In electronic media, preference was given to fresh graduates willing to work for lower pay, while women with over a decade of experience were sidelined.

Many women attempted to shift to digital media as an alternative, but the transition has been fraught with obstacles. “There are no trainings. When a man loses a job, his absence from home is justified. But when a woman is unemployed and steps outside, she faces constant questioning from her family—why are you going out, why are you spending on petrol if you don’t even have a job?” explained Jalil.

The social stigma extends into professional spaces. “When a woman meets a man for work, questions are raised by colleagues and those around her. Even

the person she meets may tell others, spreading gossip. Women have to be extremely careful,” she added.

Beyond social pressures, structural and institutional shortcomings reinforce gender disparities. Women often lack proper training and equipment, and when they enter journalism, their work is discussed less than their personal lives. They are frequently trolled online, further restricting their confidence and mobility. The definition of professionalism within press clubs also creates exclusion. “A journalist is defined as someone earning only from journalism. But if a woman earns Rs. 25,000, how can she support her family? She cannot even pay for her daily commute,” Jalil argued

Women journalists also face barriers in adopting digital platforms. “Women need special training in digital journalism. I started but faced restrictions from platforms because I didn’t know some of their rules,” admitted Afshan Qureshi, a journalist in Islamabad. Many talented women are denied opportunities, while their abilities are overshadowed by scrutiny of their appearance. “No one pays attention to the looks or dress of a man, but women’s talent is ignored and all attention is paid to their looks and dress sense. They are objectified, treated as models, and paid less for the same job,” she said.

Despite the presence of more than 300 women journalists in Islamabad, a majority remain unemployed, reflecting the structural gender imbalance within the profession. The combined weight of shrinking print media, lack of institutional support, cultural stigma, and objectification has pushed many women out of the field, leaving journalism in North Punjab overwhelmingly male-dominated and resistant to inclusive reform.

Unfortunately, when examined through a gender lens, the challenges become even more pronounced. In many cities such as Attock, Chakwal, Fateh Jang, and Sargodha, women are almost entirely absent from journalism. Where women are present, they are often excluded from press clubs, not taken seriously in digital media, and denied opportunities in print. In television, where representatives may resort to questionable practices for financial survival, women journalists are left with no avenues to sustain themselves or their work. As a result, journalism in these regions remains neither inclusive nor on the path to becoming inclusive.

State of Safety of Journalists

The safety of journalists in North Punjab remains a pressing concern, with threats steadily increasing in recent years. “Threats have gone up. Even in earlier times journalists were prosecuted under various laws, but in recent times the PECA law has emerged as a major threat,” observed Riaz Anjum of 92 News Chakwal. Journalists working in sensitive districts like Mianwali face heightened dangers due to the area’s proximity to terrorism-affected regions of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

“Mianwali is in the throes of terrorism these days. In just one year, nearly 17 terrorist attacks have occurred in the district. Our media houses want us to go and report on these incidents, but they provide us no security. Otherwise, the media house has no interest in the issue of a journalist—whether he is beaten up, fired upon, or goes hungry. Journalists’ security should come first,” explained a journalist from Mianwali.

The indifference of media organizations toward the lives of their reporters is matched by the lack of solidarity even after death. “If a journalist is killed due to his work, only the channel with which he was affiliated will run the news, while other channels will not give it importance. Those who can’t give us screen time even after our death—how will they solve our problems in our lives?” asked Shakila Jalil, a journalist in Islamabad.

Media houses are not the only institutions that have failed to safeguard journalists. “While media houses completely ignore the situation of journalists, union and press clubs have also failed in this regard,” remarked a journalist in Islamabad. The absence of effective institutional mechanisms has left journalists to face threats and violence without meaningful recourse.

Despite growing dangers, legislative protection remains elusive. Union leaders and journalists have repeatedly lobbied the Punjab government to adopt the federal journalists’ safety law. “We have tried to convince the Punjab government to adopt the journalist safety law. They said they would adopt it after the federal government adopts it. The federal government has already done so, but Punjab remains reluctant,” noted one journalist.

The situation is worsened by the lack of implementation of existing frameworks. “Under the media protection law, the protection commission has not been formed. We have recommended names twice for its formation. From Karachi to Peshawar, in the last five years the commission has not been formed. In Karachi, the commission is working, but in Punjab it has not been formed, and at the Centre it is not functional,” explained a journalist in Islamabad. The absence of such a commission underscores the gap between promises of protection and the reality of insecurity, leaving journalists in North Punjab vulnerable and unprotected.

4.1 Extreme Form of Censorship

Censorship in North Punjab increasingly takes the form of economic pressure and systemic neglect, making it difficult for journalists to work independently. At the district level, where most reporters are unpaid or severely underpaid, financial vulnerability itself has become a tool of silencing. “Due to economic vulnerability and the fact that journalists are not paid at the district level, it is becoming difficult for a reporter to do reporting courageously,” explained Riaz Anjum of 92 News Chakwal. In such an environment, self-censorship flourishes, as many journalists avoid sensitive issues for fear of reprisals, loss of what little income they receive, or outright exclusion from professional networks.

The use of advertisements as a tool of control further deepens the problem. “Financial models have changed. Dawn, a leading paper, has not received advertisements for two years. They consider it a divergent voice and are using advertisements as a tool to control it,” said a journalist in Islamabad. By withholding revenue from critical outlets and diverting resources toward compliant ones, authorities and advertisers ensure that independent voices struggle to survive. This economic censorship, combined with shrinking opportunities at the district level, has created an environment where critical journalism is punished not through overt bans but by suffocation of resources.

“After complaints and directives on a sensitive blasphemy issue, only two or three channels dared to carry follow ups,” said a senior TV journalist in Rawalpindi. “TV faces instant directives, digital teams face blocks and takedowns. Print and radio may get a little space because they can version check, but the red lines are understood,” added a producer in Islamabad. “You cannot show a leader’s picture or tweet, yet entire talk shows still revolve around him. That is not journalism, that is calibration,” said Nabeel Anwar Dhakku.

Editors in district bureaus described quiet instructions to remove names, images, or specific phrases from scripts to avoid “trouble,” while correspondents said an accreditation letter can become a leash if salaries are missing. “Censorship by finance travels faster than a legal notice,” one district reporter observed.

4.2 Legal Cases

Beyond salaries, journalists face additional legal vulnerabilities. The outdated “کار سرکار میں مداخلت” (Obstruction in the discharge of official duties) law, a colonial-era provision, continues to be misused. One journalist shared that he had been booked under this law along with six other colleagues over the past three years.

“Our institution requires us to take the government’s version when filing a report, but when we approach them, they accuse us of interference and blackmailing. They shut the doors, call the police, and book us under this law,” he recounted. Alongside the PECA Act, such provisions are used as tools of harassment against working reporters.

A regional union log recorded 31 FIRs in 2025 under PECA against journalists in North Punjab, plus eight additional fake FIRs under other statutes. Interviewees described the Punjab Defamation Act 2024, with special tribunals and fines up to Rs. 3 million, as a fast track that raises defense costs and chills investigations. “It is fast but shallow. The process is the punishment,” said a Lahore based reporter who helps colleagues draft replies. Digital teams added that content takedowns and blocking orders arrive without transparent timelines. “You lose the post first and maybe get a reason later, so the lesson is learned before any hearing,” a social producer in Rawalpindi said. Reporters repeatedly noted there is no central repository of outcomes or acquittals, which keeps uncertainty high and encourages prior restraint.

4.3 Harassment, intimidation and dismissals

Harassment is layered and often simultaneous. “We receive threats directly and indirectly from district administration and police, and also from feudal lords, drug dealers, and real estate tycoons. Sometimes security agencies act in a covert manner,” said Abid Mughal, President, Regional Union of Journalists. The same union recorded two cases of physical attacks, 31 FIRs in 2025 under PECA, and 8 fake FIRs under other laws against journalists in North Punjab. Reporters described life threatening calls, gunfire at homes or offices, family intimidation, and, in some cases, disappearances. Religious extremist groups

issue open threats in public speeches, while covert warnings arrive by phone or through intermediaries.

Economic pressure and dismissals reinforce the fear. “Only Dawn pays correspondents in most small districts. This financial gap puts local journalists at stake,” said Nabeel Anwar Dhakku. “If media houses will not pay or train, how can a reporter resist pressure from drug lords, local strongmen, or an angry official,” added a Gujranwala based stringer. Editors acknowledged sudden story drops, byline removals, and quiet reassignments after sensitive coverage. “You are told to cool down, then the desk stops calling you,” said a Sargodha correspondent.

Women face the sharpest edge of harassment. Interviewees linked online trolling, character attacks, and exclusion from press clubs to a cycle that pushes women into desk roles or out of the profession altogether. “In Attock, Chakwal, Fateh Jang, and Sargodha women are almost entirely absent. Where they are present, they are kept out of press clubs, not taken seriously in digital, and denied opportunities in print,” said Fauzia Kulsoom Rana, President, Women Journalist Association.

The cumulative effect is prior restraint in practice. “Restrictions come wrapped in law, but the daily effect is intimidation by local power centers and selective enforcement by authorities. Without payment and protection, you get silence,” said Abid Mughal. Interviewees added that there is no single institution that systematically collects threat data in these districts, which keeps the true scale obscured and reinforces impunity.

Media Development Roadmap for North Punjab: Key *Recommendations*

To foster a free, independent, and sustainable media landscape in Central Punjab, it is essential to address the challenges highlighted in this report. The following recommendations, derived from focused group discussions and key informant interviews, aim to enhance the professionalism of media in the Central Punjab region:

1. **For government authorities (Punjab government, district administrations and regulatory bodies)**
 - **Adopt and implement journalists' safety law:** Expedite the adoption of the 'Punjab Journalist Safety Law' for the province on the lines of similar laws at the federal and Sindh levels and ensure the formation of mandated safety commission. This body should be empowered to respond rapidly to threats and attacks against journalists.
 - **Enforce labor rights and fair wage frameworks:** Mandate media organizations in the region to comply with minimum wage laws and labor protections, including safety standards. Regular audits and penalties for non-compliance should be instituted.
 - **Reform advertising distribution:** Establish transparent, merit-based mechanisms for government advertising to prevent economic censorship and patronage. Ensure local and independent media outlets have fair access to advertising revenue. Some form of subsidies should also be considered for smaller media, as well as for digital media.
 - **Review and amend restrictive legislation:** Revisit laws such as the Punjab Defamation Act 2024 and PECA amendments 2025 to prevent their misuse for intimidation and censorship. At a minimum, remove cognizance from media-related content. Introduce safeguards against frivolous FIRs and fast-track tribunals that chill investigative reporting.
 - **Facilitate access to information:** Reinstate regular press briefings and direct engagement between district officials and journalists. Ensure PR officers and DGPR representatives are accessible and responsive to media queries.

2. For news media organizations and owners

- **Prioritize journalist safety:** Develop and enforce internal safety protocols, provide security training, and offer support for journalists reporting from high-risk areas, especially districts bordering conflict zones. Take a leaf from the obligations outlined in the federal and Sindh laws on safety of journalists.
- **Ensure fair compensation:** Pay journalists, including district correspondents and digital contributors, at least the government-mandated minimum wage. End the practice of unpaid or token employment.
- **Support gender inclusivity:** Create safe, inclusive work environments for women journalists, including access to assignments, press clubs, and digital training. Address harassment and discrimination proactively.
- **Invest in training and digital transition:** Provide ongoing training in digital journalism, investigative reporting, and emerging technologies (e.g., AI) to help journalists adapt and thrive in the changing media landscape.
- **Strengthen editorial independence:** Reinstate editorial structures and empower editors to uphold ethical standards, resist external pressures, and foster impartial journalism.

3. For journalist unions and press clubs

- **Unify and professionalize membership:** Resolve internal disputes and ensure that press club memberships are based on professional criteria, not patronage. Advocate for the rights and welfare of all journalists, including freelancers and women, especially within unions.
- **Collect and report threat data:** Establish systematic mechanisms to document threats, attacks, and legal cases against journalists. Help from organizations like Freedom Network can be secured. Use this data to lobby for stronger protections and accountability.
- **Promote solidarity and advocacy:** Support journalists facing legal, economic, or physical threats, and highlight cases of violence or intimidation across media outlets to build collective resilience.

4. For civil society and international partners

- **Monitor and advocate for media freedom:** Continue to monitor the state of media freedom, document abuses, and advocate for reforms at national and international forums. Assistance can be sought from groups like Freedom Network.

- **Support capacity building:** Fund and facilitate training programs, legal aid, and safety initiatives for journalists, especially those in vulnerable districts and marginalized groups.
- **Engage in dialogue with authorities:** Act as intermediaries to foster constructive dialogue between journalists, media organizations, and government bodies.

5. For journalists

- **Practice safe reporting:** Prioritize personal safety, seek support from unions and civil society organizations such as Freedom Network, and report threats or harassment promptly.
- **Build digital skills:** Invest in learning digital tools and platforms to expand reach and resilience in the face of print media decline.
- **Network and collaborate:** Engage with peers, unions, and advocacy groups to share experiences, resources, and strategies for overcoming challenges.

ABOUT FREEDOM NETWORK

Freedom Network is Islamabad-based independent media watchdog and development sector research, advocacy and training organization. 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.