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GENDER EQUALITY POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR NEWSROOMS IN PAKISTAN



MODEL GENDER EQUALITY POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR NEWSROOMS IN PAKISTAN

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Contents

Acknowledgments:	1
1. The Rationale	2
2. Context & Background.....	3
3. Scope and Applicability.....	5
4. Guiding Principles.....	7
5. Main Features	9
6. Institutional Policy Commitments.....	12
6.1 Governance and Leadership.....	12
6.2 Human Resource Management.....	12
6.3 Safe and Dignified Work Environment.....	13
6.4 Work–Life Balance and Care Support	13
6.5 Professional Development and Capacity Building	14
6.6. Gender-Responsive Editorial Practices	14
7. Role of Press Clubs, Unions, and Professional Associations.....	15
8. Implementation Mechanism.....	16
9. Monitoring, Reporting, and Review	16
10. Conclusion.....	17

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1. The Rationale

IRADA- Foundation for Research & Advocacy has committed itself to advancing gender equality across news media organizations in Pakistan by providing a comprehensive policy framework that promotes safe, inclusive, and equitable newsrooms. Recognizing the news media's powerful role in shaping public discourse and influencing social norms, this commitment is premised on the belief that fair, safe and inclusive workplaces are essential to ethical journalism, impartial public accountability through news media and, hence, democratic development.

Through this model framework, IRADA seeks to contribute to the development of a news media in Pakistan that is not just responsive to the country's democratic needs but it also practices what it preaches: equality, accountability and inclusion. This document, therefore, aims at

1. supporting news media houses in establishing institutional mechanisms that ensure equal opportunities for people of all genders in recruitment, retention, and career progression;
2. guaranteeing protection from harassment, discrimination, and retaliation; promote safe and enabling working conditions in both newsroom and field formations; and
3. encourage editorial practices that reflect gender sensitivity, diversity, and respect for the dignity of all individuals.

This framework is designed as a practical and adaptable resource for news organizations across print, broadcast, and digital platforms. Its purpose is to strengthen compliance with existing laws, enhance organizational accountability, and contribute to the creation of news media spaces where journalists of all genders can work without having to worry about fears, favours, biased, and/or other personal and structural barriers.

By developing and disseminating this framework, IRADA seeks to facilitate industry-wide progress towards gender-equitable news media houses and to foster a professional culture that reflects the principles of equality, safety, inclusion and respect both within newsrooms and in the contents they produce.

2. Context & Background

News media in Pakistan plays a central role in shaping public opinion, informing democratic processes, and influencing social, political and economic behaviours. As a key pillar of democratic development, newsrooms are expected to uphold the principles of fairness, diversity, equity, inclusion and accountability not only in their editorial contents but also in their institutional practices. Evidence from many national and global studies indicates that gender disparities persist across the news media sector, particularly in relation to recruitment, retention, access to decision-making positions, allocation of beats, workplace safety and benefits, and representation in news content.¹

Women in Pakistani newsrooms remain underrepresented in leadership and editorial decision-making roles and are often concentrated in contractual or junior positions with limited opportunities for career progression.² Gendered division of labour within news media organizations frequently restricts women to so-called “soft beats,” while their presence in political reporting, investigative journalism, and prime-time analysis remains comparatively low. This situation is exacerbated by the weak implementation, and sometimes total absence, of gender equality policies, contributing to unequal pay, informal employment arrangements, and limited access to professional development opportunities.³

Workplace harassment and the lack of fail-safe confidentiality mechanisms for filing harassment complaints continue to be significant barriers to women’s equitable participation in the news media. Although the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010 makes it mandatory for all workplaces to establish anti-harassment

¹ <https://samsn.ifi.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/IFJ-Gender-Disparity-Report-final-Upadted-.pdf>

² <https://www.fnpk.org/women-underrepresented-in-press-clubs-unions-fn-report/>

³ https://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/Event/Gender/GenderAtWork_web2.pdf

committees and devise and adopt of an internal code of conduct to prevent sexual harassment at workplace, news media organizations are found to be not complying with these legal requirements. Women journalists also face gender-specific safety risks during field assignments, while working late, and even within digital spaces where online harassment, threats, and coordinated trolling have become increasingly common. These challenges are further compounded for individuals belonging to marginalized groups, including transgender persons, who, otherwise, are protected from such abuse under the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2018.

At the same time, news media in Pakistan leaves a lot to desire for as far as ethical, responsible, and rights-based journalism is concerned. This is partially, if not mainly, a reflection of the inequities prevalent within newsrooms. A gender-equitable newsroom is, therefore, an essential ingredient for producing content that reflects the diversity of society, avoids harmful stereotypes, and ensures balanced representation of women and marginalized communities as sources, experts, and subjects of news.

The structural and institutional gaps identified above generate the need for a comprehensive and sector-specific gender equality framework for news media organizations. This model framework has been developed to provide practical advice to newsrooms across print, broadcast, and digital platforms. It seeks to support news media organisations in creating safe, inclusive, and enabling work environments, strengthening internal accountability mechanisms, and promoting gender-sensitive editorial practices.

By offering a standardized yet adaptable framework, this initiative aims to contribute to the professionalization of the news media sector, improve working conditions for journalists of all genders, and enhance the quality and credibility of journalism in Pakistan.

3. Scope and Applicability

This Model Gender Equality Policy Framework is designed for adoption by news media organizations across Pakistan's diverse news media industry, including print media organisations, television and radio broadcasters, digital media platforms, and news agencies operating at national, regional, and local levels. It is designed to be relevant to both large and small organizations, encompassing corporate media houses, independent newsrooms, community-based media initiatives, and emerging digital and multimedia outlets.

The framework applies to all categories of media workers within these organizations, including permanent and contractual employees, freelance journalists, contributors, interns, cameramen and technical and administrative support staff, recognizing the increasingly hybrid and non-standard nature of employment in the news media sector. It is designed to guide organisational policies and practices across administrative and governance structures, human resource management, editorial decision-making, field reporting, and workplace environment.

Recognizing the significant variation in institutional capacity, ownership patterns, operational scale, and resource availability across news media organizations, this framework adopts a flexible and phased approach to implementation. The organizations that adopt it will be encouraged to contextualize its provisions in accordance with their internal structures, operational requirements, geographic location, and financial and human resource capacities. Smaller organizations and digital start-ups may implement the framework through incremental and resource-sensitive measures, while larger media organizations are expected to institutionalize comprehensive systems, dedicated focal persons or committees, and formal monitoring mechanisms to oversee its immediate implementation.

The framework is also applicable to both urban and non-urban media contexts and responsive to the challenges of field reporting, shift-based work, and the 24-hour news cycle. It is designed for seamless integration with existing organizational policies, regulatory obligations, and

professional codes of conduct, and is intended to complement statutory requirements under Pakistan's national labour and workplace laws.

By allowing for a phased, context-specific, and scalable adoption, this framework seeks to promote broad-based uptake across the news media sector while maintaining a clear commitment to the implementation to its core principles of equality, non-discrimination, safety, and dignity at work.

4. Guiding Principles

News media organizations adopting this Model Gender Equality Policy Framework shall be guided by a set of core principles that underpin all institutional policies, procedures, and editorial practices. In theory, these principles are grounded in Pakistan's constitutional guarantees of equality as well as the broader human rights framework that the country has endorsed under the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In practice, these are intended to inform organisational culture as well as day-to-day decision-making in news media organizations across platforms and in all parts of the country.

It is expected that the news organizations that adopt it will:

1. uphold the principle of equality and non-discrimination by ensuring that all their staff members are treated fairly and are provided equal opportunities in recruitment, retention, career progression, leadership, and access to beats, irrespective of gender, gender identity, marital status, disability, or any other status;
2. design institutional systems, including human resource policies and editorial decision-making, to eliminate direct and indirect discrimination and to address structural barriers that limit equitable participation on the basis of gender or gender identity;
3. abide by the principle of dignity and safety at work to guide the creation and maintenance of work environment in which all media workers are able to perform their professional responsibilities without fear of harassment, intimidation, violence, or retaliation. This includes physical safety in newsroom spaces and during field assignments, psychological well-being in high-pressure work environments, and protection in digital spaces where journalists increasingly face gendered forms of abuse;

4. ensure transparency and merit-based appointments and promotions through clear, documented, and publicly available procedures for recruitment, remuneration, performance evaluation, promotion, and leadership selection. Organizational decisions affecting career progression and allocation of opportunities should be based on objective criteria, thereby reducing the impact of such factors as personal likes and dislikes and gender-based biases;
5. promote inclusivity and diversity as a means of elevating both their institutional capacity and the quality of their journalism. This includes fostering equitable participation of women and individuals from historically underrepresented groups in all areas of news media work, as well as encouraging a plurality of perspectives in editorial content, sourcing, and storytelling;
6. adopt a policy of zero tolerance for harassment, enforced through effective prevention, reporting, inquiry, and redress mechanisms in accordance with the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010. This principle requires visible leadership commitment, regular awareness and training, and protection against victimisation for those who raise complaints in good faith;
7. be guided by the principles of accountability and institutional integrity. This requires the allocation of responsibilities for implementation, periodic internal review of progress, documentation of measures taken, and the integration of gender equality objectives into organisational planning and governance systems. Accountability mechanisms will ensure that commitments made under this framework translate into measurable and sustained institutional change.

5. Main Features

This Gender Equality Policy Framework delineates a structured set of principles, guidelines and institutional commitments aimed at promoting inclusive, equitable, and safe working environments within news media organizations. Besides laying down a strong theoretical foundation based on internationally recognized standards and best practices as well as Pakistani laws, it provides practical guidance to strengthen gender equality across news organizations including in editorial decision-making, newsroom governance, employment practices and workplace culture.

The framework emphasizes upon institutional accountability, transparency, and sustained commitment to integrating gender equality into everyday newsroom operations, practices and decision-making processes. It is built upon the following main pillars:

1. The first key pillar is gender-responsive governance and leadership. News organizations that adopt the framework will be encouraged to ensure meaningful representation of women in senior editorial and management positions and to address existing imbalances both quickly and effectively. Transparent and formal practices and processes in recruitment, retention and promotion processes have been included in the framework as safeguards against discriminatory practices. News organizations will also be encouraged to periodically review gender representation in decision-making roles and eliminate informal practices that restrict equitable participation in newsroom structures.
2. The second main pillar of the framework is inclusive human resource management practices. It recommends the implementation of non-discriminatory recruitment, retention, and promotion policies and the maintenance of gender-disaggregated employment data across all staff categories. Formal and equitable salary structures and promotion criteria should be established by news organisations to support equal pay for work of equal value. Employees should also have equitable access to reporting assignments and professional opportunities regardless of gender. They should be supported through structured mentoring and

professional development initiatives to reduce existing gaps and imbalances.

3. Creating safe and dignified work environments is the third central pillar of the framework. News organizations that adopt it will be encouraged to devise and implement anti-harassment policies in compliance with the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010, including the establishment of empowered inquiry committees and accessible complaint mechanisms. Workplace codes of conduct should be prominently displayed within the office premises, and safeguards should be put in place to protect complainants from any retaliation. News organizations should also implement safety protocols for field assignments, night shifts, and digital workspaces, and facilitate access to mental health and psychosocial support where feasible.
4. The framework also emphasizes policies that support work-life balance and caregiving responsibilities. News organizations should provide maternity and paternity leave in accordance with applicable laws and introduce flexible working arrangements where operationally feasible. This framework recommends the provision of safe transport facilities and access to childcare support mechanisms for women employees, alongside workplace policies that recognize employees' health and family care responsibilities.
5. Professional development and institutional capacity building are also an integral part of this framework. News organizations that adopt it will be encouraged to ensure equitable access to training, fellowships, and leadership development opportunities. Regular gender-sensitization programs, inclusive leadership training, and orientation sessions on workplace conduct, harassment prevention, and labor rights are also recommended to strengthen institutional awareness and address discriminatory norms.
6. The framework promotes gender-responsive editorial practices by recommending using gender-sensitive language and ensuring fair and balanced representation in editorial content. Journalists should prioritize diverse sourcing and apply ethical guidelines

when reporting on gender-based violence, while encouraging coverage that reflects the experiences and perspectives of women and other marginalized gender groups.

7. Finally, the framework stresses upon mechanisms for its implementation and the accountability of the news organizations that adopt it. News organizations should designate a gender focal person or a committee to develop phased implementation plans, and integrate gender equality objectives into their organizational policies. Periodic gender reviews or audits should be conducted to assess progress, document institutional measures taken, and update policies to ensure their continued effectiveness.

Beyond these key pillars, the framework recognizes the role of press clubs, journalist unions and professional associations in advancing gender equality across the news media sector. These institutions are encouraged to review their governance structures, promote equitable participation in their leadership positions, and adopt transparent electoral processes that prevent the concentration of power within their elite male members. Mentorship, networking, and capacity-building initiatives should be developed to support women journalists and members from marginalized groups while ensuring safe and inclusive institutional spaces for everyone to partake in those spaces without any discrimination.

Overall, the framework provides a comprehensive institutional arrangement to embed gender equality within news media organizations by strengthening their internal governance, employment practices, workplace protections, and editorial standards. Through sustained institutional commitment and monitoring, news organizations can foster professional environments that uphold dignity, fairness, and equal opportunity for all members of their staff regardless of their gender.

6. Institutional Policy Commitments

6.1 Governance and Leadership

Media organizations adopting this framework will:

- ensure women representation at senior editorial and management positions and will take corrective measures where women are underrepresented;
- establish transparent and merit-based selection and promotion processes;
- conduct periodic internal reviews of gender representation in decision-making roles;
- eliminate informal practices that restrict equitable participation in decision-making processes as well as at the workplace in general.

6.2 Human Resource Management

Media organizations adopting this framework will:

- implement non-discriminatory recruitment, retention, and promotion policies;
- maintain gender-disaggregated data across all employment categories;
- establish transparent salary structures and promotion criteria;
- ensure equal pay for work of equal value;
- ensure access to all reporting beats to women staff members and those from other marginalized genders;
- provide structured mentoring and professional development opportunities to every staff member regardless of their gender.

6.3 Safe and Dignified Work Environment

Media organizations adopting this framework will:

- adopt and implement a workplace anti-harassment policy in compliance with the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010;
- display prominently on their premises a code of conduct for sexual harassment devised in accordance with the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010;
- constitute functional and empowered anti-harassment committees in accordance with the Protection Against Harassment of Women at the Workplace Act, 2010;
- establish accessible and trusted complaint and grievance mechanisms;
- ensure protection for the complainant against retaliation by the accused or the management;
- adopt safety protocols for field assignments, night shifts, and all digital and physical workspaces;
- provide access to mental health and psychosocial support where feasible.

6.4 Work–Life Balance and Care Support

Media organizations adopting this framework should:

- provide maternity and paternity leave in accordance with applicable laws;
- adopt flexible working arrangements like remote work, staggered shifts or flexible hours where operationally feasible;
- facilitate safe transport for employees where feasible;
- facilitate access to childcare through in-house daycares;
- recognise health and family care responsibilities in workplace policies.

6.5 Professional Development and Capacity Building

Media organizations adopting this framework should:

- ensure access to training, fellowships, and leadership programmes equitably to all employees and regardless of their gender;
- conduct periodic gender-sensitisation and inclusive leadership training for all employees;
- organize mandatory awareness and orientation sessions for all staff on harassment, workplace conduct and labor rights;
- support institutional learning to address discriminatory norms and other structural and non-structural barriers to gender equality within themselves.

6.6. Gender-Responsive Editorial Practices

Media organizations adopting this framework should:

- adopt gender-sensitive language and fair and equitable presentation and representation in their editorial contents;
- ensure diverse and balanced sourcing, particularly in gender terms, in news coverage;
- adopt ethical guidelines for reporting on gender-based violence;
- encourage coverage that reflects the perspectives and experiences of women and those belonging to other marginalized genders.

7. Role of Press Clubs, Unions, and Professional Associations

Under this framework, press clubs, journalists' unions, and media associations are encouraged to:

- conduct periodic gender reviews of their governance structures and membership policies;
- promote equitable membership and leadership opportunities for women and those from other marginalized genders within them;
- ensure equitable representation of women and those from other marginalized genders in elected leadership positions, including through reserved or quota-based seats where necessary;
- Implement term limits and transparent electoral processes to prevent monopolization of leadership positions by a few men;
- ensure that their governing documents include enforceable provisions guaranteeing the participation of women and people from other genders in their governance and decision-making mechanisms;
- provide structured capacity-building facilities, mentorship, and networking opportunities to their women members as well as members belonging to other marginalized genders;
- adopt policies and institute mechanisms that promote gender equality and prevent harassment;
- provide safe and accessible institutional spaces to all their members, particularly to women and those belonging to other marginalized genders;
- organize periodic consultations with women journalists as well as those belonging to other marginalized genders to review progress in the implementation of this framework, identify challenges and barriers and find ways and means to address those.

8. Implementation Mechanism

News media organizations adopting this framework are encouraged to:

- designate a gender focal person or committee from among their staff;
- develop a phased implementation plan;
- allocate institutional resources for implementation, where feasible;
- integrate gender equality objectives into organizational policies and procedures.

9. Monitoring, Reporting, and Review

Adopting organizations should:

- conduct periodic internal gender reviews or audits;
- document progress and institutional measures taken;
- review policies at regular intervals to ensure their effectiveness and relevance.

10. Conclusion

The adoption and consistent implementation of this framework have the potential to significantly change newsroom environments in Pakistan by embedding gender equality as a core institutional value rather than as a peripheral promise. Over time, news organizations that will implement it are expected to become more equitable across editorial and management hierarchies. Their employment practices are also expected to become transparent and fair, complemented with stronger protections for workplace dignity and safety. These changes can, in turn, contribute to professional environments in which journalists are able to pursue their careers without facing structural barriers related to gender, caregiving responsibilities, or workplace harassment. By integrating gender equality into governance, human resource management, and editorial standards by adopting and implanting this framework, news organizations can reform both their internal institutional culture and restore public trust in journalism that is often seen as biased and discriminatory.

This is not merely wishful thinking. Experiences from other countries demonstrate that sustained institutional reforms can produce measurable change in news organizations. In the United Kingdom, BBC's gender equality strategy, supported by regular pay audits and leadership commitments, has contributed to narrowing gender pay gap and increasing women's representation in senior editorial roles.⁴ South Africa has also successfully implemented gender transformation initiatives within the news media sector through the South African National Editors' Forum (SANEF)⁵ and the Gender Links⁶ media programs. These initiatives focus on increasing women's representation in newsroom leadership, strengthening gender-sensitive editorial policies, and conducting regular gender audits within media organizations.

⁴ Managing the BBC's pay-bill, 2019.

<https://www.nao.org.uk/press-releases/managing-the-bbcs-pay-bill/>

This framework is also not an exercise in isolation. It, indeed, supplements and complements many other similar initiatives supported by organizations such as United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization (UNESCO) which is supporting gender equality initiatives in newsrooms worldwide. These initiatives encourage gender-sensitive editorial policies, safer working environments for women journalists, and improved institutional safeguards.⁷ They promote gender-responsive reporting practices, training programs, and policies aimed at increasing women's participation both within news organizations and the content they generate. They also support newsrooms in developing gender-responsive safety strategies to protect women journalists from online and offline harassment, while also encouraging news organizations to adopt inclusive editorial practices and standards and implement internal gender equality commitments.⁸

Looking ahead, the implementation of this framework in Pakistan can contribute to building a news media ecosystem in which diverse voices participate fully and without any discrimination to shape a public discourse that is balanced and free of biases and prejudices. Newsrooms that embrace gender equality are better positioned to produce balanced reporting, broaden the range of perspectives reflected in news coverage, and strengthen journalism's role as a democratizing institution that can offer its space to all and sundry without any fear, favour or discrimination based on gender or any such considerations.

⁵ South African National Editors' Forum, <https://www.genderlinks.org.za/>

⁶ Gender Links for Equality and Justice, <https://www.genderlinks.org.za/>

⁷ Media and Gender Equality, https://www.unesco.org/en/gender-equality/media-gender-equality?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁸ Enhancing gender-responsive safety strategies in newsrooms, <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/enhancing-gender-responsive-safety-strategies-newsrooms>

By adopting this framework and thereby creating inclusive workplaces and equitable professional pathways, news organizations can also attract and retain talented female journalists who might otherwise leave the profession due to the structural barriers mentioned above. Over time, the collective adoption of such frameworks across the news media sector can help foster a more resilient, representative, and socially responsive journalism in Pakistan.

IRADA

IRADA is a registered civil society organization aiming to advance democratic transformation through Law, Information, and Technology.

We work to strengthen fundamental freedoms, including freedom of expression, access to information, political and ecological rights, and cultural inclusion.

Our approach combines research, advocacy, and capacity-building to catalyze participatory reforms and enable citizens' equitable access to justice, technology, and knowledge.



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