

Exploring the Internal and External Attributes of Rising Fear: A Study of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's Women Journalists

Abstract: *The objective of this study is to explore the factors behind fear factors that are compelling women journalists to go for self-censorship. This study documents the concept of self-censorship adopted largely by women journalists in Pakistan. The idea behind doing so is to safeguard themselves in various situations, particularly in times of distress and serious matters from pressure groups and threatening bodies. The study at hand is qualitative in nature where in-depth interviews were done. Seven women journalists from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa – Pakistan, were interviewed with an experience of 10 years at least in the field of journalism and survived the terror attacks while providing their dedication to the field of journalism. Respondents of the study were selected through purposive sampling, and thematic analysis was acquired to generate meanings from the data collected. The results show that fear has different variables that affect everyone differently. The greater the fear triggering women journalists, the greater will be the sense of self-censorship adopted.*

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Key Words: Self-censorship, Fear, Women Journalists, Pressure Groups

Introduction

Self-censorship is a term used to define a conscious choice of withholding one's action ([Williams, 2002](#)) or remaining silent to protect oneself from any kind of social harm and torture ([Shanehchiyan, 2019](#)). It is observed that the whole world, but more specifically Pakistani society, because of its cultural norms and traditions, has made it a little more difficult for women to step into their professional lives by

shrivelling the area in which they grow. Cadsby et al. (2013) suggested that individuals' actions are governed by several different identities like society, peer group, family, status, locality, institutes, gender, occupation, and race, where norms and values play a huge part in constructing their comfort zones. In addition, women upholding their position in journalism with male dominance is quite challenging.

Antonijevic (2015) stated that women who believe in their capabilities accept societal

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challenges as a voice for voiceless, suppressed society. After accepting those challenges, pressure groups make it difficult for them to continue with the task by targeting their self-esteem and dignity. The pressure constructed by pressure groups could be external and internal or, in some cases, both ([Nelson and Quick, 1985](#)). Psychological consequences, stress, self-confidence, self-awareness, self-esteem, self-efficacy, fear of sanction, fear of success, and own mindset are included in the internal attributes that influence self-censorship. At the same time, external attributes include discrimination, stereotyping, marriage and work interference, social isolation, behavioural, physiological, environmental, biological, socio-cultural consequences, pressure on the organisation, creating demand, unconventional work methods, criticism, mockery, judgment, negative evaluation and death threats (Zehngut et al., 2015; [Williams, 2002](#) and [Zuckerman et al., 1980](#)).

Hence, the inclination towards considering the media not really the voice of the voiceless is observed as a new challenge towards the freedom of expression where social, legal, and workplace challenges are playing their role.

Background of the study

The concept of self-censorship has evolved over time which explains how pressure groups force an individual to self-censorship their content. They enter a state of extreme tension/pressure due to which they want to censor the content to save themselves from getting attacked. Social, cultural, economic and religious aspects act as problematic constraints for women in performing their professional roles (Yonas, 2008). Here, fear plays a vital role in restricting perceived ideas. The fear can be enforced by someone else or can be generated by one's own perception. Fear stems from different attributes either through one's own internal territory, such as family pressure/control, supervisors' authority, and organisational stress or from external localities, such as terrorists' attacks and threatening parties.

[Hayes \(2007\)](#) expanded the idea of self-censorship and claimed it to be isolating oneself from an area that, in turn, threatens our life and safety, which further leads to targeting the credible and authentic standards of journalism.

The existing literature has successfully defended that the pressurised environment evokes the feeling to self-censor content while keeping all the responsibilities aside. This study will fill the gap identified in the literature where no such shreds of evidence have been provided to ensure the forces behind the fear of women professionals self-censoring their content.

Problem Statement

The presence of women in the field of journalism is vital but challenging situations ahead for them cannot be ignored. Women in the field of journalism are facing different kinds of challenges, i.e. financial, social, ethical, professional and moral, which vary across the country. In Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, women journalists are less in number, where their problems are outnumbered. These Women journalists are constantly facing the fear of isolation because of their gender and also the vulnerability that their gender brings. The study will explore the factors that bring fear among women journalists, which affects their work in terms of self-censorship.

Significance of the Study

Over the years, it has been observed that women journalists are being targeted in one way or the other by fulfilling the responsibility demanded by their professional high-ups. They have to sacrifice their responsibilities of being a family member, i.e. being a daughter, sister, wife and mother. Later the norms and societal values form a matter of dignity for their families, due to which they have to surrender. This study is designed to help and identify those influential causes and factors which are affecting women journalists' performance in terms of self-censorship. The study will further guide the women journalists to encounter those issues that force them to self-censorship.

Theoretical Contribution

Revolving around the central idea of Spiral of Silence and talking about the change in attitude, behaviour, mindset and perception, the scenario is crystal clear that people express their views after observing their surroundings ([Spenser and](#)

[Croucher 2008](#)). Studies have linked the element of opinion expression to sensing the ambience and then deciding the next step ([Fox and Holt, 2018](#)) and displaying reluctance to speak up at work ([Detert and Edmonson, 2011](#)). However, the current study will contribute to the existing literature by highlighting the factors that are compelling women journalists to ponder mass opinions and pressures before opening up in any case.

Practical Contribution

The outcome of this study will help working women journalists to understand the factors as well as techniques to tackle the fear force that is causing them to censor the newsworthy topic. This will, in turn, help them to eradicate the problematic constraints efficiently to work effectively.

Aim of the Study

This study aims to explore what are the factors which bring fear in women journalists of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa in terms of self-censorship in their journalistic responsibilities.

Research Questions

Following are the research questions of the study;

- What are the internal attributes that are enforcing working women journalists of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to self-censor their newsworthy content?
- What are the external attributes that are forcing working women journalists of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa to self-censor their newsworthy content?
- How do external and internal attributes impact working women journalists' decision to avoid coverage of sensitive issues?

Research Objectives

Following are the main objectives of the study;

- To explore the factors that are acting as catalysts for women journalists in acquiring the state of self-censorship.

- To discover the meaning of fear for women journalists of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.

Literature Review

The concept of self-censorship has evolved over time. In the early 19's, authoritarian countries incorporated this concept as they used to remove the material that government might find controversial, and the fear of sanction led them towards self-censorship ([Grossman, 1990](#)). Noam Chomsky and Edward S. Herman supported the idea that corporate ownership of news media strongly encourages the technique of acquiring the state of self-censorship in journalism with respect to pressure groups ([Wintonick, 1994](#)). [Lee \(1998\)](#) argued that self-censorship is so structurally embedded in journalism that journalists themselves are not aware of what is being censored by them most of the time. Thus, the frequent pressure and the fear factor are making press freedom a vision that seems too difficult to achieve.

[Nadudar \(2007\)](#) talks about the different types of media, which further makes it possible to distinguish between different journalists depending upon the sensitivity to their work. It is obvious that journalists working in channels are normally more renowned than newspaper and radio journalists as they rarely appear on the screen and are hardly known by their appearance. Sometimes, work or the type of reporting style speaks up itself, but still, the print media journalists have a safe corner of hiding themselves in person as their name works for them only. Akhtar (2005) explained in contrast to that the print media journalists are more likely to self-censor themselves than the other as observed during the time of the earthquake back in 2005 because it is quite hard to speak up against one's own political structure and journalists had to censor their content. However, it is not only about print media; other mediums are doing the same, too, as self-censorship is also regarded as saving oneself from being misunderstood by reporting critical news items (Nebiyu, 2008).

Self-censorship is being adopted in two ways, i.e. Active and Passive, where active self-censorship is more threatening in which journalists frame up the information that has

been gathered in possible ways they want, while in passive self-censorship, the journalist actually ignores and decides not to collect the newsworthy content that carries public interest and needs to be reported (Skjerdal, 2008). In passive self-censorship, direct negligence of the content does have some negative consequences but is not as alarming as in active self-censorship (Skjerdal, 2008). Journalists tend to adopt them by sensing the environment first in which they are working. Hence, nowadays, silence is a secret yet major cause behind the flaws we encounter in journalism.

It is highlighted that violence and any other kinds of threats like physical and mental torture can lead us towards silence which may be in various forms like stopping oneself, refraining from the threatening body, thinking about how to deal with it, looking for alternative ways and losing the hope can be considered (Löfgren and Örnebring, 2016). This gives rise to different ideas leading us to further investigate the causes in different depths. According to a survey, 70% of the masses are frightened thinking about their families and how they would react to anything they do (Patton, 2009). Internal and external attributes play their part, and external attributes give birth to internal attributes most of the time (Vachek, 1962).

Unfortunately, we live in a world where power has been divided successfully between the existing genders making the males more dominant, superior leaders and rulers occupying the peace of mind (Talbot, 2008). Perez (2014) stated that with the increase in technological advancement, the threats and terrifying statements are now being conveyed to women by men digitally. Encountering online abuse against women journalists, it's painful to state, but men do believe that women who talk too much are needed to get raped. This makes the picture clear enough that how men objectify a woman if she is fair enough to take the stand against the patriarchy. According to the International Women's Media Foundation Global Report1, nearly two-thirds of reporters are male; this imbalance is not frightening to the ones who are actually taking the stand as they consider themselves strong enough to win the battle against this gender discrimination. On the other

hand, this thing surely affects the ones who were in the process of shaping up their minds to come up with a cause (Perez, 2014). This simplifies why women journalists are seen not even in half the number of male journalists just because they are targeted easily.

Gender stereotyping has always been a barrier to women's professional advancement in any field (Skelly and Johnson, 2011). Personal, professional and educational choices, along with opportunities, have been framed by the patriarchal boundaries with the advancement of technology and arousal of new media. A challenging setup has been seen where women are required to fight for themselves and their upcoming generations. Chambers et al. (2004) stated that it is indeed a saddening reality that gender matters for women when it comes to Journalism. While talking about media calling it free and fair and regarding it as the fourth pillar of the state, it should also be taken into account that it is not really free unless and until it provides equality and justice for all in which women from every class, every party and every religion are needed to be involved. We can see that women who do have the courage to speak up for women's rights are majorly targeted, whether they are activists, social workers, reporters or feminists, which directly or indirectly makes the circle stop just to save themselves and their dignity (Antonijevic, 2015).

The typical patriarchal structure and media challenges are somehow interconnected. Milivojević (2015) stated that the greater the platforms provided, whether online, print or broadcast, the greater will be the structural patriarchy. This needs to get dealt which simplifies that women are subjected to lesser news stories than men found in different mediums, i.e. online, print, television or radio. Maslach et al. (1985) argued that physical appearance for women is still important as they will only be showcased with ratings they try to achieve, while on the other hand the experience is considered more important for men, which is the main reason because of which we see old age men and young girls over the screen. The way our society is still treating our women, no matter where they are and to which field they belong, does have an impact on the way they receive

feedback and is considered an easy target for ages.

Patterson and Donsbach (1996) highlighted that choosing any profession is totally exclusive to the concept of self-censorship, which simplifies that there is no specific method to choose the right profession taking our gender into account. While talking about journalism and women, it should always be kept in mind that being an easy target should never be associated with the demands of journalism as it is sensitive. As it is only about the mindset, not the requirements of a profession which constructs it negatively. Media organisations are aimed at refraining from offending any government official, military or armed forces, or large corporations even if the facts are true to reveal, which eventually leads to self-censorship just to avoid any mishap later in the stage (Lee and Chan, 2008). As a matter of fact that they do depend upon powerful entities to sustain their jobs (Fishman, 1980). As pressure on a news organisation grows, the possibility of adopting cautious strategies is more welcomed (Tong and Sparks, 2009). Hence, the power pressure is strong enough to stop the responsible profession like journalism not to opening up. A vacuum of silence incorporating the spiral of silence theory is created where torture compels one to acquire silence (Lee and Kim, 2014).

Freedom of expression has always been a debatable topic, but while talking about self-censorship of women journalists, it is quite a new aspect of new media to know that harassment which was considered private in the past, is now a matter of public social issue (Hagen, 2015). It is usual to see journalists in anger, loneliness, discomfort and stress just because of the alarming threats they face with each story they cover. It is always difficult for a journalist to accept that threats have hit them hard, and instead, they acquire the way of censoring the content when things are going to get out of hand. Harassment is not actually faced; it is something that needs to be born (Hagen, 2015). Butler (1997) suggests that this arouses the idea of speech injuries, a situation in which loss of context and words happens is observed while dealing with harassment at multiple levels among women journalists because one does feel discomfort if one gets targeted for no good reason but the quality of work.

In some ways, online harassment is more dangerous because of its ability to spread around. As a matter of fact that once it is online, it remains online spreading fear across the masses from time to time (Ambrose, 2012). McKenzie (2015) claimed that a female journalist's story takes a back attack with threats and harassment in the form of personal attacks, focusing on the woman's character, body parts, or even going too far to sexual violence. Online trolling is also setting another trend against women journalists, which makes fun of them in whatsoever way (Paul, 2005). Moreover, abuse and threats against women journalists are considered hard data to be reported because it is sensitive enough (Munoz, 2015). A report launched by Media Matters for Democracy (MMfD) in 2019 shows that 95% of women journalists in Pakistan feel that their professional choices are directed by online violence, while 77% of them regard self-censor as an approach to counter it. However, trolling of any kind needs to be highlighted to make sure that work is being carried out to eradicate this social issue.

Journalism has turned into one of the most challenging, risky and dangerous professions around the globe over the last couple of decades (Masood, 2017). Journalists in Pakistan have to deal with a dilemma of their safety rights in contrast with people's right to know about it (Rehmat, 2014). Jamil (2017) suggests that an unsafe institutional environment provided to Pakistani journalists where they work holds different safety threats that do affect their work and the quality of journalism as a whole. It also suggests that journalists face not only physical risks but also psychological, financial, emotional and digital risks while at work, besides other threats. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa is a vulnerable region for journalism, making the journalists of the locality feel highly insecure when it comes to performing their job (Iqbal and Rauf, 2018). A report from the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) reveals that at least 60 journalists have been killed in Pakistan since 1992 for motives that have been officially confirmed. "Moreover, seven media workers have been killed since 2009, raising the

number of killed journalists to 87 from 1992 to date. Rehmat (2014) suggests that more than 100 journalists and media workers have been killed and over 2,000 injured in the country from the beginning of 2000 to 2014. According to CPJ (2017) data, most of the killings of journalists occurred in the KP and FATA region (24), followed by Balochistan (15), Sindh (14), Punjab (6), and the federal capital Islamabad (1)".

The sensitivity of a locality does also affect the type of job. Press freedom has never been consistent in Pakistan because of several types of threats journalists, and the media have to deal with every day (Siraj, 2009). Iqbal and Rauf (2008) clearly stated that journalists from South Asia are more likely to be targeted due to their region than others in one way or the other. Region Khyber Pakhtunkhwa of South Asia has been the hub of terrorist attacks, blasts, honour killings and a lot more. The masses belonging to this region can tell so much more about their sufferings than anyone else because they themselves are eyewitnesses. Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, being in a conflict zone, adds a lot to the cultural and religious richness where things have been seen taking a drastic turn when religion or culture is added in any way just to threaten a woman (Arsan, 2013). Journalism is not an easy thing to do in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and women journalists are more prone to safety risks (Jamil, 2020). According to a report by Media Matters for Democracy (2018), 7 out of 10 women journalists say that self-censorship makes them feel safer.

Yesil (2014) states that the practice of self-censorship has been considered undoubtedly a serious threat to the future of journalism. Power players are identified as the key sources behind self-censorship, where government plays its part on the top. The threats and attacks on journalists vary from country to country, but collectively they result in self-censorship where journalists choose not to speak up against the power players. Pakistan has been enlisted among the top most dangerous countries when it comes to journalism (Jamil, 2020). Ever since the partition, the Pakistani government always wanted to rule over the media, and for that purpose, strategies like discriminatory use of advertisements, press advisory boards and government-owned media

outlets were formed (Mezzer and Sial, 2010). However, the lack of professionalism, ethical understanding and exposure are found widely in Pakistan and its people. Hence, they play a vital role in compelling journalists as a whole to self-censor their content (Yesil, 2014).

The overall literature has served well in providing necessary information to understand that fear, in one way or the other, incorporates into the inner self that acts as a catalyst in further compelling individuals to move towards the state of self-censorship (Skjerdal, 2008). The literature also served as providing the types of fear and pressures one faces while stepping into something challenging, but no such literature contributed towards the factors behind the fear; however, the recommendation is attained to do so (Zeybek, 2020). Therefore, the study aims to highlight those influential causes that are triggering fear in women journalists.

Underpinning Theory

Taking into account the overall scenario and the research being conducted, the 'Spiral of Silence' theory will be used in the theoretical construct of the study (Matthes et al., 2012). This theory largely focuses on how the fear of isolation makes it difficult for the minority subgroup to speak up for themselves or even raise their point of view regarding any subject matter. The same thing will be applied over here how the pressure created by several internal and external attributes makes it almost impossible for the women journalists of Pakistan to report the particular subject under the degree of its importance.

The Spiral of Silence has illustrated the framework of how people perceive the environment and how, on the basis of others' opinions, they construct their opinion. Theory suggests that if one finds his opinion in the majority of the social circle, he surely expresses his thoughts, whereas the disagreement of one's opinion from the majority masses creates silence and eventually self-censorship (Noelle-Neumann, 1984).

However, an argument will be generated through the findings stating that if women journalists feel secure from any kind of pressure, then they will work more efficiently or if women

journalists feel free to become the voice of the voiceless, and then the credibility of journalism will rise above the standards that have been maintained so far.

Conceptual Model

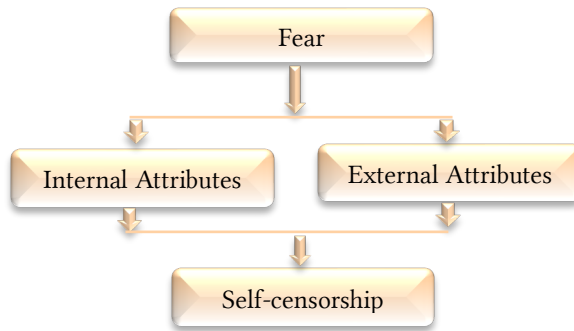


Figure 1:

Research Methodology

Research Design

Keeping in view the nature and requirements of the study, the research design is qualitative, following the ontological stance as relative and epistemological stance as social constructionist. The study is contextual and explorative in nature. The purpose of using an exploratory method is to come up with as many influential causes as possible behind the triggering constraints of fear. This approach is designed to be used following the study of [Antilla \(2008\)](#) on self-censorship.

Population

The population of the study is all the women journalists of the Khyber Union of Journalists. This study focused on those journalists who are working in the field and practising self-censorship. The total number of members of the Khyber Union of Journalists is 583, of which 13 are women journalists.

Sample Size

7 out of 13 women journalists from the Khyber Union of Journalists were selected to be interviewed as per their 10 years of experience in

which they faced terror attacks. The results are influential without any doubt, as they will surely help women journalists of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as a whole.

Sampling Technique

Taking into consideration the overall population of women journalists registered in the Khyber Union of journalists, the non-probability purposive sampling technique is used ([Ryan, 2011](#)).

Data Collection

Research regarding media requires an in-depth study and understanding of the work previously done. Incorporating the method used in the study ([Skjerdal, 2008](#)) researcher opted in-depth interview method to come up with leading factors playing a part as a catalyst toward self-censorship. [Lee and Chan \(2008\)](#) considered in-depth interviews as an influential method of analysing the fear factor. The same method was considered in the current study to identify the factors behind fear compelling women journalists to acquire the technique of self-censorship. Data was collected through the same series of questions via in-depth interviews with the

participants that were recorded in the same order. The interviews were verbatim, and essential information was taken into account, considering their specific experiences. The researcher assured respondents that the data collected from them would be kept private and highly confidential.

Data Analysis

[Galanis \(2014\)](#) proposed the idea of incorporating the 'Thematic analysis technique' for summarising and analysing the data where themes are generated. Required information is extracted from collected data to identify the subject knowledge and generate respective meanings from it. The thematic analysis technique is one of the widely accepted practices in qualitative research as it allows the flexibility of withholding different approaches altogether. The thematic analysis deals with comprehensively organising, identifying and arranging ideas and concepts attained from the respondents and generating specific themes from them in order to simplify the finds and generate meanings out of the data collected ([Braun & Clarke 2012](#)). A visible advantage of the thematic analysis technique is its diversification in terms of generating results and extracting information from the recorded set of data collected ([Maguire & Delahunt, 2017](#)).

Findings

Defining Self-censorship

In-depth interviews with the respondents of the study brought some influential insights that are beneficial in concluding the findings. Respondents of the study believe that various factors act as a push behind forcing them to self-censor their content. According to the women journalists of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the concept of breaking news is the first, and the foremost element that makes us do so because one cannot always verify the content at a rapid pace and hence hiding the content is the only way out or focusing on just a part of it. Likewise, the demands of the organisation and editorial policies play their part as well. Stories like religion-based violence, protests, pressure groups, and national interest have a major role when it comes to self-censorship. It is the fear of safety for oneself and

for the family, character assassination, abusive treatment and social circle and social media bashing that indulges us in the war of dos and don'ts just for the sake of not becoming a piece of news to give a news and practice self-censorship in journalism. However, sometimes the ambiguous feeling that covering a particular story can create problems for anyone and stops us from moving ahead. On the other hand, the lack of no such government institute for the sake of journalist's protection and security and the lack of proof to take a stand for your work also builds an unsafe environment that makes us believe in concepts like self-censorship to safeguard our lives and surroundings and breathe in a safe ambience.

While categorising the factors that act as a booster towards self-censorship, women journalists from Khyber Pakhtunkhwa regarded adoption of culture, lack of support from colleagues, gender roles, confidence level, lack of objective reporting, lack of organisation's ownership, giving business more importance over employee's lives as internal factors that gave birth to the feeling of self-censorship. On the other hand, women journalists stated that external factors affect internal factors in both positive and negative ways. Society and surroundings, outside pressure of any kind, make it difficult to control the situation because one suffers, and hence we go for self-censoring either the content or self-identity. Moreover, women journalists also held the media responsible, saying it's not up to the mark, nor is it close to the expectations of the masses. It's a mafia now that disturbs the overall chain, which in turn affects journalism as a whole. However, it was also made clear that the external environment affects internal energy and confidence level, where the internal has a major role over the actions.

Defining Fear

According to the women journalists of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the thoughts of harm, while getting nearer to a danger zone, stopping oneself from going step ahead, zero protection and a sense that something could happen and trauma of getting attacked are actually fear. Psychological pressure, patriarchal society, others' move, extreme situation in any way, restrictions and prohibitions, life and family concerns and

situation in which we cannot work properly is fear. Moreover, while explaining the term fear based on their personal experiences, they elaborated that fear is an emotion with different variables and types which affect everyone differently. The suffering of media due to the widely accepted practice of self-censorship is also fear. However, while taking into consideration the relationship between fear and self-censorship, it was made evident that self-censorship is the reaction to fear. The greater the fear factor, the greater will be the practice of self-censorship.

Conclusion

Working in a structured environment where

every step has to be taken by focusing on the outcomes that first truly effects the job in any way. One cannot function well when pros and cons are prioritised over reality. Self-censorship, too, is affecting the quality and standards of journalism, where it has been made clear through several pieces of evidence that journalism is not journalism when censored. Research has made it evident that fear is a compelling body behind opting for the state of self-censorship, and this study has come up with several factors that are working in raising the fear element. However, fear and self-censorship are interconnected in one way or the other and, in turn effects the capability of functioning in

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