

Chapter 5

Sexism and Gender Discrimination in Pakistan's Mainstream News Media

Erum Hafeez

Media Science Department, Iqra University, Karachi, Pakistan

Luavut Zahid

Independent Researcher, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

This research aims to examine how sexism and gender discrimination impacts women journalists in Pakistan. The International Federation of Journalists (2018-19) ranks Pakistan as the fourth most dangerous country for journalists. The Coalition for Women in Journalism declares Pakistan as the sixth-worst for female journalists (2019). In 2018, the Global Gender Gap Report highlighted Pakistan as second from bottom, ranking it 148 out of 149 countries. Given these numbers, the country is an ominous space for women in news media. This study collects the data from women journalists working in the three largest cities of Pakistan, that is, Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad. The aim is to investigate the issues faced by female journalists due to discrimination at the workplace including glass ceiling, pay gap, and lack of female leadership. Following the mixed-method approach, around 102 women journalists were surveyed, and 10 were interviewed. Findings indicate the rampant existence of sexism in Pakistani media and its detrimental effects on the growth of a gender-balanced news media industry.

INTRODUCTION

Sexism is rampant in the Pakistani media industry. Its prevalence is connected to the conservative and patriarchal social fabric (Jamil, 2020a). While this is not a problem unique to the media industry, the impact of this attitude in the news industry has proliferating after effects on society, as reflected in the construction and dissemination of narratives to the masses (Pasha and Saleem, 2019). This research looks at how gender-based discrimination prevails in the industry, whether it is explicit, subtle, or both. It is

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assumed that female journalists have to tackle several issues, and the opportunities available to them are often in stark contrast to their male colleagues (Hussain, 2013). There is a lack of parity in terms of career growth, opportunities, beat assignments, and pay-scale specifically. Besides, organisational policies are often missing, or inadequate, when it comes to dealing with the issues of gender-based discrimination and harassment (Mirza, 2016).

At the heart of this attitude are stereotypes. Women are often told that they are not capable of handling certain tasks, which are typically perceived to be a man's job. They are repeatedly conveyed that their capacity to manage the work is simply irrelevant and insufficient (Hussain, 2019, p. 23). There is a prevailing, harmful narrative surrounding native female media professionals (Huda and Ali, 2015). Their abilities are often doubted. As a result, female leadership is perhaps the only way forward to mitigate the hurdles and threats, that women journalists face (Byerly, 2004).

Women journalists face tremendous mental and physical issues while working in the Pakistani news media industry (Jamil, 2020b, 2018, 2017b) and they experience constraints to exercise their right to freedom of expression (Jamil, 2017a, 2015b). Most issues they face include a lack of freedom of expression; atop turbulence in terms of their job security, unmanageable work hours, privacy, and security lapses (Qamar et al., 2020). Invisible barriers like the glass ceiling are yet to be shattered. Former research shows that women leave the profession early because of issues such as masculine values, long hours, and lack of support systems that aid in work-life balance (Chambers and Steiner, 2009).

In an exploration of Pakistani TV channels, Zia et.al (2016) found that even when women journalists are thriving in their careers, they face harassment at work. A good majority does not come forward to report the issues they face. Besides existing stereotypes contribute to toxic, male-dominated spaces. In terms of their career growth, women can have all the needed skills and talent to advance in the industry, but seldom find it easy to reach high-level positions in most organizations. Despite feminist movements and social progress, the landscape of the industry has not changed. Women continue to be viewed as weak (Huda and Ali, 2015). Sakha and Shah's (2019) findings also confirmed that women journalists have to face additional pressures because of their jobs. Their gender definitely comes into play; despite all the hurdles they face, most women journalists are not willing to openly discuss the harassment they face (Jamil, 2016, 2015a). Furthermore, Bilal and Begum (2017) studied the performance of anti-harassment inquiry committees in Karachi-based news organizations. The study found that many women journalists opt not to file a complaint because of their lack of faith in the inquiry committees set up to help them.

According to Dawn newspaper (2019), only 11% of the Pakistani (media) industry at present consists of women journalists. Barring any revolutionary change in the status quo, these numbers are likely to grow at an agonisingly slow pace at best. There is also a potential threat that the existing female journalists may opt-out of the profession altogether, owing to the deterioration of the media industry in general, and the menace for women in particular. Considering the facts highlighted in past studies and news reports, thus this study aims is to investigate the numerous issues women journalists face due to sexism and gender discrimination in the industry

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The ubiquitous gender disparity in Pakistani newsrooms can be explained in light of the Attribution Theory of Sex Discrimination. According to it, gender-based discrimination can make it difficult for women to get and thrive in certain jobs (McElroy and Morrow, 1983). Stereotyping is underscored as

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