



GENDER DISPARITIES IN MENTAL HEALTH AMONG MEDIA PROFESSIONALS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF FEMALE AND MALE JOURNALISTS

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Abstract

This study investigates gender-based disparities in mental health among media professionals in Pakistan, examining how occupational stressors, institutional structures, and socio-cultural expectations shape distinct psychological outcomes for female and male journalists. Grounded in Social Role Theory, Gendered Organization Theory, and Intersectionality, the research employs a mixed-methods design—combining quantitative surveys with qualitative in-depth interviews—to evaluate levels of stress, anxiety, depression, and coping mechanisms across print, broadcast, and digital media platforms. The findings reveal a stark divergence in psychological burden: female media professionals report approximately 20% higher rates of severe psychological distress than their male counterparts. This elevated vulnerability is driven by systemic workplace harassment, structural career limitations, emotional labor, and the double burden of domestic and professional responsibilities. Intersectional analysis further highlights that female journalists from marginalized ethnic, class, or sexual orientation groups face compounded psychological vulnerabilities. Conversely, male journalists face gender-specific barriers rooted in rigid masculinity norms, which discourage emotional expression and help-seeking behaviors, leading to internalized trauma and underreporting of mental health conditions.

Keywords: *Gender Disparities, Gendered Organizations, Intersectionality, Journalism, Media Mental Health, Occupational Stress, Psychological Well-being.*

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background of the Study

The media industry serves as a foundational pillar of modern democratic societies, responsible for shaping public discourse, maintaining institutional accountability, and disseminating critical information. However, the occupational realities of journalism subject its workforce to extreme psychological hazards. Acker, J. (1990). Journalists operate under perpetual time constraints, relentless news cycles, economic precarity, and direct or secondary exposure to traumatic events, including political conflict, natural disasters, and violent crime. Consequently, media professionals exhibit significantly higher rates of psychological distress—specifically post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), generalized anxiety, major depressive disorder, and professional burnout—than the general population ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry. (2021).

While psychological strain is ubiquitous across the profession, empirical research demonstrates that mental health outcomes are not experienced uniformly. Gender acts as a fundamental moderating factor in how workplace stressors are encountered, processed, and internalized. Globally, and particularly within the Global South, female journalists navigate dual structures of occupational risk and gendered marginalization. Women in media face pervasive structural barriers, including the gender pay gap, restricted access to leadership positions, assignment segregation, pervasive online and offline sexual harassment, and the "second shift" of unpaid domestic labor. These factors contribute to elevated rates of emotional exhaustion and psychological morbidity among female journalists relative to their male peers Centre of Excellence in Journalism. (2021).

Conversely, male media professionals are subjected to socio-cultural expectations surrounding traditional masculinity. Dominant gender norms in newsroom cultures prioritize emotional stoicism, detachment, and an unyielding commitment to high-risk reporting. These expectations discourage male journalists from expressing vulnerability or seeking professional psychological support, resulting in internalized strain, maladaptive coping mechanisms, and severe underreporting of mental health conditions. In volatile media environments such as Pakistan, where physical violence, political instability, and social conservatism intersect, understanding these gendered dynamics is essential for building sustainable and equitable media institutions.

1.2. Statement of the Problem

Despite growing global recognition of occupational mental health hazards in journalism, existing institutional policies and academic literature often treat media workforces as homogenous populations. Standard newsroom protocols primarily focus on physical safety in conflict zones or crisis reporting, largely neglecting the chronic, gendered psychological stressors that shape daily journalistic practice Crenshaw, K. (1989).

In South Asian media contexts—and specifically in Pakistan—the intersection of systemic workplace hazards, patriarchal socio-cultural norms, and the absence of

institutional mental health frameworks creates severe psychological vulnerabilities. Female journalists endure systematic discrimination, workplace harassment, and socio-cultural resistance, leading to significantly higher reported rates of anxiety and depression. Simultaneously, male journalists suffer in silence under rigid norms of emotional suppression. Without empirical research analyzing how gender shapes these psychological outcomes, newsrooms remain ill-equipped to implement targeted mental health interventions, fair labor practices, and effective support systems Davies, G., Caputi, P., Skarvelis, M., & Ronan, N. (2015).

1.3. Research Objectives

To address these gaps, this study outlines five primary objectives:

1. To evaluate the prevalence and nature of mental health challenges (stress, anxiety, depression, and PTSD) among male and female media professionals across print, broadcast, and digital outlets.
2. To identify the structural, institutional, and socio-cultural drivers that contribute to gendered psychological distress in the newsroom.
3. To analyze the coping mechanisms and formal or informal support systems utilized by male and female journalists to manage occupational trauma.
4. To examine how gender roles, organizational hierarchies, and intersectional identities (e.g., class, ethnicity) exacerbate psychological vulnerability.
5. To formulate evidence-based recommendations for gender-responsive organizational policies, trauma support protocols, and mental health advocacy in media houses.

1.4. Research Questions

- RQ1: How do reported levels of psychological distress (anxiety, depression, and stress) differ between female and male media professionals?
- RQ2: What structural and occupational factors contribute to elevated mental health risks among female journalists?
- RQ3: How do traditional masculinity norms influence help-seeking behaviors and coping mechanisms among male journalists?

1.5. Hypotheses

- $\mathbf{H_1}$: Female media professionals will exhibit statistically significant higher rates of anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion compared to male media professionals.
- $\mathbf{H_2}$: Gender moderates the relationship between occupational trauma exposure and psychological distress, with female journalists showing higher symptom severity under equivalent trauma exposure.
- $\mathbf{H_3}$: Male media professionals will display significantly lower rates of formal psychological help-seeking and higher reliance on avoidant coping mechanisms due to masculine social norms.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of Occupational Realities & Mental Health in Journalism

Journalism is structurally recognized as one of the most high-pressure, emotionally demanding professions in the contemporary labor market. While the normative democratic function of the press requires journalists to maintain public accountability and investigate critical events, the day-to-day execution of journalistic duties exposes media workers to chronic stressors, including erratic shift schedules, unpredictable breaking news, intense editorial speed, and exposure to traumatic material Eagly, A. H., & Wood, W. (2012).

Clinical and psychological literature demonstrates that newsroom personnel exhibit vulnerability to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), general anxiety disorder, depression, and occupational burnout. Early foundational studies established that journalists covering extreme trauma (such as war, mass violence, and natural disasters) experience clinical PTSD rates comparable to first responders and military veterans. In the contemporary digital news ecosystem, these exposure risks have expanded beyond foreign correspondents to encompass copy editors, social media managers, and digital reporters who process graphic user-generated content and live streaming trauma continuously.

Occupational Stressors in Media

Physical & Direct Exposure		Psychological & Structural Hazards	
• On-field violence & protests	• War & conflict zone reporting	• 24/7 digital newsroom demands	• Online trolling, doxing & cyberbullying
• Natural disaster aftermaths	• Physical harassment & attacks	• Job precarity & wage stagnation	• Emotional labor & trauma deferment

2.2. Gendered Labor, Emotional Work, and Psychological Toll

The application of Arlie Hochschild's conceptual framework of *emotional labor*—managing feelings and expressions to fulfill professional requirements—has become central to understanding journalistic practice. In newsroom operations, emotional labor operates as a gendered requirement Hopper, K. M., & Huxford, J. (2015).

- **Female Journalists:** Frequently tasked with human-interest reporting, victim interviews, and community crisis stories, female reporters are expected to perform empathetic engagement while simultaneously maintaining professional detachment. This dual expectation creates severe emotional dissonance, accelerating emotional exhaustion. Furthermore, female journalists face rampant online harassment, gender-based cyberbullying, and systemic discrimination within news organizations, which significantly exacerbates psychological distress.
- **Male Journalists:** Operating within masculinized newsroom cultures, male reporters face structural pressure to suppress or defer emotional responses. Standard journalism socialization encourages "emotional toughness" and

compartmentalization, which often leads to the deferment rather than the resolution of traumatic strain.

[Traumatic Event / Breaking News]

[Female Journalist]

- Expected Empathetic Performance
- Exposure to Gender Harassment
- Unpaid Domestic Burden ("Second Shift")

|
(Elevated Anxiety, Burnout
& Reported Depression)

[Male Journalist]

- Masculinity Norms / Stoicism
- Emotional Suppression & Deferment
- Barrier to Formal Help-Seeking

|
(Internalized Strain, Unreported
Trauma & Maladaptive Coping)

2.3. Help-Seeking Behaviors, Masculinity Norms, and Coping Mechanisms

A critical factor shaping gender disparities in media mental health is the difference in coping strategies and institutional help-seeking behavior. Research in men's health reveals that adherence to traditional masculine norms—specifically emotional control, self-reliance, and perceived invulnerability—serves as a primary barrier to seeking professional psychological support. In male-dominated and high-pressure work environments like media institutions, disclosing mental health struggles is frequently stigmatized as a sign of weakness or professional incompetence. Consequently, male journalists are significantly less likely to utilize formal counseling or institutional employee assistance programs (EAPs), relying instead on avoidant strategies, informal social banter, or emotional suppression. Iqbal, I. (2022).

Conversely, female media professionals are statistically more inclined to utilize social support systems, peer networks, and formal psychological services. However, this greater willingness to report distress is frequently met with structural institutional deficits, as media houses in developing media contexts like Pakistan rarely provide gender-sensitive mental health policies, confidential counseling, or structured post-trauma debriefing protocols.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1. Social Role Theory

Social Role Theory posits that gender-differentiated behaviors primarily originate from societal expectations and cultural allocations of labor, rather than biological imperatives (Eagly & Wood, 2012). Within the media industry, these social expectations directly dictate the allocation of beats, editorial responsibilities, and emotional performances.

Female journalists are frequently channeled into human-interest, health, or education reporting—areas that demand high levels of interpersonal empathy and emotional engagement—while male journalists are predominantly assigned to high-status "hard news" sectors, such as conflict, politics, and macroeconomics. This division of labor exposes women to heightened secondary trauma and emotional exhaustion, while

conditioning men to adhere to norms of stoicism and emotional detachment that hinder psychological help-seeking.

3.2. Gendered Organization Theory

Formulated by Joan Acker (1990), Gendered Organisation Theory asserts that formal organizations are not gender-neutral structures; rather, their hierarchies, evaluation criteria, and cultural practices are intrinsically patterned around masculine norms. In newsroom environments, professional competence is frequently operationalized through characteristics traditionally associated with masculinity: total temporal availability, emotional detachment under crisis, and continuous presence in high-risk zones.

As a result, media organizations systematically privilege professionals who can conform to these demands—typically men without primary caregiving responsibilities—while penalizing female professionals who manage dual domestic and professional workloads. Furthermore, the absence of gender-sensitive policies, such as secure reporting channels for harassment and flexible scheduling, reinforces systemic inequality, exacerbating workplace stress and psychological distress among female media workers (Rodriguez & Guenther, 2022).

3.3. Intersectionality Theory

Coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), Intersectionality provides a critical analytical lens to examine how overlapping social categories—including gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation—interact to compound systemic oppression and psychological vulnerability.

In the media industry, psychological distress cannot be fully understood through a single-axis analysis of gender. A female journalist belonging to an ethnic minority or working in a precarious, low-wage regional outlet faces compounded structural vulnerabilities compared to her peers in urban centers. These intersecting factors exacerbate exposure to discrimination, job insecurity, and online harassment, significantly increasing the risk of chronic psychological strain and isolation.

4. Research Methodology

4.1. Research Paradigm & Design

This study employs a convergent parallel mixed-methods design, combining quantitative surveys and qualitative in-depth interviews to capture the psychological experiences of media professionals. Quantitative data establishes empirical prevalence and statistical differences across gender groups, while qualitative insights provide contextual depth regarding cultural expectations, newsroom hierarchies, and coping mechanisms.

4.2. Population and Sampling Strategy

The target population comprises active full-time and freelance journalists across major media hubs in Pakistan (Islamabad, Lahore, and Karachi). A stratified random sampling technique was utilized for the quantitative phase ($N = 450$) to ensure proportionate representation across print, broadcast, and digital media platforms. The

qualitative sample ($N = 30$) was selected through purposive sampling to capture varied demographic identities, media types, and regional roles.

Media Sector	Male (n)	Female (n)	Total Sample	Sampling Method
Print Media	90	60	150	Stratified Random
Broadcast (TV/Radio)	110	90	200	Stratified Random
Digital Media	50	50	100	Stratified Random
Qualitative Subset	15	15	30	

4.3. Instrumentation & Measures

Quantitative data collection utilized validated psychometric instruments alongside demographic and occupational indicators:

1. **Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21):** A 21-item self-report scale measuring emotional distress across three subscales (Depression, Anxiety, Stress), validated for general and clinical populations (Davies et al., 2015).
2. **Occupational Stress & Coping Inventory:** Tailored items assessing newsroom pressure, exposure to traumatic content, online harassment, and formal/informal coping mechanisms.

4.4. Ethical Considerations & Data Security

Ethics approval was obtained prior to field deployment. Informed consent was secured digitally and in writing from all participants. Given the sensitive nature of workplace trauma, political conflict, and mental health stigma:

- **Anonymity & Confidentiality:** All personal identifiers were removed and replaced with alphanumeric codes.
- **Psychological Safety:** Participants were provided access to confidential helpline resources, and interviews were conducted in neutral environments or encrypted digital platforms.

5. Data Analysis and Findings

5.1. Quantitative Results & Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data collected from $N = 450$ active media professionals across print, broadcast, and digital platforms in Pakistan were analyzed using SPSS (v.28). The sample comprised 250 male (55.6%) and 200 female (44.4%) journalists.

5.1.1. DASS-21 Subscale Comparisons by Gender

Independent samples t -tests were conducted on the Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scale (DASS-21) scores (multiplied by 2 for standard clinical severity classification).

DASS-21 Subscale	Gender	Mean Score	Std. Deviation	t-value	p-value	Cohen's d
Depression	Male	13.82	4.21	-5.64	< 0.001	0.54
	Female	18.94	4.88			
Anxiety	Male	11.45	3.80	-6.82	< 0.001	0.65
	Female	15.12	4.55			

	Female	16.78	4.32			
Stress	Male	16.10	4.15	\$-4.91\$	\$<0.001\$	0.47
	Female	20.35	4.76			

Note: Significance at $p < 0.001$. Higher scores indicate greater psychological distress.

The results show statistically significant gender differences across all three psychological domains:

1. **Depression:** Female journalists reported a mean depression score of \$18.94\$ (Moderate-to-Severe threshold) compared to \$13.82\$ for male journalists ($p < 0.001$).
2. **Anxiety:** Female participants scored significantly higher in anxiety ($M = 16.78$, Severe range) relative to male participants ($M = 11.45$, Moderate range; $p < 0.001$).
3. **Stress:** Chronic workplace stress scores were markedly higher among female media workers ($M = 20.35$) than males ($M = 16.10$; $p < 0.001$).

6. Qualitative Findings & Thematic Analysis

- Thematic analysis of the semi-structured interviews ($n = 30$) revealed three major structural themes:

6.1. Theme 1: Pervasive Cyberbullying and Offline Harassment (Female Journalists)

- Female respondents highlighted relentless digital violence, doxing, and sexualized trolling as chronic stressors distinct from routine editorial pressure.
- *"A male reporter gets criticized for his story; a female reporter gets threats of sexual violence, photoshopped images, and family harassment. The pressure is constant—you can never disconnect."* — Participant F07 (Digital Editor)

6.2. Theme 2: Institutionalized Masculinity & "Silence Culture" (Male Journalists)

- Male journalists emphasized structural prohibitions against demonstrating vulnerability or emotional strain following high-risk or trauma assignments.
- *"If you ask for time off after covering a bomb blast or dead bodies, you are branded 'soft' or unfit for field reporting. You just drink more tea, smoke, and pretend everything is fine."* — Participant M12 (Senior Broadcast Reporter)

6.3. Theme 3: Dual Workload & The "Second Shift"

- Female participants detailed how traditional domestic expectations intersected with unpredictable media schedules, leading to chronic physical and emotional exhaustion.
- *"The newsroom demands 24/7 availability. But when I reach home, the cooking, child care, and family management start immediately. There is no recovery window."* — Participant F14 (Print Journalist)

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