

Ethical Dilemmas and Psychological Stress: The Impact on Pakistani Journalists in Conflict Zones

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the ethical dilemmas and psychological stress faced by journalists reporting from conflict-affected regions of Pakistan, with a focus on Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and surrounding rural districts. Data was collected between 2015 and 2025 using two primary methods: semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The research included 10 professional journalists with direct experience covering high-stress and conflict-related news stories. Primary data were gathered through these interviews, while secondary data were drawn from media reports and published articles. Thematic analysis revealed a range of recurring issues, including psychological stress, burnout, moral complexity, and the standardized nature of self-censorship. Journalists repeatedly reported a lack of institutional support—such as trauma-informed training, mental health resources, or editorial protection—which exacerbated their emotional and ethical burdens. Urban-rural divide became an important factor: the stress was more severe, professional growth was restricted, and the physical danger was higher in the rural or underserved localities than in the urban areas. Female journalists found other levels of harassment and exclusion as well. On the whole, the research raises the issue of systemic neglect, exposure to trauma, and political pressure as the factors that interact to impair the well-being of journalists as well as the quality of conflict reporting. The study demands immediate institutional changes that are required to establish a safer, more ethical, and trauma-sensitive media environment in Pakistan.

Keywords: Ethical dilemmas, Stress, Journalists, Conflict zone, Pakistan

INTRODUCTION

It has been observed that Journalists frequently face physical or mental harm while covering various incidents (Seely, 2019). During their duties, the journalists, including those not directly threatened, frequently experience repetitive exposure to traumatic news, including wars, crimes, and accidents (Feinstein et al., 2014). Many journalists experience psychological distress, with a subset developing clinically significant symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), necessitating medical or psychological interventions (Browne et al., 2012). The Journalists working in the Global South often lack adequate mental health resources due to their challenging work conditions and despite research on psychological distress, such as PTSD, in developed countries, there is a lack of attention given to the stress, trauma and PTSD experienced by regional journalists, often reporting from conflict zones in a country (MacDonald, 2017).

Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, a province bordering Afghanistan, is particularly vulnerable due to high violence levels. Despite their high risk, their experiences are often overlooked, and no studies have investigated the impact of trauma on the mental health of the Journalists, particularly PTSD (Ashraf, 2018). Pakistani journalists facing trauma face a significant gap in resources due to centers located in urban areas like Karachi. This gap is experienced in the rural and remote regions and they are at a disadvantage of accessing the much needed assistance. The situation is complicated by poor literacy levels and language barrier. Electronic resources such as the Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma are usually in English, and rural journalists may not have access to them. Such absence of support leads to poor mental and emotional health (Shah et al., 2019).

The journalists in Pakistan and specifically in regions with high crime rate of violence such as KP face an unprecedented combination of physical danger, psychological trauma, and moral quandaries. Although Pakistani journalism has witnessed an upward trend since 2002, there is still no sufficient measure in the support systems of the institutions, especially in regards to mental health and ethical consideration issues. The difference is especially pronounced in the rural areas and war zones: Journalists are not only underpaid or trained inadequately; more to the point they are exposed to trauma like violence/war and political upheaval. Such conditions not only affect the individual welfare of the journalists but also the integrity and morality of their reports.

Not only does this complex environment subject journalists to direct threats and emotional exhaustion, it also causes them to work in a disjointed and frequently inconsistent professional culture. In most situations, the reporters are supposed to provide accurate timely and impartial news even though they do not have the institutional protection or the ethical training that the mentioned tasks require. Lack of editorial protocols, trauma-informed practices, and legal protections leaves most journalists to make high stakes decisions alone, and often with fear, intimidation, and uncertainty. This leads to ethical compromises becoming a matter of survival, not choice and the emotional toll of reporting under pressure starts to be reflected in symptoms of moral fatigue, self-doubt and in some cases leaving the profession altogether.

Although there is a lot of research in the Global North indicating a close association between conflict reporting and psychological disorders like post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), there is little research on this in Pakistan. The lack of local investigation is concerning, as Pakistan has a history of impunity, targeted violence against journalists and structural censorship. Additionally, local journalists often face linguistic, cultural, and infrastructure obstacles when accessing online trauma resources. This is especially troublesome. Therefore, the journalists in rural or high-risk places lack the tools and morals to carry out journalism on the ground, which results in compromised journalism. The study is necessary to fill a gap in knowledge that is quite large. By examining journalists in KP and other geopolitically vulnerable regions, the authors would like to investigate the way systemic neglect, along with exposure to trauma and political limitations, leads to a morally and professionally hazardous situation. It not only will explain the ethical problems that these journalists are experiencing, but further discuss its broader implications of press freedom, journalistic ethics and institutional responsibility in Pakistan. This issue must be addressed to maintain the moral integrity of journalism and encourage media without prejudice trauma-based practices.

Research Questions

- What motivated you to cover conflict or violence-prone areas in Pakistan?
- Can you describe a time when you faced an ethical dilemma while reporting from a conflict zone?
- What factors influence your decisions about what content is too graphic or sensitive to publish?

- Have you ever been pressured—directly or indirectly—to alter your reporting? By whom, and in what context?
- How has reporting from conflict zones affected your mental and emotional health over time?
- Have you ever sought psychological support or trauma counseling because of your work? If not, why?
- Do you feel that media organizations in Pakistan adequately prepare or support their reporters for high-risk assignments?
- What coping mechanisms or practices help you deal with the emotional stress of your job?
- How do your peers or editors respond when journalists show signs of psychological stress or burnout?
- What changes policy, training, or otherwise do you think are essential to protect journalists in conflict zones in Pakistan?

Research Objectives

- To explore the motivations and personal experiences of journalists who choose to report from conflict or violence-prone areas in Pakistan.
- To examine the ethical dilemmas journalists face while reporting from conflict zones, including how they navigate decisions around sensitive or graphic content.
- To investigate the nature and extent of external pressures—such as censorship, coercion, or political influence that affect journalistic independence in conflict reporting.
- To assess the psychological and emotional impact of long-term exposure to violence on journalists working in high-risk areas.
- To evaluate the availability, accessibility, and effectiveness of psychological support systems (e.g., trauma counseling) for journalists in Pakistan.
- To analyze the role of media organizations in preparing and supporting journalists assigned to high-risk or rural areas, with a focus on safety, training, and mental health.
- To identify the coping mechanisms journalists adopt to manage stress, trauma, and burnout in the absence of formal institutional support.
- To understand peer and editorial responses to mental health concerns within newsrooms, particularly when journalists show signs of psychological distress.
- To recommend policy, training, and structural reforms that can better protect journalists—ethically, psychologically, and professionally—working in conflict zones in Pakistan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

It has been observed that Journalism has become an essential component for an egalitarian community as it acts as a basic structural block, enabling the free flow of information to the masses. Pakistan endures difficulties in recruiting journalists, making journalism among the most difficult professions globally (Ghafari et al., 2023). The media's role in analyzing the global crises and impacting public perception is both intricate as well as ethical. Its judgments on narratives, narrative design, and voice priority impact preciseness, equity, and depiction. Reporting favoritisms may support stereotypes, aggravate divisions, and lead to conflict resilience (Chaudhary & Riaz, 2024). Journalist's right to freedom of speech and employment ratio of the journalists is significant but, it has been noted that the Asia-Pacific region is the world's third worst offender of freedom of the press, with Pakistan ranked among the top ten states for journalist assassinations in the last two decades (Jamil & Sohal, 2021).

Journalist's ethical opinions are criticized due to economic and organizational restrictions. They have to guarantee that news remains fair and objective, an issue which can be overcome through ethical theory (Christmas et al., 2020). Media reporters often justify their attempts to get into other people's private life by claiming "the people's right to know," but this reply lacks what the people have a right to know (Ward, 2013). Studies have examined journalist's ethical orientations through assessing their attitudes toward controversial actions by survey methodologies. Journalists encounter multiple constraints and limitations when producing news, often debating whether to engage in illicit practices such as pressuring sources of information, paying for data, accessing confidential data, acquiring another person's identity, or photo editing (Day, 2006).

The Journalists might get involved into illegal activities, such as using hidden cameras and adopting substitute identities, while trying to investigate important news stories, and ethical standards and professional values can come into conflict in real-life situations, and it is essential to avoid any connection across controversial practices and unethical actions (Lee et al., 2015). Over the last two decades, the media business has undergone reforms such as liberalization and privatizing, transitioning away to the state-owned paradigm while still holding conventional media organizations. Journalists, particularly in Pakistan, face growing challenges in uncovering corruption and political and corporate offenses, highlighting a utilitarian approach to ethical decision-making (Mezzera & Sial, 2010). Pakistan's media operations experienced changes, including liberalization and privatization, leading to more private television networks and higher staff requirements. As journalist's expertise and attitudes shift, the industry faces more ethical conflicts (Memon & Soomro, 2023).

Since the journalism profession is so unrepresentative of the society it serves, this calls into doubt how the media can fulfill its watchdog function when journalists are not secure and how it can reflect and enlighten public opinion (Jamil, 2020).

Hypothesis

- 1) Journalists in conflict zones frequently encounter ethical dilemmas that significantly impact their psychological well-being, leading to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and PTSD.
- 2) Journalists employ a variety of coping mechanisms, including professional support, peer networks, and personal strategies, to manage the stress arising from ethical dilemmas.

Limitations

- 1) **Sample Size and Generalizability:** Although the research anticipates a wide range of Pakistani journalists, a small sample of 10 on qualitative interviews could restrict the application of the research results to all the journalists in conflict areas in Pakistan.
- 2) **Self-Reporting Bias:** The reliance on self-reported data for both interviews could introduce bias, as participants may underreport or overreport their experiences due to social desirability or recall bias.
- 3) **Access and Safety:** Accessing journalists in conflict zones can be challenging due to safety concerns and logistical difficulties. This may result in a sample that does not fully represent those who are currently active in the most dangerous areas.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research is qualitative as a means to give a general idea of the moral dimensions and psychological strain that the Pakistani media people in warzones go through. This study will be based on Pakistani

journalists with experience of working in conflict zones. Purposive sampling will be used in their selection in such a way that different journalists in terms of regions and media houses will be represented differently. The sample size of qualitative interviews is supposed to be around 20 journalists. All the selected journalists are supposed to have covered a story of a conflict zone and they are supposed to have been in the industry over three years.

Data Collection

In-Depth Interviews: The selected journalists will be interviewed semi-structured to explore their experiences with ethical dilemma and psychological stress. The interviews will be based on certain incidents, coping skills and the impact on their emotional wellbeing. Interviews will be transcribed and analyzed using thematic analysis to distinguish repeating themes and patterns connected with ethical dilemmas, psychological stress, and coping mechanisms.

Qualitative methods, such as in-depth interviews, give point by point, personal insights into the journalists' experiences, coping mechanisms and survival strategies. This enhances the depth and breadth of the findings, offering a comprehensive understanding that can illuminate powerful help systems and strategy suggestions for journalists working in high-risk conditions.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

This research highlights the deeply intertwined nature of psychological distress and ethical decision-making in Pakistani journalism, especially in conflict-prone regions such as Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Baluchistan, and former FATA. Several unique findings emerged from this comprehensive study:

1. Trauma in Local Journalism Is Underreported and Underserved

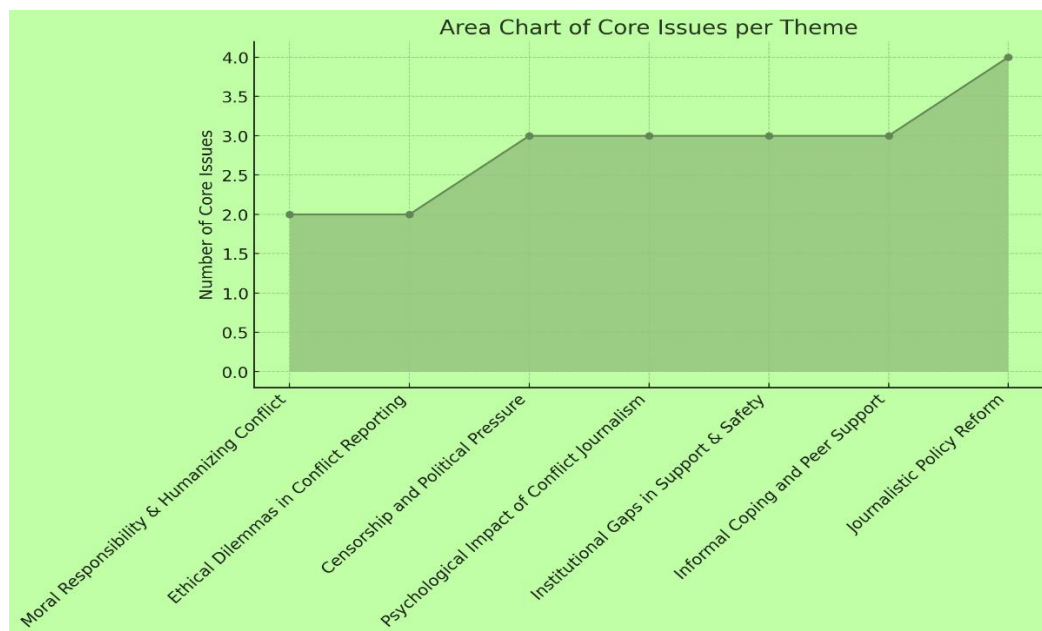
The study reveals a critical disparity between the level of trauma experienced by rural journalists and the attention it receives from both the media industry and academic research. While journalists in regions like KP are frequently exposed to bombings, militant threats, and violent protests, there is virtually no structured psychological support available to them. This finding contrasts with the growing discourse on trauma-informed journalism in the Global North and calls for context-specific mental health interventions tailored to Pakistan's rural realities.

2. The Concept of 'Assignment Stress Injury' Needs Localization

The study is specific, as it is devoted to the problem of Assignment Stress Injury (ASI), which is a combination of post-traumatic stress and the load of both occupational and ethical stress. In contrast to more conventional PTSD, ASI involves not only stress due to recurrent ethical dilemmas, but also intrusive imagery and institutional neglect. The research suggests that it is a more culturally and professionally applicable framework to Pakistani journalists who are not provided editorial safety nets or trauma training.

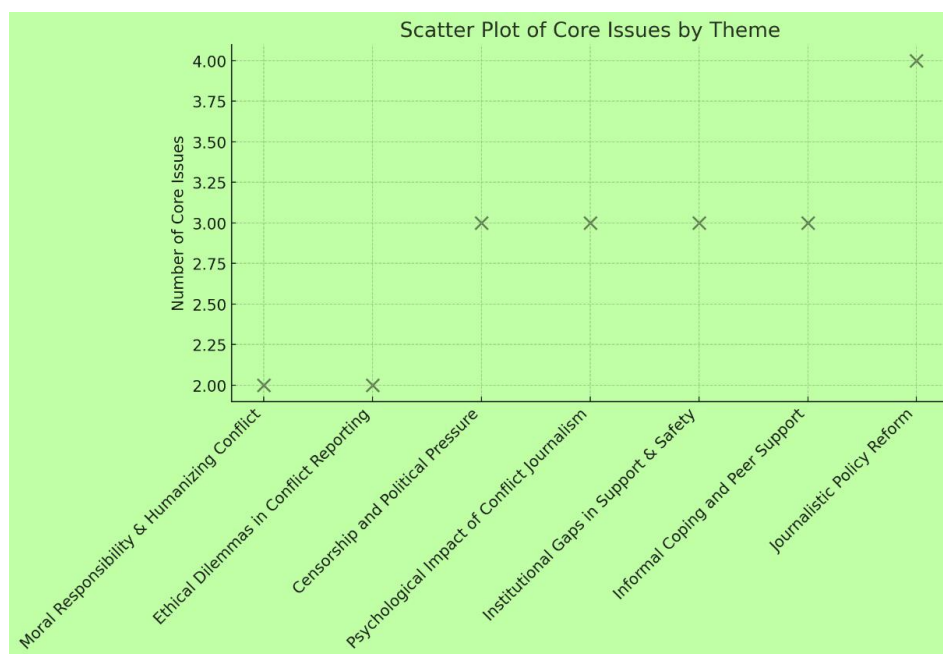
3. Ethical Dilemmas Erode Long-Term Professional Integrity

Reporters stated that they had a dilemma on whether or not to publish graphic pictures, expose the identity of the victims or succumb to the pressure of political and militant organizations. Such ethical conflicts were not exceptional cases but repeated dilemma that resulted in chronic moral injury. Not only professional detachment but also a gradual loss of journalistic purpose, with the result of burnout, guilt and refusal to engage in investigations, occurred.



4. Gender Amplifies Psychological and Ethical Vulnerability

Pakistani women journalists encounter two types of challenges; the one related to work in the risky areas and the one associated with patriarchal culture in the newsrooms. Mental health risks are added by sexual harassment, underpayment, being excluded when it comes to high-profile assignments, and being denied maternity support. The research revealed that although male journalists were the more frequent victims of physical violence, female journalists were the victims of protracted psychological abuse and marginalization in the workplace, which had a unique effect on their ethical judgement and mental health.



5. Self-Censorship Is a Survival Strategy, Not Just an Editorial Choice

The research revealed that self-censorship on the part of conflict journalists in Pakistan is not solely a result of state censorship but survival instinct on the part of an individual journalist. Journalists will not touch a story that could anger militants or the security agencies, especially those in Balochistan or Swat. Such avoidance does not occur under institutional pressure only, but also under the condition of an acquired instinct to save themselves and their families against retribution, be it physical, psychological, or economical.

6. There's a Silence Culture around Psychological Distress

Pakistani journalism has a culture of silence about emotional vulnerability. Reporters were also reported to have been discouraged to talk about mental health because they would have been labeled as weak or unprofessional. Burnout symptoms were frequently overlooked by editors and other senior colleagues, which further emphasized unhealthy cultural expectations of emotional control. This repression does not only prevent healing but creates an intergenerational cycle of trauma.

7. Newsroom Hierarchies Deepen Inequalities in Mental Health Exposure

The analysis established apparent hierarchical differences in the individuals who are at the receiving end of trauma. The older journalists in the big city offices are paid better, are more secure and get more resources, whereas the stringers in the rural counties have the riskiest jobs with the least protection. Such stringers are sometimes poorly trained and over-exposed to trauma and have no access to counseling or trauma-informed editorial work. This leaves uneven distribution of risk that is unethical and unsustainable.

8. The Role of 'Witnessing' Trauma Blurs Ethical Boundaries

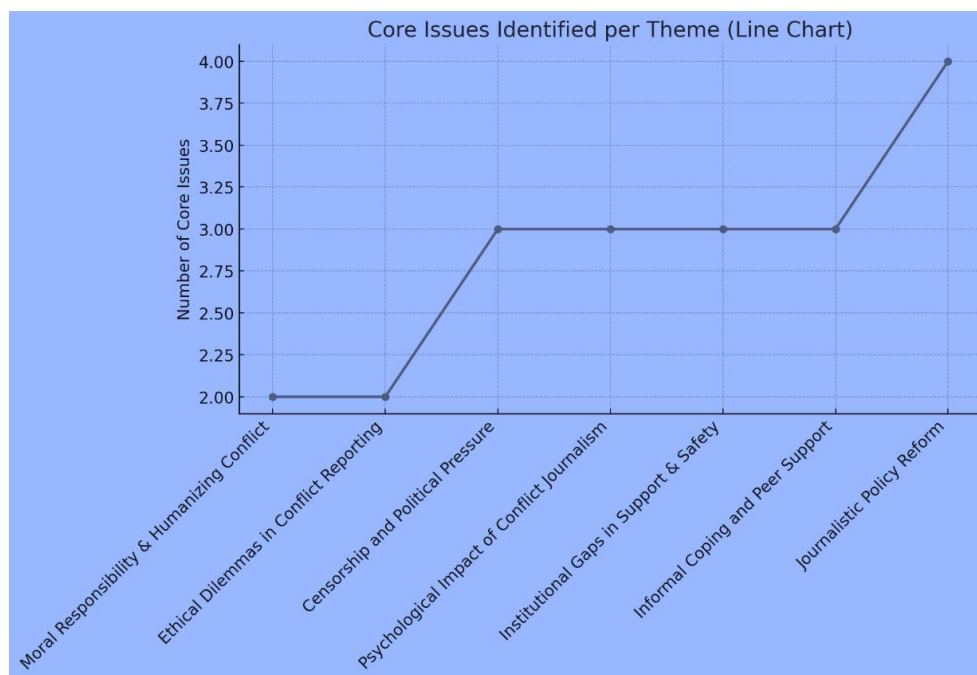
The reporters also reported a sense of guilt of not only doing something but also not doing something, i.e. their inability to assist a victim or their decision to photograph a traumatic scene instead of trying to stop it. This secondary trauma stress confuses ethical barriers between professionalism and human sensitivity. The psychological harm of testifying alone is a long-term contribution to the psychological harm of testifying without support.

9. Digital Harassment Has Become a New Layer of Conflict Journalism

The other distinctive finding was that cyber harassment is emotionally taxing. In particular, online intimidation, misogynist trolling, and stalking developed a second battlefield among female journalists that existed outside of the geographical combat zones. This online harassment combined with preexisting stress in the field reporting, another layer of trauma that is poorly served in the Pakistani media systems.

10. Journalism in Pakistan Operates in a 'Conflict-Within-Conflict' Structure

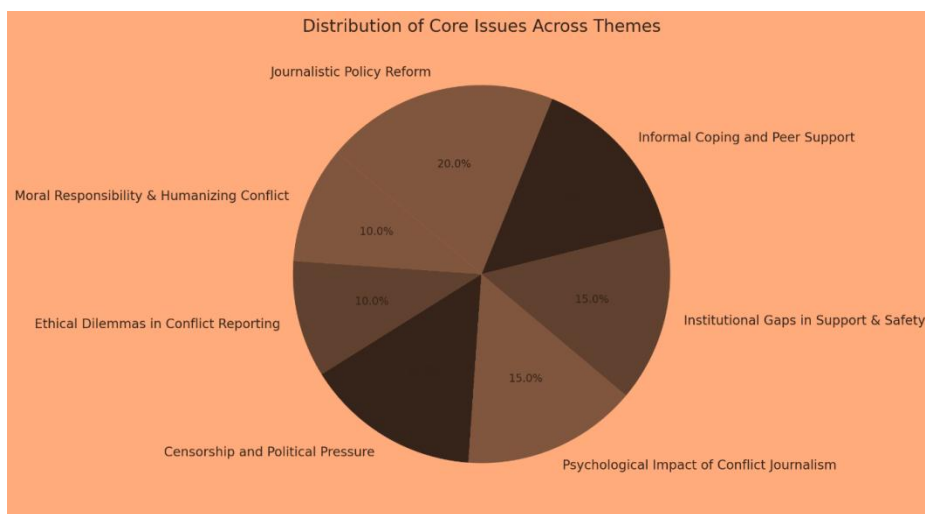
Finally, the research is the first of its kind to conceptualise journalism in Pakistan as being conducted within a paradigm of conflict-within-conflict, where the role of the reporter is not merely witnessing wars and crises but also struggling with institutional apathy, ethical corruption and psychological burnout. This double-bind questions the established role of the journalist as an impartial witness and instead places him in the role of an active victim of the conflict that he reports.



In sum, the findings underscore a dire need for trauma-informed journalism training, ethical support systems, and institutional reforms. The current environment fosters ethical compromise and emotional damage, threatening both journalistic integrity and individual well-being. The main themes arising from the interviews, placing them within the larger literature on conflict journalism, ethical decision-making, and mental health (Table 1).

Table 1:

| Theme | Core Issues Identified |
|--|---|
| 1. Moral Responsibility & Humanizing Conflict | Ethical commitment to unheard voices; empathy over spectacle |
| 2. Ethical Dilemmas in Conflict Reporting | Consent, dignity vs. editorial pressures; truth vs. safety |
| 3. Censorship and Political Pressure | Editorial interference, political coercion, economic influence |
| 4. Psychological Impact of Conflict Journalism | PTSD symptoms, anxiety, burnout; lack of institutional counseling |
| 5. Institutional Gaps in Support & Safety | Absence of training, protective gear, mental health services |
| 6. Informal Coping and Peer Support | Meditation, journaling, peer sharing; cultural resilience practices |
| 7. Journalistic Policy Reform | Safety training, trauma protocols, legal safeguards, advocacy |



ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION

Over the past ten years, there have been numerous cases of journalists being killed across the globe. According to global perceptions, journalism is no longer a secure profession. Threats to the safety of journalists are causing serious harm and rights to freedom of expression. Reports by international authorities have disclosed the recent years (starting from 2012) are the most violent years since then have been marked by brutality against journalists worldwide. Particularly, what is the situation with Pakistan when it comes to violence against journalists? The UN has estimated that Pakistan is one of the deadliest countries for Journalism Profession (Jamil, 2018).

The research highlights the unrestrained socio-political conditions that underlie the fragile state of press freedom for journalists in Pakistan, a reality often characterized by continuous political unrest,

institutional interference, and threats from both state and non-state actors. The interviews carried out in the course of this study have shown a worrying trend of ethical issues, which among others, featured forced censorship, politically driven restraints in reporting, editorial manipulation, and intimidation by influential interest groups. Reporters kept mentioning cases when they had to rewrite or shelve the stories that criticized political parties, security organs, or militant groups, usually under the threat of professional punishment or even personal violence.

Such observations are consistent with past academic and institutional research which has recorded how the Pakistani journalists are frequently compelled to balance between their respective professional ethics and the unwritten rules set by the political parties, extremist groups and economic vested interests. The most frequently recognized ethical concerns are the selective reporting of the facts to support the specific stories, purposeful withholding of the sensitive materials to avoid the backlash and the continuous ethical dilemma between the duty of serving the common good and preserving personal safety or income. Journalists are in a paradox, they are bound to the ideals of truth, transparency, and accountability and at the same time they are bound by the same structures that they are supposed to criticize.

In addition, the study identifies an internalized moral dissonance with most of the journalists especially those working in the battle fields feeling guilty or morally drained by the compromises they have to make. Some of the interviewees were emotionally upset about the idea of publishing the sanitized versions of the events, or by the need to remain silent in order to ensure that speaking out would not have jeopardized them or their families. This kind of psychological strain is another dimension in the ethical dilemmas they undergo, wherein journalism is not only a professional issue, but also an emotional and existential one.

Finally, the results show that the moral environment of journalists in Pakistan is not only defined by the journalistic codes or company policies, but there is a wider environment of fear, intimidation, and political involvement. It is over these dangerous waters that journalists are forced to continually evaluate risks posed by each editorial choice they make and the weight of responsible reporting versus the very tangible dangers of violence, character assassination or legal harassment. This is further worsened by the lack of institutional protection systems and trauma-informed editorial systems, which means that the responsibility of making ethical decisions falls on individual journalists in an unsupportive environment that is not safe.

The qualitative data of the research was continually emphasizing the standardization of self-censorship. The fear of losing their jobs and even physical attacks usually influenced journalists to make decisions based on content as opposed to other issues despite the fact that their decisions contradicted with professional ethics. This was reported by journalists on several occasions. The environment promotes some sort of moral burnout, where a frequent neglect of integrity diminishes morality and leads to a persistent stress.

Navigating the Ethics and Impact of Conflict Journalism



The other significant aspect that the interviews brought out was the psychological stress. As indicated in the survey findings, respondents claimed to be anxious, burnt out, sleep deprived and feel so powerless, especially when they are required to cover up the violent acts or politically sensitive news. Also, the lack of institutional support, limited access to psychological counseling, and insufficient organizational safeguards contribute to the increase of the mental health challenge. Other respondents noted that there is no support system within the news organizations, which involves a culture of emotional strength that is not likely to assist the members. This study has been carried out to explore how ethical dilemma and psychological pressure are connected in the life of Pakistani journalists that work in conflict zones. Based on available interviews and literature that is available, it is obvious that not only is journalism in places like Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (KP), Balochistan, and Azad Kashmir a physically dangerous profession, it is one that is emotionally and morally complex as well. Ethical issues and psychological outcomes of journalists are inseparable and in most instances, they are affected by institutional blindness, sociopolitical engagement, and self-exposure.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATION

This study reveals the intricate moral dilemma confronted by journalists involved in conflict in Pakistan, uncovering a profession that is not about sensationalism but about ethical conduct, empathy, and pursuing justice. Rather than being characterized by adrenaline as the norm, these reporters perceive their work as a

means of advocating for causes, frequently entering hazardous areas to enhance silence and bring about human suffering. Their choices are weighed heavily and subject them to extreme pressure to withhold disturbing footage, challenge censorship, or care for their mental health.

All of the issues explored in this paper, which include real-time ethical decisions, political demands, psychological costs (including children), and institutional failings, portray an extremely human picture of what journalism in war zones is all about. The results of these findings are indicative of the alarming gap that exists between the ethical demands of journalism on the one hand, and the realities of the practitioners on the other. However, they are also amazingly strong. Despite censorship, trauma, or institutional indifference, Pakistani journalists create their own support systems, draw on peer-to-peer cooperation, and keep on reporting the stories that count.

To conclude, this research implies that the journalism funding in the high-risk environments needs to be revisited. Ethical journalism requires ethical infrastructure that comprises of training, emotional support and editorial autonomy. Since these journalists are giving the final stand in their occupation, the media houses, policy-makers, and the society at large have a duty to offer them practical support to their actions.

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