

UKAAS- THE REFLECTOR

A BIANNUAL E-NEWSLETTER



EDITORIAL: BREAK THE PATTERN

The drama industry in Pakistan has grown exponentially and is a very valuable export of ours. For Pakistanis living abroad, they serve as a potent link to life back home and provide a much-needed break from reality. However, one thing which has become quite rampant is the display and portrayal of violence on these shows. Being an avid serial watcher and drama lover, I am starting to notice that this is now being normalised, which is a huge problem.

Where does one draw the line between love and torture, between passion and violent behaviour? I am afraid there isn't any such line, not for our TV dramas. Having watched so many of these, the storyline more or less remains the same which shows women being abused. From subtle to the most brutal acts, these women are shown as bearing torturous behaviours, suffering, sobbing, and crying. They are made to believe that staying in a violent relationship is temporary and that love still exists in the relationship. Do you find that easy to believe? I don't.

The irony, though, is that I am a minority in the vast audience who consume these shows while having dinner with their family and nobody bats an eye. I am one of the few viewers who watch dramas with an open eye and mind but I cannot digest simply everything that comes my way. I need to dissect it, unpack the storyline, decipher the innate and hidden messages along with the very obvious ones. I have found issues with a lot of storylines; the depiction of angry young men who are enraged and passionate within a blink of an eye or the totally headless women who bear all the brutalities. But that's not where my problems with today's TV dramas end.

I have problems with many of the male and female artists, defending and justifying explicit portrayal of violence against women in TV dramas. It is obvious that they certainly live in denial and ignorance. Why else would someone justify this glorification of brutal and abusive behaviour against women as 'something even the strongest women go through?' or, 'Oh, but he does love her/me!' This is called the normalisation of heinous acts of violence, and when this delinquent behaviour, this justification comes from big names, it breeds real-life ramifications. Turning men into monsters and abusers who deem it fit to exhibit their toxic masculinity as and when they desire. Be it a slap, a kick, sexual abuse or any other form of sexual assault. Everything is justified as being a 'part of our daily lives because our TV dramas portray them as such. As if the stars were not enough, the directors too come to defend the brutalities shown blatantly in their plays. All in the name of 'portraying the facts of life, reflecting the social realities, love and hatred, abuse and passion' – a horrific mixed platter.

There are a dozen different, important topics that are brushed under the carpet, denied, mocked and in the end declared unfit for public viewing as showing such realities may destroy our family structure. One such being marital rape. A lot of women go through torturous and tumultuous marital relationships – all without their consent. Or why can't we take up issues of LGBTQ? Why is it that out of all five letters – which, by the way, all exist in our society – we only happily recognise and talk about trans people? And that too, very superficially? It makes us as viewers and the ones churning out this content, extremely hypocritical.



Another problem which I find is important to highlight is the lack of trigger warnings. Many of these dramas portray realities of life by showing violent scenes which are being watched in a family setting. The messages are stored in some corner of the mind, seeing the depiction of heroic masculinity, the power and the rage is enough to be a huge influence. Emotional and psychological damage has been done, specially where there's already some form of violence in the family. And this cone become the reason behind breeding potential harassers, abusers, rapists, murderers – you name it. And channels after channels follow no ethical guidelines. The censor board looks the other way.

One easy solution is to stop watching these dramas. But that doesn't curb the problem. I head an organisation which monitors and analyses media content, news and entertainment. What I have always focused on is producing counter narratives. By showcasing what real Pakistani women are capable of. Yes, there is domestic violence, there is brutality and harassment and there is toxic masculinity, but haven't we all faced it bravely and come out of it? When I see women fainting at every small incident, I am reminded of all the traumatic real-life situations that I have been through and how I dealt with it.

Women in real life are neither this fragile nor weak. They're courageous and brave. They may stumble, even fall, but they have the strength to stand up and get back with their lives. That is what is needed in our TV dramas. Depiction of truth is not in showing women being abused, or suffering in silence, or being clueless on how to differentiate between love and violence. Truth lies in depicting how women can and must come out of an abusive relationship. Truth is to show that a girl child must be brought up to be strong and not give in to masculine power. And the biggest truth the dramas can show is that boys need to be raised as human not as monsters, as loving and friendly beings, not abusers, as partners and not adversaries.

**TASNEEM AHMAR
DIRECTOR**

This editorial appeared as an article in You Magazine, in The News International in February 2022.

WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING AT UKS?

Strengthening and amplifying the voices of women in and through the media

The Uks-WACC project which commenced on Aug-2020 was an attempt at redefining the agenda, constructing content that can be replicated, and influencing how women are being represented in the mainstream media. By inspiring reporters and editors with new, cutting-edge ideas and social research, in this project, Uks endeavoured to push back against prevalent toxic tropes about women.

This project has laid the foundation for changing stereotypical tropes and misogynistic perceptions in the mainstream media. This project sought to change the ways of reporting on women that are far removed from the prevalent toxic, hateful tropes about women that are deployed in the industry today. It also helped benefit senior editors and assignment editors by providing them the opportunity to change up their frame of reference and conjure up the intellectual cognition to discard the stereotypes. In the four conferences for women journalists that were held as part of the project, issues such as the reluctance of reporting rape, the media's capability to report on sexual violence, and ethical ramifications in media reporting were discussed. The conferences succeeded in sparking debates on national media over the issues of Prime Minister Imran Khan's "brevity" on sexual violence and women's attires and aftermath of that statement, and the fact that sexual violence aimed at boys had also risen but was not being reported. The project also spurred the resilience of women in media providing an anchor to the jolting ship of women journalists during the dark times of pandemic and shadow pandemic.

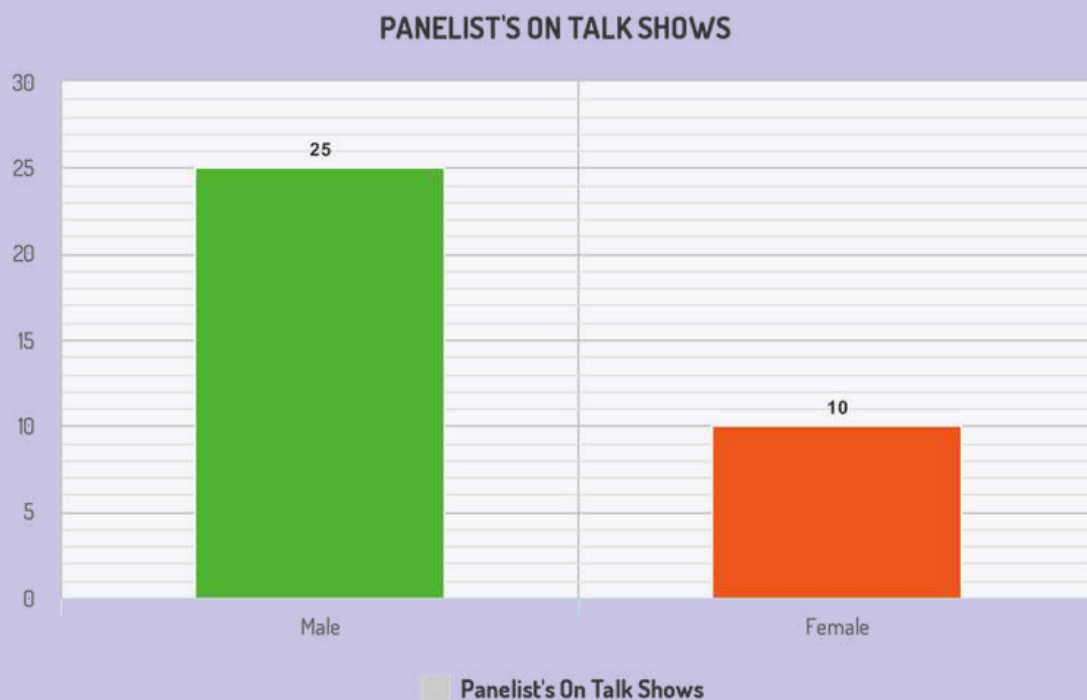
'Manel Watch' was also part of this initiative and examined the propensity of TV channels to invite all-male panelists on talk shows. Women journalists produced eight digital stories on unsung heroes of the pandemic. The stories spotlighted resilient women who broke the shackles of stereotypes. The cohort of women journalists was trained and has now morphed into a working group that shares ideas, hones narratives, and provides feedback. The fellows pitched their news stories and published them in leading news outlets.



WHAT'S BEEN HAPPENING AT UKS?

MEDIA MONITORING: Noor Muqaddam's Case and Manels

In the aftermath of the brutal murder of Noor Muqaddam, Uks monitored primetime talk shows on Pakistan's news channels from July 20 till August 6, 2021. Millions of Pakistani women were in distress over the murder of the young girl at the hands of the accused Zahir Jaffer. Results from the study showed that apart from some marginal representation of women, either as hosts or panelists most of the talk show panels were dominated by male experts, a phenomena commonly known as Manels. The presence of women moderators who throws in the odd comment is usually a form of tokenism. This televised gender imbalance is a stark reminder of how male-dominated Pakistan's media is. Barring a few exceptions, not only did these manels present a less nuanced view of the incident, they also perpetuated and reinforced patriarchal mindsets and tropes such as vengeance and counter-violence.



Uks has been advocating for a gender-balanced approach for all media content and we are acutely aware that this would necessitate that the editorial and creative process is also gender-balanced. Manels perpetuate and reinforce patriarchy, sexism and exclusion, and sometimes lead to blatant misogynistic remarks being broadcast. Discussions about Noor's murder often turned into victim-blaming and -shaming exercises. Issues were muddled as many male panelists used the opportunity to express their aversion to the Aurat March (Women's March), which is organised on International Women's Day and had little to do with the gruesome incident apart from the fact that (March 8) after Noor's picture participating in the protest march surfaced after she died.

It was unfortunate that very few talk shows challenged this perspective and looked at Noor's murder as an act of violence against women and as a human rights issue.

RESEARCH: Women, COVID-19 and SDGs: Bridging the Information and Knowledge Gaps

Uks conducted a 3-month research study in collaboration with Oxfam. The study focused on Women Health Workers, Women Home-based Workers and Women Domestic Workers across Pakistan (i.e. Karachi, Rawalpindi, Peshawar, Quetta and Gilgit). One-on-one interviews with the media and women's right organisation were conducted. The research explored the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on these categories of women. The first phase of the project involved monitoring the media for reporting on these groups. The second phase involved surveys and focus group discussions with the targeted audience. The project is expected to end in March 2022.



ACTIVISM: 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence

In 2021, Uks implemented a campaign on 16 Days of Activism. This is an international campaign that challenges violence against women and girls. The campaign runs every year from 25 November, the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, to 10 December, Human Rights Day. To mark the 16 days, Uks created a series of podcasts on media and gender-based violence which were uploaded on YouTube. The podcasts were titled '*Inhi Patharon Pe*' (On these stones) and featured a discourse between Director Uks, Tasneem Ahmer and Journalist, Ahmed Yusuf.



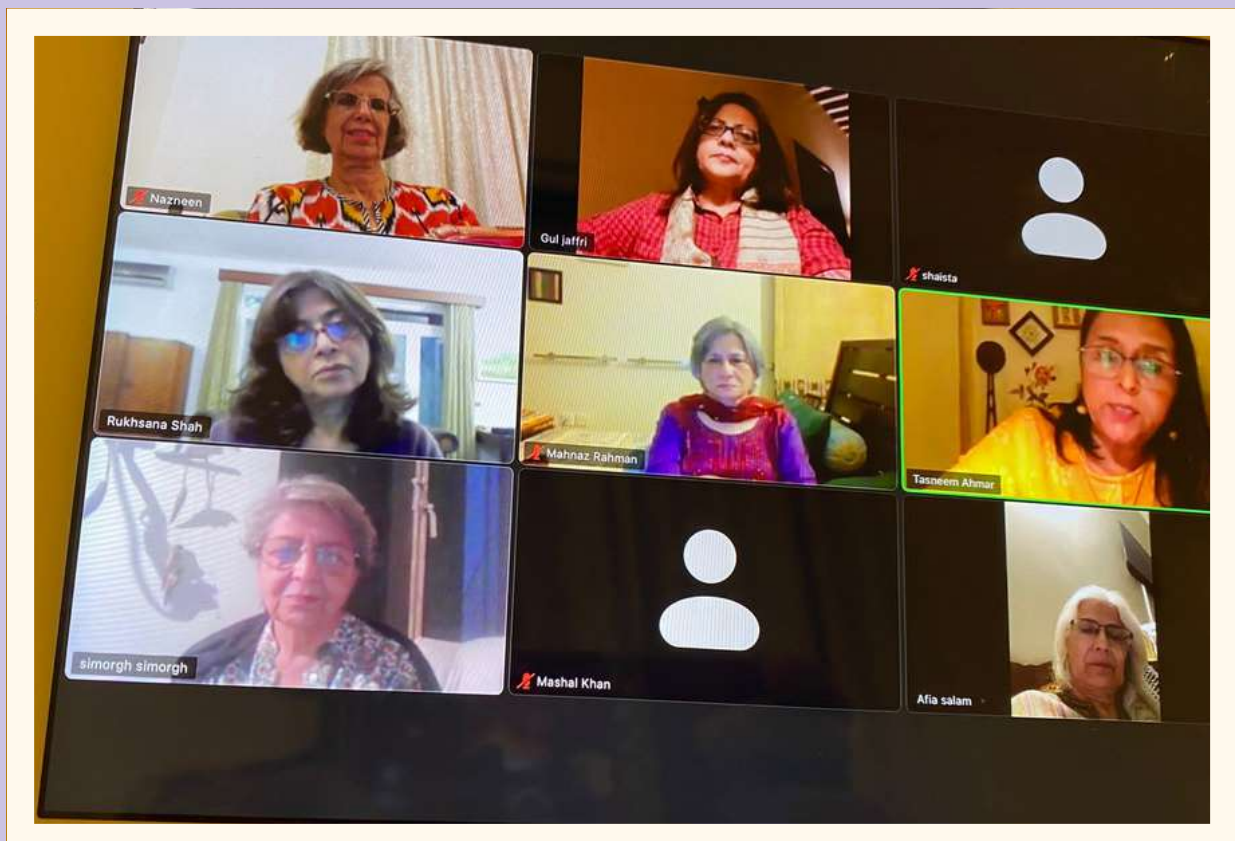
Unpacking Gender Imbalances in TV Dramas

Television dramas are an inescapable part of Pakistan's pop culture. While these dramas entertain millions every day, their content is often far from appropriate and not reflective of a healthy society.

On November 2021, a group of activists, writers and journalists met online to discuss the current state of Pakistani dramas and the messages being propagated through entertainment media. The event was organised by Uks Research, Resource and Publication Centre under its Hopscotch initiative. The group examined the content of Pakistani television dramas and focused on whether love stories are simply a popular theme for Pakistani TV dramas or a diversion to distract viewers from real life issues.

"The hopping, skipping, turning, bending, jumping while trying to maintain balance is also like a reflection of a woman's life, and the steps that she takes in life. But in our plays women are depicted as very unreal. They are wicked, they are plotters and they all are in love with their cousins. If not that then they are meek and helpless. Yet, in real life, there are other women who are fighters, who struggle and emerge victorious," lamented Director, Uks Tasneem Ahmar.

Gul Jaffri, an educationist recalled a time when she was watching a play on TV with her 19-year-old house help. "There were the husband and wife being shown in a scene in which the wife is pressing her husband's legs with him asking her if she obeyed his wishes of not sending their daughters to college. And my house help thought it was strange. She asked me where this happened. Now, this is a girl who lives in a one-room flat,' she pointed out.



Talking about the viewers, Ahmar said "I would also like to say here that viewers have a a lot of power and a huge responsibility. But they are silent. They watch, they see the faults but say nothing. But they should air their concerns and feelings about what is being shown. They need to form a pressure group, which can also boycott plays".

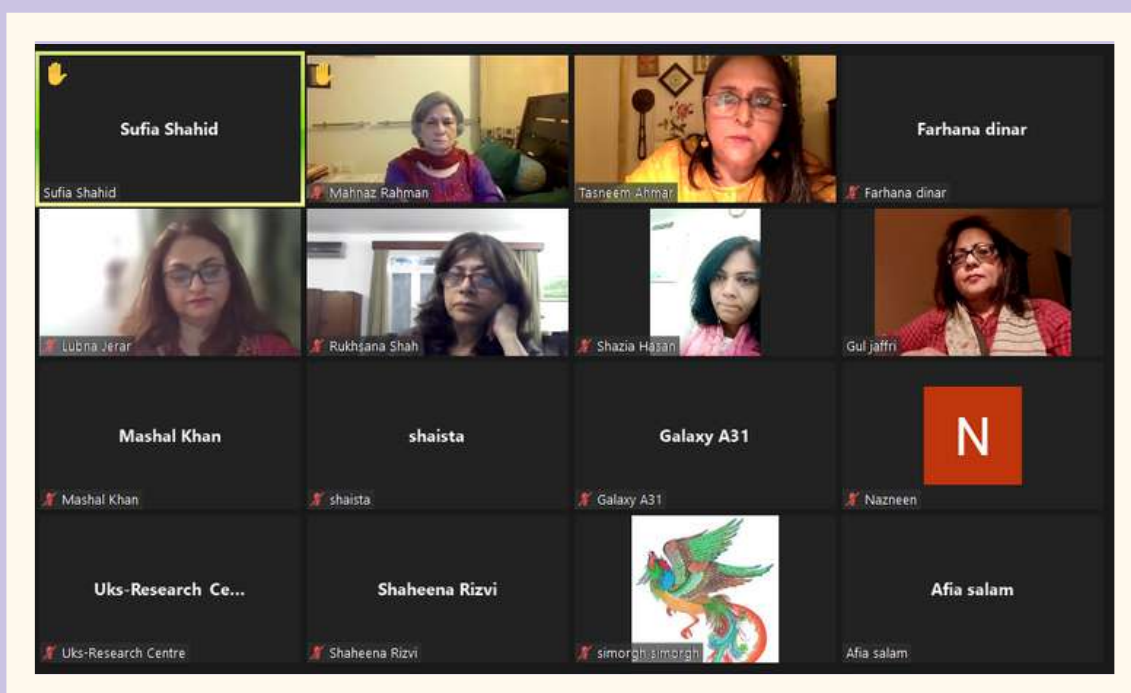
Rights activist and journalist Mahnaz Rahman said, "We need to raise our voice against the stereotypes and misogynistic and damaging content and narratives. Why do our female characters only focus on getting married?".

Talking about the market-driven content of TV dramas, writer and poet Neelum Ahmad Basheer elaborated, "All the content in our plays is geared towards marketing. Then whether a play is successful or not depends on its getting commercials. The more advertisements it gets, the more successful it is," she said. "So you are to keep in mind that our plays are no longer written or designed for mental satisfaction or art," she added.

Writer Sufia Shahid said that she wished that the dramas would spread awareness about issues instead of closing (viewers') minds. "There are many issues here but our plays don't talk about the solutions," she said.

Talking about TRPs (Talking Rating Points) Journalist Afia Salam said they are only reflective of the big cities, "They are not giving you the full picture," she said. She added that instead of talking to the production houses, advertisers (sponsors) need to be targeted, because production houses will not make poor content "if they don't get sponsorship".

The discussion which received media coverage in Dawn, raised many issues about how gender and diversity were represented in drama and also about the damaging role of programming that was driven solely by commercial motivations.



MEDIA: Director Uks on Zara Hat Kay

On 28 July 2021, Director Uks, Tasneem Ahmer appeared on Dawn TV's talk show Zara Hat Kay to talk about media coverage of the Noor Muqaddam case and women's representation in the media. Talking about similar cases of violence and gruesome murders of women in Pakistan, Ahmer said that the Noor Muqaddam case offered an opportunity to the media to learn how to relay news to its audience. She said, 'The media should understand that its job is to impart information. It's role is not to sensationalise the information, become the moral police or to give a lecture on morality.

She urged the media to demonstrate sensitivity and empathy when it came to reporting and stressed on the need for the media to be mindful of the language being used while reporting. Ahmer emphasised on the need for media to be trained continually on gender sensitivity. Speaking about media's representation of women, she said that monitoring reports show that media reporting on women fell during Covid-19 when it should have increased given that the pandemic has had a greater and more profound impact on women as a group.



Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B59yH1NOQI0>

NEWS CONFERENCE: 'Violence Against Women: Justice demands objectivity but media gives us sad music and asks insensitive questions. So, where's the news?'

On 28 July 2021, Uks Research Centre In Pakistani journalism organised a conference titled 'Violence Against Women: Justice demands objectivity but media gives us sad music and asks insensitive questions. So, where's the news?'. The conference was organised close on the heels of Noor Muqaddam's murder on July 20, 2021.

Speaking at the conference Kamal Siddiqi, director of IBA's Centre for Excellence in Journalism, '...violence against women isn't taken seriously unless a circus is made out of it on our television screens.'

Uks Director Tasneem Ahmer, said that media monitoring shows that horrific cases of violence against women happen almost every day. "Most of the time, there's more negative than positive content. Every day there's a news or two about children's and women's sexual abuse, rape, gang rape, harassment at work and in public places, abduction, kidnapping, trafficking and flesh trade, young girls dropping out of schools – and yet when women come out to ask for their rights, they're named and shamed.'

"Some of the content in the media that we monitor also focuses on the fact that women should not leave the security of their homes. The fact that domestic violence happens within the four walls of one's home isn't taken seriously, and is often denied."

Ahmar also drew attention to how social media was turning into the newest tool to humiliate women. "It seems there are no boundaries for indecent, vulgar, and obscene content that keeps popping up in the form of tweets, trolls, memes and whatnot."



She said that misogyny and misandry are two sides of the same coin, and are often rooted in culture, society and values, which the media ends up reflecting.

“Any extreme views based on gender, sexuality, origin and such are violations of basic human rights. Be it any gender, any segment of society, every human being has the right to be respected and accepted. We need our media to not only understand this but also remember this in its production of content.”

Speaking about Noor Muqaddam, she said that while social media can be used to help take action on such issues, at the same time, it can be misused leading to dangerous consequences.

Elaborating on the role of social media in Noor’s case, Ahmar talked about how on one day #JusticeforNoor was trending and the next day it was all about her murderer. She talked about the rampant debates about Noor who was deemed to be in a supposedly illicit relationship with her murderer, and who consumed drugs. The implication being that ‘this is what happens to liberals’ and to some extent, ‘justifying’ the gruesome murder

Speaking about the changing role of the media as a watchdog, Siddiqi said, “Incidents of violence against women and sensationalism, wrong choice of words and wrong choice of clichés happen all the time, and we hold the ratings system responsible, which is also true. But even in newspapers, reporting of such incidents isn’t up to the mark.”

Writer and director Bee Gul who was also speaking at the event said that the class hatred in this high-profile case was evident. Talking about domestic violence in impoverished sections of society, she asked, ‘Who knocks on the door when they hear the scream of a woman due to domestic violence in the narrow streets in an underprivileged locality?...We are all equally responsible for this. If there’s any violence against any woman or man, and I am unable to do anything about it, I am guilty as a writer.’

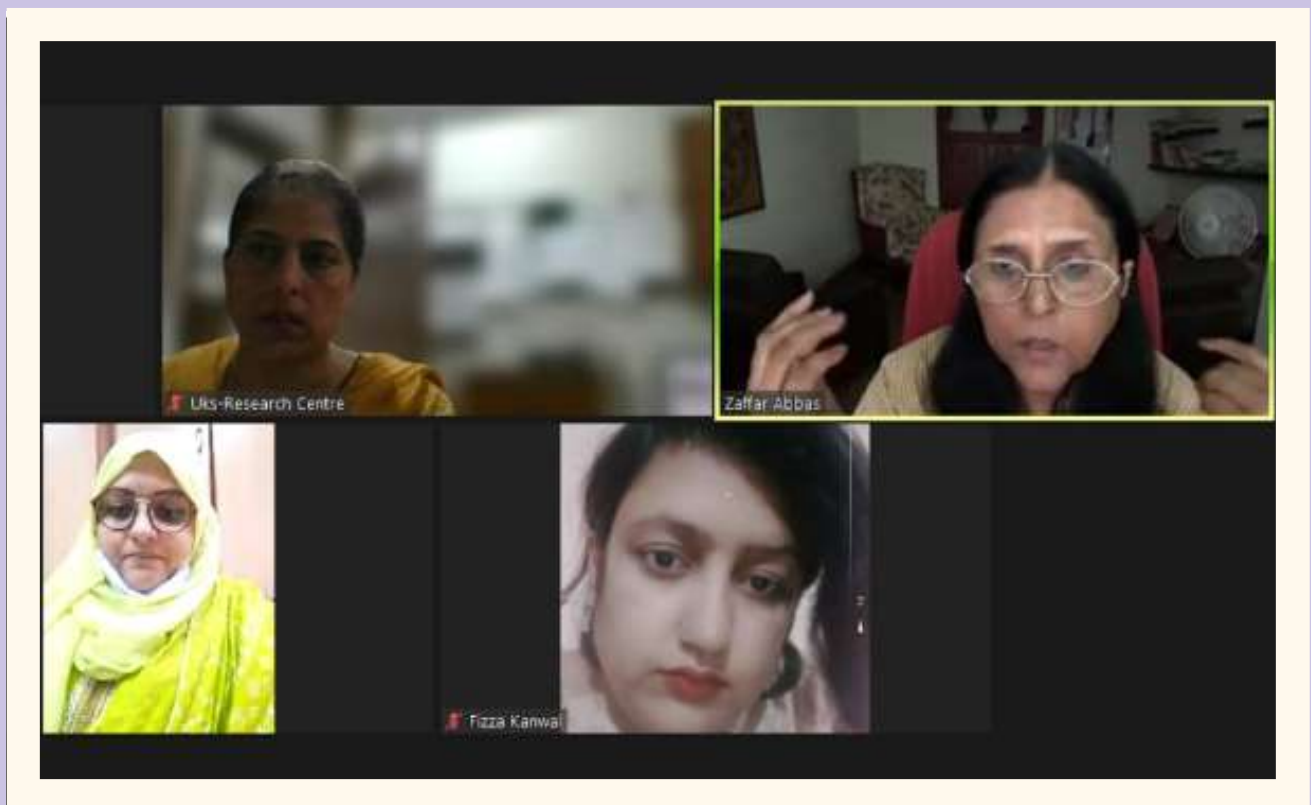


IFJ-Uks Women In Media Mentorship Pilot project

Uks has always been focused on ways to impact reporting on women that are far removed from the toxic, hateful tropes about women widely deployed in Pakistan's media today. With the ratio of women to men continuing to fall in newsrooms, misogyny continues to be furthered through content. The situation has worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic which has found that a mix of culture and religion have come together to hold women responsible for the health disaster. In such a scenario many women working in newsrooms tend to remain silent out of fear for their jobs and reputation.

It was with this in mind that the IFJ-Uks Women In Media Mentorship Pilot project was conceived. Uks and the International Federation of Journalists joined hands to launch the IFJ - Uks Women in Media Mentorship Pilot project. The project aimed to enhance and support women's leadership development in Pakistan's media industry and enhance their understanding of women's issues in media. Following IFJ's guidelines, Uks selected three female working journalists- one each from Karachi, Quetta, and Hunza -as the project mentees. The project was divided into three phases and the time frame allocated to the three mentees was 1980-2021. A handbook has been shared to guide them through the intensive and in-depth research.

Through the duration of the project the mentees will be guided on creating innovative and gender-balanced media content, and in supporting women as activists, unionists, and decision-makers.



EVENT: Uks' Annual Diary Launch

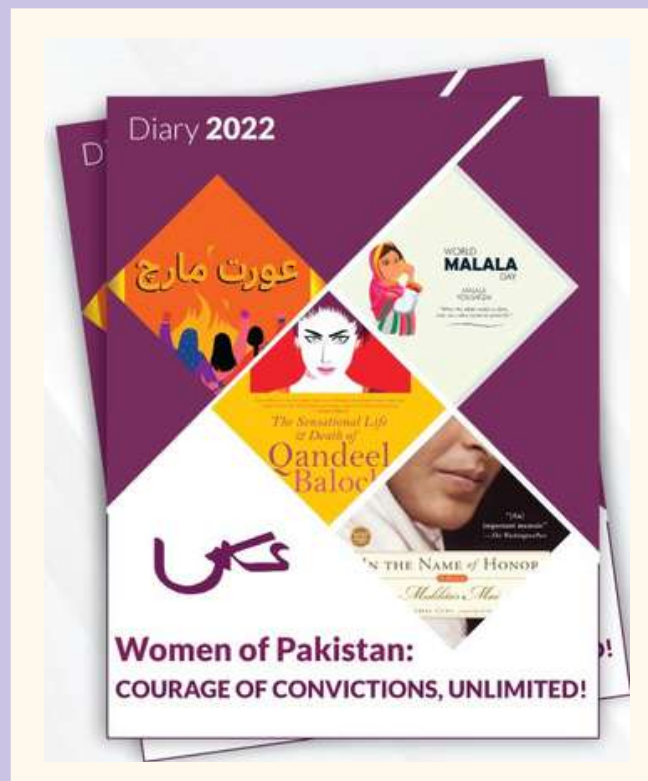
On 1 January 2022 Uks Research & Resource Centre launched its 24th annual diary. The Uks diary launch is an annual event and every year a new diary with a carefully chosen theme is presented to the audience. So far the themes have included politics, education, environment, and sports.

Speaking at the event, Director Uks, Tasneem Ahmar said, "During our research work and media monitoring we come across many stories that don't reach the common persons. Our women were very active after independence. There was Begum Ra'ana Liaquat Ali Khan whose activism started in the 1950s. There were women in so many places. There was a woman taxi driver in the 1960s. Then there was the women's movement that started in the Ziaul Haq era. There was the Women's Action Forum [WAF], which pushed for women's rights".

Talking about Uks Diary 2022's theme, Ahmar said it included Qandeel Baloch. "She also deserves to be on its cover. She has a story. Likewise, we have Malala Yousafzai, whose every move is critically watched here (in Pakistan). Coming to the criticism, there is also the Aurat March and its slogans some of which people find so shocking. For instance, the slogan 'Mera jism meri marzi' (My body my choice) is really about the women here going through multiple pregnancies while having no control over their body. There is more depth to this slogan than people choose to understand".

Speaking about women's strength in the face of adversity, she said, "These stories tell you that the Pakistani woman is not helpless. Unfortunately, here people, especially women, are conditioned to think that women have to take everything lying down. But Pakistani women are not like that. They are strong, be they homemakers or whatever".

Academician Sarah Zaman also spoke at the event and said that women have an innate drive to resist wrongs. "It comes from within us. For me my resistance was personal. It grew and has taken in so much. My investment is not just physical or mental but emotional also. My resistance comes from my being angry. And my anger grew more as I saw more. People say that we are pessimistic, that we only see the negatives in things. But while being angry I also hope for things to improve," she said.



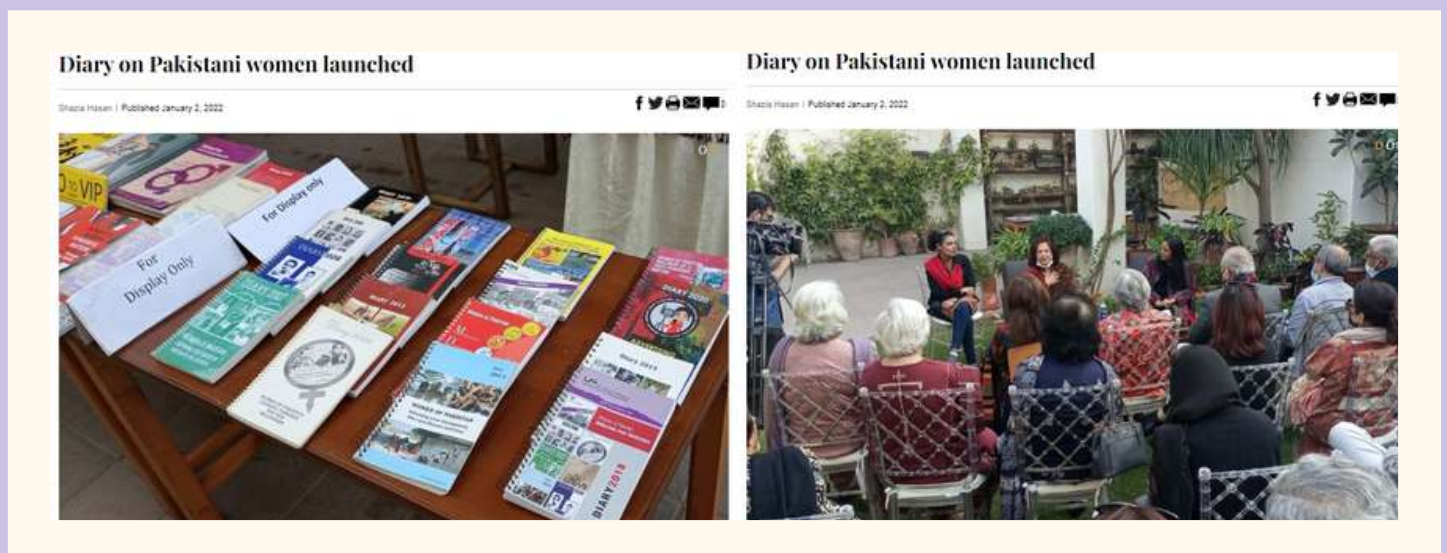
“I have seen women navigating through the messiest of situations. They are very conscious of being pushed aside or crushed. Political parties, civil society talks about it. I even hear mosques talking about women and how they should be treated in their Friday *khutba* (sermon)” she said, adding that the Aurat March this year will be in its fifth year.

Speaking about the March, which is held every year on International Women’s Day, Zaman said, “Through the Aurat March we want to build a consensus. Our visions match the visions of other women. We see the daily struggles of people. We talk of climate change, the labor movement, we see all, we understand all. And we find a nurturing space in feminist movements. That coming together, that camaraderie makes us feel better”.

Pakistani women’s rights activist and a former provincial minister of Sindh, Anis Haroon, who is a journalist and also a member of WAF praised Uks’ work regarding women. She spoke about the disturbing content of Pakistan television dramas which frequently show women tolerating violence. “Why does she take it? It shows our society’s thinking. If she revolts, the audience has issues with it. But they are fine with her taking abuse,” she said.

The event concluded with Uks Kahani, a radio programme featuring women who have shown exceptional courage and resilience such as a young female footballer, a woman who runs a pharmacy from her motorcycle, a widow who sells sugar cane juice to run her home and educate her children, two student entrepreneurs who run their business called Oven Diaries which connects bakers with customers, tribal women and more.

Media coverage of the diary launch appeared in Dawn on January 2nd, 2022.



Mediamatters for Women

Uks is once again back to monitoring the media and providing analysis for gender balance, bias, and blindness. It looks at the good, the bad, and the ugly aspects of each content that Pakistan audiences have been consuming. This time around, Uks will be examining the recent television shows, ads, and media practices that have been grabbing attention.

The Good

The Cadbury ad is that good content that Pakistan gets to see once in a while on their televisions! It not only showcases that ubiquitous chocolate bar to its full effect but provides a sweetness to family bonds and love in a way even TV shows do not seem to present (a shame). The ad's premise, of a grandmother declaring that she wants to find a suitable husband for her granddaughter, only to learn that the latter wants to study for her Master's degree instead, has been a go-to basic story in this country. But the plot twist is how the grandmother not only agrees to her granddaughter's wishes but does so with love and affection that is heartwarming to see. This is the antithesis of Pakistani elders being stereotyped as narrow-minded, stubborn, and cruel to those who go against their wishes. It's great to see Pakistani families who are progressive, supportive of the young women in the family, and display such tender love. More ads like this, please!



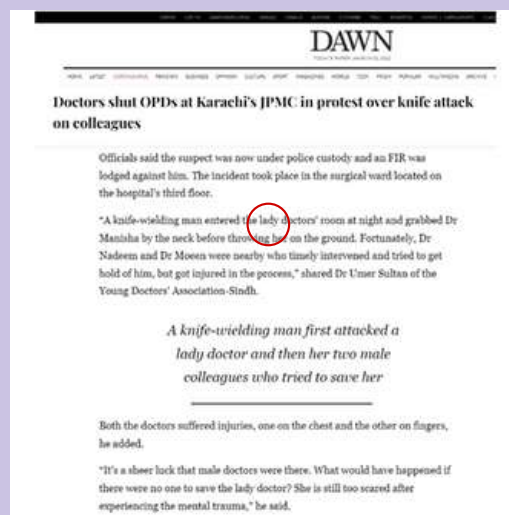
Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mlfjGblz2Jl>

The Bad

Pakistani print media has yet to realise that putting the word “lady” next to a profession is both tired and silly. Case in point, this is an article in The News about a drug smuggler. And this is how she is described:



In another story in Dawn, a doctor had been attacked at her workplace. And once again, the word ‘lady’ is attached to her profession.



Professional and working women should not have to be described in news stories that unnecessarily emphasise their gender and patronise them. A person's profession has no relation to his or her personality, traits, or gender. So what does saying “lady doctor” or “lady smuggler” accomplish? A woman's name or her pronouns are more than enough to state who the person in the story is. Adding “lady” is just an unnecessary way to separate her from her male counterparts and condescends to her by describing what type of woman she is. So print media, let's just call someone who is smuggling a smuggler and a doctor, a doctor from now on. Irrespective of the gender

The News article: <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/916364-lady-smuggler-arrested>

Dawn article: <https://www.dawn.com/news/1676331>

The Ugly

While it is commendable for Pakistani TV dramas to highlight the domestic abuse many women face at home, it can be said that these shows are also simply giving new ideas for society to mock women, too. This is apparent in the latest drama on the channel Express named “Main Aisi Kyun Hun” (translation “Why am I like this?”). In the first episode, the female lead, played by Noor Zafar Khan, is being mocked by her onscreen husband (Syed Jibran) for having curly hair. He not only expresses his dislike towards her for it but shows disappointment at how their daughter has that same trait. Pakistanis were rightly not impressed with this show, as they felt that abusing someone over their hair was not just toxic it is also pointlessly silly plot wise.

And they have a point. While highlighting domestic issues is a good thing, it’s quite another to come up with innocuous ways for a woman to be insulted to add variety to the plot. There’s no need to mock women in new ways when they are already being body-shamed and color-shamed onscreen and off-screen. And, for once, it would be nice for these TV channels to come up with stories that are both engaging, uplifting, and unique. Where Pakistani women are praised for their body, skin colour, and hair!





A Research, Resource and
Publication Centre on
Women & Media

UKS RESEARCH CENTRE

CONTACT: +92-512712416, +92-51-8489945

EMAIL: INFO@UKSRESEARCH.COM.PK



[FACEBOOK.COM/UKSRESEARCHCENTRE](https://www.facebook.com/UKSRESEARCHCENTRE) | [TWITTER.COM/CENTERUKS](https://twitter.com/CENTERUKS) | [INSTAGRAM.COM/UKSRESEARCH](https://www.instagram.com/UKSRESEARCH)

ADDRESS: OFFICE 4B-4C 4th FLOOR, GULBERG PALACE E-11/3 ISLAMABAD

WWW.UKSRESEARCH.COM.PK