

JOURNALISM IN BALOCHISTAN

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

Pakistan

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**STATE OF MEDIA FREEDOMS, ACCESS
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OF JOURNALISTS AND MEDIA
PROFESSIONALS IN **BALOCHISTAN** –
THE WAY FORWARD**

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Chapter 1

Executive Summary

This report examines the freedom of expression and state of safety of journalists in Balochistan, Pakistan's largest province by area, and traces how security, governance, economics, and demography shape the media ecosystem and journalists' safety. Drawing on desk research, focus group discussions, and key informant interviews it finds a chronically constrained information environment in which local media are financially brittle, structurally peripheral to "national mainstream" agendas, digitally disadvantaged, and exposed to overlapping coercive pressures from state and non-state actors. The cumulative effect is systematic under-coverage of public-interest issues, heightened self-censorship, and a steady erosion of citizens' right to know.

The province is linguistically diverse (Balochi, Pashto, Brahui, Hazargi/Dari prominent) and exceptionally young: 56.64% of the population is under 15. Pakistan's electronic media expanded rapidly after 2002 under PEMRA, but Balochistan's "regional" media footprint remains thin. National channels and newspapers keep shrinking bureau presence in Quetta as digital distribution becomes the default; outside the capital, coverage is sparse to nonexistent. The province lacks a terrestrial current affairs TV channel. State outlets (PTV and Radio Pakistan/PBC) operate mainly from urban centers; their multilingual mandate complicates content and reach, and transmission into remote areas remains limited.

On the private side, Vsh News (Balochi-language, Karachi-based) positions itself as a 24/7 satellite channel for Baloch audiences with national and diasporic reach. FM radio exists but is constrained by PEMRA's ~35–40 km coverage caps—unworkable in a province defined by vast distances and difficult terrain. Print is concentrated in Quetta and hampered by cost, distance, and low literacy in rural areas. Of the 120+ periodicals on the provincial DGPR list, only about a dozen dailies have real readership; many outlets function as "dummies" to capture government advertising rather than serve audiences. Balochi and Pashto titles are few; Urdu dominates (e.g., *Azadi*, *Intikhab*, *Balochistan Express*, *Qudrat*), alongside a small English presence.

With ad budgets digitizing and public-sector tenders moving online (BPPRA), legacy publishers see revenue evaporate. A nascent Digital Publishers

Association of legacy titles (*Azadi*, *Balochistan Express*, *Intikhab*, *Qudrat*) plus *Quetta Voice* seeks to pivot to monetizable digital operations, but staff and budgets have already been halved in two years.

Digital divide and shutdowns

Pakistan counted 116 million internet users at the start of 2025 (45.7% penetration), but Balochistan lags badly at 15% penetration, with 60% of the province lacking fiber connectivity. Prolonged, localized shutdowns—sometimes weeks or months (e.g., Panjgur since May 2025; post-attack blackouts in Khuzdar) — compound isolation, impede reporting, and create two starkly different digital realities within one country. Social media has, paradoxically, become essential for newsgathering and distribution while exposing journalists and citizen reporters to surveillance, takedown demands, and retaliation.

Coverage priorities and public-interest journalism

Security and politics dominate editorial agendas, squeezing out development, health, education, and social welfare coverage. Investigative work is rare due to risk and cost. Districts such as Turbat, Awaran, Panjgur, Zhob, Dalbandin, and Sherani are chronically under-covered; even Quetta often appears nationally only during spectacular violence. The cost of sustained field reporting across great distances — amid checkpoints, conflict, and poor security situation — pushes editors toward desk-based curation of social content and WhatsApp-mediated “coverage,” degrading verification standards. In this vacuum, untrained digital influencers fill space with high reach and low rigor, raising the stakes of mis/disinformation.

Threat actors and safety

Journalists face pressure, intimidation, and violence from multiple sides: separatist/militant groups, security and intelligence agencies, political and tribal elites, and mobs. Over two decades, “40 journalists have been killed in Balochistan; roughly 30 were targeted killings, the rest collateral to bombings/attacks. Khuzdar has been cited among the most dangerous districts for journalism. Journalists are frequently coerced to carry militant claims or assist security services in tracing callers; refusal or cooperation can each trigger threats. Compensation exists for terror victims (e.g., PKR 4 million), but impunity persists — no convictions in journalist murders, despite repeated assurances. Authorities highlight allocations for law and order (e.g., PKR 100 billion) and

protective measures (guards for press clubs) but lack tailored, preventive safety mechanisms or legal framework or accountability pathways. The Balochistan Union of Journalists marks August 28 annually for slain journalists (e.g., Irshad Mastoi, 2014) and reiterates unheeded safety demands.

Women journalists remain very few, largely confined to Quetta, and face layered constraints —mobility, hostile field conditions, newsroom sexism, pay gaps, lack of basic facilities (transport, washrooms, childcare), and harassment. Editors often bar women from district assignments for “safety,” reinforcing stereotypes while still expecting output without support. Women frequently work off-camera or have male colleagues voice their packages.

Right to Information (RTI)

Balochistan replicated weak federal FOI standards in 2005 and only passed a modern RTI law in 2021 — the last province to do so. Implementation is faltering: information officers are missing or transient; requests face blanket refusals, delay tactics, or ad hoc replies; the RTI Commission became barely functional only in 2025 and still lacks offices, staff, and timely salaries. The core problem is low administrative capacity coupled with low political will to operationalize transparency.

PECA and coercive digital governance

While PECA 2016 has reportedly not been formally used against a journalist in Balochistan, its deterrent threat is routine. Combined with prolonged internet shutdowns, platform surveillance, and state-funded “influencer” ecosystems, the legal-administrative environment chills online speech and steers attention toward official narratives.

With weak local markets, most outlets depend on government advertising, creating structural leverage for content control. Chronic delays in ad payments (e.g., seven months outstanding as of June 2025) force salary arrears, layoffs, and ethical compromises. The provincial Journalist Welfare Fund provides relief but is no substitute for a viable business model. As budgets migrate to digital — and as authorities bankroll aligned platforms/individual “influencers” — independent outfits are squeezed from both sides: starved of revenue and policed in content.

Chapter 2

Introduction

Balochistan, one of Pakistan's four provinces, functions within the country's federal constitutional system. Like other provinces, it has its own provincial assembly and representation in the National Assembly and Senate. Debates around provincial rights, resource governance, public security, and human rights have long shaped centre–province relations and influence how journalism operates in the province.

Covering 347,190 sq km — about 44% of Pakistan's landmass—Balochistan borders Iran to the west, Afghanistan to the northwest, and the Arabian Sea to the south, including the deep-sea port at Gwadar. Internally, it adjoins Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Punjab, and Sindh. The province's location at the juncture of South, Central, and West Asia, combined with significant mineral and energy potential, places it at the heart of national development plans and regional connectivity agendas. Since the early 2000s — particularly in the post-9/11 period — debates have intensified around resources, investment, and security.

Demographically, Balochistan reveals a province characterized by linguistic diversity and a notably young population structure. The languages with the most native speakers in the province are Balochi, Pashto, Brahui and Hazargi (a dialect of Persian also called Dari). The linguistic composition reflects ethnic diversity in a province whose demographic profile is overwhelmingly youthful, with the population of Balochistan under the age of 15 comprising 56.64 per cent of the total.¹

This young demographic structure has significant implications for civic and political expression in Balochistan where political resistance, mass movements and insurgency is increasingly led by youth that is temperamentally more inclined toward social and political activism, and yet more vulnerable to restrictions on fundamental freedoms as governments and the state respond harshly to their political views and expression. Little wonder, then, that it is the youth that constitutes a majority of the missing persons, a problem that has haunted the province for decades now.

¹ https://www.pbs.gov.pk/sites/default/files/population/census_reports/pcr_balochistan.pdf

2.1: Methodology

The Freedom Network collected the data for this report through desk research as well focus group discussions (FGDs) with journalists media practitioners and other stakeholders as well as key informant interviews (KIIs) in Quetta and other districts of Baluchistan in 2025.

2.2: The State of Media in Balochistan

Since 2002 onwards when the state first opened up media to private ownership, electronic media experienced tremendous growth under Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority (PEMRA)'s regulatory framework; the authority facilitating licensing of numerous TV channels, cable TV networks, and FM radio stations across the country. But while "national mainstream" TV channels and newspapers have maintained bureau offices in the provincial capital of Quetta – presently diminishing in the wake of digital media growing relevance – the provinces own share of "regional" media, whether newspapers, TV or radio, has negligible despite the province's vast geography. Now, as then, its share of news on national media remains disproportionately small relative to its geographic size and population.

As is the case with other provinces on the periphery, Balochistan lacks a terrestrial current affairs TV channel. Pakistan Television Corporation (*PTV*) and *Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation (PBC)* maintain presence in Balochistan, primarily in major urban centers. Radio Pakistan operates stations that serve the province, though their reach in remote areas remains limited. The state-owned media plays a big role in publicizing the government perspective on provincial issues. The multi-linguistic nature of Balochistan requires state-owned media to navigate between different language communities within the province, creating additional complexity in programming and content development.

On the private side, presently, there is the Balochi language *Vsh News* based in Karachi that claims to be "Balochistan first and only 24/7 Balochi language satellite TV channel." Owned by the private Visionary Group², the channel also has a presence on social platforms like Facebook and YouTube; its webpage is currently under construction³.

Vsh News channel has been broadcasting for nearly 12 years, claiming to reach approximately 50 million people across Pakistan and in other Middle Eastern,

²<https://visionarygroup.com.pk/media/>

³<https://vshnews.tv/>

Central Asian and European countries⁴. *Vsh News* vision is to preserve the Balochi language, culture, and literature by broadcasting 24/7 news, current affairs shows, documentaries and infotainment programs in Balochi. The channel has correspondents in Karachi, Lahore, Islamabad and Quetta, and it collaborates with other national and international news outlets for news and footages.

Long before *Vsh*, there was the Balochi language *Rozn TV* based in the province. It was run by a group of young people who had no exposure to TV but managing a television advertising agency in Hub – an industrial and commercial district of Balochistan bordering the Sindh province. The channel boasted a satellite footprint that covered Pakistan, Gulf, Central Asia and South and Southeast Asia. *Sabzbaat* was primarily focused on infotainment and had programs in Balochi, Brahvi and English languages, proving popular. *Sabzbaat* eventually became a martyr to the province's poor economy, with advertisers not interested in tapping population in remote districts with little buying power.

An online Iran/Sweden-based *Rozhn TV* channel is focused on Baloch diaspora, and available on social platforms *Rozhn TV* claims to be “a dedicated space for the Baloch people to foster journalistic culture. As the inaugural Balochi TV channel in Iran, we take pride in our role as cultural ambassadors, actively promoting and preserving the rich tapestry of our heritage and Regards radio, PEMRA's licensing framework allows for commercial FM radio stations with coverage areas of 35-40 kilometers in radius, while campus-based non-commercial FM stations have coverage limited to campus areas or 10-kilometer radius. However, the challenging terrain and security situation in Balochistan has limited the establishment of extensive radio networks across the province. The state-owned *Pakistan Broadcasting Corporation (PBC)* and *Pakistan Television Corporation (PTV)* maintain presence in major cities including Quetta.

A number of FM stations, both private and subsidiaries of PBC and other state institutions, are active across districts of Balochistan. The list below names some of these:

- PBC FM93: Broadcasts from Gwadar and Sibbi.
- FM 101: A commercial station with multiple locations, including Quetta and Gwadar.
- Suno FM Quetta: Broadcasts from Quetta.
- Radio ONE: Broadcasts from Gwadar.
- Chiltan FM88: Has stations in Mastung and Quetta.
- Sky FM: Has stations in Qilla Abdullah, Pishin, and Quetta.

⁴ <https://visionarygroup.com.pk/media/>

- Shalimar FM: Broadcasts from Quetta.
- Campus Radio FM 96.6: Located at the University of Balochistan in Quetta.
- PBC Saut ul-Quran: Has stations in Sibbi, Quetta, and Gwadar.
- Hot FM Quetta: Located in Quetta.
- FM Radio Jhalawan: Located in Khuzdar.

PEMRA's restrictions that allow limited coverage of about 35-40 kilometers radius for private commercial stations is particularly problematic in Balochistan, where vast distances between population centers require extensive coverage to serve the entire province effectively. Television and radio have the potential for broader reach but face significant infrastructure and licensing challenges in a province wracked by security concerns.

The Print Media

The print media presence in Balochistan is heavily concentrated in urban centers, particularly Quetta, the provincial capital. This concentration creates significant coverage gaps in rural and remote areas, where populations may have limited access not just because of distance but also low literacy. The province's challenging geography, including mountainous terrain and vast desert areas, makes distribution particularly difficult and expensive. The linguistic diversity of the province also creates challenges for print media, as publications must navigate between Balochi, Pashto, and Urdu to reach different demographics.

While there are only a couple of Balochi or Pashto newspapers in the province, those published in Urdu language dominate by a large number. The Director General Public Relations (DGPR) has 123 publications on its media list for dispersal of government advertisements. Of these, *Nawai Watan* is a Balochi language daily, *Talar* publishes in Brahui, *Zhaland* and *Nawai Zund* are both Pashto dailies. The rest like *Azadi*, *Intikhab*, *Balochsitan Express*, *Qudrat* etc are in Urdu, English and Pashto.

Only about a dozen of these are proper dailies with regular readership; most only exist as dummies to benefit from public advertisement. Balochistan's native newspapers like *Azadi*, *Intikhab*, *Balochsitan Express*, *Qudrat* etc operate within a challenging financial environment that shapes their content, distribution, and editorial policies. The province's newspapers typically focus on political issues and have historically served as platforms for discussing provincial autonomy, resource rights, and political representation issues. While the native print media brings credibility and depth to coverage, it faces distribution challenges and

limited reach in remote areas in a province spread over great distances⁵.

Of the monthly magazines, there are close to 120. *Balochi Zind*, as the name suggests, publishes in Balochi. *Pashto* is a monthly in that language. There are other monthly magazines that are bilingual or multilingual, published in local languages, in Urdu and English. In addition to these are weeklies and fortnightlies of a much smaller number. The magazine and periodical scene in Balochistan appear limited, with most publications focusing on daily news rather than in-depth analysis or cultural content. This limitation may be related to financial constraints, limited readership, and the challenging distribution environment.

Increasingly, mainstream national newspapers with bureaus in Quetta have been compelled to close down—*Dawn* being the latest victim, *Bol* before it. However, regional newspapers — there are no regional channels other than Balochi language *Vsh* based in Karachi, the bilingual state-owned Bolan TV or the *Nawai-watan* newspaper — would die out first because no industry or private sector exists to sustain them in Balochistan. Even the little incentive there was for investment to happen has been sabotaged by conflict.

The death of regional newspapers is the death of freedom of expression itself, in a province where it is already at a premium. Historically, these regional newspapers have been hatcheries for local journalism, one that is vocal about the troubles of Balochistan because of their local and regional predisposition, something absent from national media in Quetta.

Coverage Patterns and Priorities

Political coverage dominates Balochistan's media landscape, reflecting both the province's complex political situation and the immediate concerns of security and governance. This focus on political issues often crowds out coverage of development, education, health, and social welfare issues that affect daily life in the province.

The concentration on political and law and order issues leave little room for editorial priorities to expand – especially when there are corporate consideration and practical constraints of funds hinged to the coverage of security situation. Stories about development projects, community initiatives, or social programs receive less attention because, in a volatile province like Balochistan where every day security is at red-alert, they become less pressing.

⁵ The information about newspapers and magazines comes from a DGPR source interviewed for this research.

Moreover, public interest journalism is expensive, requiring more resources to investigate and report issues comprehensively.

Little wonder, then, that public interest journalism in Balochistan operates within significant constraints. The challenging environment for journalism in Balochistan affects the types of stories that can be pursued and published. Investigative journalism faces particular constraints due to security risks and limited access to information. Consequently, these limitations affect the media's ability to hold authorities accountable and provide comprehensive coverage of governance and human rights issues.

The people and journalists in remote districts – Turbat, Awaran, Panjgur, Zhob, Dalbandin, Sherani – complain that the national media does not highlight their issues. “But the fact is, even we in the provincial capital are neglected by mainstream media. It takes a bombing or a political murder for Quetta to appear in the news; otherwise, we are reduced to tickers on the lower third of the screen.”

Even as Pakistan has experienced unprecedented digital growth over the years – there were 116 million individuals using the internet in Pakistan at the start of 2025, with online penetration at 45.7 percent⁶, this boom, however, stops short of Balochistan. The province remains digitally isolated with only 15 per cent internet penetration, according to the PTA⁷, and around 60 per cent of the province having no access to fiber-optic connection⁸. When compared to the national average, this creates a stark tale of two digital realities within one country.

⁶ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2025-pakistan>

⁷ <https://www.wgi.world/bridging-the-digital-divide-in-balochistan/>

⁸ <https://www.brecorder.com/news/40036611>

Chapter 3

State of Media Freedoms in Balochistan

3.1 Threat Actors to Free Speech

The state of media freedoms in Balochistan represents one of the most concerning aspects of the broader freedom of expression landscape. Journalists in the province face intimidation from multiple sources, including separatist groups, security forces, and tribal leaders. Over the last couple of decades, nearly 40 journalists have died in the province⁹. The threats are multi-faceted, creating an environment inimical to independent journalism and safety of journalists, limiting the public's access to information and restricting the media's role as a check on power.

Over the last 25 years, the challenges faced by journalists have extended beyond direct intimidation, including structural barriers to reporting such as closing down offices and preventing circulation of newspapers in the districts. Over the years and decades, Baloch militant organizations suspended the distribution of local and national newspapers in southern and central Balochistan, demanding coverage of their activities in media¹⁰. Journalistic activities were suspended in several towns and cities of the province and press clubs in Mastung, Kalat, Turbat, Panjgur, Gwadar, Pasni, Ormara, Awaran, Nushki, Dalbandin, Kharan, Hub and some other areas have been closed for several days.

"Journalists face pressure from both the state and non-state actors to be on their side, while the state cannot provide them safety in a place where its writ is challenged; nor is such security desirable because it naturally makes them an easy target for the militants." The government itself blames the "circumstances" in Balochistan where "the journalists are working very bravely." It owns up to the responsibility to provide "all out support" to media and journalists but there is little in evidence by way of measures or policies to suggest the sincerity of its intent. "The government stance is very clear: To protect journalists¹¹."

⁹ Interview with a Quetta Press Club office holder, also a former BUJ representative

¹⁰ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1368519>

¹¹ Interview with Zahoor Ahmad Buledi, Minister for Planning and Development in the current cabinet

To do this, the government is empowering the law-and-order agencies, that provide police guards to media offices and the press club, by “providing the right gadgets, training and techniques to them to counter terrorism, allocating PKR 100 billion to address the law-and-order situation in the province.” And that perhaps is the elephant in the room – the fact of the authorities dealing with a matter far more pressing than the consequences of that matter, such as the killing of journalists. There exist no mechanisms or measures to address this. The victims are compensated, of course. Those targeted by terrorists get PKR 4 million in compensation, including the journalists. But when it comes to championing the cause of freedom of expression and journalists’ safety, that is a battle left to journalist bodies like the Balochistan Union of Journalists, the civil society and the human rights organizations.

Public representatives, tasked to guard freedom of information, often become a threat actor in Balochistan. Politicians insist that it is their democratic right not to agree with a journalist or a media platform on a news story; to protest or air resentment. However, when this resentment turns into a threat like attacks on media offices or journalists, they label it as a “societal issue” where a society steeped in undemocratic mores resorts to settling issues forcefully, instead of through negotiations or debate. But in Balochistan, the combination of a tribal outlook within an undemocratic milieu complicates the picture. Sans a few political parties that react to media coverage with restraint and patience, expressing their anger and grievances in a civil manner, others resort to tribal traits, as is the case with threats to Muhammad Akbar Notezai, who earned their ire for his *Dawn* story on private jails maintained by *sardars* in the tribal eastern Balochistan¹². Especially when the story came at a time when Minister Khetran was denying keeping a private jail in the wake of the triple murder case in Barkhan¹³.

Anwar Jan Khetran, a journalist working from Barkhan, killed in July 2020. He was killed by the bodyguards of Sardar Abdur Rehman Khetran, a tribal chief who was then a provincial food and welfare minister and currently a member of the provincial assembly with PML(N) party. Jan had posted on social media accounts that allegedly linked Sardar Abdul Rehman to graft and human rights violations. Police filed an FIR (first information report) opening an investigation into the two bodyguards, but not the minister. On 21 February 2023, Sardar Khetran was accused in a triple murder incident when at least three dead bodies were recovered in the country’s southwestern region. Local residents informed the officials about the incident, prompting a strong reaction from the police

¹² <https://www.dawn.com/news/1763048>

¹³ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1738351>

team and causing outrage on social media. As the incident garnered attention and victims started sharing clips on social media, the incident along with Khetran started to trend on social media. The victims including a mother and her children were held hostage in an unlawful personal jail of Abdul Rahman Khetran. Sardar Khetran has denied involvement in both cases - the journalist and the triple murder in Barkhan.

3.2 Poor Service Structure in AJK Media

With media having no other business model to raise revenue, it is an established fact in Pakistan that it depends, by and large, on advertisements from the federal and provincial governments to survive. The government, in turn, uses that leverage to control media and information.

Salaries for journalists in Balochistan are comparatively much lower than other provinces — a problem often exacerbated by delays on the part of the government to pay advertisement funds to regional media organizations. Even the federal government quota, which is three percent for the province, goes to national media because federal advertisements are given to national bureaus based in Quetta. “The national media takes resources while giving local audiences little but state-controlled narratives.” It’s June 2025 and the newspapers still have to pay for the month of January — the advertisement quota has been delayed by nearly seven months. Papers struggle under economic stress — paper is procured on loan, salaries are delayed.

A journalist’s financial insecurity and insolvency in the face of ever-rising cost of living makes him susceptible to compromise. Journalistic morals and principles cannot feed his family. Imagine a journalist in Awaran who is only paid Rs.3000, and that too after a delay of three to four months. Can one expect him to be true to a profession that doesn’t pay or the person who does?”¹⁴ A former BUJ office-holder blames state of affairs for this – “For every reporter asking for a salary, there are 10 ready to do a job without because they draw benefits from the profession in other ways.”

One serious problem in business model of journalism in Balochistan is existence of a large number of dummy newspapers who took away the share of legitimate newspapers and are going out of business now. The phenomenon of dummy newspapers in Balochistan exposes how the province’s media landscape has been hollowed out by corruption, patronage, and technological irrelevance.

¹⁴ A press club representative in Quetta

These papers, however, “cry about the government killing the industry and economically throttling the staff,” while in reality they are *one-man shows*, with the publisher often doubling as the worker. Once tools of political patronage, these publications are now being discarded by the same government sponsors who created them, as official advertising budgets move to digital platforms — “*they no longer need a story but a video, for which these papers have no skills.*” What remains is a hollow industry — “*a USB mafia where one daily publishes a newspaper and gives it to others to change the masthead on top*” — producing identical headlines under different names. With fewer than a dozen newspapers maintaining any digital presence — most merely uploading PDFs — Balochistan’s press has turned into a theatre of appearances.

With digital platforms mushrooming, the authorities are now shifting a bulk of that advertisement quota to them, including those it established itself for PR purposes or propaganda. Government tenders under BPEPRA (Balochistan Public Procurement Regulatory Authority) that form a large part of the advertisement quota are being digitized. The local newspaper industry sees this as a move to kill local media and is currently seized with the struggle to make its presence felt through their digital platforms while still publishing daily.

Under the circumstance, the only survival strategy that the newspapers have is to monetize their digital channels. They do understand it is not enough to run an organization; it would follow that they would be cutting down the cost of publication — staff, press operations, paper procurement, distribution etc. As it is, within the last two years, regional newspapers have shrunk by 50 percent of their staff strength¹⁵.

Azadi, Balochistan Express, Intikhab, Qudrat — all legacy media publishers — have now formed a Digital Publishers Association, together with Quetta Voice, to turn the new policy to their advantage. But the concerns about survival remain.

However, the mainstream news organizations have also laid off staff over the years and as a result, and with no reporters for extensive coverage of beats, their digital platforms take cue for news and information from social platforms. In a fast-shifting digital environment, this has led to some channels closing down bureau offices in Quetta because all news is now filtered through social media, with little emphasis on physical presence on the ground.

Young students from BUITEMS and University of Balochistan, or elsewhere

¹⁵ Interview with the editor of a regional newspaper in Quetta.

in the districts, find themselves jobless after years of education and so they turn to social media, some for ideological reasons, others for money and still others from the sheer boredom of idleness. Compared to journalists running their social platforms, they are in a big majority. Since they know nothing of journalism as a discipline, they have distorted the face of the profession in Balochistan. In fact, observers say that more dangers and threats exist in the case of social media because of greater outreach that in case of negative coverage, evoke a harsh response from the authorities or whoever the coverage is aimed at.

The government-funded “Balochistan Journalist Welfare Fund,” managed by the press club, the BUJ and the office of the Director General Public Relations, Quetta, has substantial funds. The managers annually announce dissemination to “deserving” journalists through an alert/advertisement in a newspaper. There is the seed money of PKR 230 million, the interest from which is annually disbursed. Since the policy was instituted in 2020, support is offered under the Fund from that year onwards.

3.3 Gender in Journalism

Over the years, the media in Quetta has been welcoming and discouraging women journalists in keeping with the tenuous circumstances that plague the province like a chronic affliction. Most of them move on, a few stay put, but their number in media has not gone up to a point to cause optimism about gender relations in a province where of late, stories about the status of women doesn't inspire much confidence.

In the early 90s when media was opening up and there were channels and opportunity aplenty, women in urban metropolises where media headquarters are based graced the screen as anchors, commentators and reporters. The mainstream TV channel bureaus in Quetta were keen to adopt the pattern, opening up to women seeking a career in journalism. Since the late 80s, when the University of Balochistan got its Media Studies Department, women had been studying journalism but when it came to jobs, of which there were few, they preferred the protection of the four walls to the vulnerability of the field.

With women, their preference, even today, is to work for an NGOs or a bank, if qualified. Others take up teaching or healthcare. The emerging FM stations and TV channels offered hope for women to take up media but the preference was to work behind the scenes. The motivation to join journalism was so little, the faculty members of the Journalism and Mass Communications Department

at the Balochistan University pointed out in 2011 that in the past two decades less than 10 women graduates had gone on to join media as career journalists¹⁶. Female journalists criticize the university education for not training them for the field – even when male journalists come from the same universities. Societal attitudes, however, give men greater access to opportunities of learning. Internship opportunities for women are few because they need additional facilities – bathrooms, shuttle service, convenient working hours. Naturally, with female journalists only few enough to count on fingers, the women population goes unrepresented in the media.

Seeing opportunity where there was little elsewhere in the province, women joined media, but at a time that could not have been more perilous. The media expansion happened concurrently with conflict in the border regions. The door of opportunity that had opened for a few years was quickly shut. Channels had difficulty reporting violent incidents in the capital where their (male) reporters and camera persons were killed in bombings, and the districts where they were targeted. They couldn't send women, encumbered by socio-cultural attitudes and safety concerns, in the midst of all that turmoil and tragedy for coverage. Says Saadia Jehangir - the veteran who persisted despite the odds, supported by a husband who is also a journalist - of how media reinforced gender stereotypes amidst the conflict, even when she was "not owned" by the male-dominated media and the society when, as a young graduate straight out of the university, she first joined journalism: "A colleague and I were covering the aftermath of a bombing of the Hazara community. Witnessing the tragic devastation, she couldn't keep her composure and broke down while on camera. Instantly, my channel called to say why couldn't I cry on screen?"

Responding to the Taliban threat, women reporters in Quetta would make packages but have them narrated in the voice of a male colleague. There have been times when members of banned Baloch insurgent groups would call to claim responsibility for an attack on a state agency or the "settlers", and the people killed in that attack were related to the journalist called – in this case a woman. One such journalist remembers two of her cousins were killed; in another instance, a family friend, and a colleague of a family member, were killed. "These incidents traumatized women journalists more than men, if only because they are more empathetic by nature. Imagine taking a phone call from someone claiming the death of a person close to you and not being able to say anything."

¹⁶ <https://www.yumpu.com/en/document/view/49842214/media-in-balochistan-blighted-but-a-brave-new-world-intermedia>

Editors and assignment coordinators at media offices are often ignorant of the hazards and conditions, such as great stretches of desolation between cities and settlements, the near state-less nature of these distances, and the challenges of navigation therefrom. “They expect women journalists in Quetta to go to Turbat or Taftan to cover a development there.” Such demands are often made without any support, logistical or financial. While not found wanting when it comes to willingness despite the odds involved, women journalists need male colleagues to help them traverse the uncertainty and the insecurity as much as they do these vast expanses of land, often uninhabited and without law-enforcement mechanisms.

The threat is also from the mob who find women journalists easy targets. In fact, when panic or a melee ensues, there is no distinction made between men and women. But because women wear a weaker socio-cultural armour, they get hit often and forcefully – physically and psychologically – as is the case of the bombing of Sardar Bahadur Khan University bus that killed 81 people in 2013, and the riot in its aftermath. To this day, it haunts a woman journalist who happened to be in the neighbourhood and was among the first media-persons to arrive¹⁷. “I thought it was the end of the world. The mob was attacking everyone and I was glad to have left my little boy, only two back then, at home. Again, the attack on lawyers in Quetta that killed more than 70 people I survived by a mere fluke because I was surrounded by men who had turned up at the Civil Hospital after the lawyer Bilal Kasi was target-killed. They absorbed the force of the explosion, saving me while dying themselves.”¹⁸ In the case of attack on lawyers, both *Aaj News* and *Dawn News* channels also lost their cameramen, a sacrifice rarely acknowledged by the profession for which they laid their lives, because camera persons in Pakistan, although they play a vital role in news gathering, are not treated as “equals” of reporters.

Unless high up in the pecking-order of a media organization or its bureau, the salaries and services women journalists command are not on a par with their male colleagues. “When new news channels are set-up, the smallest briefcase comes to Balochsitan even though in terms of area, it is the biggest province of the country.” While this means fewer staff, it also means lower salaries all round, and within that women and the wages they receive come last and the least. There are often delays in paying salaries. Once it did not hurt a female journalist when she was young and single, but when married, she has a family to keep, a household economy to run. “I leave my house so I can earn and run that house. Delay in salaries throw off all your budget planning. One of my

¹⁷ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-22932747>

¹⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/August_2016_Quetta_attacks

colleagues who has been in media for decades only gets Rs.30,000, not even the minimum wage. He says he has given his ATM to the landlord. He calls him to withdraw the sum when his salary arrives – it is the same amount as his house rent. One can't imagine how he covers the cost of living.”¹⁹

Security trumped all other concerns back and even as it makes an alarming comeback in the border regions, the participation of women in media is subject to a host of other factors in Quetta and Balochistan. Mobility, lack of digital connectivity, distances and socio-cultural attitudes play a part but so does the working conditions. To function freely and efficiently, women journalists need transport, a harassment-free environment, privacy within the office to rewind and rejuvenate from stressful hours, separate washrooms, convenient workhours, childcare centres and maternity care and support. “More aware of the world and its ways, young women now come with expectations and these are neither met by the media organizations nor the society in general, with its tribal patriarchal values. Women journalists, especially those who are new to the job, also depend on male colleagues to assist them in the field. When young women find conditions not conducive, they do not stick around for long.”

Of late, freelance women journalists focusing on the issues of Balochistan have also earned recognition and space for their work, contributing frequently to national and international digital news platforms. On the other hand, media organizations would rather hire a male journalist with fewer needs and hindrances. The drop-out rate for women in media is high but those who stay, they mostly remain within the confines of the capital. Only those who work with more resourceful and supportive organizations willing to send their staff, including women, out in the districts would have the opportunity to report from them there. These days, though, media organizations rely on WhatsApp coverage, no more sending reporters to districts, but finding footage and comments from remote sites and sources through freeware instead of investing in the costly logistics of news.

No more does mainstream media in the urban metropolises or the periphery including the districts dedicate staff to an individual beat. Reporters are now required to cover everything. Quetta is no different. “In the morning, they cover vegetable prices in the market, in the afternoon they are reporting from the provincial assembly and in the evening, a protest. Because the sizes of the bureaus have shrunk, staff find themselves saddled with additional responsibilities and this is especially burdensome for women journalists, more so if they lack support, which is quite the norm because they work in offices

¹⁹ A woman journalist interviewed in Quetta.

understaffed and underequipped."

Harassment is common, within and outside the office. Female journalists speak about the challenges they face at their organizations – sexual harassment, lack of washrooms for female staff – in private but not in public forums, perhaps for fear of male colleagues present there. A representative for an international media rights organization in Balochistan said that women journalists speak freely about their issues on X-spaces from all over South Asia but not from Balochistan. However, forms of harassment vary. It may not necessarily be sexual – being a woman journalist in a male-dominated office bring pressures aplenty. Often work related, they induce anxiety due to deadlines. For a worker overburdened anyway, especially if she happens to be a “junior”, it means a punishing routine that hardly ever lets up. During the course of all this, if a woman journalist faces sexual harassment, and she does quite often, she keeps it to herself in order to keep a job. In a society where socio-cultural norms put women at disadvantage, their character becomes a subject for common discussion. Telling someone – a colleague, a senior, a parent or a sibling – could, other than entailing a stigma or embarrassment, mean the end of a job for someone desperate to keep it, whether for reasons of career or solvency. At home, in the office or outside, the outlook of men is shaped by the same honour-bound fears and cultural sensitivities, and therefore it is the woman who bears the brunt of it should they come true.

Chapter 4

The State of Safety of Journalists in Balochistan

According to Balochistan Union of Journalists, more than 40 journalists have been killed in the line of duty over the last two decades, with nearly 30 of these target-killed while the rest dying while caught in law-and-order situations like attacks and bombings. The post-9/11 situation of routine bombings, sectarian killings, active insurgency and targeting of media workers has somewhat eased in the provincial capital, but the threat has shifted to the districts as the province witnesses another wave of insurgency related violence. From Chishti Mujahid and Irshad Mastoi in Quetta then, it is now Anwar Khetran in Barkhan, Muhammad Siddique Mengal in Khuzdar and Latif Baloch in Awaran.

Among its mandate and list of demands from authorities, the Balochistan Union of Journalists, which advocates media freedoms, has safety of journalists as ongoing concern. It has taken this up with authorities time and again who have assured support and action, however beyond the collective prayer for slain journalists on the floor of the assembly, successive governments have shown little resolve to address the issue: as manifest from the fact that not a single conviction has happened in the case of the journalists killed despite assurances that the cases would be investigated. The BUJ reiterates this charter of demands annually on August 28 when Irshad Mastoi, Bureau Chief for the *Online News Agency*, and his coworkers were killed in Quetta in 2014. The day is commemorated as a “martyr’s day” for slain journalists in Balochistan. “Mastoi’s friends, family, and colleagues said that he had been threatened by an array of actors, including sectarian and militant groups, such as the banned Lashkar-e-Jhangvi, and the security agencies. Shortly before his death, he told a friend that someone had been threatening him on the phone, but did not offer further details.”²⁰

In the districts, journalists lack training in conflict reporting are the standards and ethics of journalism, which within the above cited environment, multiply threats and the potential for harm. Journalists in the districts often work for nationalist parties, and they agree they have sympathies with them. Journalists

²⁰ <https://cpj.org/data/people/irshad-mastoi/>

often forget that their loyalties should lie with their profession first. They tend to become activists, willy-nilly, and therefore, martyrs to a cause.

4.1 Extreme Forms of Censorship in Balochistan

The Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (HRCP) has, time and again, brought attention to severe restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly in the province. “Freedom of expression and movement faced significant setbacks [in Balochistan], as press freedom encountered severe threats from various threat actors. On World Press Freedom Day, Siddique Mengal, president of the Khuzdar Press Club, was killed by a magnet bomb, resulting in the deaths of two passers-by as well.”²¹

Newspapers like *Azadi*, *Balochistan Express* and *Intikhab*, long the vociferous platforms for highlighting issues related to Balochistan, have always had to struggle with issues of survival, as their distribution is hampered and journalists face harassment. Such newspapers are now also threatened by the fluid media landscape that the state is manipulating in its favor through funds and administrative measures.

The digital landscape in Balochistan has become increasingly restricted, with authorities using laws and digital technology to restrict freedom of expression. Repeated internet blackouts in Balochistan have impeded freedom of information, creating significant barriers to communication and access to information. These shutdowns particularly affect the province’s young population, who rely heavily on digital communication platforms.

The newspapers started their digital platforms thinking they would have relative freedom because those are not funded by the government, but even there surveillance from authorities followed. They were told not to post stories on “forbidden subjects”. And so even there they have been hit, both economically because they are still dependent on the government funds for their physical newspapers, and going down in public estimation because people are highly critical of authorities — if they don’t see coverage of Mengal, Maulana Hidayatullah from Gwadar (a Jamaat-e-Islami leader), or Mahrang Baloch in newspapers when they are all over social media, why would they bother with newspapers or their digital platforms?

²¹ <https://hrdp-web.org/hrdpweb/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/2025-State-of-Human-Rights-in-2024.pdf>

This political inclination is also borne out by the fact that the authorities have spent billions establishing platforms that do the government's bidding. The policy to divert advertisement quota to digital platforms is seen as a big step towards controlling private digital media and sustaining the government-owned platforms where "the funds can go to an organization but also an individual" who is amenable to the state's spokesperson — local media persons think these are "influencers."

The Quetta Press Club President Abdul Khaliq Baloch was told that due to the current law and order situation, no organization or political party was allowed to organize any events at the press club without obtaining prior approval from the district administration. The local administration had also previously urged the press club to restrict certain political parties and organizations from holding press conferences, seminars and rallies on its premises or holding sit-ins in front of the club.

After countrywide protests led by Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists and Balochistan Union of Journalists, the Balochistan High Court (BHC) suspended the deputy commissioner's directive on April 22, 2025. What a press club representative said about the ban goes to illustrate how the people in the province have come to accept such a restriction as normal: "What's deplorable is that the media persons, public and political parties wholeheartedly accepted the ban; it took Mahvish Kanwal of the PTI's women wing, and Hassan Kamran, a lawyer, to challenge the administration's order through constitutional petitions in BHC that finally resulted in the suspension of the ban."

Self-censorship is quite the norm, even in the newsrooms of national media, where the information received is already heavily censored and slanted — monopolized as it is by the state and its institutions. As far as the banned organizations are concerned, they now directly send their claims to international organizations who then ask their staff in the province to substantiate the developments.

In a province nearly half the size of Pakistan, internet, when and where it is available, and consequently social media, have served to shrink spaces. Distances were always a huge handicap to field-based reporting, and they continue to be so in Balochistan — as the recent episode of Pakistanis entering the border town of Taftan from Iran after Israel's attack, which only a couple of channels covered by sending reporters to Taftan. But in the districts where internet coverage is available, journalists can access information, even though they "may not always be able to report it, especially the security-related developments." Sources, if they speak at all, wish to remain anonymous.

A large number of young people have assumed the role of citizen journalist to accurately portray the situation on the ground. The same is true for journalists whose content and stories find no space in mainstream media.”²² And yet, these platforms are forever grappling with the extensive and prolonged lack of internet connectivity in the districts – on occasion spanning 10 to 15 days, and in the case of Panjgur, for months now, since May when the National Assembly was informed that the suspension of internet will go on for six months due to security reasons²³. “The government insists that Balochistan has been digitalized with greater net-connectivity. We say, it has gone further backwards. In Khuzdar, the third largest district in Balochistan, after the APS attack [in May 2025], there is still no internet till today [more than a month later]. We know nothing of what is going on there,” says a newspaper editor in Quetta.

Access to Information: The Right to Know Not

Access to information remains a formidable challenge for journalists in Balochistan, where data is either unavailable with the government departments or deliberately withheld from journalists. Information related to security is particularly difficult to obtain, and departments routinely refuse to share data that might stir a hornet’s nest at the civil secretariat or the cantonment, creating trouble for them. This attitude is most prevalent among high-ranking officials, though lower-level staff can sometimes be persuaded to share information if assured of anonymity. “The transparency-averse approach of the Balochistan government is not necessarily due to the fact that they want to hide information. It is largely due to incompetence and lack of interest of the provincial government officials. Most government functionaries are not aware of the importance of sharing information for a functional democracy. Therefore, they do not spare their time and energy for this purpose. There is no accountability mechanism for government officials to share information, which needs to be done through effective Right to Information legislation. Making information public is nowhere on the agenda of the government and its various branches.”²⁴

The province’s progress towards right to information legislation began with the Balochistan Freedom of Information Act of 2005, essentially a replica of the Freedom of Information Ordinance (BFOI) 2002, as applied to federal government bodies. The provinces improved upon the law to enact their own freedom of information legislation. However, BFOI 2005 was criticized for being one of the weakest RTI laws in Pakistan. One of the key reasons for that was

²² A district based journalist in Turbat

²³ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1913567>

²⁴ <https://thefridaytimes.com/09-Oct-2020/transparency-in-balochistan>

the lack of implementation and enforcement of the law, leading to concerns about transparency and access to information in the province. Eventually, it was replaced by the Balochistan Right to Information Act in 2021, making it the last province in Pakistan to pass comprehensive RTI legislation.

Under the new law, RTI offices were to be made functional within a stipulated 21-day response time. However, the situation on the ground tells a different story. A Quetta-based journalist who has worked with several media organizations has filed 18 RTI requests and been refused all information except one. When he pressed for answers, officials accused him of blackmail. In one case, an official simply scribbled figures on a piece of paper instead of providing information in a formal manner. In another instance, a secretary was completely unaware that RTI law existed or what it entailed.

This ignorance of the law is common among many officials, according to a journalist. He says initially, the government failed to hire departmental public information officers responsible for handling and responding to public RTI requests. Later, officers were hired for 32 departments and trained in RTI procedures, but since these were not dedicated information officers, they were eventually posted elsewhere, leaving departments without anyone to handle requests. Even when departments have designated officers, they employ delay tactics. Once the allowed response time lapses, citizens can approach the commission, but in Quetta, the RTI Commission has only now become functional, 5 years after the passage of the law.

In 2025, the RTI Commission in Balochistan is just starting from scratch, with no structure, staff, offices, or resources. Seven months into their hiring, the two provincial information commissioners do not have an office of their own. Far from being housed at an “autonomous commission”, they share temporary quarters at the DGPR office till they have a permanent space of their own. This has caused the process of streamlining the legislation at the commission and at the level of government departments drag on indefinitely. The reason cited is the lack of funds but deep down it reflects a lack of political commitment, where the functioning of a nascent organization is hampered from the start. There are delays in paying salaries to the two officials – their first salary came seven months after the hiring. Through personal efforts, the Commission staff has managed to mobilize some funds and hopes to establish a proper office within a couple of months, along with the required personnel. Meanwhile, applications for information continue to arrive, but response remains tardy.

4.2 Legal Cases and Legislative Challenges in Balochistan

Introduction of laws like Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), 2016 has eroded free speech protections with journalists complain it is already used as a weapon to silence them. Over the last couple of years, with the spike in the security and law and order situation, and protests from mass movements across the province, mobile networks have been frequently shut down in the districts, often over weeks and months, demonstrating the use of communication restrictions as a tool of control when it comes to freedom of expression and association.

PECA hasn't been invoked in the case of a journalist in Balochistan. And yet, it haunts them everywhere in the province. It is not rare for authorities to use the threat of the law to silence journalists into submission. "Already, the administration and the institutions have weaponized the law against us. They do not hesitate to brandish it when they wish to deter us from covering something they don't want."

4.3 Harassment, Intimidation, and Dismissals

An alarming outcome of finding oneself working within the push and pull of such conflicting interests is that journalists are forced to take sides, be that their own biases or the intense force that comes to bear on them from conflict actors. The state institutions force journalists to help them identify or reach the anti-state elements. They are asked to furnish information about these elements when they often have no knowledge of who they are. "We get calls on WhatsApp from 'banned organizations' all the time. They never give us their names or location. They just ask us to carry their claims of attacks on state installations. These calls are made from local or foreign numbers. One of our journalists was picked up by the intelligence agencies for having received several such calls. They wanted him to call back and engage in a conversation with the caller, while they trace the number and the caller. The next day when he was dropped off by the intelligence agencies, he immediately got a call from the banned organization, threatening him for cooperating with the state agencies."²⁵ Voicing that predicament, a journalist said the threat "is not so much from them (the banned organizations) as from the state institutions."²⁶

Journalist also feel threatened by civil servants involved in corruption, In January 2025, Hayat Khan, a journalist from Barkan – now displaced to a district

²⁵ A district based journalist

²⁶ ibid

in Punjab province (*exact location withheld to protect his privacy*) where he feels safer after a number of life-threatening attacks on him – reported on a corruption case involving the newly appointed civil servant. He was accused of charging diesel smugglers of PKR 300,000 per truck, when they usually paid a couple of thousand rupees. Khan posted documentary proof and videos on his website. This eventually led to the officer returning the money to the smugglers, but an FIR was registered against Hayat for having covered the story against the administration misdemeanor. The case was later quashed when Hayat agreed to remove the proof from his website.

It is hard to escape tribal and cultural pressures in a province steeped in identity politics, given that identity is often tied up to deep-seated attitudes that are tribal, feudal, socio-cultural and religious, among many others. Drug trafficking along routes that run deep into the tribal Balochistan with tribal stakeholders and interests involved, honour related cases, tribal feuds and interests, cultural taboos and stigmas, religious red lines and fault lines; it's a large stack of odds the journalists grapple with routinely in Balochistan. Tribal cultural practices such as honour killing or early marriages are always prickly to touch, inciting violent reaction. Rare is the district journalist that takes on the system; and when they are harmed for threatening it, it is covered up as a tribal matter where a journalist is accused of *saya-kari* or a "dishonourable act."

Social media has muddied the waters for journalists too: Where earlier, a journalist faced with the tribal pressure to write on behalf of powerful and influential tribal figures, especially if they also had political cache and profile – could say he had filed the story to his news organizations who did not carry it. And often this was the case, given the media's apathy towards the periphery. Now, there are journalists with large social following being coerced to post stories of individual tribal interests, as opposed to the collective, on their platforms. This becomes even more complicated when the stories are about tribal feuds, and the posts cannot appear without suggesting the journalist taking sides. Again, journalists, who have a socio-cultural profile because of their vocation, are called upon to assume a mediatory role between the feuding tribes and groups, a role that sets them up for harm if viewed partisan.

Safety of their journalists in the Baloch belt remains a huge concern for the editors in the capital. Although journalists and journalism are also controlled in the Pashtun belt, they are not killed. Those who have died in Quetta due to sectarian bombings, with a couple like Irshad Mastoi and Chishti Mujahid target-killed. It is the journalist in the Baloch belt "who walks the razor's edge." Khuzdar, where separatists, the military and pro-state militias are active, has been labeled as among the top 10 dangerous places for journalists where

objective, responsible journalism is well-nigh impossible.

Journalists are also targeted for social media content which is heavily monitored. In fact, journalists are still targeted even when they are prepared to change their “qibla,” - meaning leave journalism altogether. Moreover, the news local newspapers get from correspondents are carried with the understanding that they have already been vetted or approved by the establishment in the district, knowing how closely journalists are controlled there, or else they would not file a story in the first place.

In recent years, journalists working for Afghan TV channels from this side of the border have been subjected to attacks and forced to go into exile in Germany and Canada. Farman Kakar was the bureau chief for *Khyber News* channel when it was first established in Quetta. Kakar worked with foreign media, covering Taliban insurgency for *The New York Times*. He used to get threatening calls from Afghanistan or from untraceable numbers, with callers asking why he was establishing Taliban presence in the Pashtun belt. These eventually culminated in direct threats to him in his neighborhood of Bostan. Dawa Khan Menapal, an Afghan journalist who worked in Kandahar – he later became media advisor for former Afghan president Ashraf Ghani – was killed in a Taliban attack. While Menapal, as an Afghan journalist, may not be relevant to this report, his death and the displacement of others around the time when the Taliban were active on both sides of the border establish the perilous nature of the theater they are required to cover. And while the state agencies were always active in the Pashtun belt, to this, of late, has been added the Baloch proscribed groups who have expanded their activities in Balochistan beyond the Baloch belt, as seen in attacks in Dukki,²⁷ the mining town, and the recent bus attack in Zhob.²⁸

²⁷ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1864679>

²⁸ <https://www.dawn.com/news/1923411>

Recommendations

To foster a free, independent, and sustainable media landscape in Balochistan, 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 Balochistan region:

- **Financial independence of digital media outlets** needs to be explored and ensured through studying and instituting, where relevant, local and global public-interest driven models for sustainability, as opposed to dependence on government advertisement that is not so much used to sustain media as to control it.
- **Prioritizing staff safety and financial security** because without this, survival of media and freedom of expression cannot be guaranteed.
- **Support for local press clubs** with social media news platforms because that is the way journalism is headed, and for freelance journalism in the districts to bring local stories to the national and international audiences. However, this support, whether it comes from the government or media support organizations, should not be agenda driven as in the case of current focus on climate crises and action. It should be for public-interest journalism, no matter what the domain, if real and responsible journalism is to be strengthened.
- **Regular salaries should be paid to journalists**, according to the wage board. The lower staff should be paid minimum wages.
- **Journalism training for social media activists** emphasizing ethics and standards of good responsible journalism.
- **Support the BUJ, the Quetta Press Club and those out in the districts** to “fight their own case” in an industry asphyxiated by the government policies on one hand and the media organizations self-centered indifference on the other. This is not to seek a continuance of support from the government but there are greater issues of stake in a province where the

government writ is dead, journalism is at its last breath in a militarized milieu and the state oppression is running roughshod over public opinion and voices.

- **Journalists must remain independent, objective, balanced and impartial** in relation to the conflict, its actors and victims. A partisan stance and reporting have claimed the lives of many journalists and the trend continues unabated amidst a new wave of insurgency.
- **The state and the provincial administration must ensure the safety and security of journalists.** In a province torn by conflict and violence, they must take measures and institute policies to ensure this. The tribal, political and militant groups also must safeguard the professional and personal integrity, safety and independence of journalists so they can work free of fear, threats, intimidation and persecution at the hands of armed, powerful and influential groups.
- **Training in conflict reporting and first aid is sorely needed.** In the past, it has greatly built the understanding, and thereby reduced the frequency of journalists dying due to mishandling of conflict in their reporting. With renewed insurgency and conflict, journalists must be reoriented in conflict reporting principles and tools.
- **Journalists must avoid bias at all cost.** If at all journalists must mediate tribal conflicts, they must do it as individuals not as journalists. If they are there as reporters, they must avoid tribal affiliations.
- **Training on PECA and media laws** for journalists and legal aid.
- **Establish Independent Press Protection Mechanism:** Now that the federal government has amended and passed a landmark Journalist Protection Bill 2025, it should come into effect immediately, with arrangements put in place to implement it in provinces. Apart from the law, provincial governments must establish their own autonomous press protection bodies with legal authority to investigate threats against journalists, prosecute perpetrators, and provide emergency relocation assistance. This body should operate independently of security agencies and have direct reporting lines to the judiciary and parliament, ensuring that the nearly 40 journalist killings over two decades do not remain without convictions.
- **Reform Legal Framework Governing Media** Repeal or substantially amend draconian provisions of the Anti-Terrorism Act and sedition laws that are routinely weaponized against journalists. The case of Allah Noor Nasr,

charged under Section 7 of the ATA for remote reporting, exemplifies how these laws stifle legitimate journalism. New legislation should provide clear protections for journalistic activities and establish stringent criteria for any legal action against media personnel.

- **Restructure Intelligence-Media Relations** Security agencies must be legally barred from forcing journalists to act as informants or intelligence gatherers. The practice of compelling journalists to identify “anti-state elements” or engage with banned organizations while under surveillance creates a deadly trap that compromises both professional ethics and personal safety. Clear protocols should govern any interaction between security personnel and media workers.

5.1 Economic and Professional Support

- **Establish Sustainable Funding Mechanisms** Create a federal and provincial journalism sustainability fund, separate from government advertisement policies, to ensure regular salaries for district correspondents. The current situation where journalists in remote areas like Awaran receive PKR 3,000 every four months renders them vulnerable to exploitation and compromises their editorial independence.
- **Reform Advertisement Distribution Policy** Prevent the diversion of media advertisement quotas to government-operated digital platforms. The proposed policy that would channel PKR 300 million away from independent media to state-controlled digital units represents a direct assault on media independence. Advertisement distribution should be transparent, merit-based, and free from political considerations.
- **Expand Journalist Welfare Fund Coverage** Broaden the scope and accessibility of the Balochistan Journalist Welfare Fund beyond its current PKR 230 million seed money. The fund should provide immediate emergency assistance, legal aid, medical coverage, and educational support for journalists’ families. District-based journalists should have equal access to these resources without bureaucratic barriers.

5.2 Safety and Security Measures

- **Implement Comprehensive Safety Protocols** Develop province-wide safety protocols for journalists covering conflict zones, including secure communication channels, emergency evacuation procedures, and trauma counseling services. The “conflict-reporter’s worst nightmare” environment

in Balochistan demands systematic safety measures rather than leaving journalists to navigate threats alone.

- **End Enforced Disappearances and Extrajudicial Actions** The pattern of journalists being “picked up” by intelligence agencies, as experienced by those receiving calls from banned organizations, must cease immediately. Any detention of media personnel should follow due legal process with immediate notification to legal representatives and press unions.
- **Protect Sources and Whistleblowers** Establish legal protections for journalists’ sources and create secure channels for receiving information from whistleblowers. The current environment where journalists face threats both for reporting and for receiving information creates an impossible situation that serves neither public interest nor journalist safety.

5.3 Structural and Organizational Reforms

- **Democratize Balochistan Union of Journalists (BUJ)** Reform BUJ’s constitution to ensure proportional representation from all districts, not just Quetta-based journalists. District journalists’ complaint that BUJ treats them “like untouchables” reflects a fundamental organizational failure that weakens collective bargaining power and leaves remote area journalists without institutional support.
- **Strengthen Editorial Independence** Media organizations must resist state directives to publish only ISPR-approved versions of events. The instruction that mainstream outlets should not entertain news from correspondents but only official versions represents a complete abdication of editorial responsibility and professional journalism standards.
- **Establish District-Level Support Networks** Create formal support networks for district journalists, including regular training programs, peer support groups, and mentorship arrangements. The isolation experienced by journalists in remote areas like Khuzdar and Zhob contributes to their vulnerability and professional decline.

5.4 Social and Cultural Interventions

- **Promote Gender Inclusion in Journalism** Develop targeted programs to increase female participation in journalism, including specialized training, safe working environments, and flexible arrangements that account for cultural constraints. The near-absence of women journalists in Balochistan means half the population remains unrepresented in media discourse.

- **Address Tribal and Cultural Pressures** Create mediation mechanisms to address conflicts between journalistic duties and tribal obligations. The expectation that journalists serve as tribal mediators while maintaining professional objectivity creates inherent conflicts that often result in violence disguised as “tribal matters.”
- **Combat Information Manipulation and Ethical Decline** Establish mandatory ethics training and professional development programs for all media workers, particularly those operating on social media platforms. The rise of “citizen journalism” without editorial oversight has created information chaos that authorities exploit to discredit legitimate journalism while journalists resort to sensationalism and blackmail to survive economically.
- **Implementation Framework:** These recommendations require coordinated action from federal and provincial governments, security agencies, media organizations, civil society, and international press freedom organizations. The implementation should be monitored by an independent body with quarterly public reporting on progress. Without such systematic intervention, the province will continue to witness the “climbing numbers of martyrs” while journalism itself withers under the triple squeeze of state, anti-state, and tribal pressures.

5.5 Digital inclusion strategy for Balochistan

- The authorities should expand broadband infrastructure, promote urbanization, and develop small towns with essential facilities. Internet services should be made more affordable through subsidies and low-cost rural packages. The government should optimize existing network tower usage and incentivize service providers. It should launch public Wi-Fi initiatives in rural communities and install fiber-optic cables and additional mobile towers in higher-population areas. Infrastructure development should be combined with affordability measures to ensure reliable internet access across the province.
- Comprehensive digital literacy programs should be introduced to empower the local population with the skills needed to utilize digital tools effectively. This includes training in schools, as well as community-based programs for adults. The government should collaborate with the private sector to leverage expertise and resources. Partnerships with tech companies, NGOs, and international organizations can accelerate digital inclusion efforts. A robust policy framework is essential to guide digital inclusion efforts. The government should implement policies that encourage investment in digital infrastructure, protect consumer rights, and promote

digital entrepreneurship in Balochistan. Developing digital content in local languages and tailoring online services to the specific needs of Balochistan's population can increase engagement and make digital tools more accessible.

- Implement comprehensive digital literacy programs for schools and communities, forge strategic partnerships with tech companies and international organizations, establish supportive policy frameworks for investment and entrepreneurship, and develop localized digital content in regional languages to ensure accessible and relevant digital tools across the province.

5.6 Making RTI Effective

- **Dedicated information officers** should be appointed at line departments who are not subject to transfers but remain within their departments, creating an information and knowledge management mechanism to respond to both departmental and public needs for information.
- **Eliminate the mandatory submission** of Computerized National Identity Card (CNIC) copies when filing information requests, as this creates unnecessary barriers for citizens seeking information access.
- **Remove the provision requiring applicants** to state reasons for requesting information, bringing the Act in line with regional and international best practices followed by Punjab, Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and federal legislation.
- **Mandate that all public bodies prioritize publishing** information on their websites proactively, reducing the burden on Public Information Officers and streamlining the information request process for citizens.
- **Develop and maintain functional, comprehensive websites** for all public bodies, ensuring regular updates and complete information disclosure as required by law.
- **Implement comprehensive training programs** for all public officials, particularly Public Information Officers, to ensure understanding of their legal obligations under the RTI Act.
- **Launch extensive awareness campaigns** to educate citizens about their rights under the RTI Act and how to effectively utilize these provisions.
- **Strengthen parliamentary oversight mechanisms** to monitor RTI

implementation across all government departments and ensure compliance with legal requirements.

- **Develop strategies to overcome entrenched bureaucratic mindsets** and cultures of secrecy that impede information access, including performance incentives tied to transparency compliance.
- **Ensure adequate financial, legal, and administrative resources** are allocated to support effective RTI implementation across all public bodies

5.7 Supporting Women Journalists: Institutional Support and Infrastructure Media

- Provide essential workplace facilities: separate washrooms, private spaces for rest, childcare centers, and maternity support
- Offer flexible working hours and reliable transportation or shuttle services
- Ensure equal pay and timely salary payments
- Establish clear anti-harassment policies with confidential reporting mechanisms
- Provide security equipment and safety training for conflict reporting
- Redesign journalism curricula to include practical field training and conflict reporting skills
- Create more internship opportunities with proper facilities for women students
- Partner with media organizations to bridge the gap between academic training and professional requirements
- The authorities should Improve overall security conditions to enable safer reporting environments
- Expand digital connectivity infrastructure across the province to facilitate remote reporting
- Implement and enforce workplace protection laws specifically for media workers
- Provide financial incentives for media organizations that maintain gender-balanced newsrooms

- Move away from the dangerous practice of sending solo reporters to conflict zones
- Invest in proper logistics and support systems for district-level reporting
- Create mentorship programs pairing experienced journalists with newcomers
- Establish emergency support funds for journalists and their families
- Promote awareness campaigns about the importance of women's voices in media
- Challenge societal attitudes that restrict women's professional mobility
- Create support networks for working women journalists
- Freelance digital journalism with proper compensation structures
- Independent media platforms that can operate with greater flexibility
- Social media advocacy while ensuring journalist safety and protection
- The most critical immediate needs are improved security, equal workplace conditions, and institutional support systems that recognize the unique challenges women journalists face in this complex environment.

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.