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## **Battling sexism: struggles of being a Pakistani women sports journalist**

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# **BATTLING SEXISM: STRUGGLES OF BEING A PAKISTANI WOMEN SPORTS JOURNALIST**

This Capstone Project is submitted to the Faculty of Business Administration as partial fulfillment Masters of Science in Journalism degree

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Institute of Business Administration (IBA), Karachi, Pakistan

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Every female sports journalist in Pakistan is regarded as a pioneer in the field in one way or another. Afia Salam - first ever female cricket writer, Fareshteh Aslam – first ever female sports journalist, Leena Aziz – first female TV cricket commentator, Marina Iqbal – first female cricketer commentator, Zainab Abbas – first female ICC presenter and so on. The list of the firsts started from the 80s and seems never-ending.

Interestingly, they all claim of being the only woman sports journalist in the press boxes most of the times they were reporting. And if you ask them what has changed over the years, they all reply: “more women joining the field.”

I covered the first of the two Test matches between Pakistan and South Africa in Karachi earlier this year at National Stadium and guess what? I was also the only woman in the press box the first day. Seems like things have not really changed that much.

As the French writer Jean-Baptiste Alphonse Karr writes, “plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose” (the more things change, the more they stay the same).

## **Male-dominated field**

Sports journalism, like every other profession in the country, remains a highly male dominated field. While the numbers of female sports journalists may have increased over all these years, the ratio remains the same. According to a [report](#) by Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists, women constitute less than five percent of all journalists in Pakistan.

“I think 95 percent of it is men and I mean it is hard for me to give a number or percentage but of course, it’s a male dominated genre,” said Fatima Saleem, 36, sports reporter and anchor at Geo News. “Women are just very, very few, I’m sure you can count us on all ten fingers.”

Similarly, Fareshteh Aslam, former sports journalist adds, “Often in a press box of about 40 writers, I would be the only woman.” The 57-year-old, who started her career in 1987 at The Star – Dawn Media Group’s evening newspaper, said that while it was disconcerting in the beginning, she later got used to it.

“It is just in the press boxes there were not enough representation,” she said. “I was travelling the world; in Australia there were a lot more females, either correspondents or photographers or one thing or the other but I think in Pakistan press boxes very few women were coming there.”

Fast forward 28 years, Zainab Abbas – one of the country’s most known sports presenters, had much of the same observation. “It is completely male dominated. Now maybe it is changing.

Now we see more women commentators but when I started, I did not know anyone,” said the 33-year-old, who started her journalism career with a sports show “Cricket Dewangi” for Dunya News in 2015.

“Especially in broadcast, when I was covering the first PSL [Pakistan Super League] season or all those international series, I was the only woman working in the box, talking about crew members and talking about people working behind the scenes. It was obviously challenging in the beginning, especially when I was in Dunya TV; you work in a newsroom, you see only men around you, you only see women that you can count on your fingertips, so, it was a cultural shock for me,” Abbas, who had spent eight years in England, added.

Adnan Rehmat, 53, who is the program manager for a media development NGO - International Media Support - in Islamabad, believes the reason for the gender disparity in media is partly structural and partly social. “Journalism is a 24-hour industry; the media never sleeps. During the day, events happen, they unfold and information is gathered and analyzed by the evening. And it is only until late at night that they are reported,” he said.

“So, that's the time when you know, they (women) have to be up there in the front lines if they want to make a name. And that's when I think at a social level that either people in their house don't allow them to work and those who do, ask several questions like ‘what kind of work? What is the time of work? What are the working conditions?’ and then it gets progressively worse.

“And so women get left out because of social taboos. It is not because they don't want to do it; it is because they are not allowed to do it. And that is also part of the reason why there not as many women as there should be.” (Rehmat, 2017)



## **Non-seriousness**

Saleem, who has been in the field for the last 14 years, however, believes one of the reasons for the gender difference is because most women lack genuine commitment for the sports genre.

“A lot of women think it is a very non-serious job so you know they will first start with sports and then they will try to get to the other beats,” she said. “It is not easy; it is a full time job, it is a lot of responsibility, it is a lot of hard work that you have to do. It is very difficult to penetrate in a male dominated field so to last in that is not easy.”

Rishad Mahmood, 58, sports editor at Dawn shared similar views saying most women journalists who take the sports beat are not serious about it. “It is very important to have passion for journalism otherwise you cannot last in it,” he said. “We had a woman working with us in The News launching team. She was a known cricket writer and toured with the Pakistan cricket team 17/18 times and had become a very prominent journalist.

“But she was there only for her love for cricket; she knew nothing about other sports. Back then likes of Imran Khan and Javed Miandad were very famous and she was their fan, so, when cricket started getting banned in Pakistan, she switched to another field.”

## Gender stereotyping

The fan-girl impression that most men have regarding female journalists in sports media is common. Natasha Raheel, sports reporter at The Express Tribune, said that while she sometimes found it funny, it was nonetheless alarming.

“I think the first impression athletes have when you call them is they think you are a fan-girl. I then tell them I’m not a fan-girl,” the 34-year-old said.

“I thought that was really funny but at the same time really disturbing like everybody who calls you doesn’t have to be a fan-girl. I had called this cricketer, a very well-known one, and he had picked up the phone and he was like ‘no, I don’t have time now, I don’t talk like this you must be a fan and all,’ and I’m like ‘let me say it again I’m from Express Tribune’ and I thought that should have been enough for him to understand or register that everybody is not a fan.”

The Karachi-based journalist added that such stereotypes are associated with women due to the gender bias which is quite prevalent in Pakistan. “When people see a woman covering sports they think like ‘she is a woman, she wouldn’t stick around for too long, she is probably a fan-girl, she is probably supporting a team or a player or whatever for X amount of time and then she is going to move on to something else so that is the kind of bias I think that still exists,” she said.

Afia Salam, 64, widely acknowledged as the first female cricket writer in Pakistan, said that people would get surprised after learning she is a woman. “Back then there were no pictures of writers on articles and my name was not a very common one so people did not really know who was writing these articles,” she said.

“The very first time I went to a cricket event, there was a very famous cricket personality who was taken aback after I was introduced to him. He said, ‘oh so you’re Afia Salam? But you write really well’ so that ‘but’ actually indicated they didn’t expect a woman to be writing on the game.”

The Office of United Nations of Human Commissioner in Human Rights (OHCHR) terms gender stereotype as a generalized view or pre-conception about attributes and roles that are ought to be possessed and performed by women and men (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2013).

According to a report by the women’s right organization (Aurat Foundation, 2016), gender stereotyping is vehemently present in the country despite United Nations’ framework which prohibits undermining fundamental freedoms and human rights. Countries have obligations to

eliminate discrimination against women and men in all areas of their lives.

## **Gender discrimination**

Rehmat interviewed multiple women journalists for his book - Threats, Harassment and Rejection- published in 2017 by Freedom Network, a civil liberties group in Pakistan working for freedom of expression. In the study, which was based on work experiences of women in media industry, around 84 percent of women said they were discriminated based on gender.

Female sports journalists experience gender discrimination not only from their male counterparts but also from the audience, who many claim, have a tough time taking them seriously. “When a woman comes on television and talks about sports, men who are watching, they don’t take you serious,” Saleem said.

“‘What does she know?’ that was the first challenge I faced. A lot of people watching expect you to be good looking, they expect you to say a random thing or two and that’s it. The moment you try to do more, you try to show your potential, they get offended. They start questioning you like ‘Has she played any cricket? What does she know? How can she talk about it?’ So I think the first challenge I faced was men accepting me talking about sports.”

## Unsupportive male colleagues

Saleem added how she did not feel welcome when she first joined the field. “I feel a lot of my male counterparts did not like a woman coming in and covering a game. When I used to walk in a press conference or go to a media room I would see men making faces like ‘what is she doing here?’ They used to think that if they were covering the event then what was I doing there?” she said, adding most of them were afraid she would take all the limelight being a girl.

“This was also a huge challenge for me because I felt the men were so insecure. I’m not in competition with them. All I’m asking is that I want to be in the same room as you, I want to rub shoulders with you and do my own thing and you do your own thing.”

Likewise, Raheel, while referring to her male counterparts, said that most of them pretend to be progressive but have an ingrained misogynistic mindset. “I take this for my fellows as well, that they think ‘she is a woman, what does she know, we can do better stories than her ‘only by virtue of being men,’” she said.

“And it’s in the attitude, they wouldn’t admit to it if you ask them directly, it’s in the attitude – you can tell the misogyny- that they think that they would able to do better stories on sports just by virtue of being men. And these men they want to be known as very progressive too, so, that is really sad. It’s the mindset that you have to really deal with.”

The ET reporter revealed she felt harassed by a certain type of male sports journalists who made her uncomfortable in a WhatsApp group by cracking inappropriate jokes.

“They would make really crappy jokes,” she said about the WhatsApp group. “They would make lots of nude jokes in front of me and I would be like what am I supposed to say what am I supposed to do?”

“It was only when I retaliated and said what the \*expletive\* is wrong with you all and left that group they figured that was something really horrible but before they were like as if it was a very normal thing for them. And what bothers me is that people like these also cover women athletes so then I think that they would also objectify them,’ she added.

## Workplace harassment

Women in sports media are also subject to inappropriate advances by male athletes while on the job. The 2016 incident in which West Indian cricketer Chris Gayle hit on Australian sportscaster Mel McLaughlin in a live interview during a Big Bash match revealed the wide-scale existence of the problem that otherwise gets unnoticed if it occurs behind closed doors (Donoughue, 2016).

“I was interviewing this cricketer and I was just very nice to him because I was of course interviewing him and we were staying at a hotel and somehow he called me in my room and asked me if I will come downstairs and have coffee with him,” said Saleem.

“I was like no just because I’m being nice to you doesn’t mean I want to have coffee with you. But you know I know how to give a shut up call and no offense was taken but I was a bit scared because how can that person know which room I was staying in? How did he make that call? It was very weird for me because I was alone.

“This is something we deal with and you know it is entirely up to you how you react. In start you get scared but we learn to deal with all of this, you become smarter, you know how to get out of that situation.”

In Rehmat’s study for Freedom Network, around 62 percent of women journalists in Pakistan claimed they were sexually harassed. Raheel narrated how while on assignment covering an event she saw a man masturbating while watching her.

“There was a football match in Karachi during a Ramzan tournament and I was the only woman covering the event. So there was a guy who was literally touching himself down there while looking at me, and I’m like if I call him out now he’ll get beaten and he’ll get beaten bad, so, I just screamed at him like ‘bhai do it in your home,’ With time you learn to deal better with these things,” she said.

To ensure a safe working environment, the Pakistan parliament enacted the Protection against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act ( Pakistan Parliament, 2010), which prohibits any form of sexually demeaning attitude towards women or compulsion to work in an environment that is hostile, offensive and intimidating. The legislation made it obligatory for all employers to form inquiry committees to investigate claims of sexual harassment.

However, Mahmood, who is the member of Dawn’s sexual harassment committee, said he found women “make a mountain out of a molehill” in most cases he has presided over. “We have dealt with 3/4 cases of sexual harassment so far and of all those cases, only one was genuine and

action was taken against the man who harassed the woman. But otherwise, the other three cases were more like making mountains of molehills,” he said.

““Why does this person come to office just when I reach? ’Why do they stare?’ these are the things they reported. We clearly tell those complainants that we will not go by your statement only; we have to probe this matter thoroughly.

“And we did that but found that these women also had many problems. They would exaggerate little things. While those matters were sorted out in two cases, women should also keep their approach open-minded and bold. I don’t want to generalize but if you are a tough person and ready to face life only then you can advance in this field.”

Rehmat had a different view. As someone who has at least 30 years of experience in the media field and 15 specifically in media development, he said it was “problematic” for people with decision-making powers to believe in stereotypes.

“It takes a great deal of courage for any woman in Pakistan, to stand up and make an accusation. There has to be a foundation there somewhere, so, it is very troubling when people in decision-making positions think that a lot of this is exaggerated,” he said.

“Yes, the bar for evidence, the bar for proof is really high but there are no receipts for this kind of thing. When harassment is taking place, you're not recording it, necessarily. So how do you prove it? I think there needs to be greater sensitization around why it's important to have systems in place within institutions.

“And those systems need to be sensitive to the needs of women who work there or even if they don't work there. Even if it’s a male-only environment, they need to be told that these are problems and they happen. They need to be trained in being gender sensitive, not just in you know how things happen to everyone,” adding that while working conditions may vary slightly across different organizations, the fundamental context remains the same.

## Social media harassment

With the rising digitalization of the media, online abuse directed at female media practitioners has also increased. In a global survey by UNESCO and International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) in late 2020 (Posetti, Aboulez, Bontcheva, Harrison, & Waisbord, 2020), 73% of female journalists, who participated in the study, revealed they were being subjected to online harassment.

Given its large-scale presence in the country, many leading Pakistani female journalists launched a campaign against online abuse in August, 2020. They issued a joint statement (Vered, 2020), signed by about 165 journalists and organizations, asking the federal government to take action against online trolls.

“A lot of people on social media used to body shame me. ‘You’ve gotten fat,’ ‘Makeup is looking bad,’ ‘you look like a witch,’ ‘what is she wearing,’ they would say,” said Saleem while sharing her experience of online harassment.

“I’m a woman and I’m not here to model. I am a mother now, sometimes I gain weight, and sometimes I look skinny. It is okay. If you don’t like my anchoring or what I say, that’s fine but I’ve been body-shamed into a level that is heartbreaking. It is something I used to cry about a lot,” adding that as one gets older, they become wiser and realize that it doesn’t matter what people say about their body.

Similarly, Raheel, who was representing Pakistan in the 2018 Ballon d’Or voting, generally regarded as one of the most prestigious individual award for football players, was victim of a violent social media attack after she decided not to vote for fan-favorite Cristiano Ronaldo because of rape allegations against the player.

“My decision to not vote for Cristiano did not sit well with his fans,” she said. “Natasha Raheel, Resign!” they said on Twitter, adding ‘you belong in the kitchen.’ I mean I do, but you also belong in the kitchen, cooking is a life skill. There were comments and chats I received like ‘you’re the worst journalist’ which I thought was such a humility exercise for me every day like if I would think good about myself I could always see those comments,” she said with a laugh.

Abbas, anyhow, felt that learning to deal with it was the way forward. “If you are getting into a field which involves public and you become a public figure then it becomes something you have to learn to deal with; there is no excuse around it,” she said, adding that the people who sit behind keyboard can write anything to you and say what they have to because they have that “license” and “liberty.”



“Thankfully I don’t read every single comment that I get which kind of helps me because social media is now such a big thing and it has its pros and cons but as long as you don’t take it seriously, that’s the only way you can really survive. I still get my share of nasty comments, but if like 70-80 percent people are praising you and there are few trolls out there then you can certainly live with it learn to live with it,” said the famous broadcaster who has over two million followers on Twitter.

A 2019 study titled “Fostering Open Spaces in Pakistan” by Ramsha Jahangir – a journalist specializing in online regulation and digital rights – for Digital Rights Foundation (DRF) surveyed about 60 women journalists and information practitioners. The study (Jahangir, 2019) found that about 55 percent had been subject to online abuse and harassment while 91 percent said the abuse is gendered and its nature is rarely professional and mostly personal.

Majority of the respondents described the abuse as “slurs, slut shaming, fat shaming, theft of photos, spamming with pornographic images, stalking” among other forms of harassment.

Despite such a large number of journalists facing harassment, only 14.2 percent reached out for help. Around 61.7 percent women said they don’t trust Federal Investigation Agency (FIA) to help while 26.7 percent said that they’ll report it but don’t trust the agency.

Rehmat, who has extensive experience in developing strategies for Pakistan media spectrum to strengthen professionalism, believes that it is not just women who don’t trust the FIA but men also have their concerns because it is a government institution. “FIA’s basic role is enforcement of law, and enforcement you know is all about using force, so, they are really not well placed to defend rights,” he said.

Explaining people’s distrust in the organization, the scholar added, “Number one, it’s an issue of culture. What happens is there is this culture of officialdom in bureaucracies and there is this culture of inertia. So I’m not surprised that women don’t trust FIA, or, for that matter, any other government organization to address their concerns.

“Number two, I think the government itself is a perpetrator of crimes against women. And why I say that is because government has laws that prevent freedom of expression. The current government has dramatically increased the use of the PECA law to crackdown on dissent. It was supposed to end harassment and crime. But it has been increasingly used against both men and women journalists, to stop them from exercising their freedom of expression. So, I’m not surprised to know they don’t have any confidence in them because they’re part of the problem.

They're not part of the solution in the current system that is in place.”

## **Social barriers**

Salam recalled how the main challenge she faced being a woman in the sports media was the cultural barrier of mixing around in an exclusively male domain. “My male colleagues would be able to strike up conversations with players, meet them at hotels, or go to their place which was something I could not do,” she said, adding the best of the inside stories would come out from the dressing room where only male journalists would go.

Likewise, Aslam revealed her share of similar misery. “Everybody was a buddy to each other, I could never be a buddy to anyone,” said the now Country Head at Golin Pakistan. “I had to always just do my work and go home. After a while I was like that s not how it should be but that’s the way it was.”

She mentioned how back then there were no female toilets in the Pakistani press boxes of cricket stadiums. “That was always a real, real worry because we had to stay there from 9am till evening to file the stories and then go home,” she said.

## Objectification

Along with all these challenges, women in sports broadcast media are also pressurized to look a certain way while doing their job. Sexual objectification of women in media is not something uncommon.

Jolene Nacapuy, Sports Editor at La Verne University writes that women journalists struggle to make a name in the sports journalism world without being sexualized and objectified.

She mentions how one of the most famous sports reporters, Erin Andrews, has been labeled as the “sideline Barbie” or “sideline princess.” She also highlighted (Nacapuy, 2016) how Men’s Fitness magazine and Bleacher Report often share articles including slideshows like the “50 hottest female sports broadcasters,” “20 sexiest sports reporters.”

“I feel the objectification is around the world because I was in United States in 2013 and I worked with ESPN for a while and they (female broadcasters) felt the same,” said Saleem. “They felt they were more objectified as they were pressurized to look a certain way like a supermodel. Maybe wear more revealing clothes or look sexier because women in sports should look sexy because men watch it.

“I think that a male journalist can just wear his Adidas T-shirt and sit and talk about sport and I swear to you that nobody would say a word but God forbid if a Pakistani woman journalist wears a small shirt or pants, a lot of comments are like ‘what the hell is she wearing? Why is she wearing that? This is Islamic state’ so you know here it is very complicated.”

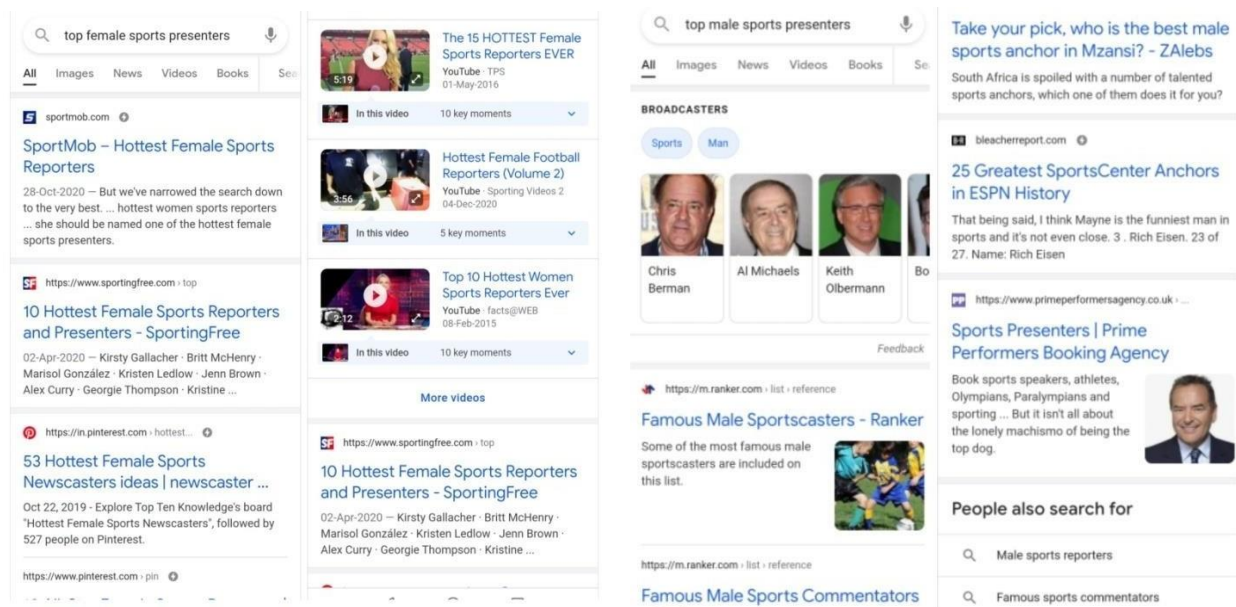
Meanwhile, Aslam believed the problem existed in every profession. “I think women everywhere are objectified. That is every woman at work; a woman prime minister is objectified, a woman newscaster is objectified. It is just part of the job, we have to acknowledge it and move on,” she said.

Abbas, who was the first official female Pakistani presenter for International Cricket Council during Cricket World Cup 2019, said that, although, women are objectified in every field, the reason it is more visible in broadcast media is because they appear on screen. “The general perception at least when I came was that girls or women really don’t add any real substance or value to conversation which revolves around cricket. They are merely there to add colour and glamour to screen,” she said.

The Lahore-born TV host added while it is important to look presentable, one’s appearance should not be their primary concern. “Your main thing is not to look like a certain way or wearing

makeup or getting your hair done, and appearing on screen a certain way; that is a requirement for television purposes but it is not something that is going to help you grow or help you sustain yourself in this field,” Abbas said, adding it is the person’s knowledge, hard work, honesty and commitment towards their work that takes them forward.

To understand the gravity of the objectification women sports anchors face, let’s do a simple search exercise. If you simply type, ‘top female sports presenters’ in Google, of the eight articles that show up on page one; five are titled “hottest female/women sports reporter/presenter.” Meanwhile, if you search “top male sports presenters” not one article of the first eight will include these words.



In order to find evidence of women objectification, a research titled “Elevator Eyes” (Cummins, Glenn, Ortiz, & Rankine, 2019), was conducted to measure the distribution of audience’s visual attention on male and female sports reporters.

The experiment tracked the eye movement of viewers to measure how much attention they allocated to male and female reporters’ bodies versus their faces, as well as differences in perceived credibility as a function of reporter gender. Results revealed a greater ratio of time on female reporters’ bodies to their faces relative to male reporters. This effect was most evident among viewers with reduced interest in sports.

## Gender pay-gap

According to the Global Wage Report 2018-2019 (International Labour Organization (ILO), 2018), Pakistan has the highest overall hourly average gender pay gap of the 73 countries for which comparable data was collected. In particular, the gender pay gap for Pakistan was identified to be 34 per cent, which is more than double the global average.

Addressing the pervasive income inequality present in Pakistan, Saleem admitted that she, too, is a victim. “I believe women get paid less than their male counterparts for doing the exact same job. I feel like if a senior male sports journalist is asked to cover an event, he will probably get offered like 2 lakhs but to me they’ll offer around 50,000. However, I think things are changing now and women get paid better but not when I had started,” she said.

Salam, who now works in the development sector, said that women in general are not given fair dues. “There is that misogynistic outlook that if you’re woman, whatever you are getting is pocket money they will ask, ‘why do you want an increment?’” she said, adding she was unaware of any gender-based pay-gap then as she never asked her colleagues about their earnings.

Meanwhile, Rehmat also agreed that it was general practice for women to get lower salaries.

“I would be really surprised to know if women are getting equal pay. You’ll always see women get hired for lower positions for lesser pay. Even for the talk show hosts that we have are getting less than half the pay or even a quarter of pay of what their male counterparts are getting. And I’m talking about some of the better mainstream programs,” he said.

“This is not just a journalism issue, the issue of women’s percentage in the labor force in the country, has a massive imbalance. The issue of wage equality, it’s a massive imbalance, the issue of access to jobs and so, it’s a recurring challenge.”

The media scholar added the reason such pay-gaps exist is because the employer knows they can get away with it. “It is an exploitation issue. Women are not getting jobs, and so they’re willing to get hired for less because they need the jobs. Women are less likely to waste their time, they work hard, and they are ready to, you know, get less. That’s why this exists,” he said.

However, Raheel, who said that she deserved a lot more than what she was getting paid, did not admit to facing any sort of gender-based discrimination in her salary. While she agreed that journalism was not a financially rewarding job, she pointed out that there are times men get paid less, too.

“I do know a lot of Urdu journalists, who are men and who work way harder than me, and they

get paid less,” she said.

Mahmood, section head at Dawn, said there is a set scale through which salary packages are designed. “Entry level sub-editors and reporters get a similar package of around 35,000 regardless of their gender,” he said, adding the amount is even lesser at The News where he worked as a sub-editor in 1991.

The senior sports editor, while agreeing women were sometimes discriminated financially, said it cannot be generalized. “I know three/four women journalists who are working with me and are getting paid triple of what I am but obviously they get that based on their experience and competence,” he said.

## **Key to survival**

For women to survive in such a male-dominating field, it is vital to stay patient and persistent. “It is so important to have a thick skin in this field because there will be a lot of sexist jokes, uncomfortable moments because you’re with men all the time,” Saleem said. “They will say something mean or comment on your body but this is part of your everyday life. So you must develop a thick skin and learn how to respond back.

“Earlier I used to cry a lot, every day I wanted to quit, I would come home and cry to my mom that I want to quit. But you know I realized I’m not going to let people put me down or make me quit. I aint gonna quit!”



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