# Women Journalists and the Double Bind

## The Self-Censorship Effect of Online Harassment in Pakistan

Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives

MediaMatters for Democracy

Policy Research & Advocacy Initiative

PPF

-Strengthening the Media

# Women Journalists and the Double Bind

## The Self-Censorship Effect of Online Harassment in Pakistan

**Published by Media Matters for Democracy in December 2020**
**The research is part of the Civil Society for Independent Media and Expression (CIME) initiative, jointly undertaken by the Centre for Peace and Development Initiatives (CPDI), Media Matters for Democracy, and the Pakistan Press Foundation**

**Research Team**
Aroosa Shaukat
Waqas Naeem

*With support from*
Sana Baig
Zafar Nizamani
Muhammad Arslan
Sarah Zafar

**Review and Edit**
Sadaf Khan

**Layout and design**
Aniqa Haider

Supported by the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) Programme of the European Union

**"In our society, the freedom to talk about things has ceased to exist to a great extent."** — A journalist interviewed for this study speaking about how she limited her online comments on political and religious issues due to the abusive and intolerant behaviour by users in response to her posts.

**"I think we face 'double censorship' of course as women. The self-censorship part that women journalists face as a class of journalists is more online, outside of everyday work."** — A journalist interviewed for this research commenting on the link between gendered online harassment and self-censorship among women journalists.

**"We are being trolled not just because of our work. We are being trolled because we are women."** — A journalist interviewed for this research explaining the gender-identity basis of online attacks against women journalists.

**"We are fighting back now. Women journalists have understood that we cannot keep censoring things. We have to push back."** — A journalist interviewed for this research, suggesting that the women journalist resistance has started.

We are grateful to the Pakistani women journalists who participated in the online survey and research interviews conducted for this study. We are in awe of the courage, resilience, and integrity of these and many more women journalists in Pakistan who continue to perform their professional duties despite facing the worst forms of coordinated online attacks, threats of physical harm, adverse cultural norms steeped in violent patriarchy and abject misogyny, and the poor financial state of the news industry. We express our deepest gratitude to them for their service. We also stand firm in solidarity with them in their struggle to demand an end to not only the online harassment of women journalists, but also the elimination of gender discrimination and sexual harassment from the news industry.

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# FOREWORD

Pakistan has been rated as one of the most dangerous countries for journalists for years, with threats and physical attacks on journalists carried out with impunity. Years of structured and institutionalised censorship, increasing threats of legal action, and prevailing impunity in crimes against journalists have created an environment where most journalists are forced to self censor extensively. While these elements have forced journalists across media to self censor, women journalists face an additional threat; structured, consistent, sexualised abuse and threats of sexual violence, perpetuated in digital spaces.

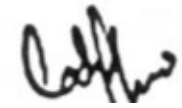
In August and September 2020, groups of women journalists came together to release a public statement documenting this abuse and asking the government and political parties to play their part in holding their representatives, party workers, and supporters accountable. In response, we saw an immediate increase in online abuse. Testimonies of women journalists, presented in the National Assembly and made public through their social media, were used as fodder to unleash further abusive comments. The trolls also scoured through the decade old history of women journalists' Twitter accounts, taking screenshots and calling out any tweets in which the women had used expletives, essentially showing that women's grievances are only considered valid if they present the image of being the 'perfect victim'- a flawless person who has never said or done anything less than ideal. Add this abuse to the pre-existing elements of state control, censorship, threats to journalists, and the regressive policies at state and institutional levels and you get a mix where women journalists increasingly find themselves limiting what they say.

This study maps the prevalence of self censorship among women journalists and explores the factors that compel the women to self censor. The study offers a comparison with a similar research we undertook in 2018 and finds that the situation for women has only become worse. Compared to 2018, almost 10% more women respondents say that they have faced harassment and threats, and there is a 10% increase in the number of women who are withholding their personal opinions online. Eight in every 10 women respondents felt that self censorship has increased during the last three years.

Perhaps the most concerning finding of the study is the identification of increasing political intolerance as one of the main factors that compels women to self censor. This is different from the traditional pressures of establishment and religion. Political intolerance, apparent involvement of political parties in abuse and harassment, and the fear of legal action is pushing more and more women journalists to keep silent. This is concerning, for the involvement of political parties and abuse of the legal system to silence journalists shows a fundamental lack of respect for democratic values.

We hope that this study will support women journalists in their cause and help them sustain a movement that forces political and other forces to pause and rethink their attitudes towards women and journalists.

**Sadaf Khan**



22 December 2020

# Executive Summary

Journalists and press freedom have always remained under attack in Pakistan. Women journalists in the country, in addition to navigating the typical curbs on journalism, also face gender-based discrimination in professional settings and are forced to deal with patriarchal norms that discourage the active participation of women in society. The rise in gendered online harassment of women journalists has also significantly increased the risks to their physical and psychological well-being. In a media environment where most journalists are pressured by powerful interest groups to abandon independent and critical news coverage, women journalists are likely to be under additional stress to censor their work and expression.

This research looks at the practice of self-censorship among women journalists in Pakistan. It examines the factors that push women journalists to limit their professional expression, the trend of journalistic restraint over time, the impact of threats and attacks on the online speech of women journalists, and the strategies they might have used to avoid or cope with censoring their own work.

The study involved an online survey of **124 women journalists** from all over the country and in-depth interviews with eight experienced women journalists. The following are the main findings of the research.

**Online violence leads to self-censorship among women journalists:** The research shows a strong connection between the online attacks against women journalists and the restraint exercised by the journalists on their professional and personal expression.

- Online harassment was most frequently identified by the respondents as the factor that forced Pakistani women journalists to self-censor their work. There was near-unanimous consensus among the respondents that women journalists who do not self-censor are more likely to be the target of online violence. Almost 68 percent of the respondents said they had faced some form of attacks, threats or harassment for their journalism or personal expression, up from 59 percent in 2018.

- The women journalists interviewed for the study referred to the 'weaponisation' of social media against journalists and said they regularly faced coordinated online campaigns on social media, especially Twitter, designed to discredit their work and malign their reputation. These attacks included sexualised abuse, rape threats, and death threats. They said the online attacks on their journalistic credibility also created physical safety risks and made it more difficult for them to reach sources and access information for their news reporting. Most women journalists (52 to 55 percent) reported they had modified their online expression on Facebook and Twitter.

**Professional self-censorship continues unabated:** The perceived practice of journalistic self-censorship among women journalists has not shown any signs of slowing down. In fact, a slightly greater number of women journalists now confirm that they limit their work on sensitive issues.

- Around **eight in every 10** respondents felt self-censorship has increased among journalists in Pakistan during the past three years. A large majority of the women journalist respondents (77 percent) said it was not possible to practise journalism in Pakistan without exercising self-censorship.

- The share of women journalists who said they self-censored their journalism work showed a slight increase to reach 90 percent in 2020 from 87 percent in 2018. Out of these, 38 percent said they restrained their work frequently. Seven in every 10 respondents said they thought their journalism colleagues also practised self-censorship in their work.

- Women journalists interviewed for the study said there was little or no institutionalised self-censorship within the media organisations, but journalists usually developed a sense of the external pressures linked to prevailing political situations and the 'red lines' drawn by society around expression of religious and cultural traditions. These were negotiated, and sometimes resisted, on a daily basis in their journalism.

**Online expression gets the axe:** Women journalists are most wary of their online expression as they connect it directly with the abuse and trolling they face on social media.

- An overwhelming majority of women journalists (93 percent) withheld their personal opinions online, up from 83 percent in 2018.

- Women journalists interviewed for the research said they had become careful about posting on social media, to the point of vetting the text of their tweets twice and bracing for the potential fallout of any opinion they share. Most journalists said there was a heavy psychological toll of the online abuse and they had drastically reduced their comments on religion and political current affairs on social media. Many used blocking and abuse-reporting features on social media to deal with the worst offenders.

**New pressure groups augment traditional reasons for self-censorship:** The historical pressures against journalists to self-censor — religion, security establishment — are now rivalled by a growing culture of political intolerance that directs its hate and anger toward women journalists on the Internet.

- Most of the respondents who self-censored their journalism work said they had done it either due to the sensitive nature of information, their organisation's policies, fear of legal action, fear of online harassment, or to avoid psychological stress. The most frequent reasons for restraining personal opinions were to avoid hurting religious and cultural sensitivities. Professional and personal opinions about the military and religion were most likely to be curtailed by the women journalists who participated in the survey. These perceptions were unchanged from 2018.

- Even though traditional pressures on journalism from the State institutions and religious groups remain, women journalists interviewed for the study pointed at the growing menace of social media cells operated or supported by political parties. These cells are accused of running coordinated hate campaigns against the women journalists. Journalists interviewed for the study said on social networks the 'red lines' and trolls pledging allegiance to various pressure groups have merged to create an extremely hostile environment for women in media.

**Unity and ingenuity to resist self-censorship needs more support:** Forced to self-censor in the face of online violence, women journalists have started to put up a collective effort against these attacks.

- Many journalists referred to a set of joint statements issued by women journalists in 2020, which called out the politically motivated online harassment of women journalists, and termed them a step in the right direction. These statements brought the women's demands on the record and political leaders were forced to take notice, even if momentarily. Some women journalists did not attach high hopes with these collective efforts, but others said the united struggle must go on for meaningful action against the online harassment of women journalists.

- Most of the respondents said they circumvented self-censorship in their work by sharing with other journalists the information they were likely to abandon themselves. They felt that this way they could ensure word got out somehow. A majority of the women journalist respondents (66 percent) said if they had better knowledge of digital safety techniques, then it would help them express themselves more freely on social media. These findings indicate that digital safety training and collaborative journalism can help women journalists counter self-censorship pressures.

# 1 - INTRODUCTION

In August 2020, a group of around 75 Pakistani women journalists released a joint statement online.[1] The statement, eventually endorsed by over 150 women from various disciplines, brought attention to the social media attacks on women journalists and commentators.

These "vicious attacks", the statement indicated, were coordinated and deliberately designed to intimidate and discredit the journalists. In these attacks, the women journalists were accused of peddling "fake news", taking bribes, and being anti-people; their photos were morphed, their personal details were leaked online, they were threatened with sexual and physical violence, and hacking attempts were launched on their social media accounts, according to the statement.

"Women in the media, especially those on social media platforms, are finding it increasingly difficult to remain on these platforms and engage freely," the statement read. "Many now self-censor, refrain from sharing information, giving their opinion or actively engaging online."

The allegations were not about some anonymous, invisible perpetrator. The statement accused government officials of initiating these attacks, which apparently mostly targeted those journalists and commentators who were critical of the government's policies and its pandemic response. The attacks were then amplified by Twitter users who appeared to be supporters of the ruling party, according to the statement.

The women journalists demanded the government to restrain its members from targeting women media workers and clearly communicate to its supporters to desist from direct and indirect attacks. They also asked the government to hold the officials involved in these attacks to task.

Many in the Pakistani women journalist community were familiar with the nature of these coordinated hate campaigns. Most had been targeted with these directly or had seen their female colleagues attacked online during the past five years. Everyone knew about the existence of troll armies with nationalist or political leanings on Pakistani Twitter.[2]

But the joint statement was an unprecedented and incredibly defiant move. No one, not the men, not least the government, expected the women journalists to unite and make their protest public. The online violence was obviously meant to silence them. But, the statement was the collective voice of women journalists shattering the silence to say: "no more".

There was a flurry of activity in the immediate aftermath of the statement's release. Some government ministers issued cautiously framed condemnations of the online attacks, qualifying their comments with messages of responsible journalism and arguments against 'fake news'.[3] National and international human rights defenders and press freedom advocates rallied in support of the women journalists.[4] The human rights committee in the National Assembly, to which the statement had also addressed a demand, took up

1. Joint statement: Attacks on women in media in Pakistan. Text available at: https://docs.google.com/document/d/1DD8BQ53noKO6zHy-gysGnFjeKT4ride4uYtQsNNRYoc/edit
2. See 'War, Lies and Hashtags' by Al Jazeera's Witness https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEuB_2KzobY and Dawn Investigations: 'Grab Your Keyboards' https://www.dawn.com/news/1518967 for more information.
3. See Human Rights Minister Shireen Mazari's response https://twitter.com/ShireenMazari1/status/1293526707652030465 and Planning Minister Asad Umar's response: https://twitter.com/Asad_Umar/status/1293617490677956608
4. For messages of support on Twitter, see as examples Reporters without Borders: https://twitter.com/RSF_inter/status/1293543084115075072 and Media Matters for Democracy: https://twitter.com/mmfd_Pak/status/1293493651386114048

the matter.[5] Women journalists recorded their testimonies at the committee's hearing in the Parliament, an occasion surrounded by such an air of inevitability that it was hard to believe it had never happened before even though the demands for journalists' safety in Pakistan go back decades. The human rights minister condemned the online harassment of women journalists, calling it "unacceptable" but denied the ruling party's involvement in such attacks.[6]

The statement also triggered another kind of action; scores of women journalists took to Twitter and closed groups to share stories of similar abuse by supporters of various political parties. It appeared the online abuse had become a part of the modus operandi to dissuade political critics online.

In early September, another joint statement signed by over 150 Pakistani women journalists was published online.[7] This declaration broadened the scope of the demands regarding online attacks on women journalists while endorsing the August statement.

"The target of these attacks are women in media, who are often targeted for reporting on issues that are critical of any political party…. A journalist's criticism of any given policy of Pakistan Tehreek-i-Insaaf (PTI) or of political parties including Pakistan Muslim League, Nawaz (PML-N), Pakistan People's Party (PPP), religious parties and accounts affiliating themselves with state institutions, may also unleash a barrage of abuse. This is almost always met with indifference and in some cases even encouragement from party leadership which further emboldens trolls and abusers," the statement read.

The September statement put six demands in front of government and political parties. These included a code of conduct for their official social media teams, investigation of "networks" responsible for running coordinated abusive campaigns against women journalists, punitive actions against officials responsible for discrediting and harassing women journalists, and cognisance of digital attacks against journalists in the journalists' safety bill.

Now, weeks after those bursts of outrage, the unsafe situation for women journalists on social media remains the same. In fact, the troll armies and officials directly accused of the attacks launched a counter-offensive in the days following the hearing and questioned the journalistic integrity of the first statement's signatories.[8]

The two statements had pointed out that the online attacks undermine public trust in the media generally and, as women journalists self-censor to protect themselves on the Internet, the public's right of access to information is also affected. But, equally importantly, the coordinated campaigns intend to malign and discredit individual women journalists so people would stop believing the facts they are reporting. This sort of online threat issued by political actors creates a perception of unfair coverage in the minds of the people who are loyal to that political cause. Since the perception is associated with the names and faces of women journalists, the online attacks also create a risk of physical harm. The preliminary findings of the global survey of women journalists conducted by UNESCO and the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) provides clear evidence of online violence spilling offline. Twenty percent of the survey respondents said they were targeted with offline attacks that they believed were linked to the online violence against them.[9]

5. See news coverage of the committee meeting https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/702713-harassment-of-women-journalists-complaints-to-be-sent-to-fia-says-bilawal
6. For women journalists' testimonies at the committee hearing and the human rights minister's response, see https://www.voanews.com/press-freedom/rare-testimony-female-pakistani-journalists-describe-social-media-attacks-lawmakers
7. Together Against Abuse. Statement available at https://qalamcamera.com/en/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/TOGETHER-AGAINST-DIGITAL-ABUSE-pdf.pdf
8. Intensification of online attacks against the credibility of women journalists after the committee hearing is detailed in the Committee to Protect Journalist's report: https://cpj.org/2020/09/as-ruling-party-fans-spew-online-abuse-pakistans-female-journalists-call-for-government-action/
9. For the Unesco-IFCJ survey's preliminary findings, please see: https://www.icfj.org/news/online-attacks-women-journalists-leading-real-world-violence-new-research-shows

It does not take a stretch of the imagination to realise what kinds of reactions and responses the online violence might generate among Pakistani women journalists. As the joint statements indicated, the women in media might try to limit their expression, retreat from those very online spaces that are so pivotal to the nature of modern journalism, or even worse, consider giving up journalism completely. These are and should be unacceptable costs for any journalism community and any democratic society. It is important, therefore, to document the shared experiences of Pakistani women journalists as they contend with controls of information, physical and digital threats, and the incidence of self-censorship. Such efforts can help provide insight on ways to fight these threats levelled against women journalists and ensure that support is made available for women in Pakistani media when they need it most.

# 2 - LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-censorship in journalism has traditionally been viewed in connection with censorship and State-led direct controls on the news media. Following this approach, according to Simon and Strovsky (2006), 'censorship' is external to the press and takes the form of an outside entity — a censor, typically a State institution or government agency — that removes or prohibits the content it has deemed unfit for public consumption through the media. In contrast, they describe 'self-censorship' as an act conducted by journalists internally to avoid causing offense, and therefore to avoid potential penalties and punishments, without "being specifically told or ordered to do so officially by an external censor" (p. 191).

Lee (1998) offered a detailed definition of self-censorship as a "set of editorial actions ranging from omission, dilution, distortion, and change of emphasis to choice of rhetorical devices by journalists, their organizations, and even the entire media community in anticipation of currying reward and avoiding punishments from the power structure" (p. 57). As such, Lee suggested, self-censorship could occur individually and organisationally.

Individual motivations for self-censorship might include physical safety, job security, maintenance of friendly terms with official sources, ideological loyalty, and financial compensation while organisational motivations might include the safeguarding of the media owners' business or political interests, reduction in threat of forced closure, avoidance of legal or regulatory sanctions, and increased likelihood of getting advertisements (Elbaz et al., 2017).

Journalism scholars have studied the existence of self-censorship in press systems around the world, exploring its connections with political influence, economic paradigms, cultural traditions, and interests of media owners, among other factors (Skjerdal, 2010; Tapsell, 2012; Maheshwari, 2019; Iordanidou et al., 2020; Walulya & Nassanga, 2020; Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2020).

Tapsell (2012) stated that the pressures from the powerful ruling elites, who wanted to limit criticism of their actions in the press, contributed to self-censorship among journalists in Indonesia even after direct censorship by an authoritarian regime had ended. Kenny and Gross (2008) discovered that political influence, business interests, and cultural values were the most prominent factors that pushed journalists into self-censorship across the Central Asian states. Similarly, in Turkey, Yesil (2014) found that journalists restrained their news reporting due to political pressures, economic pressures, and threats to their physical safety.

In press systems with long histories of threats and violence against journalists, self-censorship can become routinised and internalised in news practices to such an extent that new entrants to journalism begin to consider self-censorship a part of their professional identity (Pain & Korin, 2020). "Self-censorship is often learnt through the environment of the newsroom, rather than as an official, industry-endorsed practice," according to Tapsell (2012, p. 228). In this sense, in addition to explicit directions from editors or management, the journalists also internalise the self-censorship behaviour based on how their stories are edited for publication or how their colleagues are treated around them.

However, as Schimpfössl and Yablokov (2020) have argued, journalists sometimes also react to self-censorship pressures with creativity and ingenuity. In Russia, for example, journalists have developed a strategy they call *adekvatnost* or the "right instinct", which helps them subconsciously decide what to report and what not to report so as to stay on the correct side of political and cultural forces (Schimpfössl & Yablokov, 2014, 2020). From the outside, it appears to be identical to self-censorship, but in practice, it allows the Russian journalists considerable freedom in their reporting and they consider it a virtue or

professional skill. Similarly, Tong (2009) showed that newspaper journalists in China use self-censorship as part of their editorial gate-keeping practices to ensure their coverage avoids potential political risks while also increasing the chances of topical stories getting published. In this way, they use self-censorship to create space for media freedom.

But in most countries with authoritarian or semi-authoritarian controls on the press, self-censorship remains a hurdle in the work of journalists and leads to negative effects, which include shrinking space for societal debate on sensitive issues, uninformed public, and unchecked perpetuation of dominant narratives (Elbaz et al., 2017).

The press in Pakistan has also faced direct censorship and indirect curbs throughout its history, and attempts to silence journalists through multiple suppressive tools, including legal measures, financial strangulation, intimidation, and physical attacks, continue at present (Afzal, 2018; Alam, 2019).

Unofficial government controls, oligopolistic media ownership structure, legal threats against journalists, and lack of physical safety contributed toward self-censorship in Pakistan's print media, according to Nadadur (2007). Harrison and Pukallus (2018) stated that impunity in crimes against Pakistani journalists led to more self-censorship across media types. Local journalists exercise self-censorship in story selection and give up on topics such as militancy, judiciary, and security agencies, due to safety risks (Harrison & Pukallus, 2018, p. 13).

Journalists in Pakistan are known to have avoided news coverage of persecuted religious groups due to pressure from violent extremist organisations and religious political parties (Baloch & Andresen, 2020). Local reporters covering conflict areas in Pakistan's Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Balochistan provinces also claimed their news organisations directed them to practise self-censorship in coverage of religious and sectarian extremism (Siddiqua, Latif & Muslim, 2020).

While physical risks from state-sponsored violence and violence during dangerous assignments affect both men and women in the media, the women journalists also face trolling and other forms of sexualised hate speech on the Internet and threats of sexual violence (Sreberny, 2014). A 2013 online survey by the International Women's Media Foundation showed that almost two-thirds of 149 women journalists had experienced intimidation, threats or abuse in relation to their work and over a quarter of the respondents had faced these threats online (Munoz, 2016).

In Pakistan, as well, several studies and works have examined the threats and challenges braved by women journalists (Rehmat, 2017; Lodhi, 2018; Jamil, 2020; Kamran, 2020).

Based on in-depth interviews and focus groups discussions with Pakistani female journalists, Jamil (2020) found that a majority of the women had faced sexual harassment, psychological abuse, verbal abuse at their news organisations, discrimination in recruitment and wages, and online threats. The likelihood of experiencing workplace harassment was higher among women journalists working for television channels. The respondents identified their bosses, male colleagues, and members of religious organisations as the three major human sources of harassment at the workplace or while on assignment.

These findings echo the results of other studies about the terrible circumstances women journalists in Pakistan are forced to work in (Hussain, 2013; Pasha & Saleem, 2019; Sakha & Shah, 2019). In a survey of 100 Pakistani female journalists, a majority said they had faced gender-based discrimination at their news organisations and the discriminatory practices affected their journalism work (Hussain, 2013). The examples of workplace harassment and discrimination identified by the women journalists in the study included inappropriate advances by male colleagues, the use of insults and sarcasm to demean or downplay women's news work, threats of job termination for refusing sexual favours, and not considering women journalists for important news assignments. Sakha and Shah (2019) found that harassment of women in journalism was rooted in patriarchal social norms, which discourage women from becoming

independent, attempt to control women's lives and bodies, and associate the concept of family honour and societal morality with women.

According to Jamil (2020), a vast majority of the female journalist respondents said they experienced psychological stress because of the harassment and threats, and around 60 percent said they self-censored due to it. Lodhi (2018) found that at least eight out of every 10 respondents in a survey of Pakistani women journalists self-censored their professional work and personal opinions. A majority of the women journalist respondents also said they had been attacked, threatened or intimidated for their news work or personal opinions in the past.

The self-censorship of Pakistani women journalists is also linked with the gendered harassment they are targeted with on social media (Digital Rights Foundation [DRF], 2019; Kamran, 2019). Kamran (2019) showed that a majority of Pakistani women journalists felt their community was regularly attacked with online sexualised abuse and they had themselves exercised self-censorship in their work and opinions to counter the online violence they had faced.

The growth in scale and intensity of the insidious problems that confront women journalists in Pakistan merit regular review. In this context, the current study will inspect the trend of self-censorship among women over time. It will attempt to contribute to the body of local research that has explored the connection between online harassment and self-censorship among women journalists in the country.

# 3 - RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study intends to examine the practice of self-censorship among women journalists in Pakistan to determine the factors behind self-censorship decisions taken by the journalists and to identify the impact of these constraints on their work. The research also wants to explore how, if at all, the personal expression of women journalists was affected, especially on the Internet, and whether or not they felt forced to also restrain their opinions in online and offline settings. The study is also interested in figuring out the way the practice of self-censorship among women journalists may have changed since 2018 when Media Matters for Democracy conducted its first examination of self-censorship among Pakistani journalists and also looked at the gendered impact of self-censorship (Lodhi, 2018; Naeem, 2018).

The research questions for the study were:

**Research Question (RQ) 1: What are the factors and reasons that push women journalists to practise self-censorship in their journalism work?**

**RQ 2: How does self-censorship affect the personal expression of Pakistani women journalists?**

**RQ 3: What is the trend of self-censorship among women journalists over time?**

**RQ 4: What steps are women journalists taking to avoid self-censorship in their professional work and personal expression?**

A phenomenological approach was used to investigate the research questions. In social sciences research, phenomenology explores how people make sense of experience, especially to elicit shared meaning (Patton, 2001). For this research, self-censorship is considered to be the phenomenon under examination in order to not only develop a deeper understanding about its features but also to identify the common experiences of women journalists who might be pressured to restrict their work and expression. The objective, then, is to know what it means to 'self-censor' for women journalists. This form of inquiry is best suited for phenomenological research (Cresswell, 2013, p. 81).

Phenomenology research usually relies upon "in-depth interviews with people who have directly experienced the phenomenon of interest; that is, they have "lived experience" as opposed to second-hand experience." (p. 104). However, researchers have shown that phenomenological research works well with mixed method approaches (Mayou & Onwuegbuzie, 2013; Davison, 2014). This study also uses a mixed method approach, relying on survey data and interviews to get a comprehensive view of the self-censorship practice among women journalists in Pakistan.

Surveys use samples of a population to provide quantitative descriptions of attitudes and trends that can be used to generalise findings or make claims for the population (Cresswell, 2009, as cited in Davison, 2014). An online survey was conducted for this research to provide a snapshot of the exercise of self-censorship. It was used to collect data about several aspects of self-censorship, including which kinds of information and opinions are subjected to restraint by the women journalists. The survey questionnaire was designed based on Lodhi (2018) to allow for comparison of the current study's findings over time.

The questionnaire consisted of 24 questions about self-censorship divided into three sections. .Questions about professional journalism, questions about personal expression of opinions, and questions about factors and mitigation of self-censorship. Additional questions were used to collect job-related data about the respondents, such as work experience, journalism role etc.

The respondents were provided a definition of self-censorship to ensure a uniform conceptual understanding of the term. Self-censorship was defined after Lee (1998) as, "the act of exercising control and restraint over one's speech and expression in personal or professional settings either to avoid any kind of perceived threat, including harassment, criticism, and persecution, or to gain some perceived benefit, including job security, financial gain, and access to privileged information." The questionnaire is available in Annexure A.

The number of women journalists in Pakistan is estimated to be around 5 percent of total journalists (Rehmat, 2017). But this may not be a reliable estimate. In addition, an accurate and up-to-date estimate of the size of the journalists' population in Pakistan is also unavailable. Therefore, a non-probability convenience sampling technique was used for the survey. In convenience sampling, subjects from the target population are selected based on some practical concerns, such as ease of availability etc. (Etikan et al., 2016). It assumes homogeneity of the population and results are most likely not generalisable, but it provides a quick, affordable, and easy method of collecting observations when the target population is not well-defined, such as is the case with journalists in Pakistan (Huang et al., 2014; Etikan et al., 2016). The women journalists were identified from among the members of the Women in Media Alliance — a national alliance of women practitioners of the media industry, which includes journalists — as well as from among the signatories of two joint statements issued by Pakistani women journalists in 2020 to protest against the online trolling and abuse faced by them from political parties and their workers on social media. After accounting for duplications, the sample included 346 women journalists who were contacted via phone and email to share the online questionnaire. A total of 124 journalists filled the survey, giving a response rate of around 36 percent.

Since it was desired to study self-censorship as a collective phenomenon and because self-censorship is typically also influenced by the overall restrictions on press freedom in a country, it was deemed necessary to seek qualitative inputs from the journalists to contextualise the survey data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key informants from the women journalists' community to understand the phenomenon of self-censorship and explain its complexity. Informants were primarily selected based on their level of expertise. The informants had 10 to 20 years of experience in the news industry and represented all types of media (print, broadcast, online, and multimedia). To add diversity of experience, interviewees were selected from four different cities: Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi, and Peshawar. Polkinghorne (1989, as cited in Cresswell, 2013) suggests using five to 25 interviews. However, data collection was stopped after eight interviews after data saturation, as described by various scholars (Grady, 1998; Given, 2008; Hill et al., 2014), was reached and no new information was emerging from the interviews.

Based on phenomenology interviewing techniques of Moustakas (1994), open-ended interview questions were developed to ask the interviewees to share their experiences in terms of the phenomenon and the situations that affected their experiences. Semi-structured interview design was selected because it allows for "discovery or elaboration of information that is important to participants" but may have not occurred to the researchers (Gill et al., 2008). The interviews were transcribed, and the transcripts were analysed to highlight significant statements that provide an understanding of the experiences (Cresswell, 2013). These statements were then clustered into themes that explain the experiences of self-censorship among women journalists and used to validate and discuss the survey data.

## 3.1 - RESEARCH LIMITATIONS

The findings of the study must be read in the context of the following limitations.

**1.** The survey findings are not generalisable to the entire women journalist population in Pakistan.

The survey used a convenience sampling technique which limits the validity of the data by the size of the sample. Further research using the same sampling technique could increase the sample size to approximate generalisability.

**2.** The study does not offer a purely longitudinal view of the self-censorship trend among women journalists even though it hazards a guess. The attempts at longitudinal analysis were thwarted by insufficient access to the subjects of the 2018 study. Further research could rely on the sample used in the current study to build a robust trendline.

**3.** The frames and themes developed to examine the phenomenon of self-censorship as experienced by Pakistani women journalists are reliable (internally) but inductive. Their validity could only be established by further research. Future studies could test if the themes apply generally to the experience of most women journalists in the country or not.

# 4 - FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

This section provides a detailed analysis of the data collected through an online survey and informant interview.

## 4.1 - FINDINGS FROM THE ONLINE SURVEY

A total of 124 respondents filled the online survey questionnaire. The respondents belonged to 15 different cities or regions, covering all four provinces of Pakistan, the federal capital territory, and Gilgit-Baltistan. Two-thirds of the respondents, however, were concentrated in the major cities of Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad, which are also the main centres of the news industry in the country. A majority of the respondents worked for national news outlets and most of them said the primary language of their journalism work was Urdu.

The sample contained journalists who were affiliated with all the different media types, but online and TV journalists had the most representation respectively. Some 48 percent of the respondents identified as reporters. However, the respondents also included editors, producers, opinion writers, and anchorpersons, among other types of journalists. Almost half of the respondents were not older than 30 years but the respondents had considerable work experience. Over 60 percent of the women journalists who responded to the survey had worked for six years or more in the news industry.

The details of the survey respondents are given in Figure 1.

### Self-censorship in Journalistic Work

The respondents were asked to share their opinion about the possibility of carrying out journalistic work in Pakistan without resorting to self-censorship. Around three in every four respondents — or 78 percent, to be precise — said they did not think it was possible to practise journalism in the country without committing self-censorship. A majority of the respondents — 80 percent — said they thought self-censorship among journalists had increased in the past three years. Only one in every 10 respondents said it had either decreased or stayed at the same level as three years ago.

In reply to a question about the exercise of self-censorship by the respondents personally, 90 percent of the 124 women journalists said they had indeed limited their professional output in the past. Out of these respondents, 38 percent said they frequently self-censored their work while another 35 percent said their show of restraint in their journalism was occasional. At the extreme ends of the spectrum, roughly the same number of respondents reported they self-censored "always" or "rarely".

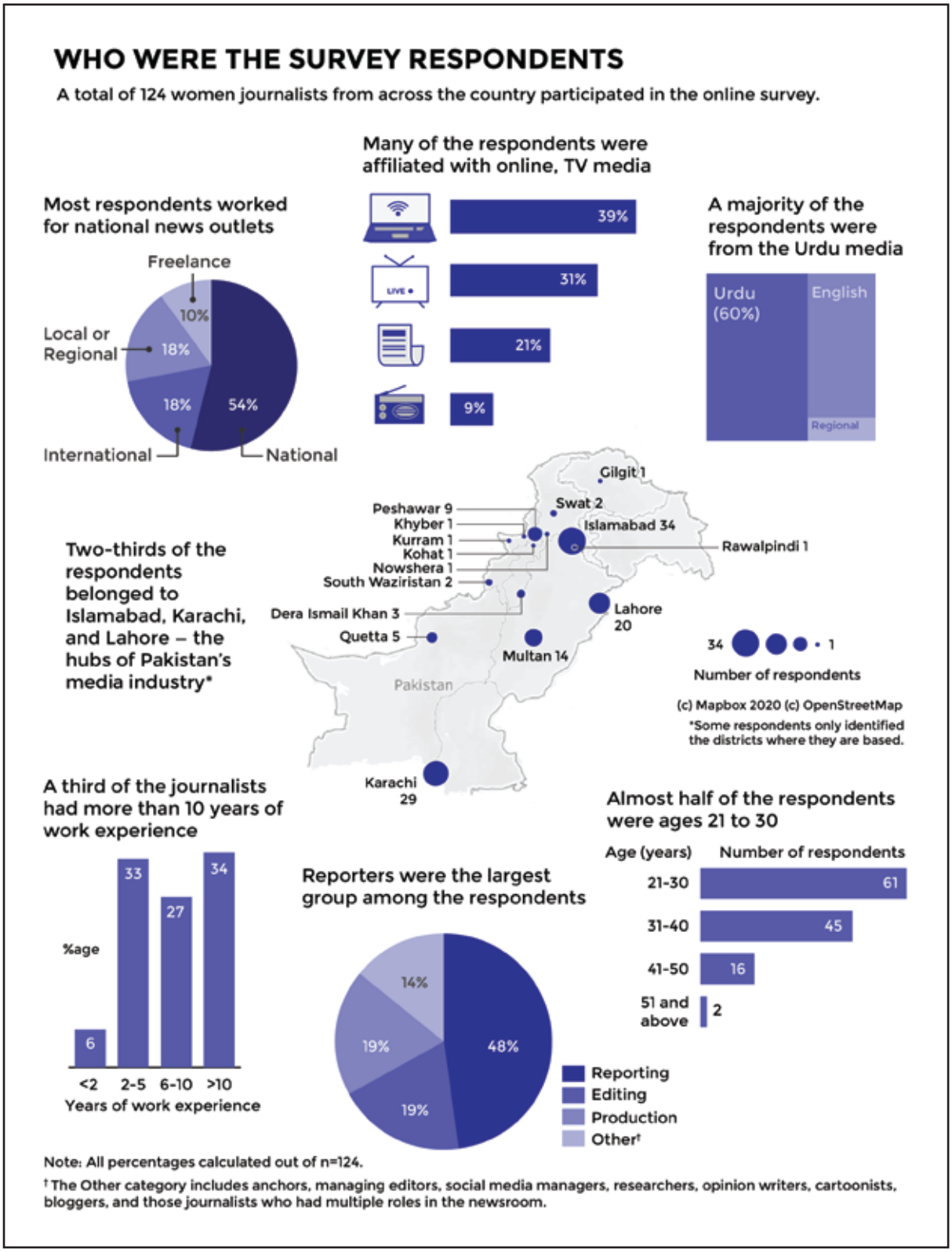



**Figure 1: Details of the Online Survey Respondents**

Reporting and writing (or editing) were the aspects of journalism work most frequently cited by the respondents where they were likely to exercise self-censorship. A total of 45 respondents out of 124, or 36 percent of the sample, said they were likely to self-censor while reporting.

Some respondents said they also saw sharing information online as a form of self-censorship. Around 15 percent said they were most likely to limit sharing their own work on social media. Another one in every 10 respondents said they would be cautious about sharing on social media the news items published by other journalists and media organisations.

Around 72 percent of the respondents said they had noticed their journalism colleagues also practise self-censorship but a quarter of the journalists were less certain of this observation.

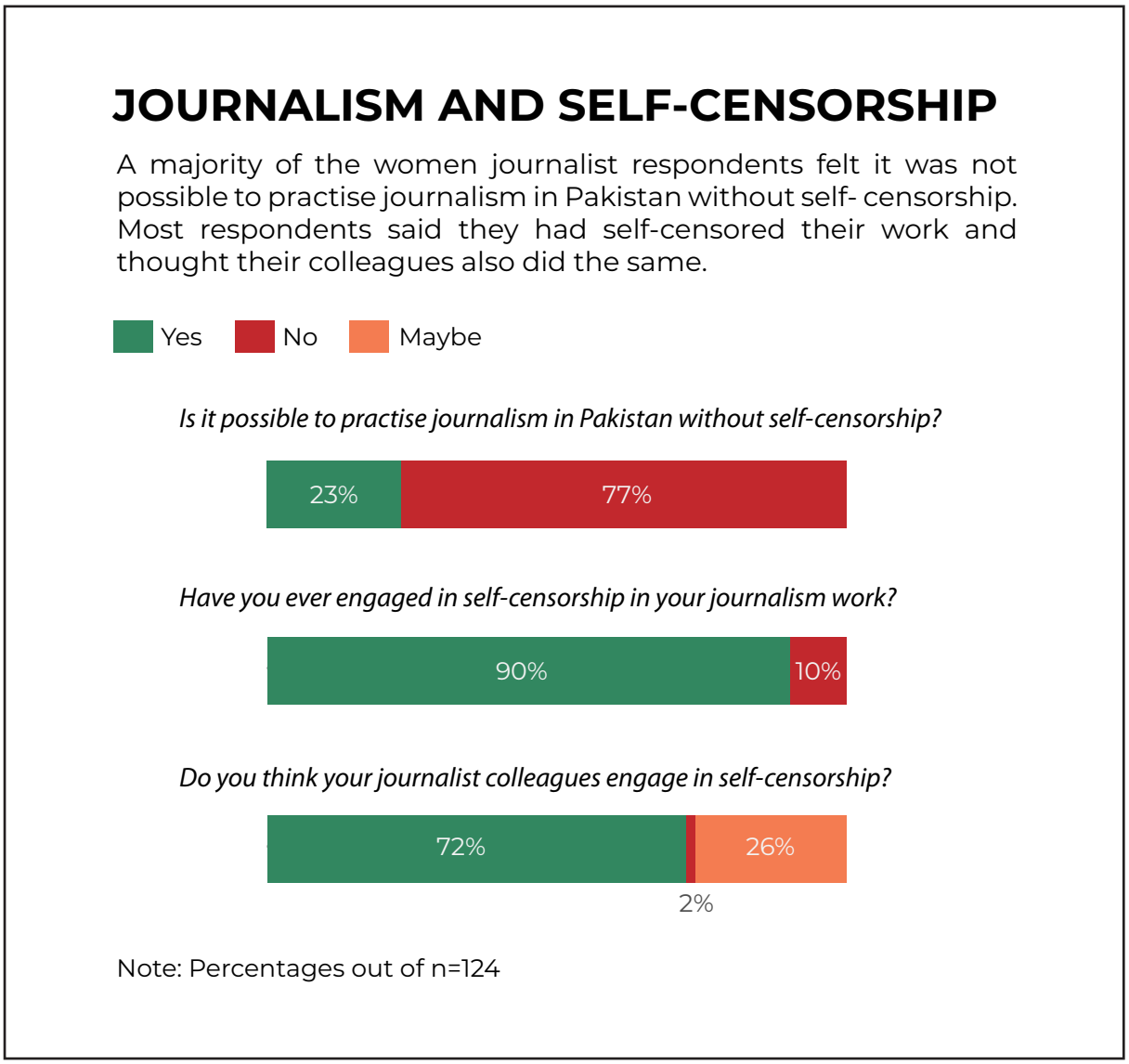



**Figure 2: Journalism and Self-censorship**

The respondents were asked to identify whether they figured out which issues they should self-censor in their professional journalism work by themselves or through other means. Many respondents (48 percent) said they made the decision based on directions they had received from the editors or management at their news organisations. This was a larger group than those respondents (31 percent) who said they used their own perceptions to figure out which issues to self-censor in their work.

However, a majority of the respondents (64 percent) said that editorial policies at their news organisations that might prevent them from reporting or writing on certain issues were implied or verbally communicated. Only around one in every 10 respondents said that their organisations had written editorial

policies. Around 27 percent of the respondents altogether either said there was no such policy at their news outlet or they did not know if a policy existed.

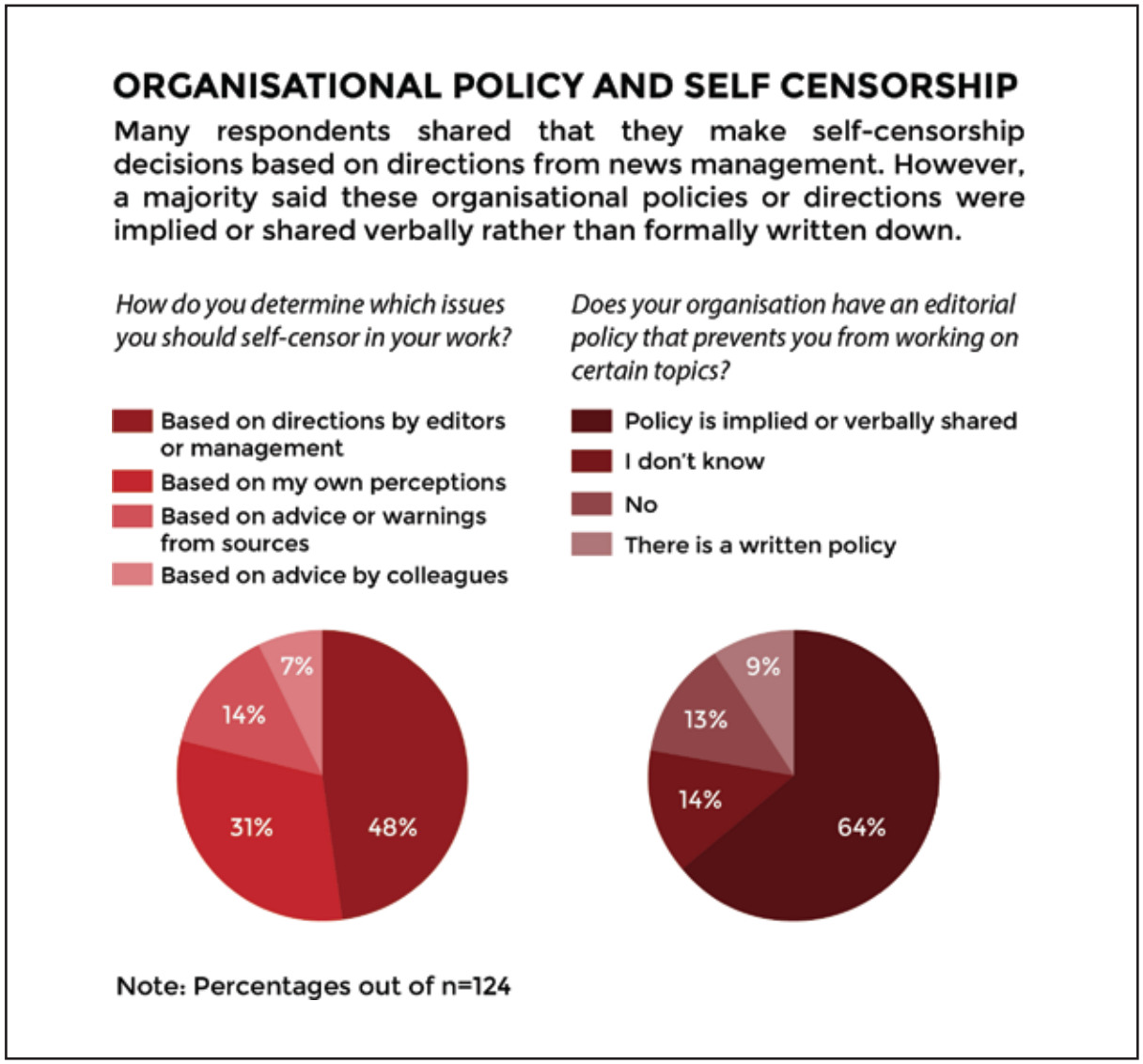



**Figure 3: Organisational Policy and Self-censorship**

The respondents were asked to identify whether or not they had exercised self-censorship in their journalism due to 11 separate reasons.

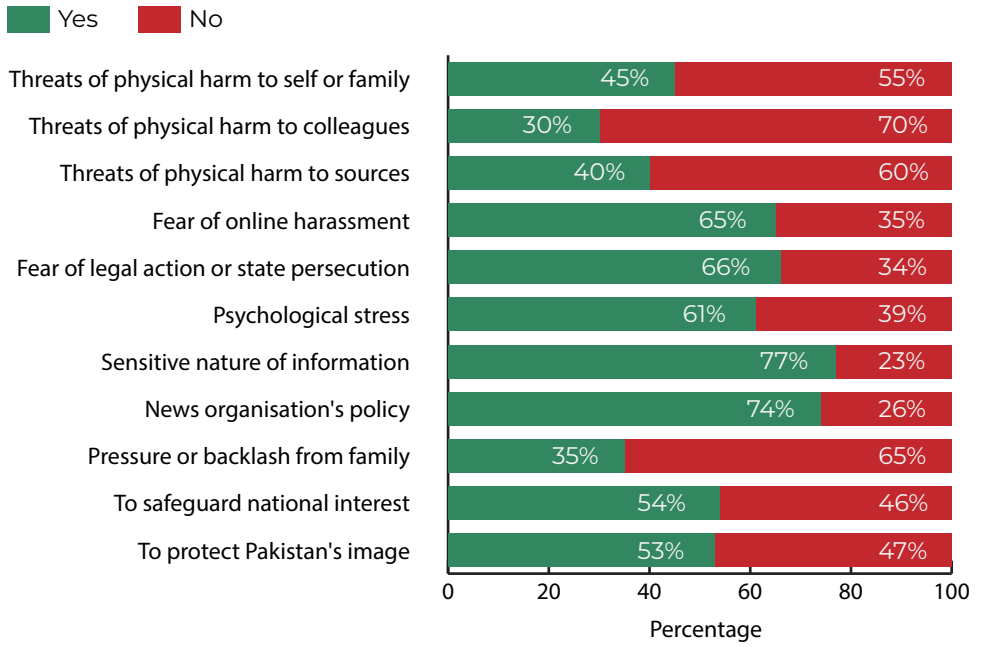
A majority of the respondents said they had self-censored their work due to the sensitive nature of information, their news organisation's policy, the threat of legal action or state persecution, the fear of online harassment, psychological stress, to safeguard national interest, and to protect Pakistan's image. The most frequent causes were the sensitive nature of information and the policy of the news organisation, with 77 percent and 74 percent of the respondents respectively stating they had self-censored due to these reasons.

Around two-thirds of the respondents reported the fear of online harassment as the reason they had self-censored in the past. Most respondents had not self-censored due to threat of physical harm.

## REASONS FOR SELF-CENSORSHIP

Top reasons for journalistic self-censorship included the sensitive nature of information and news organisation's policy. A majority also indicated fear of online harassment, legal action, and psychological stress as reasons for self-censorship.

*Have you self-censored your journalism work in the past due to any of the following:*




Note: Percentages are out of n=112, the number of respondents who had said they self-censored their work in a previous question.

**Figure 4: Reasons for Self-censorship in Journalism**

Out of the 72-percent majority who had exercised self-censorship due to their media organisation's policy, most women journalists said they decided which issues to self-censor based on directions from their editors or their news managers. Eight out of every 10 of these respondents (who had followed their organisation's policy to self-censor and who learnt about what to self-censor based on editorial directions) reported that their news organisation's policies were verbally communicated or implied.

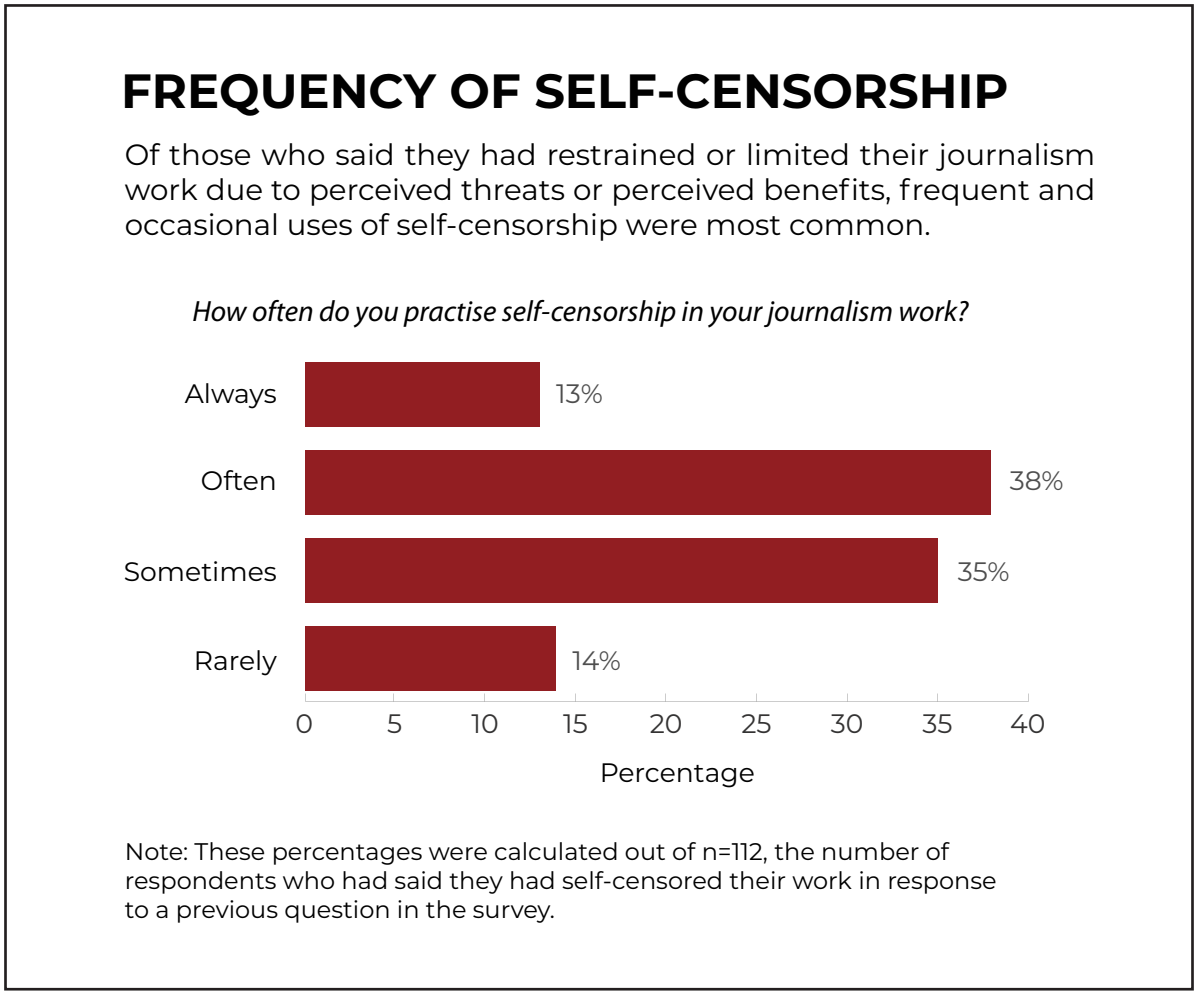



**Figure 5: Frequency of Self-censorship in Journalism Work**

In their professional interactions, such as the ones a journalist might have with their sources or colleagues, the women journalists said they were most likely to restrict the use of information about the military (66 percent) and religion (60 percent). They were unlikely to limit mentions of political parties, human rights violations or private companies.

## Self-censorship and Personal Expression

Around 93 percent of the 124 women journalist respondents said they self-censored their personal opinions on the Internet. For those who said they limited their online opinions, the behaviour of restraint was most obvious on the social media platforms. Just over a quarter of the respondents said they "always" self-censored their opinions on the microblogging website Twitter. One in every five respondents limited their views on Facebook every time, not only on their timeline but also on Facebook groups and pages. Taken together, a majority of the respondents at least frequently self-censored their opinions on Twitter (55 percent), Facebook timeline (52 percent), and Facebook groups or pages (52 percent). Respondents appeared to self-censor the least on websites or blogs. WhatsApp groups saw equal amounts of occasional and frequent self-censorship by the respondents.

In offline situations, the respondents were most careful around strangers and the public, with just over 40 percent always choosing to limit their opinions in front of unknowns. The opposite was true for conversations with family, friends, and colleagues, where roughly 40 percent of the respondents said they

would never or rarely alter their views.

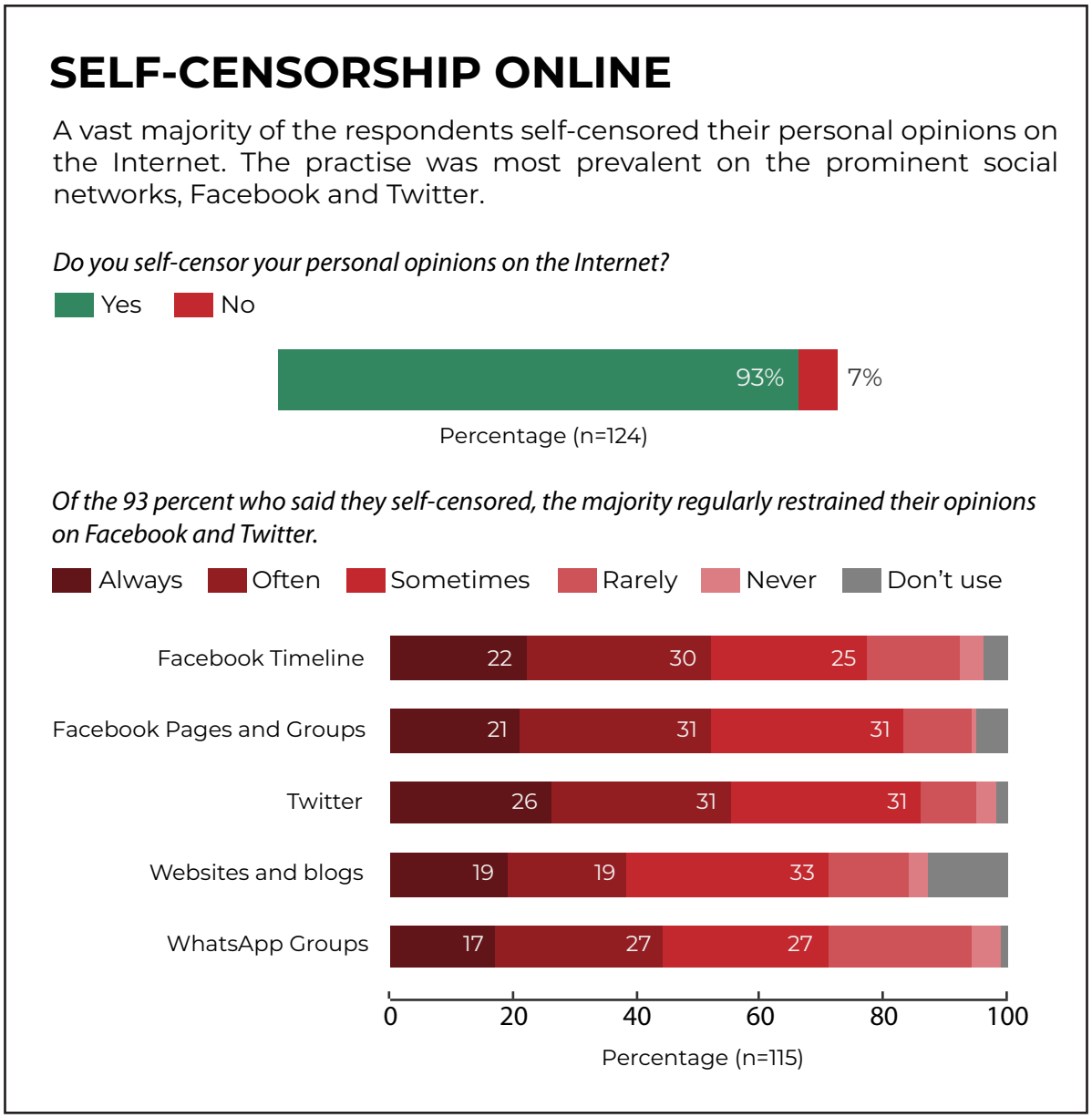



**Figure 6: Self-censorship of Online Expression**

A significant majority of the respondents said they had self-censored their opinions in the past to avoid hurting religious sensitivities (80 percent) and cultural norms (76 percent). Most respondents also confirmed they had restrained their speech to avoid public disagreement and due to fear of public backlash.

Fear of family backlash was not a majority reason for self-censorship of opinions in the sample. Just over half of the respondents, however, had previously curtailed their political opinions as well.

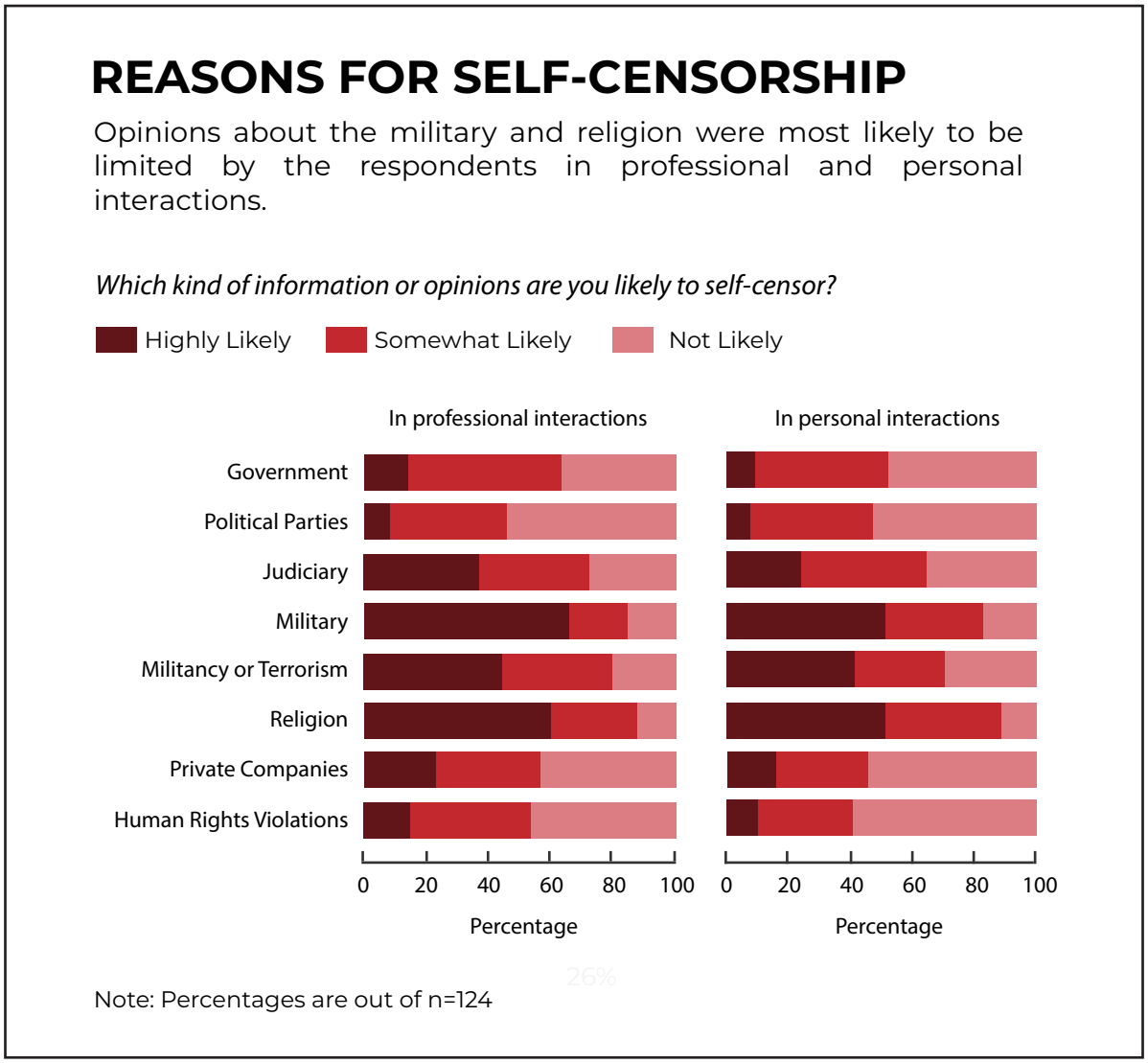



**Figure 7: Information and Opinion Likely to be Held Back**

Just like in professional interactions, a majority of the respondents were highly likely to limit opinions about the military and religion in their personal conversations. Most of the respondents were also likely to exercise some care about their views on the judiciary and terrorism. However, respondents felt less pressure in sharing opinions on politics, human rights issues, and corporate activity. A majority of the respondents (61 percent) considered their personal opinions to be separate from their journalism work.

## The Impact of Self-censorship

Online harassment was the most identified factor that forced the respondents to practise self-censorship in their work.

Alongside online harassment, the respondents also considered organisational policies, and physical threats and attacks as main factors that made women journalists err on the side of caution in their news output.

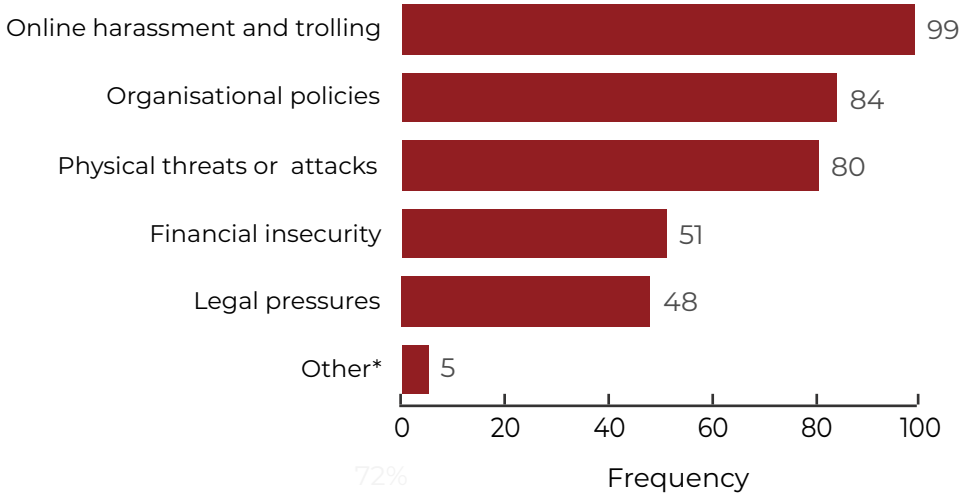
Around two in every three respondents in the survey said they had been attacked, threatened or harassed in some way for their work in the past. A vast majority of the respondents (93 percent) suggested that women journalists who do not self-censor are more likely to be subjected to online violence. Around two-thirds of the sample reported that better knowledge of digital safety techniques would help them in

expressing themselves more freely on social media.

## FACTORS BEHIND SELF-CENSORSHIP

The respondents identified online harassment of women journalists as one of the most common contributing factor towards self-censorship in their journalism.

*In your opinion, what are the main factors that force Pakistani women journalists to practise self-censorship in their work?*




Note: Respondents were allowed to pick multiple options.

*The Other category includes cultural and religious norms, harassment at the workplace, office politics, psychological pressure from colleagues, and incomplete knowledge.

**Figure 8: Factors that lead to Self-censorship**

A majority of the respondents (62 percent) said that self-censorship prevented them from reporting or publishing on issues they wanted to work on. But a quarter of the women journalists said it did not affect their work.

Opinion was split on whether the women journalists were able to fulfil their professional responsibilities if they exercise self-censorship in their work. Around 47 percent of the respondents said they weren't but it was a slim lead over some 41 percent respondents who said they were still able to meet their journalistic responsibilities despite restraining their professional expression.

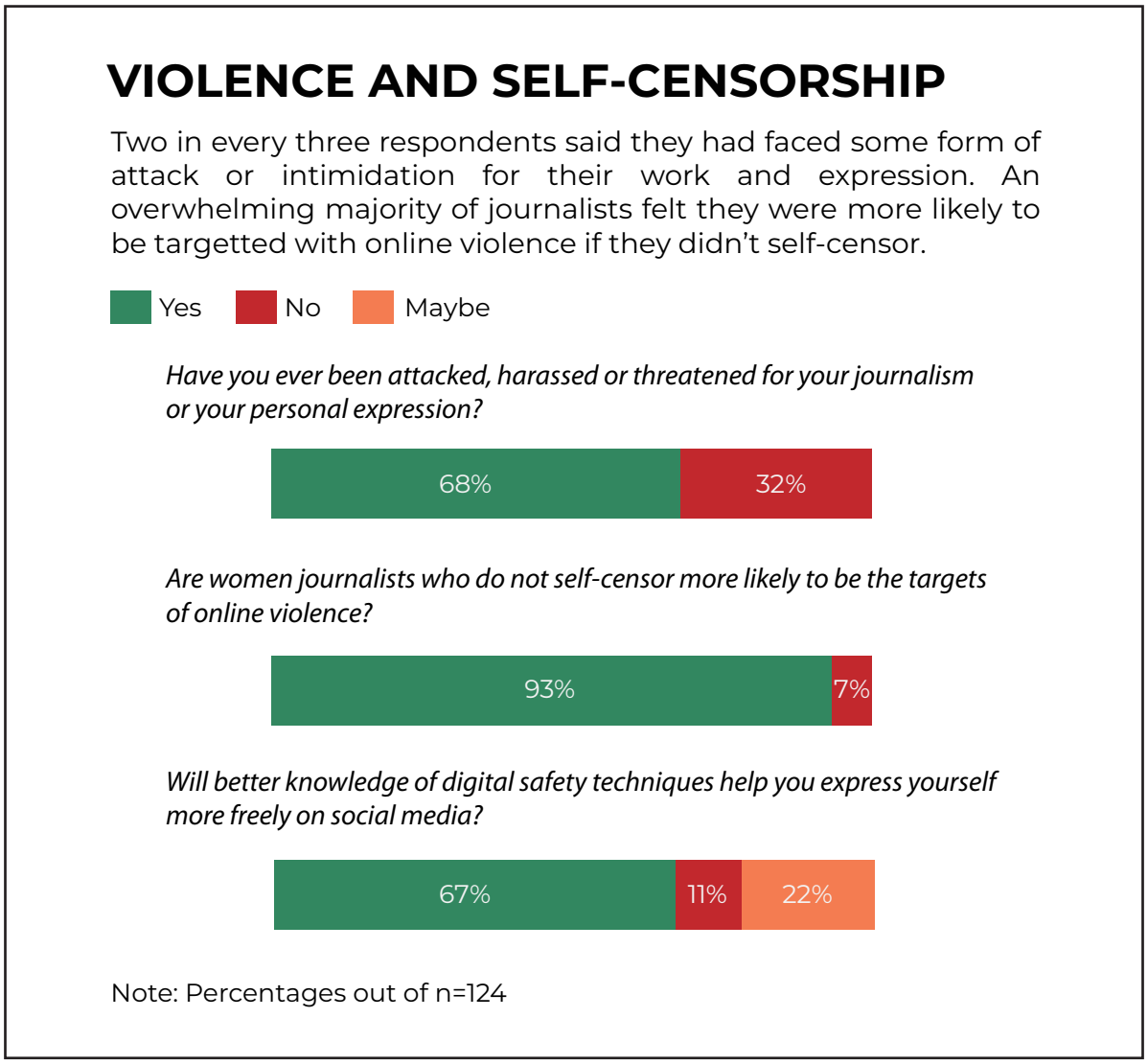



**Figure 9: Violence and Self-censorship**

The respondents also identified some news strategies they deployed to avoid self-censorship in their work.

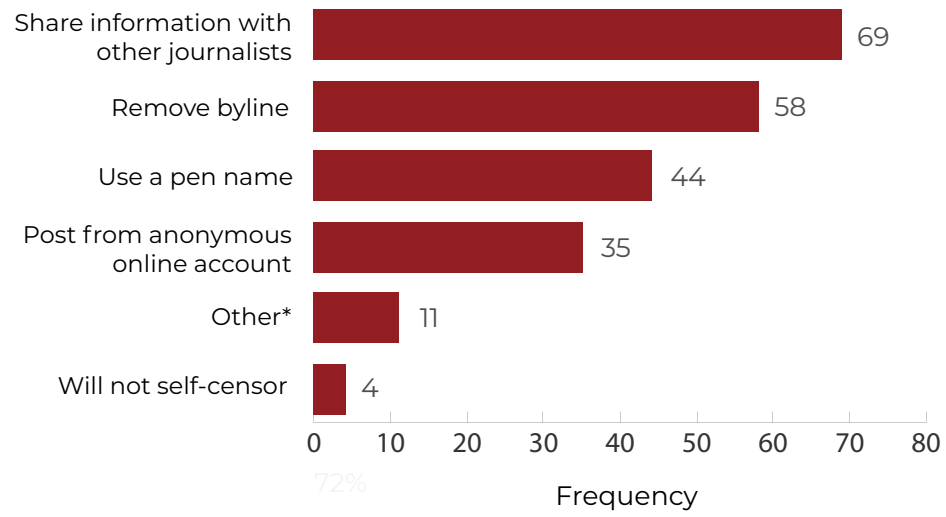
For information the respondents felt they would have to hold back, the most popular trick was to distribute the information among other journalists. A majority of the respondents who believed sharing the information they were unlikely to run themselves was the way to thwart self-censorship had six or more years of journalism experience.

Many journalists also said they would consider removing their byline from a news report that could bring trouble for them. Less common were the options to use a pseudonym or set up an anonymous page or account on social media to publish the information they were reluctant to share publicly with their own name.

## STRATEGIES AGAINST SELF-CENSORING

The women journalist respondents identified several ways in which they coped with self-censorship in their everyday journalism work.

*Which of these strategies would you consider using to avoid self-censorship?*




Note: Respondents were allowed to pick multiple options.

*The Other category includes use of indirect language, tone the information down, use of sarcasm, find publications to run the story, pitch to international news outlets, and use of direct quotes and attribution.

**Figure 10: Strategies against Self-censorship**

## 4.2 THEMES FROM THE INTERVIEWS

The eight interviewees included three women journalists from Islamabad, two from Karachi, one from Lahore, and two from Peshawar. Most of the interviewees had been associated in some capacity with broadcast media during their careers. However, the interviewees also included print and online journalists as well as those who report or publish across multiple media types.

An inductive approach borrowed from Thomas (2006) was used to study the interview transcripts and spot similar perspectives in the text, which were grouped together into coding categories. The codes described different aspects of an apparently shared understanding of the self-censorship phenomenon. These coding categories were: evidence of self-censorship, online harassment, mitigation strategies (including responses to online harassment), political influence, traditional 'red lines' (pressure from the State, religious organisations, and military), cultural pressure, impact on professional work, impact on life and personal opinions, views about organisational policies, views on professional conduct by journalists on social media, the state of journalism, and threats to press freedom. Each coding category was assigned a colour, and the transcripts were analysed again at the paragraph level to highlight statements pertaining to each category.

The clusters of statements for each category were reviewed individually and collectively to merge and refine the categories into broader themes that could explain the self-censorship experiences of the interviewees. The themes are presented below. Inter-coder reliability for two coders was calculated using Cohen's Kappa for 25 percent of the sample. Cohen's Kappa is a suitable measure for reliability of qualitative coding (Jamil, 2020). The Kappa value was found to be 0.64, which signifies good agreement between the coders and indicates reliability of the coding results (Altman, 1991, as cited in Masson et al., 2003).

The names of the interviewees and the names of their organisations are being kept anonymous to protect their identity and ensure no harm comes to them from the publication of this research study. The eight interviewees are referred to in the text by letters of the English alphabet from A to H along with a brief city-based or media type-based descriptor to distinguish between the different interviewees.

## Is Self-censorship Gendered?

The interviewees were in consensus that the curbs on the press, most notably censorship and the traditional threats that contribute toward self-censorship, are faced by all Pakistani journalists regardless of gender or other identity markers. They said these curbs were mostly related to media regulation and sensitive issues in daily news coverage — often these issues would either be of a religious or cultural nature or associated with armed conflict or linked with the military establishment — and male colleagues were as vulnerable to these pressures as the women journalists.

Field reporters were more likely to directly face these pressures from their sources, according to the interviewees. News editors and TV talk show hosts were also thought to negotiate with these concerns regularly. "There is the (self) censorship that we all face as journalists. Honestly it is not gendered, at all. We all face it all the time and it is crippling beyond belief. (It is concerned with) your beat or everyday work. When I am thinking about work now, I am thinking as an editor. Not really as a woman editor," interviewee *G* said.

Peshawar-based broadcast journalist *C* said the self-censorship phenomenon currently experienced by Pakistani journalists was not limited to women but affected the entire Pakistani news industry. "Oftentimes state institutions do not allow certain topics to be discussed in the press, so we have to stop ourselves from speaking about these," she said. "The mainstream media is subject to a lot of restrictions nowadays which are basically due to the Pakistan Electronic Media Regulatory Authority. To tell you the truth, I estimate that we kill 50 percent of the stories because we know the news reports would not be aired or our media outlet would tell us that our lives are more important and we should not risk them for these stories."

Journalist *E*, who is based in Karachi and has worked in journalism for nearly two decades, said, "Our journalists are used to self-censorship anyway. We have historically worked in an environment where we were not allowed to have conversations about many things. That's why a majority of journalists have in-built self-censorship."

She said political censorship was always around because journalists were wary of reporting on the "establishment". But the journalists were also bolder now than before and, as a result, more topics were being opened up for discussion in the news, *E* said. For example, she said, sexual harassment or child abuse were taboo topics in the press in the past but now there was widespread news coverage of these issues.

*E* also felt social media had brought into full public view the threats and pressures against the press, which were perhaps not being documented openly in the past.

But it was also on social media, all interviewees agreed, that women journalists are singled out for a horrific form of violence that forces them to limit their speech.

## Online Harassment and Self-censorship: Targeted for Being a Woman

Even though all Pakistani journalists appear to contend with self-censorship, the factors that compel women journalists to self-censor may be different. It is on the Internet that women journalists are targeted with the additional threat of online violence, which includes abuse, harassment, trolling, bullying, reputational harm, and hacking attempts. This online violence forces the women journalists to restrain their expression.

"I think we face 'double censorship' of course as women… When I go into the online world, as a professional journalist of course as well as with my gender identity which is 'woman', that is when the trouble starts. The self-censorship part that women journalists face as a class of journalists is more online, outside of your everyday work. The abuse male journalists face is completely different from what I face, and in that gender plays a part," the print journalist *G* said.

Most interviewees brought up the differences in online abuse directed at women and men to explain the effects of online harassment on the expression of women journalists.

Islamabad-based broadcast journalist *F* said the online threats faced by women journalists are "more sexualised" in nature and include threats of sexual violence. "Trolling and abuse is faced by male journalists as well, but it is qualitatively different for women. Different, and more intense."

Multimedia journalist *D*, who said she was targeted in several "coordinated" online attacks on Twitter during the past few years, gave examples of the rampant sexism and misogyny in the abuse, "There is a difference in the online abuse male and female journalists face. Male journalists are attacked for their work. Women journalists are called ugly. They are told, 'go look at your face, go look at your body, you're so skinny you will fly away in the wind, you're so fat you'll break the chair you are sitting on, we have never seen someone as ugly as you, you have no right to be in journalism, you don't even have a right to live.' Women journalists receive rape threats. We are warned not to step outside of our homes or we will be attacked. We receive acid attack threats, death threats… Women journalists are not spared at all. Men do not face these issues, I think. Women are targeted for being women, not only for being journalists. We are reminded of our gender."

*H*, an online journalist, agreed with this description. "We are not being trolled just because of our work. We are being trolled because we are women," she said.

She said most male journalists also fail to see the distinction in the abuse women journalists face and the online abuse against men. Journalist *G* said she does not want to trivialise the attacks against men journalists because they also face gendered online attacks in which women in their families are insulted, but she said women journalists have it worse. "I hate to use the term 'soft targets', but it is already difficult being a woman in the (news) industry. Then you end up facing bullying," she said. Broadcast journalist *F* agreed that when women journalists are prominent personalities, such as TV anchors, they become a soft target for online scrutiny and bullying, and it puts them in a very risky position.

Women journalists are subjected to character assassination online and their reputation as a woman is questioned, journalist *D*, who is based in Islamabad, said. Broadcast journalist *C* said it is easier to put pressure on women journalists through character assassination compared to men because women's families are more protective toward them owing to patriarchal cultural norms. "If a man is subjected to character assassination, the society does not consider it so bad. But even if a small accusation is made about a woman's character, it creates a big problem for her in society. Unmarried women especially have to be more careful about this," she said.

The effect of this online abuse and harassment is that women journalists begin to modify their professional and personal activity on social media, according to examples shared by the interviewees. Journalist *B* thinks

women journalists "absolutely self-censor" and she is extremely cautious herself in talking about religion, politics, and the military because she has been "a victim of massive trolling campaigns." Journalist *D*, who is a reporter and writer, said, "Even if I want to, I do not speak about a lot of things now. I have reduced my opinions because everyone has access to us on social media and anyone can level any accusation against us."

It does not matter what the ideological or principled position a woman journalist holds, every woman journalist is facing harassment on social media, broadcast journalist *F* said.

When the interviewees referred to "online" attacks or "social media", they predominantly meant Twitter. A few journalists brought up Facebook, too, and one interviewee saw it as "pretty bad" for women journalists. Some of them said private photos shared by women journalists on their Facebook profiles were sometimes stolen or leaked, morphed, and shared on social networks and WhatsApp to shame them — examples of the "character assassination" attacks highlighted by the interviewees. On Facebook, another interviewee, *A*, said people post comments that are completely divorced from the news content of her posts and live broadcasts. She said the comments usually attack her womanhood and contain abusive language. On YouTube, body-shaming insults and sexual slurs are posted against women journalists in the comments section under news video content, the interviewees said.

However, the women journalists interviewed for the study considered Twitter to be the most toxic platform for women journalists. A story shared by some of the interviewees explains why this is the case.

During the pandemic, some Pakistani women journalists found themselves together in a WhatsApp group that was set up to coordinate a joint statement. The statement was to protest against the online harassment faced by women journalists. In the group chat, the journalists ended up making a discovery. While sharing their experiences of online harassment with each other, they found a pattern in the abuse and trolling hurled at them on Twitter. According to interviewees who were privy to the conversations of these women journalists, the pattern of abusive behaviour was linked to certain user accounts that came across as habitual offenders. When one journalist in the group shared that she had received threatening messages from a certain user on Twitter, other journalists quickly replied that they had also received abuse from the same user. Over time, many other user accounts identified in this way were already familiar to several women journalists because they had received threatening and abusive messages from these accounts separately. It was the same accounts targeting many different women journalists at around the same time.

"What's really interesting is that when I reported some of these accounts to Twitter, the service asked me if I wanted to report any other tweets by the same user and (I saw that) a lot of their other tweets were either directed at me or other female journalists and I rarely saw those accounts targeting male journalists," Journalist *H* said. The threats in these tweets directed at several women journalists were the same, she said.

It is this coordinated and organised manner of attacks that made Twitter stand out in the eyes of the interviewees. "The bullying has intensified manifold. It's very coordinated now. It's full-on (Twitter) trends, and it really takes a very strong-willed journalist to stand up to that. Even the big names retract. That's what we call self-censorship online," the Karachi-based journalist *G* said.

Each woman journalist cited different reasons for why they felt they were targeted by these attacks and campaigns. Some felt it was their news reporting. Others said it could be their commentary on current affairs. Still others thought they were dragged in because of their perceived political ideology.

But the general trend was that these coordinated attacks, as one journalist explained, would often start as mocking tweets that became more and more aggressive with passing hours and days. The messages would include accusations of partisan bias and so-called 'fake news' against the journalists. Eventually the posts would descend into death threats and rape threats apparently in an attempt to silence the women journalists and warn them against news coverage or discussion of similar issues in the future.

The escalation in intensity of these coordinated online campaigns against women journalists was often assisted along the way by more influential Twitter users, and the interviewees had something to say about who they thought was behind these attacks. Their comments indicate a transformation of the traditional 'red lines' that have informed the self-censorship practices of Pakistani journalists and media organisations over the years.

## The Red Lines have Merged on Social Media

Interviewees identified political parties and their supporters on social media as one of the leading contributors of online attacks against women journalists. During the recent past, they said, the political elements had rivalled the more traditional no-go areas for expression in Pakistan: religious affairs and the military establishment.

"Political parties have big social media cells. If you give an opinion (that they don't like), then they attack you through their trolls and teams," Islamabad-based journalist *D* said. "These social media cells directly try to influence us to stop us from speaking on certain issues." She said social media wings of political parties had run Twitter campaigns against her in the past with specific hashtags that appeared on Twitter's Trending panel, indicating a large volume of tweets was posted using those hashtags. The tweets in those campaigns, she said, had all manner of threats against her.

While most interviewees said all political parties were involved in targeting women journalists online, the role of ruling party Pakistan Tehreek-e Insaf (PTI) was brought up often. Journalists interviewed for this study noted that when PTI political leaders tried to discredit a journalist on mainstream or social media, the Twitter mentions of those journalists were flooded by angry tweets and messages from accounts that appeared to be supportive of the PTI. Support for the party was indicated either by their display photos, the text in their bios, or their tweet history, interviewees claimed. Some women journalists had also noticed that several of these angry user accounts involved in the online attacks also openly claimed they were part of a PTI social media team or were followed by PTI leaders.

The politically motivated online attacks that contribute to self-censorship have increased since 2014, interviewees said. Journalist *G* considers it natural that politics has overshadowed other sources of online threats against journalists because she said the biggest developments in Pakistan during the past few years have been political, including the fallout of the Panama Papers and the PTI's ascent to power in 2018. Others had a similar opinion about the rise of online violence and its link with journalistic self-censorship.

"I think the sort of competition or battle for narratives on social media has just become much more intense in the last couple of years," interviewee *B*, a broadcast journalist, said. "It is not just the ruling party, it is also other political parties that have picked up on this weaponising (of social media). I would say 'weaponising' because if you are launching hashtags and trolling campaigns against particular journalists or media channels, it does translate into real life harassment and violence."

Broadcast journalist *F* seemed to agree with *B's* comments. "Social media has become extremely weaponised," she said. "(As) a result of which women journalists think twice about what we can talk about and how to frame the comments." She said if one of her tweets is perceived by one or the other political party as being against them, she knows she will be bombarded by abuse from their troll armies.

While politically motivated attacks took centre stage, the journalists also indicated that other interest groups were also active online. Several interviewees mentioned that Tehreek-e Labbaik Pakistan, the hardline religious party that campaigns for strict application of the anti-blasphemy laws and showed surprise voter traction in the 2018 elections, had rapidly developed an online following. Others hinted at the prevalence of so-called pro-establishment trolls that support the military's digital maneuvers. "Hordes of trolls have been unleashed on social media in an organised manner, and this is across the board," one interviewee said.

From the women journalist's standpoint then, it appears the red lines have not shifted but merged. Real and bot social media accounts that appear to be representing the establishment overlap with users who support the dominant political party, so that it sometimes becomes unclear who is heading the trolling campaigns.

"It's a big old mess," one woman journalist commented. "Everything's connected."

The "potentially inflammatory subjects", as another interviewee put it, now avoided by women journalists on social media include issues that any user would not directly associate with mainstream politics. For example, women journalists who had covered or supported the Aurat March — the annual rallies taken out in many Pakistani cities to mark International Women's Day — faced a great deal of backlash and trolling. The trolling of Aurat March by supposedly "pro-establishment" accounts has led some to believe that dissent to prevailing official paradigms will be cautioned online.

"Anything that goes against a certain uniform narrative that the State wants to project, any movement, any protest that critiques or challenges that narrative gets the brunt of it," one journalist said. "So again that is not about any political party, just a general trend I noticed. Many female journalists became wary of talking about the Aurat March or the feminism movement, for instance, just after that experience."

The Aurat March example and the comments about religious forces mobilising on social media also shed light on the sociocultural pressures that contribute toward self-censorship among women journalists.

## Social and Cultural Pressures

One of the biggest reasons for self-censorship by journalists is the growing level of extremism and intolerance in the society, Peshawar-based journalist *C* said. "Women are always in the crosshairs of society's judgement, and women journalists who report on social issues, human rights, and women empowerment are instantly targeted," she said.

Broadcast journalist *F* in Islamabad said a lot of this has to do with the general intolerance for opposing values in society. "Now the people with extremist thoughts have phones and access to the Internet and they can target anyone on the basis of a single tweet, so definitely this has increased the pressure and risks for women journalists," she said.

Journalist *D* said, "In our society, the freedom to talk about things has ceased to exist to a great extent." She said we have very little tolerance for religious matters and people are quick to accuse others of blasphemy or label them infidels if their religious sentiments do not match. Interviewee *F* said religious extremism has an additional level of threat for women journalists because religious directives are used more intensively to check their behaviour. Journalists felt women in media tend to restrain their opinions about religious affairs because, as one journalist put it, "religion is such a sensitive issue now in Pakistan that its stick is used to beat anyone".

Peshawar-based interviewees also raised cultural concerns that they believed exert disproportionately on the work of women journalists in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP) compared to other parts of the country. "We women are culturally bound here in KP," online journalist *A* said. "We have to care for purdah because of local customs." She said they are accused of working on the Western agenda if they attempt to report on women's rights and gender equality. On other occasions, especially online, they are told they must have dishonourable men in their family who have allowed their women to become journalists and disrespect the cultural norms.

She said when they compare their work with women reporters in Lahore or Karachi, they feel it is the cultural constraints that have held them back.

"The pressures to self-censor from institutions are the same everywhere, but even if we try to raise our work to the level of other women journalists elsewhere in the country, we feel we cannot do it because we are so bound by cultural practices. The few women journalists who work in KP, only we know the struggle we go through to continue our journalism," *A* said.

One journalist also brought up the point that cultural values also hold back women's response to online abuse. "There is also a limitation that women face by virtue of their societal roles that are assigned to them," journalist *G* said. "You know, the idea of politeness and being proper. Scores of male colleagues have responded in kind to abusive trolls but have never been told how rude they are, but if a woman swears back at an abusive troll (she is told to behave politely.) I think we suffer a lot because of the fact that responsibility politics and politeness have been taught to women. This burden is so unfair. We even get rape threats, and we are required to respond with grace and virtue and class, which are words assigned to women and not men."

The political, religious, and cultural factors inevitably lead to modification of professional and personal expression among the women journalists, as the interviewees suggested.

## Self-censorship as Impact on Professional and Personal Expression of Women Journalists

Broadcast journalist *B* said she now consciously tries and finds ways to balance or blunt her critique of current affairs because she feels it will become difficult for her to access information and sources for her reporting if she does not. "As coordinated campaigns intensified against me, I also found that many government representatives were reluctant (to speak with me, which) made it difficult for me to do my job," she said.

Another journalist said she gives up many story ideas because she knows government officials will not give her a comment for her stories. She said the denial of access is due to the politically motivated trolling campaigns launched to discredit her work and this has made it difficult for her to practise journalism.

Peshawar-based online journalist *A* said publishers also do not withstand pressure from interest groups, so even published articles get edited or deleted. She said this sets precedent for the next time she mulls story angles. The same level of pressure on journalists did not exist before, *A* noted. "In the past three years, I don't know if people have become more rude or more powerful. They try to stop even fair and balanced coverage," she said. She gave the example of a story she published for which some lawyers harassed her even though she had quoted their perspective in the article. "They just did not want it reported at all," she said.

Print journalist *G* said she knows many TV journalists who have softened their tone after being bullied online incessantly even though they probably still want to ask the tough questions. As an editor, she says, the online scenarios play a role in her own editorial decisions too. "Sometimes it is paranoia translating into self-censorship and sometimes you are being a responsible journalist," she said. "But the (online violence) affects women journalists absolutely; there is no way that it doesn't."

The self-censorship effects appeared to create different reactions in different journalists. Some interviewees called it "self-imposed" self-censorship unironically to indicate they had agency over it. Others regretted the fact they could not "call a spade a spade every time" they saw it.

But overall, the women journalists largely agreed they had modified their online expression.

Some journalists said they think twice about tweeting and triple-check information before they post it online. One interviewee also mentioned the criminal cases registered against journalists for their social media activity under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act as a source of anxiety, which has made her

careful about the content of her own social media activity.

Interviewees mentioned they exercised caution in what they published on social networks because they had started to expect the kind of negative responses their posts would garner. "If I tell a politician you have done something wrong, I completely understand that this politician has their own troll army which is going to attack me. I have to brace myself for that," broadcast journalist *F* said, adding that she now avoids knee-jerk reactions on social media and does not offer her opinion on every single issue.

The need to limit social media expression was also linked by the interviewees with the psychological impact of online harassment.

"It isn't just safety and security, trolling takes a huge mental toll on the people who are a victim of it," Journalist *B* said. "You cannot completely harden your shell against it, as much as you need to develop a bit of a thick skin if you are in a public position."

She said a woman journalist against an army of trolls is just one person against many and that can become very difficult because the campaigns undermine the credibility of the journalists. "So on many levels I think it is safety, security, and also just survival, just being able to continue to do your job as best as you can," journalist *B* said.

Other journalists said sometimes they want to speak up online but do not because they cannot take the stress of the abuse that would follow.

While they had limited their speech on social media, most women journalists said they fought to keep the integrity of their news product.

"My self-censorship is on my social media activity only," Islamabad-based journalist *D*, who now limits political and religious expression, said. "I do not apply it to my journalistic output."

Every journalist has to figure out for themselves if they are self-censoring out of compulsion or because they have been co-opted by the status quo, Karachi journalist *G* said. She said there are journalists within newsrooms who keep pushing the envelope a little, fight for stories, and keep struggling to gain more freedom for the press.

In the news organisations, the interviewees said there were usually no written policies about what to report and what to avoid. Experienced journalist *E* said what is to be self-censored is usually neither decided collectively by journalists nor anyone tells them about it in the form of directives from higher management. "It usually evolves with the situation. Your editor does discuss the story with you. If you are working for a news organisation, you have to follow their rules," she said.

Following the rules goes along with "putting two and two together," interviewee *G* said. She said if a news organisation is under pressure, which is likely in Pakistan because of the powers of the State through the media regulator, advertisements, and distribution systems, the journalists pick up on these stresses. Even if then a journalist is "going full steam ahead," the organisation might ask them to take it slow because they are under pressure.

"Of course that happens," she said. "Which is why you see so many YouTube channels of established journalists who are also on TV because on YouTube no one is regulating them other than themselves."

Just as YouTube web channels have presented local journalists with an alternative to keep their stories alive, women journalists also identified strategies they use to hold off against online violence or avoid self-censorship.

## Mitigation Strategies and Coping Mechanisms

For news reporting, journalist *C* who works in Peshawar said they deal with sensitive topics by getting on-the-record comments from sources, such as social workers and human rights activists, and use attribution to deflect the pressure off from the media outlet. But, in analysis and commentary on TV, she said they have to be careful about their choice of words and often speak between the lines.

Exercising care in language was a common practice among the journalists as they navigated around self-censorship.

"We have perfected the art of weighing our words when talking about religion or how to talk about certain issues without crossing the red lines set by society," print journalist *G* said. She said there were also differences between the Urdu and English press, with more pressures on the Urdu media due to its wider reach and diverse audience.

Another Peshawar-based interviewee said they usually know which stories will receive pressure from which quarters so they discuss that beforehand in editorial meetings. "If we do not reach a consensus in the editorial meeting, then we drop the story to protect ourselves. We make compromises, so that the little expression we are able to manage is not completely silenced," she said.

In terms of news publishing, Islamabad-based journalist *B* said, "I think where certain journalists are not able to publish their work, they are now increasingly turning to online digital platforms, which tells you how difficult or how limited the space (in the mainstream media) has become."

On the social media front, most interviewees said they use Twitter's features to block, mute, and report abusive user accounts as well as the option to 'limit replies' to tweets. Some women journalists have also stopped checking their notifications or mentions. Others have stopped reading comments altogether to shield them from harm. These strategies are not nearly perfect but the journalists agreed they can sometimes be helpful. The trolls, for example, have found the quote-tweet feature on Twitter as a workaround for when replies are limited. Often hundreds of troll accounts copy-paste the same text to quote a tweet, one interviewee said. Journalists said reporting abusive tweets to Twitter is also often a slow, frustrating process because some abusive messages are found in violation, but others are not; the platform's response appears to be lacking for local languages. One journalist said she tries to engage with her followers to educate them about appropriate online behaviour, but this sort of interaction to appeal for decency was an exception not the rule in the women journalists interviewed.

Blocking accounts seemed a more effective, if not efficient, technique. Journalist *D,* who by her own estimates reduced her political and religious commentary on social media by 90 percent, said she has blocked thousands of users to reduce hate speech against herself. Anyone who posts, likes, shares or retweets abusive comments deserves to be blocked in her playbook.

"I have blocked a lot of people, so entire teams have been tracked," she said. "What they do is that there is one person running sock-puppet accounts or a network, where when that person posts something, all the other hundreds of members in the network retweet him. If you block that one account, you cut the supply line because they are all following each other, so it's like removing a team. I took the time to block them so things are better for me."

The time investment in identifying the hub accounts and blocking them might not be manageable for most. So, when the dread and stress of online abuse becomes too much, women journalists interviewed for the study said they simply log off and some said that has proved good for their mood and mental health. Some interviewees also said they do not post personal information to social media any more or have had to delete or deactivate their profiles from certain platforms to ensure their personal information does not get leaked.

Women journalists realised that limiting replies or not checking their mentions was a "bit of a loss" as they were giving up on opportunities to engage with sensible followers, to learn, and to generate discussions. But it was a small price to pay in order to stay safe from the online violence, the interviewees agreed, and some even felt that social media platforms had become so agenda-driven in the past few years that it was simply futile to look for meaningful intellectual discourse there.

About the social media conduct of journalists generally, the interviewees were in favour of journalists holding and expressing their personal opinions but also called for professionalism.

Journalist *B* said journalists have a greater responsibility just like any other public figure to exercise care in how they express their opinions. If you have 50 people sitting in front of you, she said rhetorically, how would you express your opinion? "So that's the way journalists ought to operate as well," she said. "But that does not mean they shouldn't express an opinion because everybody does and, in many cases, journalists are more informed than other people."

Some news organisations have social media guidelines for staff, interviewee *F* said, but she was of the opinion that such guidelines should not be called censorship rather a "carefully crafted policy" to ensure professional conduct online, the same as international media where journalists do not give knee jerk reactions and international news outlets fire commentators for inappropriate or irresponsible social media posts, *F* said.

The demand for journalists to draw a line between their professional and personal opinions is pointless, print journalist *G* said. She said as a journalist her personal opinion is also her professional opinion. "Otherwise ask us not to have social media accounts, which is a fascist authoritarian argument. There should be a basic level of ethics and we should adhere to it. Disagreement is fine. If I do it in a way that is not inciting hatred or murder, it should be OK," she said.

The women journalists were buoyed, disappointed, and pragmatic in equal measure about the two joint statements issued by women journalists in 2020.

One journalist said interacting with the women journalists who banded together for the statement had given her a sense of community and solidarity that was previously missing for women journalists in the country. There was now a possibility to share their experiences, find humour in their predicament, strategise, and mobilise to demand change.

Another journalist said they had brought the issues of online harassment against women journalists on the record, but she expected no relief. "Nobody is serious about it at this time, neither the ruling party nor the opposition. It does not suit anyone. Some parties are putting new investment into social media teams. Why would they roll it back? So you have to understand that everyone is going to play politics on it but no one is going to be genuinely concerned about it enough to work on it."

One interviewee was disappointed that the statements did not have the effect they were expecting and she understood that it was difficult for individual journalists to take time out to follow up. But she insisted that "we have to keep up the pressure and stay united". She said it was a pity that there was no national platform for women journalists that could dedicate time for strategising and follow up on the demands put forth in the statements.

However, interviewee *E*, the veteran Karachi-based journalist who is also familiar with press trade unionism, was filled with hope.

"The joint statements were a groundbreaking action," she said. "These women broke the glass ceiling. This is the first time when women journalists united in this manner."

She said the gender-based attacks on women journalists and other forms of discrimination in the media will probably not end during their lifetimes, but women journalists have to keep striving and be patient because change is slow and nothing happens quickly in the world. *E* said the voice of Pakistani women journalists that was being suppressed locally was heard loud and clear even internationally when the women journalists united to issue the joint statements.

"We are fighting back now. Women journalists have understood that we cannot keep censoring things. We have to push back. These (joint statements) are the first steps and we have to use them to continue to walk. Women journalists are very brave. They can stand and do this on their own. They don't need anybody. Young women journalists stand their ground despite attacks and abuse. They are brilliant. As far as censorship and self-censorship is concerned, we are finding ways to get our voice out there and we will continue to do that," she said.

# 5 - DISCUSSION

Women journalists reported a perceived general increase in self-censorship among journalists in Pakistan. A comparison of the current study's results with the findings from a self-censorship survey conducted by Media Matters for Democracy in 2018 also shows an increase in the percentage of women journalists who self-censored their professional work and online expression.[10] These findings might be explained by looking at the shifts of the state of press freedom in Pakistan. The country has slipped down six places in the World Press Freedom Index since 2018.[11] The pressures on the Pakistani news media have expanded in the past three years to include regulatory sanctions, distribution disruptions, financial strangulation, criminal cases, and arrests, among other threats (Alam, 2019). Notable among these threats are the criminal charges brought against journalists on the basis of their online expression[12] and the temporary abductions of journalists.[13]

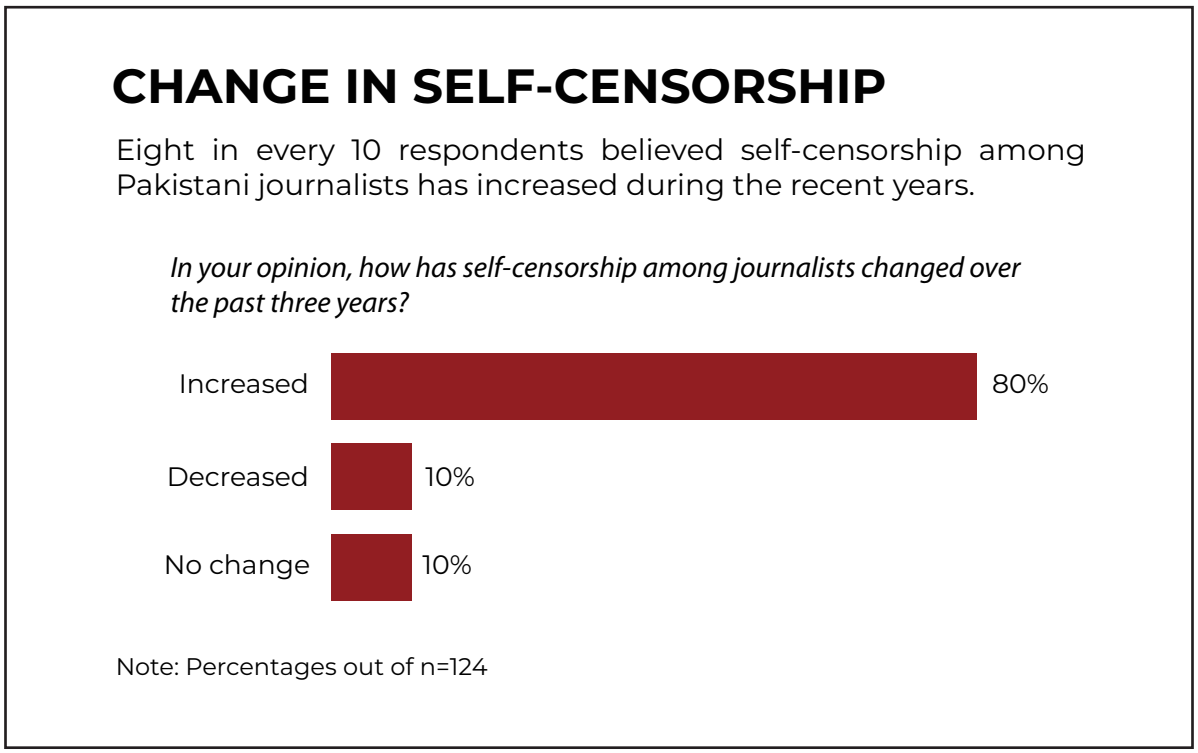



**Figure 11: Change in Self-censorship over Three Years**

10. The longitudinal comparison is not strictly statistically valid as it does not control for variation in sample size and the actual respondents. However, since the same variables were measured, it gives an idea of potential changes.
11. World Press Freedom Index 2020, 2019, and 2018 are accessible here: https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2020
12. High-profile cases include Shahzeb Jillani, a journalist who was accused of bringing the state institutions into disrepute through his political analysis, and Asad Ali Toor, a journalist who provided detailed coverage of the court proceedings related to a presidential reference against a Supreme Court judge. In both cases, the courts ruled in favour of the journalists.
13. Police inquiries in the cases of the temporary abductions of journalists Matiullah Jan and Ali Imran have not been able to provide satisfactory results.

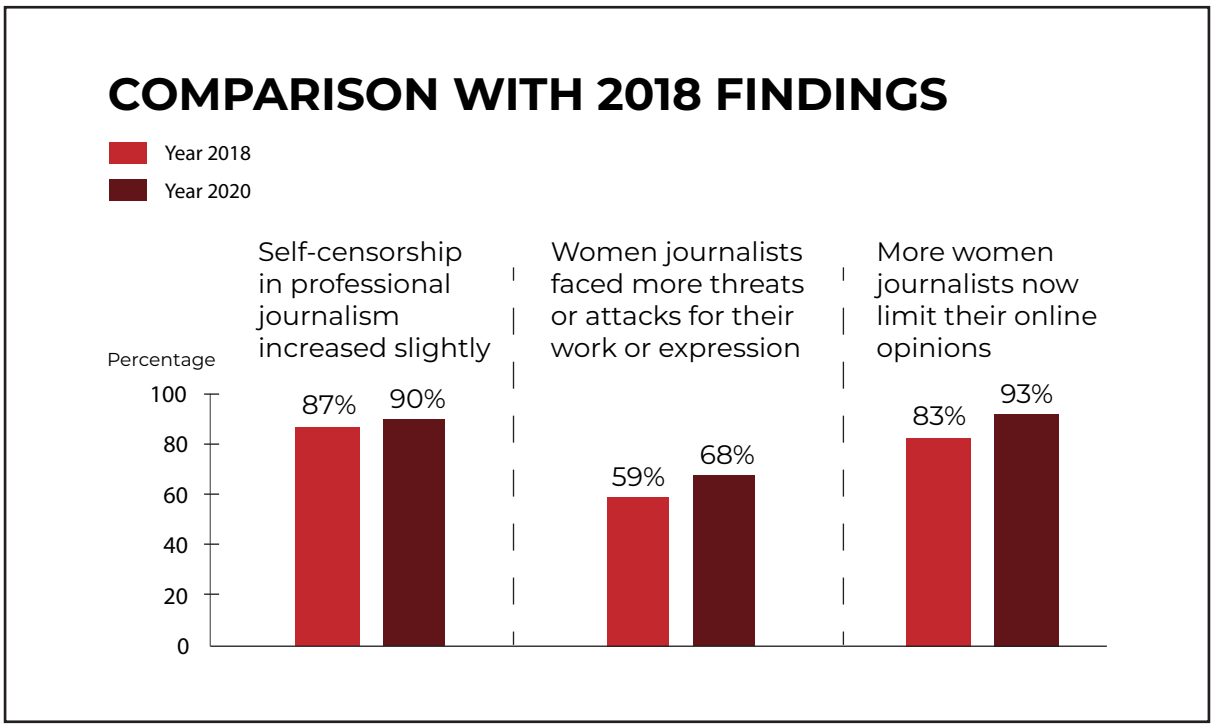



**Figure 12: Comparison with 2018 Findings on Self-censorship among Women Journalists**

One of the journalists interviewed for this study also mentioned she was extra careful about the content of her social media posts as she was wary the authorities might use the online posts of journalists to wrongfully frame them under the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA), the country's anti-cybercrimes law. The intensification of coordinated online attacks against journalists,[14] including the trolling and harassment of women journalists as narrated by the interviewees, can also be understood as a significant factor contributing to the overall perceived increase in self-censorship reflected in the survey results.

The survey results and interviewee comments about the state of self-censorship and the kinds of information and opinions that are restrained indicate that women journalists primarily view self-censorship not as a gendered phenomenon but a predicament that affects all journalists and media organisations in the country. In relation to self-censorship in their professional work and the curbs on the press, the interviewees spoke about journalists without a gender qualifier and often clarified that they meant all journalists, sometimes mentioning the journalism role or type of media (such as reporters or journalists who work in TV news) to describe their perceptions and experiences. Previous research has clearly indicated that women journalists face a highly discriminatory workplace environment based on their gender identity (Hussain, 2013; Rehmat, 2017; Sakha & Shah, 2019; Jamil, 2020). However, the responses of the interviewees indicate that purely in terms of their journalism output their primary identity might be professional rather than based on gender. The question of identity switching among the women journalists was beyond the scope of this research but it can be a line of inquiry in further research on the Pakistani women journalists community.

14. The coordinated campaign against Pakistani journalists on Twitter in July 2019 is an example: http://www.digitalrightsmonitor.pk/drm-investigates-twitter-accounts-behind-the-hashtag-arrestantipakjournalists/

On the Internet, however, it was clear that women journalists are reminded of their gender in the sexualised and abusive messages used to target them. It is online, then, that their practice of self-censorship becomes locked in a relationship with online violence. Proving causality or showing a correlation is difficult with the current data set due to the research design and the limited number of observations, but online harassment was the most frequent factor for self-censorship identified by the survey respondents and the interviewees also mentioned they had limited their online commentary to avoid trolling and abuse. This finding is consistent with previous research (Lodhi, 2018; DRF, 2019; Kamran, 2019).

The survey respondents had reported they were most likely to limit opinions and information pertaining to the military and religion in their personal and professional interactions. The survey finding is supported by the interview themes in which the respondents confirmed the existence of traditional 'red lines' for the media set by cultural forces, religious beliefs, and the security apparatus. However, the interviewees also mentioned that on social media these lines had merged with the political pressure that encourages journalists to avoid critical reporting of political interests. Self-censorship by women journalists to avoid political, military, and religious interference in their work or to protect from harassment is also supported by previous research (Lodhi, 2018; Jamil, 2020). The threats to female journalists from religious organisations and cultural practices steeped in religious values are also different compared to the threats from these same sources to male journalists because of the expectations of conformity to strict gender roles (Sakha & Shah, 2019, DRF, 2019).

The survey responses indicated that a majority of women journalists had exercised self-censorship in their professional journalism based on their organisational policies, which were mostly implied or communicated verbally by editors or news managers. The interviewees also stated that self-censorship decisions were not on the basis of some written editorial policies, rather these were often informed by a situational awareness of direct external pressures on a news organisation that evolved with time or understood in the context of cultural and religious tensions. In some cases, women journalists interviewed for the study indicated that some news organisations might have given directions to their staff to modify the tone of their coverage or the tenor of their social media posts, but they almost always distanced themselves from such organisational practices and mentioned that they had never personally experienced them. Moreover, the women journalists interviewed for the study insisted that Pakistani journalists negotiated with the limits of self-censorship on a daily basis, often putting up a resistance in order to publish or broadcast news on matters of public importance.

These points lead to at least three possibilities that might be of interest to future research on the subject of self-censorship in Pakistan, not limited to the work of women journalists. First of all, in light of the pressures on the media from powerful elites and the oligarchic nature of media ownership in the country, the self-censorship dynamics might be similar to the situation discussed by Tapsell (2010). In this scenario, ruling elites and other interest groups might exert pressure on or through media owners to get favourable coverage. These pressures might be communicated down the organisational hierarchy from the owners to the editors (or news directors), who would in turn give directions to the reporters or producers. Alam (2019) has also drawn attention to a similar situation in the Pakistani context. Similarly, journalists might learn about self-censorship by picking up signals from the style and information content of the stories that are allowed to be published or aired by the editors. Journalists might also figure out where to draw the line by learning from the examples of journalists who have been forced to quit due to their independent news reporting. The existence or prevalence of this practice in Pakistani news organisations would require further research that examines the role of news editors in how external and ownership pressures translate into self-censorship.

Secondly, if self-censorship is mostly in response to directions by editors, the conceptual critique of self-censorship by Lee (2007) becomes important in the form of this question: how much of self-censorship is a mild form of censorship in order to avoid punishments from powerful interest groups and how much of it is responsible editing done in accordance with standards of professional journalism? Moreover, as some interviewees indicated, journalists sometimes employ deliberate care in choice of words

and framing of news items on sensitive topics to ensure that matters of public interest get reported without creating political or cultural confrontation. In such instances, as Tong (2009) demonstrated in the case of Chinese newspapers, the acts of self-censorship might allow editors to increase the possibility of publication while ensuring safety of the journalists on the one hand and not abandoning the story altogether. Whether Pakistani journalists, including women journalists, agree with this characterisation or not could be the subject of further research.

Finally, the research interviewees had mentioned a 'situational awareness' that informed their decisions to self-censor. One journalist had referred to an "inbuilt" sense among journalists about what to report or not; another had mentioned that they knew before the publication of a story what kind of pressures they might face. The deliberate selection of sources and on-the-record attribution was also identified to circumvent self-censorship on sensitive topics. These strategies are reminiscent of the adekvatnost skill, discovered by Schimpfössl and Yablokov (2020) in journalists in Russia, Hungary, and Latvia, which transforms "self-censoring from something imposed by fear or coercion into something (journalists) perceive to be productive and something they practice effortlessly, without requiring any identifiable censor" (p. 30). Further research into self-censorship among Pakistani journalists from the adekvatnost frame could yield interesting findings.

It must also be noted that a majority of the survey respondents indicated they had experienced some form of threats, attacks or intimidation in relation to their work or expression. Many of the women journalists interviewed for the research highlighted the real-world repercussions of online violence in the form of risks to their physical safety and security and their mental health. In the face of these challenges, self-censorship is sometimes a natural and often a necessary response to ensure the safety and security of journalists, their colleagues, and their media organisations. The discussion of self-censorship should in no way be taken as an accusation against the journalists, a vast majority of whom honestly and diligently perform their professional duties in some of the worst circumstances for press freedom anywhere in the world.

# COCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The women journalists in Pakistan are increasingly being forced to restrain their journalism and online expression due to a host of factors, including sexualised online harassment and coordinated attacks on social media to discredit and malign their work. They are also restricted in their work and expression by religious and cultural factors that disproportionately target women journalists on the basis of gender. The factors that lead to self-censorship among women journalists also affect their physical safety and mental well-being.

In the face of these daunting challenges, Pakistani women journalists are nevertheless bravely carrying out their professional duties and have also put up a united front against online violence. Their struggle is intrinsically associated with the larger battle for freedom of expression, media independence, and access to information, and one cannot be achieved without the other. Documentation of threats and the factors that attempt to silence women journalists must be used to deliberate and strategise upon effective ways to counter these challenges and support women journalists in freely and safely fulfilling their professional responsibilities.

The study offers the following recommendations for different stakeholder groups to thwart the threats and risks that push women journalists toward coercive self-censorship.

**For women journalists:**

1. **Establish a national forum:** Women journalists who took the initiative to come up with the joint statements against online violence and gather support for the statements' demands were able to do so organically through their personal networks in the industry. However, they should consider formalising their efforts to ensure a united and sustained movement for the rights and safety of women journalists. This could be in the form of a national forum or alliance of women journalists that would provide them an opportunity to strategise to achieve common goals and mobilise more women from the news industry to join the struggle against threats that affect the professional work and personal lives of women journalists.

2. **Issue regular reminders:** Women journalists who organised and mobilised their colleagues for the two joint statements against online violence must make an effort to follow up on their demands. This will keep up the pressure on the authorities to act. Quarterly reminders that take stock of the current situation will keep the issue in the public eye and create momentum for their movement.

3. **Document the instances of online abuse and self-censorship:** Women journalists could also, wherever possible, document the sexualised and gender-based online abuse they are targeted with to discredit their work and cause reputational harm. Documentation of these attacks along with their impact in the form of self-censorship or harm to physical or psychological safety would help provide evidence for concerted advocacy against online violence and any official investigations into these attacks.

**For federal and provincial governments:**

1. **Legal protection:** The federal government should expedite the process to introduce the journalists' safety bill in the legislature and ensure that this draft bill includes appropriate actions to counter the digital threats to women journalists, including efficient investigations into incidents of digital violence.

2. **Effective law enforcement:** The federal government should enhance the human resource and gender sensitivity capacity of the Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to facilitate the registration and follow-up of cases of digital violence against women, including women journalists, in an efficient and effective manner.

3. **Accountability:** The federal and provincial governments should immediately investigate all government officials accused of inciting digital violence against women journalists, make the results of these investigations public, and take appropriate punitive action against officials found guilty.

**For political parties:**

1. **Clean house:** The political parties cannot hide any longer behind the excuse that their official social media teams are not involved in coordinated campaigns against women journalists on social media. They must immediately ask their party leaders, party workers, official social media teams as well as their supporters and followers to refrain from launching online attacks against women. The political parties should also hold internal investigations to hold to account any of their workers or supporters involved in running abusive online attacks against women journalists.

2. **Educate supporters about press freedom:** The antagonism displayed by many of the leading political parties toward the mainstream media has a significant impact on the behaviour of their supporters. Political party leaders should refrain from throwing around the term 'fake news', and instead educate their followers about the importance of freedom of expression and press freedom in a functional democracy.

**For media organisations:**

1. **End workplace discrimination:** Media organisations must begin by making their newsrooms safe and non-discriminatory places for women journalists. Women are equal members of the journalism community in Pakistan and should be treated as such. Equal wages, recognition of work, and an environment free from sexual harassment should be guaranteed by all local news organisations.

2. **Educate and sensitise male journalists:** While some men journalists endorsed the joint statements issued by the women journalists, far too often women say that men in the news industry fail to understand the gender-based online threats women are targeted with and instead tell women journalists to take it easy. This patronising behaviour trivialises the experiences of women journalists and must be corrected by providing gender sensitivity training to male journalists so they can empathise and add their voices to amplify the demands of women journalists.

**For representative associations of journalists:**

1. **Ensure equal representation:** The Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists (PFUJ) lent its support to the protests of women journalists against coordinated online abuse. However, the PFUJ and other trade unions that represent journalists must ensure that women get equal chances to participate in the decision-making units of these associations. This would ensure that the challenges faced by women journalists are highlighted in the trade union advocacy for journalists' rights.

2. **Set up a women-led special task force:** Apart from the measures to ensure long-term women participation in the journalist unions, the PFUJ should create a special national task force of women journalists in light of the joint statements issued by journalists against coordinated and abusive online attacks against them. The task force could follow up with the government and political parties on the demands issued in the statement and sustain the momentum needed to ensure the demands are met. The task force should be led by women journalists, and its members should include prominent women journalists from all over the country. It could liaise with the federal

executive committee of the PFUJ to make sure that the task force's messages are included in all PFUJ declarations on press freedom and journalists' safety in the country.

**For media development organisations and press freedom advocates:**

1. **Provide digital safety training:** Since the leading threat of self-censorship among women journalists is from online harassment, media development organisations should offer ample opportunities to women journalists for digital safety training. Such training sessions should familiarise women journalists with the tools to secure their social media accounts and digital communication as well as to minimise the harm to their physical and psychological well-being from the online hate campaigns and attacks launched against them.

2. **Promote collaborative journalism:** Women journalists identified information sharing as a preferred strategy to counter self-censorship. Media development organisations should invest in collaborative journalism opportunities for women journalists in Pakistan where a number of journalists or news organisations publish a joint investigation or a series of stories simultaneously to circumvent self-censorship and reduce the threats against any individual journalist.

3. **Support a national alliance of women journalists:** If Pakistani women journalists take the initiative to establish a national alliance or association of women journalists, press freedom advocates and media development organisations should provide technical, financial, and logistical support to such an alliance to assist the women journalists in countering self-censorship and gender-based threats to their work in their newsrooms and on the Internet.

4. **Urge social media networks for better enforcement:** In countering the online threats that encourage self-censorship among women journalists, the women have found the response of global social media networks lacking, as they often allow abusive troll accounts to operate or enforcement action is delayed. Press freedom advocates and digital rights defenders should put pressure on social media companies, especially Twitter where the bulk of the coordinated online abuse was noticed, to increase their efficiency and effectiveness in responding to the reported abuse by Pakistani women journalists. The activists should also remind the social media platforms to improve their local-language content moderation in Pakistan to ensure the safety of women, including women journalists, from sexualised abuse and misogynist attacks.

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# AANEXURE A SURVEY QUESTIONNAIRE

**Section 1: Respondent Details**
All responses and personal information will be kept anonymous.

City: _____

Gender:
Female
Male
Other:_____

Age:
Less than 21 years
21-30 years
31-40 years
41-50 years
51 years and above

Which type of media do you work for primarily?
Print
Television
Radio
Online

What is the nature of your work?
Reporting
Editing
Production
Other:_____

How would you describe the news organisation you are affiliated with?
National news outlet
Local or regional media outlet
International media outlet
I work as a freelance journalist

Journalism work experience
Less than 2 years
2 to 5 years
6 to 10 years
More than 10 years

What is the primary language of your work?
Urdu
English
Regional language

**Definition of Self-censorship**
For this survey, self censorship is defined as the act of exercising control and restraint over one's speech and expression in personal or professional settings either to avoid any kind of perceived threat, including harassment, criticism, and persecution, or to gain some perceived benefit, including job security, financial gain, and access to privileged information.

**Section 2: Professional Journalism Work**
The following questions are related to your work as a professional journalist.

1. Do you think it is possible to practise journalism in Pakistan without committing self-censorship?
Yes
No

2. In your opinion, how has self-censorship among journalists changed over the last three (3) years?
Self-censorship has increased
Self-censorship has decreased
No change

3. Have you ever engaged in self-censorship in your journalism work?
Yes
No

4. How often do you practise self-censorship in your journalism work?
Always
Often
Sometimes
Rarely
Never

5. In which aspect of your journalism work are you most likely to self-censor?
Reporting
Writing or editing
Sharing your own published news items on social media
Sharing news items published by other journalists or media outlets on social media

6. Do you think your journalist colleagues engage in self-censorship?
Yes
No
Maybe

7. Do the news organisation(s) you work for as an employee or freelancer have an editorial policy that prevents you from reporting or publishing about certain topics?
Yes, there is a written policy
Yes, but the policy is implied or verbally communicated
No
I don't know

8. How do you determine which issues you should self-censor in your journalism work from time to time?
I decide based on my own perception
I decide based on directions from the editors or management at my news organisation
I decide based on the advice of my journalist colleagues
I decide based on the advice or warnings given by my sources

9. Have you self-censored your journalism work in the past due to any of the following reasons:
Due to threats of physical harm to you or your family Y N
Due to threats of physical harm to your colleagues Y N
Due to threats of physical harm to your sources Y N
Due to fear of online harassment Y N
Due to fear of legal action or State persecution Y N
Due to psychological stress Y N
Due to the sensitive nature of information Y N
Due to your news organisation's policy Y N
Due to pressure or backlash from family Y N
To safeguard national interest Y N
To protect Pakistan's image Y N

10. In your professional interactions, which kind of information are you likely to self-censor?
Information about the government
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Information about political parties
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Information about the judiciary
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Information about the military
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely

Information about militancy or terrorism
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Information about religion
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Information about private companies
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Information about human rights violations
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely

**Section 3: Personal expression**
The following questions are related to the expression of your personal opinions in offline settings and on social media.

11. Do you self-censor your personal opinions on the Internet?
Yes
No

12. How often do you self-censor your personal opinions on the following platforms
Facebook Timeline Always (A) Often (O) Sometimes (S) Rarely (R) Never (N) Not Applicable (NA)
Facebook Groups and Pages A O S R N NA
Twitter A O S R N NA
Blogs and websites A O S R N NA
WhatsApp Groups A O S R N NA

13. Do you self-censor your personal opinions in offline settings?
Yes
No

14. How often do you self-censor your personal opinions in the following situations
In discussions with family and friends A O S R N

In discussions with colleagues A O S R N
In interactions with acquaintances A O S R N
In interactions with strangers A O S R N
In public gatherings A O S R N

15. Have you self-censored your personal opinions in the past due to any of the following reasons:
Due to cultural sensitivity Y N
Due to political sensitivity Y N
Due to religious sensitivity Y N
Due to fear of backlash from family, friends or community Y N
Due to fear of backlash from members of the public Y N
To avoid public disagreement or debate Y N

16. In your personal interactions, which kind of opinions are you likely to self-censor
Opinions about the government
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Opinions about political parties
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Opinions about the judiciary
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Opinions about the military
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Opinions about militancy or terrorism
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Opinions about religion
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Opinions about private companies
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely
Opinions about human rights violations
Not likely Somewhat likely Highly likely

17. Do you consider your personal opinions to be a part of your journalism work?
Yes
No

**Section 4: Impact and Mitigation**
How does self-censorship and the factors that lead to self-censorship affect your work as a journalist?

18. Have you ever been attacked, threatened, or harassed in any way for your journalism or your personal expression?
Yes
No

19. In your opinion, what are the main factors that force Pakistani women journalists to practise self-censorship in their work? (Tick all that apply)
Physical threats or attacks
Online harassment and trolling
Financial insecurity
Legal pressures
Other:_____

20. In your opinion, are women journalists who do not self-censor more likely to be the target of online violence?

Yes
No

21. If you engage in self-censorship, do you think it prevents you from reporting or publishing on issues that you want to work on?
Yes, it prevents me from reporting on important issues.
No, my work is not affected.
I don't self censor.

22. If you engage in self-censorship, do you think you are unable to completely fulfil your responsibilities as a journalist?
Yes, I am unable to fulfil my responsibilities completely.
No, I am still able to fulfil my responsibilities completely.
I don't self-censor.

23. Which of these strategies would you consider using to avoid self-censorship?
Tick all that apply or suggest your own in the Other option.
Sharing information with other journalists
Removing your byline
Publishing under a pen name
Setting up an anonymous social media account or page
Other:_____

24. Do you think better knowledge of digital safety techniques will help you express yourself more freely on social media?
Yes
No
Maybe

# AANEXURE B INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

The following questionnaire was used for the semi-structured interviews.

How have you experienced or heard about self-censorship among Pakistani women journalists? Can you tell me something about self-censorship in your own professional journalism work?

What do you think are the major factors that lead to self-censorship among women journalists? Do you think there are certain specific topics or issues that journalists are more likely to self-censor in their work and personal opinions?

How do you think self-censorship has changed over time, especially during the past few years?

Have you noticed any strategies of coping mechanisms to avoid self-censorship in your own work or the work of other women journalists?

## About MMFD:

Media Matters for Democracy works to defend the freedom of expression, media, Internet, and communications in Pakistan. The main premise of our work is to push for a truly independent and inclusive media and cyberspace where the citizens in general, and journalists in specific, can exercise their fundamental rights and professional duties safely and without the fear of persecution or physical harm.

We undertake various initiatives including but not limited to training, policy research, advocacy, movement building and strategic litigation to further our organizational goals. We also work on acceptance and integration of digital media and journalism technologies and towards creating sustainable 'media-tech' initiatives in the country.

MMfD recognises diversity and inclusion as a core value of democracy and thus all our programs have a strong focus on fostering values and skills that enable and empower women, minority communities, and other marginalized groups.